

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL – 6th JULY 2022

Submitted by: Councillor Simon Tagg

Portfolio: All

Wards affected: All

Purpose of the Report

To provide an update to Members on the activities and decisions of Cabinet, together with the Forward Plan.

Recommendation

That the Statement of the Leader of the Council be received and noted.

Reasons

To update Council Members on the activities and decisions of the Leader and Cabinet and to allow questions and comments to be made on the Statement.

1. Cabinet Meetings

Cabinet met on 7th June; detailed below is a selection of decisions and other actions of the Leader and Cabinet since the last Leader's Statement.

2. Climate Change – Sustainability Base Pledge

The Council has joined with local authorities across Staffordshire to work collaboratively to reduce the County's carbon emissions to net zero. Through membership of the Staffordshire Sustainability Board (SSB), the Council has committed to ten base 'pledges' including: baseline reporting, carbon literacy training, green travel planning, joint communications, move to low carbon fuelled fleet vehicles, energy reduction and use of green energy.

In 2020 the Council adopted its own Sustainability Environment Strategy containing measures that are already under way in the Borough. These include: nature recovery plans, habitat protection measures, designation of carbon capture areas and the installation of electric vehicle charging points in Council owned car parks.

As part of its Urban Tree Planting Strategy, the Council is committed to planting thousands of trees on green spaces and this programme is well under way.

Emission mitigating policies and sustainable development goals will also be introduced as part of the new Borough Local Plan.

3. One Council Programme Update

Cabinet received an update on the One Council Programme which continues on track with the projected overall savings of £1 million a year.

Work continues to embed digital improvements to how residents can access Council services as well as being careful as we progress with this transition to ensure that no resident is excluded from accessing the Council. The processes and practices used by officers to complete transactions with residents are being redesigned to ensure officers' efforts add value at every stage of their work.

The next phase will be a review of support services processes and back office structures to bring the teams' outputs in line with the One Council principles. Further savings through better ways of working are anticipated in these areas alongside the creation of a more efficient and streamlined service for the public.

4. Discretionary Rate Relief Policy

Cabinet endorsed a new policy that puts in place a scoring mechanism for assessing National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) relief applications.

The new policy means that the Council can go further to assist relevant organisations such as charities, and to help as many as possible with up to 100% rate relief where appropriate.

Organisations such as those operating from the Guildhall and Kidsgrove Sports Centre benefit from this discretionary relief.

5. Newcastle-under-Lyme 850th Celebrations in 2023

In 2023, the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme celebrates its 850th year and the Council wants to make it a year to remember for residents. It was in 1173 that Newcastle was first recorded as a town and borough and around this time was granted its first charter protecting the rights of its people.

A programme of commemorative & heritage events, to take place throughout the year, is being worked up following suggestions by a cross-party & partner Heritage Working Group, formed in 2019.

Cabinet has appointed Deputy Mayor Councillor Simon White as Heritage Champion who will oversee development of the programme and explore sponsorship opportunities.

6. Finance and Performance Review Report – Fourth Quarter (January - March) 2021 - 22

Cabinet reviewed the performance data for Quarter four and noted that performance across the Council remains strong, with 81% of targets being met or within tolerance.

The percentage of dry recycling and food waste have both increased and are above target and, as a consequence, the volume of residual waste collected is down approximately 10% on the same period last year.

Quarter 4 is the busiest time for calls to the Council's Customer Services, with contacts increasing as Council Tax, Business Rates and Town Centre BID bills are issued, together with benefits notifications and also this year, elections communications. Nonetheless, performance by the team is well within target as residents took advantage of online, by phone or in person options to interact with the Council.

Jubilee 2 continues to grow its membership as we aim to reach and exceed pre-pandemic levels. Since the Q4 figures were published the Gym at J2 has been refurbished, which will hopefully support further membership uptake.

7. Air Quality Ministerial Directive Etruria Road, Basford

Following a report in the local media and comments by Councillors from Stoke-on-Trent the Council has issued a statement to clarify its position related to the Ministerial Directive imposed by the government on both the City and Borough Council relating to air pollution on a small stretch of Etruria Road in Basford.

The Council is continuing to work together with the City and County Councils, as the Government Directive requires us to do, through the cross-agency Joint Advisory Group (JAG) for air quality, chaired by Stoke-on-Trent.

In October 2021 Cabinet asked for new modelling to be carried out to measure current/future post-Covid traffic patterns to ascertain if there has been any reduction in the pollution levels that would negate the need for the proposed bus gate - in other words natural compliance.

The Council has also lobbied local members of parliament to raise our concerns that are shared many residents about the implications of traffic problems on other roads potentially caused by an Etruria Road bus gate restriction.

JAG is continuing to monitor traffic volumes in Basford and current pollution readings are below the minimum safe level, as they have been for the last year.

8. Kidsgrove Sport Centre

The refurbishment of Kidsgrove Sports Centre has now been completed and the centre has been handed over the Community Group who will aim to reopen to the public by the end of July.

The refurbished centre boasts a 25m, six lane swimming pool, reception area, sports hall, enlarged gym, dance studio, spin studio and physio room along with updated changing areas. This is the culmination of a £7.5 million project funded by the Borough Council, Town Deal with support from Staffordshire County Council and Sport England.

The Community Group have also brought in £360,000 in match funding from outside sources for the project.

9. Queens Platinum Jubilee Celebrations

Celebrations to mark the Queens Platinum Jubilee took place across the Borough over the special four-day Bank Holiday Weekend in June. Events were held in the town centre & Brampton Park, including special markets, outdoor cinema and activities in the Guildhall. Numerous street parties were held.

A number of beacons were lit to mark the Queens 70 years on the throne including a Jubilee Beacon at Apedale Country Park, by the mining wheel, which could be seen across Newcastle.

To commemorate the long service of Her Majesty I have asked Council officers to consult with fellow users of Castle House about changing the name of the Garden Meeting Room to Queen Elizabeth II (QEII) Room.

10. Diary of Cabinet Meetings & Forward Plan

To facilitate the attendance of Cabinet Members, Cabinet meetings have been moved from Wednesday to Tuesday. The Council's calendar of future meetings will be update according.

The Forward Plan of items to be discussed by Cabinet can be found at:
<https://moderngov.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/mgListPlanItems.aspx?PlanId=132&RP=118>

Councillor Simon Tagg
Leader of the Council