

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL – 26th JULY 2023

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 18th April, 6th June and 18th July 2023; detailed below is a selection of decisions and other actions of the Leader and Cabinet since the last Leader's Statement.

2. Walleys Quarry – Odour Issues

Cabinet has continued to receive regular updates on the ongoing gas odours from Walleys Quarry landfill.

The early part of the year saw a period of stability with both Hydrogen Sulphide levels and complaint levels associated with landfill trending downwards. Whilst the overall picture remains hugely improved since 2021, April, May, and June of this year saw an unwelcome increase in complaints about odours from the site. Officers used weather forecasts to predict the likely times of odour episodes and undertook out of hours odour tours and responded in real time to very early morning resident complaints.

Over recent weeks a fresh programme of permanent capping has begun on part of the site close to the Galingale Estate and Poolfields, and it is hoped that this will bring about further improvement. The data so far for July is indicating an improved position.

The Council remains committed to keeping the issues arising from Walleys Quarry under scrutiny and ensuring that all that can be done across agencies is being done. To this end, as Leader, I convened a meeting of the political leads of organisations associated with the multi-agency response to the odour problem so that those tasked with regulating the site could explain their work and be challenged on what more can be done to improve the situation for residents. A further meeting of this group will be convened in the autumn ahead of the winter period when historically odours have been most problematic.

The Council also played an active role in a community engagement event held at Newcastle Fire Station in June to hear directly from residents their current experience, and to explain the work of the Council. Approximately 50 residents attended and had the opportunity to talk with the Environment Agency, UK Health Protection Agency, and the Borough Council's Environmental Health team. It is clear from this event that whilst the situation has improved since 2021, it remains a significant problem for some residents living close to the site. In responding to those concerns, the Council remains ready to take such action as it can within its powers to secure improvement, including action to enforce the Abatement Notice if necessary.

3. **Town Deal and Future High Street Fund**

It has been a busy period as we move to the delivery phase on more projects associated with Town Deal and Future High Street Funds. Cabinet has received several reports which jointly form part of a £30 million regeneration of the Ryecroft and wider town centre, including the contract award for the replacement Castle Car Park, York Place Development (Award of Demolition Contract) and Ryecroft Hotel (Design & Build Contract and Brand Procurement).

Cabinet has also agreed to the acquisition of land to facilitate a Kidsgrove Shared Service Hub, a key part of delivery of the Kidsgrove Town Deal, and awarded the contract for the Wammy football changing room development to provide excellent sports facilities for residents in Knutton and Cross Heath.

Lastly, confirmation has been received that the Philip Astley Performing Arts Centre business case has been accepted by the Government confirming a £1.9 million spend on this heritage project.

4. **Sustainable Environment Update**

Cabinet has received several reports relating to the Council's sustainable environment agenda including the adoption of Staffordshire Adaptation Strategy, Hydrated Vegetable Oil (HVO), Spot Market Fuel Purchasing and a separate Food Waste Processing Contract. These initiatives will help the Council as it works towards its goal of Net Zero by 2030. Increasing recycling levels will also enable us to mitigate the effects of Climate Change.

Cabinet agreed a procurement of the transportation of recycling and waste material and for temporary agency staff to ensure the continued efficient running of the Council's waste and recycling service.

5. **Active Lifestyles Strategy**

Cabinet endorsed a new five-year Active Lifestyle Strategy which sets out three aims: -

- to enable residents to participate in regular activity, including at sports centres, informal sports settings and outdoor space;
- to provide opportunities and targeted support for those with health needs, and
- to work in partnership to provide a wide range of quality sustainable leisure and sporting opportunities.

This new Strategy builds on recent success such as the reopening of Kidsgrove Sports centre, the construction of a pump track in Newchapel, improvements at J2, including the gym, and refurbished tennis courts at Westlands and Wolstanton.

6. **Financial & Performance Review Report 4th Quarter 2022-23**

Cabinet received a report detailing Quarter 4 performance. At the end of March 2023, the Council had 80% of measures on track to meet the 2022-23 target and 69% of all measures show improved performance, or no change, compared to Q4 of last year.

Performance is strong in key areas of the Council including planning, recycling, sports and leisure, car parking income and town centre footfall.

A key focus for improvement is around levels of sickness absence. Although this is a national problem affecting the public, private and voluntary sectors, the Council's HR team are supporting staff back in to work and to remain in work. Several external matters are impacting absence rates, including NHS waiting times and a rise in national instances of mental ill health due to the cost of living and related stresses, as well as legacy issues from the Covid pandemic and lockdowns. The Council is supporting staff in a range of ways with its health and wellbeing initiatives as well as enhanced training for teams and managers around supporting colleagues with mental health issues.

The Finance, Assets and Performance Scrutiny Committee has requested a report at its next meeting so that it can scrutinise further the Council's response to tackling sickness absence.

7. **Corporate Peer Challenge Outcome and Action Plan**

The Council formally received the Local Government Association's Corporate Peer Challenge report and Action Plan earlier on this Agenda. I would like to thank the Council's senior officers and Cabinet and all staff and elected members for the part they have played in achieving an excellent report.

8. **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan can be found at: -

<http://svmma/mgListPlanItems.aspx?PlanId=147&RP=118>

Councillor Simon Tagg
Leader of the Council