

**STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL –
22nd NOVEMBER 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 17th October 2023 and 7th November 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 update**

Cabinet has continued to receive regular reports detailing the position regarding the odours from Walleys Quarry. In October the Environment Agency (EA) revealed that there had been a problem identified with the Hydrogen Sulphide levels recorded by the Mobile Monitoring Facilities (MMF), which have been recording and reporting erroneous data throughout the whole period of community concern regarding Walleys Quarry. Though this issue has now been rectified, the EA are now undertaking work to establish whether the previous data, stretching back a number of years, can be re-calibrated. Central to this work will be determining whether the health risk assessments which were based on this data need to be materially changed given the under reporting that has come to light. At time of writing we still await the outcome.

In response to the EA's data inaccuracies, officers have undertaken odour assessments around the landfill site to provide some real time information about the likely community odour complaints. These assessments reflect the complaint data which continue to show a steady reduction in issues, albeit with occasional spikes.

Follow the announcement of the problem with the MMFs, I joined with the Leader of Staffordshire County Council and wrote to the Secretary of State requesting a public inquiry into what we see as the latest EA regulatory failure. Regrettably, the DEFRA Minister responsible for the EA has declined this request.

Officers continue to monitor the situation, and to engage with the site operator and with partner agencies, to ensure ongoing improvement of this situation.

3. **Newcastle Town Centre Regeneration**

Momentum continues to build around plans for the multimillion-pound regeneration of Newcastle Town Centre with the prospect of McCarthy Stone, Aspire Housing, and Capital and Centric involvement in the long awaited Ryecroft redevelopment. Accor Hotels' Ibis Styles have also been selected as the brand for a 100-bed hotel on the site.

The mixed residential housing and apartments for the over-55s and social sector proposed by McCarthy Stone and Aspire Housing, along with Capital & Centric's expertise in transforming neglected spaces into vibrant hubs, coupled with their environmentally sustainable approach, could help increase foot fall, bolster local retail businesses and further build a dynamic and thriving community in our Town Centre.

Newcastle's historic market is set for a substantial investment with a £390,000 investment via the Future High Streets Fund. The works are scheduled for completion by next spring and include new stalls, renovation of existing ones, and enhancements to public spaces, including an entertainment area. The proposal also includes short-stay parking bays, a digital advertising screen, a newly created public space along the lower High Street and the provision of rent-free stalls for traders on Mondays. This initiative aims to preserve and enhance the market's position at the heart of town centre.

4. **Sustainable Environment**

The Council has reached an important milestone in its goal of reaching net zero carbon emissions as an authority by 2030, hitting the 50% reduction mark for the first time.

Cabinet received a report highlighting progress made through its Sustainable Environment Strategy highlighting the council's shift to more energy-efficient buildings and the implementation of enhanced heating, lighting, and insulation across properties have contributed to this achievement. Additionally, converting council vehicles to Hydrated vegetable oil (HVO) and replacing diesel in HGVs have significantly reduced emissions.

The Cabinet endorsed a roadmap which will focus the council's further effort to reach net-zero by 2030.

Another milestone will be reached this winter as an urban tree planting initiative will reach its 25,000th tree. Over three years, the council has planted 14,947 trees across 21 green spaces, while community engagement, including residents and businesses, has contributed 9,995 saplings through the Britain in Bloom campaign.

Plans for the next planting season aim to break the 25,000 mark but also emphasises the council's commitment to maintaining the health of existing trees. This investment in the future looks ahead two or three decades, anticipating the maturation of these trees, enhancing landscapes, and significantly contributing to carbon capture. A new Tree & Biodiversity Management Plan, with a focus on the right trees in the right places, will promote the planting of native broadleaf, woodland, and fruit trees and this program aligns with the council's pledge to safeguard over 60 green spaces across the borough from development.

Cabinet received a scoping report about a potential solar energy production array on land adjacent to Keele Cemetery with the aim of not only powering the cemetery building but also potentially supplying clean renewal energy to a local business. Income generated from this initiative would be reinvested and drive the council towards its net zero goal. Further reports will be brought to Cabinet, a business case and planning permission would be required for the project to proceed.

5. **Borough Local Plan Update**

Cabinet received an update following the extensive eight-week consultation on the new draft Borough Local Plan, which invited residents to have their say on potential locations for residences, businesses, community amenities, and preserved green spaces. The plan also seeks to accommodate growth, promote investments, and secure spaces for leisure, healthcare, education, and transport facilities into the 2040s.

Over 1,200 responses via the online portal letters, emails, and drop-in sessions are currently being analysed by Officers before a further report is submitted to Cabinet and Scrutiny in the new year.

The Council is following the government set out procedure for implementation of a new Local Plan and Full Council will be asked to support the final draft subsequent to another public consultation before being submitted for Planning inspectors evaluation before the end of 2024.

6. **Town Deal update– Projects in Knutton**

Cabinet endorsed a report detailing the multi-million-pound regeneration of Knutton village. The Council, Aspire Housing, and Staffordshire County Council are working together on this transformative project, a cornerstone of the Newcastle Town Deal programme, enabling significant investments, job opportunities, housing, and leisure facilities in Knutton. The plan includes an expanded enterprise centre for starter businesses, a new village hall, residential development, and green spaces.

Supported by £3.5 million from the governments Town Deal funding, this initiative aims to bolster the local economy, provide employment opportunities for local people and help to put the heart back into Knutton .

7. **Temporary Accommodation Policy**

Cabinet agreed a new Temporary Accommodation Policy to assist individuals and families seeking temporary housing due to homelessness in the Borough. There is currently increased demand, particularly from families, due to escalating rental costs, reduced housing supply, and other cost of living issues.

Providing short-term shelter for a family of four can incur expenses of around £900 a week, creating a substantial deficit as only £140 can be reclaimed from the Department of Work and Pensions.

The council, in collaboration with other Councils, is seeking further financial support from the central government. The Deputy Leader has written to the Chancellor and local MPs to lobby to this end.

The Council has committed to purchasing a property to establish a secure emergency accommodation hub by 2025, aligning with the government's goal to eradicate homelessness.

8. **Financial & Performance Review Report – Second Quarter 2023-24**

Cabinet received a report detailing second Quarter performance. At the end of September 2023, the Council had 79% of measures on track to meet the 2023-24 target.

The Council continues to show strong performance across its suite of performance indicators running above target for both the percentage of Council Tax collected and the percentage of NNDR collected; in a similar vein, the performance of the councils commercial portfolio is strong, with less than 7% vacancy – well down on this time last year. Membership at Jubilee 2 continues to grow. Additionally, in our Town Centres for All priority, we are seeing year on year increases in the number of tickets purchased for car parking, year on year increase in town centre footfall, and good performance in terms of market occupancy.

Sickness absence continues to be a priority area for improvement. The Finance & Assets Scrutiny Committee received a detailed report at its October meeting and endorsed the Council's approach to tackling absence issues.

Cabinet has approved the re-procurement of the Occupational Health Service which is crucial to supporting staff back into work. I'm also pleased to report that the Council has received Bronze accreditation for the THRIVE programme, which indicates a supportive culture within the Council.

9. **Success in Britain in Bloom**

I am pleased to report that the Borough in its 850th anniversary year has clinched the prestigious Royal Horticultural Society Britain in Bloom award for the entire country for the first time, capping a remarkable year of achievements. After securing the top spot as the best 'small city' in the UK, and earning a Gold Award for its exceptional entry, the Borough went on to triumph as the overall winner announced on BBC's One Show.

This followed hot on the heels of successes earlier this year at the Heart of England in Bloom awards where the Borough claimed first place in the small city category, garnered its 21st consecutive gold award, and received recognition for outstanding achievement.

This remarkable feat, a first-time win for the top national prize, was testament to the collaborative efforts of Community Groups, schools, businesses, individuals, dedicated volunteers and council staff.

This year's entry showcased an array of sustainable gardening practices, earning it a certificate of Achievement in Sustainable Gardening, while impressing judges with its diverse plant species, ecological initiatives, and tree planting as well year-round volunteer engagement. of participating in 'In Bloom' awards in fostering community spirit and enhancing the local environment.

A big well done to everyone involved!

10. **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan can be found at: -

<https://modern.gov.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/mgListPlanItems.aspx?PlanId=152&RP=118>

Councillor Simon Tagg
Leader of the Council