

**STATEMENT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL TO FULL COUNCIL –
24th JULY 2024**

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 23rd April, 4th June and 16th July, 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**

Our communities continue to be affected by foul gas odours emanating from Walleys Quarry landfill. June and July have seen a resurgence of odour complaints higher than for the same period in both 2022 & 2023. Council officers continue to proactively undertake monitoring of odour and hydrogen sulphide levels and responding to residents' complaints.

Following correspondence with previous Ministers, I wrote to the new Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Steve Reed OBE MP, requesting that he prioritise the Council's request for permission to take legal action against Walleys Quarry Limited for breach of the Abatement Notice and inviting him at the earliest opportunity to visit Newcastle to discuss the impacts first hand.

In light of the continued blight on the lives of residents shown by the complaint data, and following a unanimous decision of Cabinet on 16th July, I have again written to the Secretary of State to reaffirm our call for a Public Inquiry into the actions of the Environment Agency as the primary regulator and its failure to bring forward a prosecution under its powers.

The Council has established a cross-party Committee of Inquiry which has now commenced its work taking evidence from key stakeholders, agencies, representative groups and others affected by the ongoing issues at Walleys Quarry. This process will complete later in the summer, with a further session with the Environment Agency and UK Health Protection Agency. The Inquiry's finding will be reported to the Scrutiny Committees and Full Council in due course.

3. **Town Deal & Future High Street Fund (FHSF) Update**

Work continues to deliver the £50 million investment in the Borough as part of the previous government's Levelling Up agenda via the Newcastle and Kidsgrove Town Deals and FHSF funding.

The new Castle Car Park continues to take shape and cabinet agreed to award a contract for the new Car Park Payment System. Work on the development of York Place will commence shortly and the market improvement work is well underway. Work continues to fit out 'Keele in Town', Keele University's new base in the town centre, which will open its door in the autumn.

Plans are being prepared for the redevelopment of the Midway and McCarthy & Stone have now acquired part of the Ryecroft for their residential development and Capital & Centric are working on plans for the remainder of the site.

Cabinet received a progress report on the development of the Shared Service Hub in Kidsgrove relating to ground conditions at the preferred site. The Hub will provide a one stop shop for local services which will be run by Kidsgrove Town Council and will provide a base for delivery of a range of community led services and groups. It will also create a new gateway into the town when accessed from the railway station or canal tow path.

4. **Sustainable Environment update**

Cabinet endorsed the refresh of the Council's Sustainable Environment Strategy which sets out the road map to enable the Council to reach carbon net zero by 2030.

The Council has already reduced emissions from its HGV fleet by 90 per cent, planted over 19,000 trees and moved to renewable energy for its electricity consumption. Over the next 6 years the road maps identified works include upgrading walls, windows and roofs, installing solar panels and LED lighting in council buildings, modernising heating systems and moving towards powering the crematorium with green energy.

Cabinet also received reports on the pilot of a new Grassland Management Strategy, Keele Sustainable Solar Energy Business Case and joint work with partners on the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

Six green spaces in the Borough are Green Flag Award winners for 2024: Bradwell Crematorium, Brampton Park, Keele Cemetery, Lyme Valley Park, Queens Gardens and Wolstanton Park. These complement the Boroughs status as reigning overall champion of the Royal Horticultural Society's Britain in Bloom awards.

Well done to everyone involved in the maintenance of our wonderful green parks and open spaces and good luck to the town centre Business Improvement District (BID) that has entered the BID category in this year's Britain in Bloom awards.

5. **Borough Tree Planting Strategy - Phase 6**

Eight more Council owned green spaces, including two in the rural villages, are set to benefit from tree planting this autumn as the 6th phase of the Strategy gets underway.

Since the protection of over 60 council owned green spaces as carbon capture areas, over 19,000 trees have been planted including at the 850 Lyme Forest in Silverdale.

It should be noted in the context of the Borough Local Plan that will be discussed earlier on the Full Council agenda that many of those 60 green spaces were considered for housing development previously at various stages of the now defunct Joint Local Plan with Stoke-on-Trent. The lower housing target in the new Borough Local Plan and the use of brownfield sites such as Ryecroft and Midway has allowed us to protect acres of much-loved public green spaces across the Borough.

6. **Crematorium and Cemeteries Rules and Regulations Update**

Cabinet has updated the Council's Crematorium and Cemeteries Rules and Regulations with the adoption of additional policies relating to the Scattering of Ashes and Welfare Funerals. The introduction of a scattering area for ashes will provide an additional option for cremated remains providing a natural burial area of meadowland and wildflowers.

Though the Council has operated welfare funerals for many years, the new Policy seeks to confirm the approach towards these going forward.

A procedure has also been put in place to ensure that requests for burials to be completed within a short period of time are dealt with effectively and in a timely manner.

7. **Staffordshire Leaders Board**

The Council has been working with Staffordshire County Council and the fellow District & Borough Councils via the Leaders Board for the last few years. The Board was created to enable collaboration on areas of mutual interest such as climate change and economic development. It also provides the foundation for exploring the potential of a deal with government on the devolution of powers and funding to the area.

Although Stoke-on-Trent were not one of the original members of the Leaders Board, it was always hoped that they would join the Board at some point, and agreement has now been reached to enable this to happen. Cabinet agreed that the Terms of Reference of the Board be amended to allow their inclusion.

In recent days the new Government has written to Councils about its emerging policy on local devolution and I will be meeting with fellow Staffordshire Leaders to discuss a response. I will of course keep the Council fully updated.

8. **Delivery of Electric Vehicle Charging through the County Council's Local Government Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) Funding**

The Council is working with Staffordshire County Council and the wider County Electric Vehicle Partnership to deliver Electric Vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure through the Government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) funding in the Borough.

The Council has several EV charging points on its car parks which support residents and visitors, EV charging bays will also be included in the new Castle Car Park.

The County Council's successful bid for LEVI funding to deliver EV chargers across Staffordshire is specifically targeted at areas where residents find it difficult to directly charge their vehicles.

Cabinet received a report regarding availability of publicly owned land which could accommodate the next phase of EV charging facilities and gave delegated authority to progress feasibility of the locations and delivery of EV chargers.

9. **Award of Short Form Services Contracts to a Consortium of Architectural Service Providers relating to DFGs**

Delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) in a timely and efficient way to those in need is vitally important. Over the last few years, the Council has revamped the DFG process by the introduction of a new Housing Assistance Policy.

Cabinet has now given approval for the Council to enter into legal agreements and short form services contracts with a consortium of suitably qualified architectural service providers to support and further improve the DFG process when adaptations require significant alterations or the building of an extension.

10. **Forward Plan**

The Forward Plan can be found at: -

<https://modern.gov.newcastle-staffs.gov.uk/mgListPlanItems.aspx?PlanId=160&RP=118>

Councillor Simon Tagg
Leader of the Council