



Report of the Leader of the Council

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 23rd April 2018

Since my last report to Council, I have continued to work with the Cabinet, Members, Directors, and Officers across all areas of the council. Many of these activities and issues are referred to in Cabinet colleagues' reports.

Unitary Status

Following a meeting that myself and other District and Borough Leaders had with Government on 20th March, all councils in Northamptonshire have received the invitation to submit a proposal for future local government arrangements in the county. The criteria set out in that invitation letter steered strongly towards a two unitary model (North and West Northants), and included the need for a population of 300,000 minimum. Northampton does not have a population of that size, but the combination of an expanded boundary and future growth would see it come a great deal closer to a population of that size. It would, however, mean that the remainder of West Northants would have a population much below the threshold insisted upon, or that the 'doughnut' model with a unitary Northampton being surrounded by the remainder of Northamptonshire as a second unitary would have to be considered, but this model does not have the support of the other Districts and Boroughs.

However, the aspiration for Northampton to become a unitary with an extended boundary, which the council expressed in a unanimous motion passed in January 2017, also seems to have support outside of the council, and so myself and the Leaders of the Opposition Parties have written to the Government Minister to set out our argument that a Northampton Unitary should be considered.

This is being done with the full knowledge of the other District and Borough councils, and would still lead to Northampton being part of a proposal being submitted for future arrangements jointly with the other Districts and Boroughs. It is important that any proposal demonstrates joint working between all councils, and we are working closely at both Leader and Chief Executive level with the other councils. To strengthen this further, the Leaders of the Districts and Boroughs met recently with the Leader of Northamptonshire County Council to discuss this issue, concluding that the County Council should become an active member of our working group developing the proposal to be submitted. It is clear that the county council share our aspirations to respond to the Government's request for a proposal with a solution that best serves our local residents, but that we all feel must address the concerns we have over the long term financial sustainability of any new councils, the issue of legacy debts, and the funding of social care.

Independent Chair of Audit

Following the initial Officer led process, a final short list of candidates has been reached. It had been hoped that interviews would take place during week commencing 16th April, but candidate availability during that week has meant that this could not happen, but we are looking to hold the final interviews within the next week few weeks, and I am hopeful that we will soon be able to announce a successful appointment to this important position.

Delapré Abbey

Following a very successful opening for tours of the Abbey, I am delighted to be able to report that (although the weather over Easter was awful, and saw many historic houses decide to close to visitors!) visitor numbers at Delapre have greatly exceeded expectations. During the first two weeks of being open, there were over 1,900 visitors, against a target of 3,500 visitors hoped for the whole of the first two months!

Other Activity

As always there have been so many good things going on in the town which it has been a pleasure to have attended or be involved in. On the business front, this has included the Chamber Alliance event demonstrating our continued involvement with the local business community. In celebration of our rich heritage and recognition of a key figure associated with the town I was very proud of our Walter Tull commemoration events. As part of celebrating the improvement of the parks and open spaces, and working with other groups to achieve this, I was glad to meet with Buddies of Becketts on 23rd March to see the new planters that have been installed in Beckett's Park, which is another step in the tremendous improvement of the park and its surrounding area.

Staffing and Council Officers

Following my comments in my last council report that George Candler had been appointed as Chief Executive, and would be joining us full time from 30th April, I am delighted to be able to advise you that he has already been committing a large amount of time not just to preparing for his new role, but actually undertaking it. This includes having played a full part in the discussions between the District and Borough councils' Chief Executives on the unitary subject, taking a key role in major issues and projects, leading the Cabinet and Senior Staff in an away-day to refocus plans and activity around our key objectives, undertaking meetings with many of our staff and chairing the Corporate Management Board, and kick-starting recruitment to important vacant posts. I am very grateful to him for the amount of time he has been able to give to the job ahead of his formal start date, and tremendously encouraged by the progress being made as a result of his work.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council