



Cabinet Member Report for Leader of the Council

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 9th March, 2020

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

Unitary Status

Work on Future Northants activity is increasing week by week and is accounting for on average two days a week of my time now. All of the council leaders across the county feel it is vital that we have good oversight on the work as it progresses, and I am pleased to advise you that the Programme Team are facilitating face to face briefings with the key officers involved across all service areas to ensure that this happens.

I would strongly encourage all members to attend the visits to the Engine Room for which all have had details. Along with attending the regular briefings that the Chief Executive and I continue to deliver, a tour of the Engine Room will help give you a good insight into how the work is progressing, and an opportunity to ask questions on any aspect of the Future Northants Programme.

The Chief Executive and I last provided another all member briefing in January, and again I would encourage you all to attend the next one which is scheduled for Wednesday 18th March.

In early February I chaired the West Northamptonshire Joint Committee meeting, and a number of key agenda items were covered, including an update on the budget and papers on the engagement strategy. This important item was tabled as the committee sees it as a top priority for both internal communication (amongst officers, staff and members), and external communication (with key stakeholder) to keep everybody aware of progress.

Since my last update I have also attended the monthly Leaders' Oversight Board meeting, and since January, every Thursday is a dedicated day where all of the Leaders spend the day in the Engine Room at One Angel Square to receive briefings and ask questions around each service area workstream. Over the last few weeks, we have had discussions on the current situation across all 8 workstreams, and we are now moving into the design stage where officers are sharing with the Leaders design principles for the respective portfolio areas and the early stages of what those new functional areas could look like. From this, further discussions will take place including modelling the financial affordability of the designs for each area.

The Structural Changes Order was formally made on Thursday 13th February which followed a series of parliamentary debates in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords. This now enables the two new Shadow councils to be formally set up, and elections to be held on Thursday 7th May.

I have also been involved in a small recruitment panel in selecting a council leader from an outside council, who will act as a 'critical friend' to support the Northants council leaders as we embark on the next 13 months of activity between now and April 2021. I am pleased to say that Cllr. Spencer Flower, Leader of Dorset Council has been

selected, and those of you who attended the county-wide member briefings at the Saints some time back may remember hearing him speak about his unitary experiences in Dorset, having gone through unitary planning as recently as 2 years ago. During an interview, everybody on the panel found his insights from Dorset's unitary journey extremely valuable, and were impressed with his ambitious approach for the authority and his commitment to cross-party working.

With so much going on it is also important to ensure that members within Northampton Borough Council are kept up to speed and therefore the regular cross party Unitary Working Group meetings continue with meetings scheduled in for the remainder of 2020.

Economic Growth

Northampton Forward continues at a pace and further Board meetings have taken place since my last report, including final feedback on the Market Square consultation and reviewing progress on the subsequent designs that Gillespies Landscape Architects are now undertaking to reflect the comments from the public. It's extremely positive that this work is progressing and will form a key strand of our full business case that we will need to submit to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government at the end of April. We are also progressing the high-level concept designs for additional housing accommodation in the Town Centre and I am hopeful that we will be able to announce more details on this in the coming weeks, and this again will form a key strand of the business case.

The opening of our refurbished and expanded museum and art gallery is fast approaching and I have been involved in a number of meetings with key colleagues alongside Councillor Anna King in the planning of both the formal opening on Saturday 20th June, but also looking at how we can allow Members and others an earlier opportunity to preview the completed building when we take back possession from the contractor in the next few weeks, as the fit-out is undertaken.

Another key investment in the Cultural Quarter is Vulcan Works and I was thrilled to be involved in the 'topping out' ceremony on Wednesday 29th January. It's only when you experience the site on the ground, or stand on the scaffolding and view it, that you see the sheer scale and real opportunity that will be provided for business start-ups. I am confident it will create a really vibrant community, within an area that is already an exciting part of our wider regeneration plans for the town.

Regeneration is clearly not just about bricks and mortar, important as that is, connectivity is also a key and important strand and therefore I was particularly pleased to meet with the new MD for Stagecoach for the East Midlands and discuss with him both our future plans for the development of the town and how Stagecoach can play a part within that, as well as ensuring that they are involved in the wider discussions that officers are having with colleagues as the County Council on the development of a transport study for the town. This transport study is vital to help improve access into and around the town, and to make sure that there is an attractive choice of transport options available, as good alternatives to the car.

The digital agenda is something that is also incredibly important and something that Northampton wants to be at the forefront of, and therefore it was particularly pleasing to see CityFibre's recent announcements and their partnership with Three. I have also been in discussions with Digital Northampton and Barclays about how we might progress potentially Barclays Eagle Labs concept here in the town. Further discussions will take place on this in the coming months.

Regional Activity

My involvement in South East Midland Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) continues and I have recently attended the finance committee and the board meetings in February. At the board meeting we regrettably had to state that we could not, at this stage, progress St James Mill link Road, although it still remains a priority for the Borough Council, and we will continue to look at all avenues of future funding to develop out this section of road.

I have also attended recent meetings regarding the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, in which governance has been a key discussion topic, with the need to ensure that both the Central Area of the Arc and Northampton have a strong voice.

Other Activity

In early February I was fortunate to attend the two day District Councils Network annual conference in which we heard from a number of key speakers on topics including the climate agenda, housing and devolution, and all very useful in bringing back thoughts and ideas to the future development of both Northampton and the wider West Northants area.

I have met with David Latham, Chair of Northampton Partnership Homes, to ensure that our two organisations are aligned in delivering the best service and maximising our strategic objectives such as house building.

I was pleased to be able to meet again with the Lowdown, this time exploring what opportunities there are for the National Lottery heritage Fund to support them with their aspirations to extend and improve their historic premises.

It was good to be able to further progress our partnership with Action for Happiness, by meeting with them and the Chief Executive of Delapre Abbey, Rachael Boyd, to discuss and agree how a Happiness Café can operate at Delapre. Providing an opportunity for people to drop in to where they know they will find a welcoming and supportive environment, Happy Cafes can also develop to run sessions to help individuals build better wellbeing and mental health, through structured sessions around the Action for Happiness Ten Keys to Happier Living.

The Good Loaf is also becoming a happy cafe, and intends to put emphasis on supporting Military Veterans, and so it was good to meet with their Chief Executive recently to discuss this, and progress some specific support that the council can bring, further supporting our own Armed Forces Covenant commitments.

Returning briefly to Delapre Abbey, we were sorry to bid farewell to Rachael Boyd as Chief Executive of Delapre Abbey Preservation Trust, as she moves on to a new challenge, but we remain extremely grateful to her for all of her hard work in bringing the Abbey successfully through its renovation and into being a beautiful building that visitors can fully enjoy. She leaves the Abbey in a strong position, and the work that we started with Rachael and the Trust Board will continue, specifically our current focus on ensuring the Abbey's financial sustainability. We are looking forward to working with the new Chief Executive, Richard Clinton, who many of you will know as a strong supporter of Northampton's cultural and business community, through his previous work at the Royal & Derngate and in the town centre Business Improvement District.

I was extremely proud to attend the Holocaust Memorial event held in the Great Hall on Monday 27th January, and I have subsequently received numerous complimentary comments back on what an extremely moving event it was.

I was also pleased to again attend the Chinese New Year celebrations at the end of January, celebrating the year of the rat. This event is always a splendid spectacle of exciting entertainment, and this time all the better for visitors being able to enter the beautiful foyer of the Old Savoy building via the main entrance now, rather than the side entrance, as a result of the Deco Theatre now progressing their taking on the whole building. I am grateful to our NBC team who do such a great job in arranging and supporting these events, and above all, always feel extremely proud of how our town's community actively embrace and participate in them.

Cllr Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council