

Report of the Leader of the Council



Northampton Borough Council

Monday 15th June 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 albeit virtually, in light of the Coronavirus pandemic. Many of these activities and issues are referred to in Cabinet colleagues' reports.

Covid-19

The way that we work was fundamentally changed with the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic worldwide and has had a significant impact on the way that I have undertaken business since we all decanted from the Guildhall on Monday 23rd March. Whilst we have all adapted incredibly well to this new way of working- through either telephone meetings or more recently Zoom video conferencing, which appears to be the 'new normal'- at the time it was a fundamental shift. Not least, asking nearly 400 staff as well as Elected Members to leave the Guildhall and not to return for the foreseeable future, following government guidelines, seemed like an extraordinary thing to have to do. However, our staff responded positively, and as it has turned out, this was just one of a huge number of extraordinary things that our staff colleagues have now done during this crisis.

I would like to formally pay tribute to every single member of our staff, both those employed directly and those working to deliver our services within our partner organisations, for the way in which they have been able to keep services to our residents running, and the additional things that they have all been required to do in order to make the council's response to covid 19 highly effective. Throughout my time as Leader of this council I have continually been impressed by daily examples of dedication and hard work, but what I and member colleagues have witnessed during the past few weeks has been incredible, and extremely proud.

My role in those initial weeks was to remain close to the Chief Executive and the Strategic Command Group that had been established for the council, as well as the lead officers that led on the Tactical Command Group who, between them, were able to provide me with daily updates on both what was happening in terms of guidelines coming from Central Government and how that was effecting not just the Borough Council but the wider community of Northampton and how we responded to that. Of particular note was the way that we worked incredibly quickly over 72 hours to move 71 rough sleepers and former rough sleepers off the streets and into secure accommodation, and establishing in just under a week a Borough-wide approach to shielding and protecting those most vulnerable in our community as part of a wider Countywide Community Resilience Cell. To date, over 646 volunteers and 126 organisations have stepped forward and 911 people have been supported.

I am also aware that, as a Borough Council, we have contributed significantly to the wider Countywide efforts, with involvement at the Strategic Command Group Countywide on (again in the early weeks) a daily basis- but now into a more settled twice-weekly approach.

I have taken a specific interest in the Business Grants scheme, whereby Northampton had £37m of Business Grants to give out to those businesses that qualified over a number of weeks. I have subsequently been involved in the second round Discretionary Grant Scheme, which launched on 1st June, whereby a further £1.7m will be distributed to a range of qualifying businesses, most particularly those who are direct business rates payers such as those in shared work spaces.

As we now start to move towards Recovery, and as the lockdown measures start to be lifted, I am playing an active role not just as a Board member on the Business Improvement District Board, but also as part of the wider Northampton Town Centre Task Force, looking at how we enable non-essential retail businesses to open safely from 15th June, seeking to ensure that the public feel safe when returning to the town centre, whilst still observing the Government guidelines relating to social distancing.

The pandemic has affected the way that we all work, not least in terms of governance and how we ensure that key projects and activities continue through the decision-making process that we have here within the Council. Since mid-March I am pleased to say that we have had 3 Cabinet meetings, all conducted through video conferencing, as well as Annual Council in May, in which we thanked the outgoing Mayor Cllr Nazim Choudhary as well as welcoming in the Mayor for the 2020/21 year, Cllr Brian Sargeant. It was an event that was a first for all of us, however it worked wonderfully well and my thanks go to both the Democratic Service team and colleagues in the Mayor's office for ensuring that the event passed without any glitches.

Future Northants Activity

In light of the pandemic, initially work around the Future Northants activity (which was increasing week by week in the first half of the calendar year) paused for a number of weeks as understandably officer's attention was focussed on the Covid-19 activity. In light of this, the programme had to be reviewed and the original Prospectus For Change- focussing on a wide variety of transformational activity- has had to be curtailed into a new programme that was launched in May. The focus is now on 'Safe and Legal Plus', and is very much about ensuring we do the key elements to transfer into the new West Northants Council on 1st April 2021, but still allows a level of transformational activity to take place, particularly around the Health and Adult Social Care Integration plans, and also the formation of the Children's Trust.

Changes to the Structural Changes Order have also been confirmed and, as a result, all 45 Elected Members of Northampton Borough Council are now concurrently Members of the West Northants Shadow Authority, which held its inaugural Council Meeting on Tuesday 2nd June 2020. As you will no doubt be aware, I am now Deputy Leader of that Authority, working alongside Phil Larratt, who is the other NBC representative on the Executive, plus six further Members from the authorities of the County Council, South Northants Council and Daventry District Council.

The Governance structure has also changed as a result, with the Joint Committee no longer in operation now that the West Northants Authority is in place and an Executive formed. Going forward there will be Executive meetings made up of the 8 Members of the 4 authorities that will make the majority of decisions in helping to create the new West Northants Council between now and 1st April 2021; our first meeting is on 9th June 2020.

Supporting these will be the Joint Implementation Executive, where both Executives of the West and North Northants Shadow Authorities come together on a monthly basis to consider and hear updates on the programme, and these are now taking place. I have also, alongside the other Leaders making up the West Northants Shadow Authority, been involved in the recruitment of the Statutory Interim positions of Head of Paid Service, S151 Officer and Monitoring Officer for the Shadow Authority. As some of you may know, George Candler- our Chief Executive here- was successful in securing that role. I know that you will join me in congratulating him, and wishing him every success in undertaking those duties in the coming months. We have therefore taken the opportunity to strengthen the resilience of the Senior Management team, and I have been involved, alongside members of the Appointments & Appeals Committee, in recruiting an Interim Chief Executive into the Senior Team, to pick up some of George's responsibilities.

Alongside all of this activity, the Chief Executive and I have also managed to meet with the Commissioners at the County Council, which is always useful in hearing how progress is being made to ensure that the County Council is in as strong a position as possible ahead of unitary. Similarly, I have also been involved in a Q&A session for Town and Parish Councils in the last few weeks, as again it is important that they are kept up to speed with developments with the Future Northants activity as we progress towards 1st April 2021.

Economic Growth

It's just over 18 months since Northampton Forward was first established and during that time an awful lot of work has been undertaken. Shortly after the Board was formed, the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) launched the Future High Street Fund and we were subsequently successful in the summer of 2019 in getting through the first stage and in with an opportunity to secure up to £25m for regeneration purposes. I am pleased to say that, even though we have had challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic, the Northampton Forward Board has met on 4 occasions since mid-March, not least because we need to ensure that the final Strategic Business Case is submitted on time. We will know the outcome of how successful our bid has been later on in the summer.

Now our attention turns to the Towns Fund, a similar scheme where we have the opportunity to bid for up to £25m, although the scope is broader than just Regeneration, including Connectivity (for example improving Cycle networks) as well as the wider Skills agenda. The first stage of the process that we will be focussing on will be the development of the Towns Fund Investment Plan, which we are beginning work on this month. As part of the Skills agenda, myself and the Chief Executive have also taken the opportunity to meet with the Principals of both Northampton College and Moulton

College, and I am pleased to say that the Skills sector will be represented by these Further Education representatives on the Towns Fund Board going forward.

I have already referenced the involvement of the Business Improvement District as part of kick-starting the economy in the Town centre, and more recently I have also had the opportunity to work with the Federation of Small Businesses in Northamptonshire, and attended a Q&A session centred around the Town centre and also covid business grants, again demonstrating our commitment to the wider economic recovery of the Town and supporting our businesses wherever possible.

Sub-regional Activities

As in most areas of our work, the Sub-regional meetings did pause during the months of March and April, however since May my involvement in a number of key areas has continued, including attendance at the two SEMLEP Board meetings as well as their Finance, Risk and Audit Board. More recently I have attended the Arc Leaders Board and the Central Area Growth Board- all key strands of the wider Growth agenda and ensuring that Northampton's voice is heard, to ensure that both our strategic focus is reflected in the wider Sub-regional Growth agenda as well as helping to shape the regional agenda as the Government looks to focus more attention outside of London in the coming months.

Other Activities

As you may have seen from Annual Council, I have recently joined the Hope Centre Board. Prior to this, the dialogue with the Chair Ben Leadsom and the CEO Robin Burgess, alongside the Chief Executive and Director of Housing & Wellbeing, has remained positive. Back in March we took the opportunity to visit Oasis House and explore ways in which we could foster closer working relationships between both the Hope Centre and the Local Authority. Little did we know that, just a matter of weeks later, this working relationship would be further cemented as we worked with partners within the Homelessness Housing Forum to ensure the 70+ rough sleepers were put into safe accommodation.

In terms of events, as you can imagine most of these have had to be postponed, the exception being the splendid VE Day celebrations on Friday 8th May, which were conducted virtually. Again the Borough Council played an important part as one of the partners in contributing toward the celebrations, which I enjoyed throughout the day through the power of the internet.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn

Leader of the Council