



Report of Leader of the Council

Northampton Borough Council

20th July 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 once again virtually, in light of the ongoing Government guidance to work from home wherever possible. Many of these activities and issues are referred to in Cabinet colleagues' reports.

Covid-19

It is over 17 weeks since the Coronavirus pandemic took hold in this country. So many things have changed in the way that we work, but also new opportunities have arisen to improve outcomes for so many people, particularly those more vulnerable across the Borough. In those early weeks it was very much about managing through the pandemic, however, as we have seen more stability come through, both in terms of managing the pandemic nationally and at a more local level, people's focus is now very much on the Recovery Phase.

A lot of the guidelines that we have been working to still remain, which includes working from home wherever we can, and therefore virtually all of the staff are still doing an excellent job based at home, with less than 40 based here in the Guildhall, because of the nature of their work, with rigorous distancing and cleaning precautions in place.

We Elected Members continue to work remotely, and I believe this seems to be working well. At present we don't see any need to consider a return back to the Guildhall, not least because the Government guidance encourages us to continue with the virtual meetings that we have become so accustomed to.

I have continued to keep a focus on the support for businesses, and specifically with regards to Scheme 1 of the Business Grants where we had just over £37m available to us to distribute to qualifying businesses. I am pleased to say that at the end of the first week in July we had given out £32.81m – a tremendous effort by finance and revs and benefits colleagues. The Government then recently announced a second phase of funding, the Discretionary Grant Scheme, where we had £1.7m to distribute. Once again, I am pleased to say that, with the excellent work being done by colleagues in Finance and Economic Growth, that we have paid out £1.187m to 200 businesses.

The importance of enabling the economy to kick start again should not be underestimated. I am therefore pleased, in my role as a Board member of the Town Centre BID, to be involved in the wider Northampton Town Centre Task Force, where we have been meeting regularly to support businesses, particularly those non-essential businesses that were able to reopen, and then more recently on 4th July the wider night time economy, a key strand of our overall business landscape here in Northampton. Again I must praise the range of officers across the Borough that have worked alongside partners in the Police, Health and other Local Authorities to ensure that these businesses have been able to open safely, observing the Covid-19 guidelines that have been issued by Central Government.

We do not underestimate the importance of our partners across the borough and therefore I have maintained regular contact with a number of them including the Leisure Trust, who at present, like all Leisure facilities across the country, are still unable to open, although we are hopeful that this will be changing in the coming weeks.

In terms of productivity, as you will have seen from the Cabinet meetings that we have held through Zoom, there is still a lot of work being concluded. Our agenda for July is good example of this, as it covers important areas such as Public Space Protection Orders, Housing Policy and ensuring the long-term sustainability of our beautiful Guildhall.

Future Northants Activity

With the reset of the Programme and the focus on 'Safe & Legal Plus', the activity is significantly increasing across the Programme as we work towards Vesting Day on 1st April 2021.

Thank you to those Members who joined the member briefing on 7th July. This was a comprehensive overview of progress, and included updates on the Unitary Programme, the integration of Health & Social Care, and the Children's Trust, and it provided the opportunity for NBC members to ask questions of the Senior Officers leading all of these areas of work. Further briefings are due to take place in the future, on a regular basis, and I would urge as many of you as possible to dial into these meetings where you can.

We have had a further meeting of the West Northants Executive Committee, which is the key decision-making body for the Shadow Authority, as it prepares the way for the new West Northamptonshire Council. These will continue on a monthly basis, right the way through until Vesting Day. At our most recent meeting we received updates on the Programme and also a Protocol with regards to the Disposal of Assets or spend over £100k that hasn't been budgeted for by each sovereign Council.

Task & Finish groups have been formed, made up of five Elected Members on each. I chair the Communications & Engagement group, which will maintain an overview of communications so that members, staff, partner organisations, residents and residents' groups are all kept aware of the progress towards the new council. We are now beginning work on the visual identity, including branding and logo, for the new West Northamptonshire Council, which will need to be carefully considered, and we will be looking to seek informally the views of the public, Elected Members and staff on some early designs in the near future.

I am also actively involved in the Vision and Values Task & Finish Group, alongside Cllr. Stone, and several meetings have taken place, starting to scope out what we would want to see as the Vision and the Values that need to be built into the DNA of the new organisation, as well as the behaviours that we would expect both Members and colleagues to display. Again, good progress is being made in this area.

The third Task & Finish group that I am actively involved in is the Senior Appointments, where the work primarily has been focussed on the process for recruiting the new permanent Chief Executive of the Council. The closing date for applications has now passed for the role, and we are now progressing the next stages including long-listing applicants, as well as planning for the more detailed interview and assessment process at the short-listing stage.

Outside of those more formal meetings, I have also had the opportunity to meet with the two Interim Statutory Officers supporting George Candler in his role as Interim CEO of the Shadow Authority. Susan Zeiss is the Interim Monitoring Officer and Martin Henry the Interim S151 Officer, and meeting with them both individually has helped me to understand more of their roles.

Similarly, the NBC Unitary Working Group, made up of cross-party members, recently had its first meeting since March, where the Chief Executive and I were able to take colleagues through a range of updates.

Economic Growth

Activity in this area continues at a pace and once again the Northampton Forward Board has continued to meet, particularly as we needed to submit the final Strategic Business Case for our bid into the Future High Street Funds. I am pleased to say that bid has now been submitted, where we are looking to secure over £12m worth of investment to regenerate one of the buildings in the Market Square, but more fundamentally to invest over £9m to transform the Market Square. You may remember that there was significant consultation in December 2019 and January of this year, and therefore we are confident that we have put forward the best submission we could, hopeful of hearing of a positive outcome later in the summer.

Separate to this and some time ago, we took a paper through Cabinet for a significant acquisition in Abington Street and I am pleased to say that this is likely to be concluded in the coming weeks. We have heard further news that, as part of the Town Fund, we will be able to access £1m of that straight away, which we intend to utilise to accelerate the works on this particular site and bring forward much-needed housing as part of our wider Masterplan of Town Centre living in the Borough.

Myself, the Chief Executive, the Acting Director of Economy & Assets and colleagues recently met with the Towns Fund team, a dedicated team funded through MHCLG, to work with us on the development of our Town Investment Plan. This plan is a prerequisite that needs to be complete before we can look to secure any funding. The opportunity for funding is still £25m, but also for exceptional cases bids can be submitted for up to £50m. Feedback from Government is that the strength of bids to these regeneration funds is an important factor, and an important part of a strong bid is being able to calculate and evidence clear economic benefit that will result from the public investment.

The Waterside Enterprise Zone is a key strand of our wider Growth agenda across the Borough and I chaired the most recent meeting in July, where again we were able to update the Board on progress on a number of schemes that sit within the Zone, including Four Waterside and further development that is anticipated at the Railway Station.

Sub-regional Activities

As we move to a period of stability, the Sub-regional meetings have started to increase again and, as I have mentioned before, it is important that Northampton is represented at these meetings to ensure that we are aware of future funding opportunities, and also that we, through myself, continue to make a strong case for further investment into Northampton. In the last few weeks I have attended a specific meeting around kick-starting the economy, entitled 'Beyond Lockdown' that was run through SEMLEP, as

well as one of their more regular meetings on Finance, Risk and Audit. I also attended the recent East Midlands Council meeting in July.

Other Activities

The importance of Culture is well advocated across the Borough, and therefore I have been particularly keen to stay in touch with the Royal & Derngate as they continue to remain closed in line with Government guidance. Through the Chief Executive, we have maintained close regular dialogue with Arts Council England to ensure that any potential funding that is available from the recently-announced Government support package does come to Northampton and our many important cultural organisations.

Similarly, the Chief Executive and I have had meetings recently with representatives of the Leathercraft Museum, currently based on the top floor of the Grosvenor Centre, with a view to establishing a National Centre for Leather here in the town. We continue to discuss potential sites that might act as a base for this exciting project.

Work continues in the new Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, and I was pleased to do a piece for BBC Look East, where we had the opportunity show the further progress on this incredibly impressive building. Covid-19 has stretched the time needed for the fit out and final phases, with necessary distancing precautions also making it harder for different strands of the work to be undertaken simultaneously, and members will recall that prior to covid-19 we were on schedule to reopen the museum on 20th June, so we are now anticipating it opening around the end of this year.

Similarly in terms of media, I have also spoken on the importance of funding for the Arts, our submission into the Future High Streets Fund, as well as Northampton's response to the easing of lockdown measures on the night time economy.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council