

Report of the Leader of the Council

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 4th November 2019

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

Further activity has been taking place with regards to the work on Future Northants (the new collective name for the Unitary activity). The Leaders' Oversight Board has met monthly in both September and October and at these meetings a regular update is received from colleagues from the Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) as well as for them to hear progress on our activity. Discussions have centred around the Structural Changes Order and the timing of when that will be laid in Parliament. We have been updated at both meetings that plans are in place for this to be finalised before Christmas.

The importance of the integration of Health and Social Care is a key strand of the work programme and further updates have been provided to the Leaders Oversight Board on progress with regards to this, as well as wider meetings with the 7 MP's across the County.

Work activity relating to the wider programme is now starting to increase and I was among a number of Leaders that attended a Discovery & Design workshop aimed at getting the views of Elected Members at an early stage into the design of both engagement with communities across the County as well as the high level structure design for Corporate Services.

The Chief Executive and I also met with Tony McArdle, one of the two Commissioners based at the County Council, and it was helpful to hear first-hand of progress being made as well as some of the work that still needs to be done between now and April 2021. The regular Cross Party Working Group has continued to meet and an all-Member briefing was also provided on the work so far in mid-September.

I have also been actively involved in the Community Governance Review, although more detail of this is contained in the Deputy Leader's report and it was a pleasure to attend the AGM of Northants County Association of Local Councils, the body that represents around 200 parish councils across the county, where a guest speaker from Cornwall, who had experienced the transfer to unitary there, seemed to support the view that there will be an increasingly important role for parish & community councils post-unitary.

Economic Development

There have been a number of Northampton Forward Board meetings in the last few weeks. Outcomes of the consultation were presented back and similarly how these have been reflected into the final Masterplan for the town. There was a further meeting of the cross-party Town Centre Regeneration Working Group on the details of the consultation and this all culminated in the Cabinet paper that formally signed off the Masterplan and the results of the consultation on the 16th October. The Masterplan is an 'indicative' plan, that is to say that it represents the ambitions that we have for the town, and reflects the changes that it is felt will be good for the town, including the views of residents and businesses. It does not contain yet much of the specific details of the schemes and projects that it describes, as these will each need more work to develop them further, and there will be a need for more consultation. However, it was important to take the Masterplan to Cabinet, as it's being adopted as a council

document not only adds weight to its importance and to our funding bids, but will allow it to be referred to in planning policy.

A full project team of professional advisers is now in place to cover the necessary skills and disciplines needed to develop the strategic business case, and to identify the priority areas that will need to be considered as part of the Future High Street Fund bid. The work cost of this team is largely being met by the initial design and development funds provided by the Government as part of the Future High Streets support. The timelines have been extended, with the outline Business Case needing to be sent to MHCLG by the middle of January, and the full Business Case submitted by the end of April, with an announcement expected in the summer of 2020.

The masterplan identifies five Opportunity Areas, one of which is Greyfriars. In the last few weeks, following a detailed feasibility study done on the site by property specialists Montagu Evans, we have publicised the outcomes of their report as well as providing a Member Briefing on the findings of the report. Whilst the report has identified that the site is challenging if we want to make it an area that really adds to the town, it remains a key opportunity area to be developed out as part of the wider masterplan work.

The council has a vital role to play in delivering the masterplan and improving the town, but cannot do this on its own, and so, as well as the work of partners through the Northampton Forward Board, it was great to visit a private sector project that is a part of delivering the ambitions of more residential accommodation in the Eastgate area, and to see the lovely apartments that GCS Construction have created at the top of Abington Street. By converting the first and second floors of a building (space that had been unused for thirty years since it was in use as a shoe factory), they have created great living spaces that retain many of the shoe heritage features of the former factory, such as wheels and pulleys, to create attractive homes consistent with our aims in the masterplan for this part of town.

It was wonderful to join a number of colleagues from the Business sector as well as the County Council, the University and colleagues from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport at the City Fibre launch on the 22nd October, and to describe how increased connectivity fits with our plans and aspirations for residents and businesses across the town. City Fibre's work to invest £40m into Northampton has already started, and over the next 2 years Northampton will be one of the best-connected towns in the UK, further enhancing its appeal as a place to live and do business in. I also visited a number of the locations where their cabling work is underway, to understand how this will be rolled out across the town, and to see how disruption can be kept to a minimum.

I have also held meetings with Paul Griffiths, Chief Executive of the Business Chamber, as we continue to work closely with them, ensuring that we stay well connected and networked with the wider Business community, and that through its membership of the Chamber, NBC continues to show support. Discussions have also taken place on the future provision of services that could be provided in the Guildhall Road Block. I am pleased that we have been able to support NN Contemporary, as they have to move out of their current location, with a short term lease, and we are keen to strengthen the cultural offer by utilising the building to the best of its ability, complementing the ongoing works at both the Museum and Art Gallery and Vulcan Works.

Investment in the town continues, and I met recently with Palace Capital, owners of Sol Central, and discussions included the new leisure operator that they have attracted, Gravity, who will be occupying 23,000 square feet at Sol, and whose indoor family activities include trampolining, indoor golf and climbing walls.

The Secretary of State recently announced the approval of the Roxhill Northampton Gateway Rail Terminal project at junction 15 of the M1, and following this I joined local groups and others at a meeting coordinated by Andrea Leadsom MP on next steps in relation to the project, with particular focus on minimising any negative impact on traffic and air quality.

Other activity

I have been fortunate enough to attend a number of civic, celebratory events and AGMs over the last few weeks. Of note were the Northampton Partnership Homes AGM in which I was able to receive the reports from their last full financial year, but also to hear of the positive housing developments that have both taken place and are proposed, over the next few years. I was also able to attend the Lowdown AGM, the Mayor's Charity, and to hear of the wonderful work that they have been undertaking in Northampton over a number of years. It was wonderful to be present at the Diwali Festival of Lights recently, as well as the Britain in Bloom celebrations that were held here at the Guildhall and the Leisure Trust Sports Awards. All wonderful celebrations of what is great in Northampton. The open day at Al Jamatul Muslimin of Bangladesh Mosque in St George's Street was a very enjoyable and informative event to attend, enabling myself and other councillors, along with a variety of organisations and civic leaders from across the county, to enjoy a tour of the building and to gain a deeper understanding of Muslim faith and worship, and as with the Northamptonshire Police Annual Community Supper, this showed that the various communities of Northampton are, in fact, one very strong community. I was also honoured to be amongst those councillors who represented the Council at the Mayor's Civic Service recently.

The Voluntary sector forum, hosted by Voluntary Impact Northamptonshire, was well attended, and a good opportunity for me to answer questions from voluntary organisations regarding unitary. I also made sure that I reiterated thanks on behalf of the whole council for the work that the sector does, and sought to reassure that the council, across all parties, sees the role of the sector as being vital to Northampton, both now and in the future.

Following a similar session earlier this year for last year's students, it was a pleasure to welcome the university's new MBA students to the Guildhall, along with the Mayor and the Chief Executive. Although the key function of these visits is to give the students an insight into local government operations and strategy, and to make them aware of a little of our proud history, we also ensured that we demonstrated the strong case for Northampton as a place to live and to do business, as these students represent a great source of talent that the town would benefit greatly from retaining.

Brackmills Industrial Estate is an important part of our economic geography in the town and I was pleased to sit down with Brackmills businesses recently to work through the parking challenges that have been experienced there, as well as separately meeting with colleagues from the County Council in relation to the recent on-street parking consultation.

Finally, on a wider sub-regional level, I am now attending East Midlands Councils' board meetings in addition to attendance at the South East Midland Local Enterprise Partnership Leaders Board meetings, ensuring that the voice of Northampton is heard, as wider, long-term strategic plans are put in place for the future growth of the region.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council