



Report of the Leader of the Council

Northampton Borough Council

Monday 5th November 2018

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

We await the Secretary of State's confirmation that he is minded to pursue the councils' proposal submission for unitary local government in Northamptonshire, but given the pressing timescales, a great deal of work continues to be done.

Further staff have been recruited to the Unitary Programme Team, using the money set aside by all of the councils, and that team of four people is based in the Guildhall.

The work is guided by regular meetings of the Leaders and Chief Executives of all councils, and also now by a Steering Group for the West and for the North. In addition, the section 151 Officers and the Monitoring Officers for the West and North are meeting regularly and following up a number of work-streams. In Northampton, our Cross-Party Working Group continues to be kept updated on progress, and the cross-party Community Governance Review Group, chaired by the Deputy Leader, is considering issues relating to local Community Councils / Town Council. One of the highlights for me of the work of the latter group is the identification of an approach that seems to have brought us certainty around the ability to have a Northampton Mayor, post-unitary, covering the full town and not just the area of a new Town Council.

As the work progresses, elected member involvement will be widened. Cllr. Larratt and Cllr. Hibbert will be joining me to represent Northampton at the West Steering Group meetings from the start of November, and there will be some workshops to which all members will be invited, in late November / early December. In addition, Task and Finish Groups will look at such areas as the draft constitution, details of the structural change order, etc., and these groups will include members cross-party.

The importance of balancing finances ahead of any possible unitary, which is a constant concern felt by all Northants council leaders, has meant that the NCC Stabilisation Plan has attracted a lot of attention. Along with other council leaders, I am concerned as to whether the Stabilisation Plan will indeed put NCC on a trajectory that will mean that local government finances are balanced in Northamptonshire by 2020. It is also of concern that a significant proportion of the savings projected relate to actions on behalf of the District & Borough councils, such as anticipated increases in the collection of business rates and council tax. This is not an area in which NBC have been highlighted as greatly under-performing hitherto, if fact reports to Audit Committee have suggested this to be an area of sound performance, and so the increase in 0.5% collections for Northampton targeted, in my view will not be realised.

In addition to the work continuing locally, myself and other leaders have met recently with both the Secretary of State, James Brokenshire MP, and with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for unitary, Rishi Sunak MP. The main focus of these meetings has been to ensure that we keep pushing progress on our four key 'asks' regarding unitary, which are help with transformation of services delivery (to improve services and reduce costs), help with the cost of transition to unitary, support on infrastructure to deliver the new homes and growth needed (to make unitary

councils financially sustainable), and the need for the NCC finances to be balanced (particularly in the light of the NCC historic debts and deficits).

Economic Development

On 16th October, I attended a conference in the Chinese city of Dalian, (paid for in full by Chinese Government) with whom members will recall the council signed a memorandum of understanding a month or two ago. A significant part of the day was taken with presentations by Chinese Government officials describing how they see links being forged between them and the other locations attending. Whilst Northampton was a recent joiner to this, I am pleased to report that we were allotted the same speaking slot as much larger locations, including the representative of the Northern Power-House.

My own key objectives for this visit were to promote Northampton and begin to seek for it to be recognised as a business location for Chinese investors, and to seek reassurance that some of the barriers that Northampton businesses see when looking to trade with China could be overcome. Through discussions with both the British Embassy in Beijing and also with Chinese officials, I was reassured by the steps that are being taken, most particularly within the designated commercial zone within Dalian, that support in such specific areas as patents and intellectual property is available, and that this makes the link with Dalian an excellent opportunity for businesses who might succeed in the Chinese market. I was also pleased to be involved in part in discussions that both the University of Northampton and Silverstone Circuit were able to have about potential new opportunities,

Beyond commercial cooperation, my discussions with the Mayor of Dalian, which is a vibrant city with a population of over 6 million residents, identified exciting opportunities for twinning type activities across cultural and educational themes, to be considered as part of the next steps.

The university, of course, has opened its doors to students at the new campus, and ahead of that it was a pleasure to attend the formal opening, and to see Fresher's Week take place on the market square. Positively, many local businesses are reporting a positive increase in trade as a result.

With the dramatic changes to shopping habits and town centres being no more pronounced than in Northampton, we are working extremely closely with the businesses of the town, especially through their collective body the town Business Improvement District, and we will look urgently and actively at the support for small businesses and for high streets that we understand will be announced in the Chancellor's budget.

Other Activity

Whilst many of the things I have been involved in are referenced in more detail in colleagues' cabinet member reports, some of my other recent activities of particular note include:

- Attending the splendid Ride for Hope reception
- Site tour of the museum, prior to handover of the site to the contractor
- Attending the highly successful Chamber Business Alliance Awards, which highlighted well the wide variety of exciting businesses in this area
- Attending the Northampton Partnership Homes Annual General Meeting, marked the 4th successful year for NPH
- Visiting, with the Mayor, the Church of the Latter Day Saints to celebrate with them the 50th anniversary of their building on the Harlestone Road
- Viewing the new Broadmead Church building and Topping Out ceremony
- Meeting with Muslim Leaders and representatives of other Faith Groups, regarding issues related to the need for burial sites

- Meeting with Trustees of 78 Derrigate, to see how the council can assist them in their ambitions to enhance the facilities for visitors, as well as improving accessibility, and the financial sustainability of the Trust
- Along with the Deputy Leader, attending the regular meeting of the Federation of Residents' Associations, to discuss a number of issues including the creation of Parish/Town Councils through the Community Governance Review
- Attending the Lord Lieutenant's Lecture on the role of Church buildings
- The High Sheriff Court Church Service, a particular pleasure as being the first formal event with our new Honorary Recorder
- Kinky Boots – I was thrilled to have the opportunity to see this wonderful show at the Derrigate Theatre
- Finally, it has been a particular pleasure to attend a number of recent NBC Staff Inductions. Although this included some of staff who have been part of our team for some time but have not been able to attend an induction, it is always a pleasure for me to take the time to learn more about them and the work they are doing for the council and for the town.

Councillor Jonathan Nunn
Leader of the Council