

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

Author:	Leader of the Council
Wards:	All
Locality Affected:	All
Parishes Affected:	All

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 To allow the Leader of the Council to outline how the Authority has performed in the first half of 2015/16 Municipal Year, towards the Council's priorities and targets.
- 1.2 To complement the Leader's Annual Report to Scrutiny as required by Article 6.02 of the Constitution.
- 1.3 Effective Scrutiny of the Council's Leader and Cabinet Members contributes towards the delivery of all the Council's policies and strategies.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is recommended to:

- 2.1 Note the work towards the priorities set for 2015/16.
- 2.2 Put relevant questions to the Leader of Council;
- 2.3 Decide if any changes to the Overview and Scrutiny work programmes are required as a result of the progress report; and
- 2.4 Decide if any further action is required.

3. Detail

Achievements in 2015

Vision, Priorities and Pledges

- 3.1 My main focus for the first part of the municipal year was completing the Vision, four priorities and thirty pledges. This was the culmination of over a year's work by Members and Officers to build on the Council's existing strategies and set a bold direction for the Borough. It sets a clear direction with which residents, businesses, stakeholders and staff can identify and align themselves. I am delighted that the Vision was approved by Council on 24th September 2015, with cross-party support.
- 3.2 Having been adopted the Council took the first steps towards embedding the Vision through a whole-day series of staff briefings and engagement at STEAM. Over 1200 staff took time to attend, ask questions, and leave their comments. I

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Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

would like to thank all the officers who made this day a success, particularly the professionalism of the Council's communications team members for their efforts.

- 3.3 However, adopting the Vision was just the beginning, as ensuring the priorities and pledges are delivered requires the support of many people and organisations, not just the Council.

Wichelstowe Joint Venture

- 3.4 In June 2015, Cabinet approved the creation of a joint venture with BDW Trading Ltd (Barratt) to develop Middle and West Wichel (Cabinet Minute 5, 2015/16 refers). This would allow the Council to secure quality development on the site and generate £43m income over the 20 years, which would both repay the debt incurred in providing the infrastructure and generate a surplus for other essential projects.
- 3.5 I am grateful to the officers and my Deputy Leader, Councillor Brian Mattock, for continuing to work on this and I remain confident that they will secure a positive outcome that will benefit Swindon for years to come.

Thamesdown Drive Extension

- 3.6 In October, along with Councillor Heenan, I met the Transport Minister, Andrew Jones MP, to discuss securing funding for the Thamesdown Drive Extension. Cabinet's position remains the same: we will spend money to support a business case, but it is for central government to provide the necessary capital funding for such a road.
- 3.7 The Minister was supportive of the principle behind what the Council is trying to do. We are preparing more information for the Department of Transport that we hope will lead to an appropriate announcement. However, at this stage no assurances have been given.

Local Plan and National Voice in Developing Planning Policy

- 3.8 Swindon Borough Local Plan was adopted unanimously by Council in March 2015 following a successful Examination and positive Inspector's Report. The Local Plan is one of the key policy documents in realising the Council's vision, particularly in the role of setting a framework for economic growth and securing the necessary infrastructure.
- 3.9 Councillor Toby Elliott, the Cabinet Member for Communities and Strategic Planning has been invited onto an 8-strong panel of experts by Planning Minister Brandon Lewis MP to look at how the Local Plans process can be streamlined. This confirms the positive feedback received by Department for Communities and Local Government on the consensus achieved in drawing up the Swindon Borough Local Plan. It also recognises how Swindon has responded positively to

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

the Government's growth agenda whilst enabling the local community to have a say in shaping their environment.

Cabinet Member Portfolios and Accountability

- 3.10 All Cabinet Members are scheduled to appear before the Scrutiny Committee for individual question and answer sessions about their portfolios. We are trying to use a common template so that Scrutiny Committee can focus its attentions effectively on both the strategic issues as well as look into operational matters.

Challenges for the Remainder of 2015/16

The Four Priorities and the Thirty Pledges

- 3.11 The next step for the Vision is to update the Council's Corporate Strategy and turn the high-level pledges into concrete actions and projects that we can measure. Once these specific projects have been defined we will have a rigorous performance measurement regime in place, which will include accessible "dashboards" on the Council's website so that Members, the public, and partners will be able to see what we have done on every pledge.
- 3.12 Staff are already being invited to review their own business plans to align them more closely to the pledges. All this will allow the Council to be held to account for what it is doing. I expect to see this dashboard in place before the end of the Municipal Year.
- 3.13 As with the 50 promises, Cabinet Members will be assigned responsibility for pledges that fall within their portfolios, which means that the Scrutiny Committee will be able to question them on specific issues and so provide transparency and accountability. In addition, I will request that all Cabinet decisions include a reference in the report to show how they are linked to the Vision, Priorities, and Pledges.

Recruiting a new Chief Executive

- 3.14 After nearly 9 years as Chief Executive, Gavin Jones is shortly to depart from Swindon to take up a new post as Chief Executive of Essex County Council. I am sure Members will join me in wishing him well.
- 3.15 My Cabinet colleagues and I have asked officers to start the formal recruitment process, using all relevant internal and external expertise to help us attract the right candidate. The interview process will have Member involvement through the Chief Officer Appointments sub-committee of the Appointments Committee, with Full Council having the final say on any decision about whom to employ.

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

Medium Term Financial Position

- 3.16 The short-term medium position will be challenging. Although the Council has delivered £100m of savings in the last five years, we have to make a further £58m over this year and the next two. While this will mean difficult choices for the Borough, it is necessary as part of the Government's overall plan to restore fiscal responsibility to the nation's public finances.
- 3.17 The government is reducing the general grant we receive so that by 2020 the Council will be living off its own means through Council Tax, Business rates, and other fees and charges. This means that more of the decisions that affect Swindon will be made locally. It will also allow more transparency of tasks that Whitehall requests of local government, and clarity about how that will be paid for. All too often this Council has been told that the money for a particular activity was simply included in the general revenue support grant.
- 3.18 This is also a great opportunity for us to reconsider what functions have to be delivered by the Council and what can be achieved better by other means. We currently allow the tax payer to bear the burden for a range of services that are better provided in the private sector, or by charities or not for-profit companies.
- 3.19 At the heart of these changes will be a move from formal, hierarchical control by the Council to a network of partnerships and influence. Members will need to act more as negotiators and facilitators rather than relying on a Council resolution. This is an enhancement of local democracy, as it will allow councillors to spend more time outside Council meeting rooms engaging with those in the communities we represent.

Community Governance Review

- 3.20 A number of parishes have requested a review of their own electoral arrangements such as the number of parish councillors or the size and number of wards. Government guidance recommends that it is prudent to carry out a community governance review of the whole borough, not just of those parishes that have requested it.
- 3.21 As Leader I am convinced that having decision made closer to the people most directly affected will result in the most effective and accountable outcomes. We have an opportunity to make local government more visible and more relevant to people's daily lives.
- 3.22 In addition, the Council has been working with some parish councils on pilot schemes to transfer StreetSmart services to the parish as part of a wider commitment to localism. The initial reports indicate that the parishes may be able to secure better quality of service without extra cost. It might be possible to extend these pilots further.

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

- 3.23 Given the two factors above, Cabinet and Council have taken the first steps towards a Community Governance Review of the whole Borough. While addressing specific issues relating to individual parishes, the review will also seek views about whether to introduce parish (town, or community councils) in the unparished parts of Swindon.
- 3.24 At this stage, the Council has no options to propose. This is an opportunity for residents, community groups, and councillors to submit their own views about whether to have parish councils. Once this initial stage has been completed, and the responses assessed, the Council will develop a set of proposals on which there will be a second consultation.

Combined Authorities

- 3.25 In late August 2015, Councils were encouraged to submit proposals for combined authorities to which the Government would negotiate the devolution of powers and responsibilities. This followed the initial scheme in Greater Manchester that received cross-party support.
- 3.26 We have held initial discussions with Wiltshire and the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership to see if there areas where we can combine so as to derive full benefit from the current devolution agenda without compromising our individual identity as Swindon.

Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

- 3.27 The Council is working with private benefactors to revise our funding bid to the Heritage and Lottery Fund. As part of that, we are setting up a Trust that will employ an appropriate senior official who will take charge of preparing the new submission. It is important to note that we are required to keep a Museum and Art Gallery open while we seek funding for a replacement. Since much of the art was donated to the Council under covenants, the works are not assets that can simply be sold off.
- 3.28 The joint working with the Museum and Art Gallery's supporters is a good illustration of one of the key principles of the Council Vision. As a local authority, alone we could not provide sufficient resources to make a credible bid, even with the cross-party support that the project has received. By building alliances beyond the Council, we have created a wide base of support that can evince to the Heritage Lottery Fund that the Borough is serious about providing a sustainable future for our cultural and heritage treasures.

New Eastern Villages

- 3.29 New The New Eastern Villages (NEV) is the largest planned greenfield development in the country. Recognising the scale of challenge and opportunity this represents, the Council has assembled a dedicated multi-disciplinary NEV

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

team to manage the delivery of a high quality sustainable urban extension in accordance with the adopted Swindon Local Plan 2026. In order to meet the economic and housing needs of the Borough, the team will ensure that development at the NEV takes place at the right time, and is supported by excellent infrastructure provision. The first strategic intervention that will be delivered by the team is a capacity enhancement scheme for Greenbridge Roundabout. The works, which are part funded by the Department for Transport, will commence on site in March 2016, and will be completed in advance of any new development at the NEV.

- 3.30 Cabinet has also established a cross-party Cabinet Member Advisory Group to support delivery of the NEV, and continues to work proactively with adjacent authorities to ensure the cumulative impact of development is appropriately assessed and mitigated.

Securing a sustainable future Lydiard House and Park

- 3.31 On the 30th October 2015, a marketing process began to find a partner who can help us both preserve and improve Lydiard House and Park, with a view to reducing the Council's annual subsidy of £450,000 and giving it a sustainable future within the Council's ownership.
- 3.32 To explore ways in which to make Lydiard House and Park more sustainable, the Council has appointed independent property advisor Bilfinger GVA to lead a marketing process to seek expressions of interest from potential partners. The aim is to preserve this key asset for the people of Swindon and give it a sustainable future, within the Council's ownership, and expressions of interest will be sought from national commercial and not-for-profit organisations as well as local community groups,
- 3.33 This is an important step in seeking an alternative market-led solution to secure a future for this regionally important facility and builds on the success of the Council's Leisure and Culture Commissioning Change Programme, which has already seen the successful leasing of the borough's leisure and golf facilities during 2014.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 There are no alternative options; Article 6.02 of the Council's Constitution requires the Leader to submit a report.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 There are no financial or procurement implications in this report.

Leader of the Council's Half-Year Update

Scrutiny Committee

Date: 23rd November 2015

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 The author has considered legal and human rights legislation in the preparation of this report. It is considered that the report's recommendations are compatible with Convention Rights.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.3 Where appropriate, these are addressed in the body of the report.

Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 Full Diversity Impact Assessments (DIA) will be undertaken on proposals listed in this report when they are included in Cabinet reports for Members to determine whether to implement them. Hence, no DIA was undertaken at this time.

Risk Management

- 5.5 None

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

8. Appendices

- 8.1 None