

Leader's Statement

31 January 2023

Welcome

As we meet for the first Full Council of this new year I'd like to thank everyone for their dedication and efforts in 2022 and I look forward to working with you all to make 2023 another positive and progressive year for Blaby District Council and for its residents.

Financial Settlement

The budget settlement we have received for the next financial year provides some positive news, in that it is better than might have been expected.

Blaby District Council does, however, face considerable financial challenges in the current year and beyond, with ongoing uncertainty over the future level of central government funding. Our running costs have increased significantly due to rising inflation and increased demand for services. In addition to this, some of our key income streams have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

This situation is forecast to continue with a funding gap next year and more significant funding gaps on the horizon between 2024/25 and 2027/28, during which period the government plans to review its funding for local government. However, the Council has plans in place to transform services with a view to reducing costs and generating additional income to minimise the impact on residents.

Our residents and businesses must always be at the heart of what we do, and we will focus not just on those statutory services we must deliver, but also those other services, which truly add the greatest value.

While we continue to face challenges on many fronts, I remain both optimistic and confident that we can meet these to ensure the future financial sustainability of the Council.

Surprise Licensing Checks

Officers from our licensing and community safety teams joined forces with Leicestershire Police to carry out a series of surprise inspections on pubs and private hire taxis.

We wanted to make sure all aspects of their licences were being complied with, and in the case of taxis, that the vehicles were safe to be carrying passengers.

All pubs passed the checks but it was disappointing that only two of the six private hire vehicles that were checked at our Whetstone Depot passed without issue—this goes to show how important it is that we as a council remain vigilant to ensure the safety of our residents.

Car Park Works

It has been a busy period for us recently in upgrading some of the District's most well-used parking areas.

Resurfacing works have taken place at Enderby Road and Johns Court car parks in Blaby village with potholes repaired and line markings reinstated where necessary.

We have also carried out much needed repair works to the large overflow car park at Fosse Meadows – one of our most popular green spaces.

We hope this will contribute to an improved visitor experience for those shopping in Blaby and visiting our popular parks.

HMP Fosse Way Extension

In December the development of a new 250-capacity cell block extension to HMP Fosse Way was approved at Planning Committee, along with an office block, multi-use games area and a further 80 parking spaces on the former Glen Parva Young Offenders' Institution site.

The building of the main prison block is well underway with some 230 jobs and 16 apprenticeships created thanks to this stage of construction alone – this provides a much-needed boost to our local economy.

The main prison is due to open this year with the creation of some 600 jobs while the extension is expected to open in 2025.

Sycamore Street Appeal Dismissed

We were delighted when the Planning Inspectorate upheld our decision to refuse planning permission for Gypsy pitches on land off Sycamore Street in Blaby.

The decision came after the applicants appealed our original refusal, resulting in a two-day hearing at our offices in September.

Following the hearing and after weighing up all the information before him, the Government Planning Inspector, Jonathan Price, dismissed the appeal in November, stating the Gypsy pitch proposal was “entirely discordant with the otherwise undeveloped and thickly vegetated character of this prominent stretch of land fronting the grounds to Blaby Hall and Bouskell Park.”

He also stated the proposed pitches and associated hardstanding and dayroom facilities would be a ‘highly incongruous feature’ and would cause ‘heritage harm’.

This judgement justified our original decision and vindicated the robust policies we have in place to prevent development which will harm the local area.

New Street Planning Application Refused

Also in November planning committee councillors were asked to determine whether a site at the back of 43 New Street, Blaby, was suitable for the construction of 12 new homes.

An application to demolish number 43 and build seven homes on this land was refused in 2021, was taken to the Planning Inspectorate on appeal and subsequently thrown out by the presiding Inspector.

Our reasoning then was that the layout and design of the development would not allow our refuse and recycling lorries adequate access to the site to collect bins.

The same concerns surrounded this fresh application for 12 homes and so again the application was refused in line with our policies to ensure the District is protected from poorly designed development.

Cork Lane Public Inquiry Decision Released

The Planning Inspectorate made its decision in relation to Blaby District Council's refusal of an application to build homes off Cork Lane, Glen Parva. The decision was to approve the reserved matters application for the development of 165 homes on the former landfill site off Cork Lane in Glen Parva.

This is a complicated site and a complex planning issue and I want to thank all in the planning team for their hard work and dedication in dealing with this matter.

The decision came following a public inquiry held last November at our offices. It means the development can progress but this is certainly not the end of the process.

The developers will now need to submit a further application to us to explain exactly how they will deal with the risks associated with contamination of the site due to its previous use as landfill.

We will consider this very carefully to ensure the developer can take adequate steps to address any threats posed to any future occupants and existing residents.

Christmas Fair

In December we held our very first Christmas Fair in the Council offices with local businesses hosting stalls, a DJ playing festive music and a craft workshop where visitors could create their own handmade gifts.

There was even an opportunity for the families who came along to visit Santa and his Elf and receive a little present to take home.

An enormous amount of time and effort went into organising this inaugural festive event and I'm glad to say it was a huge success.

Well done to everyone involved who helped bring some seasonal cheer to local residents and put smiles on the faces of those who attended.

Corporate Peer Review

In December we had a progress review visit from Peer Review team.

They were able to hear about how we were responding to their eight key recommendations and what actions had been taken so far.

We have received the draft written report and the Peer's have seen how positively Blaby District Council has committed to addressing all the recommendations and has made excellent progress.

LGA Healthcheck of Communications

The Council invited the LGA to undertake a one-day health check review of the Council's communications activity, to give an honest assessment of its strengths and weaknesses following the Corporate Peer Challenge Review held earlier in the year. The site visit took place on 30 November 2022 and the LGA health check team reviewed a range of information and also spoke to more than 30 people including a range of council staff and councillors, in eight meetings and focus groups.

The recommendations arising will be set out in a detailed report, the initial feedback was extremely positive with some specific areas of improvement to focus on.

The team who carried out the review were impressed with the Communications Team and the high standards that the team adheres to particularly as it has a remit that is wider than many other council communications teams of similar size. The LGA team praised the amount and quality of the content being produced and said that the team is hardworking and led by a manager who is well respected.

The feedback highlighted that good communication is everyone's responsibility and identified 11 areas for improvement including improving internal communications to ensure the success of the transformation programme, identifying key priorities for communications and the creation of a new overarching communications strategy. The areas for improvement will be incorporated into an action plan to be delivered over the coming months to build on our success.

Warm Spaces Partnerships

We are acutely aware our residents are facing challenges due to the rising cost of living and so we have teamed up with community partners this winter to offer a host of 'warm spaces' for people who may be lonely, vulnerable or concerned about increasing energy costs.

Our very own Brooks Room here at the Council offices is playing host to a series of monthly warm space sessions. The first was this month and there are sessions in February and March.

We have also provided grants to help neighbourhood organisations open up local centres with some organisations using the money to buy new equipment such as kettles and urns while others have put it towards the cost of food and beverages.

Eight centres have received council funding after submitting requests and we hope to hear from more local groups who want to join the initiative and help residents.

Be A Councillor Events

May 2023 sees our District Elections and residents from across the area will be selecting their Councillors for the 2023-2027 term.

Democracy is an absolutely vital part of any Council and that's why we want as many people as possible to stand to be a Councillor in May.

We ran two Be a Councillor events, a Microsoft Teams virtual session in December and a face-to-face session at our offices a couple of weeks ago, so people could learn more about being a Councillor and how the Council works.

Both events were well attended and enthusiastically received and I hope this enthusiasm will translate into a diverse number of new candidates standing for our upcoming elections.

Positive Leisure Centre Performance in 2022

I'm pleased to report that our Leisure Centres continue to perform well despite the difficult environment in which they operate - Covid closures, landfill gas issues, energy prices and cost of living.

Enderby Leisure Centre averaged around 50,000 visits a month in 2022 - up on the previous year; fitness members have increased to 3,751 - up 10% on the previous year; more than 2,000 children are having swimming lessons every week and at Huncote Leisure Centre, since reopening, we have recovered 80% of the 3G pitch bookings and have around 100 new members.

On top of the Leisure Centres performance, officers continue to drive additional value from the contract by working with SLM to support some of our most vulnerable residents by delivering our Exercise Referral Scheme, free memberships for Ukrainian refugees and dedicated sessions for people with Parkinson's, Care Leavers and young people with disabilities.

Archer's Festive Tractor Run

I'm pleased to say two of our bin lorries took part in the annual Archer's Festive Tractor Run which this time around was raising money for the Leicestershire MS Therapy Centre and LOROS, Hospice Care for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland.

Our lorries joined hundreds of tractors and other heavy vehicles, all festooned with festive lights, on a tour of local villages including Blaby, Whetstone, Cosby and Countesthorpe.

This is always an amazing community event which brings out the crowds and raises money for fantastic causes and we are proud to support it. So far this year's fundraising total is around £29,500.

Community Awards 2022

It was a privilege to be the compere for the climax to our 2022 Community Awards - the prize giving ceremony at the Council offices on 19 January 2023, with nearly 100 representatives from our voluntary sector in attendance to celebrate.

The awards are our way of recognising the huge contribution of volunteers and community groups and organisations within the district and there were three categories this time round - Volunteer of the Year, Young Volunteer of the Year and Community Group of the Year - which attracted 23 individual volunteer nominations and 11 groups.

The judging panel chose Darren Callis as Volunteer of the Year 2022. Darren is head coach at Blaby and District Spartans Inclusive Football Club and was nominated by a member of the club.

His nomination highlighted his commitment to encouraging young adults with a range of disabilities to get involved in football, instilling confidence and seeing the footballer first, not the disability.

The judges chose Kiya Kanani as their Young Volunteer of the Year 2022. Kiya raised £35k for childhood cancer awareness and organised fundraising activities for other charitable causes, including for Ukrainian families joining her school.

She was nominated in recognition of these incredible efforts as well as her strength in overcoming personal struggles and her ability to inspire her peers.

It was impressive that more than 3,000 members of the public got involved in voting for their community group of the year with the winning group being Epworth Forest Juniors Football Club, based in Leicester Forest East. The club has a particular focus on promoting girls' participation in football as a force for improving self esteem as well as health and wellbeing.

The ceremony was a fantastic event, made particularly special by hearing the volunteer stories. It was an honour to spend the evening with so many truly kind-hearted and generous members of our community.

Energy Saving Tips

The cost of living remains a key concern for many of our residents so we are always keen to provide as much information as possible to help them through these challenging times.

The Government has recently launched a nationwide television advertisement campaign to encourage people to take simple steps to reduce their energy use, reduce bills and cut their carbon footprint.

In Blaby we were ahead of the game and in tandem with two initiatives, OFGEM #EnergyAware and Nesta's Money Saving Boiler Challenge, we updated our website last year to highlight key energy saving information - such as turning down the thermostat on the household boiler, rather than just turning down the central heating dial.

We will continue to promote key energy saving messages, hopefully encouraging residents to take actions which will not only help themselves but also contribute to us being a 'greener' District.

Carbon Literacy Success

Here at Blaby District Council we pride ourselves on our awareness of the green agenda and strive to work and deliver services ever more sustainably.

Part of that has involved organising carbon literacy training to some of our staff, to embed awareness of climate change and the impacts of everyone's everyday actions.

Following this we have now received a Bronze level accreditation from the Carbon Literacy Trust, a visible 'badge' which shows that as an organisation we are both committed to Carbon Literacy and serious about maintaining our low-carbon culture.