

**Leader's Statement to Annual Council
Wednesday 18 May 2016**

Madam Mayor

I would like to start with congratulations to two of our member colleagues in the Chamber tonight.

Firstly to welcome a familiar face back to the Council, Cllr Denis O'Flynn. Congratulations on your election to represent Heaton ward, I'm sure your colleague, Cllr Darvill, will welcome working alongside you.

And congratulations to Cllr Barbara Matthews who has reached 30 years of continuous service as a councillor – no mean feat of endurance!

Madam Mayor although it has been the practice for the Leader to deliver a report to this meeting I do not propose to deliver a long and comprehensive account of all that has taken place over the past 12 months. This reflects the fact that I endeavour to bring members up to date as to the main current developments at each full Council meeting.

I would however Madam Mayor like to take the opportunity to summarise and review some of the particular achievements which have been recorded and some of the challenges which we have faced and are still facing.

As with most areas we have our share of advantages and disadvantages. With over 50 per cent of our borough being Green Belt and with 108 parks and open spaces and substantial sports and leisure facilities in place and in progress, with schools in high demand, with the sub-regional hospital, with a major retail centre and major road and rail links and hubs available to our residents there is much to commend our area as a place in which to live. Being within easy commuting distance to Central London and having Crossrail and 8 train stations (and soon a ninth) and with a growing London population there is increasing demand for our homes. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the past year has seen significant increases in house values and rents.

A year ago it was possible to find rental properties available within the Housing Benefit Rent Cap. I am advised that that is not now the case, and we have for example 2 bedroomed apartments being offered at some 40 per cent above that cap.

The advantages of our area and our housing having been reasonably priced in relation to London as a whole have meant that we have experienced over the last couple of years noticeable outward migration to us. We have also had the largest net inflow of school aged children in London.

It may be that with the movement in rents and prices these trends will change although the new building development and rising birth rates will continue to increase population projections.

The increase in numbers brings the disadvantage or challenge of increased demand for services. This is at a time of national austerity and budget cuts.

The population increases and our location bring also the disadvantage of heavier traffic and intensifying car parking pressures. It will come as no surprise that we have the largest percentage of car ownership among London boroughs.

Against this general background how then has the Council coped over the past 12 months? I am pleased to report that, despite the many challenges and with some excellent work from our staff, we have examples of good progress.

- The Romford Leisure Centre Development – it is with an enormous amount of pleasure that I can report that the works on the Leisure Centre have begun as I predicted at our last meeting. This development has been long awaited, so long that I suspect Cllr O'Flynn remembers it from his last residency in this Chamber, so it is very gratifying to know it has begun and is on track for delivery in early 2018. I appreciate some members may wish to forget about the prospect of eating their hats when this happens. I hope that even they will welcome the facilities which will enhance Romford Town Centre and provide first rate facilities for our budding sport enthusiasts across the whole borough and our increasing population.

- These facilities will also be augmented by the new £3m sports park at Broxhill which should open in the next couple of months.
- Harold Hill will follow Rainham in having a brand new library and how pleasing it was to learn that 200 volunteers have come forward to work in our libraries. This public-spirited enthusiasm is a credit to our borough.
- The visitor centre at Hornchurch Country Park is up and running.
- The plans for the Rainham Housing Zone and Beam Park scheme are moving on apace with agreement on the Masterplan and Planning Framework which sets the vision and design principles for the area as it develops. With the friendly cooperation of our neighbouring borough of Barking and Dagenham we are on course to provide much needed new housing and major improvements for the benefit of existing residents in that part of our borough.
- And in the north of the borough, securing the funds for the Romford Housing Zone has meant that the Masterplan and Planning Framework can now start to be developed and consulted on for revitalisation of central Romford.
- Havering, along with Redbridge and Barking and Dagenham, are currently working with our colleagues in the local health sector, on the bid for a Health Devolution pilot. This bid will be informed by consultation with key stakeholders across all three boroughs and will aim to address some of the health concerns we all have. It is a major task to devise a business case at all and certainly by the end of July. It is therefore very kind of Cheryl Coppell to agree to continue helping the 3 boroughs on this following her retirement.
- Our OneSource operation in partnership with Newham is progressing strongly and has been joined by our neighbours in Bexley who we have warmly welcomed. The projected savings to the Council are being achieved and exceeded.
- Members will know that Havering is representing London at the Britain in Bloom competition later this year but one of the reasons for this is the very good work done on environmental planting. An example of this is Ludwigschafen Place which is planted with species that filter pollution and contribute to cleaner air for us now and for the future.
- Our programme of securing Green Flags for our parks is also proceeding strongly.

- In Housing our void to re-let periods have fallen dramatically and upon external inspection the housing service has been found to be improving rapidly although there is still progress to be made.
- And thinking of the future, I would like to thank our schools and residents for their support, patience and forbearance in securing much needed additional school places for our younger residents. From our staff point of view it must have been an organisational nightmare and they have worked wonders. Despite the large increase in numbers this year 88% of pupils have been allocated their first choice of school – a truly remarkable result.
- Congratulations also to our primary schools for coming 7th in the whole country for achieving level 4 and above.
- Finally a thank you to those who have made it possible to continue valued public events despite reduced budgets. These have included the Havering Show, the Business Awards, Armed Forces Day, Remembrance Sunday, Holocaust Day, the Christmas lights switch on and celebrations in our local centres and the Queen's Beacon event.

So as you can see Madam Mayor, there is a lot to look forward to and to be proud of. But obviously there remain serious challenges facing the Council over the next two years, with some of the most significant that will require this Chamber's consideration being:

- Balancing the budget in the face of undoubtedly further cuts in Government grants and funding while still meeting the demand-led needs of those who are the most vulnerable in our borough. We expect to continue to be limited in the tax that we can raise and we are in any event fully aware of the need not to overburden hard pressed families with excessive tax increases.
- With a large elderly population – the oldest population in London, with new Government imposed obligations, and with large increases in the numbers of children the pressures on our budgets have continued to grow. Our responsibility to those vulnerable residents to whom we owe a duty of care is a heavy one which demands our full attention. This will be particularly challenging.

- The Government's plans to move to Business Rates retention and a Fair Funding Formula will need to be closely followed. "Fair" will need to be what it says as we do not think that we have been fairly treated by successive governments. The Local Growth and Jobs Bill was announced in today's Queen's Speech.
- In pursuing the national policy of channel shift and computerisation and the aim of efficiency we shall need to be mindful and sensitive of the needs of those in our community who find this means of dealing with the Council difficult or impossible.
- There is sure to be an increased impact of road traffic. We are, as I have said, already the borough with the highest percentage of car ownership in London and the issues arising from this will not diminish. Problems at school times and elsewhere will need to be addressed notwithstanding restrictions on enforcement activity.
- Our statutory duty to deal with homelessness has become a dramatically increasing burden with rising rents and larger numbers to assist. With limited funds this will have to be studied carefully.
- There will be the need to cope with changing Housing budgets with progressive social rent reductions and to meet the challenge of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 which received the Royal Assent last week.
- We will be continuing to address the problems caused to some residents by HMOs and some of their occupants with use of the Article 4 direction, the landlords' registration scheme and Community Safety action.
- Government plans for expanding academy status and our schools and for Adoption and Fostering as headlined in the Queen's Speech for legislation today will need to be tracked closely and planned for in Children's Services. The Children and Social Work bill and the Education for All bill were announced in the Speech.
- And the remaining stages of our Local Plan process will be addressed during the period ahead with particular regard to our Green Belt. The Neighbourhood Planning and Infrastructure bill also announced today will need to be considered.

Madam Mayor, these lists are not exhaustive but I am pleased to have been able to update members with examples of positive progress on some tricky issues and to highlight some of the challenges that will have to be faced over the coming 12-24 months.

I would like to thank all my Cabinet colleagues for their tireless efforts in their areas of work and for enabling policies to be put in place to make this progress and to tackle the challenges that we face.

I have already paid tribute to the work of Cheryl Coppel as our Chief Executive. She has lived with our successes and our problems throughout, and her wisdom, skill and hard work have been of great value to us. She has been ably supported by her teams of officers including Andrew Blake-Herbert, and as we face the difficult times ahead it is good to have him at the helm.

So Madam Mayor thank you for your forbearance and let us look forward to your year in office with renewed fortitude and good heart.