

MIKE OLLEY



United front on homelessness

MIKE OLLEY notes how local politicians from both main parties came together to intelligently discuss a modern-day scourge.

LOCAL politicians ... don't you just love 'em all? We shouldn't dismiss the value they can bring, not only to their party, but to all of us.

Another important discussion at last week's meeting of the West Midlands Combined Authority, chaired by elected mayor Andy Street, was on homelessness. This is a modern-day scourge that you really think we would have sorted out by now, but not so.

Bringing his well-honed life experiences to politics was Cllr Kristofer Wilson, the Tory leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth council.

He pointed out the Government gives £95 a week to councils to look after each homeless person in temporary accommodation, yet it costs at least £100 a day.

Cllr Wilson's day job is courts manager to the courts service, a position which places him in charge of the region's bailiffs.

Sadly, he recounted, he has too much experience of witnessing people becoming homeless.

His compassionate advice: don't be an ostrich.

When you get into problems, face up to them, swiftly. It can prevent you from being kicked out of your home.



West Midlands mayor Andy Street (inset) chaired a meeting on homelessness

He also mentioned that over Christmas bailiffs would not be evicting anyone from their home, although evictions would pick up again in the new year. So sad.

Another contribution was from Simon Foster, Labour's Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands.

He described his old job as a legal aid and housing rights solicitor and offered his worldly experience on the evils of homelessness. He told those assembled that it was all down to a lack of affordable housing, a lack of legal aid, thus denying people access to justice, and that no-fault evictions are allowed in the private sector.

I can only endorse the worthy, cross-party contributions from Cllr Wilson and Commissioner Simon.

Well done again, mayor Andy, for a beautifully chaired meeting.

■ When watching Birmingham City Council's cabinet meeting online the other day, I suddenly realised that most of our male civic leaders no longer wear jackets or ties.

To be smartly dressed was a given when I was a councillor, albeit that was many years ago.

But in November 2023, I noted that even the leader of the council had no tie. As for the leaders of the two opposition parties, plus the deputy of the Tories, they were brazenly sporting just open-necked shirts. No jackets in sight!

Thankfully, Cllr Majid Mahmood (Labour, Bromford & Hodge Hill), a notable solicitor of our great city, was keeping standards up with a

delightful well-tailored blue suit, magnificently coordinated with a matching shirt and tie.

■ Talking of civic pride, it has no better champion than football, a sport so deeply rooted in our culture.

How many of you, I wonder, share my belief that Walsall FC, the Saddlers, are the very best footy team in the Midlands, and most probably the entire world. Yes, I know we play in League Two, and what a glorious league that is, but we will be back in League One before you know it.

I recall going to Wembley with Walsall back in 2015 to watch them nearly lift the Johnstone's Paint Trophy in a final with Bristol City in the final. This was the only time we have been to Wembley, and was an occa-

sion that will never be forgotten. In those days, our average home gate was little more than 3,000 and yet at Wembley we must have had 30,000 or more fans. Where did they all come from?

Civic pride in their hometown team drove them there. What other thing attracts thousands of citizens to assemble to celebrate their locality more than football on such a regular and enduring basis?

I'm currently so proud of my club, as this Saturday we will be on TV for a third consecutive game in a row, in the FA Cup, 12.30pm on BBC1.

Even the Villa or the Blues don't get this level of exposure, I'm thinking.

This weekend's game is against Alfreton Town FC, who play in the sixth tier, two leagues below us.

But it's game on, and whilst I remain supremely confident of Walsall's inevitable victory, I'm also keeping my fingers crossed.

As we would say UTS (up the Saddlers).

■ From civic pride back to politics ... Last week's budget, one would have thought, was a great opportunity for the Tories to boost themselves for next year's general election.

Chancellor Jeremy Hunt told the nation that he was introducing tax reductions, but the Office for Budget Responsibility said that was not really the case.

The opinion polls agreed, and the Tories dropped another point or two. Oh dear...

■ Mike Olley served on Birmingham City Council from 1991 to 2005, when he was made an Alderman.

THE BEST OF GREGGS IN YOUR FREEZER




ANY 4 £10

SAVE £4




21 TO CHOOSE FROM

LOWERING PRICES

Iceland

the food WAREHOUSE

DELIVER TODAY

TAKEAWAY FOR FREE

