



Leader's Report to Council – 29th July 2015

There have been many developments since the Council's AGM in May.

I would like to take this opportunity to formally welcome the three councillors who were elected to represent Areley Kings & Riverside on 9 June, one of course is a very familiar face and two new members and I look forward to working positively with them all as with other members of the Council.

I am very pleased to report that the work on the public realm improvements in Kidderminster town centre is progressing well and I am sure members would join me in welcoming the modern and fresh look that the new paving gives to Vicar Street and other areas. We look forward to completion of the works in the coming months. The Cabinet has also taken steps to support the important development of the Western Gateway, setting a clear deadline for landowners to reach agreement with the developers. The expansion of Weavers Wharf will bring much needed regeneration to this part of Kidderminster, including the demolition of Crown House. It is right that we should be ready to use our compulsory purchase powers to realise this major private sector investment – at no cost to the Council.

Work on the new leisure centre at Silverwoods is progressing well. I was pleased to attend the launch event, together with the Chairman and our Project Team, when a time capsule was buried by pupils of local schools and to meet senior representatives of our key partners. The event was attended by the chief executive and directors of Places for People, the owners and general manager of Pellikaan Construction and a senior manager from Sport England which has provided £2m towards the project. The next event will be the topping out ceremony in the autumn and the project is currently on schedule to complete in the summer of 2016.

Work on replacing the car park at Wyre Forest House has been successfully completed by Thomas Vale's contractors since the last meeting of Council. I would like to thank members, staff and tenants for their forbearance during the disruption.

Wyre Forest District Council works through many partnerships to deliver its objectives. Another example is Worcestershire Regulatory Services which was created as a shared service in 2010 and has successfully delivered significant savings for all the councils in Worcestershire. Partnerships develop and, in this case, proposals will come before Cabinet and Council in September to agree a new partnership under which Worcestershire County Council will cease to be represented on the joint committee (although trading standards will still be delivered by staff of Worcestershire Regulatory Services) and the district councils will continue to have two representatives each on the committee.

Since 2011 we have been active members of the Worcestershire and of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnerships. Members will be aware from media coverage of the proposal to create a West Midlands combined authority by April 2016. Wyre Forest is one of many councils that have been invited for discussions regarding these proposals. It remains to be seen what the functions and responsibilities of the combined authority will be, and the basis on which councils outside the metropolitan area might join.

A similar process is under way among the Worcestershire councils looking at whether to create a Worcestershire combined authority. Work has recently started on the economic case for such a body.

By way of background, combined authorities are bodies created by Parliament and allow formal joint decision-making on a range of issues from economic development and transport through to almost any public service as a result of the Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, which is currently before Parliament. They are also a vehicle for securing devolution of powers and funding streams from Government and Government agencies, so that they are under more local control. They are not about local government reorganisation, although there is an expectation that they will make a contribution to public service reform, in particular changing how some services are delivered to reduce their cost and improve outcomes and looking at other opportunities to join up services and budgets. A decision by Wyre Forest to join a combined authority will not mean restructuring into unitary authorities.

I would like to stress that no decisions have been made yet and it will not be until the autumn or possibly later that we will consider whether or not Wyre Forest should join one or both combined authorities. Any decision that is taken will be made by Full Council.

Finally I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Councillor Fran Oborski on being recognised by Her Majesty The Queen in the Birthday Honours List in receiving her MBE. Fran's political and public service is unparalleled in the history of Wyre Forest District Council, extending to a period before I was born! It is a real pleasure to see Fran honoured in this way.

Cllr Marcus Hart
Leader of the Council