

Council, 13 May 2020

Leader's announcements

I am sure there will be unanimous support for tonight's motion of thanks to the very many staff in the NHS, Council and a wide range of public and private sector organisations for all that they are doing to support local residents and businesses during these exceptional times.

Colleagues can continue to read about the messages of thanks and tributes that staff are receiving in Wyred Weekly. I was pleased earlier today to be able to issue a press notice about council tax reliefs worth up to £150 that staff have processed for nearly 5,000 deserving households in Wyre Forest who receive support under our council tax reduction scheme.

Members were grateful for the two briefing notes that Tracey Southall provided to give an initial view about the financial impact for the Council. A formal report for Cabinet has now been issued for its meeting on 20 May to give the latest information for members and for the public: we need to be candid that, if the Government does not meet the bulk of the extra costs and lost income faced by this Council, our reserves will deteriorate and it will accelerate the point at which we have to reduce expenditure on services. We will commence discussions again soon with Town Councils about the localism agenda. If we are to avoid some discretionary services ceasing or being significantly reduced, the probability is that localism will have to move faster and that Town Councils will have to make a greater financial contribution sooner than had been assumed in the medium term financial strategy.

Discussion among the Worcestershire Leaders has already focussed on how councils can best support the economic recovery of the county. The economic impact is severe, with some projections suggesting a contraction in GVA of 35% or more. It would be rash to assume that this will be recovered swiftly or in full, and it would equally be unrealistic to think that local government could afford the interventions that might enable all the impact to be reversed. Indeed, the full impact in terms of job losses will probably become clear as the Government's furlough scheme is withdrawn. Local government, working with the LEPs and other partners, will need to focus on those interventions that might have the biggest impact.

The Corporate Leadership Team is working on a recovery plan for the Council and its services, taking account of the flurry of guidance which has emerged since the Prime Minister's statement on Sunday. CLT's message for staff on Monday was that current arrangements for working from home are going to continue for the foreseeable future. This is the best way forward to help protect the health of staff and their loved ones at home. Indeed the Prime Minister said "Work from home if you can, but you should go to work if you can't work from home" and the position being adopted is consistent with that. Likewise, the guidance may mean that it will be a considerable time before we can revert to face-to-face meetings for Councillors.