

**Wyre Forest District Council**

**Leader's announcements Council, 9 December 2020**

COVID-19 continues to affect local communities and the Council, following the second national lockdown. The whole of Worcestershire entered Tier 2(High) restrictions on 2 December. The infection rate continues to fall in Wyre Forest and is now in line with the Worcestershire average, and well below equivalent figures for the West Midlands and England. However we must not be complacent, or presume that the reduced infection rate is going to lead to a change of Tier when the Government reviews the current restrictions on 16 December. All commentators are expecting a further peak in infections following the relaxation of rules on mixing within households over the Christmas period – it is great that families will be able to get together but the price will be more infections being reported in January. The very welcome initial roll out of a vaccine will not prevent this. It remains to be seen how quickly the vaccine will result in a reduction in infections that allows the Government to remove restrictions altogether.

The Council continues to deliver all services, apart from the closure of the museum that was required again during the national lockdown. Its shop introduced a call and collect service as a commercial response and has continued the service even though the shop is now open again. Our waste collection teams have kept important services running, despite the extra volumes of waste and recycling being produced by households, and are now entering the busiest period of the year – details of the minor changes to collection arrangements over the Christmas and New Year period have been announced.

I would like to pay tribute to the efforts that Worcestershire Regulatory Services are making as part of the “One Worcestershire” response to the pandemic, supporting work on test and trace, undertaking enforcement work and also hosting Worcestershire’s COVID advisors, posts which have been funded by the district councils by pooling Government funding. The various periods of restrictions also mean that the Council is administering a burgeoning series of grant schemes for businesses through the Revenues and Benefits team and North Worcestershire Economic Development & Regeneration. This is in addition to the scheme of £500 self-isolation grants for people on low income who cannot work from home, which I mentioned in my last report to Council. Discretionary funds are being exhausted in all districts and the county council is considering a proposal to provide additional funding from grants that it receives from the Government for preventing spread of the disease.

Next week, we will publish the draft medium term financial strategy that sets out the latest estimates of the financial impact of COVID on the Council’s financial position and the steps that the Progressive Alliance administration is proposing to address it. We will continue to discuss these issues with all groups through the Strategic Review Panel meetings in January, building on the briefing and discussion at last month’s Members’ Forum.

The spending review brought cold comfort to district councils with (as things stand) a 2% principle for “excessive” council tax increases and no real additional ongoing funding for services. There will be a further single year allocation of new home bonus but the value of this will be lower than 2020 because of the reduction in house building during the pandemic. The inflation increase for revenue support grant delivers no additional resources for many districts, such as Wyre Forest, which receive zero RSG.

However it is positive that Government support for income losses suffered as a result of COVID will continue for the first quarter of 2021-22, and that some funding will be made available for irrecoverable collection fund losses in the current year. On 22 October, the Government announced £100m of funding for local authority leisure centres but it has taken a long time for details to emerge: they are expected imminently and are likely to involve a submission before Christmas. The fund is intended to cover the period to end of March 2021. We are working with Places Leisure to ensure that Wyre Forest Leisure Centre benefits from the fund to the greatest extent possible, as this will assist the Council’s financial position.

The negotiations with the unions about the pay and grading review were completed yesterday and the unions will now consult their members. It is hoped that a positive result will be achieved and that the collective agreement can then be subject to formal ratification by Council in February.

In respect of place shaping and regeneration, the Government’s Devolution and Local Growth White Paper is now rumoured to be delayed until after the May elections. The inspector’s inquiry on the local plan commences in January. The road scheme at Churchfields is almost complete and the preparatory work for the adjacent major housing scheme in this part of Kidderminster is also underway. It is good to see significant progress with major construction schemes at the Silverwoods site, including the Council’s units for new and small businesses at Unity Park which are nearing completion. My report in September said that the Government’s decision on the important Future High Streets Fund bid for Kidderminster town centre was expected in weeks, rather than months, according to a senior MHCLG official who had appeared before the Public Accounts Committee. We and other councils are still waiting. We will update members as soon as we hear anything.

Finally, I would like to wish all members of Council and their families a Merry Christmas and a Happier New Year than 2020!