

Leader's announcements

23 February 2022

My announcements in December started with reference to the smooth and effective response to the major fire at Hoo Farm Industrial Estate by the emergency services and the wide range of partners that deal with significant emergencies. We have seen the same dedicated response to the flooding along the River Severn, in particular at Beales Corner. A major incident was declared on Monday and the barriers were outflanked on Tuesday and the expected peak of 5.3-5.4m was reached earlier today. The total number of properties flooded at this location is about 30, but there will also have been domestic and business properties and caravan parks affected elsewhere along the Severn including at Stourport-on-Severn. Council will want to join me in extending thanks to the staff of all agencies involved. Thankfully, no injuries have been reported and this fourth flooding event in three years demonstrates why the permanent scheme of flood defence is needed at Beales Corner. We await the planning application by the Environment Agency.

The Prime Minister's announcement of the ending of legal requirements and restrictions relating to COVID will mean that the need to administer test and trace payments will cease. This has been one of several new burdens taken on by the Revenues, Benefits and Customer Service team in the last two years and, while they have effectively and cheerfully discharged the additional tasks asked of them, I know that they too would welcome a return to "normal" – except that the Government's energy rebate means there is more work that they will have to do at the busiest time of the year as they issue council tax bills, deal with enquiries and then follow up households which have not paid the first instalment on time. The revenues team and North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration are also working hard to distribute the remaining Covid Additional Relief fund and Additional Restrictions Grant.

Car parking charges are an important part of the Council's income, and they can be a source of contention both between politicians and with the public and businesses. The Cabinet has approved various changes to the pricing structure for April 2022. It is important that we analyse what impact those changes have, including whether they generate the income that we need to support services. The Cabinet and I have therefore decided to set up a Car Parking Advisory Panel which will be multi-party and will provide any recommendations to Cabinet by November 2022, so that we can consider them for implementation in April 2023. I expect the panel to commence its work in the latter half of 2022, when it will be able to have meaningful data about usage and income in the first few months of the financial year. Further details will be provided to members in due course.

Colleagues will recall that North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration made successful grant applications to the Future High Streets Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Community Renewal Fund, which will bring almost £40m of Government grant to Wyre Forest. Progress is good. Planning permission has been secured for redevelopment of the former magistrates' court; a number of site purchases have been completed; and procurement will get under way soon for a construction contractor. Bookings have opened for the cleantech BetaDen boot

camp that will be hosted at Wyre Forest House and provide support to start-up and scale-up businesses in Worcestershire to enter the growing green sector of the economy. Four free workshops are being held over the next few weeks and the boot camp itself gets under way on 25 April. Situated at Wyre Forest House for two days a week, the BetaDen North Bootcamp will offer entrepreneurs, start-ups and scale up businesses a free package of support worth over £25,000. This includes a marketing fund of £9,000 towards a new website, branding etc, project support, mentors, expert speakers, desk space and much more.

We have also been selected for free consultancy support in the latter part of 2023 from the Government's High Streets Task Force. We will take advantage of the offer and will invite the Task Force to focus on Stourport-on-Severn, so that we can shape plans for the future with their expert advice. We will work with the Town Council on how best to exploit this opportunity.