

COUNCIL, 7 DECEMBER 2022

LEADER'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Local government has provided a beacon of stability during the time since Council last met, with yet another change of Prime Minister and of many Ministers.

The main national event since the current Government took office was the Autumn Statement. It brought limited news for district councils. The proposed increase from 2% to 3% in the threshold for council tax increases considered to be "excessive" in no way recognises the serious financial pressures facing districts as a result of inflation that is now running at over 11%. The extra grant funding and other decisions relating to social care reform will assist the county council but do nothing for the position of the six district councils in Worcestershire and the important strategic, preventative and universal services that they provide.

DLUHC has promised a policy document about the local government finance settlement for 2023-24, which is expected in the next few days and is anticipated to confirm the future of important grant streams such as new homes bonus and local services grant. With the provisional settlement due on the unacceptably late date of 21 December, local government's ability to plan finances properly continues to be jeopardised by the Government. The Cabinet meets on 20 December to consider the draft medium term financial strategy but we will be unable to take account of whatever the announcement on 21 December brings.

I am sure that Council would want to join me in congratulating our accountancy team, headed up by Lisa Hutchinson and Kath Pearsall, on the outstanding job that they and Helen Ogram have done to meet the deadline for our 2021-22 accounts to be audited by the end of November. They have maintained our record of 100% of accounts being on time and 'clean'. Last year only 9% of councils achieved this by the deadline, and I suspect that an even lower proportion will have met it this year: there are hundreds of sets of accounts outstanding across local government. Congratulations to the team and thank you for your exceptional effort and dedication.

It is good to see that work started on 5 December on sites in Worcester Street to prepare for the regeneration of that area. Locally based industry specialists DSM have been appointed by NWedR on behalf of Wyre Forest District Council to carry out work at 1 Worcester Street (former Woolworth), 2-6 Worcester Street (former Littlewoods) 7-8 Worcester Street (former Poundland) 9-10 Worcester Street (former Sigma Aqua) and 1-3 Oxford Street. All work is being conducted from the rear of the buildings and there will not be any road closures associated with it. The work is expected to be complete in Spring 2023 to make way for the regeneration of this area.

At its last meeting Council agreed a number of motions, and an item on tonight's agenda deals with two matters where Council asked for a report back. I can provide the following additional updates.

I am pleased to report that the Defence Employer Recognition Scheme Bronze Award was applied for and accreditation was received on 8 November. The motion also asked the Council to work with partners across Worcestershire “to update the Armed Forces Covenant”. The wording of the Covenant is not in Worcestershire’s hands, but whether there is a need to update the collective response of the Worcestershire Armed Forces Covenant Strategic Partnership will be considered at a future meeting of that Partnership.

In respect of the cost-of-living crisis, a letter was sent to (then) Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions with a copy of the agreed motion on 22 September. A response was received on 5 December and is attached.

A Cost-of-Living Emergency Summit, convened by WFDC, was held on 13 October. I would like to extend thanks on behalf of Council to the staff who organised the event. The action plan arising from the Summit was considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 1 December and will be considered by Cabinet on 20 December. Tonight’s meeting will consider a recommendation to reduce from 20% to 10% the minimum council tax contribution that working age households have to pay. This is a further practical step that the Council can take to assist our poorest households in coping with the high level of inflation. We have also been able to provide grant funding for churches and voluntary organisations to provide “warm spaces” at various locations in the district.

Earlier this week, the Government announced that all investment plans for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund had been approved. In common with many other councils, this is subject to minor conditions in the case of Wyre Forest. It took the Government over four months to approve plans - longer than the period councils were given to draw them up in the first place! The grant allocations for capital and revenue purposes in the current financial year have been confirmed as £158,500 and £244,389 respectively, and we can now move forward with discharging the conditions and implementing the plan.

In response to feedback about arrangements in previous years, we have changed the provision of free parking in the run up to Christmas. This year we are offering free parking in all council-owned car parks over the weekends of Saturday 10 December to Sunday 11 December and Saturday 17 December to Sunday 18 December. As usual, the parking offer is not available at Weaver’s Wharf car park in Kidderminster, which is privately owned.

It remains for me to wish all members of the Council, staff and local residents a Merry Christmas and to extend hopes to them of as prosperous a New Year as is possible in current circumstances.



**Department
for Work &
Pensions**

Ministerial
Correspondence
Caxton House
Tothill Street
LONDON
SW1H 9DA

0207 340 4000

www.dwp.gov.uk

ministers@dwp.gsi.gov.uk

Your ref: IM/cr

Our ref: MC2022/75916

Mr Ian Miller
Wyre Forest House
Finepoint Way, Kidderminster
DY11 7WF

5 December 2022

Dear Mr Miller,

Thank you for your letter of 22 September to the Secretary of State about the Universal Credit £20 uplift, benefit uprating and the State Pension Triple Lock. I am replying as the Minister for Employment and I apologise for the delay in doing so.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has completed his annual uprating review and State Pension and benefit rates will increase in line with the Consumer Prices Index for the year to September 2022. This means, subject to parliamentary approval, rates will increase by 10.1 per cent from 10 April 2023.

His decisions were announced by means of a Written Ministerial Statement on 17 November 2022.

There are no plans to reinstate the temporary increase to Universal Credit. However, the Government understands the pressures people are facing with the cost of living and is taking action to support people with their energy bills. The Government's Energy Price Guarantee, running from October 2022 to March 2023, will save a typical British household around £900 this Winter, based on what energy prices would have been under the current price cap - reducing bills by roughly a third. This is in addition to the over £37 billion of cost of living support announced earlier this year which includes the £400 non-repayable discount to eligible households provided through the Energy Bills Support Scheme.

The £37 billion also includes Cost of Living Payments worth up to £650 (paid in 2 lump sums of £326 and £324) which have targeted support at around 8 million low-income households on means-tested benefits. In addition, 6 million

eligible disabled people have received a one-off disability Cost of Living Payment of £150 and pensioner households will receive a one-off payment of £300 alongside the Winter Fuel Payment from November.

For those who require additional support in England the current Household Support Fund, running from 1 October 2022 to 31 March 2023, is providing £421 million of funding for those most in need. The devolved administrations have been allocated £79 million through the Barnett formula.

To ensure stability and certainty for households, in the Autumn Statement the Government announced £26 billion in cost of living support for 2023/24. This includes Cost of Living Payments for the most vulnerable. In 2023/24, households on eligible means-tested benefits will get up to a further £900 in Cost of Living Payments. A £300 payment will be made to pensioner households and individuals in receipt of eligible disability benefits will receive a £150 payment. The Government also announced the amended Energy Price Guarantee, which will save the average UK household £500 in 2023/24 and the benefit cap rise by 10.1 per cent, in line with inflation.

For those who require extra support, the Government is providing an additional £1 billion of funding to support households in England in the next financial year. This is on top of what we have already provided since October 2021, bringing total funding to £2.5 billion. In England this will be delivered through an extension to the Household Support Fund backed by £842 million, running from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, which local authorities use to help households with the cost of essentials. It will be for the devolved administrations to decide how to allocate their additional Barnett funding.

I hope this helps to clarify the position.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Guy Opperman', with a horizontal line underneath it.

**GUY OPPERMAN MP
MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT**