

**Council, 17 July 2024**

**Leader's announcements**

The General Election provided a decisive majority for a new Government. Locally, electors backed Mark Garnier – albeit by a smaller majority than he has enjoyed in the past – to continue for a fifth term as MP for Wyre Forest. On behalf of Council, I would like to extend congratulations to Mark on his re-election. He has worked closely with the Council since 2010, regardless of its political make up, in trying to secure the best deal for the district and we can be particularly grateful for his support in lobbying Ministers about funding for major capital projects and regeneration schemes – from Silverwoods Way and the railway station to more recent investments under the Future High Streets Fund and Levelling Up Fund. The administration looks forward to continuing to work closely with Mark in the changed political position at Westminster, with the aim of securing further advantages for the district in the Labour Government's reform programme. I am sure Council will also join me in sending best wishes to Caroline Garnier as she continues her recovery.

Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to all council leaders. Her letter included two important paragraphs:

“We know we will only be able to improve public services through economic growth, and it is critical you play a leading role in delivering it by participating in a new wave of devolution. But we also recognise this must be accompanied by reforms to local government and long-term funding settlements, providing you with the certainty to plan and provide the best possible value for money for residents.”

“This Government has been elected on a manifesto to widen and deepen devolution across the country... I have written to those areas of the country that have not yet taken up the offer of a devolution deal, to reiterate that this Government believes that by pushing power out of Whitehall we will light the touch paper of growth across our regions.”

Regrettably, the separate letter about devolution has been sent to leaders only of county councils and unitary authorities. That seems a missed opportunity: planning and housing authorities need to be at the heart of and directly involved in devolution if it is to successfully contribute towards economic growth. Today's King's Speech has outlined the legislative programme that will drive forward these and other reforms. Local government will be studying closely what the detail means for its future direction. Worcestershire council leaders meet next week for an initial discussion on the response from the county.

Planning reform and housing growth are receiving much attention: Wyre Forest benefits from an up-to-date local plan which reviewed the green belt and provides for over 5,000 new dwellings. We look forward to consultation on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework and will respond as necessary, depending on their implications for the district. Among other things, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will involve “improving local planning decision making by modernising planning committees” and “increasing local planning authorities' capacity, to improve performance and decision making, providing a more predictable service to

developers and investors". We look forward to information on what this will mean in practice.

There continues to be good progress with our major capital schemes. The Castle Road temporary accommodation remains on budget and in line with programme. The first floor concrete pads have now been installed.

Tenders for the capital works for the Brinton Park HLF Project close on 22 July and we will make an announcement about award of contract as soon as possible after that. The planning application is expected to be considered by the Planning Committee in August.

Enabling works at the Piano Building are due to start in the week of 22 July, with main works scheduled for early November. The planning application is expected to be considered by the Planning Committee in September. Letting agents have been appointed for the food and beverage/ leisure units.

The contractor for the Connectivity Project mobilised this week with main works due to start on 12<sup>th</sup> August and completion in February. Works are well advanced with the Creative Hub, with practical completion expected early in December. Letting agents are being appointed for the office space in the Creative Hub and Piano Building.

Finally, it remains for me to wish colleagues who will be taking a holiday over the summer period a safe journey and enjoyable time. I also hope that they recharge their batteries for what is likely to be a busy remainder of the municipal year, as we continue to drive forward the priorities in our corporate plan and the new Government's legislative and policy changes become clearer.