



Leader's Report to Council – 25th May 2016

I would like to congratulate all members who were elected earlier this month, and extend a welcome to new members (including two who are rejoining the council after a break). I look forward to working with all members in the interests of the residents and businesses in Wyre Forest. I would also like to pay tribute to the seven members who stood down at the elections or who lost their seats, and to extend my personal thanks to them for their contribution to the work of the council.

The elections have confirmed a clear majority for the Conservative administration for the next two years and I am pleased that we will continue with the good governance of the council by having members of opposition groups providing the chairman and vice chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The major change following the elections is the resignation of Councillor John-Paul Campion from the Cabinet following his election as Police and Crime Commissioner for West Mercia. I am sure all members would wish to join me in congratulating him on his appointment: it will be good to have someone from Wyre Forest filling such a significant role and we look forward to a positive working relationship with him. I am also confident that members would wish to join me in paying tribute to John for his twelve years of service in the Cabinet, including seven years as Leader. He can look back with satisfaction on significant achievements during that time, as a result of projects initiated under his leadership such as the new leisure centre, Wyre Forest House and the range of successful joint services. I was delighted to appoint Councillor Tracey Onslow to the Cabinet to take over the portfolio for planning and economic regeneration.

The regeneration of central Kidderminster is making progress on a number of fronts. The works on town centre public realm are nearing completion, with works in Exchange Street and outside the Town Hall expected to be complete before the end of the month after a few delays caused by location of underground services, drainage and bridge decking over river. The contractors will then return to the square at Vicar Street/High Street to redress the issues with finishing and complete the works. Our consultants, Savills, will be finalising the first stage of the Eastern Gateway commission early next month which will provide a development framework for us to move into the next stage of delivery. Plans are in hand for the decommissioning of the Glades Leisure Centre and securing it when it is closed. Works on Worcester Street will be designed to start work in 2017/18 as a result of the county council rephasing its match funding. Officers are working on alternative delivery of the redevelopment of Crown House and are working with the tenant on options. Initially, potential layouts will be considered and then viability tested to determine what is feasible.

We have continued to make excellent progress with letting vacant space at Wyre Forest House. I announced earlier this month that Premier Care, trading as Carewatch, have leased my former office on the first floor. We have secured a tenant for another office and one of our existing tenants is about to expand to by taking further space. I will make further announcements about these in due course, when

the formal documentation has been signed. There is high interest in the remaining space in the former executive suite. Income from tenancies and ICT support charges now exceeds £200k a year, helping to protect front line services.

On 20 April, I was part of the delegation from Worcestershire which had a constructive meeting with Lord Heseltine. A strong case for more powers to be based locally was put forward by the delegation which included Local Government, Local Enterprise Partnership, Health and Police partners. Lord Heseltine set out the Government's model for devolution. It is clear that Government is now working on larger geographic footprints than single counties. We will continue to work with our partners to see what can be done without a devolution deal and assess whether a different configuration or arrangement could achieve our desired outcomes whilst continuing to monitor the progress of those deals already agreed and the evolving position of the Government on deals outside of the City Mayor model. Over the next few months, together, all members of 'Team Worcestershire' will consider how our ambitions for the County can be best fulfilled whilst we continue our dialogue with central government. What is clear is that this will be a long drawn out process.

Following the decision by Worcestershire leaders that the county would receive about 50 Syrian refugees in 2016, the first groups of refugees are expected to arrive in the county in June and July and will be housed in a number of locations. Two families will be coming to Kidderminster in mid July.

Since my last report to Council, the reorganisation order for Kidderminster has taken full effect with the transfer of the ownership of significant assets to Kidderminster Town Council on 1 April, including the Town Hall, Market Street toilets and the war memorials and land adjacent to St Mary's church. The formal agreements with the Town Council about the Town Hall and provision of a range of services by the District Council have been finalised and generate a significant contribution to the provision of local services, costs that previously were met 100% by the District Council. I look forward to working positively with the members elected to the Town Council this month now that they have assumed their roles.

Finally I was very pleased to announce earlier this month that the Wyre Forest Leisure Centre will open to the public on Wednesday 6 July. The Centre offers fantastic, modern facilities for local residents and visitors. I am sure it will be very popular when it opens. Marketing of membership packages has been started by Places for People, who are building and will operate the new centre. Total annual savings exceed £500k, made up of the original projected revenue saving of £390k and over £100k a year from cheaper borrowing costs than predicted in the business plan. In addition, there will be a one off saving of £240k as a result of the leisure centre opening earlier than assumed in the business plan. This is a "good news" story for Wyre Forest and I am sure members will be looking forward to the official opening ceremony, which will take place in the autumn – details will be circulated in due course.

Councillor Marcus Hart
Leader of the Council