



Agenda Item No. 8

Leader's announcements to Council – 26th July 2017

It is a pleasure to commence my announcements with several items that recognise the good work done by the Council and its staff.

Wyre Forest District Council and Worcestershire County Council have picked up a prestigious urban design award for the recently opened Exchange Place in Kidderminster town centre. The Urban Transport Design Award was presented to public realm experts IBI Taylor Young who designed Exchange Place and were Highly Commended for the innovative shared traffic and pedestrian space in the heart of the town centre outside the historic Town Hall.

Exchange Place is part of the Council's £2m investment in an improved town centre environment which has attracted significant new private sector development. Within the last few weeks a range of cafes and restaurants have opened their doors along the newly created Riverside Walk adjacent to Weavers Wharf and are proving very popular, bringing added vibrancy to the town.

The Birmingham Resilience Project won the West Midlands Royal Town Planning Institute award for Regional Planning Excellence. The project is the biggest engineering challenge Severn Trent Water has ever taken on and includes building a new 25km pipeline from the River Severn at Lickhill to Frankley. Colleagues on the Planning Committee will recall that we considered an application in respect of the route through Wyre Forest. The RTPI award recognises the efforts of all organisations involved in handling the planning process, including Emma Anning who has recently left our development management team for the private sector.

North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration has been shortlisted for the Enterprising Britain Awards in the 'Improving the Business Environment category'. This is welcome national recognition of the work that NWEDR have been doing across North Worcestershire in recent years to foster a positive attitude towards supporting business. This includes such things as the investments that the Council has made in major projects and the excellent outcomes achieved from the local development order in South Kidderminster Enterprise Park. The results will be known in September and I am sure colleagues would wish to join me in wishing Dean Piper and the team well in the final judging. Two of the entries will be selected to represent the UK in the European Enterprise Promotion Awards.

It is excellent news that Brinton Park in Kidderminster and the Queen Elizabeth II Gardens in Bewdley have retained the prestigious Green Flag Award, demonstrating again their continued high standards and quality.

Last week I received a letter from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman about complaints in the year to 31 March. This will be reported to the Ethics and Standards Committee as usual but I was delighted to read that none of the five complaints against the Council had been upheld by the Ombudsman.

Since the last meeting of Council we have had the terrorist outrages in Manchester and London as well as the shocking loss of life in the fire at Grenfell Tower. Councillor Rogers has answered a question on this topic earlier in tonight's meeting. The Council has been active in taking appropriate steps with the landlords of tower blocks in Kidderminster and Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Service to review the position locally and to reassure residents. The Council has responsibilities to enforce housing standards under the Housing Act 2004, which include fire safety. We will continue to work with the Fire and Rescue Service locally, inspecting properties where relevant and taking enforcement action if necessary. I wrote to the Chief Fire Officer myself to personally reassure myself in respect of the flats that we do have in Wyre Forest, two owned by Wyre Forest Community Housing and two in private ownership.

An application was submitted for a Parks for People grant of up to £2 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund for Brinton Park, but earlier this month we were disappointed to be informed that the application had been unsuccessful. The Council is looking to reinstate the heritage aspects of the park, which have been lost over time, as well as create a place which will serve the community for the next 100 years. We had worked with the community to develop the plans and a public survey was carried out last summer and there was widespread support for the project. The future development plans for Brinton Park will be discussed further at a meeting with partners and park users to decide what steps to take next, including whether to resubmit our application at a future date.

Consultation on the preferred options for the local plan is well under way and closes on 14 August. The drop in sessions have been very well attended by the public, showing great interest in the future development of the district. Following the consultation, the forward planning team under Kate Bailey will be analysing the many comments that are received. We can then consider how best to proceed, taking account of the tension that exists between the unavoidable need to allocate more land for housing to meet the district's needs in the future (including greenfield and greenbelt land) and the understandable natural reaction from those who may live next to potential sites in opposing development that would affect views from their house and the ability to use the various footpaths or have an impact on local services. The consultation version of the plan is due to be finalised in early 2018 for a period of public consultation prior to consideration by a planning inspector.

In respect of future regeneration projects, the county council is progressing design works for Worcester Street, starting from Ringway up to High Street. A more complicated solution is required at the junction of Worcester Street, High Street and Coventry Street due to steep gradients - a specialist streetscape designer has been appointed to advise further. A public engagement exercise is still anticipated later in the summer.

Mike Parker has been continuing discussion with Telereal Trillium in respect of Crown House, examining different scenarios. It would be premature to say that a way forward has been agreed but recent discussions have been positive and I hope that it might be possible for Cabinet to consider specific proposals in the autumn. Councillor Hardiman has updated colleagues about progress with procuring construction of the lower level of Load Street car park in Bewdley, and Council will

be asked to agree an amendment to the capital programme at its September meeting. Last week, we were able to announce that the Council has put in place arrangements for the summer to enhance the number of car parking spaces to help boost trade and encourage summer visitors to the town. The free “park and walk” facility at Bewdley High School provides 78 spaces and will be supplemented on Saturdays with a free shuttle service.

The sale of part of the Vale Road car park in Stourport has been completed. We can now expect to see progress by the developer on implementation of the planning permission for the creation of 5 housing units.

The enormously successful Wyre Forest Leisure Centre celebrated its first anniversary on 6 July with news that more people had visited the centre in 12 months than the two previous sites combined. I have recently agreed an amendment to the financial allocation for the construction of 31 additional parking spaces at the centre, and we will share the cost with Places for People Limited. Work is expected to get under way by the autumn.

The Cabinet has begun to approve the first investments from the Capital Portfolio Fund and we expect soon to receive applications for potential loans to third parties. I have discussed with Group Leaders proposals to change how the Cabinet takes its decisions on future investments and loans. We need to ensure that we can take decisions swiftly to respond to market opportunities, rather than have to wait for the next scheduled meeting of full Cabinet. Cabinet will therefore be asked to agree at its September meeting to delegate decisions to a Cabinet sub-committee of any three members (chaired by either the Leader or Deputy Leader). Discussions are being held with the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee about whether to put in place similar arrangements for that Committee so that it too can consider business cases more swiftly than might be possible under the present cycle of meetings.

I received a letter from the Police and Crime Commissioner on his consultation paper regarding the proposal to change the Fire and Rescue Governance arrangements in line with primary legislation which permits this. I encourage all elected members to have their say and respond to this important consultation by 11th September.

Finally, there have been a number of important staff appointments recently. Helen Ogram joined us in early July as Financial Services Manager and deputy Section 151 officer. She was previously section 151 officer at South Staffordshire District Council. Rupert Detheridge has started as our Property and Investment Manager and leads the work on the Capital Portfolio Fund and in May Helen Smith joined us as Spatial Planning Manager, just in time for the baptism of fire of consultation on the preferred options for the local plan. John Baggott leaves us at the end of this week as Development Manager after 9 years and I wish all the very best and I am delighted that our own Paul Round has secured the position. I am sure members would wish to join me in welcoming them to their new roles.

Cllr Marcus Hart
Leader of the Council