



Leader's announcements Council, 24th July 2019

The most significant event since the Council's AGM has been the announcement on 5 July that the Future High Streets Fund bid for Kidderminster has reached the second stage. The three main elements of the bid are for Lionfields (Bromsgrove Street site), the former Magistrates' Court and the site of Crown House and the wider Bull Ring gateway into the town.

Wyre Forest's bid is one of only 50 across England out of over 300 that have been successful. It is the only one in Worcestershire, and one of only five in the whole of the West Midlands, to reach this stage (Stafford Borough Council's bid is the only other one led by a district council in the West Midlands). The Council has done exceptionally well in reaching this far, and I am sure that members would want to join me in congratulating Ostap Paparega, the Head of North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration, and his team. The really hard work now begins! It remains an intensely competitive process with potentially a large funding prize of multi £ million at the end of the process, if we are successful at the second stage. The Council will now access funding from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to prepare the full business case, which has to be submitted by January 2020.

The annual general meeting commissioned two reviews, of the Council's future role in affordable housing and of our governance arrangements for decision-making. The review of affordable housing is expected to report to the Cabinet in November and will be considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee before that meeting. The group leaders and deputy group leaders have met twice and considered a range of papers, including information about arrangements in Malvern Hills and Worcester and design principles for any changes in Wyre Forest. The Chief Executive has sent all members copies of these papers and a questionnaire for members will soon be issued – please take part and let us know your views. The members' forum on 17 October will have a presentation from Ed Hammond of the Centre for Public Scrutiny and a workshop about governance models, so there will be a further opportunity for members to consider options and provide their views.

All members also receive papers for the Strategic Review Panel which has met twice since the AGM. Many thanks to members who attended the members' forum on 11 July and gave their views about priorities for the new corporate plan. The public survey about priorities has already received over 1,000 responses, which is a much higher rate of return than we have achieved for similar surveys in the past. Please encourage local residents and others to respond by 15 August: members were sent the link to the survey for this purpose on 12 July. The Panel's main task before September is to produce a draft of the corporate plan taking account of the feedback from members, staff and the public and this is expected to come to the September meeting of Council for approval.

The Cabinet considered a number of important issues at its meetings in June and July, the most significant of which was approving a further period of consultation on the local plan in September and October. Again members can play an important role in raising awareness of the plan, and the changes from the version which was the subject of consultation in 2018, and in encouraging people who have new or different comments to make to respond to the consultation. (We will consider all the comments received in the 2018 consultation automatically, so people do not need to repeat them: they need to respond in the autumn if they did not reply in 2018 or if they wish to add to or alter their previous response.)

Since the AGM, I have attended two briefing meetings for leaders of councils involved in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership; the county council's overview and scrutiny board hearing on the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership; two meetings of the Worcestershire Leaders' Board; and three meetings with the Leaders of Redditch and Bromsgrove in the "Northern Alliance". Among other things, we agreed the North Worcestershire appointments to a range of bodies for 2019/20: Councillor Fran Oborski has taken up a number of roles relating to her portfolio, either as the lead representative or substitute.

Much of the discussion has revolved around the review of local enterprise partnerships – the Government wants to remove overlaps and a decision may be announced in the next few weeks. Wyre Forest and the other districts involved in the GBS LEP have resisted change as we strongly support the current arrangements of being in two LEPs. It remains to be seen whether political changes in Westminster will affect the Government's approach to this issue: with the new Prime Minister in office, there is likely to be a change of Ministerial personnel. Redditch Borough Council passed an emergency motion on Monday to set out its preference for the GBS LEP and to give notice to leave the Worcestershire LEP. I am not proposing that Wyre Forest should take any such step at present. Redditch's resignation from the Worcestershire LEP will mean that the North Worcestershire representation on that body will have to be altered.

The Worcestershire Leaders' Board received an interesting presentation from the Worcestershire LEP on the emerging local industrial strategy and also had a helpful discussion with the Director of Strategy of the Worcestershire Acute Hospitals Trust about recent and future developments in performance and services.

Cllr Graham Ballinger
Leader of the Council