

Wyre Forest District Council

Leader's announcements Council, 23 September 2020

I must first welcome Councillors Anna and Roger Coleman to the Progressive Alliance. They are members of the Independent Community and Health Concern Group. I look forward to their contributions within the Progressive Alliance. We will deal with the changes to political balance as an item later on the agenda.

COVID-19 continues to affect local communities and the Council. Last week, the Cabinet considered the latest report on the financial impact and what it means for the Council's overall position. Unless the Government provides more funding, in particular for the estimated loss of income that will be experienced this year and next, it is likely that our general reserves will be exhausted by 2023. This underlines the need for decisive, early action to reduce our spending. There will be an opportunity for all-party discussions on the budget, as usual, and I hope to confirm the detailed arrangements shortly.

Despite the financial challenges that this and other councils are facing, Whitehall continues to show confidence in local government to deliver. Last weekend, the Government announced that billing authorities including Wyre Forest will operate the scheme of £500 self-isolation grants for people on low income who cannot work from home. Lucy Wright and the revenue and benefits team are working flat out to meet the Government expectation that the scheme is operational by 12 October, with backdated payments to 28 September.

While WFDC's staff have all done an excellent job during the pandemic, I would like to pay tribute to how Lucy's team has taken on a huge volume of additional work since March: thousands of rates reliefs and grants for businesses, totalling tens of £ millions, processing thousands of hardship payments of £150 for council tax reduction scheme recipients and a higher than usual amount of work in dealing with residents and businesses about their local tax bills.

I feel that I should also mention the excellent work of our waste collection teams in keeping important services running – they've coped very well with the extra volumes of waste and recycling being produced by households and deserve every plaudit for what they do, regardless of the weather.

It was good to see the recent announcement that the consortium of Worcestershire district councils, led by Wychavon, was awarded £445k from the Next Steps Accommodation Programme for continuing to support rough sleepers supported during the COVID response. The homelessness team has also gone "above and beyond" during the pandemic, and it is good to see the Government recognising the work that they and colleagues across the county continue to do to help rough sleepers.

Important consultations and negotiations are under way on workforce matters. Members will be aware of the consultation with all staff about homeworking, and negotiations have commenced with the recognised trade unions about the pay and

grading review. The results of both these processes are expected to be reported to Council in December for formal decision or endorsement.

In respect of place shaping and regeneration, we are keen to see what the Government's Devolution and Local Growth White Paper offers local areas in promoting growth. The most recent reports suggest this might not emerge until late in the year or possibly even early in 2021, when we had been expecting it in September or October. We are awaiting confirmation soon from the inspector about the timetable for the inquiry on the local plan. Meanwhile progress with the road scheme at Churchfields is well under way and, when complete, will allow the major housing scheme in this part of Kidderminster to move forward. The Government's decision on the important Future High Streets Fund bid for Kidderminster town centre is expected in weeks, rather than months, according to a senior MHCLG official who appeared before the Public Accounts Committee this week. We will provide an update for members as soon as we hear anything about the outcome of our bid.

Councillor G Ballinger