

**Leader's announcements to Council
14 July 2021**

Following the Government's announcement about ending of lockdown restrictions in England on 19 July, the Council will revert to face-to-face meetings with effect from that date which means that the Planning Committee and Audit Committee will meet in person later this month. Room layouts will promote a degree of social distancing where possible, and we will still be encouraging those attending to maximise their own and others' safety by following guidance about hand-washing and wearing masks if they wish. Councillors should do whatever makes them feel safest, and we recognise in particular the position of colleagues who are clinically extremely vulnerable. If people wish to wear face coverings when not speaking at meetings, they are able to do so. Colleagues who wish to observe the Planning Committee and do not intend to speak are encouraged to follow the webcast rather than come to Wyre Forest House.

COVID-19 infection rates continue to climb sharply in Wyre Forest and elsewhere, particularly among younger people. Regrettably, some people will experience severe symptoms and have to be hospitalised. There continues to be a modest death toll each week, although thankfully much lower than earlier in 2021. The sad impact on individuals and families continues. The Government's approach is nevertheless to lift all restrictions and leave each business and operator – whether nightclub, bus company or office – to decide its own COVID-safe arrangements, including whether or not to require evidence of both vaccinations or a negative test. Arrangements to implement hybrid working by WFDC staff are being finalised and are expected to be rolled out from 1 September. They will see fewer staff in our buildings than prior to the pandemic as many staff will continue to spend some time each week working at home, and this will help reduce the footprint that we occupy.

The Future High Streets Fund grant of £20.5m announced on Boxing Day 2020 was the largest grant award ever secured by the Council. We are now seeking to expand the impact that the FHSF projects will have on regenerating Kidderminster town centre through a major bid to the Government's Levelling Up Fund. North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration has submitted a regeneration proposal worth £17.9 million. It is a culture and heritage led proposal which fulfils the strict criteria detailed in the Government's prospectus. As members will recall from the briefing session held a few weeks ago, there are three key projects in the proposal. The first is to refurbish Kidderminster Town Hall in partnership with Kidderminster Town Council to cement its place as a key town centre heritage asset, a cultural space and events venue. The second project is to bring back into use an empty listed heritage building in the heart of town, and thirdly to create a new walking and cycle pathway along the canal towpath in partnership with Worcestershire County Council - linking the heritage and natural assets with Kidderminster town centre. We expect to hear the outcome of this bid in the autumn.

The Council received an allocation of £90,000 from the Government's Welcome Back Fund. Service level agreements have now been completed with all three Town Councils and the Kidderminster Business Improvement District to appoint them as delivery partners and the Activity Form has been approved by the Ministry. This

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means that the Town Councils and BID can move forward with implementing local initiatives to support the town centres.