

City Councillors Report for Warndon Parish Council for the meeting on Monday 6th February 2023

Planning application for Worcester's new arts venue submitted

The planning application for an exciting new arts venue in the heart of Worcester city centre has been submitted for approval and is available for comment on the Worcester City Council website.

The ambitious proposals would transform the Angel Place area, attracting world-class arts, music, and comedy acts to Worcester, as well as giving a much-needed boost to local businesses.

If the submission is approved, the eagerly anticipated arts centre will revive the historic Scala Theatre, Worcester's original 1920s cinema.

The spectacular renovation has been designed by architects Burrell Foley Fischer, who also designed the Hall for Cornwall, as well as the Crucible in Sheffield, among several other award-winning venues.

The arts centre proposals are part of the Government's Future High Streets Fund (FHSF), which includes £3.5million worth of public realm improvements to Worcester City Centre, many of which are already being enjoyed by residents.

Funding for the proposed Scala development has been awarded through the FHSF programme.

Additional funding has now been confirmed for the proposed redevelopment of Worcester's Scala Theatre, taking the ambitious plans a step closer to becoming reality.

Following Government approval, approximately £6 million has been reallocated from other elements of Worcester's original FHSF award, the majority coming from proposals to redevelop Trinity House, which are no longer being taken forward.

The Swan Theatre will continue to operate for community theatre groups for the foreseeable future, with relevant user groups having suggested several design ideas for the Scala that were adopted by the architects.

City Council plans to buy land for new walking & cycling pathway

Worcester city councillors are to be asked to consider making a Compulsory Purchase Order to help acquire land for the creation of a new walking and cycling route linking the city centre and Shrub Hill railway station.

The Shrub Hill area is undergoing a multi-million pound regeneration, turning it into a major new centre for residential, business and entertainment use.

Now the City Council's Place and Economic Development Committee is to be asked to support proposals to build a new route from Shrub Hill to Pheasant Street and the canal bridge at the western end of Cromwell Street. This will create a new walking and cycling link from Shrub Hill to St Martin's Quarter and the city centre beyond.

The ownership of some of the land in question is unknown, and the committee is being asked to support the use of a Compulsory Purchase Order to ensure that the project can go ahead.

Cllr Lucy Hodgson, Chair of the Place and Economic Development Committee, said: "The Shrub Hill regeneration will create a major new quarter for homes and employment, and the railway station could also deliver a big boost to arrivals in the area, with the number of passengers expected to double over the next 20 years.

The creation of the new pathway will be financed from the City Council's £19.6 million share of the Government's Towns Fund, with £10 million allocated for investment in Shrub Hill.

The City Council will also work with Worcestershire County Council to refurbish Isaac Maddox House on the Shrub Hill industrial estate for use as an Enterprise Centre.

Additionally, the City Council is awaiting the result of its £8 million bid to the Government's Levelling-Up Fund for investment in the refurbishment of the historic grade II listed Engine Works building, one of the main Shrub Hill landmarks.

The Shrub Hill industrial estate is now owned by Worcestershire County Council, which is leading on its broader regeneration.

Car park prices increase considered, to support services to Worcester residents

Worcester city councillors are to be asked to consider the first increase in car park charges in 14 years, in order to ensure services can continue to be delivered to residents.

Prices at the 14 car parks operated by Worcester City Council have not gone up since 2009, and the Environment Committee is to be asked to support new prices that will still be below the rates charged in privately-run car parks and similar-sized cities.

Income from car parks forms a major part of the funding that the City Council uses to deliver essential services like waste and recycling collections, street cleansing, and housing support and advice. A report to the committee's 24 January meeting notes that rising costs make it essential for charges to be raised in order to ensure the Council can set a balanced budget and continue to provide the critical frontline services that Worcester residents rely on.

The City Council's car parks have all received the prestigious national Park Mark award, in recognition of their high levels of cleanliness and security, with lighting and CCTV in place in all 14 car parks. The City Council is also increasing the availability of electric vehicle charging points in its car parks, with 12 in place in St Martin's Gate and more set to be installed in King Street and Tallow Hill.

It is proposed that the price of a two-hour stay at the Council's three red zone car parks (Copenhagen St, Cornmarket and Providence St) changes from £2.40 to £3.

At the six amber zone car parks (Cattlemarket, King St, Newport St, St Martin's Gate, Clare St and Commandery Rd) parking up to two hours would increase from £1.80 to £2. Parking for 24 hours at St Martin's Gate multi-storey car park would cost £4, compared to the current £3.60.

In the green zone car parks (Pitchcroft, The Moors, Tallow Hill, Tybridge St and Croft Rd), the two-hour parking fee would move from £1.20 to £1.50.

Council to consider steps to address costs of running Worcester's leisure centres

Worcester city council are to support a range of measures to tackle the increased running costs at the city's three leisure centres, to ensure that residents will continue to have access to sport, fitness and exercise facilities.

The proposals are in response to the recent rises in energy bills that have left Freedom Leisure, the not-for-profit trust that operates the Perdiswell, St John's and Nunnery Wood centres on the Council's behalf, facing a £585,000 funding gap in the next financial year. The report says that the payment of up to £315,000 to Freedom Leisure is required to help meet the increased costs of running the three Council-owned leisure centres.

Also recommended is an investment of £550,000 in measures to reduce energy usage and CO₂ emissions at the three sites. This will produce savings of £147,000 a year, with the investment fully paid back within four years.

The proposed energy-saving measures include solar panels, more efficient lighting and new chemical controls at the Perdiswell swimming pool. If this proposal is supported, a detailed business case will be prepared for approval by councillors.

In addition, the committee is being asked to support changes to opening hours at the Perdiswell and Nunnery Wood centres, to deliver savings of £40,000 a year. Freedom Leisure is also asking for permission to increase customer prices at the leisure centres by an average of 8.8% in the next financial year, in order to raise £230,000 to help meet energy costs.

Have your say on proposed new licensing rules for Houses in Multiple Occupation

Worcester residents are invited to have their say on the expansion of additional licensing for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in the city.

A House in Multiple Occupation is defined as a property where three or more people in two or more households share a basic amenity such as a toilet, a bathroom or kitchen facilities. HMOs with occupancy of five or more people need to be licensed by the local authority before they can be let out to tenants.

Worcester City Council has also been operating an 'Additional Licensing' scheme in some parts of the city since September 2015, requiring HMO properties with fewer than five occupants to be licensed.

The current Additional Licensing scheme covers the wards of Arboretum, Bedwardine, Cathedral and St Clements and St Johns and city councillors are considering whether to extend the scheme across the whole of the city.

Chair of Worcester City Council's Communities Committee, Cllr Jabba Riaz, said: "The safety of residents remains a high priority for us and I would urge members of the public to have their say in this consultation as we believe that all wards in the city would benefit by being covered by these rules."

There are currently 284 HMO properties in Worcester City with Additional Licences. Worcester City Council is seeking views on the impact of the current Additional Licensing Scheme and also whether it should implement a new Additional Licensing Scheme to cover the remaining wards in Worcester City.

Please note that licensing is separate to planning consent. Any new HMOs will still be required to obtain planning permission, while licensing covers the ongoing standards, conditions and management of HMOs.

Have your say on the future of outdoor play in Worcester

Children, young people and their parents and carers are being asked for their views on the outdoor spaces they use or would like to use in Worcester.

Worcester City Council has launched a consultation and is urging residents to voice their opinions on play areas for children and social spaces for young people in a bid to find out which areas are popular and also whether there are areas of the city where people would like to see better space for play or socialising.

An online consultation is now open, using an interactive map of Worcester.

The consultation does not cover indoor spaces to play and socialise, as these places are mostly run by organisations other than the City Council.

The consultation will run until the end of February, 2023.

Worcester residents need photo ID to vote at elections in May

For the first time, residents in Worcester will need to show photographic identification (ID) to vote at the City Council elections in May. Residents are being urged to make sure they are ready to vote by checking they have the right form of ID.

A wide range of photo identification can be accepted, which most people will already have, including a passport, a Driver's Licence, an immigration document and some travel passes, such as an older person's bus pass. Voters will be able to use expired ID if they are still recognisable from the photo.

Anyone who does not have one of the accepted forms of ID will be able to apply for free ID, either online or by completing a paper form.

The full list of accepted ID is available on the Electoral Commission's website along with more information about the new requirement and details of how to apply for the free ID.

Anyone who wants to have their say in the elections this May must also be registered to vote.

It only takes five minutes to register online at gov.uk/register-to-vote. Voters wishing to apply to Worcester City Council for free ID should first make sure they are registered to vote. The requirement to show photo ID at the polling station is a new requirement, introduced by the UK Government's Elections Act which was passed last year and comes into effect for the first time this May.

New information signs to be installed at Worcester's riverside park

Work will get underway this spring to install new information signs at the entrances to Worcester's beautiful Riverside Park.

Fifteen new totem-style signs will be put in place to welcome visitors to the park, and will include maps, information on walking and cycling routes, stories from the rich history of the area, and family-friendly facts on the wildlife that lives on, in and near the river.

Thirty-one illustrated granite floor tiles are also due to go in on pathways and routes into the park, to increase public awareness of the riverside as a visitor destination. Some of these tiles will feature arrows to suggest recommended routes or spots of special interest

Work to create the foundations for the new signs and tiles will be starting shortly, and public notices are being displayed at the locations where this will take place. The signs and floor tiles will start to be installed in April.

Grants to make your local community greener up for grabs in 2023

Worcester City Council is offering grants of up to £1,000 to community groups, charities and voluntary organisations that wish to take action to protect the environment.

Applications are invited to support initiatives which will reduce carbon emissions, improve resilience to climate change, reduce waste, benefit the natural environment or raise awareness about environmental issues.

The funding helped to plant more fruit trees and vegetables, improve recycling facilities, protect bees and build bird, bat, insect and hedgehog houses, amongst other actions.

New grant available for Worcester retail businesses

Worcester City Council has launched a new grant to help businesses and organisations which are either moving into empty premises or looking to make improvements to their existing building.

The Retail Enhancement Grant will help fund interior renovations as well as improving the frontages and accessibility of empty and occupied retail units across Worcester. The grant is available for units used for purposes such as retail, hospitality, leisure, personal care services or provision of financial services.

Businesses moving into an empty unit can apply for a grant of up to £12,000 towards the cost of refurbishment. For those already in a retail unit, there is a grant of up to £6,000 for improvements to the internal appearance, frontage or access. Businesses must be able to make a 'cash match' contribution of at least 50% towards the costs of the proposed renovations.

The project is funded by the UK Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The Retail Enhancement Grant is part of Worcester City Council's allocation of £2.96m.

The scheme is designed to encourage longer-term occupation of vacant retail premises and improvements to existing shops to complement the wider investment in public realm and help ensure Worcester remains an attractive place to visit.

The new Retail Enhancement Grants build on the Property Enhancement Grants that were delivered through the Future High Street Fund for properties in The Cross and Angel Street. However, the new grant is for retail properties anywhere within Worcester.

For further information or to request an application pack, contact the Worcester City Council Economic Development team either by email economy@worcester.gov.uk or call 01905 722106.