

City Councillors Report – February 5th Parish Council Meeting

January Floods

2024 got off to a far-from-ideal start with floods reaching our city again, following several weeks of rain, climaxing in Storm Henk. There was a high quality of the multi-agency response, including the work of officers across several of the City Council's services.

There was regular contact with flooded householders and businesses throughout the incident, and the City Services teams swung into action as soon as the flood level started to recede to get our roads, footpaths and bridges looking their best again.

The work continues to support Worcester's recovery from the floods, with the main focus now being the grants that the Government has made available to help householders and businesses who were flooded in the period 2-8 January.

Residents can receive grants of up to £500, plus a three-month Council Tax discount, while businesses may be eligible for grants of up to £2,500 and a three-month Business Rates discount.

The following conditions apply:

- Residential properties are eligible for grants from Storm Henk even if they received a grant following Storm Babet (October 2023), as long as the residents were back in their property ahead of Storm Henk.
- Businesses are eligible for grants from Storm Henk even if they received one following Storm Babet. Businesses are eligible as long as they were trading again ahead of Storm Henk, but only if the business property was flooded. Businesses that were cut off and unable to trade but weren't flooded on the premises are not eligible for this round of grant support.

The City Council are contacting eligible households and businesses directly about this support, and details are also available on our website.

Worcester is one of ten best cities in UK

Worcester has been named as one of the UK's ten best cities to live in. Savills and The Telegraph ranked cities according to their combination of value for money and high standards of living. Worcester came seventh in the list, beating Exeter and Milton Keynes.

The round-up in The Telegraph said: "Worcester residents have Birmingham's vast employment centre on their doorstep and yet can retreat at the end of the day back to its much smaller sister city, surrounding market towns and villages. They also pay far less for a house than those in the neighbouring Cotswolds. Worcester is also the top pick for the history buff."

Holocaust Memorial Day

This year's Holocaust Memorial Day was held on Monday 29 January. Hosted by the Mayor with the Worcestershire Interfaith Forum, the event was held in the Guildhall.

The theme of this year's Memorial Day is Fragility of Freedom, and the keynote speaker was Mr Michael Bibring, a second-generation Holocaust survivor. Michael's father Harry left Vienna for Britain on the Kindertransport as a 13-year-old, along with his sister. The plan was for their parents to later join them, but that never happened, with his father dying of a heart attack in 1940 and his mother being deported to the death camp at Sobibór in Poland in 1942.

This important day was marked by lighting the Guildhall in purple across the weekend and on Monday.

Important step for our new arts venue

The planning application for Worcester's new Scala arts venue has been submitted for a new performance and creativity hub in the heart of our city.

The City Council has drawn up a revised scheme to revive the historic Scala and Corn Exchange buildings in Angel Street, following extensive consultation with stakeholders in Worcester's arts and creative communities.

The project is being funded with part of our £17.9 million share of the Government's Future High Streets Fund, and the planning application can now be viewed and is open for comments on the Council website.

The plans, prepared by architects Burrell Foley Fischer, set out proposals to create a range of new facilities in the two historic buildings. These include three multi-use studios, currently named The Stage, The Screen, and The Box, as well as a café that can provide additional performance space, gallery space, and foyer and reception areas – as show in this cross-section of the ground floor plan.

With retractable seats, The Stage will be perfect for live performances and other workshops; as its name implies, The Screen will host films and talks, including film festivals, live broadcasts, and other screenings not typically shown in multiplexes; The Box will be perfect for workshops, courses, and classes, as well as new and exciting digital experiences.

The Council is working with seven local arts organisations to prepare the plans: Severn Arts; Dancefest; Mobilise Arts, a Worcestershire-based inclusive arts organisation; C&T applied theatre practitioners, technologists, web designers and teachers; co-working facility The Kiln; and community cinema operator Vestan.

They continue to be involved as plans for the management and operation of the new venue are developed and finalised.

Light Night is back – 14th and 15th February

The City Council is once again supporting this year's Light Night events, organised by Severn Arts. This year's events will bring giant light-based artworks, colourful interactive installations, inspiring artistic commissions, and entertaining walkabout artists to the city centre.

Coinciding with both half-term and Valentine's Day, the two Light Nights are on 14 and 15 February, running 6-9pm. They promise to be great events for all the family, and I hope to see many Members there.

Find out more about this year's Light Night programme on the Severn Arts website.

Severn Arts have also launched an appeal to raise £5,000 to help bring more light-to-Light Night Worcester 2024 and I hope Members will help spread the word about this.

The appeal to Worcester's community is to support one of the inspiring installations for 2024, Black Hole – End of Time, by making a donation through the Severn Arts website.

Public art at regenerated porcelain factory site

The City Council is a partner in the project to create an original new public artwork at the site of Worcester's historic porcelain factory, alongside The Museum of Royal Worcester and Royal Porcelain Works.

Experienced public artists Musson+Retallick (above) won the commission for this project and are currently running a series of free workshops to talk about their creative processes and give local people the chance to contribute their stories and memories of 'The Porcelain' or what the regenerated site means to them today, all of which will help inform the final artworks.

Natural Networks funding

The County Council have launched a new round of their Natural Networks funding programme, which makes grants of £1,000 to £15,000 available to projects that aim to create and restore habitats for wildlife.

Safer canvassing guide for councillors and candidates

The Local Government Association (LGA) has published a guide outlining seven principles for safer canvassing and provides some helpful, practical hints for canvassers.

With both the City Council's polls and the General Election approaching, councillors and candidates will be leading or taking part in canvassing sessions. The LGA is aware of the concerns regarding possible instances of harassment during canvassing activities, and this new guide is designed to help ensure this important democratic activity can be carried out as safely as possible.

The Mercian Regiment Museum (Worcestershire) have successfully bid for £243,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund

The award is development funding for the major project to relocate The Worcestershire Soldier Gallery from its current location within the Worcester City Art Gallery & Museum to The Commandery. In its new home, The Worcestershire Soldier Gallery will help link together a history of soldiers from the city and county over four centuries.

The new exhibition will place an emphasis on enhanced storytelling, more opportunities for volunteering and lifelong learning and community engagement, alongside a focus on more inclusion and greater wellbeing. It will create an improved visitor experience designed to attract more general and school visitors to The Commandery, as well as to the Worcestershire Soldier story.

The relocation is scheduled to be completed by summer 2025 and will in turn create new opportunities at the Worcester Art Gallery and Museum, with more exhibition space available.

Energy efficiency drive for historic homes

DLUHC has announced a review to tackle barriers to make historic homes more energy efficient. The review sets out commitments to drive energy efficiency and low carbon heating improvements to listed buildings and buildings in conservation areas across England, as part of the Government's commitment to reach Net Zero by 2050.

Commitments include:

- a consultation on new national development management policy specially for historic buildings
- consulting on the greater use of Listed Building Consent Orders to support building improvements, removing the need to submit individual listed building consent applications
- developing clearer guidance for historic homeowners on improving energy efficiency and supporting the construction industry to better deliver retrofitting services
- consulting on reforms to Energy Performance Certificates to ensure they are accurate, reliable and trustworthy.

People on low incomes encouraged to check eligibility for energy bill discount. The Government is encouraging people on low incomes to check if they can benefit from a £150 rebate on their energy bills.

The help is available to over three million households in Great Britain that are most at risk of fuel poverty, with many receiving the discount automatically. However, some customers in England and Wales have been sent a letter asking them to confirm their details by calling the Warm Home Discount Helpline so they can check their eligibility and get the rebate. Customers are being encouraged to stay alert to potential scams and report them to relevant authorities where they are suspected.

Households who need to provide more information should call the helpline on 0800 030 9322 by 29 February to get the support they are entitled to.

Cold Weather Payments have also been triggered to help households receiving certain benefits to stay warm this winter. The scheme – which runs until March 2024 – provides low-income households with an automatic payment of £25 following periods of cold weather.

Further information about the Warm Home Discount Scheme is available [here](#) and households can check if they are eligible for the support via the online eligibility checker.

New Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman appointed

The Government has recently confirmed the next Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman as Amerdeep Somal, who will start in post on 1 February.

She has also been appointed as Chair of the Commission for Local Administration in England, the official body which runs the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman service.

The Ombudsman investigates complaints from members of the public about councils and social care providers. The Ombudsman's investigations are independent of the Government.

Draft Ash Dieback Strategy and Action Plan 2024-2027

The Environment Committee noted the report and recommended to Policy & Resources Committee (to be held on 6th February) for the provision of a revenue allocation of £65,000 for 2024/25 to support delivery of the strategy and action plan in Year 1; and notes that a further report will be presented to this Committee in January 2025, updating on progress with Year 1 delivery of the strategy and action plan and seeking budget provision for 2025/26 – 2026/27. The strategy document makes little reference to Warndon Parish and what resources will be allocated to here where most of the ash trees in the city are and refers to Warndon Parish Council to “provide additional input and resources for Ash Dieback management specific to Warndon area”.