

Chief Executive's report to Full Council 11 October 2024

Flooding has affected several areas of the county recently following spells of torrential rain. More than a month's rainfall fell in just three hours on 21 September. The sheer volume of water meant that some systems were overwhelmed and around 30 residential and business properties were flooded. Staff from the council and our partners Balfour Beatty Living Places worked around the clock to clear standing water from roads and to provide assistance with removing damaged property where needed.

As I write, the ground is now saturated and less able to cope with the continued wet weather and river levels are currently high. Information about ways to prepare for flooding and to report flooding are available on the council website www.herefordshire.gov.uk/flooding

I was fortunate to be invited by the Lord Lieutenant to join Council Chairman Councillor Roger Phillips to meet His Royal Highness The Duke of Edinburgh, during his recent visit to the county. The visit took in some of the further and higher education establishments, including Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire College in Holme Lacy and NMITE at Skylon Park, as well as the Veterans Centre in Hereford. Royal visits have a positive impact for the county through drawing attention to the excellent work taking place here.

There have been some key appointments made to the corporate leadership team during the summer. Tina Russell joined us as Director of Children's Services on a fixed term basis leading on delivery of the refreshed children's services improvement plan. Rachael Sanders has been appointed as the Director of Finance on a secondment basis and will oversee the budget setting process until a permanent appointment is made to this post. The Director of Public Health position is currently being advertised, and in the interim is being ably filled by Dr Cate Carmichael. Rosie Thomas-Easton has been appointed as the new interim Director of Strategy and Transformation, and will be joining us in November.

As returning officer, I announced Charlie Taylor as the new ward member for Credenhill in September. I look forward to working with her. The by-election was called following the sad death of Cllr Bob Matthews in June. The election results can be found on the council website at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/elections

With the new school year underway, I wanted to restate our 'well done' to all the young people in the county who worked hard towards their GCSEs, A Levels and other qualifications. We saw a strong performance once again across our county, which is testament to the many wonderful teaching and support staff in our schools.

Our children's services improvement plan phase 2 was agreed by all partners at the Children's Services Improvement Board, and endorsed by Cabinet, in September. The new plan provides a clear focus for our improvement work and how we will measure progress. It is supported by audit, performance indicators and more opportunities for children and families to tell us about their experiences, so we can clearly see where our actions are making a difference. You can view our summary Improvement Plan documents on the council website at: [Herefordshire Children's Services Improvement Plan on a page Phase 2;](#) [Children and Young Person's Improvement Plan on a page Phase 2](#)

Our eye-catching 'Join us on our journey' recruitment campaign is going well, and our children's services now have more social workers and managers employed on a permanent basis, providing greater stability and consistency.

The Luston Wetlands received a high-profile official opening in August by television's Kevin McCloud MBE. The writer, designer and presenter, who is best known for fronting Channel 4's Grand Designs, delivered a keynote speech at the opening of the site, which has been operational for a year, helping to tackle nutrient pollution in the county's rivers. The Luston Wetlands are a world first and a national exemplar in capturing and removing phosphate, helping to improve the wellbeing of our rivers. The scheme ensures that more phosphate is removed from the river system than is returned to it through any form of development. The project has delivered wide benefits for biodiversity and has helped to release the potential of 1,000 homes in North Herefordshire, with 620 having already been granted permission.

The new waste collection services contract started in September and is set to deliver many benefits. The most visible immediate change has been the introduction of a new fleet of vehicles, including two electric vehicles. The service will see greater reuse of bulky items, weekly collections of recycling for areas with no external storage space and the expansion of commercial recycling bin options. Close ongoing monitoring of the service will ensure it provides exactly what local people need from it. I'm sure you'll join me in thanking the team involved in the development and implementation of this contract.

Alongside the new collection service, we have launched a campaign to heighten awareness of what should and shouldn't be recycled. Called 'Be Clued Up! On Waste', you will start to notice the campaign on the side of bin lorries and on social media over the coming weeks and months.

Our accounts for 2023/24 were approved by the Audit and Governance Committee during the final week of September and officially signed off by our auditors. This made us the first council in the country to publish audited accounts and our Value for Money opinion, and well within the deadline set by government. My thanks to the finance team for all their hard work which made this possible.

As part of our commitment to offer the best possible services for local residents and businesses, we recently introduced an improved pre-application planning advice service. Based on feedback from users, the service provides advice and guidance for those looking to apply for planning permission. The new web page and digital application form offers automatic quotes meaning an improved and less complicated service for the applicants. See the council website www.herefordshire.gov.uk/planning

Plans for the renovation of the Shirehall are progressing well. One of Hereford's most historic buildings, the design proposals outline how the building's heritage features will be preserved when the Shirehall becomes a vibrant community hub and home to a modern library and learning centre.

The Register Office in Hereford has recently moved next door to 8 St Owen Street. All appointments to register a birth, death or stillbirth, as well as to give notice of marriage or civil partnership, will now take place at the new register office, although ceremonies already scheduled in the Oak Room at Hereford Town Hall, will take place in the Oak Room as planned. The move will allow Hereford library to relocate temporarily to the Town Hall until its permanent home in Shirehall is completed.

Herefordshire has a proud history of welcoming people from other parts of the world at times of need. Since the Homes for Ukraine Scheme was launched 2022 more than 200 sponsors in the county have opened their doors to guests escaping conflict. While the war in Ukraine may no longer be hitting our daily news headlines, the need for sponsors is ongoing. If this is something you or someone you know could consider, there are further details on the council website www.herefordshire.gov.uk/ukraine

Following the recent all-member briefing on devolution, elected members will be aware local authorities were asked to submit an expression of interest (EOI) in working with the government on a devolution deal by 30 September. Following discussion with Group Leaders, it was agreed to submit an expression of interest as set out below:

Preferred Geography - Our preference is devolution at a single county level. However, we are open to explore what it means for Herefordshire to work with our neighbours, subject to further information and details about a devolution framework that defines the powers and flexibilities available to areas entering into such agreements and future timescales.

Initial preference on mayoral/non-mayoral devolution - Non-Mayoral Devolution

It is important to stress that this is only the expression of interest stage. In my response to the deputy prime minister, I confirmed that progress to further stages of Devolution will be subject to Full Council or Cabinet approval as appropriate. We await details of the devolution framework and plans for a White Paper. Once received we will arrange a further all-member briefing to consider the details, as stated in our expression of interest.

Finally, the latest issue of Herefordshire Now magazine has just been published. Issued quarterly online, with a limited number of printed copies available through libraries and talk community hubs, the magazine provides a brief overview of council news and information for residents. It can be found on the council website at www.herefordshire.gov.uk/council/herefordshire-now