

Chief Executive's announcement Full Council 8 October 2021

It has been a real privilege to learn about Herefordshire since I joined the council six months ago. From Bromyard to the Golden Valley and Kington to Ross-on-Wye, I wanted to see things for myself. I have met with Members and mayors in the market towns and had conversations with parish councillors about their ambitions and plans. I have taken time to build relationships across the West Midlands with leaders and chief executives. I have seen the growth of our Talk Community and volunteer network, and how they come together to connect residents to services within their local community. The same is true for our Veteran Support Centre, which underpins the council's key role in establishing and maintaining an Armed Forces Covenant for the county, which makes sure our veterans get the support they need.

It is important to me to hear all the voices in the council, so I have spent time meeting teams across the council to see for myself how things work and to learn more about the council's history and culture. I've been determined to reach out across all parts from children's centres to planning officers, from adult placement officers to procurement, and I've been out into the libraries and our community facilities. One such facility is Hillside Care Centre which is doing fantastic work providing residential care and dementia services to some of the county's most vulnerable residents. I want to thank the staff at Hillside, and the discharge to assess team, for their invaluable role in supporting placements for those who need further care support and helping to relieve pressure on the NHS during the current Covid-19 pandemic.

There's still a lot of places to see and a lot of people to meet, and I have a continuing programme to do that. Meeting staff has given me the chance to hear what we do well, and to listen to what we can do better. I have been really impressed with the commitment our staff have to the council. Many of the staff who work for us are Herefordians who want to be part of a successful organisation and are passionate about how the council is perceived. I do hope my visible leadership has set a new tone for the council – a shared vision for the future of the council, making the most of the 'Spirit of Herefordshire' which I have seen in our staff.

I believe the success of any organisation is down to its people and the relationships they have with each other and the people they serve. We are continuing to develop our staff and Member communication channels to keep everyone informed and to allow two-way conversations to take place. Our weekly updates to staff and monthly corporate briefings allow me to share what's happening in all parts of the council. My all staff briefings allow me to share my vision for the council, and the staff panels gives people the chance to feed back into corporate matters that affect their working life. I will keep that dialogue open so staff can share what's on their mind, and we can work together to move things forward.

Like many organisations, staff are keen to understand what our future workplace will look like. Covid forced the majority of our office staff to work remotely and I'm keen to learn from that. We have found that many staff valued working remotely and benefited from an

improved work/ life balance. However, some staff reported feeling isolated and some roles required staff to work from a fixed location. I want our staff to feel engaged and empowered to get their work done well, regardless of their location. But we also need to balance that with our customer and organisational needs. To develop the most suitable approach, we are learning from other public sector organisations who have adopted hybrid working, and we are listening to feedback from our staff panels and surveys. The aim is to pilot the 'Flexible Futures' hybrid working plan at our Plough Lane office from January 2022.

There are organisational improvements to make too in the areas of organisational culture, governance and performance management. I have found that there is a limited council-wide approach to strategy and action. I have taken the first step in our 'One Council' corporate transformation programme and restructured our management board with a shift in focus to 'Corporate Director'. This will bring visible and effective corporate leadership with a renewed council-wide focus, rather than working in silos. The new Corporate Directors will lead and develop a more corporate way of working, and will role model those corporate practices and ways of working which we want to adopt throughout the organisation. An interim Director of Transformation will lead and take us through this corporate transformation, and they will also develop modern and efficient ways of working and serving our communities. Interviews for the Corporate Directors will take place in November.

And of course, the improvement journey continues for the council's Children's Services. When I joined the council six months ago, I made a commitment to ensure that we will make all the necessary improvements to our Children's Services. The monthly Improvement Board, chaired by an independent Department for Education advisor, has given me the assurance our improvement journey is underway. The board reviews our Improvement Plan progress, our Early Help services and it will oversee the development of the Children's Safeguarding Partnership. Other reported progress in Children's Services includes the development of 1 to 1 coaching and mentoring sessions for managers, the development of tracking processes for children within the legal system and an ongoing audit of all open cases by the project auditing team.

Our next steps include the development and relaunch of our Children's Service standards, an improved 'front door' safeguarding referral system and a review of our child protection and Independent Reviewing Officer services. This is a hugely challenging time for our Children's Services but our priority must be to ensure that the children of Herefordshire receive safe, supportive and effective services. I want to thank our Children's Services staff for their hard work during such an unsettled time, and I hope they are starting to see some benefits in the changes that have taken place so far.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the fantastic work that's been done in response to the pandemic, whether that's through our public health team and environmental health officers to our delivery partners who have continued to clean our streets and recycle our waste. Our comprehensive, multi-agency response to the Covid-19 pandemic continues as we adapt to changes in national policy. This includes ensuring the public receive accurate, timely and helpful information and publishing regular intelligence data on the current situation in Herefordshire.

The Outbreak Control Hub continues to do great work quietly behind the scenes. As well as supporting local business to implement Covid prevention measures, they manage local outbreaks in settings such as at schools, colleges and nurseries, care homes and farms. The general public are moving towards making regular testing part of their new normal, and our testing team regularly distribute lateral flow test kits at pop-up stands across the county. Working alongside partners, we continue to support the Covid vaccination programme, with our role particularly focusing on inequalities. We have worked to address these inequalities, which includes co-ordinating vaccinations for seasonal workers and identifying and responding to key groups where vaccine uptake is lower.

I would like to once again add a personal thank you to all staff working in difficult circumstances for their commitment and hard work during the pandemic.

We have now put in place plans to support post-Covid recovery with a £6 million investment in an economic and wellbeing recovery plan to support the county to recover from the impact of Covid-19. Our response to the pandemic has been well-managed, but there is no doubt that our communities and local economy have been severely impacted.

So far we have offered free swimming lessons and announced community grant programmes to support the development of our green spaces and cultural activities. This excellent investment is set to bring physical and mental wellbeing benefits to our residents. Our free and unlimited weekend bus travel offer will bring further benefits to our local economy and help to reconnect our Herefordshire communities.

We held the first Herefordshire Economic Summit in September at the new Shell Store. The summit was about setting the tone for a new conversation, building new relationships and working together with businesses to develop a new economic plan for the county – the Herefordshire Big Plan. I was joined by Councillor David Hitchiner, Jesse Norman MP, Councillor Ellie Chowns and over 80 business leaders to hear presentations and discuss the future of local business.

The Herefordshire Big Plan will set out how the county can think big to drive change and meet opportunities, building new relationships with businesses to deliver growth. We will be developing a Big Plan and City Masterplan, covering the period to 2050, to set out the county's economic direction. These plans must be realistic and business-focused, so it is vital that we work collaboratively with a broad range of businesses across the county.

The strategy will build on our local strengths and opportunities to create a greener, fairer economy for all - revitalising our market towns, city and wider rural county.

I look forward to continuing my learning about Herefordshire and our partners, developing new opportunities, accelerating delivery of key projects and improvements and as always taking time to listen to and work with staff across the council.