

Chief Executive's report to Full Council 9 December 2022

Looking back over the past twelve months we really couldn't have foreseen the way that 2022 would unfold. While at the very start of the year we were supporting the county's economic recovery from Covid, improvements required to our children's services, the significant impact of the war in Ukraine and the current financial situation have since demanded our attention. I'm proud of how hard everyone's worked to deliver the best response to these challenges.

Our main and key focus continues to be improving our children's services following an Ofsted report in September that downgraded our children's Social Care Services to 'Inadequate'. The commitment to make the changes needed to make a difference for children and families in Herefordshire runs throughout the whole council. We are one year into a three year improvement programme and we have been open that it will be some time before sustained change can be demonstrated. We welcome the support of the Children's Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, who brings additional oversight and a wealth of experience to our work to improve the service. The significant additional investment agreed by Full Council will support this improvement work and build a service that we can all be proud of.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in February, the people of Herefordshire stepped forward with offers of help and support for those affected. We now have more than 539 Ukrainian guests in the county who are settling well into their local communities. As they start to rebuild their lives, we continue to provide a range of supporting services directly and through various partner agencies.

Our services to find solutions for the accommodation and support needs of rough sleepers in the county continue to run successfully and have been accepted as part of the Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM) national network. Workshops have been held recently with stakeholders to look at how the learning from these services can be applied more widely, to people with multiple complex vulnerabilities, such as substance misuse and mental ill-health, with a strategy to be agreed early in the New Year.

It's been a busy year for economic development in the county with several exciting projects making significant progress. Emerging from the worst of the pandemic, we supported local businesses with the highly-popular and innovative Shop Local cards, funded by Covid recovery money, which encouraged people to stay, shop and spend locally. We also helped businesses with 'Revive and Thrive' business support grants, encouraging people to start up new businesses and providing support to expand.

We've continued with our Business Summits, building relationships with businesses across the county to work together to steer the economic development of Herefordshire. This has included forming the Herefordshire Sustainable Growth Strategy Board to lead the development of our Big Economic Plan which is gathering pace and will be launched in early 2023. The Big Economic Plan will set a long-term 2050 shared vision for the county, considering the kind of place we would like the county to be, how we can address some of our long-term economic challenges, and realise some of our fantastic opportunities. This will be supported by five-yearly delivery plans identifying how the public, private and voluntary sector can work better together to achieve these ambitions.

In the summer, we received confirmation that £22.4million in Stronger Towns funding had been secured for 15 capital projects across the City. The £18m Hereford Museum and Art Gallery (which will provide the permanent home for the Herefordshire Hoard), and a new £3.5m Library and Learning Resource Centre at Maylord Orchards head the list of the council's projects funded under this scheme. A number of other projects are already planned and under way in Hereford to help improve how we travel around and experience our City. These includes the upgrade and cycleway in St Owen Street, while consultations on the proposed transport hub and the overarching Hereford Masterplan have been launched recently.

We've submitted Levelling Up Fund bids to government seeking over £40m to develop new employment sites, enhance public realm and improve transport connectivity. We should know the outcome by the end of the year. We've also submitted the required UK Shared Prosperity Fund, Multiply and Rural Prosperity plans to government which will unlock £9.4m of much-needed support for our local economy over the next couple of years.

During the past year we've launched and contributed to a number of initiatives and campaigns which look to address the climate challenge and to protect our natural environment. Our first Citizens' Climate Assembly has led to the development of a number of projects identified as the main priority areas by participants, and these will soon be getting underway. We've also been running our 'Getting it Right' recycling campaign which is making an impact in how and what residents are recycling, and we've supported the Greener Footprints campaign as part of the Herefordshire Climate and Nature Partnership Board.

The newly established Cabinet Commission on River Wye Restoration has already received the backing of MPs and neighbouring counties, and is quickly developing constructive relationships with key stakeholders across a range of sectors.

I'm delighted that our network of Talk Community Hubs has now reached 68, providing contact points for residents across the county as well as offering warm and welcoming spaces during the winter, which is looking to be a difficult one financially for many of our residents.

Looking inwards, we've delivered the major part of the Flexible Futures programme, providing the means for our staff to work flexibly across the county. The changed working practices during the pandemic gave us a launching pad for a move to flexible working – with benefits to staff and the council and I'm pleased to say this new way of working is starting to feel like it's our new normal.

For me, we can't do anything without our people and it's important we that we look after and understand how our staff feel about working for the council and what it's like for them. We ran a staff survey during the year to find out and more than half of staff responded providing a statistically valid insight into the views of the workforce. The results will enable us to identify areas that are working well and those that need improvement. This will help to ensure the best experience for our staff and attract skilled people to come and work for us.

I'm confident that after a difficult period, we're developing a more stable workforce. All directorates now have a permanent Corporate Director, and we're steadily reducing the number of interim and contract staff, and appointing to permanent positions.

Our frontline staff play a hugely important role, providing help, advice and support when and where needed, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their hard work. We're currently working to improve the way the council interacts with customers, putting our residents at the centre of re-designing our services and modernising technology so that it is easier for staff to do the best possible job. This is a comprehensive review of how we can make technology work effectively to improve everyone's experience, while freeing up services to work face-to-face where that's the best thing to do. We look forward to introducing these changes from next year.

Major national events that have impacted us locally during the year include the loss of our Monarch, the late Queen Elizabeth II, in September took the nation into a period of mourning. Our staff, in conjunction with other public services, did the county proud with an impressive Proclamation ceremony at Hereford Cathedral which was followed with services in each of the market towns.

Finally, but importantly, major global and national events have pushed finance and budgets to the top of the agenda – for us and every other public sector body in the country. We're currently forecasting an £11.2million overspend this year and looking at a £21.6million budget gap next year. I've asked everyone in the council to think about ways to make savings and also to consider opportunities to commercialise or maximise income generation. As you'll be aware, the Leader has written to the Prime Minister and Chancellor, but we need to be prepared for not receiving any more support from central government. Tough financial times ahead...

Thank you all for your support over the past year. I look forward to working with you, and our delivery partners including Balfour Beatty Living Places, FFC, Halo and The Courtyard, in 2023 to deliver excellent services to our residents and businesses and continue to make Herefordshire a county we can all be proud of.