

Chief Executive's Announcement – July 2023

Since our last Council in May, where we welcomed both new and returning councillors, individuals have settled into new roles familiarising themselves with the important and valuable work the council undertakes and the various priorities, issues and opportunities facing us and I am pleased to say that there is already much activity and progress under way for me to report on.

I have had a number of one-to-ones with our new councillors which have been going well. For those I haven't yet met and who would like to meet with me, please do get in touch to arrange one.

We continue to work hard to deliver the improvements required of our Children's Services. We are really delighted to begin our long-term improvement partnership with the Leeds Relational Practice Centre (LRPC). This represents a significant and really positive development in the improvement journey under way at Herefordshire Council and very welcomed by our senior leadership team and workforce.

Following the inadequate Ofsted inspection judgement in July 2022, the service, council and partnership have been galvanised into action and the improvement partnership with LRPC plays a key part in our onward journey at this stage and over the next two years. There is clearly much to do and we welcome the knowledge, skills, expertise and experience they are able to offer us – they have assisted many other local authorities in this space and are well respected in the sector. Leeds have been on an improvement journey themselves. They have been judged to be Outstanding (twice) and our early conversations indicate that there is a really good 'fit' which bodes well for the developing partnership.

We have been working hard to put the building blocks of improvement in place to establish a solid foundation upon which to build. At this point in our improvement journey, we welcome the support and challenge LRPC will bring. This is very timely and will assist with our focus and pace. Sal Tariq the Programme Director of LRPC is invited to attend the Herefordshire Children's Improvement Board to make sure that the improvement partnership continues to develop and is reported as an integral part of the work of the Improvement Board.

Further positive achievements are that work is nearly completed at Herefordshire Council's Plough Lane offices to transform a series of rooms into family and child-friendly spaces with the project due to be completed at the end of July. The rooms are being transformed for families who are meeting Children's Services care and support staff. A dedicated entrance to the building is being created so families can access the new area directly without having to go through the main reception area. We look forward to the opening of these new facilities very soon.

Following the feedback we shared from our first Ofsted monitoring visit in March that cited examples of good and improved practice, and raised no serious safeguarding concerns, we now await the feedback from our second monitoring visit held on 28 and 29 June, where the focus of inspection was on children in need or subject to a protection plan. We know that there is still much more to do and as a council, we remain committed to supporting everyone working with children and families in Herefordshire to achieve this.

We will be holding two Member Briefings to update members on the latest Ofsted visit where we will share our current challenges and review our latest performance. These will be taking place on 2 August at 1pm to 2pm and on 3 August at 3pm to 4pm.

Supporting our priority to invest in our communities and grow our local economy through tourism, I am pleased to report that we have successfully been awarded £5 million grant funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which supports initiatives to create positive and lasting change for people and communities. This really is a significant achievement given Herefordshire Council was granted the full amount it bid for, which we believe has never been granted to any other applications made to the Fund.

The funds are to redevelop the Grade II listed Hereford Museum and Art Gallery, significantly enhancing the city's cultural offer. The project will see the introduction of a contemporary museum and exhibition centre to the cathedral city. The revamped museum will also provide a new permanent home for the Herefordshire Hoard, one of the most significant early medieval treasures ever discovered in Britain.

This month, we officially launched the county's new Health and Wellbeing Strategy at Hereford racecourse. Over 100 representatives from across the public, private and voluntary sector came together to celebrate our past achievements in keeping people healthy and making plans on how we deliver our two new priorities - improving mental wellbeing and the best start in life.

Last week, regional colleagues undertook a short review of adult social care to assess the service's preparedness for the new inspection regime to be undertaken by the Care Quality Commission. Inspections under the framework are due to start in the autumn. The review was informal but the team met with the Leader of the Council, Chief Executive, managers, staff, people with lived experience, support organisations and partners. There was positive feedback about the direction of travel and the council's general readiness for inspection. There is no formal report but the team's feedback will feed into the service's ongoing improvement and transformation plans.

In June, the Home Office notified Herefordshire Council of a proposal to use the Talbot Hotel in Leominster as contingency accommodation for asylum seekers. This would be in addition to the current use of the Three Counties Hotel in Hereford. We are very aware of the pressure on the system supporting asylum seekers and Herefordshire has a significant track record in recent years of participating in government migration schemes. However, alongside the regional Strategic Migration Partnership, and local police, health and fire services we have raised a number of concerns in our feedback on this proposal through formal channels to the Home Office.

The Home Office will be carrying out due diligence checks over the coming weeks to assess the suitability of the property, following which they will inform the council of their final decision.

This month, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Minister for Intergovernmental Relations notified all local authorities that the Office for Local Government (Oflog) has been established and new Best Value Guidance has been published. Oflog will provide authoritative and accessible data and analysis about the performance of local government, and support its improvement.

Oflog will help councillors and the public have the information they need to scrutinise more effectively local decisions. It will also ensure council leaders can compare themselves against their peers and find examples of good practice to learn from; and it will allow central government and its partners to identify where there might be challenges and a need to step in to give support, where appropriate.

At the end of May, Herefordshire welcomed a visit by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), the Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP, accompanied by her local parliamentary colleagues, the Rt Hon Jesse Norman MP and Bill Wiggins MP. She convened a roundtable to meet with the farming community, representatives of Herefordshire Council, Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Welsh Government, Powys and Monmouthshire Councils, local partners and environmental groups, to discuss the environmental challenges being faced across the River Wye Catchment and the region. She was keen to understand the issues first-hand and encouraged proactive collaboration and urgent action.

We have used this opportunity to respond directly to the Secretary of State. We have suggested that Government creates and oversees a Task Force responsible for driving the necessary changes, and which equips statutory agencies and local partners with the capabilities to tackle the environmental challenges to bring about the changes so needed to restore the Wye Catchment, its rivers and the ecosystems across our region.