

Leader's Report



It is a great privilege to be elected as Leader of Herefordshire Council. Thank you for putting your trust in me. I want to use my first report to council to set out my key areas of focus. I am sure you will agree with me, the improvement of children's services must be the top priority for this council, and for all members.

Further focus must be on stepping up measures to addressing the pressing issues we have with our rivers and our roads in the county. Unlocking this county's fantastic potential is about listening to our businesses and communities, working in partnership to deliver the best outcomes for Herefordshire.

We all have a part to play in Herefordshire's future and I really look forward to working with you all in this shared endeavour.

1. Children and Young People

a. Improvement Board and improvement plan

Members will be familiar with the content of the Ofsted monitoring visit report which was published and debated at the cabinet meeting again on 22nd June 2023. Ofsted's most recent monitoring visit was conducted on 28th and 29th June 2023, the letter is due for publication on 2nd August 2023. I am unable to give any detail of the likely content of that report as it is embargoed until it has been published.

The improvement board continues to progress the details of the children's improvement plan and children's services continue to benefit from the scrutiny and support of the children's commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, and the DfE improvement advisor/independent chair of the improvement board, Gladys Rhodes White. The improvement board recently agreed proposals to rationalise the improvement board infrastructure. These are designed to streamline and coordinate arrangements, improve reporting accountability and increase the pace of the overall improvement programme.

In addition, we welcome our recently announced long term (2 years) improvement partnership with Leeds City Council Children's Services. Leeds have previously been on their own improvement journey and have been rated outstanding twice by Ofsted. They are much respected in the sector having supported several other inadequate local authorities and established a strong reputation for restorative and relational practice.

But, we recognise we still have much progress to make and we are not complacent in this regard.

b. Meeting with parents and families

Councillor Ivan Powell, the Cabinet Member for children and young people is clear in his commitment that the ongoing work to endeavour to reach resolution for families has to occur in tandem with the improvement journey and the need to deliver the latter at pace.

In this regard, members will be aware that the Independent Commission to 'Consider Families Experience of Children's Services in Herefordshire' conducted its work in March and April 2023 - the report was published in June 2023. The terms of reference for the commission set out its purpose as follows:

- I. To give parents and families an opportunity to tell their story to an independent panel.
- II. To identify any steps that the council and partners can and should take as a result of hearing families' testimonies, either in relation to individual cases or in respect of general issues.
- III. To learn from their experiences and to ensure that this knowledge is used to inform improvements to Children's Services.
- IV. To ensure that, as far as possible, families feel that their concerns have been heard and addressed, and that this is as much as can be done to resolve matters.

During the commission, matters raised by some families (eleven of the twenty who made representations) were reported by the panel to the local authority for consideration and response. This work was conducted and the relevant families received a personalised letter from the Service Director for Improvement on 2nd June 2023.

Following the cabinet meeting on 22nd June 2023 Councillor Powell met with three parents at their request. During that meeting it became apparent that for some families despite their involvement in the commission their individual responses from children's services left them with unresolved matters. To that end, I have asked that further meetings with me and the cabinet member for children and young people take place. The first of those meetings, accompanied by the Service Director for Improvement, was held during the evening on 5th July 2023 resulting in an agreed course of action between the family and children's services.

A letter was sent to each individual family thanking them for their contributions and extending the offer to meet with them again, should they so wish to do.

It is acknowledged that there are other families who, for their own reasons, did not wish to contribute to the families' commission but do have similar and related concerns about their experience of children's services in Herefordshire. Where these approach the organisation they will similarly be afforded the opportunity of a meeting with a view to resolving any outstanding matters.

2. River restoration

It has been a busy time stepping up the council's work on river restoration. With the help of our MP's we were able to secure a ministerial roundtable held here in Hereford with Theresa Coffey MP, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. The meeting took place in the shadow of the announcement by Natural England that the condition status of the Wye had move to unfavourable and declining. This change means that all the agencies involved must now take further steps and measures to prevent further deterioration of the river and comply with the Habitats Directive.

This only adds to urgency, so in my welcome letter to the Secretary of State, sent in advance of the meeting, I called for a cross border task force to bring the right people together. We would like to see this initiative being led by a high profile River Champion to secure more credible national leadership to coordinate the tangible efforts of the many agencies and partners involved. I am pleased to see this proposal enjoys cross party political support in both England and Wales and we continue to press hard for this.

We have not lost sight of the desperate plight of the County's homebuilders and have attended Meetings at number 10 to discuss how we deal with Nutrient Neutrality. This demonstrates that we now have engagement at the highest level. We have also submitted a £2.1m bid to DLUHC seeking further support to deliver new approaches to mitigation and to cement Herefordshire's role as a respected national leader in tackling nutrient neutrality challenges.

3. Road Improvements

Addressing the condition of our roads is another pressing priority. Government awarded the Council £2.558m to help it improve the condition of its roads. We will be using this tranche of funding to allow our works teams to effectively patch roads across the county, preparing them for surface dressing in the spring of 2024.

I am committed to putting investment in to an ambitious programme of road surface repairs. We recognise that this investment is not enough to repair every road surface in the county. But we will continue to work with our public realm partners and with our local communities to ensure this new investment is targeted appropriately. By investing this money over the coming months we will be better prepared for winter and better able to start our larger programme of surface dressing early in the 24/25 financial year.

4. County Wide Infrastructure

Following a recent meeting with the Chief Executive of Midlands Connect we had some constructive discussions around areas of shared priority.

Upgrading the line between Hereford and Birmingham is an area of long overdue investment. We are working hard to ensure that our proposals for the transport hub, together with their plans for twin-tracking and passing places on the line would increase the number of trains and faster services between Hereford and Birmingham.

We have also considered - within the framework of National Highways priorities – the scope for Herefordshire during their prioritisation of investment. We will be pushing hard to ensure National Highways keep Herefordshire's ambitions front and centre in their plans. Cllr Price and I will be lobbying hard for any new major infrastructure investments to include scope for major projects such as the Southern Link and western crossing to be reconsidered.

These early discussions will be just one example of where my administration will be re-engaging with strategic regional and national partners. It is my mission to present our amazing county as being open for business, strategic in our thinking, and driven by a determination to support our communities so that they can thrive in Herefordshire.

5. The Local Plan

There have been a number of additional pieces of evidence base which have been received since the initial drafting of the Local Plan. It is important to reflect upon these to ensure that the plan placed on public consultation is based on the most up to date and robust information. These studies include Landscape Character Assessment, Green and Blue Infrastructure Study and initial Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitat Regulation Assessment. In addition initial viability feedback on the draft policies and more detailed information regarding infrastructure needs and requirements have been received.

With this in mind, the consultation placed for the 19 June to 8 September have been paused and the Cabinet are currently undertaking a review of the draft plan with officers. We have had constructive meetings with officers following two workshops on 10 and 11 July. The intention is to undertake a public consultation as soon as possible later in the year.

6. Health and Wellbeing Strategy Launch

On Wednesday, 11 July, I was pleased to be amongst public, private and voluntary sectors for the launch of Herefordshire's joint health and wellbeing strategy.

This is another brilliant example of what we do really well – working in partnership to create a shared strategy for the Health and Wellbeing Board. It provides leadership and example to support the Integrated Care System and allows local insights to assist in the development of local health and wellbeing intervention for our local population.

This 10-year plan outlines the county's top two priorities to help people live better and longer lives. Namely, giving people the best start in life, and having good life-long mental wellbeing. These are, of course, national priorities.

Our strategy explores local dimensions around these key objectives. For example, while life expectancy in Herefordshire is slightly better than elsewhere in England it is worse in our more deprived areas. For those living in poverty there is a lower life expectancy of 5.4 fewer years than in wealthier communities.

The overall ambition of the board is to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone living in Herefordshire. To do this, it recognises it needs to close the gap between poorer and wealthier residents. It troubles me greatly, as I know it will you, to see this disparity of life expectancy within our county.

Taking action to deliver these changes are now the next important steps. Delivery plans will be developed for each of the two priorities co-produced with partners, communities and those with lived experience, together with a dashboard that will be subject to monitoring and review.

7. Care Quality Commission – Readiness Report

Staying on the health and wellbeing theme, regional colleagues recently 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.

8. Relocating the Hereford Library and Learning Resource Centre (HLCC).

As members will be aware, cabinet considered the review of the proposed location of the HLLC. My cabinet requested this review with one simple but fundamental ambition in mind - to deliver the best possible high-quality library and new learning centre for the people of Herefordshire. Our review has been undertaken to ensure that we identify the best possible location for a library and learning centre. A detailed business case will be presented back to Cabinet in the autumn for further consideration.

The ambition is to create a modern 21st century library that offers not just world class learning opportunities but a wonderful visitor experience for all.

9. 'My Herefordshire' Children's Art Competition

I was delighted to help showcase some of Herefordshire's best young artists who have been honoured for their creative talents and some top prizes in a special competition run by Herefordshire Council.

The 'My Herefordshire' artwork competition was open to local schools and nurseries across Herefordshire earlier this year. The competition gave young people the chance to display their artistic skills and express what they like best about living in the county.

A panel of council judges had the difficult task of narrowing down the eye-catching artwork to 10 winners, who received their prizes at a presentation event on 17 July at the council's Plough Lane offices.

The winners came from five schools, St Joseph's Primary School, Trinity Primary School, Steiner Academy Hereford, Walford Primary School, and Ashfield Park Primary School. Each of the winners were presented with book tokens, a printed canvas of their artwork and a signed certificate.

Copies of the artwork will be hung on the walls of the Plough Lane Atrium for staff and visitors to enjoy.