

Chief Executive's report to Full Council 13 October 2023

Our work is ongoing to deliver the improvements required for our children's services. Important progress has been made throughout the summer. Our new partnership with one of the country's leading children's services – Leeds City Council – is helping the council continue to drive forward these improvements at pace. Frontline children's services social care staff have met with colleagues from Leeds – where children's services are rated as 'outstanding' - to hear directly from them about their experience, how they work and how this will benefit Herefordshire. This month new training will begin with our staff on a new way of working – known as restorative practice – to improve the way we work with families and children needing help.

We continue to have regular inspections from Ofsted that focus on key areas of practice. Their third visit took place in September and looked at our services for looked after children and permanency arrangements. There was positive feedback on the work of the children with disabilities team and some examples of good work and progress elsewhere. However, their feedback was clear that we need to increase the pace of change and increase and demonstrate the ambition that we have for children. There's no doubt that we're in a very different place than a year ago. However we know we have much to do to ensure our children and families are receiving the best possible services. Where we do have good practice we need to share this, learn from it, duplicate it in all parts of the service and set our aim and our ambitions higher.

Children's commissioner Eleanor Brazil continues to oversee our improvement programme. She is currently undertaking her formal six-month review of progress and will then submit her report and recommendations to David Johnston, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing) to consider. We are grateful for Eleanor's expert insight and guidance and the advice and support we receive from the Department for Education appointed improvement advisor Gladys Rhodes White OBE.

Our scheme offering special summer holiday activities to children and young people who receive free school meals has continued to grow in popularity. This year, more than 1,100 children took part in the Here for Herefordshire scheme which offers a variety of free indoor and outdoor activities which ran during the summer holidays.

In September, we celebrated the wonderful contribution of our fostering families. Foster Fest was a fun family day and a great way for the council to show its appreciation for the fantastic work they do. It also allowed families to share experiences in an informal setting. The council is part of a collaboration of more than 80 councils and children's trusts across the country to promote fostering with a powerful new film – Any of Us. The film highlights that anyone who cares has the potential to be a foster carer. It can be viewed on YouTube through the council website.

Herefordshire Council has been asked by the government to bring together local landowners and nature conservation groups, and embark upon a major nature recovery programme. This will aim to connect the many natural spaces with each other through a network of natural byways and recovered spaces. As an appointed Responsible Authority, the council is tasked with producing a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Herefordshire, which will be developed working in consultation with landowners, nature organisations and conservation groups in the county over the next 12 months.

Following audits to understand where farms in the county can cut carbon emissions and become more sustainable, the council recently facilitated a farm conference to share the outcomes and

experiences. The day was a chance for audit participants to meet with each other and stakeholders such as the county's Wildlife Trust and Forestry Commission teams who work with farms to support change. There's a spotlight on farming to cut carbon emissions and it's clear that Herefordshire farmers can and want to be part of the solution. Follow up farm audits will be conducted in 2026 to help measure progress.

The council, in collaboration with the Police and Crime Commissioner John Campion (PCC), and West Mercia Police have launched a new £1million grant scheme for projects that tackle crime. The Safer Communities Grant will support projects that focus on early prevention, tackling the causes of crime, vulnerability, exploitation and anti-social behaviour. Open to not for profit organisations and schools across Herefordshire, grants of between £25,000 and £300,000 will be available over the next two years.

The recent community day and official opening of the new cycle track in Hereford have been a great way to celebrate this fantastic new facility made possible thanks to Stronger Towns funding. The 1km circuit, which is managed by Halo Leisure, is next to the leisure centre in Holmer Rd and is an impressive addition to the facilities already offered there. The fifteen Stronger Hereford projects are set to transform culture, sport, skills and the City's riverside as well as offering greener travel and will benefit residents from across the county.

Investing in staff development is vital if we are to build experience and retain skills in the council. We've recently introduced a new apprenticeship scheme with Coventry University which will allow staff to gain the qualifications they need to further develop their career while continuing to work. The apprentices spend 80% of their time at work and 20% for study, which includes going to university. The apprenticeships in occupational therapy and social work are a great way to gain additional experience and qualifications.

We've also recently welcome three new colleagues who've joined us as part of the LGA's national graduate development programme. They'll be spending two years working across different council departments as they learn about how local government works and developing their project and service management skills. We wish them all well.

Thank you for your support

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Paul Walker
Chief Executive