


Appendix 1: Report of the Leader of the Council - 28 July to 5 October

Leader's Report	
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Since my first report I wish to update on the progress we have made on a number of our priority areas.

Improving children's services remains my number one priority. We continue to implement our improvement plan whilst also working with our national partners in the Department for Education (DfE), Leeds, and the Local Government Association (LGA) who continue to provide leadership and example. I am hugely grateful for their insights and support.

Work continues at pace with our wider priorities. I am pleased to report our progress on some of the more prominent areas of activity in my report below.

In unrelated events, I was delighted to be guest of honour at the Herefordshire, Ludlow and North Shropshire college graduation ceremony on Wednesday 20 September. The ceremony was held at Hereford Cathedral. It was truly inspiring to see the next generation of talents taking their first tentative steps in to their new careers. Careers that cover some vitally needed skills such as Health and Social Care, Early years and Adult Care. I wish them all well in their future endeavours.

Priority No. 1: Children's Services

1. Update Children's services

Since my last report, Ofsted inspectors have undertaken a further monitoring visit to review our Children's Services. Inspectors visited the council's service in September specifically to review progress in the way children in our care are looked after. Ofsted are yet to publish their most recent letter explaining their latest findings.

Following a previous review in July - we know we are on the right path but that the pace of change needs to be quicker and improvements more consistently embedded. While we have taken some positives from the July visit our full and undivided focus remains resolute on where improvements continue to be needed and what we need to do to address areas of ongoing concern.

Since our July Council meeting, new and positive new developments have come in to place. Our new partnership with colleagues from Leeds City Council is proving to be a huge help. The experience and insight they bring – having been on this journey themselves and helped other council's children's services – is invaluable to building the service we all want to see at Herefordshire. We are also working with the LGA who continue to offer valued advice and experience in helping the council to develop its corporate parenting panel and in assisting scrutiny to provide strong and effective critical friend challenge around the services we are delivering.

It is my expectation that the outcomes of the review in September will continue to show that there is still much to do. The improvement of Children's Services remains the top priority for the council. We are determined to continue working with Ofsted and partners to ensure improvements continue to be made.

2. Hampton Dene Primary School – expansion of the Language and Communication Centre (LCC)

I was delighted that, on 28 September, Cabinet approved, subject to the necessary planning consents, up to £2.4m of the high needs provision capital grant be allocated to extend Hampton Dene Primary School's LCC.

This investment enables the council to deliver much needed additional capacity that will continue to ensure that our statutory responsibility to provide high quality education places for children and young people with Special Educational Needs or disability (SEND) is met.

The LCC at Hampton Dene caters for children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This unit has been at full operating capacity since 2018, but demand for the service has increased significantly (by 50%) over recent years. The expansion of Hampton Dene will include two additional classrooms with the appropriate support room, toilets and outdoor space. This flexible learning environment will accommodate 16 additional learners.

This decision will ensure the delivery of a high quality specialist educational accommodation for children and young people with an Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) in Herefordshire. The extension of the LCC at Hampton Dene Primary School will be one of a number of projects that will come forward in order to fully utilise the grant funding.

This is a school leading in example, I look forward to reporting further progress on other similar initiatives to the council in due course

Priority No. 2: River restoration

3. There have been no new Cabinet decisions since my last report. However, I would not wish members to think that we have not been active on a number of fronts. There are significant new initiatives and developments that I wish to bring to your attention.

Active work is underway to;

- i. Retrofit septic tanks in schools within the Lugg catchment to improve the discharge which is hoped to deliver both phosphate savings and value for money.
- ii. Create a second wetland at Tarrington having obtained planning permission.
 - Our first wetland at Luston continues to mature and increase in biodiversity
- iii. Explore the potential phosphate reduction on council owned farms.
- iv. Develop pre- application advisory service for private phosphate mitigation schemes to help support housing delivery and river betterment.
- v. Facilitate a conference to learn more about the agricultural sector response to nutrient enrichment of the river catchment.

Priority No. 3: Road improvements

4. Pothole repair fund

Following the decision by the Cabinet Member for Roads and Regulatory Services to commit the just under £2.6m toward highways maintenance repair work is now underway.

This programme of works has been prioritised according to established asset management processes. These are based upon available data (from surveys and statutory inspections) to select sections of our road that are at their optimum point for surface dressing. Feedback from the public has consistently specific focus on local C and U roads is to enable improved links between our rural communities. The programme of works is beginning with initial works focusing on patching repair.

As weather is a material factor facilitating deterioration in our county's roads we are also looking at highways drainage issues. This programme of works will help prevent further deterioration to the point where our roads require expensive resurfacing. Our delivery partners, Balfour Beatty Living Places, are delivering these works with instruction to ensure cost effective repairs with minimal disruption to our local communities.

The web-page can be found by following: <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/roads-1/herfordshire-road-investment>

5. Capital Investment in Highways Infrastructure

Plans are moving forward with a programme of capital investment in our highways infrastructure. The funding aims to support the council's Highways Asset Management Strategy, complimenting the Capital Funding provided by the Local Transport Plan.

A further injection of funding in 2024/25 will focus on more extensive surface treatment. This programme also lays the foundations for more targeted future years' highways maintenance. For members and members of the public who are interested in monitoring our progress a dedicated web page has been developed.

Our major roads in the county suffer from significant deterioration. The rate of that deterioration will accelerate if a planned programme of investment and maintenance is not progressed. The proposed programme will focus on the outstanding preventative maintenance backlog. Our investment will need to be targeted toward slowing further deterioration and avoiding the risk of road closures.

Priority No. 4: County Wide Infrastructure

6. Objectives of the new local transport plan

Work is ongoing in developing the core objectives to underpin our Local Transport Plan (LTPs). The Department for Transport intends that LTPs should offer a vision-led approach to achieving better outcomes for people, businesses and places of Herefordshire. While we are currently looking at the detail, it is my expectation that our local plan will deliver just this.

The new Herefordshire LTP will set out the council's policy and strategic framework for local transport and travel. It will establish the long-term strategy for the progression, development, management and maintenance of the county's highway and transport systems. Measures can include a wide range of transport improvements, from new highway infrastructure to support growth or tackle safety problems, to road safety schemes or improvements to pedestrian facilities.

We are also looking at alignment with the Local Plan. There are intrinsically linked connections between transport and place-shaping. So our objectives will cover the following interlinked themes:

- i. Supporting a thriving and prosperous economy
- ii. Enabling healthy behaviours and improving wellbeing
- iii. Tackling climate change
- iv. Protecting and enhancing the natural and built environment
- v. Improving accessibility and inclusivity
- vi. Improving transport safety and security

7. Acceptance and approval to allocate the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Grant

In September, the Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure accepted and approved the allocation £240,260 from the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) Capability Fund. In addition accepting Herefordshire Council's allocation of £1,124,000 from the Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Capital Fund. In accepting these grants, we will participate in a consortium of local authorities seeking to expand the EV charging point network across the area.

The Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy (EVIS) is designed to address Herefordshire Council's commitment to increasing the availability of charge point infrastructure – specifically in our council car parks. LEVI also provides funding to deliver charge-point infrastructure to support residents without off-street parking.

The Capability fund, as well as increasing the capacity and capability of EV infrastructure, will also create two employment positions for a duration of 23 months (Principal Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Officer & Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy Officer). Delivery of electric vehicle infrastructure is planned for 2024/25 / 2025-26.

8. Marches Forward partnership

Over recent weeks, my cabinet and I have been looking into the opportunities to work collaboratively with Shropshire, Monmouthshire and Powys County Councils. The Marches Forward Partnership brings together strategic joint working to support government ambitions around Union Connectivity, between England and Wales, helping to attract investment and accelerate delivery of key infrastructure projects.

Whilst initially focused on more efficient and effective service delivery, the partnership provides opportunity for constituent partners to generate a greater economy of scale. The scope of this partnership working includes areas such as healthcare, education, skill development, jobs, service provision and transport infrastructure (including road, rail and bus travel and cycling).

As part of this early scoping work a draft Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) has been developed and six key objectives have been prioritised around:

- i. Data, Evidence and Research:
- ii. Nature, Energy and Climate Adaptation:
- iii. Transport and Digital Transformation
- iv. Sustainable Communities
- v. Food, Rural Development and Visitor Economy
- vi. Government and Strategic Relations

The Cabinet and I are keen to stress that these objectives provide a starting point, a starting point that we remain interested to influence. At our first meeting with the partnership and other respective leaders (on Friday 6 October), I took the opportunity to raise the need for us to work together to secure critical investment in our road and rail networks. I also used this as an opportunity to raise the profile of proposals for a station at Pontrilas.

We are also clear, however, that the priorities of this council must be front and centre of our collective efforts. I intend to review our position in 12 months to consider if the MOU remains on track, and if the partnership is achieving its desired outcomes.

Other matters of note...

9. Q1 Budget and Performance report

The council's approved net revenue budget for 2023/24 is £193.3 million which includes planned savings of £20 million comprising £14.1 million of Directorate savings and £5.9 million of Central budget savings.

The Quarter 1 Budget and Performance Report was presented to the 28 September Cabinet. The report forecasts an overspend of £13.5 million for 2023/24 and this position reflects significant national pressures including inflation, unprecedented demand for adults and children's social care and national living wage increases.

If no recovery action is taken in 2023/24, the overspend will require full utilisation of the Financial Risk Reserve and a review of the council's reserves will be required to fund the additional balance. This will reduce the reserves available to manage risk in future years.

At our Cabinet meeting we agreed to continue to monitor the forecast revenue outturn position and the impact of actions identified to address it through monthly budget monitoring reports. We have asked that Scrutiny Management Board review the budget monitoring position and that relevant Cabinet Members provide explanation for key variances and actions identified to address key pressures. We continue to work with the council's senior management team to strengthen management actions to reduce the forecast overspend going forward.

10. National Lottery Heritage Fund Delivery Grant Acceptance (Hereford Museum & Art Gallery)

In August, the Cabinet Member for Community Services and Assets accepted £5,084,465 of delivery grant funding from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. This grant forms part of an £18 million redevelopment of Hereford Museum and Art Gallery - a flagship project for Stronger Hereford and the Town's Investment Plan.

The grant will support the redevelopment of Hereford Museum and Art Gallery. The council

submitted three project proposals to the Board, including the redevelopment of Hereford Library and Museum into a state-of-the-art museum and art gallery. The application committed to creating a museum of regional significance, I believe we will surpass that promise and deliver something that is world class.

The project will significantly enhance the city's cultural offer, support community engagement and attract visitors into the city. Hereford will become a better place for people to live, study, work and invest in, as a result of this decision. The heritage-focused attraction in a new cultural quarter will significantly contribute to the regeneration of the city centre as a whole.

11. Procurement of Waste Contract

On 5 October, Cabinet gave approval to progress the delivery of the Waste Management Strategy objectives. The current waste collection contract is due to expire on 31 August 2024.

This decision will pave the way to securing environmental improvements, by continuing the procurement of a waste collection service under the existing collection model. However, there is built in to this the scope for Cabinet to agree phased implementation of the new collection model to enable the services to transition to:

- i. a three weekly, twin stream recycling service,
- ii. introduce a weekly food waste collection service and:
- iii. introduce a non-mandatory, seasonable, two weekly, chargeable (full cost recovery) garden waste service.

12. THRIVE

The council has a significant requirement to reduce the cost of service delivery due to substantial inflationary pressures and increasing demand for services. In September, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate committed to investing to save through the council's THRIVE strategy. This is a four year council wide transformation strategy designed to assist the council to both improve customer experiences as well as rationalise the many customer contact points.

Customer contact in Herefordshire is primarily carried out by email and phone. An assessment of our council work identified the main opportunities to address and digitise a number of customer entry points. Development of digital self-service has huge potential to create a more efficient service enabling the release of financial benefit, whilst ensuring customers who need support can access this more easily.

A central aim of our THRIVE strategy is to improve customer interaction points which in turn can drive forward the ability create a sustainable financial position. This invest to save digital transformation offers a win-win scenario; creating an improved and responsive customer experience (often available on a 24/7 basis) alongside excellent value for money. A substantial contribution can be saved toward the council's savings requirement of £1.0 million - which is expected to be delivered through transformation activity. I look forward to reporting further progress to you on this exciting new strategy in due course

13. Transaction of functions from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

Earlier this year the Government's announced that they would no longer fund Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP). It is intended that their current functions to be transferring to

Local Authorities by April 2024. In preparation for this, my Cabinet and I have commenced discussion with the LEP board and our neighbouring local authorities. During this period of change we have been clear that we do not wish to see any loss of business support services given to our local business communities.

Cabinet will take a decision in October to set out the governance arrangements relating these transition arrangements, going forward.