

## **Chief Executive's report to Full Council 8 December 2023**

As part of effective local democratic processes it's important that council finances are open and transparent. In May we were among only 30 per cent of councils to submit our draft 2022/23 accounts to meet the new government deadlines. And at the end of September we were the first unitary authority in the country to have those accounts signed-off as being 'true and fair'. This is thanks to the hard work of the council's finance team who enabled this to happen.

The council's financial position continues to be challenging. Like many other councils across the country, we're experiencing significant budget pressures with rising costs due to inflation, the cost of fuel, and the continuing impact of increasing demand for adult and children's social care. However, we have strong financial controls in place. Corporate directors have implemented additional expenditure controls and recovery plans to manage delivery of services within the approved budget this year. These controls will continue, as part of directorate financial management in 2024/25, but we know there will be difficult decisions to be made to ensure we can deliver services within budget next year.

We're continuing to deliver our far-reaching children's services improvement programme. Children's Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, has been working alongside the council to help drive these improvements, and recently submitted her six-month review of progress to the Minister for children, families and wellbeing. We're currently (at the time of writing) awaiting the publication of her recommendations by the Minister alongside their response. We know that there is still much to do to deliver the service that we all want to see but there have been positive developments to form the basis for quicker and more sustained improvement. We have an ambitious three-year improvement plan in place and delivering a service which meets the needs of the whole county remains our number one priority.

It was national Care Leavers Week at the end of October. Our care leavers team, who support young people during a really important time in their lives, organised a range of activities for care leavers in the county. The events were a great way for the young people to come together and enjoy activities they may not have otherwise experienced. I'd like to thank the young care leavers who took time to meet with me during the week. They told me all about themselves and asked me lots of questions about the issues and challenges they face and what I can do to help. I've committed to follow-up and take action on a number of things and to meet with them again.

I recently addressed a conference of head teachers and senior school leaders in the county. We're committed to working in partnership with schools in a way that is ambitious and inclusive for all our children and young people. Following an update on the key challenges and opportunities facing the Council I wanted to talk about our collaborative work with children with special educational needs and or disabilities. This year we've been proud to launch our new co-produced SEND strategy. This and other important developments such as the creation of 42 additional SEND places through new mainstream autism hubs, wouldn't have been possible without their support.

In early November, Leader Cllr Jonathan Lester and I joined government representatives, MPs and MSs, and other council leaders and other chief executives at Hay Castle to formally launch the Marches Forward Partnership. This ground-breaking agreement with Shropshire Council and Monmouthshire and Powys county councils will allow us to work together, and with both UK and Welsh governments, on some of the big challenges we all share. Transport, skills and housing, alongside energy, climate change, tourism and digital connectivity are all high on the agenda, and we'll now progress work in these key areas.

The ecological health of our rivers and countryside are essential to maintaining and growing a sustainable, prosperous rural economy for residents. The council has committed to working with neighbouring local authorities, national agencies, environmental groups and local businesses and communities to harness a collective action to secure river restoration. In November, the council jointly facilitated a conference with Herefordshire Rural Hub and Friends of the Lower Wye, to start to build a shared understanding of the challenges of protecting and restoring our rivers, and to find solutions. With speakers and delegates from a number of specialist fields the event was an enlightening start to an ongoing conversation about this important area of work.

Following the government cabinet reshuffle in November, I wrote to the new Secretary of State for the Environment Food and Rural Affairs, Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP on behalf of the council, inviting him to Herefordshire. It's important that we are able to share with government the issues and challenges that face our county due to its rurality, and those messages are more powerful when delivered in person, in the county. I look forward to his response.

We've received news that we've been ranked as the top performing local authority in the West Midlands on sustainability action for the third year in a row. The Sustainability West Midlands (SWM) benchmarking results, which give us an overall score of 91%, demonstrate the excellent progress we're making on our environmental performance and reflects our continued commitment to net zero by 2030.

The council is an accredited organisation and ambassador for the national White Ribbon Campaign which aims to end male violence against women and girls. We recently hosted a joint conference with Worcestershire County Council to raise awareness and increase knowledge of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls in our community. More than 300 people attended this online event which aimed to raise awareness, knowledge and confidence around identifying supporting, and signposting those suffering abuse. This year's White Ribbon UK theme is #ChangeTheStory. This starts with challenging harmful attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate violence, and the conference encouraged all of us to make that difference.

As winter approaches, a number of our services are putting plans into action to help local people during the cold, wintry and wet weather. Additional accommodation is available in Hereford for people who are homeless, providing shelter during the coldest months of the year. We're once again opening up our libraries and other buildings as warm spaces for people who may be finding it difficult to keep their homes warm. Our highways partners Balfour Beatty Living Places are working to keep our roads safe and their gritting teams have already been out this year when temperatures have been low enough for ice on the roads. Information about additional services over the winter can be found on the council's website.

Local communities have continued to welcome people who are staying in contingency accommodation in the county while awaiting the outcome of their asylum applications. We understand from the use of the Talbot Hotel is until the end of February 2024 and the use of the Three Counties Hotel is until the end of March 2024. The support that has been shown to these people at a time of need underlines what a generous and compassionate county we live in.

Work is underway across the council to review the way that services are provided. All services are involved in re-considering how they do things. Over the next four years the changes will include improvements to our digital infrastructure and service enhancements that put the experience of our residents at the centre. Over the past few weeks we've been trialling the use of voice automation for some telephone calls. This has led to shorter waiting times for callers, and has been positive in that users received the information they needed without needing to wait in a telephone queue. We're now looking at how these and similar schemes can be implemented permanently.

Finally, I'd like to recognise the efforts of the council staff who spend time over and above their day job to make our council a good place to work, through our employee networking groups. The groups are a collective of colleagues who share identities, life experiences or cultures who come together to initiate positive change in the workplace and play an important role in strengthening the voices of employees. In October our Black and Asian staff network organised a range of events to mark Black History Month. This year's theme was Celebrating our Sisters / Saluting our Sisters / Matriarchs of Movements #WEMATTER, emphasising the vital role black women have played in shaping history, inspiring change and building communities. Events during the month included a number of webinars and a well-attended networking breakfast. A video capturing all of the activities has been produced to share with staff across the council. And this month, our Diff-Ability group is hosting a networking breakfast to mark International Day for Persons with Disabilities.