


Appendix 1: Report of the Leader of the Council - 6 October – 30 November

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| Leader's Report |  |
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Since my last report, much of the work of my administration has been focussed on shaping the budget which we will present to the Council meeting in February. In setting out our priorities for the county we have been keen to involve and engage partners at the regional and local level; seeking out common interests and shared aspirations and wherever possible to build consensus.

Improving children's services is one such example. We continue to implement our improvement plans with our colleagues from Leeds. Their insights of a local authority moving from inadequate to good is proving to be so valuable. And the Local Government Association (LGA) continue to provide their national perspectives in areas of scrutiny and corporate parenting.

On environmental matters, Herefordshire Council is recognised for our credible commitment and leadership on environmental concerns. We have been ranked as the top performing local authority in the West Midlands on sustainability action - for the third year in a row! We also lead from the front in our continued efforts around river restoration - at county and national levels.

Economic investment and infrastructure is also gathering pace as it grows in to new geographic boundaries. The Marches Forward Partnership is gaining momentum and directing attention in areas such as healthcare, education, skill development, jobs, service provision and transport infrastructure (including road, rail and bus travel and cycling). And, as we move away from the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership, we move in to exciting new opportunities to support our local businesses and prioritise our ambitions for growth with central government recognising local authorities as a principal investment partners.

There is much work still to do, but I am increasingly optimistic about the opportunities that lay before us. I also hope members can see that working with partners is a central underpinning in advancing all of our strategic priorities.

Finally, I am keen to highlight the work of our scrutiny committees. They play an essential role in being that critical friend challenge to ensure that the right decisions are made. Scrutiny committee members efforts are greatly appreciated. I know they will play a vital role in scrutinising the budget process and I look forward to seeing the outcomes of their meetings in January.

Priority No. 1: Children's Services

1. Update Children's services

Our work with the Leeds City Council's Relational Practice Centre is hugely important to delivering a range of practice improvements. Leeds have had their own improvement journey to 'Outstanding' and have applied their learning to support several other local authorities leading and promoting the benefits of restorative and relational practice. Leeds continue to help our staff to develop with a programme of training activity. These include

- Introduction to Restorative Practice (core training)
- Team Manager Action Learning Sets, co-facilitated by Service Managers (core training)
- Directorate and Joint Directorate Leadership Team and Heads of Service Development Sessions – scheduled for Jan-April 2024.
- Service to Service developments (between Leeds and identified teams/services including Edge of Care / Home (*sometimes referred to as ECHO*) service, Early Help and the Safeguarding and Review Service.

So far, 18 Restorative Practice Sessions (attended by 295 staff members) have taken place. We have around 150 staff members still to book onto a course, with a further 15 sessions planned. Moving forward, this introductory session will be facilitated by our Train the Trainers and embedded within the induction for any new starters within the service.

We do not underestimate the continuing tasks ahead of us and we are committed in our working with partners to ensure improvements continue to be made following tried and tested practices. We hope that the Commissioner's feedback from September's monitoring visit will demonstrate this resolve in continuing this improvement journey.

Priority No. 2: River restoration

2. River Restoration Conference.

On Sunday, 26 November Herefordshire Council hosted a conference on the restoration challenges, objectives and priorities of our local rivers. It was a very informative event which invited contributions from a range of key local to national representatives. Attended by around 100 delegates, including local Member of Parliament, Jesse Norman. Topics debated included:

- Nutrient load in our river catchments, the principal causes and measures that can reduce the impact;
- The role technological solutions can play in restoring our waterways;
- Short and longer term prioritisation of actions;
- The role of water regulation and,
- Ensuring that collaboration is a central underpinning in our shared restoration efforts.

3. Linking local to national – River restoration

I attended the County Council's Network in November. Aside from the ever useful topics being covered it was an opportunity for me to ask the Secretary of State, Michael Gove, about the government's plans concerning nutrient mitigation. He confirmed that there would be further help from government to fund mitigation schemes. This is excellent news as this recognises the progress that councils have made.

It is important to note that with the wetlands scheme in Luston, Herefordshire is leading the way with this approach. This approach locks-in and secures that win-win scenario; appropriate safeguards to the environment built in to the planning consents for housing development in the river catchment areas.

To provide some context. In Herefordshire, since commencing the trading of phosphate credits in July 2022, the council has received £420,782.00 of Section 106 phosphate income to manage and invest in future wetland projects. This has released planning permissions for 185 dwellings.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Autumn Statement on 24 November 2023 two funding streams for local planning authorities, a planning capacity fund to target application backlogs and a local nutrient mitigation fund to deliver high quality schemes to offset nutrient pollution, unlocking planning permissions that are otherwise stalled. Having placed bids for both of these funds, we await to see if Herefordshire Council has been successful.

Priority No. 3: Road improvements

4. Road surface dressing

Following the decision to commit just under £2.6m toward highways maintenance repair work is progressing well. This programme of works which is prioritised in line with established asset management processes is helping to prioritise the surface dressing schemes planned for next year.

5. Capital Investment in Highways Infrastructure

Plans are moving forward with a programme of capital investment in our highways infrastructure. Department for Transport have announced that Herefordshire is to receive £10.6m of funding over the next 11 years. £1.86m of this funding will be allocated for this year and a further £1.86m for 2024/25.

In year 1 there will be a spread of treatments to complement the additional funding - we will deploy the traditional resurfacing works alongside the opportunity to invite other contractors to work with us too. The proposed programme is focussing on preventative maintenance backlog. Our investment is targeted toward slowing further deterioration and avoiding the risk of road closures.

The remaining balance of the Department for Transport funding will be distributed over the remaining 9 years of the settlement period.

Priority No. 4: County Wide Infrastructure – laying the foundations...

6. Marches Forward Partnership – an historic new agreement

On 10 November, I joined the Leaders of Monmouthshire, Powys and Shropshire at Hay Castle to sign our membership of the Marches Forward Partnership. This is an historic new agreement covering and crossing the Welsh and English borders. Our four local authorities will now work even more closely together to give a strong and clear voice with both UK and Welsh governments.

The Partnership represents the new 'self-determining' regional administrative areas that are beginning to form. It is a partnership growing around similar social, economic environmental and geographic interests, opportunity and challenges.

Work is progressing well and starting to gain momentum. Priority areas are supporting our critical local services and investment in our much needed road and rail infrastructure. It also presents opportunity to tackle an issue close to many members' interests - the continuing need to invest in digital connectivity in our rural communities.

The Marches Forward Partnership will create a strong case to encourage investment into the region. Investment that can attract the right skills and in turn create vibrant and sustainable communities. These are very early days but we've already started discussion around what we would like to achieve and will be moving at pace to turn these ambitions into actions

This will give increased focus on our infrastructure needs in Herefordshire whilst also recognising the needs of our geographic neighbours. Working together increases our chances for supporting our region.

7. Transaction of functions from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

As I reported earlier this year, the Government announced that they would no longer fund Local Enterprise Partnerships. From April 2024, government will support local authorities to take on Local Enterprise Partnership functions. Namely, business representation, strategic economic planning, and responsibility for the delivery of government programmes where directed.

Government have stated it will provide revenue funding to local and combined authorities in 2024/25 to support them to deliver the functions currently delivered by Local Enterprise Partnerships. We do not know yet whether that will be through individual allocations or to partnership geographies. But we do know, wherever possible, government expects local authorities to work together to deliver the Local Enterprise Partnership functions within geographies with a minimum population of 500,000. This being in line with the geography principles set out in the Levelling Up White Paper.

I am pleased to say that Herefordshire Council will be playing a leading role as the accountable body supporting the Joint Committee arrangements whose principal responsibilities are likely to include:

- a) Setting, monitoring and reviewing the programme for transfer of Local Enterprise Partnership responsibilities and existing programmes of activity across the Marches area;
- b) Agreeing the allocation of Local Enterprise Partnership revenue and capital spend previously under the control of the Local Enterprise Partnership Board;
- c) Oversight, monitoring and review of ongoing grants, assets, programmes, or initiatives until such time as they cease or are transferred.
- d) Reviewing and aligning government and public investment and economic growth across the geography of the three councils;
- e) Providing an annual report on the activities of the Joint Committee to the respective three partner councils;

The Joint Committee will comprise of one nominated elected representative from each local authority, generally this will either be the Leader or nominated lead portfolio holder. It shall

discharge its delegated powers within the respective budgetary and policy frameworks set by each of the constituent Councils.

8. Herefordshire Economic Plan

My Cabinet and I continue to press the need for a new overarching Economy and Place Board to bring together the great work of the existing theme specific partnership boards. It is vital that we work in a co-ordinated way to achieve our shared ambition for our county. Graham Biggs has met with the Herefordshire Business Board, the Climate and Nature Partnership, and engaged with further and higher education training providers to form a new Skills Board. The Economy and Place Board of representatives which includes the Community Partnership will work with and through existing networks to shape and make the strategic long term case for much needed public and private investment.

9. Delivery Plan/County Plan

On 23 November, the Cabinet have agreed a new delivery plan which sets out the key programmes of work that the administration will progress through to the end of 2023/24. We are continuing with the three ambitions set out in the current County Plan of Economy, Community and Environment. Each of the projects and deliverables contributes to one, if not more of the objectives set in the County Plan as well as to outcomes and outputs during the year.

Work has commenced on setting out a new county plan. We will look to be consulting on this in due course, and keen to hear people's views on our emerging priorities. The consultation process will start on 8 December and will run through to 10 January.

Other matters of significance in the County

10. The Hereford Zipper Bus service

I wish to congratulate Hereford City Council with the launch of their fantastic new service. I took one of the free electric, zero emission bus routes around the city centre. This is a convenient bus service from the main transport hubs into the centre of town, giving residents and visitors access to central Hereford. Zipper buses have a range of up to 300 miles in between charges and stop at many locations across Hereford City Centre.

11. South Wye Development Trust Annual General Meeting

I would like to offer special recognition to The South Wye Development Trust, based at the Kindle Centre, who have just been awarded The King's Award for Voluntary Service. This is the highest award a local voluntary group can receive in the UK. Their work, along with others from across the UK, reminds us of all the ways volunteers contribute to their local communities and as a consequence working to make life better for those around them.

Attending their recent Annual General Meeting, I was privileged to speak to some of the individuals and volunteers who make such an outstanding contribution to community life, helping many different people. It is a truly inspirational organisation benefitting so many residents of Herefordshire.

12. Megan Baker House

In November I was invited to Megan Baker House. Focussing on Conducive Education, and having received funding to assist children and adults with neurological movement disorders,

providing both education as well as skills to assist their day to day lives. The centre is based in Orchard Lane in Ledbury. The new funding is enabling adults and children who have been on waiting lists to now gain access to the great support and services Megan Baker House can provide.

They are providing a range of hugely valued services to children and adults both within the county and across the country. Adults and children who suffer with serious conditions such as Stroke, Multiple Sclerosis and Parkinson's are being assisted in managing the difficulties experienced by these disorders.

13. Midlands Connect Conference

Finally, I would like to just note that I will be attending the Midlands Connect – Network North Conference. The agenda will be covering a range of transport and infrastructure matters that are highly relevant to Herefordshire. I will be highlighting the need for vital investment to ease congestion and create more accessible links into the region. I will be stressing the importance of improvements to our rail network. Specifically I will be advocating the need for a new station at Pontrilas and ensuring that links out of the county are made faster and more reliable by the duelling of the line between Ledbury and Hereford.

These infrastructure projects are the key to ensuring we attract the right skills and jobs to the county and with it a strong and prosperous economy.