

Chief Executive's report to Full Council - December 2024

As we head towards the end of 2024, I'm struck by the solid progress we've made in consolidating our strategic direction and improving our services over the past year.

The Council Plan and its guiding principle, 'To deliver the best for Herefordshire in everything we do', has set a clear direction for our work and we've made considerable headway against the activities outlined in the corresponding delivery plan. This work is set to progress further over the coming year as we strive to meet our commitment to providing the best possible services for our residents and businesses.

The improvement of children's services has continued to be a key area of our focus. I'm pleased to confirm that Tina Russell will be extending her time with us as interim director of children's services until December 2025. We're already starting to see the impact of the actions outlined in the *Phase 2 Improvement Plan* following its implementation in October. There's confidence that it provides a clear direction for our improvement work and how we will measure progress. The plan is supported by a range of measures including audit and key performance indicators, alongside more opportunities for children and families to tell us about their experience of our services.

We now have more social workers and managers employed in our children's services on a permanent basis, providing greater stability and consistency. Our eye-catching 'Join us on our journey', recruitment campaign has received a positive response, and we've recently seen an increase in the number of skilled staff indicating they're interested in working here.

As I write, we're expecting the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection of our services for children at risk of harm and exploitation outside the home, and there is due to be an inspection of our arrangements for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) during the first week of December. I'll provide an update when I can.

In November we announced we'd be investing an additional £4.23 million in our schools and facilities to create more places for children with SEND to meet growing demand across Herefordshire. The funding, from a Department for Education (DfE) High Needs Provision Capital Grant, will be used to fund the refurbishment of the Ryefield Centre in Ross-on-Wye to create a small special school for children with SEND, to expand Aylestone School, Leominster and Trinity primary schools to help children who need additional support, and to allow future plans for the county's Pupil Referral Unit. This is on top of £2.67 million for the expansion of the Language and Communication Centre (LCC) at Hampton Dene Primary School and improvements at Barrs Court School, both of which are already underway and will create additional specialist places.

The work to enhance Leominster town centre by restoring heritage features on shops and properties, and by improving the look and safety of roads and pavements, is now nearing completion. The recent cold snap delayed the final stages of work, however we are on track to be finished by mid-December. The improvements are thanks to the Leominster High Street Heritage Action Zone funding – a multi-million pound regeneration initiative supported by Historic England, delivered through Herefordshire Council and Leominster Town Council. The attractive new look and feel to the area around the High Street, Victoria Street, Iron Cross and Corn Street certainly enhances the town for retailers, residents and visitors, helping to boost trade.

Two brand new, state of the art, all-electric refuse collection vehicles have been delivered for use in Hereford as part of the new recycling and waste collection services contract between the council and FCC Environment. The two new vehicles are the first all-electric RCVs to join the fleet

in Herefordshire and will help reduce both air and noise pollution in the city. I'm pleased to report that the new recycling and waste collection services contract we introduced in September is performing well to date and we look forward to developing these services further over the coming year.

As the infrastructure work on the Hereford Enterprise Zone (HEZ) has now been completed the HEZ Board, private sector volunteers who have given their time and expertise, agreed that its original purpose is fulfilled and voted in the summer to close the company down. This was completed this month. Over the past 10 years the Hereford Enterprise Zone has delivered over 60 acres of land sold or developed, over 60,000 sqm of new workspace built, is home to over 100 businesses, significant new assets have been established such as Shell Store, Cyber Quarter and NMITE's specialist campus. Over two thirds of the land has been sold or developed with strong interest in the rest. Businesses have brought nearly 1,500 higher value jobs on occupation, and a further 1100 jobs in their specified growth plans. The HEZ will contribute a minimum of £29million retained business rates income to the council over its lifetime. This is a fantastic contribution and I thank the Board for all they achieved. We will take the lessons learnt and best practice from their work as we now focus on other employment land areas across the county.

We activated our Severe Weather Event Protocol in mid-November in response to sub-zero temperatures and snow. This triggers additional resource and proactive engagement with people who are particularly vulnerable in cold weather, including those who are sleeping rough to offer them shelter. We have seen tremendous work over the past year, both in early prevention and supportive intervention, which has led to a significant reduction in homelessness and long-term rough sleeping in the county.

The cold weather was then followed by some extremely wet weather, which led to our fifth flooding event of the year causing severe disruption for a number of households, businesses and roads users. Once again, the council's response teams were activated and worked closely with our partner Balfour Beatty Living Places and local communities to help minimise the impact. Two all-member summits on Flooding & Drainage were held on 24 October. Following these sessions we asked members to provide detailed feedback on the issues being experienced in their local communities and we are currently collating this information to help shape the action needed and our future plans.

The work to improve the condition of the county's roads is continuing, with a focus on resurfacing C and U roads during November and December. We are investing £8 million this financial year into resurfacing on the county's highway network. An additional £445,000 is being spent on improvements to the drainage network.

The renovation of Hereford's Shirehall took another step forward in October when design proposals were submitted that outline how the building will be transformed into a new library and learning centre, and versatile community space. One of Hereford's most historic buildings, the plans also include how the building's heritage features will be preserved. In the meantime, Hereford Library has made Hereford Town Hall its temporary home, offering users a convenient central location close to High Town.

The government's Devolution White Paper is expected to be published imminently. This will set out details of the reorganisation of local government, through the English Devolution Bill. Along with all other councils not currently part of a combined authority, Herefordshire Council was asked to submit an expression of interest in working with the government on a devolution deal. Our preference is devolution at a single county level. However, we are open to explore what it means for Herefordshire to work with our neighbours, subject to further information and details about the

devolution framework and future timescales. Progression to any further stages of devolution in Herefordshire will be subject to the appropriate approval by councillors.

Looking to 2025, we are expecting to see progress on a number of major developments. Work on the new transport hub in Hereford is due to start early in the New Year, work on the refurbishment of Shirehall will get underway and further steps are anticipated towards the exciting complete refurbishment of Hereford museum. The continued implementation of new IT systems within the council will support our staff and teams to work in a more integrated way, which in turn will make it easier for residents and businesses to access the services and information they need.

During the course of the next year our services and leadership will be reviewed by a number of outside agencies including two further Ofsted monitoring visits, a Care Quality Commission (CQC) inspection of our adult social care services, as well as by the Local Government Association through their Corporate Peer Challenge programme. While inspection processes are never easy, these visits and inspections are a valuable way of ensuring we are delivering the best possible services.

Finally, I would like to extend my thanks to all council staff for their hard work and dedication this year. As well as continuing to deliver council services day to day, they have shaped and embraced new ways of working to ensure that our residents are provided with the best possible local services. Through this year's employee survey we know that an increasing proportion of staff would recommend the council as a place to work and expect to still be working here in a year's time. Their feedback highlights a commitment on an individual and team level to ensuring quality work and to making the changes needed to improve. The council's achievements would not be possible without their tireless efforts, professionalism and commitment. From frontline workers to those who contribute behind the scenes, every member of staff plays an essential role in helping to make Herefordshire a better place to live, work, and visit.

Wishing you all a restful and peaceful Christmas. I look forward to seeing you in the New Year.