

## Chief Executive's report to Full Council – February 2025

It was an extremely cold and wet start to the year with snow and heavy rainfall in early January, and with strong winds towards the end of the month. I'd like to acknowledge the efforts of council staff and our partner agencies, many of who worked long and unsociable hours to keep our residents safe. This included keeping our roads gritted and clear of water, fallen trees and branches to keep the county moving. We activated our Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) and our winter night shelter has so far provided a warm space to stay for seven people a night on average, helping more than 40 individuals, since it opened in December.

I was saddened to hear of the death of former Lord Lieutenant Sir Thomas Dunne KG, KCVO on Monday 6 January. Sir Thomas served Herefordshire for many years and was highly respected.

Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner, Eleanor Brazil, published their latest findings for Herefordshire Children's Services in December 2024. It was reassuring that both reports recognised the service improvements that are now underway, and our concerted drive to ensure children, young people and families' voices are heard and actively involved in service development and delivery. We acknowledge there is much more to do, however this is a positive sign that we are now making the progress needed. We have received the draft outcome report from Ofsted's inspection into our Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services, which took place in December. We expect Ofsted to publish the final report in February, when we will be able to share more widely.

In her six month progress report, Eleanor stated that given the increased confidence in direction and evidence of progress in tackling what needs to change there is no longer a need to retain both the Children's Commissioner and Department for Education appointed advisor. The Children's Commissioner role will remain in place until the next inspection to oversee and help drive ongoing and sustained positive change, filled by Deborah McMillan. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Eleanor for her valuable support, guidance and expertise over the past two years.

I would like to pass on my congratulations to the eight Herefordshire recipients of an honour in the New Year Honours 2025, in recognition of their exceptional achievements and service: Abigail Appleton, Principal at Hereford College of Arts for her services to further education; Jonathon Pryce, Chief Fire Officer HWFRS; Rev. Ann Elizabeth Hitchiner as Chaplain to the Forces; Rev Kenneth Hopkins for his services to education; Karen Rogers, CEO Herefordshire Care Homes Group; Gareth Ratcliffe for charitable services; Wendy Tarplee Morris from Little Princess Trust for her services to children and young people with cancer; and Elizabeth Davies for services to the community in Kimbolton. Thank you all for your outstanding and valuable contribution to life in Herefordshire.

On Monday 16 December 2024, the government published its [English Devolution White Paper - Power and Partnership: Foundations for Growth](#). This sets out how the government intends to deliver its proposals for devolution in England over the course of this parliament. The White Paper outlines plans to replace two-tier local government with unitary authorities, and the establishment of regional Strategic Authorities each with an elected Mayor. We are currently assessing what this may mean for Herefordshire with further guidance expected from government over the coming weeks.

The multi-million pound project to enhance Leominster town centre by restoring heritage features on shops and properties, and by improving the look and safety of roads and pavements, was

completed in December in time for the town's Victorian Christmas market. The attractive new look and feel to the area around the High Street, Victoria Street, Iron Cross and Corn Street enhances the town for retailers, residents and visitors.

Looking to the year ahead we are expecting to see progress on a number of major developments. Work on the new transport hub in Hereford is due to start within the next three months, the refurbishment of Shirehall will get underway and further steps are anticipated towards the exciting complete refurbishment of Hereford museum. We will also continue our implementation of new IT systems within the council to support services 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.

We are also preparing for our upcoming Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC), which has been postponed from March until June due to the availability of the Chief Executive peer. This will be a great learning opportunity taking a look at how we work, what we do well and where we could do things better. The CPC is a core part of the sector-led improvement provided by the Local Government Association (LGA). Delivered by experienced officers and elected members from other councils, it is designed to complement and add value to our own performance and improvement arrangements. It provides an independent view and an opportunity to learn from best practice in other areas. Over the next few weeks we'll be starting to prepare for the visit and self-assessment. As a first step, we will be working to produce our position statement which reflects where we feel we are now against the findings and recommendations from our last peer challenge which took place in 2018.