

Chief Executive's report to Full Council – March 2025

Our new Herefordshire YEH Youth Employment Hub officially opened in February, offering advice and support to help young people aged 16-24 into work, education and apprenticeships. The hub, which is a partnership between the council and the Department for Work and Pensions, will provide a positive start to the future working lives of many young people in the county. Young people helped co-design and develop the hub and will continue to be involved as the service expands. The YEH Youth Employment Hub opening took place during National Apprenticeship Week. Apprenticeships are an important way we can upskill young people, build their confidence and experience, to help them into work.

Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) recently published their findings from the inspection of Herefordshire's SEND Partnership that took place in December 2024. Despite the nationally acknowledged pressures on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services our partnership has been given the middle rating and we have received a very positive report overall. The report recognises a wide range of good practice and strengths within the partnership workforce at both a strategic and operational level. The inspectors noted some inconsistencies in our services experienced by families and have made four recommendations for improvement. This feedback and the priorities will inform the work of the partnership to improve the experiences and outcomes for all children and young people with additional needs and disabilities.

Ofsted held a further monitoring visit during February which focused on the front door into our children's services. We expect to receive the outcome in a few weeks.

Our children's services are currently preparing to host our first awards ceremony for care experienced children, which will be held in April. The event is an important reminder that the young people in our care face challenges every day, and that it is for us to make them feel valued and supported, and that we recognise their achievements, as proud corporate parents.

Following a far-reaching recruitment process at the end of last year, I'm pleased to announce that we've appointed a new Director of Public Health. Zoe Clifford joins us from OHID (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities) and DHSC South West where she is Deputy Director for Population Health and Wellbeing. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Cate Carmichael for filling the DPH role since last June. Zoe will join us at the end of March.

Preparations continue in adult social care for a Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessment. This new requirement for local authorities was introduced as part of the Health and Care Act 2022 and places a duty on the CQC to measure how well the council is performing against its statutory duties as set out in Part 1 of the Care Act 2014. The assessment framework comprises four themes: working with people; providing support, ensuring safety and leadership. To date, 24 reports have been [published](#) and assessment activity is underway in a further 63 authorities. The CQC has confirmed the dates on which it will notify local authorities that they will be starting assessments. The next notification date is 10 March and monthly thereafter.

Planned reform of local authority funding has begun with a commitment from Government to provide a multi-year settlement from 2026/27, consolidate multiple funding sources and allocate funding where it is needed most. To inform the local government finance settlement from 2026/27, Government has consulted on its proposed approach to update the existing formulae by which grant funding is allocated and to 'reset' the Business Rates Retention system. Early

notification of updated funding allocations will help the council's medium-term financial planning and service delivery and we look forward to receiving more detail following the outcome of a multi-year spending review in late Spring 2025, including plans for transitional arrangements to manage potential changes in funding. We will continue to engage with Government and input through our professional networks to ensure that the council receives a fair allocation of funding to maintain its strong financial position and support planned improvements.

We are reaching the end of 2022-2025 UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) programme and are pleased with the number of projects and grant schemes that have been delivered. We've directly delivered grant schemes, commissioned contracts and worked with our local partners on a range of projects that have benefitted local residents, communities and businesses. One of the projects, I'd like to highlight is the Halo Cycle Project. Halo secured £19,994, to purchase three side by side trikes which allow for assisted cycling. The bikes are used by people with mobility issues, those with vision impairments, specialist schools, residential homes and also those recovering from head injuries. They already have two of these bikes and had not realised the level of demand they would receive. We're delighted that the new trikes will be available next month to offer more opportunities for those who want to use them.

Planning permission and listed building consent has been given to transform Hereford's Shirehall into a modern community space including a new library and learning centre. Work can now begin on this exciting project. The design has been carefully considered to both complement and revitalise the heritage of the Shirehall, while delivering the much-needed restoration of this key historic building. The main entrance will be transformed into a large, welcoming area with exhibition space and improvements will be made to provide greater accessibility. The Assembly Hall will provide the new home for the library and will offer readers plenty of space to relax, read or browse the collection, and a new learning centre will offer facilities and services for learning, digital literacy and cultural activity. The development of the Library and Learning Centre is supported by £2.6 million from Hereford's Stronger Towns funding.

Following the appointment of specialist support, work has started on the development of detailed plans for the first phase of the Hereford Western Bypass. The planned new route joining the A49 to the A465 will help ease traffic flow in south Hereford, make it easier to access employment land and support growth south of the river. Planning permission is already in place for the new road, and work will now progress, over the next two years, to review and update the plans already in place for the road (previously known as the Southern Link Road) in light of changing regulations, legislation and environment considerations since they were first developed. The final plans, agreements and funding arrangements will then allow for the construction of the new road to proceed.

At the start of February we learnt we've received £380,844 for active travel measures in the county, as part of a £300m national funding package from Government and Active Travel England. As part of our commitment to developing active travel options for our residents, we're always looking at new ways to make it easier and safer to walk or cycle. This additional funding will help towards planning and implementation.