



## Chief Executive's report to Council, Herefordshire Council – 13 February 2026

I am pleased to update Council on key highlights of our delivery, investment and engagement since my last report in December 2025, as well as outlining ongoing challenges and strategic priorities.

I am delighted to report that the final **Ofsted inspection report**, published on 12 January 2026 following the November 2025 visit, judged Herefordshire Children's Services as "Good" overall with "Outstanding" leadership. Inspectors highlighted vast improvements, a strong culture of leadership, diligent work by teams and the positive impact on children and families. This marks a significant milestone in our long-term improvement journey, and I extend my sincere thanks to Tina Russell, the dedicated teams in the Children and Young People's Directorate, Cllr Powell, and all members for their leadership, challenge and support throughout this process.

We continue to await formal outcomes from the **CQC assessment** of adult social care, building on positive initial feedback. In related areas, we are seeking input from people with lived experience to help shape future community activities for adults with care and support needs, ensuring services reflect real needs and preferences.

The Council continues to operate within an exceptionally **challenging national financial climate**, particularly for rural authorities with dispersed populations and high service-delivery costs. The impact of the Fair Funding Review remains significant, leaving Herefordshire with a structural funding gap that does not reflect the true cost of providing statutory services across a large rural county. This has placed sustained pressure on the organisation's ability to manage rising demand, particularly in social care, transport and SEND provision.

In recent weeks, we have intensified our engagement with government officials to underline the scale of the challenge. I have met with senior leadership at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to set out the financial realities faced by Herefordshire and to advocate for a funding model that recognises rural need. Alongside this, we continue to work closely with the Rural Services Network and maintain regular dialogue with our local Members of Parliament to press the case for fairer, more sustainable funding for rural councils.

This collective lobbying is essential as we await the Final Local Government Finance Settlement. The scale of the financial pressures for 2026/27 remains considerable, and we are continuing to plan responsibly and proactively so we can sustain vital services while delivering the best outcomes for residents. A **revised SEND Policy Statement** will also be prepared once the Final Settlement is confirmed, ensuring our future approach reflects both local needs and the national funding context.

Major capital projects are also progressing well, with Hereford's new **Transport Hub** continuing to take shape. Construction of the central canopy is now underway, marking another key milestone in creating a modern, integrated transport interchange for the county. Once complete, the Hub will strengthen connections between different modes of travel and help deliver a more efficient, accessible and future-ready public transport network.

In education, the Council has welcomed the granting of planning permission for **Aylestone School's** £13.1 million expansion in January 2026. This significant investment will expand capacity and strengthen inclusive education, ensuring more young people have access to high-quality learning environments that meet their needs. The project highlights the Council's continued commitment to supporting schools and improving educational outcomes across Herefordshire.

However, the Council had to respond firmly to the government's disappointing decision (December 2025) to withdraw funding for a **new SEND school**. This intervention underscores the Council's ongoing commitment to challenging national decisions that disadvantage vulnerable young people and highlights its readiness to advocate strongly on their behalf.

Construction is advancing at **Ross Enterprise Park**, a 17-acre strategic employment site backed by the Council's investment. Work is underway to deliver office and light industrial space, expected to create around 600 jobs and power economic growth in Ross-on-Wye and the wider county.

We have named M Group Highways as the preferred provider for our **new Public Realm Services** contract, approved in December 2025 to replace the current arrangement. Starting in June 2026, it will cover road maintenance, green spaces, highway drainage, street lighting and more, ensuring high-quality, efficient delivery.

In December 2025, we invested nearly £2 million through the **Community Spaces Capital Grant Scheme**, awarding 13 grants to enhance community venues, strengthen connections and improve local facilities.

On 5 February 2026, a major county-wide partnership coordinated by the Council submitted a bold Expression of Interest to bid for **UK City of Culture 2029**. Involving arts, culture, creative industries, community groups and public-sector partners, this zero-cost initial step positions Herefordshire's rural heritage, creativity and communities for potential national recognition and lasting benefits, with up to £10 million possible for a winning bid.

Herefordshire Council has once again been awarded Gold status in the **Defence Employer Recognition Scheme**, reaffirming the organisation's longstanding commitment to supporting members of the Armed Forces community. This highest-level accreditation reflects the Council's continued dedication to both current and former military personnel and their families, delivered through its active implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant.

During the recent period of **severe wet weather**, our highways, drainage and emergency response teams - working closely with Balfour Beatty Living Places - have shown exceptional commitment in keeping the county moving. BB crews and council officers have worked around the clock to monitor high-risk locations, clear debris, unblock drains and culverts, and respond swiftly to reports of flooding.

This has included coordinated action with the Environment Agency to manage river levels, prioritise public safety and ensure timely, accurate communications to residents. Their efforts have enabled the rapid reopening of roads, the protection of local communities and the minimisation of disruption across the county. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone involved for their professionalism and dedication during challenging conditions.

Enhancing mobility is also at the heart of the Council's new partnership with **Citymapper**, launched in late December 2025. By integrating journey planning tools into a widely used digital platform, the initiative makes navigating Herefordshire smarter, simpler and more accessible for residents, students and visitors alike.

Supporting our high streets remains a priority, including by the opening of a **new Business Hub in Leominster** town centre in December 2025. Offering free, personalised support to local enterprises, the Hub strengthens the business ecosystem by helping entrepreneurs access advice, resources and growth opportunities. This investment signals the Council's ongoing commitment to fostering a resilient, diverse and thriving local economy.

The establishment of the **new Integrated Care Board** covering Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Coventry and Warwickshire marks an important step in strengthening system-wide collaboration across our region. As a member of the ICB Board, I continue to support work to develop the new strategic commissioning arrangements and deliver the ambitions of the NHS Long Term Plan. Central to this is a shared focus on the wider determinants of health - education, employment, quality housing and strong communities - and the opportunities that closer partnership working creates for more joined-up services. By deepening collaboration between health, local government and community partners, the new ICB provides a platform to shift further towards prevention and integrated community-based care, ensuring residents can access the right support at the right time, closer to home.

Alongside this strengthened collaboration across the health system, we continue to work closely with partners through the **Herefordshire Chief Executives Group** and wider regional networks to progress shared priorities for the county. These partnerships bring together expertise and resources across housing, community support, children's services and wider public services, helping us address complex challenges in a more coordinated way. By aligning our efforts, we are better able to support vulnerable residents, strengthen community wellbeing and deliver long-term, sustainable improvements that no single organisation could achieve alone.

Across the organisation, colleagues continue to demonstrate exceptional commitment, professionalism and care in a period of sustained pressure. Recent staff recognitions have highlighted the depth of expertise and dedication across our workforce, including long-serving colleagues who were thanked for 25 years of service across roles spanning social care, trading standards, archaeology and housing development. We have also celebrated outstanding teamwork and impact in services supporting adults and children, including the Adult Safeguarding team and our Children's Services teams, whose achievements have been recognised not only internally but also in our recent Ofsted inspection. These examples reflect the strength, resilience and values of colleagues across the council who work tirelessly to deliver for residents every day.

Finally, I would like to express my **congratulations to Cllr Roger Phillips**, who was awarded an OBE in the 2026 New Year's Honours List. This honour reflects his outstanding contribution to the county and its residents over many years. It serves as a timely reminder of the importance of civic leadership and the value placed on those who demonstrate dedication to public service and community wellbeing.

I ask members to note these updates and the positive momentum they represent. Please contact me for any further details.