Leader's Report - 24 July 2026	Herefordshire Council

Foreword

I am pleased to present this latest report, covering a period of significant delivery and progress since my last update in March.

Since that meeting we have continued to focus on turning the ambitions of the Herefordshire Council Plan into practical action. In April, Cabinet approved the Delivery Plan for 2026/27, providing a clear roadmap for delivering our priorities of People, Place, Growth and Transformation. The decisions set out in this report demonstrate that work is already well underway across all four areas of the Council Plan.

Supporting residents remains at the heart of everything we do. Since March we have approved the new Crisis and Resilience Fund, providing over £2.8 million of support for those facing financial hardship, agreed new housing investment programmes, adopted a five-year Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy, and continued work to ensure people can access the support they need at the right time and in the right place.

We have also continued to invest in the next generation. As well as introducing Child Friendly Herefordshire, we have made significant investment in school places and educational facilities; providing support for children and young people with SEND, and our summer activities programme providing free activities and during the school holidays, we are working to ensure that every child has the best possible start in life.

Alongside this, support for carers, community groups and local voluntary organisations, together with the introduction of the new Councillor Ward Grant Scheme, is helping strengthen local communities and support grassroots projects across the county.

We have maintained momentum on a number of major infrastructure and growth projects. Since my last report, we have launched the Back the Bypass campaign, progressed detailed design and early works for Phase One of the Hereford Bypass, approved the Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan, continued active travel works at Holme Lacy Road, and good progress of the Hereford Transport Hub, which is now approximately three-quarters complete and remains on course to open later this year. These schemes are critical to improving connectivity, unlocking growth and creating opportunities for future generations.

Equally important has been the successful launch of our new Public Realm Service from 1 June. This is not simply a change of contractor, but a fundamentally different approach to delivering highways and environmental services. The new operating model has been designed to provide greater accountability, make better use of technology and data, improve responsiveness for communities and enable the council to take a more proactive approach to maintaining and improving the county's roads, drainage systems, public spaces and environmental assets. It reflects our commitment to improving the condition of our highways network, responding more effectively to local concerns and delivering better outcomes for residents across Herefordshire.

Our commitment to economic growth remains equally strong. Ross-on-Wye Enterprise Park has now been formally launched and will become one of the county's most significant employment sites, supporting hundreds of jobs and providing opportunities for businesses to grow and invest in Herefordshire. Through Invest Herefordshire we continue to promote the county as a destination for inward investment, with a particular focus on sectors such as advanced manufacturing, engineering, defence, cyber security and green technologies. We have also *continued to support local businesses through skills and workforce development initiatives, including our partnership with NMITE, helping ensure local people have access to the skills needed to benefit from future economic opportunities.*

Protecting and enhancing our environment remains a key priority. I am particularly pleased that Herefordshire Council has played a leading role in bringing together the recently launched River Wye Charter. The Charter represents a shared commitment by organisations across the catchment to work together to restore and protect one of our county's most important natural assets. It demonstrates that the future of the River Wye depends upon collective action, shared responsibility and a willingness to work together across traditional boundaries.

Alongside this, we have approved a new Carbon Management Plan, continued work to improve river health and biodiversity, and progressed measures that will help make Herefordshire more resilient to climate change while supporting active travel and sustainability.

Despite continuing pressures facing local government, I am pleased that the council delivered a balanced revenue outturn position for 2025/26 while continuing to invest in services, infrastructure and major projects. We have committed £86M of capital expenditure – the highest level recorded for this council. This has included

- *£40.3m highways and public spaces*
- *£3.4m investment in council assets*
- *£11.1m investment in school improvements, and*
- *£12.6m investment in transport and infrastructure*

This demonstrates prudent financial management, a clear focus on value for money and a determination to continue investing in Herefordshire's future.

This period has also marked an important transition for the council. In June, I was delighted to welcome Paul Satoor as our new Chief Executive and Head of Paid Service. Paul brings a wealth of experience, strong values and a proven track record of leadership, and I look forward to working closely with him as we continue to deliver our ambitions for residents, communities and businesses across the county.

At the same time, I would like formally to place on record my gratitude to Paul Walker for his outstanding service to Herefordshire Council over the past five years. Under Paul's direction the council strengthened its financial position, improved governance and performance, progressed major infrastructure projects and oversaw the transformation of children's services from an Ofsted rating of inadequate to good, with outstanding leadership.

The report that follows highlights a council that is ambitious for its communities, prepared to invest in its future and committed to delivering results. While challenges remain, there is clear evidence of progress across all four priorities of the Council Plan. By continuing to focus on delivery, innovation and partnership working, we are building a stronger, more prosperous and more resilient Herefordshire.

My Cabinet and I remain committed to doing the very best for Herefordshire in everything we do.

Councillor Jonathan Lester
Leader of Herefordshire Council

My Report to Council:

Herefordshire Council Plan – 2024 to 2028. Through the development of the Herefordshire Council Plan, four corporate priorities have been identified. These are:

I. **People** – We will enable residents to realise their potential, to be healthy and to be part of great communities who support each other. We want all children to have the best start in life.
II. **Place** – We will protect and enhance our environment and ensure that Herefordshire is a great place to live. We will support the right housing in the right place, we will support access to green spaces and we will do everything we can to recover the health of our rivers.
III. **Growth** – We will create the conditions to deliver sustainable growth across the county; attracting inward investment, building business confidence, creating jobs, enabling housing development along with providing the right infrastructure, and
IV. **Transformation** – We will be an efficient council that embraces best practice, delivers innovation through technology and demonstrates value for money.

The Herefordshire Council Plan, alongside the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, provides the overarching policy framework within which decisions will be taken and resources allocated over the next 4 years.

Delivery Plan 2026 to 2027 – turning the strategic vision in to delivery

Central to the realisation of the Council Plan is the Delivery Plan 2026-27, which sets out the milestones and progress against our priorities of People, Place, Growth and Transformation. As members of this council you will be able to mark our progress through quarterly reporting into Cabinet and routine financial monitoring against the approved revenue budget and capital programme. Alongside this we are developing annual service plans within each of the directorates which will be reporting progress monthly to the corporate leadership team.

In my report below, I have outlined where the cabinet and cabinet members decisions begin the delivery of those stated objectives.

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***Theme 1 - People*: We will enable residents to realise their potential, to be healthy and to be part of great communities that support each other. We want all children to have the best start in life.**

1: Crisis and Resilience Fund, 2026/29

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Tackle inequality and facilitate social mobility by focussing on early intervention and prevention activities that enable people to live independent and fulfilling lives

This year we will: Deliver schemes to tackle inequality that support our most vulnerable residents, and we will deliver the Household Support Fund (HSF) to those affected by cost of living

In April, the Cabinet Member for adults, health and wellbeing approved the acceptance and delivery of the Department for Work and Pensions' Crisis and Resilience Fund (CRF). This fund provides £2.817 million in 2026/27 to support households experiencing financial hardship across Herefordshire. The fund replaces the previous Household Support Fund and introduces a longer-term, prevention-focused approach aimed at helping residents build financial resilience, reducing reliance on emergency support and strengthening local community-based services.

Alongside this decision approval was given to a local eligibility framework that will ensure support is allocated according to financial need and individual circumstances. The programme will operate through a cash-first approach, providing direct financial assistance where appropriate, alongside a "no wrong door" access model that enables residents to access support through a range of council and partner services. The programme will also support wider preventative measures, including debt advice, income maximisation services, targeted outreach and community resilience initiatives, helping to reduce the risk of residents escalating into crisis. A new digital payment and referral systems will be introduced to improve accessibility, coordination and accountability.

The decision delegates authority to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to accept future CRF allocations through to 2028/29 and to make the operational and budgetary decisions required to administer the fund. Spend will be in accordance with the approved framework and Government grant conditions.

2: Allocation of Basic Need Capital Grant for the Expansion of John Masefield High School and Weobley High School

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Support all children to have the best start in life

This year we will: Continue to deliver the schools capital investment programme

In June, the Cabinet Member for Community Services and Assets approved £5.39 million programme of capital investment to expand John Masefield High School and improve accommodation at Weobley High School. The funding is drawn from the Department for Education Basic Need Capital Grant funding and Section 106 contributions. The investment will help the council meet its statutory duty to provide sufficient school places and ensure that educational facilities remain suitable for current and future demand.

The largest element of the programme is the expansion of John Masefield High School in Ledbury, increasing the school's capacity from 750 to 900 pupils. The expansion responds to sustained growth in demand for secondary school places arising from population increases and new housing developments in the area. The project will provide additional teaching and specialist learning spaces to support the increased number of pupils and secure sufficient capacity for the future.

The programme also includes the relocation of modular accommodation from Peterchurch Primary School to Weobley High School. This will replace temporary accommodation that has reached the end of its operational life and provide improved classroom facilities, additional teaching space and enhanced amenities. The reuse of existing council-owned modular buildings is intended to deliver improved accommodation in a cost-effective manner.

Subject to planning and procurement requirements, the Weobley project is expected to be completed during 2026, with the John Masefield expansion due to be delivered for the 2028/29 academic year.

3: Strategic Housing – Three-year Capital Programme, 2026/29

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work with partners and residents to build connected and resilient communities

This year we will: Enable people to access the housing they need through the strategic housing service

In April, the Cabinet Member for Economy and Growth approved the expenditure of £4.1 million of capital funding over the next three years to support a range of housing initiatives. The funding is designed to address homelessness, increase the supply of suitable accommodation and meet the needs of vulnerable residents across Herefordshire.

This decision helps to address the significant and growing pressures within the local housing system. Demand for temporary accommodation has increased steadily, with the number of households accommodated rising from 93 in January 2023 to 184 in January 2026. During 2024/25, the council provided temporary accommodation for 326 households. The costs of providing emergency accommodation continue to rise, with a single room in a local hotel costing the council around £85 per night, equivalent to more than £31,000 per year, while housing benefit payments do not fully cover these costs.

A key element of the programme is the introduction of an Empty Properties Grant Scheme to bring long-term vacant homes back into use. Herefordshire currently has more than 1,800 empty properties, including over 600 homes that have been vacant for more than a year. Grants of up to £50,000 per property will be available to support refurbishment, with funding tied to agreements that make homes available at below-market rents. This will enable the council to move families out of temporary accommodation and into more stable housing.

The funding will also support the development of accommodation for groups whose housing needs are particularly difficult to meet, including large families, disabled residents and households requiring accessible homes. The council is currently supporting several larger families in unsuitable or expensive temporary accommodation and maintains an Accessible Homes Register with more than 70 households awaiting suitable housing solutions. The investment is intended to create more sustainable local accommodation options, reducing reliance on costly out-of-area placements and improving outcomes for vulnerable residents.

The programme also provides transitional accommodation for homeless young people and care leavers, helping them move towards independent living. The council intends to purchase at least four properties for this purpose, creating a stepping stone between supported accommodation and permanent housing. Supported housing placements for looked-after children cost the council on average £61,000 per year. Investment in transitional accommodation has the potential to improve independence while delivering significant long-term savings.

Theme: Place - We will protect and enhance our environment and ensure that Herefordshire is a great place to live. We will support the right housing in the right place and do everything we can to improve the health of our rivers.

4: The New Public Realm Services

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Develop Herefordshire as a place for growth, prosperity and communities to thrive.

This year we will: Deliver the Public Realm Services and agree the Public Realm Services operating model and commence the procurement for a new Public Realm contractor

In April, the cabinet member for local engagement and community resilience approved up to £450,000 of capital funding to undertake works at depots and other facilities. This work is required to support the mobilisation and delivery of the Council's new Public Realm Service contract. Initial works identified included the installation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure at Thorn and Kingsland depots, together with improvements to Council office accommodation at Thorn Depot. Further requirements may emerge as the new service becomes fully established.

The gives delegated authority to the Major Contracts Programme Director to identify, procure and deliver any necessary depot and facility improvements within the approved funding envelope. This enables the council to respond quickly to operational requirements, while ensuring that all necessary legal, property and landlord approvals are obtained before works proceed.

5:	**The New Public Realm Service - Highway Maintenance Plan** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Expand and maintain the transport infrastructure network in a sustainable way and improve connectivity across the county **This year we will:** Deliver the highways maintenance investment programme across the county

This decision, taken by the Cabinet Member for Local Engagement and Community Resilience in May, approved the adoption of a revised Highway Safety Inspection Manual, coming in to effect from1 June 2026. The new plan replaces the previous Highway Maintenance Plan and sets out the Council's system for inspecting the highway network, identifying defects and prioritising repairs. The framework ensures that the Council is able to meet its statutory duty to maintain the public highway and manage related risks.

The updated manual has been developed to align with the new Public Realm Services contract that commenced on 1 June 2026. It includes a revised structure focused on highway safety inspections, updated defect categories and response times, an amended risk matrix and revised procedures for dealing with reports from members of the public and other third parties. These changes are intended to ensure that highway defects are assessed and addressed consistently and appropriately under the new contractual arrangements.

The revised manual is intended to support the effective management of Herefordshire's extensive highway network and provide a clear and proportionate system of inspection and repair. Its aim is to help keep roads, footways and other highway assets safe and serviceable, while ensuring the Council can demonstrate a reasonable and robust approach to fulfilling its legal responsibilities as the local highway authority.

6:	**Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Work towards reducing county and council carbon emissions, aiming for net zero CO_2 by 2030/31 and work with partners and communities to make the county more resilient to the effects of climate change **This year we will:** Adopt the Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan and provide residents with different travel choices through integrated networks

In March, Cabinet approved the adoption of Herefordshire's updated Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWWIP). This plan sets out the council's long-term strategy for improving walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure across the county. The plan identifies priority routes and schemes that will help encourage active travel, improve travel choice, support healthier lifestyles and contribute to the council's carbon reduction objectives.

A key purpose of the LCWWIP is to provide an evidence-based framework for future investment in active travel infrastructure. Adoption of the plan will strengthen the council's ability to bid for and secure government funding; many national funding programmes now require local authorities to have an approved LCWWIP in place before applications can be considered.

The plan has been shaped through public consultation and stakeholder engagement, which generated significant feedback from residents. Consultees expressed strong support for improvements such as off-road walking and cycling routes, safer junctions, quiet lanes, better routes to schools, improved crossings, additional cycle parking and enhanced accessibility. This feedback received during the consultation has been used to refine the final plan, including the addition of further routes and connections identified by residents.

7:	**Hereford Western Bypass Phase One – Assessment Criteria** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Expand and maintain the transport infrastructure network in a sustainable way and improve connectivity across the count **This year we will:** Complete the necessary work to tender for the design and construction of Phase 1 of the Hereford Western Bypass

In April, Cabinet approved a set of assessment criteria and pre-construction requirements that will be used by Cabinet when considering whether to proceed with the construction of Phase One of the Hereford Western Bypass. It does not approve the release of construction funding or the award of the construction contract at this stage. Instead, it establishes the framework against which the forthcoming Full Business Case will be assessed.

Phase One of the scheme will provide a new road link between the A49/B4399 junction and the A465, improving access to the Hereford Enterprise Zone and reducing traffic on key routes including Belmont Road, Walnut Tree Avenue and Holme Lacy Road. The project forms part of the wider plans to complete the Hereford Western Bypass in full; this first stage being an important component of the county's transport strategy and future growth plans.

A Full Business Case has been prepared and will be presented to Cabinet before any decision is taken on construction. The business case will be assessed against criteria based on the Government's Five Case Model, covering the strategic, economic, commercial, financial and management aspects of the scheme. These criteria will be evaluated to assess value for money, transport benefits, affordability, environmental impacts, deliverability and overall investment value.

The criteria will confirm the key requirements that must be in place before construction can begin, providing assurance that necessary preparatory work has been completed. The adopted criteria and requirements will enable Cabinet to undertake a structured and transparent assessment before deciding whether to release the approved construction budget and authorise the start of construction

8:	**Phosphate Income: Housing delivery update** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Value nature and uphold environmental standards to minimise pollution and maximise biodiversity

As at the point of drafting, £2,190,490 (up by £754,239 since my last report in March) in phosphate income has been received. To date these actions have released planning permissions for 980 dwellings (an increase of 94 dwellings).

9: Carbon Management Plan 2026 to 2031

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work towards reducing county and council carbon emissions, aiming for net zero CO_2 by 2030/31 and work with partners and communities to make the county more resilient to the effects of climate change

This year we will: Reduce the council's own CO_2 footprint through implementing our Carbon Management Action Plan

In May, cabinet approved Herefordshire Council's Carbon Management Plan which sets out the council's approach to reducing carbon emissions from its own operations over the next five years. The plan is a key element of the Council Plan 2024–2028 and provides a framework for delivering continued improvements in energy efficiency, reducing environmental impact and supporting the council's longer-term objective of becoming carbon neutral.

The Carbon Management Plan identifies the council's main sources of carbon emissions and establishes a programme of actions to reduce energy consumption across its estate and operations. This includes improving the energy efficiency of buildings, increasing the use of renewable energy technologies and reducing reliance on fossil fuels. The plan is intended not only to reduce emissions but also to strengthen the council's resilience to future energy cost increases.

To date, the council's carbon management plans have delivered significant reductions in carbon emissions reducing by 63.5% compared with the 2008/09 baseline by 2024/25. The new plan builds on this achievement by identifying further measures that will reduce emissions, improve energy performance and support the council's target of no longer being a net source of carbon emissions after 2030/31.

In addition to environmental benefits, the plan is intended to deliver wider organisational benefits through lower energy costs, increased energy security, greater use of locally generated renewable energy and improved air quality.

Theme: Growth - We will create the conditions to deliver sustainable growth across the county; attracting inward investment, building business confidence, creating jobs, enabling housing development along with providing the right infrastructure.

10: Herefordshire Homeless Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2026 - 2031

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work with partners to provide high quality and affordable housing to meet all needs

This year we will: Utilise the full range of measures to prevent people becoming homeless including through the provision of transitional accommodation

The decision gave approval for the Homelessness Prevention and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2026–2031 and its associated Delivery Action Plan. This aligns with statutory requirements set out by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), which mandates all local authorities to maintain up-to-date homelessness strategies and publish annual action plans. In adopting this strategy, the council remains compliant with our legislative requirements under the Homelessness Act 2002. It also ensures the council's compliance with the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and the National Plan to End Homelessness (2025).

The strategy places particular emphasis on prevention, early intervention and recovery. Our own local analysis demonstrates that Herefordshire has made progress in preventing homelessness; however, ongoing challenges remain. These include increasing pressures from private rented sector evictions, family breakdowns, domestic abuse, and the growing complexity of support needs, particularly relating to poor mental and physical health among those at risk. The presence of families in temporary accommodation, including the use of bed and breakfast provision, further highlights the need for strengthened responses.

The development of the strategy has been informed by a comprehensive evidence base, including stakeholder engagement, service user input, data analysis, and benchmarking against national best practice. This has enabled identification of key systemic pressures and opportunities for improvement. The needs assessment confirms that homelessness in Herefordshire is closely linked to structural housing issues, health inequalities, and financial vulnerability, requiring a coordinated, multi-agency approach. In response, five strategic themes have been identified:

I. improving systems for early identification and prevention;
II. strengthening multi-agency partnerships;
III. enhancing the availability and quality of accommodation;
IV. embedding a data-led approach to decision-making; and
V. maximising funding and resources.

These will be delivered through a detailed action plan designed to increase accommodation capacity, improve support pathways, and build long-term resilience across services.

11: Local Authority Housing Fund Round 4 - Grant Acceptance

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work with partners to provide high quality and affordable housing to meet all needs

The decision had been taken because of the importance of the Local Authority Housing Fund (LAHF4) as an established government initiative to support councils to acquire good quality temporary accommodation. The type of accommodation that the council will be looking to provide will assist vulnerable families, including those resettled through national schemes. Previous rounds of the fund had already demonstrated success in Herefordshire through partnership working with Registered Providers, resulting in the delivery of additional homes. Round 4 is specifically focused on enabling the council to build its own stock, thereby reducing reliance on costly and unsuitable temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast provision.

The funding has been provided to cover - typically - 40–50% of property costs with the council and its partners contributing match funding. The grant includes additional contributions toward associated costs such as refurbishment and furnishing, alongside a small revenue allocation to support delivery. The council has determined that this will enable the acquisition of 20 homes, with a combination of council-owned and Registered Provider-managed properties, maximising overall benefit without requiring additional unplanned resources.

The increasing demand for temporary accommodation has been a critical factor underpinning the decision. The number of households requiring support has risen significantly over recent years, alongside escalating costs driven by shortages in social housing, high private sector rents, and wider cost-of-living pressures. The use of nightly paid accommodation had placed substantial financial strain on the council, with costs far exceeding sustainable levels. This scheme has therefore been viewed as a necessary intervention to provide a more cost-effective and stable housing solution while supporting the council's statutory homelessness duties.

Broader policy and community considerations had reinforced the decision. The proposal had aligned with national and local priorities to reduce homelessness, eliminate inappropriate temporary accommodation for families, and support the resettlement of vulnerable Afghan families. By increasing the supply of suitable housing and supporting integration outcomes, the scheme is being designed to deliver long-term social and economic benefits for residents and the wider community.

12:	**Purchase of flats for temporary accommodation** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Work with partners to provide high quality and affordable housing to meet all needs

In May, the Cabinet member for Adult Health and Wellbeing to the decision to approve the purchase of four one-bedroom flats in Hereford City along with a small allowance for associated costs such as legal fees and surveys. The properties are intended to be used as temporary accommodation.

This decision ensures the council's can carry out its statutory obligations to prevent and relieve homelessness, whilst also alleviating some of the pressures arising from increasing demands, more generally, for temporary accommodation. The number of households requiring support has risen significantly over recent years, both locally and nationally, driven by factors including a shortage of social housing, high private rents, and wider cost-of-living pressures. This in turn placing growing strain on Hereford City's existing temporary accommodation provision.

Financial considerations were also central to the decision. The council has become increasingly reliant on Bed & Breakfast and hotel accommodation, which is both expensive and limited in supply. The high nightly costs of such placements creates significant and ongoing financial pressure, with housing benefit only partially offsetting these costs. Purchasing and managing council-owned accommodation is as a more cost-effective and sustainable solution over the longer term.

This decision addresses rising demand and enables the council to increase its supply of suitable, good-quality temporary accommodation while reducing reliance on high-cost emergency options. This approach also provides more stable and appropriate housing outcomes for residents in need

13:	**Housing Delivery Update** **Stated Delivery Plan Objective:** Work with partners to provide high quality and affordable housing to meet all needs **This year we will:** Enable the delivery of affordable properties in the county, including council owned land, through registered providers and developers

Council also requested that – as part of my Leader's report – I provide an update on housing delivery at each ordinary meeting of the Council.

Since my last report, in March, we have held a second housing summit. It was a positive discussion where we considered how we can continue to work together to meet the county's critical need for social and affordable housing.

The challenges remain the same with over 2,000 people registered on HomePoint and rough sleeping increasing following the closure of the winter shelter. There has also been a decrease in the supply of private rental properties, following the introduction of the Renters Rights Act, as previous landlords have decided to no longer rent out properties given the changing requirements/ restrictions.

Within this context the following actions were identified as priorities:

1. **Bringing forward council-owned land for housing** – constructive discussions have taken place with two Registered Providers (RPs) following the first summit; bringing forward the first sites on Merton Meadow will be an area of continuing focus.
2. **Homes England grants** – Homes England would like us to submit a portfolio of sites that require grant funding. They will consider and constructively explore whether they can approve an overarching allocation to enable the council to bring sites forward more rapidly.
3. **Duchy landholdings** – the Duchy of Cornwall is looking to sell 20% of their landholdings to enable the development of affordable housing on remaining land. It was agreed that the council would follow up with the Duchy estate as to what opportunities there may be in Herefordshire.
4. **Empty Properties** – There are 186 empty properties owned by the RPs across the county. It was agreed that we will proactively work together to bring these properties back in to use as soon as possible.
5. **A joint work programme** – To drive forward future joint working it was agreed that we would establish a joint work programme. The agreed initial areas of joint working are;
    a. ***Empty Properties*** – as above, a programme to bring the 186 properties back on line as soon as possible
    b. ***Homes England*** **–** work with HE to secure funding, invite to them to the next meeting
    c. ***Housing delivery programme*** – to include all council owned sites, RP led development and all live and any stalled Housing Developers sites
    d. ***Local plan going forward*** – ensure the RPs are fully engaged in the development of the Local Plan
    e. ***Devolution*** **–** to identify asks in terms of future powers and funding we would like to support social and affordable housing.

Housing Delivery

Members will recall that at full Council on 8 December 2023, we agreed that cabinet would develop a programme to deliver an ambitious number of units of social housing, market-rent lifetime tenancies, affordable home ownership and market sale properties, funded through the prudent use of borrowing, capital receipts and the management of council assets. This would be in time for this to be agreed by Council as part of next year's capital programme.

365 new affordable homes have been delivered since 1 April 2025, with 95 of these provided as general needs accommodation during the current financial year to date.

External Local Authority Housing Fund Round 4 grant funding secured by Strategic Housing (£2,899,500 capital grant and £22,548 revenue grant) is expected to support the delivery of 20 homes in total. This will include 5 units of general needs temporary accommodation and 15 units for Afghan resettlement. The temporary accommodation will be purchased and managed by Herefordshire Council to help meet increasing homelessness demand. The resettlement accommodation will be purchased and managed by Registered Providers.

To date, offers have been accepted on two five-bedroom properties, with a further 3 offers made on additional properties. All acquisitions remain subject to Red Book valuation and RICS survey to ensure value for money.

An additional Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government funding allocation has enabled the purchase of four one-bedroom flats in Hereford – these will be used as temporary accommodation. Alongside this is the delivery of a further four one-bedroom flats in Ross-on-Wye. Internal funding has also enabled the creation of four flats in Hereford city through the refurbishment and conversion of a former three-bedroom Council-owned property.

Prevention remains at the heart of the Housing Service's work. By intervening early, officers help residents resolve housing difficulties before they become crises, through practical support, mediation, debt advice, tenancy sustainment and financial assistance.

This approach helps people remain in their homes, protecting family stability, employment, education and wellbeing. It also reduces costs to the Council, as preventing homelessness is significantly more cost-effective than providing emergency accommodation and statutory homelessness support.

Theme: Transformation - *We will be an efficient council that embraces best practice, delivers innovation through technology and demonstrates value for money.*

14: Change and transform the organisation to be fit for the future and deliver the efficiencies required

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Continue to invest in the property assets of the council to ensure they are maintained and decrease the burden on revenue repair works

This year we will: Deliver the programme of projects

In April, the Cabinet Member Community Services and Assets approved the drawdown and expenditure of £3.223 million of capital funding to deliver a programme of property improvement works across the Council's estate between 2026/27 and 2028/29. The programme includes planned maintenance and improvement projects to corporate and commercial buildings, ensuring that properties remain safe, compliant, operational and fit for purpose. The investment is intended to support service delivery, protect the value of Council assets and maintain income generated from the Council's commercial property portfolio.

The decision also approves a programme of works at Council-owned care facilities used to provide residential care and support services. These works include essential repairs, improvements to fire safety measures and other upgrades required to maintain safe and effective care environments and support compliance with regulatory requirements.

Additional funding has been approved for adaptation works to a Council-owned property that will be used to deliver an overnight short breaks and outreach service for children with disabilities. The improvements will help ensure the property is accessible and suitable for children with complex needs, supporting the Council's statutory responsibilities to provide respite services for disabled children and their families.

15: School Transport Operating Model (formerly known as Pilot Programme for School Transport Operating Model)

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Change and transform the organisation to be fit for the future and deliver the efficiencies required

This year we will: Complete the review of home to school transport to mitigate increasing costs through a new delivery model

In March, the Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure approved a pilot programme to deliver some school transport routes through Hoople, Herefordshire Council's arms-length trading company. The pilot forms part of the council's wider school transport transformation programme and is intended to test whether transport can be provided more efficiently and at a lower cost to meet the needs of eligible children and young people.

The programme has been developed in response to increasing demand and rising costs associated with home-to-school transport, particularly for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Analysis undertaken by the council indicates that some of the most expensive transport routes could be delivered more cost-effectively through Hoople, potentially reducing costs while maintaining service quality, safeguarding standards and reliability.

The pilot will initially introduces a number of routes – these will be closely monitored and evaluated. The council aims to assess whether greater control over route planning, vehicle utilisation, driver recruitment and staff training can improve efficiency and resilience, while providing a positive experience for children, young people and their families. The model is also intended to reduce reliance on external transport providers and create a more sustainable long-term approach to delivering school transport.

The pilot will be subject to ongoing monitoring of its financial performance, operational effectiveness, safeguarding compliance and customer experience. The findings will be used to inform future decisions on the longer-term delivery of school transport services.

Other Decisions Taken by Cabinet and Cabinet Members

16: Delivery Plan 2026 to 2027

In March Cabinet agreed the 2026/27 Delivery Plan. The plan, which is a constitutional requirement, sets out what actions the council will take to achieve the priorities of the Herefordshire Council Plan 2024-28.

Delivery Plan progress is monitored through quarterly performance and budget reporting to Cabinet, reporting to the Corporate Leadership Team, annual service plans, and individual performance reviews. The 2026/27 Delivery Plan includes both outstanding actions from 2025/26 and new deliverables to support the Herefordshire Council Plan priorities of People, Place, Growth, and Transformation.

17: High Needs Budget 2026/27

In March, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People agreed the Council's High Needs Budget for 2026/27. This budget funds support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those requiring alternative provision. The budget is funded through the High Needs Block of the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG), which local authorities must use to meet their statutory responsibilities for SEND provision and specialist educational support up to the age of 25.

Demand for SEND services continues to increase across Herefordshire, with rising numbers of children and young people requiring specialist placements, top-up funding, post-16 support and independent school provision. Although the council's High Needs funding allocation has increased for 2026/27, the increase largely reflects the incorporation of existing grants into the funding formula rather than additional funding to meet growing demand.

As a result, the proposed High Needs Budget requirement for 2026/27 is £50.9 million, while available funding is significantly lower, leaving an anticipated in-year funding shortfall of £25.7 million. However, there continues to be a mismatch between the cost of meeting statutory SEND obligations and the funding provided through the national system.

Herefordshire's cumulative DSG deficit has continued to grow in recent years due to sustained overspending within the High Needs Block, driven by increasing demand and the legal requirement to provide appropriate support regardless of the level of funding available.

18: Appointment of an external transformation partner for Community Wellbeing Directorate

This decision agreed a proposal that an external specialist partner be procured to support the Community Wellbeing Directorate in identifying and designing transformation activity to deliver sustainable, recurrent savings over the Medium-Term Financial Strategy period. Delegated authority was to be granted to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to manage the procurement process and award the contract. This approach was intended to complement the £7.3m savings already committed for 2026–2027 and to ensure further savings could be identified and delivered in subsequent years.

The decision was driven by the significant financial pressures facing the council and the scale of the Community Wellbeing Directorate's budget and responsibilities. The Directorate was required not only to deliver substantial savings in the immediate financial year but also to contribute further savings in later years of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy. It was recognised that identifying additional efficiencies of this scale would be challenging without external expertise, particularly given increasing service demand and the complexity of adult social care.

The proposed approach involved a two-phase model. Phase 1 comprised a 12-week diagnostic exercise, focused primarily on adult social care, to identify opportunities to manage demand, improve productivity, and design services around the needs of residents and carers. Subject to demonstrating sufficient, sustainable savings, Phase 2 would involve implementation over 12–18 months, with the external partner supporting delivery while also developing internal capability to sustain improvements. The commercial model reduced financial risk through a contingent fee structure linked to realised savings, with only a fixed fee payable if the council chose not to proceed beyond the diagnostic stage.

In reaching this decision, it was emphasised that the diagnostic phase would identify deliverable and sustainable savings, but any proposals would be subject to further assessment and approval before implementation. A future key decision would determine whether to proceed to Phase 2. The alternative option of taking no action was rejected on the basis that it would be unlikely to deliver the required level of additional savings without specialist support, thereby undermining the council's financial strategy.

19: Justice for Tenants (JFT) – Renters' Rights Act 2025: Housing Enforcement, Civil Penalties and Housing of Multiple Occupancy Licensing

In May, the Cabinet member for Adult Health and Wellbeing approved a new enforcement framework for the private rented sector in preparation for the Renters' Rights Act 2025. This included adopting updated enforcement and civil penalty policies, standardising House of Multiple Occupation (HMO) licence conditions, and agreeing to enter into a support contract with Justice for Tenants (JFT). JFT is a non-profit organisation dedicated to raising standards for renters, empowering tenants through knowledge, and strengthening enforcement against rogue landlords and agents., subject to legal review. This decision puts the council in a position to meet its new legal duties and to apply housing standards consistently and effectively across all wards.

The new legislation introduced a stronger duty on councils to take action where there are breaches and placed greater emphasis on civil penalties. The Council's existing policies had been developed under an older, more discretionary approach and no longer fully met these requirements. Adopting the JFT framework provides a clear, structured and nationally recognised approach, helping to ensure decisions are transparent, consistent, and more robust if challenged.

This approach also reduces operational and legal risks. The JFT model aligns policy, enforcement practice and licensing conditions helping to avoid inconsistencies and supports officers in making defensible decisions. The decision creates benefits for residents and the wider community and contributes to improving housing standards, protects vulnerable tenants, and ensure fair treatment of responsible landlords. By strengthening enforcement and increasing confidence in regulatory activity, the new framework will deliver a more effective and reliable housing service.

20: Introducing a Herefordshire Councillor Ward Fund Grants Scheme

In May, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services, approved the introduction of a new Herefordshire Councillor Ward Grant Scheme, giving each ward councillor an annual budget of £1,000 to support community groups, local projects and initiatives within their ward. The scheme is intended to increase councillors' ability to respond directly to local needs and support activities that contribute to the priorities set out in the Council Plan.

Under the scheme, local community groups will be able to apply for funding through a simple application process. Councillors will have delegated authority to decide how their allocation is spent, funding projects that deliver local benefits and support community wellbeing. Councillors will also be able to combine their allocations to support projects that span more than one ward area.

The scheme aims to encourage greater local participation in community-led initiatives and strengthen the link between councillors and the communities they represent. By providing members with a small discretionary budget, the council hopes to support grassroots projects that might otherwise struggle to access funding.

To ensure accountability and transparency, all grant decisions will be recorded and linked to the council's agreed priorities and policies. Democratic Services will support the administration of the scheme and publish quarterly reports showing how ward grant funding has been allocated across the county.

21: Microsoft Enterprise Agreement Subscription

Also in May, the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services approved the renewal of Herefordshire Council's Microsoft Enterprise Agreement Subscription (EAS) This decision ensures that the council has continued provision of the Microsoft software and cloud services that underpin the organisations' day-to-day operations. These services include email, Microsoft Office applications, Teams, Windows, device management, security tools and other digital systems that support the delivery of council services.

The decision authorised the award of a three-year contract to Phoenix Software Ltd to continue providing the specialist reseller and licensing management service required for the council's Microsoft licensing arrangements. This will enable the council to access public-sector pricing arrangements and secure fixed discounted pricing for the duration of the agreement, helping to deliver value for money.

The renewal does not introduce any changes to services provided to residents, businesses or visitors. Instead, it ensures continuity of the council's existing digital infrastructure and allows licensing levels to be reviewed annually so that the number of licences can be increased or reduced to reflect organisational needs. This will allow licensing arrangements to be managed efficiently and ensure that the council and Hoople continue to have access to the technology required to support their services.