

Foreword

I am pleased to present my report, covering a period of continued delivery and progress since my last update in July. While local government continues to operate in a challenging financial environment, our focus remains firmly on delivering the priorities set out in the Herefordshire Council Plan and ensuring that residents see tangible benefits from the decisions we make.

We are continuing to respond to significant housing pressures by investing in prevention and increasing the supply of temporary and transitional accommodation. We have now begun the redevelopment of the John Venn building, while additional accommodation is being brought into use. We are also developing plans for a dedicated homelessness assessment and support hub, bringing services together to help people earlier, provide better-quality accommodation and reduce reliance on costly emergency and bed-and-breakfast placements.

We are strengthening support for people affected by domestic abuse through the recommissioning of specialist services, with a greater focus on prevention and early intervention, safe accommodation, housing advocacy and whole-family support. This will help ensure that victims and their children can access the right support at the right time, while recognising children as victims in their own right.

Since my last report was published, the Department for Education (DfE) has formally confirmed the revocation of the statutory direction relating to children's services, bringing government intervention to an end. The improvement plan has been replaced with the business plan and Children's Services is progressing the major national reforms in SEND and Families First.

We continue to provide help and support to keep children at home with families. However, where staying with families is not possible, we always provide the right care and support to help those children and care leavers achieve good outcomes. In my report you will also see we have approved a new overnight short breaks and outreach service for children and young people with disabilities. The new service will expand local provision, enabling more children and young people to receive support closer to home while providing valuable respite and additional support for their families and carers.

We are also recommissioning the Children's Rights and Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service, helping to ensure that children and young people can express their views, participate in decisions affecting their lives and have their rights promoted and upheld. These updates reinforce our commitment to children and families in Herefordshire, and to ensure their needs, voices and outcomes are understood.

We are also helping more local people access higher education through the new Herefordshire Futures Bursary. Backed by the council and delivered with Hereford College of Arts and Herefordshire, Ludlow & North Shropshire College, the scheme will provide eligible students with up to £3,000 towards undergraduate study in the county. By prioritising people facing financial barriers, the bursary will create clearer routes into higher-skilled employment, support rewarding careers and help ensure local employers can access the talent and skills they need.

In adult social care, we are continuing our improvement programme following the Care Quality Commission inspection. The findings broadly reflected our own assessment, and improvement work was already under way at the time of the inspection. We are building on these firm

foundations through a focused plan to deliver further progress, alongside more sustainable home care and care home arrangements and closer integration with health services.

To maintain continuity of home care for around 834 residents, we have extended the existing commissioned frameworks while the new Care in Your Home model is developed, procured and introduced. This will provide stability for residents, carers and providers while supporting a safe transition to a more sustainable, outcomes-focused approach that promotes independence and wellbeing.

We have also approved a new Care Home Partnership Framework to respond to rising demand for residential and nursing care and the increasing complexity of need. The framework is intended to improve capacity, quality and provider stability, strengthen partnership working and support more effective hospital discharge arrangements and better outcomes for residents.

The new Public Realm Service has made a positive start as the arrangements become established. This gives us a more direct approach to improving and maintaining our roads, public rights of way and other open spaces, with clearer accountability for the condition of the places residents use every day.

Supporting sustainable growth across the county remains a key priority. We have launched the Herefordshire Future Skills Grant programme, helping local people and businesses develop the skills needed for future employment opportunities, while the new Big Economic Delivery Plan provides a clear framework for driving investment, productivity and business growth across the county.

I was pleased to attend the launch of the Herefordshire Apprenticeship Awards 2027 last month, which will recognise and celebrate the achievements of apprentices and the employers and training providers who support them. At the time of writing, I am also looking forward to attending the skills conference being organised by the council's Growth Hub. The event will bring businesses, education providers and other partners together to explore how we can develop the skills our economy needs, help employers recruit and retain talent, and create more opportunities for local people to build rewarding careers in Herefordshire.

At the time of writing, I am also looking forward to attending the opening of the new Elevate Business Lounge in Hereford. Its co-working areas, flexible workspaces and meeting and conference facilities will provide local businesses and professionals with a place to connect, collaborate and grow.

Together, these initiatives will help create jobs, strengthen our economy and ensure Herefordshire is well placed to compete for future investment.

Supporting our rural communities remains equally important. I recently visited Green Farm in Felton as part of the National Farmers' Union's Back British Farming campaign, where I met the Simcock family and saw how the business is producing high-quality food, maintaining strong animal welfare standards, creating local jobs and supplying locally sourced school meals.

Our Invest in Herefordshire team also represented the county's rural economy at the World Agri-Tech Innovation Summit in London, alongside local business S&A Produce. We have continued the farm mentoring programme, providing practical support to local farming businesses. Alongside our fellow councils in the Marches Forward Partnership (MFP), we have also continued to champion the industry regionally. As part of this work, the Chief Executive and I were delighted to visit the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) with the MFP. The visit provided an opportunity to raise the profile of the region and its rural priorities with Welsh parliamentarians and government officials.

We are also making progress in enabling housing development, with 677 net additional dwellings completed during 2025/26, despite a challenging planning and development environment. Meanwhile, more than £2.3 million in phosphate mitigation income has now been received, helping to release planning permissions for 1,096 homes while supporting our wider environmental responsibilities.

Following extensive engagement with partners and stakeholders, we have adopted Herefordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy. This represents an important step in protecting biodiversity, improving river and landscape health, and ensuring nature recovery is embedded within our plans for future growth.

I was proud to attend the Hereford Military History Festival, where I joined a packed audience in Hereford Cathedral for a discussion on the past, present and future of the SAS. The strength of the turnout was testament to the deep bond Herefordshire shares with its Armed Forces communities and the enormous pride felt across the county in those who serve and have served. It is a commitment the council is proud to share, reflected in the recent revalidation of our Gold Award under the Ministry of Defence's Defence Employer Recognition Scheme - the highest level of recognition for organisations that demonstrate sustained and outstanding support for the Armed Forces community.

Moving away from core services, a number of major projects are now reaching important milestones. At Merton Meadow, the flood alleviation works are nearing completion, creating the conditions to unlock future housing, enhance biodiversity and improve public access to green space.

Significant progress has also been made on the Hereford Transport Hub, which is nearing completion and is expected to provide a modern gateway with new facilities and improved access. The Holme Lacy Road active travel scheme is also approaching completion, improving safety and more travel choices for residents. Ross-on-Wye Enterprise Park is progressing well and moving closer to becoming one of the county's most significant employment sites.

Preparatory work has begun along the route of Hereford Bypass Phase One, including site preparation, fencing, ground investigations, trial holes and drainage and pavement surveys. Detailed design work, land negotiations and engagement with National Highways, Network Rail and other stakeholders are helping to move the scheme towards its next decision point, with final design work and associated costings expected during the autumn.

Construction works at the new Peterchurch School have now been completed, delivering modern facilities that will benefit pupils and the wider community for generations to come. We are also preparing to begin work to increase capacity at Aylestone School in Hereford, seeking public views on proposals to establish a new special school at the Ryefield Centre in Ross-on-Wye, and using the opportunity presented by the Department for Education's (DFE) School Rebuilding Programme to develop options for increasing capacity at Westfield School. Together, these projects form part of our wider work to create more local school places and strengthen support for children and young people with SEND.

While this has been another period of significant delivery and progress, it is important that we acknowledge the challenges we continue to face. At Quarter 1, the council is forecasting an £11.6 million overspend against its £234.1 million net revenue budget. The main pressures arise from growing demand in adult social care, temporary accommodation, SEND and home-to-school transport budgets. We are taking action to mitigate the forecast overspend: delivery of outstanding savings plans, identifying mitigations and maintaining robust expenditure controls to deliver services within the approved budget.

It is incredibly important that those and future decisions are well-informed and transparent. This is why I am very proud that Herefordshire Council continues to demonstrate its commitment to strong governance, transparency and sound financial management. On 29 September, the council published its audited accounts for the year ended 31 March 2026, one of only seven local authorities in the country to achieve this milestone by this date. This achievement reflects the dedication of members and officers and the council's ongoing commitment to accountability and responsible stewardship of public funds on behalf of the residents of Herefordshire.

Following a period of four months of audit testing, the external auditors have confirmed that the accounts are free from error and we have followed proper accounting standards. This provides valuable, and timely, external assurance to all members and residents that the accounts can be relied upon to support decision making and financial planning.

Through their work to assess the council's arrangements to secure Value for Money, I am thrilled to report that the auditors have raised a 'Good Practice Insight' highlighting the transformation and improvement in children's services as 'notable practice'. This finding reinforces assessments made by other regulators this year: the Ofsted 'Good' with 'Outstanding' leadership of services rating in January and the removal of the statutory direction in July.

My Cabinet and I remain committed to doing the very best for Herefordshire and to ensuring that our actions and decisions continue to support stronger communities, sustainable growth and improved outcomes for everyone who lives, works and invests in our county.

*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: Extension of the council's current commissioned home care frameworks

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Enable people to support themselves and each other by providing the right help at the right time

This year we will: Review all Supported Living services

In September, the Cabinet Member for Adults health and Wellbeing approved the extension of the existing home care framework arrangements from 31 October 2026 to 30 April 2027, with the option to extend for a further period of up to four months, ending no later than 31 August 2027. Delegated authority is also sought for the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to implement the extension and complete all associated contractual arrangements required to support the transition to the new Care in Your Home (CIYH) commissioning approach.

The proposed extension will ensure continuity of care for approximately 834 residents currently receiving home care services, equating to around 11,600 hours of support each week. Maintaining the existing arrangements will provide stability for service users, carers and providers while the council develops, procures and mobilises the CIYH model, which is intended to deliver a more sustainable, outcomes-focused approach that promotes independence and wellbeing.

Extending the frameworks is considered the most appropriate option as it supports the council in meeting its statutory duties under the Care Act 2014, minimises the risk of disruption to vulnerable residents and maintains market stability during a period of increasing demand and complexity of need. The extension also provides sufficient time to complete the development and implementation of CIYH in a safe and controlled manner, while continuing to achieve value for money through existing contractual arrangements.

Alternative options, including allowing the frameworks to expire, proceeding directly to implementation of CIYH without an extension, or extending the frameworks for a longer period, were considered but are not recommended. These options would either create unacceptable risks to service continuity and market stability, provide insufficient time to develop the new commissioning model, or unnecessarily delay the implementation of the long-term Care in Your Home approach

2: Domestic Abuse Commissioning - 2026

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Support people to feel safe and respected in their communities

This year we will: Work with partners to prevent serious violence, organised crime, and domestic abuse/ Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) by strengthening early identification and promoting bystander intervention training across communities and frontline services

In August, the Cabinet Member approved the recommissioning of domestic abuse support services through an open procurement process using a two-lot model comprising Safe Accommodation Services and Whole-Family Community-Based Support, Safe Accommodation and Housing Advocacy. Contracts were approved for an initial two-year period from 1 April 2027 to 31 March 2029, with provision for extensions of up to four further years, subject to funding availability. Delegated authority was granted to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to award and manage the contracts and approve any future extensions in accordance with the contract terms.

The decision was taken to ensure the council continued to meet its statutory responsibilities under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, including the provision of support for victims of domestic abuse and their children and access to appropriate safe accommodation. It also enabled services to be aligned with confirmed funding arrangements and responded to evidence of increasing demand, pressures on accommodation provision and the need to reduce reliance on unsuitable temporary accommodation.

The approved commissioning approach built upon existing specialist domestic abuse services while creating a more integrated and sustainable support system. It strengthened the focus on prevention, early intervention, housing advocacy and whole-family support, with particular emphasis on improving outcomes for children as victims in their own right. The lot-based structure was intended to promote partnership working, encourage innovation and ensure flexibility to respond to changing levels of need and available funding.

3: Herefordshire Care Home Partnerships Framework

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Enable people to support themselves and each other by providing the right help at the right time

This year we will: Increase the number of Care homes that we work in Partnership with

The Cabinet Member approved the procurement of a new Care Home Partnership Framework for adults in Herefordshire, with an estimated value of up to £484.3 million over a maximum eight-year period. Delegated authority was granted to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to award contracts to successful providers, enter into contractual arrangements and approve operational decisions, extensions and variations in accordance with the council's Contract Procedure Rules.

The decision was taken in response to rising demand for residential and nursing care, increasing complexity of need and growing expenditure on care home placements. The existing commissioning model relied heavily on reactive spot purchasing arrangements, which provided limited opportunities for strategic planning, demand forecasting, market development and quality improvement. The new framework was intended to replace this approach with longer-term partnership arrangements that would provide greater certainty for providers, improve visibility of available capacity and support more effective commissioning of care home services.

The approved framework was designed to support the council's Care Act market-shaping responsibilities, improve provider sustainability and strengthen collaboration between the council and care home providers. Through an Open Framework model under the Procurement Act 2023, the council sought to establish a more sustainable and transparent care market, improve hospital discharge pathways, enhance quality assurance and support better outcomes for residents through a stronger focus on partnership working, performance and person-centred care.

4: Recommissioning of Children's Rights & Advocacy and Independent Visitors Services

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Support people to feel safe and respected in their communities

In August, the Cabinet member – Children and Young People took a decision to approve an open procurement exercise for the provision of a Children's Rights and Advocacy Service and an Independent Visitor Service. The procurement will enable the council to continue meeting its statutory responsibilities to provide independent advocacy, representation and support for vulnerable children and young people across Herefordshire.

The procurement also supports the transition of the Children's Rights and Advocacy Service from an in-house model to an externally commissioned service. This approach will strengthen the operational independence of advocacy provision in line with national guidance and recognised best practice, while maintaining continuity of support for children and young people. An initial five-year contract term was approved, with the option to extend for up to a further 24 months, subject to performance, ongoing need and available funding.

Independent advocacy and independent visitor services play a vital role in ensuring that children and young people are able to express their views, participate in decisions affecting their lives and have their rights promoted and upheld. Recommissioning the services through a single procurement exercise will provide a coordinated commissioning approach, support effective contract management and help ensure continued delivery of high-quality services that meet statutory requirements.

The decision also recognised that the proposed commissioning model supports the council's wider improvement journey and commitment to listening to the voices of children and young people. Provision was made for phased mobilisation of the services and for the management of any Transfer of Undertakings Protection of Employment (TUPE) regulation implications arising from the transfer of the advocacy service. This decision ensures the smooth transition and continuity of support for children and young people.

5: Award of contract for the provision of overnight short breaks and outreach service for children and young people

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Enable people to support themselves and each other by providing the right help at the right time

This year we will: Deliver our Child Friendly Herefordshire and Improve services for carers of all ages

Also in August, the Cabinet member children and young people took the decision to award a contract to PCA Dom 1 Ltd to develop and deliver a registered overnight short breaks and outreach support service for children and young people with disabilities from a council-owned property. The contract will be awarded for an initial period of five years, with the option to extend for a further 24 months, at an anticipated value of £2.1 million over the full seven-year term.

The service will support the council in meeting its statutory responsibilities to provide support for disabled children and their families. It will secure a guaranteed minimum of 2,520 overnight short break bed nights and 14,000 outreach support hours over the lifetime of the contract, while retaining flexibility to increase provision in response to changing demand and assessed need. The service is intended to develop sustainable local capacity and improve access to support for children and families across Herefordshire.

The procurement was undertaken through a competitive process under the Procurement Act 2023 and that the contract has been designed to provide both certainty of provision and the ability to commission additional support where required. Authority was therefore delegated to the Corporate Director for Children and Young People to purchase additional services during the contract term, up to a maximum total contract value of £7.6 million, subject to available approved funding.

The decision also delegated authority to the Corporate Director for Children and Young People to take all operational decisions necessary to implement, manage, vary, extend or terminate the contract in accordance with the approved budget and contract terms. The service will form part of the council's wider short breaks offer, helping to improve outcomes for children and young people with disabilities and providing greater support and respite opportunities for families and carers.

6: High Needs Capital Spend

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

This year we will: Work with appointed DfE Advisers to ensure readiness for the SEND Reforms

This decision, taken by the Cabinet Member for Community Services and Assets, approved the expenditure of up to £9.162 million of Department for Education capital grant funding, comprising £5.362 million of High Needs Provision Capital Grant and £3.8 million of Special and Alternative Provision Free School Alternative Places Grant, to increase local Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) capacity across Herefordshire. Authority was also delegated to the Service Director for Education, Learning and Skills to take the operational decisions necessary to deliver the programme and utilise any future related capital grant funding added to the council's capital programme.

The funding will support the council's statutory duty to ensure sufficient school places are available for children and young people with SEND. The programme has been developed in response to increasing demand for specialist provision and aims to improve local capacity, strengthen inclusion within mainstream schools and reduce reliance on higher-cost independent, non-maintained and out-of-county placements.

A key element of the programme is the proposed expansion of Westfield School, which is currently included within the Department for Education's School Rebuilding Programme. Subject to further feasibility, design development and affordability assessments, the expansion would increase specialist provision within the county and support more children and young people to access education closer to home.

The programme will also invest in the development of support bases within mainstream schools, initially focusing on secondary schools. These facilities are intended to strengthen inclusive education, provide earlier intervention and enable more children and young people with SEND to remain in mainstream settings where this is appropriate to their needs. Opportunities to expand support base provision within primary schools will also be considered where there is identified need and a viable delivery model.

In addition, the programme will provide flexibility to acquire, adapt or refurbish suitable council-owned or purchased assets to create additional SEND capacity. This approach recognises that adapting existing buildings may, in some cases, provide a more cost-effective and deliverable solution than new-build provision, enabling additional places to be created more quickly and within the available funding envelope.

The programme will operate as a flexible capital investment programme, allowing individual schemes to be prioritised according to need, affordability, deliverability and value for money. All projects will remain subject to appropriate feasibility work, governance arrangements, procurement requirements and statutory approvals, with the overall objective of improving SEND sufficiency, strengthening inclusion and delivering better educational outcomes for children and young people across Herefordshire.

7: Active Travel Capital Fund 2026/27

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Support all residents to live healthy lives within their communities

This year we will: Deliver active travel programmes to encourage more walking and cycling

In September, the Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure approved the allocation and expenditure of the 2026/27 Active Travel Grant, totalling £234,354, to support the delivery of active travel infrastructure projects across Herefordshire. The funding forms part of the council's wider active travel capital programme and will be used to progress priorities identified within the adopted Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan (LCWWIP).

The grant is provided annually by Active Travel England and supports the delivery of infrastructure that encourages walking, wheeling and cycling. The approved programme will assist the council in implementing its integrated transport objectives and delivering improvements that support safer and more sustainable travel choices for residents.

The LCWWIP, previously approved by Cabinet, establishes the council's strategic priorities for active travel investment. The proposed allocation for 2026/27 will give effect to those agreed priorities and enable the progression of schemes identified within the plan. The principal project identified for delivery during 2026/27 is the Ledbury Safer Routes to School scheme, which has been allocated the full grant funding of £234,354 to improve active travel opportunities and support safer journeys for pupils travelling to and from school.

Herefordshire Council is currently assessed by Active Travel England at Capability Level 2 and is seeking to strengthen its position through delivery of the LCWWIP programme. Continued investment and successful delivery of active travel projects may support future funding opportunities and contribute to the council's longer-term transport and sustainability objectives.

Authority was delegated to the Chief Operating Officer, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Transport and Infrastructure, to take all operational decisions necessary to implement and vary the approved programme within the available funding and in accordance with the council's governance, financial and procurement requirements.

8: Care Quality Commission (CQC) Assessment report and Improvement plan

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Enable people to support themselves and each other by providing the right help at the right time

This year we will: Improve services for carers of all ages

In July, Cabinet noted the outcome of Herefordshire Council's Care Quality Commission (CQC) assessment and approve the CQC Assurance Improvement Plan 2026-2027. Authority was delegated to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to lead delivery of the improvement plan and take the operational decisions necessary to implement the identified actions.

The assessment was undertaken under the framework established by the Health and Care Act 2022, which requires the CQC to evaluate how local authorities fulfil their adult social care responsibilities under the Care Act 2014. Following the assessment process, Herefordshire Council received an overall rating of Requires Improvement, achieving a score of 56%, seven percentage points below the threshold for a Good rating.

The assessment recognised a number of significant strengths within adult social care services. Areas identified as performing well included partnership working, safeguarding arrangements, prevention services, hospital discharge arrangements, workforce engagement, equality and diversity initiatives, innovation through technology, strong governance arrangements and effective collaboration with providers and community organisations. The assessment also confirmed that no adults at risk requiring safeguarding intervention were identified during the inspection process.

The findings broadly reflected the council's own self-assessment and provided assurance that the authority had a clear understanding of both its strengths and areas requiring further development. Improvement activity is already underway at the time of the inspection, although some initiatives had not yet been fully implemented or embedded.

The approved plan sets out a programme of work across seven key areas, including strengthening the front door offer, improving reablement services, enhancing support for unpaid carers, developing occupational therapy services, increasing capacity to manage demand and waiting lists, progressing innovation in services for working-age adults, and improving the use of data to support service planning and performance improvement.

This assessment as an important milestone in the council's improvement journey and established a structured framework for driving progress during 2026-2027. Delivery of the improvement plan will be overseen through established governance arrangements, with regular reporting to the Corporate Improvement Board, Cabinet Member, Directorate Leadership Team and the Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee.

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.

9: Adoption of Herefordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Value nature and uphold environmental standards to minimise pollution and maximise biodiversity

This year we will: Lead and be responsible for the delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy

In August, the Cabinet Member for Culture and Environment approved the submission, adoption and publication of Herefordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) and authorised its submission to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Delegated authority was granted to the Head of Environment to approve any modifications required by the Secretary of State and to manage the allocation of the £135,500 LNRS delivery body transition grant, together with any future funding received to support delivery of the strategy.

The decision was taken to fulfil the council's statutory responsibilities under the Environment Act 2021, which requires designated responsible authorities to prepare and maintain a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. The LNRS was developed through extensive engagement with stakeholders, environmental partners, landowners, farmers, community organisations and residents, and identifies locally agreed priorities, actions and locations for nature recovery across Herefordshire.

The adopted strategy established a framework for restoring and enhancing biodiversity by identifying priority habitats, species and areas where nature recovery action would have the greatest impact. It was intended to guide future investment, partnership working and environmental decision-making, while supporting the targeting of funding opportunities such as agri-environment schemes and Biodiversity Net Gain initiatives. The strategy also sought to improve habitat connectivity, support nature recovery across urban and rural settings, and contribute to wider environmental, social and economic benefits.

The decision also enabled the council to transition from its role as the responsible authority for preparing the strategy to a delivery and coordination role, working with partners to develop and support projects that contribute to the strategy's objectives. This approach was intended to strengthen collaboration, unlock external funding opportunities and support the delivery of nature recovery outcomes across the county over the coming years.

10: Western Bypass Phase One – Update report (formerly known as Hereford Bypass Phase One - Assessment Report)

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: Complete the necessary work to tender for the design and construction of Phase 1 of the Hereford Western Bypass

In September, Cabinet noted progress made on the Western Bypass Phase One following the award of the Pre-Construction Services Agreement (PCSA) in April 2026 and to delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Economy and Environment to take the actions necessary to progress the scheme. This includes concluding the corrective action process within the PCSA and determining the most appropriate route to achieving a construction contract within the approved governance framework and budget.

Significant progress has been made during the design phase, with the contractor working alongside council officers and key stakeholders, including National Highways and Network Rail, to develop the scheme. As the design work progressed, amendments were required to reflect updated road and bridge standards, resulting in revisions to elements of the proposed scheme. Final design work and associated costings are expected to be completed during the autumn.

Negotiations with landowners have continued, with substantial progress made towards securing the land required for the scheme through voluntary agreement. However, as not all land can be acquired through negotiation, the Compulsory Purchase Order and Side Road Order processes will continue to ensure that all necessary land interests and rights can be secured to enable delivery of the project.

There have been a number of factors that have increased estimated construction costs, including design changes required to meet revised national standards, limitations on value-engineering opportunities and rising construction costs linked to wider economic pressures and global supply chain disruption. The existing PCSA includes mechanisms to address these challenges through a corrective action process designed to bring the scheme within the approved governance and budget parameters.

Authority was delegated to the Corporate Director for Economy and Environment to review the outcome of that corrective action process. Should the review conclude that a construction contract can be delivered within the agreed governance and budget, a full business case and assessment against the previously approved criteria will be brought back to Cabinet for consideration. If this cannot be achieved, the Corporate Director will be authorised either to commence a new procurement process for the construction phase or return to Cabinet with alternative proposals for the delivery of the scheme.

11: 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, £2,331,168 (up by £140,678 since my last report in July) in phosphate income has been received. To date these actions have released planning permissions for 1,096 dwellings (an increase of 116 dwellings).

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.

12: Herefordshire County Business Improvement District (HCBID) - Second Term Ballot

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work with our partners and businesses to facilitate growth across the county

This year we will: Support the growth and resilience of Herefordshire's business community

In July, the Cabinet member economy and growth approved the continuation of the Herefordshire County Business Improvement District (HCBID) by authorising the Director for Growth to vote in favour of the BID in the ballot for its second five-year term. Subject to a successful ballot outcome, approval was also given for the council to pay the BID levy on eligible properties within its ownership, estimated at £21,398.13 per annum for five years.

Business Improvement Districts are business-led partnerships funded through a levy on business ratepayers, with the Herefordshire County BID covering areas outside Hereford city centre. The proposed levy for the 2027 to 2031 term has been reduced from 2% to 1.75% of rateable value, and is expected to generate approximately £537,888 of levy income to support economic development activity across the county.

The BID will continue to focus on supporting the tourism and retail sectors, complementing the work of the existing Hereford City Centre BID. Through its first term, the organisation delivered a range of marketing, business support and tourism initiatives that helped raise the profile of Herefordshire regionally, nationally and internationally, while supporting local businesses and attracting visitors to the county.

For its second term, the BID has developed a programme centred on four themes: Attracting Visitors and New Audiences, Growth for Local Businesses and Producers, Rural Life as an Economic Engine for Tourism, and Investing in Tourism. These themes are intended to strengthen the visitor economy, support rural and town-based businesses, encourage investment and improve tourism infrastructure across Herefordshire.

The council does not operate a dedicated tourism function, however a number of council services contribute to the county's visitor economy. Continued support for the BID is expected to complement the council's wider economic growth objectives and help deliver long-term benefits for businesses, communities and visitors across Herefordshire.

13: Big Economic Plan

Stated Delivery Plan Objective: Work with our partners and businesses to facilitate growth across the county

This year we will: Support the growth and resilience of Herefordshire's business community

In July, Cabinet approved the Big Economic Delivery Plan as the county's delivery framework for implementing the long-term ambitions set out in the Herefordshire Economic Plan 2050. Authority was delegated to the Director for Growth, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economy and Growth, to make any final minor amendments prior to publication and to take the operational decisions necessary to implement the plan.

The Herefordshire Economic Plan, approved in 2023, established a vision for the county to become an exemplar 21st-century rural economy. A key recommendation of that plan was the creation of an Economy and Place Partnership Board to provide strategic oversight and develop a delivery plan that would identify the actions, timescales and lead organisations required to achieve the county's economic ambitions.

The Economy and Place Partnership Board, established in 2024 and chaired by the Leader of the Council, led the development of the Big Economic Delivery Plan with input from a wide range of partners and stakeholders. The plan reflects progress made since 2023 and responds to changes in national and local priorities, including the National Industrial Strategy, the Defence Industrial Strategy, housing growth targets and the council's updated strategic priorities.

The Big Economic Delivery Plan is structured around four core themes: Place, People and Communities, Business Growth, and Infrastructure. These themes are supported by cross-cutting principles focused on sustainability, maximising investment and partnership working. Each theme includes a series of priority actions designed to support economic growth, improve skills, strengthen communities, encourage business development and deliver the infrastructure needed to support future prosperity.

The plan is intended to be a partnership-led document for the county, with responsibility for delivery shared across a range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The council's adoption of the plan demonstrates its commitment to playing a leading role in delivering the identified actions and supporting sustainable economic growth across Herefordshire.

14: 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

Since my last report the housing service has continued to respond to significant housing pressures whilst also progressing a number of initiatives to increase housing supply and reduce reliance on expensive temporary accommodation.

Demand for housing and homelessness services remains high with more households applying to register on Home Point and the number of households requiring temporary accommodation

continues to increase. Despite these pressures, the Housing Service remains focused on prevention, helping residents resolve housing difficulties before they reach crisis point through housing advice, mediation, financial assistance and tenancy sustainment support. This preventative approach remains the most effective way of reducing homelessness and protecting public funds.

Through the Local Authority Housing Fund Round 4 funding and other government grant allocations, additional temporary accommodation and transitional accommodation has been delivered across the county. Recent acquisitions have resulted in additional larger family accommodation, and one-bedroom flats in Hereford and Ross-on-Wye. The accommodation will provide much-needed self contained accommodation for local people and help reduce reliance on costly bed and breakfast provision.

The housing team are also developing plans to bring council-owned buildings back into use. The vision is for a dedicated homelessness assessment and support hub, bringing housing, health and support services together to provide a coordinated response for rough sleepers and people facing homelessness. The proposal would make better use of an existing council asset while improving outcomes for some of the county's most vulnerable residents. Alongside this, business cases have been developed to convert vacant council-owned buildings into self-contained temporary accommodation. These schemes are designed to provide better quality accommodation, reduce expenditure on emergency placements and create long-term savings for the council while meeting statutory homelessness duties.

The council continues to work closely with Registered Providers, Homes England and other partners to bring forward social and affordable housing. Stakeholder engagement has also supported the development of a new Supported Housing Strategy, which will help ensure that accommodation and support services meet the needs of older people, people with disabilities, those experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable groups.

While challenges remain significant, we continue to work with partners, government and housing providers to increase housing supply, improve the quality of available accommodation and ensure that residents receive support as early as possible to prevent homelessness wherever we can.

Other Decisions Taken by Cabinet and Cabinet Members

15: Renewal of Access Group contract for Mosaic, Synergy and associated systems

The Cabinet Member for Adults, Health and Wellbeing approved the award of a new five-year contract with The Access Group for the provision of the Mosaic, Synergy, Abacus and Core+ systems, at a total cost of £3.4 million for the period from 1 October 2026 to 30 September 2031. Delegated authority was granted to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to finalise and execute the contract, including hosting arrangements, implementation planning and associated operational decisions.

The decision was taken to ensure the continued provision of business-critical systems that support statutory functions across adult social care, children's services, education and youth services. The existing contract was due to expire in September 2026 and the current hosting arrangements would no longer be supported. The new contract provided for the migration of the

systems to a cloud-hosted environment, improving resilience, functionality, system integration and long-term support arrangements.

Market testing demonstrated that The Access Group offered the most cost-effective solution and that replacing the systems would involve significant financial cost, operational disruption and delivery risk. The council considered that retaining the existing platform represented the best value-for-money option while maintaining continuity of service, protecting critical data and avoiding disruption to services supporting some of the county's most vulnerable residents. The contract also included enhanced functionality and improved integration of financial and provider payment processes, supporting more efficient service delivery and future system development.

16: Herefordshire Parking Strategy 2026 - 2041

In July, cabinet adopted the Herefordshire Parking Strategy 2026-2041 as the council's long-term framework for the management, enforcement and development of parking across the county. Authority was delegated to the Chief Operating Officer for Economy and Environment, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Roads and Regulatory Services, to take the operational decisions necessary to implement the strategy and its associated delivery plan.

The strategy establishes a coherent approach to parking management and is intended to support wider transport, economic and place-based objectives. It provides a framework for future policy, investment and operational decisions, ensuring that parking is managed consistently across Herefordshire and aligned with the council's broader priorities.

Increasing demand for parking, changing travel behaviours and evolving national policy as key drivers for the strategy. Public consultation responses demonstrated strong support for measures that improve road safety, tackle obstructive and inconsiderate parking, strengthen enforcement arrangements and improve accessibility for all users, particularly disabled residents and visitors.

The strategy places a particular emphasis on improving safety around schools, junctions and other high-risk locations, while supporting accessibility, inclusion and access to town centres and local businesses. It also seeks to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of parking services through clearer policy direction, better prioritisation of resources and a more coordinated approach to enforcement and infrastructure investment.

The strategy will provide a clear basis for future parking management across the county and help ensure that parking services contribute positively to transport objectives, economic growth and the vitality of local communities. Progress and outcomes will be monitored through existing performance measures, including enforcement activity, compliance rates and customer feedback.

17: National Parking Platform

In July, the Cabinet Member Roads and Regulatory Services approved Herefordshire Council joining the National Parking Platform (NPP) and entering into the necessary contractual arrangements to enable its implementation. Authority was delegated to the Chief Operating Officer for Resident Services to take all operational and financial decisions required to progress the council's participation in the platform.

The National Parking Platform is a not-for-profit national digital infrastructure that allows multiple approved parking payment applications to operate across the same council parking locations. Rather than relying on a single cashless parking provider, motorists will be able to use a range of approved applications, including services such as JustPark, RingGo and PayByPhone, while existing cash and card payment options will remain available.

Joining the platform will increase customer choice, improve service resilience and reduce dependency on a single supplier. The approach will allow residents and visitors to use their preferred parking application across participating local authority areas, creating a more consistent and convenient user experience while reducing the risks associated with provider outages or future contract changes.

Participation in the platform is expected to cost approximately £71,000 over the initial three-year period, including an estimated annual platform commission of around £48,000 based on current transaction levels. However, the arrangement removes the need for future procurements of individual parking app providers, reduces contract management requirements and supports a more flexible and competitive parking payments market.

The National Parking Platform represents a strategic shift from managing individual parking payment contracts to participating in shared national infrastructure. This approach is intended to support long-term service resilience, cost transparency, risk management and improved customer experience, with implementation anticipated during December 2026.

18: Herefordshire's 2026-27 Section 75 agreement

In September, Cabinet approves a new Section 75 Partnership Agreement between Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2030, providing the legal framework for the continued delivery of integrated health and adult social care services through the Better Care Fund. Authority was delegated to the Corporate Director for Community Wellbeing to finalise, implement and manage the agreement.

This agreement enables the council and the Integrated Care Board to pool resources and jointly commission services under Section 75 of the NHS Act 2006. It underpins the delivery of Better Care Fund programmes and supports integrated approaches to adult social care, community support, prevention services, hospital discharge arrangements and interventions designed to promote independence and wellbeing.

The new arrangement replaces previous annual variation agreements with a single five-year framework. This approach is intended to provide greater stability for strategic planning, commissioning and service delivery, strengthen partnership working, and reduce the administrative burden associated with securing annual approval of overarching agreements.

Approval was also sought for the pooled budget arrangements and partner contributions for the 2025/26 and 2026/27 financial years. While the framework agreement covers a five-year period, annual financial schedules, budget contributions and service arrangements will continue to be reviewed and approved through each organisation's governance processes and appended to the agreement each year.

The integrated working arrangements between the council and NHS partners have continued throughout previous years, ensuring that Better Care Fund requirements remained compliant and services were delivered without interruption while detailed financial schedules were being agreed. The new agreement provides a strengthened governance framework for future partnership working and continued delivery of integrated services for Herefordshire residents.

Delivery of the agreement and associated Better Care Fund schemes will continue to be monitored through established partnership governance arrangements, including the Better Care Partnership Board, Joint Commissioning Board and Health and Wellbeing Board, with performance and outcomes reviewed through regular reporting mechanisms.

19: Q1 2026/27 Budget Report

Also at the September Cabinet meeting, the Quarter 1 2026/27 budget monitoring position was reviewed. This provided the forecast financial outlook and sets out the management actions aimed at reducing the projected overspend during the remainder of the financial year.

A forecast overspend of £11.6 million against the council's net revenue budget of £234.1 million at the end of June 2026. Following planned management interventions, the forecast overspend is expected to reduce to £10.7 million. The principal financial pressures arise from increasing demand within adult social care, temporary accommodation, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) services, and home to school transport.

Adult social care continues to experience significant budget pressures despite measures to manage demand, increase the use of technology-enabled care and strengthen community-based support. Additional pressures have also arisen from rising demand for temporary accommodation, while ongoing increases in SEND placements and transport requirements continue to place pressure on council budgets. Approved savings remain at risk of delivery, contributing significantly to the forecast overspend.

To address these challenges, the cabinet will continue to implement recovery measures including the delivery of outstanding savings plans, identification of additional mitigations within directorates, and the operation of expenditure control panels to scrutinise and challenge spending decisions. Existing expenditure controls introduced in previous years will remain in place to support financial recovery and strengthen budget management throughout 2026/27.

The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit, which stood at £36.3 million at the start of the financial year and is forecast to rise further. However, the council has submitted its Local SEND Reform Plan to the Department for Education and expects to receive a High Needs Stability Grant that could offset approximately 90% of the historic DSG deficit, subject to government approval.

Cabinet also received an update on the capital programme, which has increased to £169.3 million following the carry forward of budgets and the receipt of additional grant funding. While forecast expenditure is currently below the approved budget due to project slippage and rephasing, a number of capital projects are expected to help address key revenue pressures over the longer term, particularly through increasing local SEND provision, reducing reliance on temporary

accommodation and investing in infrastructure that supports service efficiency and demand management.

20: Q1 Performance Report

Cabinet has reviewed the Quarter 1 2026/27 performance position and approved updates to the Delivery Plan 2026/27. This will ensure that it remains aligned to current priorities and delivery timescales. Amendments included the carry forward of milestones from 2025/26, the addition of new priority activities and a number of minor revisions to improve clarity, without changing the council's overall strategic objectives.

There has been strong overall performance against the Delivery Plan, with 104 of 124 milestones (83.9%) either completed or on track for delivery by the end of the financial year. Performance against the council's key indicators is positive, with targets being achieved or exceeded in areas including children's social care assessments, children in care reviews and planning application performance. Overall, the Quarter 1 demonstrates that Cabinet are largely on track to meet the Council Plan and annual Delivery Plan objectives.

21: Risk Management Update Q1 2026/27

The council's Risk Management Strategy and Risk Appetite Statement provides the framework for identifying, assessing and managing risk across the organisation. The Corporate Leadership Team undertook a review of the Corporate Risk Register at 30 June 2026, considering risk scores, existing controls and mitigating actions, as well as any emerging threats or opportunities that could affect delivery of corporate objectives.

Cabinet have approved the Corporate Risk Register at Quarter 1 2026/27 and approved the updated register and the Risk Appetite Statement for 2026/27. Cabinet have given assurances that strategic risks are being actively managed and that appropriate controls and mitigation measures remain in place to support delivery of the Council Plan.

No new corporate risks were required to be added to the register and no changes to the scores of the existing nine corporate risks were proposed. The Corporate Leadership Team have considered the effectiveness of current mitigation measures and was satisfied that the risks continue to be appropriately managed within the council's governance framework.

Particular attention was drawn to the impact of recent extreme weather events both locally and nationally. Although no changes are proposed to corporate risk scores, work is underway with partner organisations and key stakeholders to strengthen preparedness and response arrangements relating to flooding, wildfires and other severe weather incidents, helping to improve resilience across the county. Regular monitoring and review of corporate risks will continue through established governance processes, including the Annual Governance Statement and Audit and Governance Committee oversight.