



March, 2026

Foreword



As Leader of Herefordshire Council, I am pleased to present this latest report, highlighting the progress and decisive action we have taken since my last newsletter. Once again, our shared ambition to deliver the very best for Herefordshire is reflected throughout the work of the council, with clear evidence of delivery across our priorities: People, Place, Growth and Transformation.

As I reported in my last newsletter, Herefordshire Council has not fared well in the local government funding settlement - we are facing in real terms a £17.3m reduction over three years. Despite this, we have taken significant steps to strengthen our financial position and invest in the county's future. Council approved our 2026/27 capital and revenue budgets in February (and associated instruments). We have put forward robust and responsible plans that respond to the funding gap created by the Government's Fair Funding Review, while still investing in highways, housing, flood resilience, infrastructure and the local economy.

The budget includes, out of necessity, a 4.99% council tax increase to maintain delivery of services alongside major capital investment in resurfacing, emergency accommodation, infrastructure maintenance and heritage assets. This also includes a savings programme of £20 million to be achieved through transformation of services, reduction of costs and managing demand.

We have also celebrated a significant landmark achievement for our children and young people. Ofsted has formally judged Herefordshire's Children's Services to be Good overall, with Outstanding leadership - a transformation from the inadequate rating of 2022. This is a hugely significant moment for the county, and I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Cabinet Member Cllr Powell, Corporate Director Tina Russell, the Children and Young People's Directorate, Chief Executive Paul Walker and all staff and partners involved in this

Chief Executive, staff, partners and all staff and partners involved in the improvement journey. Their dedication has made a profound difference to the lives of children and families.

Our commitment to young people remains central to our agenda. To mark National Apprenticeship Week, we released a new video celebrating the first anniversary of our Youth Employment Hub. More than 300 young people have received tailored careers, skills and employment support since the hub opened last year - an achievement we are hugely proud of. In that same week, I was delighted to attend the council's first ever Apprenticeship Awards, celebrating the outstanding dedication, ambition and talent of apprentices and employers across the county. The event showcased exactly why investing in skills matters: it strengthens our economy, supports local businesses to thrive, and gives young people the opportunities they deserve to build successful careers right here in Herefordshire.

For adults, we have approved the re-procurement of our Independent Adult Advocacy Service to ensure people who need support to make decisions about their care continue to receive high-quality, statutory advocacy. Meanwhile, our Emergency Duty Team service for children has been secured for a further three years, ensuring safeguarding support remains available around the clock. We have also taken decisions that protect vital community assets, including agreeing in principle to retain the swimming pool at Peterchurch Primary School following a strong, community-led business case.

Our determination to build a vibrant, ambitious and confident Herefordshire was further demonstrated with the announcement of our county-wide partnership bid to become UK City of Culture 2029. This bold proposal, developed collaboratively with arts, culture and creative organisations, celebrates Herefordshire's identity as "A Living Borderland" - a rural county alive with creativity, community, heritage and innovation. Should we be successful, the benefits would extend far beyond 2029.

We continue to drive forward growth and investment. Recently, we launched the new Invest in Herefordshire campaign and website - a modern, compelling platform for attracting business investment and showcasing our economic strengths, key employment sectors and development opportunities. This will support our ambition to secure new jobs, boost productivity and increase prosperity across the county.

On growth, our focus remains on unlocking housing, supporting local businesses and creating opportunities across the county. You will see in my full report, the council plans to increase the amount of social housing, speed up development on key sites, bring empty homes back into use and improve existing properties. A £10m capital programme for 2026/27 will help deliver more homes for large families, accessible housing, accommodation for young people, and additional temporary accommodation to meet growing demand and reduce long term costs. I am proud the Council (collectively with the Registered Providers) has delivered 731 dwellings in the County since 2023).

We have also supported the Hereford Business Improvement District in

progressing to its third term, enabling more than £1.9 million of local investment to boost tourism, city-centre vitality and business confidence. This work sits alongside wider economic initiatives, including our new Invest in Herefordshire service, our enterprise-zone renewal efforts, and steps to secure sustainable growth in key sectors.

In response to feedback from businesses and residents, Cabinet has agreed to extend the popular 30-minute free parking scheme to include on-street bays in Hereford city centre, complementing the existing 'Pop & Shop' provision in council-operated car parks from April. This measure supports footfall, accessibility and the local economy.

Major regeneration and infrastructure projects are also progressing at pace. At Merton Meadow, construction is now underway on the innovative flood alleviation scheme - a nature-based project that will create wetlands, enhance biodiversity and unlock the potential for new homes and public spaces north of the city. Alongside this, the Hereford Transport Hub continues to take shape, with the installation of the central canopy marking a visible and exciting milestone in creating a more welcoming, accessible gateway to the county.

Herefordshire's 'Back the Bypass' campaign has officially launched with Council leaders, business representatives and other stakeholders coming together to see the transformational potential benefits the scheme could bring to the county.

Central to the campaign is a new series of films, including one featuring residents and businesses, that bring to life the challenges of life without a bypass, and the opportunities that this infrastructure could bring. Other films set out new details of Phase One and how environmental impact will be mitigated, as well as high-level proposals for the full scheme.

The films were revealed at a special event held on Wednesday 25 March. Also launched were a new brochure and website that set out in more detail some of the likely benefits of the project.

The event marked a major step in consolidating widespread support for a project designed to tackle long-standing congestion, improve connectivity, and create the conditions for jobs and economic growth across the county.

The launch of the Back the Bypass campaign comes after Herefordshire Council recently announced that a contractor has been appointed to lead detailed design and early works for Phase One of the bypass.

Phase One of the Hereford Bypass, which will connect the A465 to the A49 to the south-west of the city, is already expected to deliver significant early benefits.

This 3km single-carriageway link would run across land between Grafton and the B4399, providing a modern, high-standard road that reduces commuter and freight traffic through South Wye residential areas such as Belmont, Walnut Tree Avenue, and Holme Lacy Road.

By tying into both the A49 and A465, Phase One will become a strategically important west-east link on the southern edge of Hereford, improving access to key employment destinations, including the Hereford Enterprise Zone.

Some of the proposed benefits for Phase One of the Scheme, include:

- Over the next 60 years, the total financial benefits are estimated at £54–£77 million, with around £47 million coming from people and goods saving time on their journeys.*
- Traffic during busy periods on the A465 is expected to drop by up to 20%, with fewer vehicles using Holme Lacy Road, Walnut Tree Avenue, and other local streets.*
- Bus services expected to be more reliable, and walking and cycling likely to be safer and easier.*
- Noise and pollution will also be reduced, with an estimated 4,285 tonnes less CO₂ produced over the 60 years of the appraisal period.*

Phase One also provides the anchor for the full bypass, which if fully realised, will provide a new River Wye crossing and could unlock space for growth and housing. Land will become available for 150 hectares of employment land – the same size as approximately 200 standard football pitches and around 10,000 new jobs. There will be space to build up to 14,000 new homes, including affordable options once complete.

The council is taking extensive action to tackle the rise in potholes across Herefordshire, with highway crews completing more than 3,000 repairs since January and carrying out up to 150 repairs each day since then. Prolonged rainfall followed by freezing temperatures - has significantly accelerated the formation of potholes, but teams are working daily to inspect and prioritise the most urgent defects.

Alongside reactive road repairs, the council is investing in long-term improvements to strengthen the road network, including 47 miles of resurfacing, 62 miles of preventative surface dressing, major drainage upgrades, and an additional £13.5 million committed to resurfacing, patching and preventative treatments. Parish Councils and residents are encouraged to support this work by reporting defects through the Report It app, with a new resurfacing and surface-dressing programme to be announced soon.

I have been continuing to actively engage with my counterparts (alongside Chief Executive, Paul Walker) across neighbouring authorities on devolution, most recently to understand the implications and opportunities presented by the Government's recent confirmation that areas outside existing devolution arrangements may now apply to become Foundation Strategic Authorities. These discussions have focused on the practical benefits such a designation could offer in strengthening our strategic capacity, economic resilience and long-term planning across the wider region.

While Local Government Reorganisation does not directly affect us as an established unitary authority, it remains important that we fully explore the

options available and assess whether a coordinated approach could deliver tangible advantages for Herefordshire. We are responding to the Government's consultation on our neighbouring authority's of Gloucestershire and Worcestershire. We favour their single county wide unitary proposals over their proposals to sub-divide the county in to two smaller unitary councils.

We had a very successful Parish Summit (3 March), where I look forward to an evening discussing key topics, including Councils' Charter, Child Friendly Herefordshire, Public Realm and Parish Grants. As ever we will be holding a marketplace with council teams on hand to discuss services or issues with parish councillors and clerks.

Under Transformation, we continue to modernise how the council operates, deliver value for money and strengthen the resilience of frontline services. We have extended our Dynamic Purchasing System for passenger transport, allowing us to deliver home-to-school, Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and commercial transport in a flexible, efficient and legally compliant way while we procure a replacement system under the new legislative framework. These changes reinforce our ambition to be an efficient, innovative and future-ready organisation.

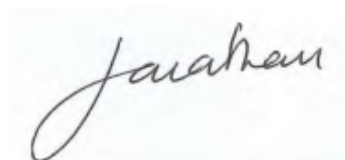
I was saddened to hear of the death of former Councillor Roland Summers of Leominster who passed away, aged 90, in January. Former councillor Summers was Cabinet Member for Economic Development and Chair of the (related) Economic Development Programme Panel, and a member of the Central Area Planning Sub-Committee. Whilst, I did not know him personally, it is clear from the positions he held at the council, he was a dedicated public servant to the people of Herefordshire, and I would like to pass on my condolences to his family on behalf of the administration.

I want to thank our officers, councillors, partners, volunteers and communities whose hard work and support continue to deliver real benefits for the people of Herefordshire. Together, we are building momentum, strengthening resilience and creating a future we can all feel proud of.

As always, you can contact me by emailing

Jonathan.Lester@herefordshire.gov.uk

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jonathan', is displayed on a light blue rectangular background.

Jonathan Lester
Leader of the Council

Hereford Western Bypass – Phase 1: Land Acquisition Compulsory Purchase Order



In December, Cabinet approved the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) and Side Roads Order (SRO) for the acquisition of land and rights required to construct, operate, facilitate and maintain the first phase of the Hereford Western Bypass.

The New Road Strategy for Hereford, approved by Cabinet in March 2024, includes the delivery of the Hereford Western Bypass, which is planned in two phases. Phase One will link the A49/B4399 junction with the A465 (formerly the Southern Link Road), with Phase Two extending the route north to rejoin the A49.

Phase One is intended to significantly improve access to the Hereford Enterprise Zone, particularly from south-west Herefordshire and South Wales. It will reduce traffic congestion at the A465/A49 junction near Greyfriars Bridge and remove traffic from unsuitable rural roads currently used as shortcuts. This phase also supports wider ambitions for housing and employment growth across the city, county and region.

Full planning permission for Phase One was granted in July 2019. Further construction is programmed for December 2026, but this is dependent on acquiring most of the land along the route. At present, only one parcel of the required land is in council ownership.

Children's Services: Ofsted Inspection outcome - we are a Good Council.

I want to provide a few more details about the Council's recent Ofsted inspection in November 2025 which has now officially moved Herefordshire from an inadequate rating to Good. The inspection overall effectiveness with Outstanding leadership impact, published in January 2026. Inspectors highlighted strong leadership, a child-centred culture, effective partnerships, a stabilised workforce, robust quality assurance, and high-quality social work practice. Services were praised for effective early help, strong safeguarding thresholds, skilled practitioners,



impactful multi-agency work on exploitation, improved foster and kinship care support, and a strong care leavers' service.

Two development areas were identified: management oversight of the Local Authority Designated Safeguarding Officer (LADO) function and identification/assessment of children in private fostering, both already being addressed. Following these improvements, the independently chaired Children's Improvement Board has agreed to stand down, with future oversight returning to normal council governance arrangements. The Secretary of State's next decision will be informed by the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) outcome and a further commissioner review due in March 2026.

Cabinet has authorised the Corporate Director for Children and Young People to lead the completion of the Phase 3 improvement plan and Ofsted outcome action plan. This work will be integrated within a Children Services business plan for 2026/27 with future governance and monitoring in line with other council directorates.

Re-procurement of Herefordshire Independent Adult Advocacy Services Alternative Provision Procurement Framework



In January, the Cabinet Member: Adults, health and wellbeing approved the re-procurement of Herefordshire Independent Adult Advocacy Services, by way of an open tender process.

Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide independent advocacy to help people particularly those who are vulnerable or lack mental capacity—take part in decisions about their care, treatment, and rights. Advocacy ensures that individuals' views are heard, their wishes are respected, and their rights are protected, especially where there is no appropriate family member or friend to support them. It plays an essential role in assessments, care planning, treatment decisions, safeguarding enquiries, and complaints processes.

The proposed contract will run for a minimum of five years, with options to extend for up to a further two years providing continuity and stability for both the council and service providers. The service delivers statutory advocacy in line with key legislation, including the Mental Capacity Act 2005, Mental Health Act 1983 (as amended), Care Act 2014, and Health and Social Care Act 2012. Alongside statutory duties, the service also provides community advocacy, reflecting the wider principles of the Care Act.

The advocacy service offer includes:

- Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy (IMCA) for people aged 16 and over who lack capacity to make serious decisions and have no one appropriate to support them.
- Relevant Person's Representative (RPR) support for individuals subject to Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards who lack capacity and have no suitable representative.
- Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHA) for people detained under the Mental Health Act, including those on Community Treatment Orders, provided on an opt-out basis.
- Care Act Advocacy to support people who would otherwise struggle to engage in social care assessments, planning, reviews, and safeguarding.
- NHS Complaints Advocacy to help individuals raise concerns about NHS-funded care.
- Community Advocacy, offering non-statutory support, information, and signposting to adults who have difficulty expressing their views.

In a related decision - in February, the Cabinet Member: adults, health and wellbeing took the decision to extend Council's care Home Contract. The Council has a statutory duty under the Care Act 2014 to ensure there is sufficient, suitable care provision for residents. To support this, a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) for adult care home provision (with or without nursing) was established in 2016. The DPS was originally set up for five years and has since been extended several times.

The DPS is currently due to expire on 5 September 2026. The Council proposes to extend it until 23 February 2029, which is the maximum extension permitted under the regulations, representing a final extension of 2 years and 5.5 months. There is no financial limit associated with extending the DPS, as it does not have a fixed contract value. The DPS provides access to pre-qualified suppliers through a competitive, fair and transparent process. New providers can join at any time during its lifetime.

Extending the DPS will ensure continuity of care arrangements, enable wider transformation and savings work and allow flexibility to shape and procure future services. Care placements will continue to be made on an "as-and-when" call-off basis until the service is re-procured.

Retaining of the swimming pool at Peterchurch Primary School

In December, the Cabinet Member: Community services and assets, approved the decision to retain the swimming pool at Peterchurch Primary School in principle as part of the new



correct, in principle, as part of the new school site.



There is very limited alternative swimming provision locally, and travelling elsewhere would increase costs, reduce curriculum time and create barriers for pupils. Retaining the pool supports statutory Key Stage 2 swimming requirements and provides clear educational, health and wellbeing benefits for both pupils and the wider community. The pool has been used for decades and is valued locally, with consultation confirming strong community support for its retention.

The council would not be responsible for funding the renovation. Delivery would depend on Section 106 contributions from a nearby housing development, any available budget within the school rebuild project, and decisions made by the school's governors. The recommendation is to retain the pool as part of the site, allowing future planning without committing the council to carrying out or funding the works.

Children's Emergency Out of Hours Duty Team (EDT) Service



In January, the Cabinet Member: Children and Young People approved the direct award of the Children's out of hours Emergency Duty Team (EDT) social care service contract to the incumbent service provider for a further 3 years with the option to extend for up to an additional 48 months.

The Council has a legal duty under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need, including outside normal working hours. To meet this responsibility, the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) provides an out-of-hours service for children and young people at risk of significant harm where waiting until the next working day would be unsafe.

The EDT responds to urgent statutory matters such as child protection assessments, emergency child-in-need assessments, decisions about accommodating children, applications for emergency protection orders, joint visits with the police, and coordination following sudden unexpected child deaths. The service ensures immediate safeguarding actions are taken when required.

Since 1998, the EDT service for Herefordshire has been delivered by Worcestershire County Council and is staffed by a service lead, nine part-time social workers and an administrative assistant. Inspections by Ofsted over several years have consistently recognised the effectiveness of the out-of-hours service, noting timely, proportionate decision making and appropriate responses

service, noting timely, proportionate decision-making and appropriate responses to urgent need, even where wider children's services were judged to require improvement.

Herefordshire Council is satisfied with the quality of the service, which operates under clear joint protocols and regular contract monitoring. Although the current contract cannot be extended, legal advice confirms that a new contract can be directly awarded without a full procurement exercise because it qualifies as an exempt "horizontal" contract under the Procurement Act 2023. F

Work continues with partners to provide high quality and affordable housing to meet all needs

On Tuesday, 24 February, we held a housing summit with registered providers where we explored how we can use of our assets to facilitate delivery by making housing sites available through sale, long term leases and Joint Ventures. We discussed pre let mandate agreements to help underwrite funding bids and revenue as we work with together with partners to support funding bids to Homes England.



We explored how the planning system and our own planning policies can be enabled to prioritise the delivery of more affordable housing in rural areas. There is a clear role to play here for S106 to assist in delivering more units and we are determined to ensure the flow of this vital source of finance can be unlocked.

We focussed on how we can help in supporting community groups, seeking to deliver rural affordable housing, to create diversity and quality in the affordable housing being provided. We ended the meeting with agreement that we would have some working groups to try and identify additional ways to address the immediate need of households in temporary accommodation.

Herefordshire has delivered more than 1,400 affordable homes since 2020, including social rent, affordable rent and shared ownership properties. Over 120 of these homes were designed specifically for people with additional needs, such as young people at risk of homelessness, families escaping domestic abuse, refugees and residents requiring accessible accommodation.

This progress has been achieved despite significant challenges, including rising construction costs and reduced development capacity. Alongside new homes, the council has invested in better temporary accommodation and support programmes for vulnerable groups.

Looking ahead, the council plans to increase the amount of social housing, speed up development on key sites, bring empty homes back into use, and

speed up development on key sites, bring empty homes back into use, and improve existing properties. A £10m capital programme for 2026/27 will help deliver more homes for large families, accessible housing, accommodation for young people, and additional temporary accommodation to meet growing demand and reduce long-term costs.

The total number of affordable homes delivered by the Council (collectively with the Registered Providers) in the County are as follows:

- Yr – 2023 to 2024 = 268 dwellings
- Yr – 2024 to 2025 = 276 dwellings
- Yr – 2025 to 2026 (to date) = 234 dwellings

Incidentally, £1,436,251 in phosphate income has been received (up by £137,956.48 since my last newsletter in December). To date these actions have released planning permissions for 886 dwellings (an increase of 135 dwellings since December).

The New Public Realm Services



In December, Cabinet approved the award of a contract for the provision of the new Public Realm Services contact for Public Realm Services for an initial period of 6 years and 10 months (so as to align with Council financial years) and with the option for the Council to extend for a further 3-year period subject to, and in accordance with, the performance review mechanism set out in the contract.

Public Realm Services are a statutory responsibility of Herefordshire Council and are essential to the county's infrastructure and quality of life. These services include maintaining highways, green spaces and street cleanliness, managing drainage and lighting, providing bereavement services, and ensuring safe and reliable travel for residents, businesses and visitors.

The current Public Realm Services contract was awarded in 2013 and is largely outsourced, with the Council retaining a limited client and contract-management role. In April 2024, Cabinet agreed that this model no longer met the Council's requirements and approved termination of the contract with effect from 31 May 2026. Given the scale, visibility and financial significance of Public Realm Services, Cabinet approved a new delivery approach in November 2024. This includes bringing some services back in-house and adopting a new contract model based on a schedule of rates rather than a cost-reimbursable arrangement.

The new approach is designed to better support the Council's vision, ensure continuity of statutory services, and provide improved value and flexibility. The procurement process for the new contract has been specifically designed to

align with these objectives and to maintain uninterrupted service delivery from 1 June 2026. The new contract also promotes greater engagement with community groups and town and parish councils, enabling additional voluntary or paid services where appropriate.

Until the new arrangements begin, the Council and the existing provider will continue to work together to ensure a smooth and well-managed transition. Details of the procurement process are set out in the report, although the identity of the successful bidder cannot be confirmed until the contract award process is completed in line with public procurement regulations.

Herefordshire Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy (H-THAWS).



In January, the Cabinet Member: Environment approved the new countywide Herefordshire Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy. This strategy will support the council's Biodiversity Duty under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 and Environment Act 2021.

Tree and hedgerow management was later reviewed by the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee in November 2024. The committee made several recommendations, including setting a clear percentage target for increasing tree cover and providing practical advice and guidance on tree planting and good hedgerow management. These recommendations have directly informed the development of this strategy, and funding was identified to support its production.

The resulting Herefordshire Tree, Hedgerow and Woodlands Strategy encourages residents, and owners, organisations and partners to take their own actions in support of a shared vision for a more connected treescape across the county. It sets out an ambitious but realistic long-term vision for conserving, improving and expanding Herefordshire's trees, hedgerows and woodland network.

To support delivery, the strategy recommends establishing a Herefordshire Treescape Task Group. This group would help drive and promote the strategy as part of a wider review of environmental partnerships, working alongside key local stakeholders and external organisations such as National Landscape Partnerships, Natural England and the Forestry Commission.

[Forward Plan](#)

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