

As of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021

## **Leader's newsletter**

Welcome to the March newsletter which is an opportunity for me and Cabinet Members to let readers know what has been happening recently in the Council.

We are all I am sure pleased that the government has announced a road map for the gradual release of the COVID restrictions. We are hopeful that with the help of the role out of the vaccines, and continued caution with regards to social distancing, the milestones in that road map will be achieved.

## **Children and families – Cllr Felicity Norman**

**Marlbrook;** New state of the art facilities opened for pupils and staff at Marlbrook Primary School at Green Croft this week following a £6 million investment project by Herefordshire Council.

The council funded sustainable scheme has provided six new classrooms, a new hall and a special hygiene and physio room. The school has also benefited from new netball courts and improvements to the car parking area.

Local company, Morgan Sindall Construction, were contracted by the council to carry out the work which they completed in time ready for when pupils return to school after February half term.

The school – rated Outstanding by Ofsted, has experienced a significant rise in pupil numbers in recent years and the council's investment has enabled the size of the school to be significantly increased.



**Kickstart;** Herefordshire Council is set to support local young people and businesses through being a gateway organisation for the delivery of the government's Kickstart scheme in the county.

Across the UK younger people have been some of those worst affected economically by the pandemic. In Herefordshire there has been a 108% increase in people aged between 18 and 24 claiming out of work benefits since March 2020.

As part of the Covid-19 recovery programme, the Kickstart scheme will provide 6-month work experience placements to 16 to 24 year olds receiving Universal Credit and at risk of long term unemployment.

The Kickstart scheme fully meets the salary and costs for each placement, as well as providing the individual with skills and wrap around support during their placement - such as coaching, mentoring, work skills including supporting job applications, CV writing and interview skills.

Employers have a choice to either access Kickstart through a gateway employer or apply directly to DWP. [Further information about the Kickstart scheme.](#)

**Laptop scheme;** Colleagues in the Education, Skills & Development area of the Children & Families directorate have worked throughout the lockdown period to identify vulnerable children most in need of remote learning and laptop access. £650k funding was identified for the purchase of laptops, 4G routers and home internet access for children across the county. The purchase of this equipment will also increase the resilience of schools post-pandemic, to enable remote learning to continue during unplanned closures, for example closure due to extreme weather.

**Care leavers;** It was lovely to see a column in the Hereford Times recently, (Opinion, February 4th 2021) written by one of our care leavers, Mariam Njeri, (Maz), in which she celebrated the positive things that have come out of this past year, and recognised how uncertain times often bring out the best in people. What a great attitude to have, especially from someone who has not had an easy time herself. You may remember last year we circulated some wonderful poems that had been written by our young people, including one by Mariam. She will be writing a regular column for the paper, so look out for the next one. Thanks to Ellie Chowns for suggesting this and to the paper for seeking to encourage a wider range of voices, including that of our young people.

### **Adults and Communities – Cllr Pauline Crockett**

**Commissioning - Fee Increases;** The Council is recognising the fantastic efforts of care providers by increasing fees paid for care services again this year. During the previous 12 months the Council has allocated grants to the care sector of over £6 million and purchased £1.8million of PPE, 75% of which has been allocated free of charge to care providers. In 2020/21 the Council has made additional Covid 19 payments above usual fees of over £1.6million and will be increasing fees to all care providers and shared lives carers from April 21.

**Talk Community;** 12 Talk Community Hubs are now live with a further 16 in development and in the process of being mobilised:

Live Hubs

- Hope Centre
- Bromyard Food Bank
- Hinton Community Centre
- Wellington
- Yarpole
- Ross Good Neighbour Scheme / Ross CDT
- Putson Church

- St Peter's Hub
- Bishop's Frome
- Wigmore Huddle Hub
- CARE Herefordshire (GV Hub)

Covid-19 Response; The Talk Community covid-19 response continues to provide information, advice and support to those in the community and will continue throughout the lockdown with link workers across each of the Primary Care Networks (PCN). The numbers of requests remain low with the highest requests for suppliers and medication delivery. Last week the government announced that nationally a further 1.7million people will be added to the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable list following a new predictive risk model to help clinicians identify adults with multiple risk factors that make them more vulnerable to COVID-19. The research has been developed by subgroup of NERVTAG, led by the University of Oxford and funded by National Institute for Health Research and individuals identified through the COVID-19 population risk assessment, using the QCovid® model, will be added to the list.

In Herefordshire 4000 people have been identified as part of this model with plans are in place to directly contact these individuals through the customer services team.

**Talk Community Mental Health Offer;** Talk Community will be providing mental health awareness and first aid training for communities, community leaders and volunteers with the aim is to increase the awareness and basic knowledge of mental health. This will provide them with tools to help people to look after their mental health and maintain their well-being and provide them with confidence to support people in distress or who may be experiencing mental health issues or refer them onto the relevant services. Further information will be provided on when this will be launched.

Talk Community Debt and Money Management Support; Talk Community to fund voluntary and community organisations, to help Herefordshire residents in need of debt, money or budgetary advice which will be across each of the market towns and within the city.

The support is to respond to residents with existing debt problems as well as early intervention / prevention activities and to support future sustainability of the service

### **Finance and corporate services – Cllr Liz Harvey**

#### **Modern.gov – we would value your views and ideas on how we can improve your user experience**

The Civica Modern.Gov software offers many features that help Herefordshire Council to fulfil its legal and constitutional obligations in regard to holding and conducting public meetings and taking local decisions. As a unitary authority Herefordshire Council is responsible for a wide range of services including: economic development, education, environmental health and animal welfare, highways, housing, leisure and culture, local tax collection, passenger transport, planning, public health, social care (adults and children), strategic planning, trading standards, transport planning, waste collection and disposal. It also has an overarching 'local leadership' role being responsible for the economic, social and environmental wellbeing of the county. The council is also the 'corporate parent' to children and young people in its care.

Civica Modern.Gov supports the council in undertaking its democratic services functions. Additionally, Civica Modern.Gov provides an app that ensures members have the latest meeting papers (in electronic version) for committees which they can

annotate and refer to during meetings. This functionality remains relevant and utilised by officers and members of the council. However, the council has not undertaken a review of the current Civica Modern.Gov system configuration since 2017.

Significant changes have, and continue to, shape the way the council operates and conducts its business. For example the council:

- is undertaking a review of current constitutional arrangements. This is likely to bring forward new processes (such as new formats to publish the council constitution and consultation methods on key decisions) and structures (such as changes to scrutiny committees);
- is actively examining how it can extend its duty of care to officers and members who require reasonable adjustments or accessibility aids in accessing council reports and/or meetings;
- has recently introduced project management software seeks to build in key milestones/project phases that require governance and decision making to interplay with large scale project management activity;
- is currently considering and anticipating a more permanent legislative change that will enable the continuation of remote and/or hybrid meetings.

To this end, the council is aware of new innovations in product developments which we wish to explore in terms of future configuration options of the Civica Modern.Gov system software. In addition, over the course of the last four years, the council has noted some existing configuration issues that it would like to review and address. For example, use of the Civica Modern.Gov App has had limited uptake from members and some members have experienced difficulties in saving and archiving annotated PDFs.

Creating a more user friendly solution for officers and members will need to be a key focus of any reconfiguration options we take forward with Modern.gov. Democratic services is currently undertaking a review of the services that Modern.Gov provides and would welcome your feedback on your user experiences.

Please email [governanceupportteam@herefordshire.gov.uk](mailto:governanceupportteam@herefordshire.gov.uk) with any comments/feedback you wish to provide us with. We will use this feedback to set up a members seminar, with Modern.gov and Hoople representatives present to discuss what changes can be introduced to ensure members are being provided with the best possible committee support and services.

**The 2021 Census is here;** You probably already know that the national census takes place this month. Census day is Sunday 21 March, and you may have already received your purple household pack through the post. For local authorities, census population estimates underpin both planning and provision of public services – so it's really important that we support it as much as we can. Getting the best possible response rates for the census will make sure that decisions are based on accurate, high-quality data. It also provides vital evidence that voluntary and community groups need to win funding bids. The local Census Engagement Manager has already had an enormous amount of support from people and organisations across Herefordshire to help make sure that everyone gets their chance to be included. We will be sending you a Councillor Handbook in the next week, which will explain more about how you can get involved.

## **Housing, regulatory services and community safety – Cllr Ange Tyler**

**Test and Trace;** Herefordshire Council's local Test and Trace team have been working hard behind the scenes to support the national response to the coronavirus pandemic. To provide more insight into what they do, our officers were featured on BBC Morning Live. Those that missed the program (10/02/2021) can still watch it on iPlayer here:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000s5ml/morning-live-series-2-10022021> (the piece starts at 9 minutes and 48 seconds and concludes at 16 minutes).

**Empty Homes Week 15<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> February;** this was the National Empty Homes week, and to mark the occasion Strategic Housing worked with the Comms Team on a media drive to highlight how detrimental it is to have Empty Homes in the County.

The Empty Property webpage link was sent out on Facebook and twitter and a flier was sent to the Town Councils and all Parish Councils. 7 contacts were made due to the flier and 2 new empty properties were identified. 81 hits were recorded on the empty homes webpage and a further 25 searches for empty homes on the website, a total of 101 visits.

A number of individuals have also made contact asking for advice & assistance or VAT reduction letters.

There are currently 284 long term empty properties in the County, a number of empty properties are due to probate or elderly owners moved into some form of care facility.

**The community protection team** are seeing an increase in fly tipping across the county although we do not suffer large numbers of fly tipping but it's all relative to our population and county as a whole.

The animal health team are seeing a rise in animal welfare complaints regarding farmed animals both in numbers and severity. The covid enforcement patrols are continuing and tackling any issues that arise and keeping up the reassurance visits to support local business and the public. We are now preparing for the changes to the covid legislation as per the government road map and will adjust to tackle any up and coming issues.

## **Commissioning, procurement and assets – Cllr Gemma Davies**

I have commissioned a full review of council assets including those in our investment portfolio. Sara Jowett, head of PMO, will be leading the project alongside the property team. The review will take approximately 12 months whereby at the end we will have a full estate management strategy and be able to identify those assets we need to keep, which one of those we could transfer to suitable parties such as parishes or community groups and then finally those assets that we need to dispose of. With regards to the investment portfolio a strategy will be worked up to ensure that we are returning on our investments be that monetary, social value or a mixture of both. This information will be transparent for you and I will update you on its progress.

Many of you will have seen that the transfer of the Town Hall and No 10 St Owen's Street have appeared on the forward plan. Transfer of the Town Hall has been on the agenda since Herefordshire Council's formation. I am delighted to say that a viable option for transfer is currently being worked up on the basis of a freehold transfer to a third sector community organisation. As matters are not confirmed I won't say who the parties are but needless to say they are passionate about the building and making it into something really special. It's been a difficult time for many of the councillors and officers who have been talking about this for years and I am personally delighted that the Town Hall will stay for the benefit of the community, even if Herefordshire Council are not the ones to do it.

I promised to keep you updated on the Shire Hall and I'm afraid that it is not good news. We have an 800 page document from the structural engineers that the team are currently working their way through. Though the ceilings in the court rooms were the reason for the initial survey, the survey has further identified significant issues with the ceiling of the main assembly hall. This means that it is not able to be used until we have identified the works that need doing. I have commissioned a full review of the survey with specialists with a view to doing a full options appraisal for the building. I think it pertinent when we are scrambling around for savings of £200k in the budget meetings that when a council asset is likely to have substantial costs that we identify what our strategic position is. This will be a short review, I have asked that it takes a matter of months, and once I have more details I will update you again.

**Estates and Maintenance contract;** You may have seen the exciting decision to bring our estates and maintenance team back in-house (ish). An options appraisal was put to me in February that gave me four options: an extension for four months with BBLP as the contract is; for the estates and maintenance to go into the BBLP and Public Realm contract; for services to come back in-house; for services to transfer into Hoople. A value for money assessment was undertaken that identified the preferred method was for the services to go into Hoople. Hoople have been fantastic with this opportunity and are hastily preparing the services transfer to them at the end of the BBLP contract. It also allows us to use as much local tradespeople as possible through our social value procurement of which Hoople are a part. I hope that you will all be supportive of this change and in the extension of work undertaken by Hoople.

## **Environment, economy and skills – Cllr Ellie Chowns**

### **Environment**

On Monday 22 February we launched our new **City Trees campaign** which will help plant over 500 new trees in Hereford City. This campaign proved incredibly popular and was fully subscribed on the 3 March with all 500 trees allocated to residents and organisations across the City. This project will help to increase tree coverage, help to enhance and protect local diversity and will also help to improve air quality in the city. This project was done in partnership with the local tree specialists Frank P Matthews, was administered by Herefordshire Council and is fully funded by the government's Accelerated Towns Fund.

Another great project funded through the Towns Fund accelerated funding is the introduction of **electric Beryl Bikes** which are launching on the 11 March.

The **Marches Renewable Energy Project** has continued to be popular with local businesses and organisations as it offers capital grants towards the costs of renewable energy projects. Here the scheme has recently become oversubscribed in Herefordshire and will see significant local investment in renewables across the county.

As part of our **Carbon Management Plan** to reduce the council's carbon emissions, new energy efficiency LED lighting and a new solar PV system has recently been installed at the Widemarsh Childrens Centre.

A new '**Zero Carbon and Nature Rich Herefordshire**' website is currently being finalised and will be launching later this month. This website brings together a huge amount of work from a dedicated group of external partners and council officers and launches the first iteration of a new countywide carbon and nature action plan. More details will be available shortly.

As part of the **new capital budget** which was approved at Full Council on Friday 12 Feb, the council included funding for an innovative new project that will help to achieve biodiversity net gain and offset the carbon emissions from highway maintenance. This project which will be further developed over the coming months will work closely with all areas of the council, identifying locations to improve such as ponds, breeding sites, winter refuge sites and in addition to increased tree cover. The project will be a collaborative approach across property services, public realm and the conservation team drawing on specific expertise to improve the county's biodiversity and help mitigate the impact of maintaining the highway network.

## **Economy**

**Covid 19 Business Support Grants** – We are continuing to deliver grant support to businesses impacted by Covid 19 trading restrictions. The council's Finance Team continue to do a great job in making regular payments through the nationally defined Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRSB) as well as other schemes such as the Retail Leisure and Hospitality (RLH) 'top up' grant. Through the locally defined Discretionary Grant and Exceptional Circumstances Fund schemes the Economic Development team has now approved over £2.2m of support to those not eligible for the national schemes. Following the government announcement on the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021 regarding the lockdown roadmap, we are now preparing to make the next phase of monthly grant payments to eligible businesses covering the lockdown period up until the end of March.

**Hereford Town Investment Plan** – The Hereford Towns Fund Board submitted the Hereford Town Investment Plan on the 28<sup>th</sup> January. I was very pleased to be part of the Board working with a wide range of partners from across the city in developing what is a very exciting vision and selecting 15 projects seeking up to a £25m that could make a real difference to Hereford and the wider county. Through the development of the Town Investment Plan we received positive feedback from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) regarding the significant level of community engagement and interest. The Plan can be found at the following link: <https://strongerhereford.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/S20098D-Hereford-TIP-Document-NEW-FINAL-1.pdf>. We hope to hear back from government in circa April/ May.

**Market Town Investment Plans** – We also recognise the critical contribution the market towns make to the county's economy, and are committed to supporting the growth of the towns. As I have mentioned previously, to understand local needs and opportunities in each of the market towns the council has commissioned the development of Economic Development Investment Plans to support recovery from Covid 19 and enable their future growth. Over the last month I have held a number of meetings with Rose Regeneration (the consultants leading the development of the plans) who through local consultation and engagement are starting to identify a broad range of project opportunities in each town. In the next few weeks Rose Regeneration will be further engaging local businesses and partners on the emerging priorities prior to finalising the plans in May.

## **Fastershire**

ZOOMM working in Hereford will have some live properties in May (this is commercial delivery supported by Herefordshire Council but not funded by us)

70% of the properties we enabled through the BT contract have now taken a superfast broadband service

Gigaclear have started building in Staunton on Wye

Airband have started work on their rural clusters around Kington

Full Fibre build is starting in Ross on Wye next month, targeting live properties in May (This is funded through the Marches & Gloucestershire Business Broadband Grant)

Work has started on Shobdon Airfield to reach 20 Businesses with Full Fibre

A Community Project is launching in Castle Frome this week as part of the Fastershire Community Grant.

## **Skills**

A **Herefordshire Skills Board** has been established and first meeting held on 22 Feb. The purpose of the board is to bring together local employers and learning and skills providers, which includes the voluntary and community, private and public sectors, to share knowledge on skills and labour market needs and work together to understand and find solutions to key local skills challenges. This includes what is needed now and looking at what is required in the future. Having a joined up holistic view on skills issues and possible solutions will also enable us to maximise funding opportunities, for example the National Skills Fund.

**Marches LEP Skills Advisory Panel update** - The Marches LEP area draft local skills report will be sent to the Marches LEP Board on Tuesday 16 March ahead of the LEP Board meeting on Tuesday 23rd March for final sign off.

The **KickStart** gateway employer agreement between the council and DWP has been signed. HOOPLE is delivering the scheme of behalf of Herefordshire Council and will provide the wrap around support to individual young people. This scheme is planned to deliver over 100 work placements for young people as part of Covid recovery.

Herefordshire council's **adult and community learning service** will resume onsite delivery from 8 March 2020. Some courses will continue to be delivered remotely or be a mix of onsite and remote learning. Delivery partners have to have in place and follow the system of controls, to effectively reduce risks and create a safe environment. DFE advise that adult and community learning providers will have access to Lateral Flow home testing from the end of March. In the meantime DFE advise that we use community testing facilities for staff and students.