

## **Leader's newsletter**

Welcome to my newsletter.

Whilst County Councillors will be aware of changes made at the Council AGM and subsequently, Parish Councillors may not be so aware. I think it is worth me saying something about this.

The most significant area of change is in the Children's services area where I have split the portfolio held by Cllr Norman so that she continues with Education but the Childrens safeguarding area (which was so seriously criticised in the court judgements going back to 2018, and which showed failures since 2012) passes to Cllr Toynbee. This is probably the most challenging of portfolios. The change is no reflection on Cllr Norman. As Cllr Norman has acknowledged to me, we need a fresh pair of eyes. Council also voted for a change to Scrutiny Committee Chair with the appointment of Cllr Howells. This is no reflection on Cllr Gandy either. Carole has been very committed to improve this area, but again, while this is a Council choice and not mine alone, I think that a fresh pair of eyes is appropriate.

Cath Knowles, our Interim Director for Children's services, completes a new team, with the previous Director leaving us last month.

This is such an important area to get right. Not only for the sake of the children, whose lives are impacted, but financially too. If we can get this area right, we can look after our children better but also at lower cost. Had the right action been taken earlier (going back to 2012), the c£5.2million we have just allocated to improve this area, would have been available for other uses. Improvements to outcomes for your people will take time, and cost savings longer.

We are endeavouring to establish a more open and honest environment and if you have any concerns about Children's Services there is a help line available as follows [careconcerns@herefordshire.gov.uk](mailto:careconcerns@herefordshire.gov.uk).

Please encourage residents to use this. At the last count there have been about 50 concerns raised. I would also encourage people who have good experiences to mention these also. There is some very good practise and those who do good work should be encouraged.

Finally, in her section below Cllr Harvey mentions some information of local interest now available and I would also like to encourage you to access the [Talk Community website](#) . If you need an explanation about the problem with phosphates in our rivers, you might want to look at the section below from Cllr Harrington.

## **Children and families – Cllrs Diana Toynbee/Felicity Norman**

### **Staffing update**

As well as welcoming Cath Knowles into the role of Interim Director Children and Families, we have also over the past month welcomed Andrews Osei (Interim AD Corporate Parenting, Children in Care and Fostering & Adoption), Sharmain Lawrence (Interim AD MASH/CIN/CP/Assessment), and Risthardh Hare (Interim Service Lead Children in Care and 16+ Service).

### **Children in care**

We are currently prioritising meeting staff and working on critical areas of improvement across the service. More specifically Andrews is focussing on the corporate parenting

strategy and is keen to reach out through some planned workshops with councillors. In addition Andrews is working with the fostering service around the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

### **All Ages Commissioning**

To support the recovery work in Children's services, the commissioning functions of Adults and Children's have transferred to one leadership team under the direction of Paul Smith AD All Ages Commissioning. Closer relationships and shared learning between the 2 functions has already begun and mapping of all potential synergies is underway.

### **Herefordshire Council Improvement Board**

Herefordshire Council has received a non-statutory Improvement Notice from the Department for Education (DfE).

The notice follows significant concerns raised in a recent High Court judgement which led to an urgent and thorough external review of Herefordshire Children's Social Care Services.

The Improvement Notice includes the appointment of Gladys Rhodes White OBE as an Improvement Adviser for a minimum of 12 months, and until such time that the Secretary of State is satisfied that she is no longer required. Mrs Rhodes White will provide advice to Children's Social Care Services and Herefordshire Council, and she will chair the Improvement Board, the first meeting of which will take place on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> June.

### **Education, Development & Skills**

Our Early Help teams continue to work with families to support them through the pandemic. The number of referrals increases but to date the response times to provide support remain good.

There is much activity in the post 16 arena with national initiatives including Youth Hub (where 16-19 year olds can access careers advice), Kickstart to help budding apprentices and wider projects. The main aim is to support school leavers in taking their next steps beyond school whatever future they envisage. The plan is to be able to offer a wide range of advice and training opportunities alongside employment.

Schools and settings are all fully open but still subject to COVID safety rules so life remains far from 'normal' for them but attendance is very high above national).

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

#### **Advocacy**

The council has awarded a new contract for advocacy services for adults to Onside. Having provided a range of statutory and other advocacy services in Herefordshire for a number of years, Onside has won the award through a competitive procurement process. The provider will work with the council over the next five years to manage significant changes to advocacy services occasioned by new legislation, including the introduction of Liberty Protection Safeguards and amendments to the Mental Health Acts.

#### **Hillside**

Situated on the roof of Hillside Care Facility, Hereford, the panels will generate 44,124 kWh of electricity per year and deliver an annual carbon reduction of just over 10.2 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> / year (based on current emission factor). The installation cost was met from a corporate

budget held for solar PV panels. Increasing deployed renewable technologies on the corporate estate was outlined in the latest Carbon Management Plan for 2021-2025. With projected savings to the council of £5,868 every year, this means the installation will repay the council funding in just over nine years, while at the same time contributing to the Council's carbon reduction objectives. The Council has an ambitious target of becoming carbon neutral by 2030 and this project makes progress towards this.

The solar energy installation is the final phase of a wider project which sought opportunities to improve the environmental sustainability of Hillside Care Facility following the Council's decision to re-open it during 2020. Previous work as part of this included the upgrade of all internal lighting to high-efficiency LED with intelligent controls.

### **Community Wellbeing Survey**

Between January and March 2021, a community wellbeing survey was undertaken by DJS Research on behalf of the Talk Community division in Adults and Communities. The aim was to improve the understanding of the wellbeing and resilience of Herefordshire's communities and their residents, including the impact of flooding and covid-19 emergencies.

1,101 residents undertook a telephone survey of over 50 questions across a range of thematic areas including; physical and mental wellbeing, satisfaction levels, participation, economic wellbeing and digital inclusion.

There are some really interesting findings from those surveyed including;

- 92% of the participants report being satisfied or very satisfied with their local area
- 23% provide unpaid help to groups, clubs or organisations monthly
- 10% said they feel lonely always or often
- 82% feel that people have supported each other during the last year
- 32% have seen their household income reduce due to covid
- 22% are concerned about more services being moved online

The report publication is imminent and Members will be able to hear more about the results in the coming weeks and how the information will be used by the council. It will also be published on the Understanding Herefordshire website for any partners to use to support their work.

### **Talk Community Hubs**

Two further Talk Community hubs have launched, bringing a total of 20 hubs, please visit <https://www.talkcommunitydirectory.org/keeping-well-staying-healthy/keeping-yourself-well/talk-community-hubs/where-is-my-nearest-talk-community-hub> for all the hubs across the county.

### **Talk Community healthy population**

The Holiday Activity Fund application process is now live on the following link [www.herefordshire.gov.uk/hafgrant](http://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/hafgrant) for activity, cultural and food organisations to apply to provide an offer to children eligible for free school meals during the summer holidays.

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

#### **Enhanced maps on the website**

The Herefordshire Council website includes a feature called "my neighbourhood" (green button on the top right corner of the front page) which allow you to search for services based on address. This now has an enhanced functions listing your ward member, planning

applications, waste collection days and school catchment. You can also do a filter search to include community halls, GP surgeries, public rights of way, parish, council building, etc. – the feature also allow you to zoom in and out to widen to the whole of the county or narrow your search to your house.

Another feature is the live traffic flow (<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/roads-1/roadworks>). The webpage include a map of information including roadworks, live traffic flow and public transport details which includes live bus times. When visiting the site you can sign up for email updates select the 'Email alerts' tab (envelope icon), complete the form, select your area using the draw tool and select 'Set alert'. Though remember to check your inbox as your alert may be sent to your junk mail inbox!

Other feature that are often missed are the [grass cutting schedules](#), [gritting road maps](#), [administrative map](#) of parishes, wards, conservation areas and tree preservation orders. Also there is a whole host of [report it](#) functions that is incredibly useful to the council to know some of the problem including areas such as highways and waste.

### **Help Protect Against Cyber Attacks**

Whilst the council via Hoople ITC have a range of controls in place to protect against cyber attacks there are a number of things you can do, including....

- Don't share information between your work and home email – your home email is very likely to have a lot less protection and attackers will use it as a gateway to access your work contacts
- Use the log onto the council VPN - though not essential to manage your emails it is worth using to provide extra protection to council systems and access updates
- Though the council has a 15 digit password please use something that someone wouldn't guess
- Don't response to suspicious emails and don't open a web link from an email you are not expecting
- Never share password – Hoople ICT will never ask you for this
- Not to use your council email address unnecessarily to register with sites – certainly when not work related!

### **Infrastructure and transport – Cllr John Harrington**

#### **Transport**

Cabinet will consider options and confirm its priorities and allocate the money agreed for taking forward transport proposals it identified, from the Hereford Transport Strategy Review, in their meeting on 24 June 2021. This allows us to move forward at pace with our ambitions to develop the walking and cycling network, determine the best bus strategy and partnership model and begin work on the evidence base and plan for an eastern bridge from Rotherwas across the Hampton Park road to Ledbury Road. We are recruiting a dedicated project manager, employed directly by Herefordshire Council to drive this work forward as we do not have the resource and capacity to oversee these projects and deliver them within the desired timelines. This will add resource and support to the small in-house transport team and means we will not need to lean so heavily on partners like BBLP and WSP to control pace and scope of projects. We have the budget allocated then to allow our in-house team to directly commission external expertise when needed.

#### **Infrastructure**

The **Hereford City Centre Improvement (HCCI)** project continues after a long hiatus with the installation of the planters and benches in High Town and surrounding streets. Installation has been patchy due to supply chain issues but generally the planter benches look good and have been mostly well received (the usual comments about seagulls repainting them aside). We will be liaising with business owners, the City Council, BiD and other stakeholders to discuss further sites for planters and also, crucially, where we can get large semi-mature trees directly into the ground. The planters in High Town and other parts of the City can be moved (relatively easily) but we really need to think about the best places to put the bigger trees directly into the ground, we want to get this right so they will stay in place for decades. The HCCI encompasses quite a broad area and includes Broad Street, King Street, Bridge Street, Eign Gate, High Town, Widemarsh Street, Commercial Street and potentially St.Owen's Street. My big concern at the moment is how we make further improvements to the area, which will include resurfacing, without disrupting our retailers and hospitality outlets as they emerge from lockdown and try to recover from the effects the pandemic has had on high streets. We are also currently reviewing the Emergency Active Travel Measures on the basis that all restrictions may be removed by the end of June if the government road map remains on target (the impact of the Indian variant may alter this). As well as removing tubs (Bromyard first in any work queue Nigel) and other social distancing restrictions, we will be reviewing the closure of the Old Bridge.

Following an internal review of the project the **Hereford City Centre Transport Package (HCCTP)** will continue shortly. I hope to be able to make a decision shortly to commission work to progress initial design work sufficient to determine the estimated cost to deliver the remaining project elements of a Transport Hub in front of the station and the changes to public realm along Commercial Road to improve provision for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport. The budget is not as big as it should have been due to higher than projected costs on closing out outstanding elements of the City Link Road but I am certain we can still deliver an attractive and practical transport hub. One that is not over engineered with blockwork surfaces and gleaming steel but is efficient and in some way unique to Herefordshire (maybe with a bank of apple trees, which many of us, including Elissa, would welcome). We shall see what responses we get back from all stakeholders but I welcome all ideas from our members who have experience of using the station for business or pleasure. There will be a dedicated project managers shortly in place to manage and drive forward both these projects – applying the same logic outlined in engaging a dedicated manager for our transport projects.

## **Public Realm**

**Bins.** In response to many queries I have received I wanted to provide clarity around the situation regarding bins and the use of bins for dog waste. BBLP have confirmed dog waste can be put into normal refuse bins. As long as the volume of dog waste does not exceed 60% of the volume of the bin which is usually unlikely (no prizes or compensation for anyone who decides to measure this). Bins will normally have a sticker applied (but those without may also be used if in the public realm) which confirms they can accept dog waste and we keep an eye on bins to ensure these stickers remain in place. This is in line with policy not to supply dedicated dog poo bins, for all sorts of reasons and to actually phase them out. So tell you parish council standard public realm waste bins can receive dog waste.

## **Phosphates and the building moratorium**

Another Nutrient Management Board took place on 13<sup>th</sup> May, chaired ably by Cllr Swinglehurst, when the review of the Nutrient Management Plan was discussed. The attendees agreed that this plan was a significant improvement to the last one, although concerns were still raised around the degree of certainty of the likely result of the actions. The only action in our control as a council are our wetlands initiative (where we put aside money from the New Homes bonus to buy land to put wetlands between sewerage works

and the section of the river that treated sewerage water is discharged into – further stripping phosphates out by allowing the reed beds to absorb them rather than allowing the water to go directly into the river through a discharge pipe). With this in mind, our work is progressing well on the wetlands, with the officers working very closely with Wye and Usk Foundation and Welsh Water to undertake the necessary surveys, secure easements and progress preliminary designs in order to progress to planning with our first site and hopefully a second to shortly follow.

For a quick recap, the River Lugg has unacceptably high levels of phosphate in it from agricultural and sewerage discharge (generally agreed to be approx. 2/3 agriculture to 1/3 sewerage discharge at latest figures). The Environment Agency has responsibility for the health of the Lugg and Wye but has been poorly funded over the past decade and have not, in my opinion, been as robust as they should have been in monitoring and controlling this excess discharge. Around 2014 levels of nutrients were found to be too high and a Nutrient Management Plan was produced by several partners and stakeholders, including Herefordshire Council and national agencies. This plan really didn't have anything solid attached to it in terms of a practical, demonstrable plan but it satisfied statutory consultees like Natural England. Then as a result of precedent set in a case in The Netherlands involving and won by an environmental cooperative organisation, Coöperatie **Mobilisation** (The Dutch Case), Natural England withdrew any consent unless it was proven any proposed development could demonstrate neutrality or betterment in terms of phosphate discharge, which meant effectively a moratorium came into place by default anywhere within the catchment of the River Lugg in North Herefordshire. The plan then had to be redrawn and this is the frustrating process that has been dragging on as national agencies like the EA and Natural England fail to take a strong enough leadership role on this. We are close to achieving the plan's adoption but we are not there yet. Once one wetland goes through the planning process with a positive result we believe that will provide enough certainty for Natural England to allow 'phosphate trading' as an interim avenue to allow building developers/individuals to buy credits to offset any projected nitrate load into the river system via it's sewerage addition to the mains. We are receiving our stage 3 part of the Interim Delivery Plan report back from consultants Rlcardos this week, which will help us in our understanding of how the Section 106 process can be used with the trading platform that we are likely to require for phosphate credits arising from our wetlands. I stress, this is an interim solution and one that will be beneficial in taking forward but the broader issue of certainty of how the river's health can be restored is a matter for the EA and other national bodies to really own. We continue to push on this and Elissa has been lobbying our MPs and border MPs hard on this to increase government funding.

As an aside, according to a recent study, we have more chicken sheds in Herefordshire than any other county in the United Kingdom. We need to address the issues around excess manure dispersal as well finding more ways to strip phosphates out of our sewerage systems.

The Wye and Usk Foundation Rivers Trust are also preparing a report for us on the likely diffuse agricultural pollution within the Lugg catchment to assist us in our identification of 'hot spots' to aid our wider aspiration to purchase and re-wild key land in the Lugg catchment to remove high risk fields from damaging and intensive agricultural use as and when they may become available on the market.

## **Planning**

Robert Jenrick MP has released just last Friday confirmation of our planning officers' success in their bid to be a pilot authority for the new design guide shortly to be required by the Planning White Paper. This will provide us with a £50k boost and position us as a national leader in this design guide work, which will be required of all councils in time anyway.

## **Walking and PROW**

Cllr Symonds and I are determined that Public Rights of Way should come back in house in order to get better value out of a sparsely funded but statutorily required service. Bringing it in-house will allow greater use of the hugely valuable asset of enthusiastic and knowledgeable volunteers, more to follow on that when we discuss the detail. One final note, as lock down restrictions continue to ease we have been able to restart our popular Nordic Walking programme (currently fully booked but keep checking!). For more information on our walking and cycling activities please visit. <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/walking-1/walks-trails> and <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/cycling-1>

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

### **Veterans Accommodation**

The Buchanan Trust celebrated the opening of an additional 4 houses of accommodation for military veterans on Friday 21<sup>st</sup> May. Ross Kemp officially opened the scheme with the High Sheriff also in attendance. The new Alms-house cottages have been built specifically to help ex-service personnel make a successful return to civilian life. The Buchanan Trust is a not-for-profit charity, set up in 1918 to support ex-military personnel and in memory of Alan Buchanan who fell in the First World War. Run by a board of voluntary trustees, the Trust still continues to this day with its vital work in supporting veterans with their transition from military to civilian life.

The Trust provides transitional residential accommodation for up to 40 former service men and women and their families, to help them readjust after their time in the forces has come to an end. In addition to housing, the veterans are also provided with access to work experience, accredited training skills and employment opportunities in the rural and construction sectors.

Funding from both Strategic Housing and Homes England through the Alms-house Consortium has enabled The Buchanan Trust housing scheme to go ahead adding to the existing accommodation on the rural 700 acre Bosbury Estate in Herefordshire.



## **Housing Strategy**

The draft local housing strategy for Herefordshire was issued for consultation on Monday 10<sup>th</sup> May for 4 weeks. It has been promoted via a press release and sent to a wide range of people and groups with a specialist interest in housing including registered providers of social housing, specialist housing providers, community groups and parish councillors. The aim of the strategy is to provide an overview of the housing related work delivered by Herefordshire Council. It outlines what is being currently delivered and why, as well as detailing the improvements that the council intends to make over the next five years. Feedback will be used to inform any changes needed to the strategy and append the feedback to the strategy itself. Once the consultation process is complete the strategy will be taken to cabinet for final approval via the governance process.

## **Regulatory Services**

EHTS continues to work alongside Hereford Police and Public Health to help with the easing of Covid restrictions. Since the opening of the hospitality trade, retail and other services, the team has ensured that businesses have opened up safely as we see the public come back in to the City. As we move through lifting Covid restrictions the EHTS will be actively involved during this process.

I would also like to thank Fred Spriggs, Licensing Officer for securing 2000 face masks from DfT for our taxis. We will be issuing one box per vehicle very shortly.

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

### **Economy**

**Discretionary Restart Grant** – The Covid 19 Discretionary Restart grant launched on the 18<sup>th</sup> May. The grant scheme provides restart support to businesses that were not eligible for the nationally defined grant, such as smaller businesses who were instructed to close without a rateable value or business not instructed to close but have lost a significant amount of trade. Business that have previously applied for the discretionary schemes do not

need to reapply, we have e-mailed over 900 businesses across the county that have previously received a grant to quickly confirm details and process grant payments. Further details of the scheme can be found here: [Business advice and support – Herefordshire Council](#). The grant is funded through the Additional Restrictions Grant allocation to the council received from government, should the council commit the remaining £1.7m of available funds by the end of June 2021 we will receive a further allocation of £1.7m. This funding will be used to provide access to a wide range of business support to assist businesses recover and grow.

**Community Renewal Fund** – I mentioned last month that Herefordshire has been selected by government as a priority area for the UK Community Renewal Fund (CRF). Launched as a pilot for the longer term UK Shared Prosperity Fund due to be established in 2022, the CRF provides an opportunity for organisations to apply for revenue funding to deliver business support, skills development and employment support projects to be delivered between August 2021 and March 2022. The deadline for applications was the 23<sup>rd</sup> May, and the council received 18 proposals. We have procured an independent evaluator to assess the bids, with the council required to identify a short list (to a total value of £3m) to submit to government on the 18<sup>th</sup> June for their own assessment.

**Market Town Economic Development Investment Plans** – If you represent a market town ward you have hopefully had an opportunity over the last couple of weeks to feed into the final round of consultation (led by Rose Regeneration) of the Market Town Economic Development Investment Plans, including the prioritisation of potential projects identified by local stakeholders. We are aiming to finalise the plans over the next few weeks, due to review in the cabinet meeting in July.

**Visitor Economy project** – the Marches LEP funded Visitor Economy Marketing and PR campaign is now in full swing, promoting staycation opportunities in the county. The new visitor website continues to develop new content, and attract new visits [Visit Herefordshire | Feel a World Away](#). An advert featuring canoeing on the River Wye was placed in the Midlands Metro newspaper, and they liked it so much they gave us a free full page advert in all Metro newspapers across the country on Friday 21 May (1 million newspapers) worth £48K! The LEP funded project is due to come to an end in July, and we are reviewing how we can continue to keep this critical work going until such time as a ballot can be held on the proposed development of a Destination Business Improvement District ([Herefordshire County BID – The digital home of Herefordshire County BID](#)).

**Economic Recovery** – we are developing a Covid 19 recovery plan, including a specific focus on economic recovery. In the short term we are identifying the immediate and impactful activity we need to bring forward in order to support the soonest possible recovery. Thereafter, we intend to develop a longer term economic strategy, building on the Hereford and market town investment plans, to support the long term recovery as we look to build back better, creating higher value job opportunities for local people in establishing a greener, fairer, more resilient economy for all.

## Environment

Key issues I am currently working on are: setting up the new climate and nature partnership, including trying to arrange funding for it; getting the funding and staff in place to develop a nature strategy for the council; and getting a business case developed for a major retrofit project.

A couple of recent developments:

The Pavilion on Castle Green, which is run by Friends of Castle Green CIC for use by the local community, has started its journey into carbon saving with the installation of a renewable energy heating system which uses the River Wye as its source. The heating installation has replaced the previous gas boiler system, saving over 15 tonnes of carbon per year. Funding for the installation has been received from the government's Accelerated Towns Fund programme and Marches Renewable Energy (supported by ERDF funds) as well as Hereford City Council. Paddy Nugent, Friends of Castle Green Director, said "It is hoped that this technology will act as a beacon of innovation and encourage other local facilities to harness the natural resource of the river for renewable energy"

The council has recently purchased a licence to acquire national tree mapping data for the county which will enable us to understand tree canopy coverage across open countryside and urban areas. We anticipate that this will make it possible to interrogate data in order to understand percentage of canopy coverage within the city centre and market towns, enabling the team to set targets, identify gaps and future funding opportunities.

Our Business Energy Efficiency Project continues to support local businesses with free energy audits and capital grants for carbon, cost and waste savings projects. Please encourage your local businesses to apply! For more information please see our business energy and grants website: <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/business-1/business-advice-support/8>