

14 JANUARY 2021**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

1. My Annual Report is presented at a time when our country is seriously affected by an on-going global pandemic and new arrangements outside of the European Union commence. The wide ranging economic and societal impacts of these events are far from being over. COVID-19 has delivered an economic shock and accelerated some of the trends I mentioned last year, with a rapid move to the adoption of digital technologies and remote and flexible working. Our towns and City Centre are visibly changing with the move to online shopping and a digital offer, requiring unprecedented economic support to those individuals and businesses affected. In addition, Worcestershire has suffered from several significant flood events impacting many homes and businesses.

2. It has truly been an extraordinary year but working together as “One Worcestershire” we have collectively sought to respond with a bold and co-ordinated response with partners to these unprecedented challenges. The community response has been equally impressive; individuals and local groups offering support to others in need and the willingness of so many to help in whatever way they can. Alongside the Here2Help service, this community effort demonstrates what we can achieve when we come together.

3. The County Council will continue to play its part as the recovery from the pandemic begins in earnest once the vaccines have been deployed to a sufficient proportion of the population to safely allow restrictions to be released. Worcestershire’s Strategy for Restart and Recovery, agreed with district councils and Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership, sets out key actions and interventions that have already begun.

4. Despite the resources and focus these events have demanded, the Council has worked to progress many other projects and non COVID related matters during the year and I have used this report to try to highlight many of those achievements.

5. Locally, on 1 October we celebrated the first anniversary of our wholly owned Council company, Worcestershire Children First. Service improvement has continued, relationships with the Council and other partners remain strong and outcomes for all children and young people in Worcestershire has remained a key focus.

6. All top tier posts have been recruited to for the agreed organisational structure outlined as part of the Council redesign. Our systems and structures have proven highly resilient over the last year and the major investment in ICT systems and software has supported this resilience. This has enabled the continued delivery of services through mobile and flexible working. Our focus is now firmly fixed on how the Council will emerge from these challenges with a new way of working, tempered by that experience.

Open for Business

7. The local economy continues to be a key priority for the Council and with the impact of COVID-19 this has never been more the case. We have continued to invest in infrastructure and have committed more funding to support local businesses to adapt to the changing environment and to build future resilience. A successful local economy is essential for our business community and for the health and wellbeing of our residents.

8. Throughout the year we have worked with partners from district councils, business membership organisations and government departments to ensure a joined-up approach to our economic response across the county. We have allocated over £3.5m to support our local businesses through the provision of expert advice, support for businesses to employ new graduates and grants. This support has and will continue to provide businesses with the much-needed investment to make the changes that are required to ensure future resilience and to take advantage of current market opportunities.

9. We continue to work collaboratively with the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) on the revised Strategic Economic Plan; setting the future economic priorities for the county and our ambition for a connected, creative, dynamic economy for all. As part of our commitment to WLEP, members of our Economic Development Team work within the local growth hub, Worcestershire Business Central, whose role is to ensure local businesses access support that is available locally, regionally and nationally.

10. This collaboration continues to be successful with the county securing £12m from the Getting Building Fund for a wide-ranging package of projects that will deliver a much-needed boost to the local economy. The projects are expected to drive growth across the county through the development of innovation and business and include the expansion of the Malvern Technology Park and Vale Park, projects to reduce congestion and to enable the strategic development of our rail infrastructure in Redditch and Worcester.

11. Sites within our game changer programme; Worcester Six, Redditch Gateway, Kidderminster and Malvern Hills Science Park, continue to attract significant occupiers, generating new jobs and investment. Work has now commenced on the creation of the Malvern Hills Science and Technology Park, which will be the first larger scale science park in the county. We have also seen significant businesses invest in Worcester Six, with Kohler Mira expected to open in early 2021 and planning permission being granted to a new data centre on the site, which is expected to be complete later in 2021.

12. The award-winning Worcestershire Parkway, the first new station in Worcestershire for over 100 years, opened last February improving rail connectivity and the new station building and much-improved forecourt at Kidderminster Station opened in June.

13. Despite the impact of flooding and COVID-19, there has been significant progress on the Southern Link Road with recent major milestones including the installation of the new Carrington Bridge, Powick Viaduct, and Broomhall Way footbridge, alongside the full opening of Crookbarrow Way and Hams Way footbridges.

14. Work has progressed well on the A38 Bromsgrove capacity improvements at the A38 junction with the M5 at Lydiate Ash and the junction with the M42 at Lickey End. Work will begin on initial Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP) schemes this year and the next stage Business Case will be submitted to the Department for Transport to support the remainder of the programme next financial year.

15. The Superfast Broadband programme has continued to transform the availability of faster broadband in the county with 97% of premises now able to access 24Mbps+. Nationally and locally the focus has changed to increasing the percentage coverage of

Gigabit capable and fibre to the premise broadband. In December 2019 these were both reported at 3.8% and at December 2020 at 36.4% and 11.5% respectively.

16. Positively, in 2020, commercial operators began or announced their proposed fibre to the premises deployments in the county including around Bromsgrove, Worcester, Evesham and Malvern. In addition, supported by the Council team, businesses and communities have been very successful in securing £2.5m of Rural Gigabit Vouchers to bring Gigabit connectivity to their communities. This puts Worcestershire in the top ten of areas in terms of value secured.

17. The Worcestershire 5G consortium successfully concluded the Industry 4.0 and Security by Design focussed project in the summer. Post project, recognising the benefits 5G can offer industry, a 'Testbed as a Service' model is developing at Malvern Hills Science Park, allowing businesses to develop their products and services on a private 5G network. In addition, funding has been secured for West Mercia Rural 5G, a two-year project focussed on understanding the delivery of rural 5G solutions and opportunities it can offer around the areas of health and social care.

18. The current Local Transport Plan 4 was adopted in December 2017 and significant work has been underway since then to develop the proposed schemes. Progress so far has been excellent, with the 150 proposed schemes listed in the LTP4, 18 schemes are now fully completed, 24 are in the delivery phase and 44 are in the feasibility phase.

19. The Council has adopted a comprehensive rail investment strategy for the county. The Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy sets out an ambitious investment plan for Worcestershire's rail infrastructure and services, providing additional capacity to support change in travel demand essential to support Worcestershire's growth aspirations.

20. Worcestershire County Council continues to work closely with partners to deliver the aims and ambitions of this economically vital strategy. The Council is playing a leading role in the North Cotswold Line Taskforce, which aims to lobby Government, the rail industry and funding bodies to invest in this critical corridor to enable Worcestershire to achieve its aim of two trains per hour between Worcester and London Paddington.

21. The Major Road Network (MRN) includes sections of the key A-road network. The bidding process for funding is currently underway and is managed through our local sub-regional transport body, Midlands Connect. The A38 Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme (BREP) is a key component of the MRN scheme development programme.

22. Looking to the future, an important focus to aid regeneration and renewal will be working with district councils and the WLEP on successfully maximising the opportunities of funding being provided by the Government through Future High Street Fund and Towns Fund. Likewise, working with regional bodies like Midlands Engine and Midlands Connect to access the significant resources to be made available for improving major infrastructure, economic and environmental projects will be important to help unlock future growth and prosperity.

Environment

23. The quality of the County's natural environment is one of our key assets and is highly valued by us all. It helps attract visitors, market the County to prospective investors and skilled individuals that our economy needs to support sustainable growth.

24. The Environment Bill is scheduled to obtain Royal Assent in 2021. One of the Bill's aims is to change how we manage our resources and waste by introducing a consistent approach to recycling and introducing weekly food waste collections. The Council along with partners in the Borough, City and Districts have collaborated throughout to provide consultation responses and will continue to work together to plan the changes required.

25. Our Energy from Waste plant, EnviRecover, continues to perform well and now has the relevant permissions to enable it to process 230,000 tonnes per annum - an increase in potential capacity of 15%. The energy created provides electricity for 32,000 homes.

26. The county has suffered two major flood events in the autumn of 2019 and the winter of 2020. Record breaking rainfall combined with saturated ground conditions led to the River Severn and the River Teme reaching almost record high levels and remaining elevated for a long time. Nearly 700 residential properties, over 200 businesses and many pieces of critical infrastructure were severely impacted, a number of them twice or even three times during the extended flood period. The combined response and recovery efforts were significant, and some aspects of the recovery remain ongoing. We have continued to complete a range of drainage and flood mitigation schemes to improve our resilience and plan further investment this year.

27. The Council continues to invest in highways, with a further additional investment of £12m for improving roads in Worcestershire over 2020/21 and this coming year. Surfacing work on over 400 roads across the county has already been completed last year, with many more planned for 2021. Our additional investment of £8m for footways will see over 215 footway schemes completed by the end of this financial year, with a similar number to be completed next year. There are 10 footway teams working across the network, increasing to 12 in January, the most we have ever had in the county.

28. The progressive roll-out of LED lighting across our network continues, providing a further reduction in the energy consumption. The service also supports lighting schemes as part of the major infrastructure projects, e.g. Churchfields, Pinvin, Southern Link Road. Planned further investment will help accelerate the switch to LED street lighting.

29. A number of congestion, town centre improvement and highways schemes have been completed or are nearing completion. These include improvements at Sidbury and Pump Street in Worcester, Stourport High Street, Pinvin Crossroads near Pershore and Churchfields in Kidderminster. Further town centre schemes are due to start in Evesham and Redditch in the first half of this year, together with schemes to tackle congestion at Hoobrook Roundabout in Kidderminster, the A38 \ A4104 staggered junction, Pershore Link Road, Parkside Junction in Bromsgrove and junction improvements in Hagley.

30. Throughout the major flooding earlier this year and the COVID-19 pandemic, we have continued to deliver vital support to residents within Worcestershire. Transport Operations co-ordinated delivery of food parcels, medical supplies and PPE throughout.

31. The unprecedented challenges faced this year within the passenger transport market has meant our Worcestershire Passenger Transport Strategy has been delayed. Our main focus has been to ensure local transport operators have been supported during this difficult time and to ensure the future of the local transport networks moving forward.

32. The county has continued to invest in Active Travel, with many schemes progressed and delivered. A number of funding bids have been submitted, including to the DfT Local Pinch Point Fund. Worcestershire secured £800,000 from the DfT Emergency Active Travel Fund phases 1 and 2. Sabrina Bridge is also being completely refurbished.

33. Last year the County Council committed to reducing its own operational Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to net zero by 2050. The Sustainability Team are co-ordinating work aimed at achieving this goal, a Zero Carbon Board is in place and operating. The Council's GHG emissions have reduced by 40% between 2009/10 to 2019/20. In October 2020, Cabinet agreed the County Council Net Zero Carbon Plan, which sets out our ambition and an annual progress report will be returned to Cabinet in 2021.

34. The Council is a major contributor to the delivery of the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership's Energy Strategy, launched in 2019. The Council is working closely with the Worcestershire LEP to identify challenges and solutions for businesses and communities which struggle with power, heat and transport, including grid capacity.

35. In the last four years the Sustainability Team has secured over £15m of European, Central Government and private sector funding in order to support businesses and communities across the county to save energy, save money, cut carbon emissions, enhance the natural environment and grow our low carbon economy.

36. The Council's flagship commitment, Diamond Leaf, to plant 150,000 trees over the next five years in partnership with The Woodland Trust has been accepted as one of a series of countrywide projects to be publicised as part of the Queen's Platinum anniversary celebrations. The two initial sites, one at Norton near Evesham and the other at Bewdley, are intended to see planting commencing this coming winter.

37. Looking ahead, our work around environmental sustainability in all its forms will remain a central focus for the Council, to ensure we play our part in the significant changes that will take place in the coming years to further reduce environmental impact.

Children and Families

38. I am pleased to say 2020 was a positive year for Children's Services. The focus was to continue service improvement and to improve outcomes for children and families. Alongside this focus was embedding the company governance and monitoring arrangements required for both the Council and DfE to monitor performance of Worcestershire Children First.

39. Significant achievements have been made during the first year of operation, including the seamless transition of support for children and families with no disruption at go live. The experience of other Children's companies has been to see a drop in KPIs following transition to any company and this has not happened in WCF. WCF Quarter 3 and 4 data for 2019/20, alongside feedback from colleagues in DfE, Regional Schools Commissioner, Schools, partners and importantly our WCF staff has been positive.

40. There are strong working relationships between WCC and WCF which go far beyond the formal contractual monitoring arrangements. Our Strategic Director of People, who has the lead commissioning role of WCF within the Council, has further strengthened the strategic leadership required to improve outcomes. This has already led to a detailed commitment to the development of an all age disability programme of work. The Director

of Social Care and Safeguarding and Director of Education and Early Help fully contributed to our response in dealing with COVID-19. WCF's Director of Resources is a member of the Council's Finance Management Team and has a place on the Council's Chief Officer Group which helps financial planning.

41. The refreshed 2020/21 Business Plan was approved by Cabinet (and the DfE), in March 2020. It maintained the previously agreed aims for WCF, which are to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Worcestershire. This was refreshed in June to take account of the impact of COVID-19 and shared with all key stakeholders.

42. The SEND Improvement programme has continued to make positive progress and improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. Feedback from our DfE and NHSE Advisors has commended the progress being made, including the management of the transfer of the SEND Support Services from Babcock Prime to WCF.

43. Another area of significant progress is the rate of completion of Education, Health and Care plans. Since February 2020 the 20-week completion rate has maintained at 100% except for June 2020 (98%) where one EHCP was not completed on time. This improved timeliness includes improved holistic EHC needs assessment, improved timeliness of advice from health colleagues and most importantly better outcomes.

44. Children's social care services remained operational throughout the pandemic in order to protect and support vulnerable children. The model of operation changed as set out in the April 2020 emergency C-19 service delivery protocol for social care and safeguarding services focusing on a risk-based approach to face to face assessments and contacts. The protocol has been updated in four phases to initial emergency response through to current operation and this is reviewed regularly. The DfE have monitored our performance during the pandemic and Worcestershire has consistently performed very well comparatively both regionally and nationally.

45. On 1 October WCF held its first Annual General Meeting as well as submission of a joint report on the progress of the first year of operation as required by the statutory direction and civil servants updated the Secretary of State in December on progress.

46. This year has delivered considerable progress despite the unexpected challenges in dealing with the impact of COVID-19. The demand for advice, guidance and practical support has increased. The response from all teams has been excellent and this has been acknowledged and appreciated by a wide range of partners and stakeholders.

47. To build on our ability to effectively support children and young people to remain at home in the care of their parents, a new service was designed that went live in January 2020. The service works with families on the verge of breakdown, supporting them to find solutions to their issues and ultimately stay together, provided it is safe to do so.

48. The service in Worcestershire is known as Supporting Families First. The approach is strengths based, it identifies and manages risk, is family solution focused and sustainable. Outcome measures are recorded to demonstrate the positive impact for families, children and young people. We have already seen a reduction in the number of children aged 10 years plus coming into care.

49. WCF were successful in securing Worcestershire's Business Rate Pilot resources in January 2020 to implement a Family Safeguarding Model in Worcestershire to continue to transform our approach to working with children and families. It is based on a

successful, independently evaluated initiative developed by Hertfordshire County Council which radically improved services and reduced demand, whilst also significantly reducing the number of children who became looked after and subject to child protection plans.

50. The Worcestershire model will support the role of a social worker to provide rapid, proactive support to children and their parents and will be delivered by specialist workers trained in specialist areas of Substance Misuse, Domestic Violence and Mental Health.

51. The Family Safeguarding Model reflects our commitment to valuing family life through supporting and empowering parents to care for their own children who are 0-10 years old and have certain circumstances that pose a risk. The anticipated impact on children and family lives include; reduced time of children on Child Protection Plan, reduced number of children entering pre-proceedings, reduced numbers of Care Proceeding applications, reduction in accommodation needs for looked after children under 10 years old, as well as parents/children feeling listened to and being supported.

52. Significant progress has been made in Children's Services in the last few years and I would like to place on record my thanks to Catherine Driscoll as she moves on to new challenges and look forward to our improvement journey continuing under Tina Russell.

Health and Wellbeing

53. Health and Wellbeing is very much in everyone's thoughts at the moment due to the impact of the pandemic. It remains one of the four key themes in our Corporate Plan as it had for many years as it is so central to the work of this Council and our public health duties. Promoting independence remains the key aim to ensure people live independent and healthy lives, for as long as possible in their own homes.

54. To achieve this, Adult Social Care continues to build on their strengths-based approach with ambition and plans to enable a partnership approach to enabling our communities. This approach builds on the success of the Here2Help offer through the development of an Integrated Wellbeing Hub that will provide advice, information and access to support and services as a key part of the Council's customer offer.

55. In addition, the new Community Reablement Service is now live, ensuring people are supported and enabled to remain at home, for as long as possible. Further implementation of the national requirements of "Home First" and reablement offer is being provided to everyone at the point of hospital discharge.

56. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought opportunities to progress, at pace, our ambition to enable service provision digitally and through the last few months enhancements have been made to on-line offers for our libraries, heritage and adult learning services. All digital provision has seen unprecedented levels of access, which is both being sustained and receiving significant positive feedback from our residents who have been able to remain engaged in these services during periods of restriction.

57. Public health has been at the forefront of our efforts to protect the health of the Worcestershire population, and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and reduce health inequalities. A key focus has been working in partnership to achieve these aims and I would like to particularly acknowledge the joint work in outbreak response with Worcestershire Regulatory Services, our districts and with our NHS partners.

58. Building on existing relationships with Public Health England, district councils, health partners, police and others as well as the many communities in Worcestershire has been vital in our response to the pandemic. This will be more important than ever as we work closely with health partners to plan the delivery of the COVID-19 vaccination to the population of Worcestershire. This will be one of the biggest logistical programmes the NHS will have delivered and therefore the close working relationship will be essential.

59. The health and wellbeing strategy is in the process of review and we are working towards having a new strategy from July this year. This strategy will be really important in priority setting working with the NHS, community and voluntary sector and other system partners. Our main focus and priority in the pandemic has been to protect the population of Worcestershire whilst also maintaining other key public health work. Public health as a statutory function of the County Council has the dual aspect to improve and protect the Worcestershire population. It very much requires working with system partners, specifically Public Health England and the NHS.

60. As part of our response to COVID-19, we have also set up our Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT). This service was set up rapidly and with a huge amount of effort across Council teams and wider partners. The Local Outbreak Response Team have key roles in containing outbreaks and directing and promoting prevention measures that protect health. Within this team, we have dedicated Public Health staff alongside Environmental Health Officers who work closely with a wide range of partners to respond to outbreaks of COVID-19 in our settings and communities.

61. The Council spends some £30m on Public Health, funded through the Government ring fenced grant, and, alongside mandated services, we are continually looking for innovative ways to achieve the goals set. This includes investing in our Council services.

62. The key focus now is to support the continued testing regime, strong communications and to support the rapid and effective roll out of vaccinations. The effectiveness of our Public Health strategy remains vital for the wellbeing of all residents in Worcestershire and my thanks go to our Director of Public Health, Dr Kathryn Cobain, and her team for leading our Public Health response so effectively over this period.

The Financial Challenge

63. In my last two Annual Reports I outlined that Worcestershire County Council was facing in-year pressures to deliver balanced budgets. I am pleased to say that despite the extraordinary year we have faced we are projecting a small underspend of £13,000.

64. That is no small feat when we consider by the end of the financial year, we are likely to have received nearly £100 million of Government grants to respond and deal with the pandemic, incurring just over that in spend. Putting that in perspective, that is nearly the same amount we spend on Children's Services. Keeping track of that and completing Government returns has not been easy but thanks to strong financial controls and reporting we have been able to ensure we have a full audit trail. Back in March the Finance Team set up monitoring regimes that were shared with MHCLG as best practice, and this work was used in supporting our case for further COVID funding.

65. At the same time the Finance Team were able to close down the accounts and we were one of the first in the country (4th) to have their accounts signed off, well ahead of the deadline and unqualified, with a further unqualified opinion on our Value for Money

assessment from our external auditors, Grant Thornton. This achievement, when around 65% of councils failed to gain an opinion on time, is a credit to the team.

66. At the same time as responding to COVID-19 and all of its uncertainty and managing the position in 2020/21, we have been working to produce the draft 2021/22 revenue and capital budgets. Active financial management has enabled us to put forward proposals that see a Council Tax and Social Care Levy of just 2.5%, that will see us remain in the lowest quartile amongst county councils of what we charge our residents. Yet, at the same time, we have protected services and ensured investment in both our county's infrastructure and economy.

67. Looking forward, Government have announced that we will receive further funding for COVID-19 and social care and the additional monies are a welcome reflection of the lobbying we have undertaken alongside our CCN partners.

68. We look set to receive up to an additional £2.177m for Social Care and over £8m for High Needs and SEND. Alongside the other proposed measures around Council Tax and continuing reform, this means we have a balanced draft budget for 2021/22.

69. Going forward, we will continue to lobby for a new funding formula, now expected in 2022 following further deferment due to COVID-19, that reflects the key drivers of cost and adjusts the weighting for rurality and sparsity. This could further help to ensure the sustainability of the services we deliver today for future years.

Our Communities

70. A specific initiative as part of our response to the pandemic has been our Here2Help initiative, which has provided help to people within our communities in need of support. Here2Help was launched as One Worcestershire's community action response with the sole aim of supporting residents through the COVID-19 pandemic. Developed in-house at the beginning of the pandemic, Here2Help has assisted with more than 4300 requests for help and coordinated 2000 offers of help from those volunteering to assist in communities.

71. Understandably it has been more difficult for us to carry out some of our regular structured engagement with communities, such as our summer roadshows that were cancelled this year. We have, however, continued with our Residents' Viewpoint Survey and in September 2020 asked some 4538 panellists to complete a survey.

72. Overall the results of the survey have been positive, with significant increases in the overall satisfaction of residents with Worcestershire County Council, agreement that the County Council provides value for money, satisfaction with the local area as a place to live and in those who feel they belong to their local area.

Council of the future

73. Over the last twelve months we have completed the deployment of Windows 10 devices, rolled out Microsoft Teams as a new collaboration tool for the Council, migrated to Office 365 and new cloud-based services for greater access to data on the go. As part of the Council's mobilisation of the workforce to work remotely during the pandemic, staff have been provided with appropriate IT equipment and tools to work from home, as well as scaling up the Council's IT infrastructure and systems to support a remote workforce.

74. Major investment has been made in a new social work case management system, with migration from Frameworki to Liquidlogic now complete. This enables staff to better access and update files, enhances productivity and supports mobile and flexible working.

75. Digital is transforming everyday lives on a global scale and will continue to do so at an ever-increasing pace. Having access to the internet is now often described as the fourth utility and this drive to be better connected is also changing what people want and need from our Council. Our new Digital Strategy defines the Council's digital ambition, its approach to the use of technology, and the digital skills required.

76. We have completed senior officer recruitment for our redesigned organisation and commenced transformation programmes across a number of the critical support service areas. At the onset of the first lockdown, we implemented a pause to the organisation redesign programme, allowing the Council to focus its attentions on the COVID response. We will continue to deliver this programme in the coming months and review opportunities for further transformation in light of our experience through the pandemic.

77. Synergies and benefits from our new design for the top three tiers of the organisation are already being seen. Our Workforce Strategy and approach to Total Reward will complement this and the priority remains to ensure we have a performance and productivity culture optimised for the post pandemic environment. We have introduced our new Chief Officer Group, who are responsible for operationally delivering the priorities and projects. This group, made up of all our Assistant Directors, has already started to make a difference, setting specific service plans (2021-22) for every area, setting out success measures and objectives which can be used in our annual performance plans.

78. Our Workforce Strategy for 2021 – 2024 is being developed to ensure we have a workforce with the personal and collective resilience to drive us forward in these challenging times. We are focused on building a high performance and high productivity culture and the right working conditions, where employees are valued and supported to perform at their best. Our workforce strategy sets out clear pillars of success and an employee's promise focusing on wellbeing, leadership, recruitment, workforce transformation and culture ensuring we have the capacity and capability to meet needs.

79. Finally, I would like to thank Cabinet Members, our management team and the wider workforce, as well as all Members of the Council for the invaluable contribution they have made throughout the year to improving Worcestershire and the services of the Council. This has been a testing year and I am grateful to all for the concerted effort of the whole Council to support residents and businesses through this extraordinary year.

Simon Geraghty
Leader of the Council
January 2021