

## **COUNCIL**

### **10 NOVEMBER 2022**

## **REPORTS OF CABINET MEMBERS WITH RESPONSIBILITY – CABINET MEMBER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMMUNITIES**

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### **Introduction**

1. It is my pleasure to submit my report as Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities to full Council on the work that has taken place in my areas of responsibility. The role of Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities is a cross-cutting one covering a hugely diverse range of services that benefit all Worcestershire residents no matter what their age or needs. Libraries, Museums, and Archaeology services support cultural life within the county and help us understand our long and diverse history, whilst Registration and Coroners services support people at some of their most important life events. Trading Standards provides wide-ranging protections that support all residents, especially those most vulnerable and honest businesses, as they tackle the rogues and criminals who would undermine fair trade, whilst Countryside and Green Spaces services help support and promote the wonderful environment where our residents live, work and play.

2. I have been delighted to get out and about visiting Libraries, museums and our Gypsy and Traveller Sites. So far, I have visited, Redditch, Rubery, Bromsgrove, Catshill, Wythall, Stourport, Bewdley, Hagley, Pershore, Evesham, Broadway, St Johns and Warndon Libraries. I have been to both the Commandery and our County Museum at Hartlebury Castle. I have also visited our Gypsy and Traveller Sites in Offerton Lane in Worcester and Watery Lane in Stourport.

3. It has been over two years since the last Cabinet Member's report and throughout that time we have seen unprecedented change to services due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. For many residents, the Council's range of community services provided a lifeline throughout this time, whether it was access to high quality greenspace to enjoy the outdoors through to access to the internet in our Libraries to tackling the Covid scams and rip-offs via Trading Standards. This report focuses on recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and I am pleased to report that there continues to be significant progress in all areas of my portfolio as we continue to provide high quality services, that are valued by Worcestershire's residents.

### **Libraries, including The Hive**

4. A Library Strategy for Worcestershire was written in 2019/20 following formal public engagement, an LGA Library Peer Challenge and the creation of a Library Needs Assessment. The Strategy, which sets out a medium-term vision for the service and a context for future service transformation, received Cabinet approval in

December 2019 and a transformation programme was put in place to deliver both the ambitions of the strategy and outstanding MTFP efficiencies of £285k.

5. Libraries responded positively and flexibly to the Covid pandemic. A new Digital Library Hub was set up on library webpages within 3-4 weeks of the start of the first lockdown, providing new digital library services, accessible from home and aimed at addressing challenges posed by the pandemic. Many services, including weekly Bounce & Rhyme sessions for children, readers groups and coding clubs were moved online and new services were introduced including online Library Connect Bubbles, a Digital Champion call back service, business webinars and streamed cultural events. With restrictions on book borrowing in place, book funds were diverted to increase e book and e audiobook collections and subsequent increases in Worcestershire's digital library membership and e-issues outperformed national averages.

6. By engaging with staff and working closely with Health & Safety, libraries reopened after the first lockdown with minimum fuss and very little delay. Worcestershire's approach compared very favourably with the national picture where libraries in many authorities remained closed for computer access or fully closed for large parts of the pandemic. This recognised the significant role libraries' have in providing free access to computers and the internet for those without access at home.

7. During the pandemic take-up of digital library services increased substantially, with a 289% increase in digital membership, a 90% increase in issues of e books/magazines, a 91% increase in the use of online reference sources and over 16,000 attendances at online digital events and activities. E issues have remained at raised levels following the pandemic.

8. At the end of September 2022 library visits had recovered to 60% of pre-pandemic levels, with book issues at 84%, computer use at 46% and new library members at 131%. The number of library-based events and activities had recovered to 68% of pre-pandemic levels, with attendance at 72%. This compares favourably with national trends.

9. In October 2021 Worcestershire Libraries launched six new Business and IP centres at the county's six main district libraries (Bromsgrove, Malvern, Kidderminster, Redditch, Evesham and The Hive), increasing access to free or low-cost business resources and services at a local level with a focus on supporting business recovery and business start-up.

10. A successful Arts Council bid for Libraries Improvement Funding in February 2021 has provided £182,000 for investment in videoconferencing facilities in library meeting rooms to enhance the room hire offer and boost income generation; and in live streaming technology to support the development of libraries' digital service offer.

11. Following the lifting of stage 4 COVID restrictions in July 2021, plans were able to be progressed to implement 'Libraries Unlocked', a new open library service delivery model, at two early adopter libraries in Droitwich and Stourport. The new service went live on 6 June 22 and saw an 85% increase in opening hours at both libraries. Initial responses to the service have been positive with 600 customers signing up in the 1st week after go-live, rising to 1,733 on the 25 October 2022.

## Archives & Archaeology

12. During the period 2019-20 to 2021-22 Worcestershire Archaeology, the commercial field archaeology service, secured over 300 commercial projects, including major development projects which contribute to the economic prosperity and growth of the county (Worcester 6 Business Park, West Worcester Urban Extension and South Worcester Urban Extension). Discoveries on these schemes have ranged from a 50,000 year old mammoth tusk, through early prehistoric cemeteries and occupation sites, to later prehistoric, Roman and medieval settlement sites and WW2 defensive features, all of which have contributed to the understanding of the rich and diverse heritage of Worcestershire and the West Midlands region.

13. Worcestershire Archaeology has also provided WCC with archaeological services on projects for the Worcester Southern Link Road, the A38 Upton Roundabout, the Kepax footbridge and the QinetiQ development, and is currently supporting the development of Hampton Bridge, Shrub Hill Quarter, and land at Pinvin amongst others, meeting objectives to build stronger relationships with the council's Property, Commercial and Highways teams and supporting them in efficiently and cost effectively delivering their projects.

14. The commercial archaeology service has built a sustainable business model over the three-year period, generating external revenue in excess of £4.65 million and successfully moving from a small operating deficit in 2019-20 to an operating surplus of over £90k in 2020-21 and over £100k in 2021-22. This has been achieved despite the disruption of the pandemic - demonstrating the strength of the construction sector and the resilience and sustainability of the business model in place.

15. The Historic Environment Record (HER) team have supported sustainable development across Worcestershire through the provision of advice for strategic and policy planning and development management for large-scale urban extensions and new settlements, such as Parkway, Throckmorton and Kidderminster East. The work of the team ensures that the county's heritage is a key part of creating a sense of place and pride in new communities.

16. The HER service also successfully bid for Lottery funding to implement the 'The Roots in Time' project; an 18-month programme of community excavation and activities on WCC land designated for new public woodland at Norton near Evesham. The project will ensure the preservation of nationally significant archaeology that lies within the site while creating a diverse landscape of new woodland, wildflower meadow and wetland with multiple environmental and ecological benefits.

17. In line with national guidance, Worcestershire Archives remained closed following the first lockdown; re-opening in August 2020, earlier than much of the sector. While there was a substantial reduction in face-to-face service provision, there was a 40% increase in online enquiries and continued demand for advanced document ordering. Heritage community engagement projects were also disrupted by the pandemic but have since successfully completed. These include a £70,000 Heritage Lottery funded project to restore market gardening hovels in the Vale of Evesham.

18. Following the removal of Covid restrictions a successful bid for heritage Covid recovery funding was successful to deliver popular Archaeology Quests across Worcestershire Libraries and to support local heritage organisations in partnership with Museums Worcestershire. A number of funded projects include funding from The Wellcome Trust to conserve and catalogue sources available for the study of medicine, health and welfare in Worcestershire and from National Manuscripts Conservation Trust to conserve and catalogue the county's collection of wills.

19. The Archive Service supported the Worcester City Charter 400 celebrations in 2021, providing documents for an exhibition at the Guildhall including the original James I Charter of 1621, normally held in archive strongrooms in the Hive. The Record Office also celebrated its 75th anniversary at The Hive in May 2022.

20. Following successful negotiations with Ancestry, work has continued throughout the pandemic, with some disruption, to make Worcestershire's Parish records available on the popular family history research service. Funding from the Ancestry deal has also supported the creation of a Digital Archivist post and the procurement of a Digital Archive Management System. The first records from Worcestershire went live in July 2022.

### **Museums Worcestershire**

21. In 20-21, Covid lockdowns meant museums were only able to open for 125 days. Museums Worcestershire pivoted to new ways of working: digitally, commissioning and partnerships in communities, and through direct outreach - particularly working with those at risk of loneliness. Staff also supported other essential council services. Open whenever possible, the museums maximised opportunities to welcome visitors and participants using the valuable resource of museums' outdoor space. In 2021-22, volunteers contributed 1,958 hours to the museum service, service users showed a 14% improvement in wellbeing, and visitors to the museums brought £1,934,599 of secondary spend to Worcestershire businesses.

22. Museums Worcestershire continues to work with Hartlebury Castle Preservation Trust on the presentation and development of Hartlebury Castle as a significant family and friends visitor destination for Worcestershire. Visitor numbers are now returning to 2019 levels, outperforming both national museums and regional attractions. Worcestershire County Museum at Hartlebury Castle has a particular strength in reminiscence, and opened a new 1950s Gallery in 2021 and a new fashion gallery in 2022. Additional grant funding has started further research into the County's internationally significant Gypsy Vardo collection.

23. The third phase of *Suitcase Stories*, an intergenerational project using reminiscence to support those living with dementia and their careers, was completed in December 2021. The three phases have reached over 1,000 participants and worked with 36 artists, using £200,000 of external funding. Results have been shared with over 300,000 heritage and social care professionals online. In addition, 5,876 children and adults participated in informal learning activities at the three museums and 8,062 students enjoyed formal learning opportunities in 21-22.

24. The museum service maintains its statutory duty under planning legislation as the depository for Worcestershire's archaeological record with an additional seven sites across the county deposited as a research resource in 21-22. Lending objects and exhibitions to other museums locally and nationally continues to raise

Worcestershire's profile across the UK: 76,059 people engaged with Worcester's and Worcestershire's collections at other venues in 2021-22.

### **Countryside Greenspace Team**

25. Waseley Hills Country Park, Worcester Woods Country Park and St. Wulstan's Nature Reserve have once again retained the nationally recognised Green Flag Award; evidencing the high standard of management for visitors and the natural environment that is so highly value by our visitors, particularly during and following the Covid pandemic. A considerable amount of work across the service (22,800 hours per year) is delivered by over 430 volunteers such as Parish Tree Wardens, Countryside Sites Volunteers and Health Walks Leaders.

26. Visitor numbers to all of the County Council's country parks, nature reserves and picnic places increased dramatically during the Covid pandemic and the County Council took the decision to keep its countryside sites open during the first lockdown to allow people to access them for fresh air and physical and mental wellbeing.

27. Worcestershire Health Walks is delivered by the Countryside Greenspace Team and supported through funding from Public Health. Health Walks aim to improve the county's health and well-being by encouraging more people to become physically active through the simplest form of exercise, walking. There are over 1,100 registered walkers since the new Health Walks scheme launched in September 2021, with an average number of walkers per month at 2,300. Walks are led by trained volunteer Health Walks leaders, of which we have 185 across the County.

28. The Team continues to work, with Property Services, on the creation of several new woodland sites as part of the Queen's Green Canopy and the Council's target to plant 150,000 trees. The Netherton Lane site, alongside Blackstone Picnic Place at Bewdley, is complete, with 7,000 trees planted whilst planting will continue at New and Ashmore's Farms near Evesham, with a further 38,000 trees planted over the coming winter. Both sites are being developed as public greenspaces, to create a network of woodland, pollinator and wetland habitats, as well as interpretation about the landscape and historic environment.

### **Road Safety Education**

29. The Road Safety Team is an accredited training provider for the delivery of the Bikeability National Standard of cycle training to Worcestershire schools. Bikeability is a practical training programme, which provides school children with a life skill and enables them to cycle confidently and competently on today's roads. In 2022-23 the team have around £170K Department for Transport funding, administered via the Bikeability Trust in order to train just over 5000 pupils across 3 core levels and some Bikeability Plus modules. A pool of 20-30 qualified and accredited zero hours Instructors delivers Bikeability for the team.

30. The Team currently covers 70% of Worcestershire Primary schools with Bikeability training. They have also delivered some successful projects with partners over the past year such as training a number of Worcester City Council staff who are using E bikes, training several families in a cycling scheme with Wychavon District Council who had funding via the Community Network Rail partnership and being involved in Bewdley Bike Week. A small number of adults have also received cycle training in the Wyre Forest area via a joint project with Public Health.

31. The Road Safety Team also offers road safety education and training to all Worcestershire pupils. This provides pupils with lifelong behaviours and attitudes for safe road use anywhere, at any time, on any journey. The education and training offer is complemented by the School Crossing Patrol service, which covers 34 crossing locations in Worcestershire serving 33 first, middle and primary schools.

### **Malvern Hills AONB Partnership Team**

32. The County Council hosts the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Team which supports a multi-agency partnership overseeing the conservation and enhancement of this nationally designated landscape. The Partnership's work is wide-ranging, covering many issues of relevance to Worcestershire County Council as well as helping the Council to meet its statutory duties in relation to the AONB. Examples of work in the last 3 years include:

- Nature recovery – Key achievements include a citizen science project funded by the National Lottery (133 volunteers collecting almost 3,500 new wildlife records) and the development with all key partners of a Nature Recovery Plan for the AONB, gapping up over 20 traditional orchards, restoring hay meadows and bringing active management back to ancient woodlands.
- Supporting the community – the AONB Unit has provided financial support to approximately 45 community projects over the last 3 years, ranging from planting trees, conserving geology, promoting car sharing (and the use of electric cars and bicycles) to supporting a grassroots theatre company of able and less able actors to produce a film about the area.
- Planning and development – the team comments on approximately 70 planning applications per year with the aim of ensuring that new development does not damage the special qualities of the AONB.

### **Trading Standards & Animal Health services**

33. The Trading Standards service discharges the County Council's statutory law enforcement duties in the areas of weights and measures, food and animal feed, product safety, animal health and fair trading. Their role is key in protecting the most vulnerable, ensuring a fair and safe trading environment for all. In the last financial year the team prevented or addressed at least £2.6M of consumer detriment with a budget of just over £870,000, around £3 per £1 spent. Government's latest consumer detriment estimate in 2022 states that the overall value of detriment nationally is £54Bn per annum.

34. Demands on the team during 2021/22 remained high, with almost 7500 consumer complaints either notified or referred from the Citizens Advice Consumer Service (CACS,) which acts as a front-door for most local trading standards services in England and Wales and almost 1000 referrals from other sources including local partners. Work must be prioritised and only a small proportion of the most serious of these matters are addressed directly. The bulk are used to direct the service's proactive activities through its intelligence-led approach.

35. Tackling illegal tobacco sales was a significant part of last year's work for the team aimed at ensuring the safety of communities and improving health and well-

being. Over 200,000 illegal cigarettes and 54.7kg of illegal hand rolling tobacco with a street value of over £131,500 were removed from the marketplace in 2021/22.

36. The team also returned to using minors to test controls to prevent the sale of age restricted products. The Council's statutory duties cover sales of many products including alcohol, tobacco, and vaping products, with corrosives and some beauty treatments being the latest additions. 5 sales, 3 of alcohol and 2 of vapes resulted from 36 attempts last year.

37. The team also had over 11,000 unsafe products removed from the marketplace last year, following samples which failed relevant tests. LED lights featured, and more recently chargers for re-chargeable batteries. Officers report that many of these products are available over the internet and it is difficult for consumers to see who they are buying from. Many of the products tested were delivered directly from the Far East, so services rely on the hosts of these websites removing the traders concerned to prevent on-going supply.

38. Tackling doorstep crime and supporting scam victims is also a major part of the team's work in helping to keep our communities safe. Last year 118 scam victims were approached with the aim of stopping them responding to scam telephone calls and mailings. Based on national averages for scam interventions, the team estimates the value of this work in reducing and preventing detriment exceeds £200,000. People are persuaded to stop responding and call blockers can be installed to cut off access for the scammers. The team also works with Adult Social Care colleagues to provide additional support for victims, who are usually elderly and isolated, to help provide them with the kind of social interactions that make their lives better and reduce the risk of becoming reliant on social care later in life.

39. Although the service is mainly focused on tackling crime, it does commit some resource to supporting businesses. Currently 9 businesses have signed up to Primary Authority agreements, which is a legal mechanism for businesses to be provided with assured advice on legal compliance matters from a single local authority. Business do have to pay for this service, but it is very popular with importers and multi-site retailers. During some of the routine work that the service continues to deliver, officers provided general advice and support. Some 26 businesses had to be provided with advice to ensure their compliance with food controls including allergen controls last year and our officers continue to work closely with their Environmental Health colleagues in WRS, who deal with food hygiene and can also provide support in this area.

40. Nationally last year was the worst year on record for avian influenza, with outbreaks continuing in various parts of the country throughout summer 2022. The Trading Standards team's focus is on commercial poultry and related activities, although small flocks kept in gardens by the public are also controlled by the legislation. Worcestershire has been lucky so far in terms of the impact on commercial bird flocks with only one official outbreak last year at a swan sanctuary that also kept poultry. Flocks of fewer than 50 birds do not need to be registered with the Ministry. The threat from other animal diseases remains, and the county remains a high-risk area for bovine tuberculosis, with regular on-farm testing required.

### **Registration Service and Coroner Service**

41. The Registration service was significantly impacted throughout the COVID pandemic. For several months all birth registrations and marriage notices were

postponed so the service could deal with the 19% increase in the number of death registrations in the county. Specific COVID legislation introduced allowed for death registrations to be conducted via telephone. The legislation has now lapsed, and practice has returned to face-to-face registrations.

42. Since the relaxation of covid restrictions the service has focused effort on catching up with births and notices of marriage and civil partnerships. In June 2020, the service registered 1004 births, which is over double the average monthly birth registration figure. It has also been managing the pent-up demand for wedding and civil partnership ceremonies. From April to July 2022 the service performed 1029 ceremonies compared to 799 for same period in 2019 and 659 for same period last year.

43. During last year the service managed the change from marriage registers to an electronic register for all civil ceremonies as well as all church ceremonies. This involved closing down over 350 sets of registers and having them deposited in the County's vault. Guidance was provided to the clergy and work continues to support them in a very different way of working

44. The Coroner service, like many around the country, is dealing with a large backlog of inquest cases. During the pandemic facilities were made available to allow for hearings using Teams. This remains in place to allow those who may have difficulty travelling to continue using this facility, although face to face hearings have been reintroduced.

### **Resettlement Service including Homes for Ukraine**

45. This service grows from strength to strength following the introduction of the two Afghan Resettlement programmes, the introduction of a bridging hotel for Afghan refugees as well as continuing to support the UK Resettlement programme. From September 2021 to date we have resettled 97 people into Worcestershire under the schemes. A further 14 are scheduled to arrive before the end of December 2022.

46. The Homes for Ukraine Scheme was announced in March 2022. This scheme focuses on households 'hosting' Ukrainian guests. Over 150,000 households nationally expressed an interest. As of 17 October 2022, within Worcestershire there are over 520 households hosting over 1200 Ukrainian guests. Over 35% of these guests are children. Managing this scheme has required a 'One Worcestershire' approach working closely with our District Council colleagues and support has ranged from carrying out checks, to providing adult learning, access to education, support to access employment, bus passes and information, advice and guidance.

### **Here2Help**

47. Here2Help was initially developed as the council's response to the Covid pandemic. It provided signposting and support to those in need. From March 2020 to March 2022 there have been a total of 13,824 requests for help. The requests for support around food and supplies has remained consistently high throughout with the proportion of requests for Health & Medication was highest at the beginning of the pandemic, remaining the second highest category for most months in 2020/21, before reducing across 2021/22. The opposite was seen in the proportion of requests that included support around Business & Money Matters, which lowest



at the start of the pandemic, fluctuated month by month in 2020/21, and increased to become the one of the highest in most months during 2021/22.

48. Here2Help is now a well-established credible service with a good reputation in its response to Covid 19. Its primary focus is to enable people to live well in Worcestershire now and in the future; to help themselves through good quality information, advice and guidance and provide signposting to community support which focuses on prevention. Key areas of delivery are:-

- Developing the Community Service Directory to help enable residents to make their own choices and find their own solutions. The Directory aims to help people to connect with their communities and to provide information that is easily accessible. In March 2022, 334 organisations had registered to be publicly visible on the online Community Services Directory.
- Administering c.£12million of Winter Grant/Local Support Grant/Household Support Fund between December 2020 and October 2022. This funding has provided free meals to vulnerable families during holidays as well supporting people, including a focus on pensioners, with energy costs, food and water bills, as well as covering other essential household costs and housing costs in exceptional circumstances. In addition, funding was allocated to district councils to provide local support including council welfare assistance schemes and working with local voluntary sector partners. A further £3.95m will be administered by March 2023.
- Encouraging and enabling volunteering opportunities. Since the start of the Covid pandemic until the end of March 2022 just under 2500 offers of support from individuals came forward via Here2Help. The largest volume of offers of support came within the national lockdowns, but registrations continued outside of these periods. More than 16,000 hours of volunteer support have been provided across a variety of services including; 20 covid and flu vaccination clinics, support to individuals and group one off tasks. Safeguarding volunteers and those they are supporting is a priority and the service undertakes risk assessments for activities and DBS checks where certain activities are required i.e. handling money. The volunteering offer will continue to be strengthened through ongoing co-ordination and management, a joint council approach with other teams within the council and further developing strong relationships with the key volunteering leads across health and the voluntary and community sector.
- Crowdfunding. The council has directed just under £100k of support for community projects through a crowdfunding platform operated by Spacehive over the last two years. The funding has been pledged to 24 community projects across the county which has raised an additional £258k in match funding to enable the successful delivery of the local initiatives. Projects supported to date includes; vehicles for community transport schemes, community building improvements, local environmental improvement projects, skills projects and sports projects. The scheme will be continuing in the current financial year with one funding round to pledge to projects in the autumn.

49. Finally, I would like to place on record my thanks to all those involved in delivering the wider range of community services, including all the volunteers that have offered up their valuable time to help deliver services.

**Marcus Hart**

**Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Communities**