

COUNCIL
18 MAY 2023

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Introduction

1. My annual report is presented at a time when the country faces a different but no less serious set of challenges than those faced throughout the pandemic. High levels of inflation have been a constant backdrop to the last 12 months or so. The tight labour market is impacting recruitment/retention and staffing costs. We have seen the effects in both our services and capital projects. However, despite the challenges caused by the pandemic and war in Ukraine, this Council has continued to perform well, serving and supporting the residents and businesses of Worcestershire.

2. The Council launched a new Corporate Plan in May 2022 - [Our Plan For Worcestershire | Worcestershire County Council](#). The refreshed Corporate Plan sets out the blueprint for the organisation, setting out the Council's key priorities and guiding how the organisation will operate, both internally and with partners across Worcestershire and beyond. The Corporate Plan 2022–2027 retains the four pillars by which the Council does business: Open for Business, Children and Families, The Environment and Health and Wellbeing.

3. I have set out our many achievements in this past year based around these themes, with the report of the Chief Executive covering organisational and operational matters.

Open for Business

4. The development of the local economy remains a key priority for the Council within the Council's refreshed Corporate Plan. We have continued to invest in both physical and digital infrastructure and have committed more funding to support local companies to build resilience, invest in new technology and continue to support growth.

5. We continue to work collaboratively with all partners through the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) to deliver the Worcestershire Plan for Growth 2020 - 2040, delivering our joint ambition for 'a connected, creative, dynamic economy for all'. As part of our commitment to WLEP, members of our staff work within the Worcestershire Growth Hub, whose role is to ensure local businesses access support.

6. Our game changer programme: Worcester Six, Redditch Gateway, and Malvern Hills Science Park, continue to attract significant occupiers, creating jobs and investment.

7. Worcester Six provides new floor space for manufacturing, offices, research and development. On site 840,500 sq. ft is now let or under construction, creating circa 500 jobs. Redditch Gateway aims to promote and enhance supply chain links. The main occupier, Amazon, is now on site with the developer seeking occupiers for the remaining plots. Malvern Hills Science Park has to-date been developed over five phases and is currently accommodating over 35 technology-rich companies employing more than 350

people. Work has commenced on the creation of the Malvern Hills Science and Technology Park, following the completion of Phase 5 of Malvern Hills Science Park.

8. We have developed a vision for the Shrub Hill Quarter in Worcester as a vibrant new neighbourhood for Worcester. The strategic location of Shrub Hill Station, connecting the city to the wider county and across Great Britain, alongside our acquisition of Shrub Hill Industrial Estate, places us in the ideal position to lead on the regeneration of the Quarter and its wider role in the city. Supporting the City Council's Town Investment Plan, we will work with the city to bring forward public realm works and an Enterprise Centre within the Quarter alongside residential development, as the first phase.

9. We continue to invest in railway stations, with Cabinet approval for a new station at Redditch. This reflects the commitments made in the Corporate Plan to invest in the Redditch Railway Quarter to unlock growth and support our Open for Business ambitions. The new station will create a modern, attractive gateway to Redditch, with enhanced station amenities and improved integration and accessibility.

10. Throughout the year we have worked with partners from district councils, business membership organisations and government departments to ensure a joined-up approach to supporting our local economy. This will continue with the introduction of a new government funding regime, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will replace previous EU funding streams and be directed through District Councils.

11. We have continued to operate a programme of support for local businesses from start-up, to accelerating those that are growing and expanding being able to access professional advice and grant funding. Since 2019 our programmes have supported over 800 businesses to access more than £10m of EU funding. This year has seen a focus on supporting local companies to realise their sustainability ambitions and the introduction of a series of business focussed conferences, providing the opportunity to hear from experts in innovation, technology, net zero, finance, tax, sales and marketing.

12. Here2Help Business, enacted during COVID, continues to support businesses to build resilience, realise their growth ambitions in the county and employ local graduates. This has processed over 700 enquiries and assisted 180 businesses through 1:1 specialist advice clinics. The project aims to create 550 direct or indirect full time equivalent (FTE) jobs in addition to 55 new graduate placements.

13. The County Council's Open for Business programme has been highly successful, supporting a series of projects to aid the skills agenda, including the Connecting Schools and Business, Inspiring Worcestershire and, more recently, Workforce Resilience which supports young people to make informed decisions on future careers, promoting and supporting apprenticeships locally, and bringing together training providers, schools, employers, and young people. The programme has also supported Visit Worcestershire, the County's tourism Destination Marketing Organisation, which is now operated by Worcestershire County Council, and provided support for the One Worcestershire brand which champions the county as a choice location to live, work, learn, visit, and invest in.

14. Since taking on Visit Worcestershire in April 2020, the County Council has confirmed its commitment to promoting Worcestershire as a visitor destination. We have delivered on our commitment through investment in a new website, which has improved accessibility, delivered fresh relevant content, and had over 40,000 unique visitors in the

first month alone. Visit Worcestershire now has more than 34,000 followers across all social media.

15. In summer 2022 we launched our 'Make Worcestershire part of your Story' campaign which included out-of-County advertising, the use of influencers on social media, digital marketing, and a new Worcestershire tourism brochure (50,000 copies distributed to service stations, TICs etc). It is estimated that over 7 million people saw this campaign.

16. The Superfast Worcestershire Broadband programme has delivered significantly improved connectivity in the county since it commenced in 2013, with 98.3% of Worcestershire premises now able to access 24Mbps+. The infrastructure deployed by the programme has been taken up by over 81% of properties that it has been made available to; clearly illustrating local demand and allowing gainshare on profits to be returned and reinvested by the Council to further improve digital infrastructure.

17. In February 2023 we recommitted funding to support the expansion of 'Gigabit capable' broadband infrastructure and the wider ambitions to improve the coverage and performance of mobile connectivity in the county.

18. To achieve our ambitious target for 90% Gigabit Capable connectivity by 2027, we are reliant on the commercial deployments to deliver as expected; the success of the DCMS led 'Project Gigabit' procurement, with a preferred bidder expected to be announced in the Autumn of 2023, as well as additional local investments. In April 2023, the Gigabit capable coverage had already increased in Worcestershire's to 61.2%.

19. Supported by the Council's Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity team, businesses and communities have been successful in securing over £7m of the national Rural Gigabit Vouchers, with £1m of reinvestment funding committed locally, to bring Gigabit connectivity to their communities. Worcestershire in the top ten counties in terms of value of vouchers secured, representing around 45,200 local premises being delivered.

Environment

20. The Council continues to invest in highways, with further significant additional investment for improving roads and pavements in Worcestershire. Surfacing work on over 400 roads across the county has already been completed, with many more planned for this year and next year. Our extra investment in footways will see over 250 footway schemes completed by the end of the financial year, with a similar number next year.

21. The Council continues to carry out a range of activities to reduce the likelihood and impact of flooding. This has included direct action with regards to surface water and the network of smaller watercourses and through strong support, practical and financial, for the Environment Agency on their 'Main River' flood alleviation schemes at Bewdley, Severn Stoke, Tenbury and Toronto Close in Worcester.

22. Patronage at the Worcestershire Parkway Railway Station has continued to grow ahead of all forecasts. The station has received the Civil Engineering Environmental Quality Assessment Award in recognition of its outstanding environmental credentials.

23. We have consulted on a refreshed Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy, reflecting the success of the 2017 strategy and delivery of objectives including the new stations at Worcestershire Parkway and Kidderminster, the impact of Covid-19 on travel

patterns and proposals for the future of the rail industry. Over 200 individual responses have been received and the document will be finalised shortly.

24. The Southern Link Road is now dualled between junction 7 of the M5 and Powick Roundabout. Early data collection suggests that the volume of traffic has reduced on alternative routes such as the City Centre, while average journey times along the length of the Southern Link Road have reduced significantly. Alongside these improvements for motorists has been the provision of new infrastructure for walkers and cyclists including Crookbarrow Way Footbridge, Broomhall Way Footbridge, Hams Way Footbridge, the Ketch Underpass, and a shared-use path along Temeside Way.

25. Phases 1 and 2 of the A38 Bromsgrove Route Enhancement Programme have been completed. The work comprised capacity improvements at Junction 6 of the M5, Junction 1 of the M42 and the junction with Barley Mow Lane, new traffic-free infrastructure for walking and cycling and two new pedestrian crossings. Subject to approval of the Full Business Case submitted to the DfT, Phase 3 will see further capacity enhancements to the A38 and more improvements for walkers and cyclists.

26. A new roundabout has been constructed near Upton-Upon-Severn which will significantly improve the efficiency of this previously congested junction. This builds on the success of a similar scheme at Hoobrook in Kidderminster, which has significantly improved the junction's efficiency.

27. The Pershore Infrastructure Improvement Programme is complete and includes improvements to Pinvin Crossroads, the provision of improved walking and cycling infrastructure on Wyre Road and the Pershore Link Road which includes a new road bridge over the North Cotswolds Railway Line. The Pershore Link Road provides an alternative route to the congested area around Pershore High School.

28. A Strategic Outline Case has been completed for highway improvement schemes on A456/491/450 to support the Wyre Forest Local Plan/Bromsgrove Local Plan and improve journey time reliability. This has now been submitted to Midlands Connect.

29. A further Strategic Outline Case has been completed for a programme of enhancements required to support the growth identified in the South Worcestershire Development Plan review (SWDPr). As these enhancements are directly linked and arising from the SWDPr, the scheme has been included in the Infrastructure Delivery Plan.

30. We have continued to work with our District and City partners on public realm improvement schemes. The first phases of the Future High Street Fund improvements in Worcester have progressed well, with further phases programmed this year. We have also made significant progress with developing a business case for Phase 3 of planned improvements in Redditch Town Centre.

31. We have continued to build on investment in Active Travel, with many schemes progressed, including several new active travel bridges, commencement of Kepax Bridge, refurbishment of Sabrina Bridge and plans for Hampton Bridge. The County are also delivering active travel work on behalf of the City Council secured through the Towns Fund and Wyre Forest District Council, through the Levelling Up Fund. We are developing Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans to set out our proposed plans for the delivery of active travel routes in the major settlements in the county.

32. The Public Rights of Way Team has been working across the county to improve the network, in particular hundreds of new signs, gates and footbridges have been installed.

33. We have continued to support public transport, and in particular our local bus network, with additional funding to allow further time for bus patronage to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

34. In July 2021 the County Council declared a climate emergency, endorsing the Council's Net Zero Plan and aim for net zero carbon emissions from its own operations by 2050.

35. 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.

36. In the last five years the Council has secured over £20m of European, Central Government and private sector funding to support businesses and communities across the county to reduce energy use, save money, cut carbon emissions, enhance the natural environment and grow our low carbon economy.

37. The Environment Act achieved Royal Assent in 2021. One of the aims of this is to change how we manage our waste. The County, along with partners in the Borough, City and District councils, are working together to try to ensure that a consistent approach is maintained across the County whilst delivering the changes required.

38. The review of our habitat database (Worcestershire Habitat Inventory) is complete. This will assist in the Council's response to the requirements of the Environment Act, providing evidence for Local Nature Recovery Strategies and Biodiversity Offsetting.

39. We continue to make good progress towards our target to plant 150,000 trees over five years across the county with new woodlands already planted in the county.

Children and Families

40. Our aim remains to ensure children and young people in Worcestershire receive a good quality and inclusive education, with support for children with additional needs, to enable all to achieve their potential. We support vulnerable children and their parents through early help and targeted family support, keeping families together and building on their strengths and resilience to respond to problems they face in their lives and to safeguard children from significant harm.

41. Since I last reported to the Council, Worcestershire Children First (WCF) has continued to make positive improvements in service delivery. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was published in June 2022 and its findings and recommendations strongly endorse the approach of WCF.

42. WCF's business plan for 2023/24 was approved by Cabinet in March 2023. The plan highlights the aims, objectives, financial and operational context, the continuation of development, innovation and sustained improvement, in conjunction with the priorities within the County Council's Corporate Plan.

43. The strong strategic partnership working of WCF and WCC was positively highlighted in the External Auditor Annual Audit report in March 2022 to the Audit and Governance Committee, stating ‘a real commitment to work together to get the best outcomes for children, young people and their families.’ The report also acknowledged a clear understanding of different roles within the Council and company, that governance is appropriate, and arrangements are in place to analyse business and performance information on a regular basis.

44. 2023/24 will be the fourth year of operation for WCF. WCF values - to “Keep Children at our Heart, Value Family Life, Provide Good Education for All and Protect from Harm” -continue to be the basis for their approach to working with families, in 2022/23 a fifth value of “Embrace Diversity” was developed with staff.

45. WCF’s approach to staffing has been, and continues to be, to develop a culture where employees embrace the vision, mission and values, diversity, and inclusion through everything they do and receive praise, support and challenge to ensure they and the services achieve good outcomes for children and young people.

46. WCF leadership have a visible role within the Children’s Partnership working effectively with all partners, such as Police, Health and Schools to deliver against WCC/WCF priorities and supporting the development of joint strategy and services.

47. Turning to our work on protecting the most vulnerable children, we retain our vital duty to protect children from significant harm and our responsibility as Corporate Parents for children and young people in the care of the Council. The number of our children in care in April 2023 was 1,001, or 84 per 10,000. The number subject to a child protection plan was 565, or 47 per 10,000. Demand at the front door through Contacts and Referrals remain high following COVID, which is consistent across the country. Our average caseloads for social workers have fluctuated through increased demand and workflow pressures during the year, we have been responsive using data and performance information to target support and changes to staff where necessary to ensure workflow and workloads are managed and children and families continue to receive good quality services.

48. The outcome of this work is reflected in our social work stability and permanency data at 86% for all social work posts and 98% for social work managerial posts, and this remains a significant strength in the context of national and regional shortages and challenges. Our statutory KPIs show sustained improvement and progress against our own and regional / national benchmarking.

49. Service user feedback continues to be positive, with outcomes showing children and parents feel WCF is making a difference to their lives. Finally, the company staff health check and indicators on staffing permanence and stability evidence that WCF continues to be an employer of choice.

50. Following a SEND revisit inspection in November 2021 by the Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC), it was confirmed that the local area had made sufficient progress in eight of the twelve weaknesses identified at the initial inspection in 2018.

51. As a result, the DfE required an Accelerated Progress Plan for the four areas where sufficient progress was not made. A six-month review of progress against the Plan was undertaken by the DfE and NHS England (NHSE) in September 2022. Their feedback letter stated, “It was clear that the local area is beginning to make sustainable improvements to SEND services and to the lives of children and young people”. The twelve-month review took place on 29 March 2023. Positive feedback was provided,

including recognition of the amount of work that has taken place and a clear commitment of stakeholders to co-production in improvements. Feedback recognised the investment in staff to increase capacity in the workforce and engagement with parents, but there is still more to do and there will be a further review in September 2023.

52. During the last academic year, approximately 14,700 applications were made for school places at the normal point of entry across Worcestershire. For high schools almost 6,200 applications were received, with almost 89% being offered places at their first-choice school. Just over 5% received offers for their second-choice school. For middle schools, of the 2,474 applications received, almost 96% received offers for one of their top 2 choices. For Primary schools almost 6,100 applications were received, with almost 91% being offered places at their first-choice school. Over 96% of children received offers for one of their first 2 choices.

53. We play a vital role in school place planning and provision to ensure sufficient school places are available across the County to meet the needs of a growing County. This includes significant resources for a new secondary school and successful securing of funding for a new autism spectrum disorder school in Malvern, alongside other projects.

54. We continue to be pleased with the progress made by Worcestershire Children First, our wholly owned company, in delivering Children's Services across Worcestershire.

Health and Wellbeing

55. The introduction of the ICS under the Health and Care Act 2022 presents an opportunity to renew the wider system focus on population health. Public Health is playing a key role in local integration of health and care, whilst driving action and commissioning based on evidence, ensuring it is targeted to reduce health disparities.

56. The Annual Joint Strategic Needs Assessment presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board (HWB) in November 2022 provides analysis which informs the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and newly developing Integrated Care Strategy.

57. Public Health has led the development of the [Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022-2032](#), working with partners, on behalf of the HWB. The public consultation, which received 1,627 responses, and supporting focus groups marked a shift in the Public Health approach to engage differently, already providing a wealth of evidence that will continue to inform decisions. The priority for the strategy, 'good mental health and wellbeing' is supported by action on the wider determinants of health.

58. Public Health has continued to promote community-driven development, working with the voluntary and community sector, health and care partners and enabling community and link workers to help build strong, resilient communities. Public Health has funded 26 community builders, across the six Worcestershire districts, working within communities to develop and build sustainable community led activities.

59. Community Safety has been delivering against new duties; leading partnership activities, commissioning domestic abuse and drug and alcohol services. The requirements of the Domestic Abuse Act have seen the establishment of a new Strategic Board, action plans, and development of safe housing and support for victims. The team is also preparing to meet the new Protect duty, in response to the Manchester Arena bombing Inquiry findings.

60. Trading Standards continues to ensure that the Council meets its statutory duties, tackling fraud and scams, illicit and counterfeit cigarettes, illegal sales, removing unsafe products from sale, providing advice to businesses and animal health disease control.

61. Our vision for Adult Social Care is to modernise Council services to best meet peoples' needs; to shape the care market so that services and support maximises the way in which people live their lives; all underpinned with an ethos of a person-centred approach focused on enabling and improving people's health, wellbeing, and independence.

62. We have continued to make progress against these priorities during the past year. The establishment of Integrated Care Systems and the development of the Integrated Care Board on which the Council is represented will embed collaborative working.

63. Following a significant investment from the Better Care Fund, the Council was able to significantly increase its front-line social care workforce which is supporting the reablement and rehabilitation of residents with a focus on enabling them to maintain or regain their independence at home, following a stay in hospital. This work has continued with commissioning of a 24/7 wrap-around care service in the home, which enables patients to leave hospital and receive round-the-clock care to assist them to "get back on their feet" over a four-day period and enhanced the county-wide support to the in-house reablement service that provides up to six weeks of rehabilitation care for people who have received in-patient care at hospital. The success of these services has resulted in very positive outcomes, with minimal numbers requiring a further hospital admission.

64. Our teams have been working with Herefordshire Council and the ICS as part of a project regarding falls prevention funded through a successful bid that brought significant funding to the two counties and NHS of which WCC will receive £382,000, for Assistive Technology Provision. This work supports the established Ageing Well programme and the ICS place-based falls programmes; Herefordshire Falls Predict, Prevent, React and Respond programme and Worcestershire Integrated Care for Older People in Worcestershire (ICOPE) programme. The work will also support the Health and Wellbeing priority to ensure Worcestershire residents are healthier, live longer, have a better quality of life and remain independent for as long as possible.

65. It remains the priority of Adult Social Care that vulnerable individuals are protected. The full implementation of the 3 Conversation model has seen significant benefits in relation to promoting self-reliance through reablement, use of technology and direct payments and in turn, supports demand management.

66. Carers form an essential network in delivering care across the county and, following the development of an All-Age Carers Strategy, the County Council has completed a tender for an Adults Carers Hub which will support the management and co-ordination of support for adult carers (including parent carers of adults and young adults) across Worcestershire, providing one point of contact for all adult carers.

67. The Community Reablement Service ensures 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. From 2022 onwards, this in-house service is formally supported by one of our county-wide providers, as well as our newly commissioned reablement focussed domiciliary care service which enables providers to work across "zones" within the County and increases the effectiveness of the service.

68. The focus of our work with communities over the past year has been on recovering from COVID. Library visits and issues continue to rise to almost pre-pandemic levels, whilst those visiting our county museum, country parks and greenspace are higher than they were in March 2020. We also held our first Skills Show since the pandemic and reached over 3000 young people. We continue to build on the success of Here2help and using the network of volunteers and the information, advice and signposting aspects to focus on current challenges residents face, such as support for the cost of living.

The Finance Service

69. The monthly budget monitoring reports to all directorate management teams have been improved to include information on debt outstanding, activity analysis (particularly in the demand related services such as children's, adults and waste), use of reserves, impact of the capital programme, use of grants and other external funding. This supports the Council in being able to demonstrate reliable and consistent financial reporting which supports the external auditor's assessment on value for money.

70. We have a well-established budget monitoring, control and reporting process which identifies risks and issues as well as additional income generation opportunities which not only relate to the current financial year, but looks at the medium term, recurrent issues and their impact on future years budgets. This supports the ongoing cyclical nature of budget setting, reporting, variance analysis and feeds back into the next budget setting process. The Council set a balanced budget for 2023/24, along with a Medium-Term Financial Plan at its meeting in February 2023.

71. We also saw our external auditor commend our approach and completion of the 2021/22 Statement of Accounts, and once again we were one of the first Councils to have their annual accounts signed off unqualified. We are now in the final stages of completing the draft Statement of Accounts for 2022/23.

72. Our focus on income and debt has continued to be strengthened, with more debt recovered than any previous year. There is still more to be done and plans are in place to automate more billing and collection, including innovative use of new banking and smart app technology. I would like to thank the Audit and Governance Committee for all the work they have done in supporting and driving this agenda.

73. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Cabinet Members and the management team, together with the wider workforce and all Members of the Council for the contribution they have made throughout the year to deliver for the residents and businesses of Worcestershire.

Simon Geraghty
Leader of the Council
May 2023