

Report from Cllr Elissa Swinglehurst January 2026

Serving the parishes of Llangarron, Sellack, Marstow, Peterstow, Bridstow, Welsh Newton and Llanrothal.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

I hope you all had a wonderful time over the festive season. There were so many good things to enjoy – blissful church services in our historic churches, some fine local produce and a walk in the countryside to burn off a few of the Christmas calories.

Give and Take.

As an early Christmas present the Government withdrew the funding for a Special Needs school in Herefordshire. This school would have accommodated up to 80 young people and provided much needed local specialist provision. The number of young people who are in this cohort is growing exponentially and we would have made good use of the money to support vulnerable and complex needs cases who cannot be accommodated in mainstream schools. Instead, the government is giving us £3.8m over three years to provide adaptation to mainstream schools. Herefordshire Council has already done this work and invested around £11m in making sure we have the highest possible level of mainstream provision for children with SEND. What we needed is the money to ensure that those young people with the most complex needs are able to attend a local specialist school. We will be asking the government to reconsider but I have to say I am not hopeful.

For one of my colleagues, it was an extremely happy New Year as Cllr Roger Phillips was awarded an OBE in the New Year honours. I have to say that Roger is someone who has spent a life working for the public good in one form or another. He has been a councillor for decades, was leader of the council and is currently the Chairman. He is unfailingly good hearted and kind, a wonderful person to have as a colleague and as a friend.

Roger writes: ***I have been involved with many local organisations and been fortunate over many years to work with many wonderful people, both inside and outside Herefordshire, on projects, events and services we can be rightly proud of. Herefordshire has a remarkable culture of collaboration as a community, which has enabled us to continue delivering for local people, and frequently over the years to punch above our weight nationally.***

I am particularly proud of the building of Rotherwas Access road which then allowed the expansion of our largest business park and the creation of 1,000 jobs, the successful relocation of Hereford Livestock Market allowing the redevelopment of the Old Market site, Leominster swimming pool, modern sustainable records and archive store and the new Fire Station currently being built in Hereford. I was in good company with former Lyonshall resident and International singing star Ellie Goulding also receiving an award. We both went to Lady Hawkins school but when she was a pupil I was a school governor.

Budget

The final local government settlement came out, as it always does, just before Christmas. Let's just say that there was no good news. The government's calculations assume a 5% increase in council tax and they fund accordingly – because Herefordshire has lower council tax than the average (I know it doesn't feel like that) we are penalised and receive less funding. The council's Medium Term Financial Strategy was based on a 3.99% rise but this is not used as the basis for the Government's calculations which assume 5%. At the end of the day we need to balance the books. Every budget line is under scrutiny and both statutory services and discretionary services will need to make savings. We will, as always, do our best to maintain the front-line services and continue to invest in the roads. However, it is likely that the PROW and Lengthsman enhanced

grants will be reduced. I recommend that parish councils consider this when setting their budget for the year.

The 'fairer funding review' is punitive to rural areas. The council has made the case to the government along with the County Council Network, the Rural Services Network and others. However they have not changed direction.

The Rural Services Network (an independent organisation) estimates that most urban councils will receive around 41% more per head in Government Funded spending power than the most rural councils. Residents in rural areas pay around 20% more in council tax on average than urban residents.

The Government is saying that they have increased the council 'core spending power' (CSP) by £13.4m over three years but, in reality, this is comprised of an assumed 5% uplift in council tax in every year of this multi-year settlement. The share of funding from central government will, in fact, reduce by £17.3m between 25/26 and 28/29 on top of the £7.1m (Rural Services Delivery Grant) that they unexpectedly cut from the budget just before Christmas last year.

Not increasing tax on 'working people' appears not to include people who pay council tax.

We had already planned on savings of £18.4m but that leaves a gap of £12.8m and work is ongoing to try to resolve this. We have never had to find savings on this scale before.

Without wishing to indulge in schadenfreude it is worth taking a look at Worcestershire which has just published their draft budget proposals. They are having to consider increasing their council tax by between 7.5 and 10% as well as taking an exceptional financial support loan from the government of over 70m.

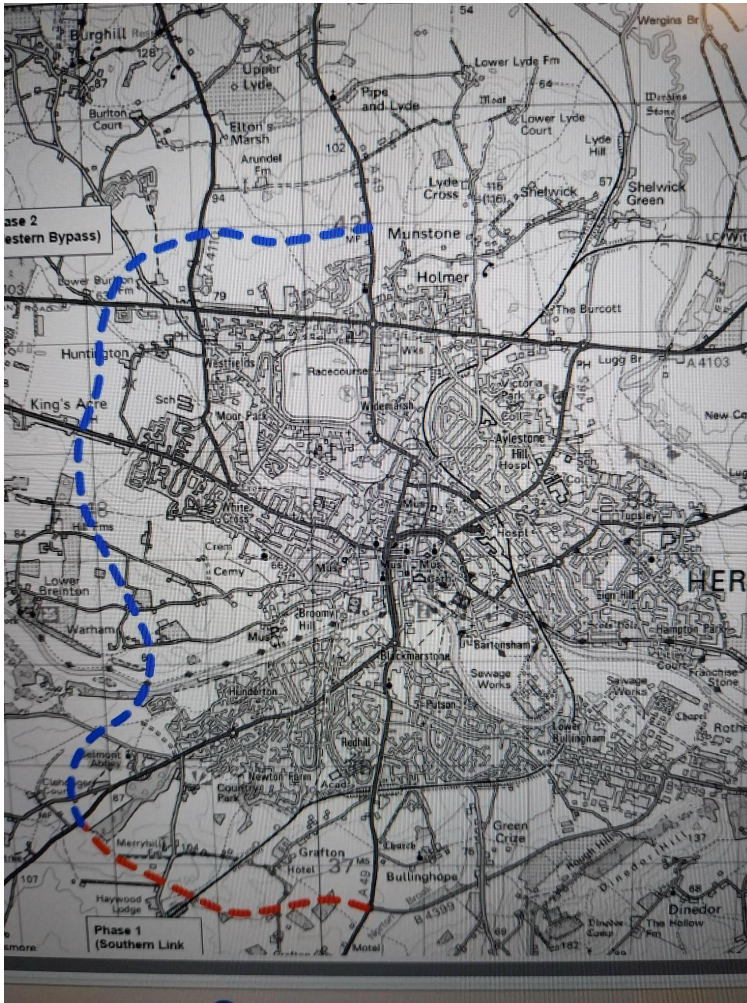
The sleeping dragon in all of this is the dedicated schools grant (DSG) which is the money that is paid by Government to support school provision. Nationally this has been underfunded for years and there will be a massive 14BN deficit by 2028. This deficit sits 'off the books' but the interest on the deficit is payable by the local authority.

Childrens Services

This is a critical area of the council's activity. In 2020 the authority was judged to be inadequate and was put into special measures. The directorate was struggling to retain staff and the cost of agency workers pushed the budget into significant overspend. Between 2019 and 2023 an additional 20m was needed to support Children's Services and yet, by 2023 Ofsted had noted not enough progress had been made to improve the situation. In 2023 the administration of the Council changed to the current Conservative led minority administration. There were some key and courageous decisions taken by the new administration that has now started to show some real improvement. One of the first decisions was to appoint as the Cabinet Member for Childrens Services a newly elected councillor who had the right experience and background. What is remarkable about this appointment to cabinet is the fact that Cllr Powell is not a Conservative. Imagine that, a leader who appoints to a key role in his cabinet the person who he feels is the right one for the job regardless of political affiliation. Cllr Powell has worked tirelessly alongside the corporate director appointed in 2023 to address the legacy of poor performance.

Whereas in 2020 we had a service that was using money from the council reserves to balance the budget we now have a service that is delivering on budget and delivering planned savings. Ofsted interim visits have been increasingly positive about the change and improvement that they see. We had full Ofsted visit at the end of last year and the report will be due out later in January so I will update you all then.

LOCAL TRANSPORT PLAN 2025-2041



A Local Transport Plan (LTP) is a statutory document required by Government for local authorities to set out their strategic priorities for an area on Transport issues. The cornerstone of this document, which has been signed off by Herefordshire Council 34 votes to 14 votes, is the delivery of a Western Bypass around Hereford.

The local plan will have to identify deliverable sites for around 30,000 new houses (27,500 mandatory target from the government with a recommended buffer to satisfy the examiner). This is almost double the original target that the council was planning for.

The council feels that a sensible place to accommodate a large proportion of these new houses is the city – specifically in a ‘growth corridor’ to the West which will include appropriate infrastructure and employment. This also aligns with the place shaping consultation that was done for the

previous local plan where there was a clear preference for development in sustainable locations around the city and market towns.

The map on the left outlines the proposed route in blue with the first stage in red. There is some opposition to building a bypass but no alternative suggestions on how you create local road resilience, reduce congestion, de trunk the A49 through the city and accommodate the mandatory increase in housing.

The total cost of the bypass will be high and needs Government support but if the Government is serious about building 1.5m homes then they are going to have to help councils invest in the infrastructure to make that possible.

The LTP also supports more active travel, cycling and walking, more investment and co-ordination of Bus services, improving EV charging, community transport options and access to train services. Encouraging economic growth alongside environmental protection and climate resilience.

The detail of the support for active travel across the county will be in a subsidiary document called the LCWWIP (Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan) which is due out in the next few months.

The whole document can be read at

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/travel-and-transport/local-transport-plan/>

HIGHWAYS

Herefordshire Council has approved a new contract and selected a preferred provider to deliver public realm services across the county, to replace the current arrangement with Balfour Beatty. The services include the maintenance of roads, roadsides, green areas and public spaces, street cleansing, highway drainage, street lighting and winter gritting. The selected provider can be named



in January after a mandatory legal standstill period comes to an end, with the new contract set to begin this June.

This will see the council take back day-to-day control of public realm services with the contractor being paid pre-agreed rates for each item of work, focussing on high quality, value for money services. I particularly welcome the current Locality Stewards transferring to the council employment with tighter ordering and monitoring of the contract on the ground.

Over the past 18 months we have seen increased investment in the condition of Herefordshire's highways through resurfacing and surface dressing work, with some 100 miles having been delivered during 2025/26 alone. Significant renewals have taken place on the network and we have also increased the amount of funding that we have spent on preventative maintenance.

Maintaining the surface condition of an entire highway network is something that clearly never stops and there is always a location that requires some form of intervention, which will vary dependant on what stage it is at in its lifecycle. It is not possible to do everything overnight, but we plan to continue improving the condition of Herefordshire's highways in 2026/27, building on what we have achieved over the past 18 months.

As we move into a new calendar year, work begins to shape a programme of works for 2026/27, which will be guided by the technical condition data obtained from our SCANNER, Vaisala and other survey information (including defects raised through the Locality Steward inspection process). Whilst technical condition data underpins and forms a fundamental and objective part of the planning process, I have been asked to let the Highways team know of any locations in the ward that are causing particular concern at this time and request a sense check as part of the programme development. I am working with my Parish Councils but to date my list is below – some of these highways have been included for two years.

Peterstow – lane from A49 to the church

Sellack – Church Lane

Marstow – road between Old School and Daffaluke

Please forward any other suggestions.

The Third Annual Rivers Conference.

The full recording of the Conference is now available to anyone who is interested but was unable to attend. Lots of good speakers covering various aspects of agriculture and water quality.

Topics include the use of fungi to increase plant available nutrients, the use of calcium to bind phosphate in low calcium high magnesium soils, the potential for bio char to lock in nutrients and be a way of turning waste into energy and top grade soil conditioner and so on.

[Herefordshire Council Annual Rivers Conference 2025 - Herefordshire Council](#)

On the plus side..

Herefordshire Council has been awarded Gold status by the Defence Employer recognition scheme for our outstanding support through policies, employment practices, community engagement, and proactive advocacy for the Armed Forces Covenant. The Council's Gold status is for a further five years, until December 2030, reflecting its ongoing dedication to serving personnel, reservists, veterans, and military families, mentoring and staff networks, flexible working for veterans and families of those in active service

Major programmes to support the Armed Forces community include support for reservists, adult cadets, proactive recruitment policies for service leavers, flexible working and paid leave for spouses of those in active services, and employing dedicated Armed Forces Covenant Officer, and a cross-organisation approach to ensure the Armed Forces community has good access to public services.

As always – if you need me you know where I am!

Elissa Swinglehurst

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