

Bircher Ward Report – October 2023

I hope that this Ward Report finds you all well. The weather has certainly taken a wintery turn and it is the time of year where attention needs to turn to drainage so we can avoid unexpected floods and excess surface water on the roads. If you have any concerns about drains or ditches then please report these via the Herefordshire Council app and to me. I will then liaise with the Locality Steward to ensure they are investigated as soon as possible.

I thought you may want to be made aware of three recent developments at the Council:

Firstly the publication of the first quarter financials which unfortunately show an expected deficit for the financial year of £13.5m within the revenue budget. This is a legacy of the previous administration and significant work will be needed of the coming months to address it.

Approximately £10m of the overspend is predicted to come from Children's Services and addressing the well documented problems in that department. I know of at least one media outlet that has suggested this has resulted in Herefordshire Council banning all non essential spending and being on the brink of issuing a s.114 notice. Whilst brakes are being put on spending to get the deficit in order, we are hopefully several years away from the s.114 situation which other councils find themselves in.

Secondly, in contrast to the revenue budget, and due to the failure of delivery by the last administration the Capital programme has significant capacity (some £36m) for reallocation of funding to new or previously abandoned projects. There are strict rules on what "Capital" funding can be spent on and none of the funding can be used to address the revenue deficit. Its primary purpose is for investment and this administration is determined to invest in projects that will both boost the local economy and generate revenue for the Council. Therefore, a revised capital programme went before the Cabinet on the 5th October and was due to be put to a vote at full council on Friday 13th October. This would have seen the following sums allocated however, as we could not get the support from other parties needed at this time it was deferred until December:

1. £10m on road resurfacing (this is in addition to current spending and any funds received from central Government).
2. £8m on the Model Farm Business Park development in Ross on Wye. (This will provide much needed development and growth space for businesses. It is my understanding the site will be restricted to new businesses so as to stop a "drain" from other Market Towns in the County).
3. £3m on the refurbishment of Shirehall (this is separate from the Library developments and will allow is to bring back into use a civic building which has been closed and decaying for several years).
- 4.) £12m to the Southern Link Road (which is essential for the development of the Western Bypass and should essentially be seen as Phase 1 of the Bypass project).
- 5.) £4m for development of economic areas across the Market Towns (to address the Hereford centric approach previously and provide land for businesses to develop, grow and create jobs).

Thirdly, the new waste contract. Before the election you will have seen details about the previous administrations plans to scrap the fortnightly waste collection and add a second recycling collection in addition to bins for other waste where possible. At the time of the election the previous administration had gone out to tender on this basis however post election we received the responses. These showed that to deliver the Green-Independent plan a budget of over £13m every year would be needed - their actual budget was £8m. We can not sanction an overspend of that amount due to existing pressures on the revenue budget therefore the current contract will be extended for a further year whilst negotiations on a future contract and pricing continue.