

REPORT

from Cllr. Elissa Swinglehurst

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

May 2026

We have a new boss!

After a bit of a recruitment blitz Herefordshire Council has a new CEO. Paul Satoor will be joining the authority as we say farewell to Paul Walker. We thought it would be easier to stay with the same first name since we are all getting older and it's easier to remember (kidding).

I would like to place on record my thanks to Paul Walker who has been a steady hand at the helm during some fairly turbulent times. I have always enjoyed working with him and wish him well for the future.

Paul S will be taking on a council that is managing its finances, delivering its services and investing in its future. There is an enormous amount to do so I hope he hits the ground running!

Boundary Commission proposed changes

We may be seeing changes to Llangarron Ward as a result of the current Boundary Commission review. The proposal is to move Sellack parish over into Old Gore. This is to even up the numbers or something like that. Personally I don't want any of my parishes to leave the ward but I'm not sure that my personal feelings are a material consideration.

The Council has just held their AGM and reappointed Cllr Jonathan Lester as leader with a strong majority in support. It is important to remember that the Council is led by a Conservative Minority administration and so we depend on the support of other parties to get things done. Whereas some minority leaderships have failed to work collaboratively with other groups (have a look at the chaos in Worcestershire) the majority of councillors in Herefordshire are willing and able to set aside political differences and silliness to ensure a steady hand on the helm.

The political maturity of the administration was something singled out for praise by the Corporate Peer Review team who visited us last year and praised us for confidence in leadership and consensus building in decision making.

A Charter for the River Wye and her tributaries.

I first had the idea of a charter for the Wye a few years' ago and last year, at the Hay Festival, I made a vow to get it done. Working with a group drawn from the Wye Catchment Partnership and the Nutrient Management Board, a charter was developed that expressed the intrinsic rights of the river; it is important to realise that the granting of rights is not something that local authorities can do. Working collaboratively with my opposite numbers in Powys (Cllr Jackie Charlton), Monmouthshire (Cllr Catrin Maby), Forest of Dean (Cllr Jackie Frazer. Cllr Andrew McDiarmid), Bannau Brycheiniog (Liz Bickerton) and the National Landscape (Andrew Blake) it has been possible to agree a shared vision across borders, boundaries and political differences. Last Sunday we launched the charter in Hay on Wye – hundreds of people turned up to witness this moment of history in the making. The sun shone.

As parishes (and as people) you are invited to make your own pledge to the river and to the charter- pledges will be added to the book where we all signed in oak gall ink made from water

from the river. Pledges will differ from person to person and organisation to organisation – whatever you bring to make the charter a reality is welcome.

The Rights in the Charter are
The Right to Flow and perform natural functions.
The Right to biodiversity
The Right to be free from pollution
The Right to a healthy catchment
The Right to regeneration
The Right to representation

Some parishes may already be represented as part of the Wye Valley group of parishes, but you may also wish to pledge on your own behalf. It would be lovely to get the charter into local schools, businesses, organisations and into people's homes and hearts. Anything you can do to help would be great.

Herefordshire Council's decision carries this set of recommendations which give some substance to a largely symbolic gesture.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **Herefordshire County Council consider the principles of the Charter for the River Wye wherever relevant in decision making processes, reviewing the opportunities for integration alongside policy and strategy updates;**
- b) **The Council reflects the intrinsic value of the River Wye and its tributaries within the new Local Plan, currently being drafted, utilizing the Charter for the River Wye as a reference document in framing ambitions regarding Herefordshire's rivers;**
- c) **The Council recognise the priorities relating to freshwater habitats stated in the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, including those to safeguard against pollution, restore and reconnect wetland habitats, and restore hydrological functions at a catchment scale, as well as the commitment in the Herefordshire Council Plan 2024 - 2028 to 'do everything we can to recover the health of our rivers';**
- d) **The Council support neighbouring authorities in their will to champion the Charter, toward a holistic, cross border and catchment-wide acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of the River Wye and its tributaries, and to publicise the collective response.**

We will be uploading a template for pledges onto the website so watch this space! In the meantime, you can just email to me.

Budget News

Cabinet welcomed the fact we delivered a balanced budget for 2025/26, despite significant national funding pressures and rising demand for services. The Council achieved £13.2 million in planned savings while actively managing cost pressures, particularly in adult social care, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), home-to-school transport and temporary accommodation. This reflects strong financial management across the organisation and a huge collective effort from teams to control spending, deliver savings and maintain services. We are already focussing on delivering the savings for the 26/27 period (so far, so good) and 27/28 since we know that the funding from government isn't going to improve.

New Public Realm Contract

Parish councillors will have had the opportunity to be briefed on the changes about to take place with the public realm contract. Balfour Beatty will no longer be the contractor, instead we will be splitting the work up between 'in house' management and contracted delivery via M Group. This is an exciting time and although there may be some teething problems (hopefully not too many) the end result will be a much more efficient and effective service. M Group manage around 50,000 miles of highway in the UK so they are working well within their comfort zone! By bringing more work 'in house' we will generate a clearer separation between commissioner and contract and be able to ensure standards. M Group will be working to specific guidelines around performance and methodology which the council will control. All enquiries and customer interface will be via Herefordshire Council. It will be possible for ward members to see reported defects and the date of action proposed in real time so they will be able to update parishes. One of the most exciting things is a bit of machinery that they call the Dragon! It basically trundles along the road, melting the road in front, filling in the middle and sealing the surface as it goes. I can think of a few places that might come in handy! Roll out from June 1st.

Carbon Management Plan to 2030

To meet the commitment to a net zero target 2030 agreed in 2019 when we declared a climate emergency, the council has published the 4th Carbon Management Plan. This is the plan that tracks the council's emissions and includes the actions that will get us to net zero 2030. It is not a plan for the county; it is only for the council.

The council has already reduced its emissions from the 2008/9 baseline by around 64%. Doing things like changing all the street lights to LED has reduced carbon emissions and saved millions of pounds – these are the sort of things that we look to do. Actions that save money as well as the environment. We have continued to drive down emissions, increasing EV within the fleet, pushing contracts to include net zero clauses, installing 4000 PV solar panels on council buildings, leisure centres and schools etc.

This is the first plan that includes offsetting, for instance, the proposal for biochar/pyrolysis as a carbon reducing element within our waste streams with the potential to create both carbon offsets as well as revenue benefits. Early indications are a 4.3m investment will return 1.4 pa. but we will need an outline business case to progress to a bid for capital next year.

As the Cabinet Member for the Environment, I was pleased to propose the plan and grateful for the many positive comments that were made by colleagues.

Planning

As you may be aware there was a recent consultation on proposed changes to the NPPF which will limit the applications that can be redirected to committee. I have clarified this point with the senior planners, and it is our understanding and expectation that, even when a redirection has been agreed, if an application is still undetermined the redirection route will be closed off once the changes are in place – the likely date for the change is August. There is nothing that Herefordshire Council can do about this, it is a change at the national level.