Ward Councillor for Worcestershire County Councillor

Cllr. Justin Bowen

Worcestershire County Council Matters

This financial year has been perhaps the most challenging that Worcestershire County Council has ever faced. With a debt of more than £600 million, a budget deficit of nearly £50 million, and just 2 weeks of emergency reserves remaining, the Council was on the bring of a S.114 notice, the Local Authority equivalent of bankruptcy.

This led to drastic measures being needed, one of which was to increase Council Tax by 8.98% for 2026/27.

However, alongside this, work has been going on to address some of the structural problems that had led to this situation.

In the directorate for which I am responsible as Cabinet Member for Children's Services, transformation has taken place to address the £60+ million bill being paid every year to private companies to look after Worcestershire children in care.

Following investment in our Worcestershire Fostering service, alongside a complete restructuring of how the service functions, we've managed to increase the number of our own foster carers by nearly 20%, bucking the national trend of decline and going a long way to reversing a fall of 40% over the previous 5 years. This has helped us save more than £12 million in placement costs, up by 30% on the previous year.

Similar changes are coming to both Adult Social Care and Highways over the coming months, as part of a full Transformation Plan for the Council. More details of this will be announced soon.

With the government also due to announce its decision for Worcestershire under Local Government Reorganisation, the year ahead is likely to be the most important one for our county for decades.

Tenbury Division Matters

This year has again been dominated by flooding, roads and community matters.

Flooding

In October, I attended and addressed the Regional Flood and Coastal Committee meeting where £1.8 million was put back into the programme budget for the Tenbury Wells Property Flood Resilience scheme. This was a huge relief, but of course the work now continues to get the scheme implemented. That is the challenge for the months ahead.

I've also been working with the coordinators of the Tenbury Wells Flood Warden Scheme which will be launched soon. This scheme will be another crucial part of flood defence and will show how our community is doing everything we can to protect ourselves – particularly important when it comes to seeking funding in future. To support this, I've connected the coordinators with officers in Highways so that the scheme joins up with County Council flood planning. This is a big step in making sure flood response runs smoothly. I'll also be seeking funding for protective equipment for the scheme's volunteers. More news on this in the months ahead.

Roads

Speeding traffic remains a major problem on many of our roads. Alongside this, speed limits are often felt to be inappropriate for rural roads. Some progress has been made in specific areas, including funding for new Vehicle Activated Signs in places such as Pensax and Great Witley, alongside improved signage in places such as Abberley.

However, the issue remains that County Council policy is driven purely by data, with no consideration of impact on quality of life. In rural areas we often don't have sufficient data to support changes, and this is something I've been trying to address since my election last May.

So, I'm happy to say that that I've now secured agreement from the new Cabinet Member for Highways that there will be a comprehensive review of policy. I have also secured support from Councillors from other rural areas across Worcestershire. My aim for this year is that we will finally achieve the objective that our community will have a much bigger say on the speed limits on our roads. I will provide updates on this as it progresses.

Potholes have continued to plague our area, although as a community we've made significant progress in getting Highways to act by reporting them. More than 50 reports have been placed on the Worcestershire Portal for both potholes and blocked drains, and where residents have shared their reports we've been able to get Highways to act. We need to continue this proactive approach.

In February, I spoke at the full County Council meeting in favour of £1 million being ringfenced for rural road maintenance and improvements and was delighted that it was agreed for this year. It's the first time I can recall money being specifically set aside for rural roads, although now the task is to ensure we get our share!

Community

This year, I've allocated nearly £10,000 for local projects and organisations, including The Regal Theatre, Tenbury Scout & Guides Group, Teme Valley Wildlife, Stoke Bliss Defibrilator, Great Witley Parish Council, The Shelsleys Village Hall, Tenbury Christmas Lights, Tenbury Primary School and We Are Men United.

Alongside this, I've worked with Worcestershire's Public Health team to secure more than £20,000 to local Health & Well-being projects, including at Tenbury Community Pool, Kyre Riding for the Disabled and Tenbury United Youth Football, amongst many other projects.

Finally, in March and after conversations with local traders, I launched my campaign "Its Time for Free Parking in Tenbury Wells".

I know from when I had my own business that removing barriers to visitors spending time in a town is one of the most important ways of increasing footfall and spending. There are many factors that affect this, but it can be summarised as marketing, parking and signage.

I have therefore written to the leader of Malvern Hills District Council to make the case that Tenbury Wells deserves special treatment when it comes to free parking and requesting that MHDC Teme Street car park is made free at least until September.

Alongside this I have raised with Worcestershire County Council that the waiting time on Teme Street and Market Street be increased from 45 minutes to 90 minutes – providing a balance between allowing longer stays with not clogging up parking. This has been provisionally approved, and consultation will now take place ahead of implementing a new Traffic Regulation Order.

Together, I think these measures can help provide a desperately needed boost to trade in the town.

There are many challenges facing our rural community, but I believe that over this last year we have made a start in addressing them. I look forward to continuing that work over the year ahead.