**Little Birch Parish council**

Ward member report, March 2016

**Neighbourhood development plan**

I made the point at the last Little Birch Parish council meeting I attended that ‘Not having a neighbourhood development plan means losing influence over where the housing growth in your area will take place.’

Many county parishes are now at the stage of adoption and therefore there is more help and advice than ever for parishes such as Little Birch at the early stages of the NDP process. Weston-under-Penyard recently became the first parish in Herefordshire to approve their NDP in a referendum with 96% of voters backing the plan.

Several of the parishes in my ward have now started the community engagement process and I would urge the Little Birch council to continue with the first steps taken over the winter months.

According to H.C files, Little Birch had not designated a neighbourhood area by early February.

For Little Birch the options are as follows:

* Produce a neighbourhood plan  - this will devolve the plan making powers to the parish council. The local community can produce locally specific policies and proposals. Technical advice and support is available from the Neighbourhood Planning team. Grants and support are currently still available for any parishes who wish to produce a neighbourhood plan although this money is only guaranteed until April 2018.
* Be included within the Rural Area Site Allocation DPD – this document will be produced by Herefordshire Council and consultation will be undertaken with the parish council and local community in line with the Statement of Community Involvement.

Detailed work on the Rural Area Site Allocation DPD will commence in the summer, and Herefordshire Council will be writing to the Parish council to explain these options in depth.

The Core Strategy also indicated that those areas who have designed a neighbourhood area but made little progress to date could also be included within the Rural Site Allocation DPD. Herefordshire Council will be reviewing current progress within those parishes who have not reached draft plan (Reg14) to ascertain the likely timetable for production.

Roads – City Link road.

Most of the preparation for building this road is coming to an end and procurement of the main contractor will be concluded during February. Several contractors have shown interest and we are hopeful of a competitive tender to build this project. Considerable amounts of Asbestos has been found and disposed during the course of preparing the site. We hope to see completion of this road link Mid-summer 2017.

Western Bypass

The original draft proposals looked at a potential corridor for the Hereford Relief road from the A49 in the south, going west of the city to the A49 in the north, and consideration to continue to the A4103 Worcester road. This corridor is subject to route selection in phases in conjunction with all statutory partners.

The first phase is the South Wye link from the A49 south to the A465 Abergavenny road, which is scheduled to be subject to a planning application in March 16. Over the last couple of months and following the first planning consultation, some additional work has been required to deal with issues raised by a statutory consultee. Having satisfied these concerns a further consultation period will follow ahead of the planning application coming to Planning committee.

The route selection went through a comprehensive process and consultation which enabled a successful bid for funding to build the road and do some additional sustainable travel options in and around Belmont. Subject to normal processes and procedures, phase 1 of the relief road (South Wye Link) will begin once planning is approved.

The process for the further sections of the HRR are in place and a considerable amount of work will be required for route selection within the corridor, archaeology and preparation of plans for consultation and adoption, and ensuring all funding opportunities through the many channels open to us, are pursued.

It must be stressed that Herefordshire has adopted the Core Strategy after years of consultation. The Western Relief Road is adopted as part of that strategy because it opens up the infrastructure to allow the strategic housing sites to be built out and sends a message to business that Herefordshire Council will support business growth by having infrastructure in place to get in, out and around Hereford.

To support our priorities of adult and children wellbeing and economic growth, this county must invest in the minimum requirement of a bypass for the city to unlock the potential for housing and business opportunity to raise our income level to support the priorities.

2016-17 Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

Update for Little Birch PC. The following were recommended to Council:

1. **approval of a 1.9% increase in council tax in 2016-17;**
2. **approval of an additional 2.0% increase in council tax in 2016-17. This will result in a total council tax increase of 3.9% increasing a total band D charge from £1,275.10 to £1,324.83 for Herefordshire Council in 2016/17;**
3. **approval of the draft 2016-17 revenue budget;**
4. **approval of the draft medium term financial strategy (MTFS) which incorporates the capital programme approved by Council on 18 December;**
5. **approval of the draft treasury management strategy (TMS); and**
6. **in the event of final central government funding allocations being above or below the provisional settlement level any variation is managed by an adjustment to general reserves.**

Background

Central government has reiterated its commitment to achieve a budget surplus by 2020, as a result of this Herefordshire Council is having to address challenging financial conditions, entering year seven of a ten year ‘austerity period’. The council is on schedule to meet these challenges, delivering savings of £59m by the end of 2015/16.

Whilst focused on delivering services to residents it has been necessary to reduce the size of the council, demonstrate efficiency and ensure good use of resources by:

* Reducing the workforce.
* Rationalising buildings we owned in order to centralise in fewer business centres.
* Making stronger connections across public sector organisations – making resources go further.
* Reducing wasted expenditure on paper, and shifting as a first choice to digital, in our offices.

Council approved the 2016-17 budget on 5 February 2016 and also approved the medium term financial strategy and the corporate plan to 2019-20.

Autumn statement

The Chancellors autumn statement on 25 November included the following specific announcements that impact Herefordshire:

* Support (as yet unquantified) to secure launch funding to create a new university in Hereford, focused on engineering, in 2016.
* Provision of £250m nationally over the next five years to tackle potholes, details awaited.
* The introduction of a national funding formula for schools, high needs and early years; detailed consultation will be launched in 2016 and the new formulae will be implemented from 2017/18.
* Better care fund to increase nationally by £1,500m by 2019-20, starting in 2017/18. This will include increased disabled facilities grant funding and will be funded by reform to the existing new homes bonus scheme. Consultation on the method of redistributing new homes bonus grant funding has begun.
* The introduction of a new apprenticeship levy at 0.5% of employer wage bill from 2017/18, £200k for Herefordshire plus a further £200k for schools.
* Reductions to the education support grant by 75%, 10% in 2016/17. Herefordshire receives £1.5m. The local authority role in running schools is expected to be reduced and a number of statutory duties will be removed. However, Herefordshire has already reduced or removed a number of activities covered by the current non-ring fenced grant. Consultation on the policy and funding proposals will start in 2016.
* The public health grant will remain ring-fenced until 2017/18 but there will be a real terms cut of 3.9% per annum.
* Higher costs for rural areas to be recognised by quadrupling the current sparsity grant by 2020.

Provisional funding settlement

The provisional local government settlement 2016/17 – 2019/20 was announced on 17 December 2015 and included additional reductions in revenue support grant (RSG). It was subsequently updated by the department for communities and local government (DCLG) on 23 December 2015 and for Herefordshire:

* Reduces RSG by £25.9m (98%) in 2015/16 to just £0.6m in 2019/20.
* A standalone sparsity grant of £1.3m in 2016/17 rising to £4.1m in 2019/20.
* Care act funding (£1.7m in 2015/16) is no longer a grant but included in the reducing RSG.

RSG reductions have been higher than expected in Herefordshire, due to government re-distribution of overall grant to metropolitan and London authorities. Local government has borne the brunt of central government’s cutbacks and our central government funding in Herefordshire will have fallen by 80% between 2010 and 2020.

The rural delivery services grant has been removed from the revenue support grant (£1m in 2015/16) and allocated as specific grant funding (£1.3m in 2016/17) in recognition of the additional costs incurred when providing services in sparse areas such as Herefordshire.

The settlement confirmed the council tax referendum threshold at 2%.