

### *County Council leadership and 2025 elections*

The May 2025 elections saw Reform UK become the largest party on Worcestershire County Council but without a majority. They won 27 of the 57 seats in May and Jo Monk became leader of the council.

It has been a very tumultuous year with one Reform UK councillor standing down after four months without attending a single meeting. The by-election was won by the Liberal Democrats. The deputy leader of Reform UK then resigned from the party on live TV, leaving the administration with 25 councillors. At time of writing Jo Monk has been replaced by Alan Amos as leader of Reform UK at the council and there is a leadership vote at the next meeting in May.

### *Council Finances*

Last year the council had to ask the government for £31 million of exceptional funding to balance the books. This is a loan that needs to be paid back. It was estimated this time last year that this would grow to £43 million black hole for 2026-27. This became over £70 million by December. Several causes of this deficit have come about. The adult social care bill continues to rise as the population gets older, the special educational needs bill is rising due to a lack of investment in specialist places in the local school system (leading the council having to pay for private provision) and continued overspend on infrastructure projects and home to school transport.

The council budget includes a £59 million loan from the government again this year and a 9% increase in council tax. Any attempts to reduce the over spends and limit the chances of an above 5% increase in council tax happening again need to be coming forward before the summer as it takes time to action cuts to staff and services. The administration is yet to put forward plans but the term transformation is being used in many speeches.

### *Local Government Reorganisation*

Government announcement on the unitary structure for the county are due in June-July 2026. Recent announcements for Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk have shown the 500,000 residents criteria is not a priority and, as yet, not a single whole county approach has been agreed. County council is heavily split on a whole county approach with a vote showing a large number of councillors against it. County is still approaching taking the whole county approach while the districts are leading on a north-south model.

The strategic mayor elections were expected in 2028 but the timeline seems to be becoming more vague and suggestions of 2030 and even 2031 have emerged. This makes things a tad more complicated as the Police and Crime Commissioner leaves the role in May 2028 so intermediary boards etc are likely to need to be formed. At the moment there is consensus in the area that Worcestershire will join Herefordshire and then Warwickshire and/or Gloucestershire. Not expecting updates on this area in the immediate future.

### *School issues and funding for SEND*

Two issues currently appearing in this area. One is the lack of school spaces in Worcester and the construction of the Wychavon New Town. This will have an impact on school places in Pershore. This has now been flagged several times at scrutiny meetings and currently the issue of Worcester schools seems to have been solved without busing young people to Pershore. However the new town has flagged bigger issues with a secondary school expected to be in place for September 2031. It usually takes four years to build a school so we are approaching a point where we would expect to see a plan and funding in place. To be clear the costs are not fully covered by the contributions from developers so government funding would be expected. The council has committed to putting a plan in place for next year and I am following this closely as the capacity issue will have a huge impact on Pershore High given the first three years of the development will have no secondary school in place.

Secondly, recent calculations for overspends for Special Educational Needs provision are showing that the council will have a total debt of over £450 million by the end of 2028-29. The government has recently announced that they will be writing off 90% of this debt but it means the council has to find the £45 million, which currently does not sit on the council budget as part of an agreement with the government. This temporary measure has been in place for years but this change will mean it is back on the books. The council will need to find a way to finance or pay off this money in 2028.

Furthermore, current calculations are showing that these overspends are continuing to rise and at pace. The government has not shown exactly how any future overspends will be written off and the council is in talks with the government over how this will work. Either way, if we assume 10% of the overspend stays on the council books and it is expected to be financed this is millions of pounds every year that will need to be found. The council is still pursuing the new autism school in Malvern as a way to bring more places online but demand is still currently outpacing supply and it is clear that further specialist centres are required. The council has now committed to surveying all council owned buildings to see whether they can be repurposed as centres which would reduce the council reliance on private provision, where costs are rising fast.

#### Increased government funding for highways projects

The Liberal Democrat group secured government funding from the highways budgets to focus on some of the areas residents have been raising. The funding includes:

- £2 million of rural road resurfacing, focusing on areas where roads have not seen funding in recent years
- £1 million for drainage reconstruction where old infrastructure need replacing
- £10 million over two years for improvements to pedestrian crossings and village pavements
- Additional funding for councillors to fix footpaths in their own divisions

There is a also a project to see if the council can retrofit existing buildings the council owns to turn them into special educational needs centres to save money on out of county or private provision.