

LEIGH AND BRANSFORD PARISH COUNCIL
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Minutes of a meeting of Leigh and Bransford Parish Council held at 7.00 pm on Tuesday 28 July 2026 at Leigh & Bransford Memorial Hall

Present: Cllrs D Fereday, N Christie, P Ralph, N Cresswell, L Bayston, J Sharp, J Brazier, P Hawkins and S Chandler; Cllr C McSweeney (WCC/MHDC)

Clerk: Anna Briggs. Also present: 16 members of the public.

20/26 Apologies for absence. Apologies were received from Cllr Rouse and accepted.

21/26 Applications for co-option. No applications had been received.

22/26 a) Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests and Other Disclosable Interests.

Cllr Cresswell declared an interest in planning application M/26/00700/FUL.

b) Register of Interests. Councillors were reminded of the requirement to submit their Register of Interests. No matters were raised.

c) Requests for dispensations under section 33 of the Localism Act 2011. None received.

23/26 Public Participation

The meeting was suspended to allow members of the public to address the Council.

A4103 road closure

Residents described the significant impact of displaced traffic, including Class 1 and Class 2 vehicles and HGVs using local roads, with some vehicles turning in private driveways. They asked whether vehicle or speed restrictions could be introduced.

Particular concern was expressed about speeding and racing on Suckley Road and Sherridge Road. Residents reported wheel-spinning, loud car radios from around 4.00 am and verbal abuse. Traffic noise, together with the hot weather, meant that some residents felt compelled to keep their windows closed in order to sleep. Although residents had been advised that the police would have a presence in the area, they had not seen officers.

Residents considered that insufficient planning had preceded the closure and expressed concern that Worcestershire County Council (WCC) appeared to be passing responsibility to the developer when, in their view, responsibility should remain with the highway authority.

The Chair confirmed that the Parish Council had contacted all relevant bodies and had raised the matter through the press and local radio. Cllr Christie outlined the action already taken to convey the Council's concerns to the responsible agencies and said that road safety and speeding had consistently been Council priorities. West Mercia Police had been invited to the meeting but were unable to attend. Cllr Christie read their latest communication and emphasised that the Council recognised the seriousness of this exceptional closure and its effects. He also read an excerpt from a further email from West Mercia Police stating that they had not been involved in the planning of this matter.

Residents said that advance signage in Herefordshire was inadequate. In particular, signage before Newtown Cross appeared too late for HGV drivers to select the correct lane. Vehicles were consequently continuing towards the closure and stopping outside Storridge Village Hall with hazard lights on and nowhere to turn. It was also noted that signs stating 'Unsuitable for HGVs' and 'No HGVs' conveyed different restrictions and were causing confusion. **ACTION:** Clerk/Council to ask Herefordshire Council to improve advance signage. A resident asked why a temporary route could not have been provided through the new housing estate so that the A4103 could remain open. Cllr McSweeney explained that this would not be legally feasible because the land was privately owned.

Regarding the programme, it was reported that the works could not extend beyond the authorised end date without alternative arrangements being made. Weekend working had commenced and it was hoped that this would shorten the duration.

Cllr Sharp reported that he had spoken to the local police. Officers intended to monitor speed and driver behaviour, particularly around Sherridge Road, although identifying a safe position for speed-camera operation was difficult and the local team comprised only three officers. It was subsequently confirmed that the police had access to a suitable location on Sherridge Road, and Cllr Christie offered the use of his driveway. The police could not prevent HGVs from using unrestricted public roads.

The Suckley Road VAS is currently facing towards Bransford and is due to be rotated to face towards Smith's End Green. The Lengthsman is scheduled to carry out the rotation this coming Sunday. The VAS will remain facing this way for the duration of the closure.

Cllr McSweeney confirmed that signage in Worcestershire was WCC's responsibility, with Headway involved, while signage within Herefordshire was the responsibility of Herefordshire Council. He had made numerous suggestions for improvement and agreed to inspect the Herefordshire signage on his next visit to Hereford. He noted the need to provide sufficient information without creating confusion through too many signs and confirmed that the official diversion route was via Bromyard.

It was noted that local news reports continued to refer to a 35-mile diversion, which residents considered misleading. In response to a question about press involvement, the Council confirmed that it had dealt extensively with the media over recent months and particularly acknowledged the Malvern Gazette's helpful coverage.

A young resident described the effect of the increased traffic on wildlife and said that she could no longer play outside safely. Residents described the current conditions on local roads and paths as unpleasant and unsafe. All parties agreed that road safety was the principal concern.

Particular concern was raised about the stretch along the Sherridge Road from the Memorial Hall to the Coles Green turning as many people walk along this stretch of road to exercise their dogs on the Hall field. Cllr McSweeney agreed to inspect it, including overhanging branches, and possible temporary measures such as cones were suggested. Concern was also expressed about the PRow footpath from the ford which comes straight onto the highway at the Suckley Rd/Sherridge Road junction. Cars travelling at speed come very close to those leaving this footpath onto the junction.

Cllr Chandler said that WCC, as highway authority, held statutory responsibility for highway planning and that, in his view, its handling of the closure had been inadequate. He asked Cllr McSweeney to press for improved signage on the Herefordshire approach, inspection of the footpath and overhanging branches, and direct observation of HGV movements. He acknowledged that HGVs could not be prevented from using unrestricted roads and that a Traffic Regulation Order would take months to introduce.

A resident asked how local people could make their concerns heard. Cllr Christie confirmed that the police had supplied a dedicated email address through which residents could report HGV and speeding incidents. Residents were encouraged to report incidents and, where safe and lawful, provide video evidence. **ACTION:** Clerk to publish the address on the Council's website and social media that evening. The Chair asked that relevant contact details be publicised and that the Clerk be copied into correspondence so that matters requiring Cllr McSweeney's assistance could be forwarded. Cllr Wells was identified as WCC Cabinet Member with responsibility for Highways. A resident reported that she had contacted him, but the matter had been referred elsewhere and the subsequent response had been unsatisfactory.

Residents requested regular progress reports. Cllr McSweeney believed the works were on programme but agreed to seek confirmation. A resident had heard that later footway works might require another closure; Cllr McSweeney was optimistic that a further full closure would not be necessary. **ACTION:** Parish Council/Cllr McSweeney to obtain a progress report. A resident asked whether compensation was available for the inconvenience and risk experienced. No compensation scheme was identified at the meeting. Cllr McSweeney acknowledged the perception that more should have been done, said that considerable work was taking place behind the scenes and agreed to visit the area regularly to monitor conditions.

Proposed Community Land/Community Hub

Residents alleged that relevant comments submitted following the previous meeting had been redacted or removed from the MHDC planning portal and questioned whether this was permissible or good practice. They also reported that application documents appeared to have been replaced by amended versions, retaining the original publication date but without the original versions remaining available. They considered that this made changes difficult to identify and undermined confidence in the process.

The Chair confirmed that planning officer Anna Priestley-Clark had been contacted to ask if any of the information the PC thought was missing from the application, and thus preventing a decision, would be forthcoming. She advised that further information would be added to the portal as it became available.

Residents referred to MHDC's Statement of Community Involvement (SCI). They asserted that, because MHDC owned the land and was also the applicant, the proposal fell within Tier 2 of the SCI and required pre-application public consultation. In their view, that consultation had not taken place, creating a conflict of interest and a breach of the SCI. They reported that their complaint had reached stage two and said they felt their concerns were being repeatedly dismissed.

As a comparison, residents referred to Kempsey's football-pitch application, submitted on 19 March 2025, where they said residents had been involved during 2024. They suggested that the Parish Council review that example.

Residents asked the Parish Council to obtain and consider the SCI, hold the District Council to account against its requirements and support meaningful community involvement. They agreed to send the relevant documents to the Parish Council for consideration. Residents also stated that factual information previously attributed to Cllr Rouse, including a proposed January commencement by contractors, had been removed from documents. They questioned the absence of publicly available financial and governance information and the practice of withdrawing and replacing documents.

The Chair confirmed that the latest stated project budget was approximately £3.4 million and advised that, under agenda item 27/26, he would present slides summarising the figures and the decisions of MHDC's Executive Committee on 16 June 2026.

The meeting noted that section 62A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 permits planning applications to be submitted directly to the Planning Inspectorate where a local planning authority has been designated by the Secretary of State on performance grounds. Applicants may choose either that route or submission to the designated authority.

The meeting was reconvened.

24/26 Reports of District and County Councillors

Cllr McSweeney reported that Cllr Pat Jenkins (Green Party) had been elected Leader of WCC and that a Green/Liberal Democrat coalition now controlled the Council. He confirmed that had been appointed Chair of the Environmental Scrutiny Group and looked forward to the role. He had no further MHDC matters to report. In response to Cllr Ralph, he explained that MHDC had been designated under section 62A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 in relation to major applications. Applicants for schemes of more than ten dwellings could therefore apply directly to the Planning Inspectorate or continue to apply through MHDC; where submitted directly, an Inspector would determine the application.

In Cllr Rouse's absence, members were referred to her district report and separate report on Local Government Reorganisation. The Chair read extracts from the latter; both reports are appended to these minutes.

25/26 Minutes of the Parish Council meeting held on 26 May 2026

The minutes, having been circulated, were approved unanimously and signed by the Chair.

26/26 Progress reports on matters from the previous meeting not otherwise included on the agenda

The following updates were received:

- a) Bollards, Somers Terrace: The bollards had now been installed. The Council thanked Cllr McSweeney.
- b) Mobile mast: To be considered under item 29/26.
- c) Ditch at Chapel Lane: Cllr Sharp reported that the Lengthsman would arrange a meeting with South Worcestershire Drainage during the following week.
- d) White gates and road closures: Cllr Sharp reported that the Lengthsman would clean the white gates during the A4103 closure but would not work on Suckley Road or Sherridge Road while the roadworks continued because conditions were unsafe. Further closures were noted: the road from Alfrick towards Knightwick from 3 August; the road through Leigh on Monday 3 August; and one-day closures at Hopton Lane, Alfrick, and Brockamin on 3 and 4 September respectively.

27/26 Planning

- a) a) Minutes of the Planning Committee meeting held on 23 June 2026. The minutes, having been circulated, were approved and signed.
- b) b) Community Hub update. Using slides, the Chair presented information obtained since the Planning Committee meeting, including the minutes of MHDC's Executive Committee meeting on 16 June. Subject to planning permission and approval of CIL funding, grass-pitch works were expected to begin in September and construction of the building in January 2027. The estimated project cost was now approximately £3.4 million, with a reported funding gap of £2.46 million against the original estimate, proposed to be met from CIL. Cllr Chandler considered that a project of this scale required much stronger governance. He asked that the scheme's purpose be clearly established and that any decision to proceed be supported by a robust audit trail and a sustainable budget; otherwise, there was a risk that the development would not be deliverable. The Chair also reported that approximately 90 representations had been received since 29 June, of which two or three were objections and the remainder supportive to the Badgers.

Following the public participation discussion, it was **RESOLVED** that, once the residents' SCI documents had been received and considered, the Chair be authorised to pursue the Parish Council's concerns and report back. Proposed by Cllr Sharp, seconded by Cllr Hawkins and carried unanimously.

- c) c) Planning applications for consideration

MHDC Reference	Location	Proposal	Recommendation
M/26/00953/S106	2 Jacksons Bank Bransford Worcester WR6 5JB	Request under section 106A(1)(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to modify the requirements relating to legal agreement dated 17.10.24 associated with planning permission M/24/00290/FUL to amend trigger relating to payment of affordable housing contribution from prior to commencement to 12 months following commencement.	No vote needed.
M/26/00885/FUL	Land At (Os 7833 5108) Leigh Sinton	Proposed community centre, car parking and public space including 3 grass football pitches, hard surfaced multi-use games area, outdoor gym and attenuation pond, with access from existing estate road serving the adjacent housing development - Amended site plan and amended floor plans and elevations	The substantive issue considered at the previous meeting remains unresolved and therefore continues to be held in abeyance until it is resolved. Cllr Christie proposed, Cllr Sharp seconded. All in Favour.
M/26/00700/FUL	Interfields Equestrian Lower Interfields Malvern WR14 1UU	Change of use of part of a building from mixed agricultural and equestrian use to residential (Use Class C3) forming a single storey extension to the existing dwelling, facilitated by the installation of external doors. (Retrospective)	In accordance with Minute 22/26(a), Councillor Cresswell withdrew from the Parish Council table for the duration of the item. Approve: Cllr Christie proposed, Cllr Ralph seconded. All in Favour.
M/26/00963/AGR	Land at OS 7657 5225, Smith End Green, Leigh Sinton	Prior notification for a new agricultural track.	No objections lodged under the Scheme of Delegation. Noted.
M/ENF/26/0049	The Low Barn, Dingle Road, Leigh	Enforcement notification only.	No further comments required. Noted.

- d) Planning decisions received

M/26/00301/FUL - Caro Burberry Sculpture Studio, Bransford: Proposed change of use from Class E(g) (light industrial) to F1 (Local Community Education): **Approved.** Noted.

M/26/00733/HP - Fieldwood House Suckley Road, Leigh: Proposed outbuilding, single storey extension to host dwelling and alterations to fenestration. **Approved.** Noted.

M/26/00440/RM – Sunningdale, Stocks Lane: Reserved Matters application following Planning Permission Ref: M/24/01511/OUT (for appearance, landscaping, layout and scale). **Approved.** Noted.

M/26/00963/AGR - Land at OS 7657 5225 Smith End Green Leigh Sinton: **Approved.** Noted.

M/24/01765/FUL - Victoria House, Hereford Road, Leigh Sinton: Part demolition of building, erection of detached two storey dwellinghouse and erection of boundary treatment. **Approved.** Noted.

28/26 Finance

- a) a) Schedule of accounts payable. The payments were noted and it was RESOLVED that the schedule of accounts payable be approved.

Schedule of Accounts - Parish Council meeting, 28 July 2026

A Briggs	Clerk's Pay (May)	910.47
NEST	Pension – payment for May & June	137.58
L Griffiths	Gardener – Jubilee Gardens (May)	49.50
The Sphere	Donation	25.00
South Worcs CAB	Donation	250.00
Leigh Church	Donation	1,500.00
CALC	Training (Cllr Brazier)	48.00
A Briggs	Clerk's Pay (June)	905.97
L Griffiths	Gardener – Jubilee Gardens (June)	49.50
Memorial Hall	Room rent – April – July	163.80
A Briggs	Clerk's pay (July), including: ICO renewal - £52.00 HMRC PAYE/NIC - £384.15	1,342.12

Balance as at: 26th July 2026

Community Current Account: £10,475.74

Business Premium Savings Account: £144,538.02

- b) b) Internal Audit Plan 2025-26. The plan was reviewed and approved unanimously and signed by the Chair.

29/26 Support from the National Landscape Team for a potential Neighbourhood Development Plan review

Members noted that the current review would need to be completed by October 2027. It was agreed that no assistance was required at present and that the Council would wait until it was ready to review its own Neighbourhood Plan. **ACTION:** Clerk to inform Cllr Rouse. Cllr Hawkins asked whether telephone masts might be relevant. Cllr Sharp reported that land belonging to Nicolls Organ Builders had been earmarked for a proposal, with a planning application expected shortly, although it would not cover Bransford. He also referred to the booster system at Alfrick and noted that O2 and EE did not permit text messages to be carried through the radio-wave system.

30/26 Updates

- a) Haywood Drive pathway/footway alongside the A4103. Cllr McSweeney reported that Highways considered there was insufficient space to provide the footway without moving the kerb and altering the carriageway. Deferred to the September meeting.
- b) Potters Reach Phase 2. No update. Deferred to the September meeting.
- c) A4103 road closure. Discussed under public participation. **ACTION:** Cllr Christie to contact the police and offer use of his driveway.
- d) Worcestershire Local Government Reorganisation (Unitary Authority). The Chair summarised Cllr Rouse's report. He also referred to a CALC communication from Chris Wayman regarding an event at the Cricket Club on 15 September, from 10.00 am to 2.00 pm, with lunch provided.

31/26 Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

There had been no change since the previous meeting and an update was expected in October. Current projects were the Scout Hut 'Big Build' and the WC and kitchenette at Leigh Church, for which diocesan approval would be required. Cllr Sharp referred to a self-build property which was now being let and asked whether this affected its CIL status. **ACTION:** Chair to investigate.

32/26 Reports from working groups and representatives

- a) New-build developments: Cllr Chandler had nothing to report.
- b) Memorial Hall Committee: Cllr Bayston drew attention to the new hallway floor and reported that the folding doors would also be replaced.
- c) Play areas: Cllr Christie reported that the smaller wooden play equipment was beginning to decay. As maintenance could only prolong its life, he suggested establishing a reserve for replacement equipment and asked whether CIL could be used. An annual provision of £3,000 was suggested for consideration in the next budget.
Woodland: Cllr Christie reported that all was well and asked when the next tree inspection was due.
ACTION: Cllr Sharp to check the date of the last inspection.
- d) Open spaces: Cllr Sharp reported that no grass cutting had taken place for several weeks and anticipated increased cutting once rain encouraged growth.
- e) Lengthsman Scheme: Cllrs Sharp and Brazier had no further update. Cllr Chandler suggested that the Lengthsman inspect the footpath raised during public participation.
- f) Parish footpaths: Cllr Christie had nothing further to report.
- g) Road safety and VAS/SID: Cllr Chandler had nothing to add to the earlier discussion.
- h) Worcestershire CALC: Cllr Bayston confirmed that the next meeting would take place in September.

Members discussed gullies which had not been cleared effectively and the risk of flash flooding when rain fell on the hard ground. **ACTION:** Cllr Christie to report through the WCC portal that ditches near his property were overgrown. The Chair would re-report ditches near his property because the previous work had been inadequate.

33/26 Items for future consideration. None.**34/26 Dates of next meetings**

The next Parish Council meeting will be held on 29 September 2026 and the next Planning Committee meeting, if required, on 25 August 2026.

All meetings commence at 7.00 pm at Leigh & Bransford Memorial Hall.

The meeting closed at 9.26 pm.

Chair..... Date

Appendix: Reports from WCC and MHDC**Supporting Our Communities**

As we move into summer, I would like to thank everyone who has applied for funding through my District Councillor Ward Budget and to recognise the incredible work being undertaken by volunteers, community groups and parish councils across our ward.

I have been delighted to support a range of local initiatives, including funding cricket balls for Alfrick Cricket Club, supporting the fantastic Suckley Festival with car park management equipment, helping with the Poppy Wall at Leigh Church, providing chocolates for the Rushwick Santa Party and supporting a local group that meets at Escape to the Lake to provide swimming sessions for people with neurodiversity. This last project is particularly close to my heart and highlights how community-led activities can make a real difference to people's wellbeing. There has also been substantial investment in local facilities through Malvern Hills District Council's Legacy Grant Scheme:

- **Alfrick Village Hall** – £7,400 for acoustic improvements.
- **Suckley Parish Council** – £14,995 towards improvements to the pavilion at the playing fields.
- **Leigh and Bransford Memorial Hall** – £14,950 for acoustic improvements.
- **Legacy Moto CIC, Bransford** – £31,520 towards the creation of a motorcycle café and support charity focused on wellbeing, community connection and support.

Significant investment has also been made through funding generated by development in Leigh Sinton.

The Scout Group previously secured £90,000 of Section 106 funding from Malvern Hills District Council, with the full support of Leigh and Bransford Parish Council. More recently, the Parish Council has allocated a further £72,000 of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding towards the ambitious Big Build project, helping to deliver a new Scout Hut and improved facilities for future generations.

In addition, £32,000 of CIL funding has been allocated by Leigh and Bransford Parish Council to Leigh Church to install a toilet and kitchenette, creating a more accessible and flexible community facility for both church and wider community use.

Taken together, these projects represent more than **£260,000 of investment** in our local communities. That is an extraordinary amount of funding for a rural ward and reflects the dedication of those who have developed projects, completed applications and worked tirelessly to bring ideas to life.

What strikes me most is not simply the money that has been invested, but the people behind it. Across the ward volunteers give countless hours of their time to improve facilities, organise events, support young people and strengthen community life.

As significant sums continue to be invested locally, it is important that residents are aware of the opportunities available and have a voice in helping shape future priorities. The success of these projects demonstrates what can be achieved when communities come together with a shared vision.

My sincere congratulations and thanks go to everyone involved. We are fortunate to live in an area blessed with such strong community spirit, commitment and ambition.

Proposed Leigh Sinton Community Hub

One of the most significant decisions taken by Malvern Hills District Council's Executive Committee in June was the approval of funding to support the proposed Leigh Sinton Community Hub through the Council's Community Infrastructure Investment Plan.

The proposed development represents an investment of approximately **£3.43 million** and would provide a new community building incorporating a large multi-purpose hall, meeting room, kitchen and changing facilities, together with three natural grass football pitches and more than 13 acres of publicly accessible open space. The Executive Committee also approved the allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding to bridge the remaining funding gap, recognising the strategic importance of the project to the district's future community infrastructure.

A planning application for the proposed Community Hub has now been submitted and is currently awaiting determination by Malvern Hills District Council. It is important to stress that the Executive Committee's decision relates to funding only and **does not grant planning permission**. The application will be considered through the normal planning process, taking account of planning policy, consultation responses and all other material planning considerations before any decision is made.

Should planning permission be granted, the proposal would provide modern, accessible community facilities for local residents, support Leigh and Bransford Badgers Football Club with new pitches and changing facilities, address a recognised shortage of sports provision in the area and create a significant area of publicly accessible green space for informal recreation and community events.

The scale of the proposed investment demonstrates the Council's commitment to investing in community infrastructure. If approved, it would represent one of the largest investments ever made in community facilities within our ward.

Planning Service Update

Many of you will be aware that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has designated Malvern Hills District Council's planning service for the determination of major planning applications.

The designation was made because the Council's performance in determining major planning applications fell below the Government's required threshold during the assessment period. The designation relates solely to major planning applications and does **not** affect the Council's ability to determine householder applications, smaller developments or the vast majority of planning applications submitted within the district.

Malvern Hills District Council has formally appealed the designation and has set out the exceptional circumstances that affected performance, including resource pressures and the complexity of a number of applications during the assessment period. The Council has also implemented a range of improvements within the Planning Service and continues to work towards improving determination times.

The appeal process is currently underway and I will provide further updates as information becomes available.

Local Government Reorganisation

The Government is expected to announce further details during July regarding Local Government Reorganisation and the proposed creation of new unitary authorities.

Although district and county councils continue to operate as normal, all councils across Worcestershire are currently awaiting confirmation of the Government's preferred model and the timetable for implementation.

These proposals represent the most significant change to local government in Worcestershire for more than 50 years and will shape how local services are delivered in the future. As further information becomes available, I will continue to keep parish councils updated and share any information that may affect our communities.

Looking Ahead

As always, I remain available to assist parish councils and residents with district council matters and welcome the opportunity to discuss local issues, planning matters, funding opportunities and community projects.

Thank you once again for everything you do to support your communities. The commitment shown by parish councils, volunteers and local organisations continues to make our ward a wonderful place to live, work and visit.

Best wishes,

Councillor

Sarah

Rouse

District Councillor - Leigh, Alfrick and Rushwick Ward

Local Government Re organisation

Good Afternoon All

You may already have heard that Worcestershire will move to two unitary authorities from April 2028, bringing together the services currently provided by the county council and the six district councils into two new organisations.

To prepare for this, elections will be held in 2027 for the new shadow authorities. These councils will spend around a year establishing the new governance arrangements, budgets, staffing structures and service responsibilities before formally taking over in April 2028.

Current Malvern Hills District Councillors will remain in office until March 2028, meaning there will be a period of around ten months when both existing district councillors and the newly elected shadow councillors are serving. Once the transition is complete, residents are likely to be represented by two unitary councillors for their division, alongside their parish councillors where applicable.

Experience from other areas of the country shows that reorganising local government on this scale is a lengthy process. While the new authorities will legally come into existence in 2028, it is likely to take several years before new systems, staffing structures and ways of working become fully established. Initially, the most significant changes tend to be at councillor and senior leadership level, with wider organisational restructures taking place over time. During this period, maintaining service delivery while implementing major organisational change can be a significant challenge.

The Government's ambition is that larger unitary councils will simplify local government, reduce duplication and make decision-making clearer for residents. Whether those ambitions are realised will depend on how successfully the new organisations are established and whether any efficiency savings are sufficient to offset increasing demand for services.

This week, several councils, including Somerset and Shropshire, were issued with Best Value Notices. Both are unitary authorities facing significant financial pressures, demonstrating that reorganisation alone does not remove the underlying challenges facing local government finances. Somerset, in particular, entered the unitary system with substantial existing debt and has continued to experience financial difficulties. These examples serve as a reminder that while structural reform may create opportunities for efficiencies, it is not, on its own, a solution to the financial pressures affecting councils across the country.

One of the biggest pressures on local authority budgets continues to be adult social care, alongside children's services. An ageing population, increasing complexity of need, workforce pressures and rising provider costs mean demand has consistently outpaced funding growth for many years. In many councils, social care now accounts for well over half of all day-to-day expenditure, leaving a much smaller proportion of the budget available for services that, while not statutory, make an important contribution to residents' quality of life.

As Worcestershire moves towards two unitary authorities, there will inevitably be interest in how future budgets are balanced. Residents will rightly want to know whether the anticipated efficiencies from local government reorganisation can protect investment in discretionary services such as community development, health and wellbeing, economic development, leisure, culture and environmental initiatives, or whether increasing social care costs will continue to absorb a growing share of available resources.

Alongside local government reorganisation, the Government has commissioned the independent Casey Commission, chaired by Baroness Louise Casey, to undertake a fundamental review of adult social care in England. The Commission is considering how care should be organised, funded and delivered over the coming decades, recognising that the current system is under significant financial and demographic pressure. Its work is expected to examine issues such as long-term funding, support for unpaid carers, improving independence and prevention, integration with the NHS, and ensuring that social care is sustainable as demand continues to rise. I am fortunate to be involved in the local government response to the Casey Review through my role as Deputy Leader of the Health and Wellbeing Committee at the LGA. What happens next with social care will affect people's lives for decades to come.

While the Commission's recommendations have yet to be published, they could have a significant impact on local government. If national reforms alter the way adult social care is funded or commissioned, this could fundamentally change the financial responsibilities of councils. Equally, if no major changes are implemented, local authorities are likely to continue facing the challenge of meeting growing statutory care costs while maintaining investment in the wider services that support healthy, resilient and connected communities.

The next two years are therefore likely to be a period of considerable change for local government in Worcestershire. Alongside creating two new councils, there will be wider national decisions on the future of social

care and local government finance. Together, these reforms will shape not only how councils are organised, but also the services they are able to provide and the priorities they can afford to fund in the years ahead.

Sarah Rouse

DRAFT