



# Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire

Restoring confidence in rural democracy



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# Foreword

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## Tackling the unprecedented national debt will be a huge challenge for all public services for years to come.

Effective engagement with local communities will be crucial in the nation's recovery. We are facing a crisis of confidence in our political system. An imbalance of responsibility and power between 'Whitehall' and local authorities needs to be addressed by moving decision-making and influence to local communities. Shifting power in this way is an essential change because we know many people have a desire to get involved at a local level to affect and shape the things that matter to them. Centrally inspired solutions and diktats often fail to deliver where it matters – on the ground, which is understandable – how could central bureaucrats possibly know more about what is happening in a community's back yard than the community itself?

For many people, local councillors are the first point of contact with services and therefore it is with them that we have the first opportunity to demonstrate what real engagement and involvement can achieve.

Up and down the country I have come across some fantastic examples of councils and councillors effectively involving their communities in the running of their neighbourhoods. We are already good at understanding, supporting and representing people. Nevertheless, we should always be ready and prepared to learn about new ways

of interacting with the people we represent.

Devolving power to local authorities is only half the story. There is now a greater expectation than ever before for councils to make sure they are listening to and acting on the wishes of local people. That's the deal.

The Herefordshire approach puts local councillors at the heart of the engagement process. It is essential that public services, the community and the voluntary sector join forces to tackle local issues together. Through this approach, we hope to learn even more about councillors' connection with communities and what matters to them.

### **Bob Neill MP**

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State  
Communities and Local Government

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# Introduction

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Herefordshire's residents are rightly proud of their towns, villages and hamlets, each of which has its own unique history and rich traditions. Like all rural communities, people here are resourceful and have always known and supported their neighbours. The best councillors know most people and most of the things that are going on, but often find it hard to make practical things happen. We find ourselves faced with urban solutions that often don't meet the real rural challenges in housing, planning, transport and infrastructure.

With the reputation of national politics and confidence in public services at an all-time low and the need to make drastic spending cuts at the forefront of politicians' minds, the connection with our communities has never been more important. Public services in Herefordshire are well-placed when it comes to these connections. For example, Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire (the local primary care trust) are pioneering closer partnership working, with a single chief executive, integrated senior management and excellent relationships with other public service, community and voluntary sector partners.

Local councillors need both ambition and support if they are to make localism even more effective: ambition to reach shared solutions with their communities for what are inherently rural issues; and support from public service managers to make this happen. It was with this aim that we

embarked on the Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire programme.

**Councillor Roger Phillips**  
**Leader, Herefordshire Council**



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# Executive summary

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## Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire

Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire is a politically-led approach that connects local councillors with their communities. Politicians are of their place, recognise the resourcefulness of rural communities and know their electorate well. If given support they can work with local community leaders to save money and to convene public services around what matters most in their communities – and in so doing restore confidence in rural democracy and strengthen local society.

Many of the Total Place pilots have focused on thematic areas and involved political leaders and portfolio holders, which can leave other councillors feeling disconnected. Democracy that is firmly rooted in the councillor's place – his or her ward – becomes every bit relevant to citizens and communities.

The focus of the programme was to strengthen the fabric of local society through: placing councillors at the heart of the community; helping local public services, the community and the voluntary sector to work together; empowering communities to do more for themselves; and encouraging public services, and crucially local people, to take practical action. By building a connected network of robust local societies at ward level we ultimately lay the foundations for successful Big Society.

The approach to the programme was simple and consistent. The process need take no longer than ten weeks from beginning to end. The themes, which varied locally, included:

- what can communities do to sustain rural enterprise?
- how can we work together to achieve shared solutions?
- how can we create a thriving community for young people?

Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire has already generated many solutions to the challenges faced by rural communities, and these are now being developed. These include investing in broadband infrastructure, celebrating volunteering, combining community and public service assets and changes in how the council approaches housing, planning and transport.

As this document explains, if you are interested in using this approach your purpose needs to be clear. You should also expect resistance from all sides when you first start out – community trust is hard to earn, and for good reason. Planning and celebration of what is already working will pay off. Also note that communities are fed up with over-consultation, and that expectations around more funding need to be managed.

**Mari Davis and Councillor John Lamb  
Advisers, Local Government Leadership**

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# The politics of place

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When Herefordshire first embarked on Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire there was determination that it would take a Total Place approach. And a commitment to ensuring it placed politics and local councillors firmly at the centre of the initiative rather than, as has happened in some areas, around the margins.

Total Place is an initiative that looks for ways in which a whole-area approach to public services can lead to service improvements and cost reductions. Redesigning public services so that they work together in a different way – with service users always at the centre of things – can achieve efficiency gains while making life easier for residents. To date, most pilot projects have taken a thematic approach. This usually involves council leaders and executive portfolio holders agreeing a strategic approach but unfortunately, this also excludes many frontline councillors, who are left with the feeling that Total Place is distant from the places that they represent. It's easy then for them to feel disconnected from the initiative and to see it as irrelevant to their work.

But when Total Place starts with and is firmly rooted in the places that councillors represent, it becomes both relevant and incredibly valuable. Building it up from a foundation in frontline wards acknowledges councillors' role at the heart of their local communities and galvanises that community and the public services that support it to work together in a different way. This

makes service redesign a local reality that makes sense to those who are part of that community.

## Why politics needs to be at the centre of the approach

The row over MPs' expenses has damaged both the reputation of politicians and the public's confidence in the political system more broadly. The fact that councillors were not in any way a part of this debacle, which was a Westminster issue, has not prevented the electorate from tarring us with the same brush. The good news, however, is that local politicians have a significant advantage over their central government peers.



Local elected politicians stand at a crucially important place in times like these. They have one tremendous advantage over national politicians, which is that they are fundamentally in and of their places in a way that Westminster politicians rarely can be. Councillors live and work from day to day among the people who elected them. They do not spend the working week in the capital, but in the villages and towns where their voters do. They are not parachuted in through selection contests open to national party activists, but are chosen from among local people who are active in their communities. Councillors share the experience of people who voted for them. They are rarely full-time politicians; even among leaders of councils running very large organisations, it is common to find teachers, community workers and business people who balance their political commitments with a working day leading ordinary lives. The summit of their ambition is to lead and serve in their places, not to play on the distant Westminster stage. They are rooted in their places. They connect with what parents, entrepreneurs, NHS patients and care users feel about those places in a way that MPs and ministers with two (and more) homes and working lives do not.

### **Who's in Charge?**

A manifesto for a new politics LGA, 2009

Local councillors come into contact with voters far more frequently than MPs do. This gives them a great opportunity both to stay in touch with what people are thinking and to demonstrate why they came into politics in the first place – usually for the simple reason that they wanted to make a difference.

Many residents expect that councillors can use council resources to fix particular problems in their wards, but this only works so far. What we do know is that in these wards – and particularly in rural wards – there is also an effective self-help infrastructure consisting of local people. This presents a great opportunity. If politicians stop to think about the people who live and work in their wards, they will start to see that there is a massive untapped resource of expertise, ideas and the potential to get things done. Very often the only thing that is missing is someone to focus that potential and bring people together as a potent force for change; the local councillor should be that person.

### **How this approach changes the role of the councillor**

This approach changes the traditional role of the local councillor into one that combines that of facilitator, networker and fixer and places him or her at the centre of community engagement. It provides frontline councillors, some of whom feel that the cabinet model of governance leaves them with little to do, with satisfying opportunities to make a real difference by championing or convening local initiatives.

As an added benefit, ward councillors who work closely with their communities will raise their political profiles and are likely to see their efforts rewarded at future elections. And it is not just individual councillors who will benefit politically from their hard work on behalf of residents: it will also help to restore public confidence in politics. Given that local government needs to attract more skilled people to serve as councillors, demonstrating just how effective a councillor can be is likely to help persuade other active community

members to put their names forward for election to office.

On top of this, local councillors will also have the opportunity to play a role in reducing the national debt by cutting costs – something which local government will have to find ever-more creative ways to do. Engaging the community at ward level to help define what really matters to them and to identify ways of doing things differently and at no extra cost is the way forward.



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# A simple method - far-reaching consequences

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One of the most impressive and powerful features of Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire is the way in which a simple, straightforward process – summarised on page 13 – can have far-reaching consequences for the local community and local democracy. Indeed, the entire process need take no longer than ten weeks from beginning to end. And, while it is important to take a consistent approach across different locations, there is enough flexibility in the programme to allow the details to be adapted as required.

## Initial conversations

The starting point will be scene-setting conversations between the leader, cabinet, scrutiny, chief executive and management team to agree the purpose and the scope of the project. Having a clear, focused and easily-expressed purpose is critical to the programmes overall success.

The next stage involves discussions with political group leaders, local partners and community and voluntary sector agencies in order to build mutual agreement. This is also the time to encourage councillors from all political parties to volunteer. Make sure they realise that they may have to work in partnership with other councillors, as the locations chosen for the programme will be natural communities that may not conform to ward boundaries, which means that different wards may be grouped into one place.

Next, nominate a director or other senior manager to support each place. He or she will act as a liaison and ensure that all relevant services respond to any issues raised during the programme duration. You should also identify learning facilitators – people from partner agencies who will listen to the personal stories of people attending events and feed what they have learnt into the system.

## Identify a theme

The councillor or councillors should meet with the director and walk or drive around their chosen locality. This is an opportunity for councillors to share their knowledge of the place, its people and its assets. It should also enable them to identify the theme or issue that matters most in their community, as well as organisations and individual community leaders who would be willing to get involved.

## Planning the first event

This first, small, group, will help with planning the first event; they will also help to identify up to 50 invitees. Possible attendees could include representatives of the local chambers of commerce; parish or town councillors; headteachers; local GPs or other healthcare staff; advice bureau representatives; and people from the local information centre. Representatives from relevant partner agencies plus community and voluntary sector organisations working within and beyond the authority's boundaries should also be invited.

This meeting, designed to plan the first event, should be quite informal. The councillors, director and five or six community leaders meet somewhere such as the village hall or a local pub to discuss the purpose and theme of the event. Groups may well find that the original idea will be refined or even substantially changed at this stage.

The group should also identify the total amount spent on the community by public services and voluntary organisations to make links between services and to start identifying where public money could be spent more effectively. It is also useful to come up with a straightforward way to explain this to other people – for example, a video can be very effective.

Further planning meetings can be held before the first event, if necessary.

## The first event

This should be held in the locality – obviously – and will usually last for half a day. Conversations, which should be led by the councillors and the director, could include: a celebration of what is working well; the history of the community or an interest group; identifying the issues faced and what solutions might be possible; agreeing actions that can be taken together immediately; and planning for conversations in the community over the coming month.

Learning facilitators will be present to ensure that as many individual stories as possible are heard and fed back into the process.

It is critical that councillors and the director keep a note of any immediate actions agreed at the event, and that they follow them up appropriately.



## Conversations in the wider community

Over the following period, which can last up to a month, community leaders and public services talk with a wide range of people in the community. This could be organised through existing groups such as sports clubs and parent and toddler groups, or held in less formal settings such as the local shops, farmers markets and so forth. Ensure that people whose voices are not normally heard get a say, for example by tapping into community leaders' networks. The detail of the conversations will vary but all should involve listening to a wide range of perspectives on what matters to people and how shared solutions might be developed.

## Planning the second event

Draw on the results of the first event and the community conversations when planning the second event. For example, you may choose to invite different attendees, either to get different perspectives or to gain further insight into issues raised at the first event.

## Second event

Conversations could include: feedback on what has happened since the first event, including messages emerging from the wider community; the questions that need solutions; and the identification of practical actions, both short and longer term, that can be taken forward together.

## Moving forward

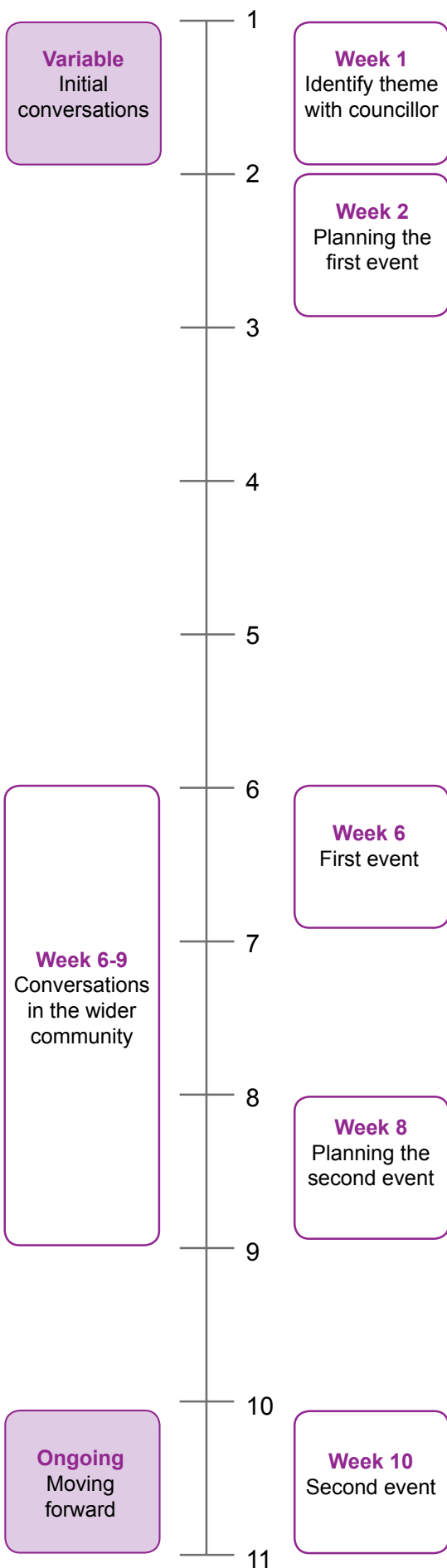
Build an ongoing conversation with the community by finding and agreeing ways in which these local discussions can continue. For example, this might involve a small group of community leaders meeting regularly with the councillors and the director to take the specific theme forward and to ensure that the right actions are taken in the right way.

As these conversations progress, consider focusing on different themes and/or involving different members of the community.

Finally, take everything that you have learnt throughout the process and feed it back in to the relevant public services.



A timescale for the process



The four guiding principles of the process are:

Place councillors at the heart of their community

Public services and community and voluntary sector work together differently locally

Empower and encourage communities to do even more for themselves

Do something practical – take action

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# Local politicians listening to the heart of their community

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## Putting the people back into local politics

“When I first became a councillor I held the firm belief that people came before politics. Some 30 years later Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire has demonstrated that my faith has not been misplaced. It is also clear that something has been lost over the years and there is a need for all of us – councillors, officers and other service providers – to remember that we must do things for people rather than doing things to them. We know that we can trust the heart of Herefordshire; now we need to listen to it.”

**Councillor Olwyn Barnett**  
Mortimer ward, Conservative

## A convenor of public services

“Every bit of my role is about convening public services in Bromyard. It is only through real dialogue between the secondary headteacher, the family-centre manager, the leisure centre, our youth workers, and the parish council that we can do things differently with and for young people in this town. The councillor’s role as facilitator is now as important as anything else we do. It is about allowing people to work together for a common goal.”

**Councillor Alan Seldon**  
Bromyard, Independent

## Building a reputation of trust

“The debacle over MPs’ expenses and second homes has left public respect for politicians at an all-time low. The mistrust of Westminster politicians is no doubt affecting local councillors. And very often the council doesn’t do itself any favours, either. Connecting with and listening to people in practical ways is far more likely than other options to increase the regard of local people. Local politicians are very well-placed to heal the reputation of politics in a democratic society.”

**Councillor Terry James**  
Kington, Liberal Democrat



## Letting go of control

“This is the most valuable thing I have been involved with since becoming a councillor. The project has connected people in communities to each other, encouraging involvement and enabling the community to take the lead in talking about the things that matter most to them. Influencing the way that our local authority works has allowed the community to feel part of the decision-making process. Working in this way helps the community and council officers to resolve issues that arise from the perceived controlling way that officialdom works. It was great to see democracy working in the most rural parts of Golden Valley. By looking over the parapet we have found many people on the same wavelength.”

### **Councillor Philip Price**

Golden Valley, Conservative

## Managers as the missing link

“As rural councillors we are already well-known in our wards and connected to our communities, but in the past we have felt unable to effect local change. This approach has raised our profile in our wards and means that people will see us as able to make practical things happen. The missing links were between the town, the council and its partners – it doesn’t work without officer support.”

### **Councillor Bernard Hunt**

Bromyard, Independent

## Observing with eyes and ears

“I can stand up in cabinet now and say ‘the local people have said this’ – my people, the people I have lived among and represented for the last 20 years. I think it’s a string to my bow and I feel very privileged to have heard these things. Lots can come from it.”

### **Councillor Beris Williams**

Golden Valley, Independent

“Before this we had consultation fatigue. This is a new way of thinking about how we provide services and how we can listen to young people in a different way. This gives young people and others the feeling that they can do something for themselves with support from us.”

### **Councillor Alan Seldon**

Bromyard, Independent



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# Communities totally at the heart of their place

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Communities are looking for a different conversation with their councillors and public services: one where they are listened to and can influence the agenda. Politicians of all parties, searching for ways to make huge cost savings across the public sector, would do well to turn to their communities to find shared solutions. A vibrant participative democracy can prioritise the services that people want and see communities themselves taking more responsibility. This in turn can only strengthen our representative democracy.

Each councillor selected the particular community members who they wanted to be involved in planning and attending the events. These are some of their responses:

## Consulted to death

“You seem to think that the more you communicate with us the happier we are with you. Not so. It makes us think something will actually happen and then it doesn’t, so we get really frustrated and can’t be bothered to get involved again.”

“Public services are bureaucratic and unwelcoming. There has been a feeling of remoteness from the council and decisions are made for people. Don’t do it to us, do it with us.”

“Council officers need to understand what is really needed in communities. Our experience is one of being told, not being listened to. Then you don’t feel you can influence the things that affect you.”

“It’s the feedback loop people miss out on. You consult us and then we never hear any more. We don’t see any actions as a consequence. If it can’t be done just be honest and tell us.”

## A rich tradition of self-reliance

“For generations we have done an awful lot to be self-reliant in Mortimer Country and, like many rural communities, we are proud of this. We have excellent volunteers and village wardens, we know and care about our neighbours and we have shown determination in raising funds for things that matter to us. We also know that, as spending on public services reduces all the time, we are going to have to find even more ways to support our own health and wellbeing. This might mean getting more people involved in supporting the young, the elderly, those who are ill or dying and other people with particular needs in our communities. The pendulum has swung. We can’t expect it all to be done for us.”

## The council really listened today

“This hasn’t been about consultation or information-giving. The council really listened and we had a dialogue. We agreed the questions that mattered to us together and were then able to find shared solutions, which ultimately means our community will take shared responsibility for making it happen – and of course that the solutions are more imaginative.”

“We have always been able to do things for ourselves – what stops us is access to services and funding. They need to give us the right information, help and support. The community was galvanised and a new community spirit emerged. Power to the people worked”.

## We can do things on our own

“The Kington Blackboard (a community website) has been an amazing success and has got us talking to each other in real time. Not that there is agreement – far from it – but all views are welcome. We don’t need the council to do it for us. Reaching the hearts of Kington came at the same time and inspired us to do a community newsletter. Face-to-face dialogue and social media went hand in hand.”

## Living side by side

“Our communities are pretty cohesive and we all know each other. That said, people sometimes resent newcomers – we can feel that they treat us as country yokels and come here to organise us. Some of them have different cultures and don’t always fit. But, if we are honest, we acknowledge that they bring an awful lot to our rural communities, which can be insular and isolated. We know what our communities need and they have the experience and know how to make it happen.”



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# Public service managers listening with their hearts

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Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire is an ongoing dialogue with communities, not a one-off event. It is a conversation that began with listening, not telling; it is a conversation that encourages debate, challenge and the emergence of shared solutions. There is more to be done to connect public services to their councillor, the community and each other at a local level. Doing so can radically change democracy as we know it.

Senior managers from Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire acted as lead officers for each place. Representatives from the public services and the community and voluntary sector working across Herefordshire were invited to each event. Learning facilitators listened to and recorded individual stories at the events. These are some of their perspectives:

## Get out more

“It was a really good experience and gave me a very strong sense of why we are here and what we are here to do. Hearing about the little things that make a big difference in communities and remembering that these things really do matter was very useful. A greater empathy can only make me better at my job. A better understanding of rural needs can only mean better services and savings for the public purse.”

### **David Powell**

Director of Resources, Herefordshire Council

## Buzzing with ideas together

“It is not often that you get everybody together from many parts of Herefordshire Council, the third sector and the community to discuss the issues that real people in Herefordshire have. It was also an opportunity to celebrate the responsive community spirit in some of the very rural parts of Herefordshire. The meetings buzzed with ideas and promises of engagement to ensure that solutions were delivered – let’s do this again.”

### **Colette Colman**

Chief Executive, Age Concern Hereford and Localities

## Actions speak louder than words

“This new approach to community engagement succeeded because it brought together democratic representatives, community champions and those responsible for the provision of services in the local area. It maintained a positive focus by building on the strengths of the local community, what is already working effectively and the aspirations that will motivate future activity. The focus was on practical actions and developing the leadership for future activity. Responsibility and accountability were kept at the local level, empowering the community rather than just engaging with it. It worked well when focusing on one specific section

of the community by ensuring that young people were included in and supported by wider local leadership but still able to keep control of their own agendas. A new process of community development has been established that we hope will provide a sustainable way for communities to maintain local leadership.”

**Richard Betterton**

Herefordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services

### It won't happen without managers' support

“Senior officer support is essential - it just won't happen without it. At one level, this process is time consuming for us as managers. At another, can we afford not to listen and have a more equal dialogue? Councillors are our most valuable resource in rural communities. They know what matters and we need to hear this. As officers, this is all about listening and hearing in a different way. There is still a way to go for public services to work together locally, for us to work out what our role as senior leaders is and to create a can-do attitude throughout the council and the NHS.”

**Annie Brookes**

Head of Chief Executive's Office, Herefordshire Council and NHS Herefordshire

### Spending power

“We began the event in Kington with a DVD showing public services and what was spent on each of them in the town – more than £20 million per year. The impact was immediate. I think the community realised we did care and was amazed at how much was coming in to the community. Our challenge together is to spend it on the things that matter. Trust is

vital if we are working towards a more equal relationship – trust that is hard to earn and can easily be lost if we don't keep our side of the deal.”

**Geoff Hughes**

Sustainable Communities Director, Herefordshire Council

### Go with the flow

“I welcomed being in a position where the council wasn't in control and we had to go with the flow. By listening and reflecting back I think the councillors felt enabled and supported – and in turn I noticed they handed over power to the young people in Bromyard. It's a move away from informing, directing and telling people. Potentially a challenge to my leadership instincts, but ultimately far more liberating.”

**Michael Hainge**

Director of Environment and Culture, Herefordshire Council



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# Rural solutions to rural challenges

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Many people living in the towns and remote rural settlements in Herefordshire are proud to have families going back generations. People visit and choose to stay, attracted by the rural area, safe environment, sense of community and friendliness of the people. Yet rural living is not without its challenges, particularly at a time when public services are looking to reduce their costs and market forces are reducing provision in market towns. Hidden deprivation can disadvantage communities that live in these areas. Access to basic services can be poor, with large distances to travel to service outlets and high delivery costs. The answer is for public services and communities to work together to find rural solutions that are unique to each place. Here are some of issues identified during Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire, along with potential actions to address these challenges.

## Invest in broadband infrastructure

Most urban areas already benefit from high-speed, low-cost broadband. In many rural areas there is no broadband service, or, at best, a very slow one; there is little competition between providers to keep prices down; and mobile phones often have limited reception. Young people commented on the difficulty of doing homework without access to the internet, while businesses struggle to compete on a level playing field. Although the issues around national investment in

infrastructure are complicated, it is a potential solution to many rural challenges. Access to services and information could be improved and the need to travel reduced, making working from home more realistic and therefore also reducing carbon emissions.

## Celebrate volunteering

Volunteers are a vital part of increased self-sufficiency in rural communities. They underpin many services, yet many volunteers go unrecognised. Politicians should celebrate their involvement while ensuring that the support and infrastructure is in place to support them. Increasing the numbers of volunteers by drawing from a wider pool – especially of older and younger people – could have the added benefit of reducing isolation and loneliness among people in these groups.

## Enterprise and business

Communities said that encouraging small business was an essential part of sustaining rural living. Herefordshire's proportion of home workers is above the national average and it already has many world-class entrepreneurs. Support from the council is important to encourage more people to set up and sustain business in the area.

## Young people

Young people in Bromyard identified the problem of the last bus from Hereford being

at 6pm and the problem of access to things to do outside the town. This issue is relevant to the rest of the rural county as well. Ideas to improve transport included using the minibuses which are owned by the schools and clubs with volunteer drivers; buses only leaving towns when they are full; information about lifts being posted on Facebook; making cycling safer; and having bus timetables that link in with events.

## Planning and housing

Although housing-needs surveys show that communities want affordable housing and want local people to be given priority, there is often a minority voice that opposes such developments. Many are in favour of planning policies that are flexible enough to allow rural communities to continue to evolve with small-scale developments. Clear communication will give communities the confidence that this is possible. The development costs associated with small housing developments are often higher than those for larger ones in urban areas, and delivery more complex, but community support helps improve the chances of success.

## Access

Most small communities are keen to maintain services such as village halls and local pubs. Planners can help to maintain such services by refusing change-of-use applications. However, communities working together to support and encourage the use of existing facilities, rather than travelling out of the area, is essential.

## Transport

Rural communities that have access to a shop or post office often still need to travel to local towns for other goods and services.

Bus services cover many areas, but they are often limited, not well used and heavily subsidised, which is not viable in the long term. Communities and transport providers working together can identify the routes people want to use and encourage greater usage. It is also possible for community transport to operate with smaller vehicles that cost less to run.

## Providing information and advice

Very rural communities often lack access to the information and advice that they need to access the services and benefits to which they are entitled. This is because they do not live near the council's Info Shops or CAB service centres, and transport is limited. As a result of this programme, however, benefits staff have been working with Dorstone Front Room in Golden Valley, a community meeting place, to help customers understand the criteria for claiming housing and council tax benefits. The aim is to improve benefits take-up and to ensure people get the discounts to which they are entitled. This is an example of the council taking services to the community and delivering them in an accessible way. There is an opportunity to extend services by using local facilities to create community access points.

## Assets

The community and public services often have a number of separate buildings, each with their own running costs and staff. A 'total capital' approach is now being taken in Herefordshire: all assets have been mapped and discussions are taking place with public services and communities to look at shared usage. This will improve local service availability and benefit the public purse. In some instances it will mean transferring assets from the council to communities.

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# Restoring confidence in rural democracy: ten lessons for political leaders

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## Recognise the resourcefulness of rural communities

Rural communities are already very resourceful; rural people have always found ways to support each other. They can be even more self-sufficient when their councillors and public services listen to them and give them the support that they need to make their ideas happen. Issues such as rural transport and planning need rural solutions reached by members of the community, not urban blueprints imposed by outsiders.

## Take the town hall to the village hall

In isolated rural communities making your voice heard is not as simple for residents as just dropping into the town hall. Local councillors represent their community to the council, not the other way round, so taking scrutiny into the village hall will aid politicians' understanding of what matters most to communities and will help them to involve residents in getting it sorted.

## Councillors need support from managers

Rural councillors are the eyes and ears of the community and are thus a most valuable resource, but they need support from

managers. Give councillors the tools to be rural cabinet members for their wards, and managers the time to listen to real people. Both reconnect with their hearts – the reason why many came into public service in the first place.

## Prepare for austere times ahead

People know that public services are facing a period of austerity and that huge savings need to be made. With the MPs' expenses scandal still fresh in people's minds, being honest can increase the trust in and reputation of local councillors. Involved rural communities will have plenty of ideas about how to save money.

## Value and make use of local activists

Everyone knows everyone in a rural community. Local activists will willingly target and reach those people public services might struggle to reach – but they have to be engaged and asked for assistance first.

## Listen to good old-fashioned gossip

Rural councillors are totally of their places and live and breathe the fresh air – that's why they were elected. Remember the chance remarks on the school playground, at the farm gate, in the pub, in the village

hall. They can give genuine insight into what really concerns people: winning hearts is all about these conversations. Listening properly means that you will hear about the little things that, when sorted, can really make a big difference in communities. It's a return to village politics.

## Knit it all together

Knit together what wants to stay separate. That means using social media and face-to-face dialogue to help counter rural isolation. Unite newcomers and those who were born and bred in the area – harnessing diversity can bring growth.

## Respect the uniqueness of rural communities

The one thing that all rural communities have in common is that they all do something different. Respect the unique identities and the histories of each community; each has its own story. It is by doing this that politicians can embrace an agenda beyond each town and parish, uniting around the issues that impact across the place.

## The politics of influence

Politicians have more influence when they listen rather than trying to control. Rural politics isn't about communicating what public services are doing, or, as a councillor, always doing things for people. People want to be heard and know that councillors care too – if they feel this they may engage in the change themselves.

## It's never too late to learn

No one said it would be easy, but be bold. Councillors should be willing to experiment and to accept that it's okay to fail sometimes. But they should experiment and learn with the community, not in a classroom. Getting it right is all about understanding yourself and how groups of people work best together: in community with each other.



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# Conclusion and next steps

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“If we are going to achieve anything with this project we now have to grasp it and lead it, not shilly-shally around.”

## **Councillor Philip Price**

Golden Valley, Conservative

Councillors engaging rural communities in real conversations about local solutions to the issues that matter most to them is the only way forward. It's the only way to achieve the savings necessary in public services while shifting power to communities. Support from public services at a local level is crucial.

Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire was just the start of the journey. We need to make sure that the dialogue between council, community and public services continues in the places where it is already underway. More localities will be invited to join the programme, including the first urban area, part of Hereford city.

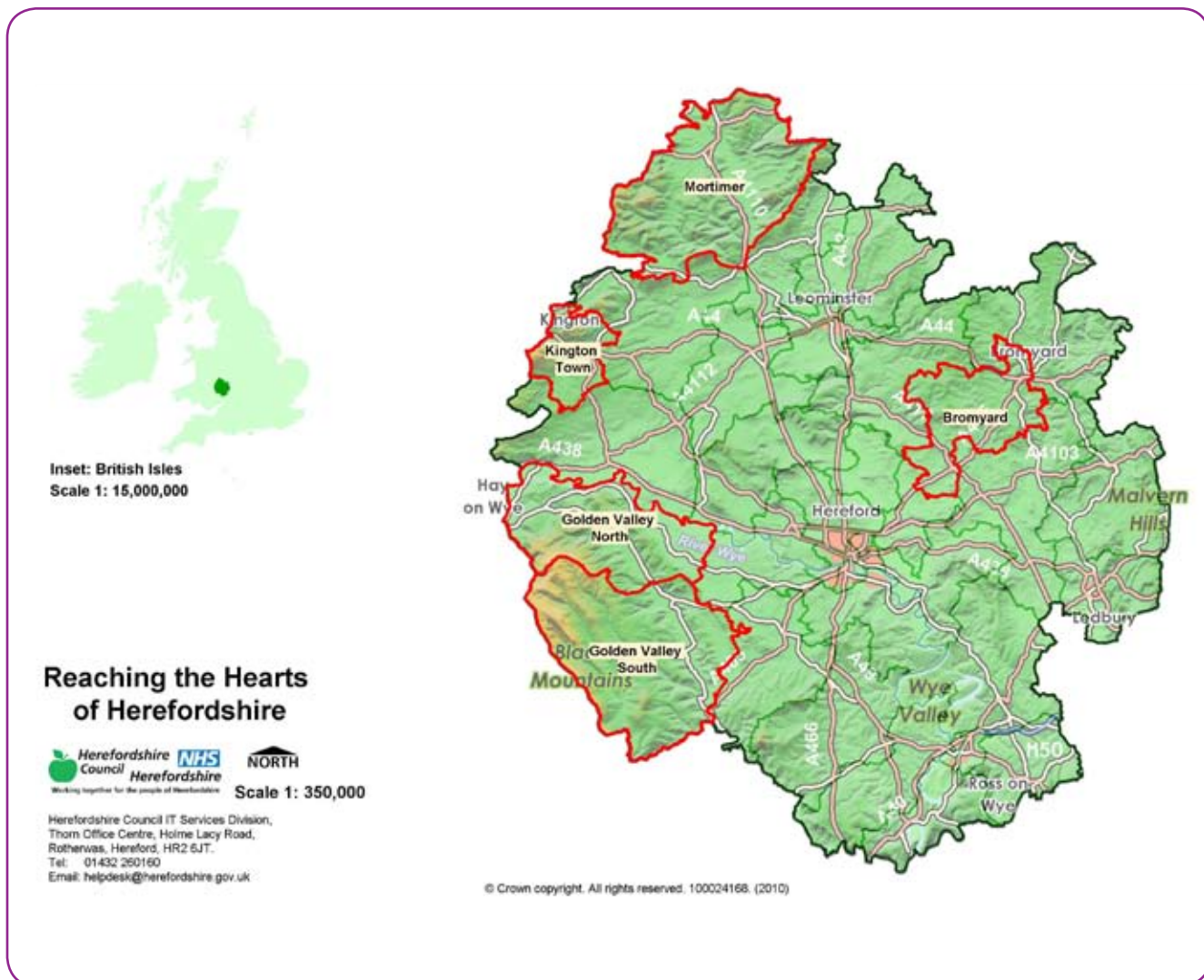
The dialogue needs to continue at all levels: with council and NHS management so that everyone has a can-do approach to taking action; with councillors, so that we can make the most of modern ways of being a councillor; with parish councils, so that we can work even more closely together; with partner agencies, so that we share ways to engage communities and so that all managers understand the potential of working alongside local councillors; and with central government, so we can share rural solutions to overcome some of the barriers to rural living.

Finally, we would like to thank everyone who has been involved in making Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire such a success, and wish others who take up the approach the same success in their own rural communities.



# Places for real

## Appendix 1



## Herefordshire overview

Four rural communities volunteered to try the Reaching the hearts of Herefordshire programme: the market towns of **Bromyard** and **Kington** and the remote rural areas of **Mortimer** and **Golden Valley**. Each chose a relevant theme to discuss at the events. Early actions have been taken in each place with longer-term planning now underway.

## Mortimer

Councillor Olwyn Barnett, Conservative

**Theme:** What can the community do to be even more self-reliant in health and wellbeing?

The five parish council groups were at the heart of the programme. The issues considered included access to a first response scheme in case of emergency; first aid training; developing the village warden scheme; support to children and families; and use of volunteers.

### Early actions

- The Red Cross is delivering first aid training in Mortimer.
- Youth services, community youth groups, the school, the parish council and Teme Valley youth project are looking at how the public and community buildings in Wigmore can be better used for the benefit of children and young people.



## Golden Valley

Councillor Beris Williams, Independent, and Councillor Philip Price, Conservative

**Theme:** What can the community do to sustain enterprise in the area?

Our goal was to find ways to ensure that people in Golden Valley had the option to stay in the area at all stages of their life, from early education to work and then retirement. Jobs and enterprise were seen as a vital part of this. Discussions covered topics such as encouraging and sustaining business; making decision-making and influence more local; ensuring housing needs are met; encouraging and sustaining farming; and ensuring that planning needs are met.

### Early actions

- A Golden Valley youth forum has been set up on Facebook by young people so that those living in remote places can communicate with each other after school.
- Benefit staff are working with Dorstone Front Room, a community meeting place, to raise awareness of the criteria for claiming housing and council tax benefits, and to consult on the quality of forms and letters issued to customers.



## Kington

Councillor Terry James, Liberal Democrat

**Theme:** Working together better to achieve shared solutions.

The community wanted to build on its good community spirit and many active groups by making sure that it gets the very best from public services and that it has a strong voice in what happens in the town and the surrounding area. The conversations included how to find out what matters to members of the Kington community who did not attend the event; improving transport provision; the importance of the local shops and how to make sure they prosper; better use of buildings and money; and reducing energy consumption.

### Early actions

- Launched the Kington Chronicle ([www.kingtonchronicle.co.uk](http://www.kingtonchronicle.co.uk)) a community newsletter in electronic and paper form that runs alongside a community website called Kington Blackboard ([www.kingtonblackboard.org](http://www.kingtonblackboard.org))
- Established the Kington Hub, which locates key voluntary sector organisations in one building.
- Set up a small fund which the community can use for small local priorities such as Christmas lights.



## Bromyard

Councillor Alan Seldon and Councillor Bernard Hunt, both Independent

**Theme:** How can we create a thriving community for young people in Bromyard?

It is vital for Bromyard's young people to have high self esteem and a sense of belonging if the community is to build a future for the next generation and continue to thrive. Young people were involved in discussing a new youth club; a drop-in café; and improving transport. They also took the lead in a number of areas and helped to publicise what was going on.

### Early actions

- Young people, with adult support, are running a monthly teenage disco in the local Falcon Hotel.
- The new Youth of Bromyard (YOB) forum has held a number of meetings to explore issues that are important to young people and to organise activities.
- We have convened the youth service, schools, the Bromyard Centre, the Hope Family Centre and the Conquest Theatre to meet each quarter, coordinate their approach and look at how best to support young people with projects.



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# What works and what doesn't

## Appendix 2

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### Expect initial resistance

This will come from political groups, parish councils and communities. The best ways to overcome this are to listen; be prepared to change the focus; involve those who want to be involved; concentrate on what is working; and go with the energy. Any mistrust of public services will have been built up over many years and won't be overcome in an instant.

### Set clear objectives

Keep the purpose very clear and simple, and repeat it at every opportunity. If it isn't clear there will be confusion.

### Planning pays off

It may be a cliché, but it's true, especially when planning includes a cross-section from the wider group of people that will attend the events.

### Manage expectations

There isn't any more money to go around and this approach won't bring any, so be honest and say this upfront.

### Avoid consultation fatigue

Be clear that this isn't another consultation exercise – it's a two-way conversation that will lead to shared actions.

### Avoid formality

Keep things as informal as possible. People might expect strict governance structures, long speeches and formal dress, but these things all stifle debate and dialogue. We found that the best conversations were informal: chats in the pub or the school library; conversations held around tables in the parish hall over a cup of tea and some locally-produced food.

### Celebrate what is already working well

It's very irritating for communities when anyone assumes that they are not already active. If councillors make this assumption, it creates the impression that they do not know their community and its issues.

### Learn from failure

At some point everything will go wrong – it's virtually inevitable. Don't let that put you off. Stick with it and work through the tension together. Failure is our greatest teacher.

## Use learning facilitators

They're incredibly beneficial: they make sure that events and discussions are as effective as possible. At events, some people won't connect with the theme, or will have a different story they want heard; others will become irritated and want to let off steam; and still others will have perspectives that just wouldn't have been heard in a larger group. Learning facilitators listen and record a living story.

## Remember to enjoy yourself

If the right people are in the conversation, real wisdom and solutions will emerge. What could be more fun – or more rewarding?





## Local Government Leadership

Local Government House

Smith Square

London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7187 7388

Facsimile 020 7187 7383

Email [info@localleadership.gov.uk](mailto:info@localleadership.gov.uk)

[www.local.gov.uk](http://www.local.gov.uk)



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