

Cumulative Equality Impact Assessment – Budget Proposals 2014/15

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1. Background

Herefordshire Council needs to have delivered savings of £33 million by 2016/17. To reach this target, we must make savings of £15 million in the financial year 2014/15. In order to achieve this, we have produced and published a number of budget proposals.

Assessing the potential impact of our decisions on “equality groups” and the most vulnerable in our community is an important part of our decision-making process, so we have assessed the potential impact of individual budget proposals using our Equality Impact Assessment process. However we also need to assess the “bigger picture” of these impacts, and this is what this document starts to explore.

The budget proposals are being consulted on between December 2013 and February 2014. We will be listening to the views of our communities in this time, and then feeding these views back into the Equality Impact Assessment process before the proposals go to Cabinet on 7 February 2014.

At this stage in the process, the budget proposals, if implemented in their current form, would have greatest impact on disabled and older people. Where an equality impact assessment reveals a risk of adverse impact on equality groups, a clear understanding of what that impact is must be provided so that any decisions made are informed. Also, where appropriate, action must be taken to mitigate against the impact. This summary recommends that, in addition to carrying out further evidence gathering and consultation with equality groups on the proposals, consideration also is given to developing options to reduce or mitigate the impact on people with protected characteristics, in particular, disabled and older people. It also recognises that there are two factors which, although not “protected characteristics” and not covered by the Equality Act 2010, could compound the disproportionate impact on the equality groups; these factors are rurality, and low income.

2. National Context

There are a number of external factors that affect the context of the proposals that we have developed. Whilst these factors are out of our direct control, we have considered them in both the development of our proposals and any mitigation that we have identified. These external factors include:

- the Comprehensive Spending Review (which means that we are operating in a context of reduced funding for local authorities)
- Welfare Reform
- Education Reform
- Herefordshire demography and geography (rural nature of the county)

3. Legal Context

Herefordshire Council has a legal duty under the Equality Act 2010 to pay 'due regard' to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by the Act
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it

In practice, having 'due regard' means that consideration of equality issues must influence our policy and decision-making. Equality Impact Assessments are the tool that we use to shape and demonstrate our decision-making.

"Protected Characteristics" are:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) does not prevent us from changing or ceasing services, but it does require that the decision maker:

- (a) is informed about any impact the change/closure is likely to have on any group who share a protected characteristic
- (b) pays due regard to that impact when taking the decision on change/closure

Complying with the PSED means better quality decision-making.

4. The Potential Impact

The Council is committed to supporting people to live full and independent lives within their local communities. While assessing the cumulative impact of our proposals on equality groups, we have identified two additional factors that could compound the impact. These factors are:

4.1. Rural isolation (due to the rural nature of the county)

According to the 2011 Census, Herefordshire is the 4th largest county (in geographic area) in England, with 54% of its population living in areas classified as rural. These rural areas make up 97% of the land area. The proposals will impact upon our rural communities. We recognise the need to offer support to enable people to exercise more choice and control over the services they receive.

We acknowledge the importance of services such as transport and the rural bus service in providing access to services for rural communities and, in particular, older and disabled people and those on low income.

We acknowledge the need to ensure that our services are as accessible as possible, and are looking at alternative models of delivery to support these budget proposals, including the use of technology to reduce our costs.

We also recognise that these changes will have implications for carers, the majority of whom will be women, and that we need to fulfil our responsibilities to carers. Service users who are facing changes to residential or day centre support may face considerable uncertainty, worry and disruption. These impacts could be disproportionately felt by older and disabled service users, and specifically service users with a learning disability. We also recognise that the changes and remodelling we do around “early years” and children’s centres will have an impact on this same group.

4.2. Risk of financial exclusion (due to low income)

We understand that people are experiencing financial difficulties in the current economic climate. We also recognise that imminent changes such as housing benefit cap will impact on some people, particularly large families that are waiting for social housing. It is recognised that some of our proposals might further impact on these individuals.

There are also some fee increases for non-statutory services that we provide, for example car parking, and we understand that these fee increases all add up. We have also recently decided to change the support through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme. The Council Tax Reduction Scheme provides essential help towards the Council Tax liability for all claimants on a low income. By continuing to assess entitlement on a means-tested basis, similar to the national approach to means-tested benefits, the scheme is equitable, albeit that the level of support overall may be reduced to working age claimants.

Many of the services that are not a statutory requirement for the council to deliver will be delivered at full cost recovery (ie. charged for), or outsourced to an alternative provider.

Again this may not impact on specific protected characteristics, but will impact on those who have a low income.

4.3. Potential positive impact

Where people are eligible for social care support, the aim is to support them in a way that reflects their preferences and the outcomes they wish to achieve. However, this needs to be balanced against the Council's responsibilities to make best use of available resources.

The national move to Personalisation in social care, education and health is driven by a commitment to ensuring that individual service users are in the driving seat about how their needs are met. We believe personalisation will bring benefits to people giving them greater choice and control over their lives.

As part of this budget process, a number of services are being redesigned and re-commissioned in order to make improvements and reduce costs. Many of these changes will have a positive impact on those who share a protected characteristic, particularly people who use residential and nursing care.

It is also widely expected that improved broadband and better use of technology will bring benefits to a number of people who share a protected characteristic, enabling better access to services.

5. A Targeted Approach

A more targeted approach to delivering services will allow us to deliver positive impacts for our most vulnerable communities, but we do recognise that, in these cases, other customers with fewer needs may experience a reduction in services. For example:

We are proposing to make changes to the way that we provide Day Opportunities. Existing and potential service users will be assessed for eligible needs based on the Herefordshire Fair Access to Care policy.

This follows other moves within the Children's Wellbeing directorate towards more targeted operating models, including:

Remodelling of "early help" and children's centres

This potentially may reduce opportunities for some children and families who will have to be more self reliant. This needs to be addressed through market development and working with the voluntary sector. It has been identified that children from vulnerable groups in Herefordshire have a significant gap in their early years development compared to their peers. Some areas of Herefordshire may experience a different way of delivering the core offer, or people may have to travel to benefit from services. This may mean that some vulnerable children and families may not access services and therefore not develop. We propose to address this issue through the development of a new "hub and spoke" service offer, and from clarifying the relationships with the voluntary, independent and school sectors and publishing service offers which clearly show what is available to support families.

We also recognise that a reduction in preventative work that focuses on the highest risk, could have the effect of increasing demand for services in the future. This will be mitigated by much more effective targeting of the work of council services and its partners such as health services.

6. Impacts on Herefordshire Council Staff

The proposals that we have developed present a significant amount of change for our staff. In the future, we will be a smaller organisation. There are a number of proposals across all directorates which reduce the number of posts within teams. This has resulted in some staff being put 'at risk', and ultimately resulted in compulsory redundancy.

The drive to identify efficiencies in the way we carry out our services also affects our staff, with a number of changes to both the internal systems we use and our ways of working, for example:

- our working arrangements with Hoople
- the reduction and redesign of the service level agreements around Human Resources, IT and Finance

- the flexible/mobile working model to reduce cost and improve efficiency

7. Conclusion

The attached table provides an overview of the budget proposals that we have identified as possibly having a significant impact on particular groups of people who share a protected characteristic. It is evident that some groups are more adversely impacted upon than others. We have tried in all circumstances to mitigate against any negative impact of the individual changes and, where significant impact has been identified, a detailed Equality Impact Assessment has been carried out.

We are aware that there are some protected characteristics which are referenced very little throughout our Equality Impact Assessment process. These include gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, religion or belief and sexual orientation. This may be because some of these groups are not affected by our proposals, but we recognise that this may also be because we have gaps in our monitoring information, or because we simply have not identified these impacts yet. We welcome any views on the impacts of our proposals on these, or other, groups throughout the consultation period.