

Cumulative Equality Impact Assessment of Budget 2016/17

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1. Background

Herefordshire Council has a saving target of £10.9m in the financial year 2016/17. In order to achieve this, budget proposals have been prepared. Those that affected services had an equality impact assessment completed, and these were considered before decisions were taken on the budget.

Over the next four years a total £28m of savings are required.

This document summarises the Equality Impact Assessment for the budget proposals for the financial year 2016/17. It highlights:

- The key differential impacts of potential budget decisions for legally protected groups
- Where a single decision or series of decisions might have a greater negative impact on a specific group
- Ways in which negative effects across the council may be minimised or avoided, and where positive impacts can be maximised or created

Budget decisions can have different impacts on different groups of people, either changes to individual services or in the way those changes have an impact cumulatively.

The council has a legal duty (under the Equality Act 2010) to evidence that we have paid due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the act
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it

The budget EIAs demonstrate how we are considering impacts, and action we will take where needed.

2. The Budget Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) Process

In Herefordshire we use an EIA process to identify the main potential impacts on groups covered by legislation (the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010¹).

EIAs have been completed by service leads on the budget proposals where the potential change impacts on service provision. These have been reviewed for the proposals 2016/17 and, where new proposals have been put forward, new impact assessments have been completed. Also, where we have implemented changes we have reviewed the impact of those changes, summarised in appendix 4.

¹ "Protected characteristics" are; age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation (also marriage and civil partnership, but only in relation to eliminating discrimination)

The aim of the EIA is to support good decision making; it encourages public bodies to understand how different people will be affected by their activities so that policies and services are appropriate and accessible to all and meet different people's needs.

The aims of an EIA become especially important at times of straitened budgets, enabling us to:

- Think about what the council is trying to achieve
- Consider what impact the decision will have on different groups
- Target resources to those who may be most vulnerable
- Fund services which respond to people's diverse needs and save money by getting it right first time

Nationally there have been a number of successful legal challenges to funding decisions because public authorities have failed to show such consideration during the process. In such cases the public authority will almost always be required to start the decision-making process again, with improved consultation and evidence gathering to identify the impact on particular groups.

We have agreed that we must focus our priorities and resources towards:

- Enable residents to live safe, healthy and independent lives
- Keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life
- Support the growth of our economy and the number of people in work
- Secure better services, quality of life and value for money

Unfortunately, it is not just severe funding reductions we are facing, but also an increasing population with additional needs, particularly in priority areas such as children and young people and adult social care.

In the simplest terms, we can no longer continue to pay for all the services we have traditionally provided. Therefore we must prioritise the services we provide and how we provide them. This means we may need to radically reduce or completely stop providing certain services, especially if they are not within our priority areas. However, even within our priority areas, we still need to make reductions to balance our budget.

3. The National Context

The budget proposals are being developed within the context of on-going reduced public funding to local government.

Key national issues that may have an equality impact include:

- Final comprehensive spending review
- Specific grant funding allocations
- Increased integration with health
- Devolution of services to local authorities
- Retention of business rates
- The on-going costs of refugees and asylum seekers
- Welfare reform
- Education reform

4. The Local Context

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.

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

We understand that people are experiencing financial difficulties in the current economic climate.

5. Equality Impact Assessment Findings

The EIA process and consultation have been based on identifying whether or not service delivery impacts are likely to be different for a person because of their protected characteristic (with a focus on where impacts may be worse).

There has been an overall assessment of the Equality Impact Assessments that have been produced and the findings are:

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