

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at The Shire Hall, St. Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Thursday 24 October 2019 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor David Hitchiner, Leader of the Council (Chairman)
Councillor Felicity Norman, Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Gemma Davies, John Harrington, Trish Marsh and Ange Tyler

Cabinet support members in attendance Councillors John Hardwick, Peter Jinman and Alan Seldon

Group leaders in attendance Councillors Terry James and Jonathan Lester

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance Councillors Jonathan Lester

Other councillors in attendance: Councillors Mike Jones and David Summers

Officers in attendance: Alistair Neill, Richard Ball, Chris Baird, Claire Ward, Andrew Lovegrove and Stephen Vickers

92. OPENING REMARKS

The leader of the council welcomed attendees and announced that the next meeting of the cabinet would be held in Leominster, as part of an effort to engage with communities across the county.

Concerns were expressed from a group leader about the travel implications of holding meetings outside Hereford, commenting that the city was centrally located in the county. These concerns were noted and it was confirmed that arrangements would be kept under review.

93. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors Crockett and Harvey.

94. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

95. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2019 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

96. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Pages 7 - 8)

Questions received and responses given are attached as appendix 1 to the minutes.

97. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

No questions were received from councillors for this meeting.

98. CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL UPDATE 2018/2019

The cabinet member children and families introduced the report and noted the key achievements in 2018/19. She reminded cabinet members of the seven corporate parenting principles in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and stressed the importance of doing everything possible to support children in the care of the council and care leavers.

The director for children and families endorsed the comments from the cabinet member and noted that this report covered the second year of a three-year strategy. He outlined a number of areas of progress since the end of March 2019 to update cabinet since the end of the financial year.

In discussion of the report, cabinet members noted that:

- A wide range of initiatives were in place to help recruit and retain social care staff including an individual training allowance, market forces supplement, clear career pathway and one-off payments for agency staff converting to permanent contracts;
- A social work apprenticeship scheme was planned for introduction in February 2020;
- A recruitment agency micro site had been established and the director was proactive in contacting individuals who expressed an interest in working in Herefordshire;
- The council had a good record on retaining permanent staff, with most changes a result of agency workers coming and going or permanent staff moving to other children's social work roles within the council;
- A number of councillors had attended the alternatives care panel and all councillors were encouraged to attend to see the work that took place, councillors were also welcome to attend the corporate parenting board;
- The numbers of children coming into care had been stabilised but was still comparatively high;
- It was proposed to establish an edge of care service as it was felt this would be beneficial in reducing LAC numbers, the service would work with families when they were at a point of requesting that the children be taken into care and also work to enable children to return home safely;
- special guardianship orders (SGOs) gave carers parental rights for children up to the age of 18 and were usually granted to extended family members, the same financial assistances was now given to those with a SGO as to foster carers;
- children were being placed with adoptive families much sooner;
- it was not viable for the Refugee Action service to continue as numbers were so low, the council would need to consider whether it was viable to commission a replacement service;
- it was important that the views of children in the care system and care leavers were considered in developing services.

Group leaders were invited to present the views of their group. The update on the strategy was welcomed but concern was expressed regarding the continuing high numbers of LAC. It was noted that:

- there were a number of ways that councillors could contribute to supporting children in care, including ensuring that services were performing well;
- looked after children wanted to have normal experiences and did not necessarily want their status as LAC highlighted;
- it was important to listen to staff who worked with children in care as they often had good ideas on how best to support LAC;
- the report could be more explicit about the initiatives to improve recruitment.

It was suggested that all councillors receive a hard copy of the current strategy so they could see what was expected and encourage ownership of the strategy in its next revision.

It was resolved that:

the progress of the corporate parenting strategy as outlined at appendix 1 to the report was considered and cabinet did not identify any further actions required to improve the delivery of the strategy.

99. FOSTERING AND ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORTS 2018/19

The cabinet member children and families introduced the report and highlighted the key achievements for the adoption and fostering services during 2018/19. In particular it was noted that the length of time for children to be placed with adoptive families had reduced and the Ofsted inspection in 2018 identified several areas of good practice. The report referred to the plan for Herefordshire to join Adoption Central England (ACE) but this had now been completed.

In discussion of the report, cabinet members noted that:

- Herefordshire had some difficulty in finding a regional adoption agency that would accept them and the move of the service into ACE had been a significant undertaking but had been delivered within planned timescales;
- Being part of a regional agency gave access to a larger pool of prospective adopters for children in Herefordshire;
- To attract foster carers to work with the council rather than with independent fostering agencies it was important to provide them support, an example of this support was the opening up of the 'orchard' benefits scheme to foster carers which would give access to discounts on activities;
- It was unclear why numbers of enquiries for the sleepover scheme had reduced, there were a number of factors which might discourage potential carers including lack of space as adult children were still at home;
- There were also a number of reasons why foster carers resigned from the service, including changes in family circumstances and retirements due to age.

Group leaders were invited to present the views of their group. The work of foster carers and adopters was praised and it was noted that:

- These services had performed well for some time and it was hoped this would continue under ACE;
- Work to reduce the numbers of children in care was important to reduce pressure on these services;
- The reduction in the time to secure placements was welcomed; and
- It was important that recruitment continued to focus on getting the right people.

The work of foster carers and adoptive parents was recognised by the whole cabinet.

It was resolved that:

(a) The performance of the adoption service as outlined at appendix 1 to the report was reviewed, no additional risks to achievement of objectives were noted and no further mitigating actions were required; and

(b) The performance of the fostering service as outlined at appendix 2 to the report was reviewed, no additional risks to the achievement of objectives were noted and no further mitigation actions were required.

100. ANNUAL REVIEW OF EARMARKED RESERVES

The leader of the council introduced the report. He highlighted that Herefordshire had an appropriate level of reserves as a percentage of expenditure, as shown in the comparison with other similar councils. The leader drew attention to the supplement that had been published for this item, which included recommendations for two new earmarked reserves. The first was to undertake research on housing options while the second was to bring forward edge of care services ahead of the current plans.

A minor correction was noted to the supplementary information on the proposed edge of care service – the final sentence should refer to a previously planned introduction from April 2020 rather than 2021.

The chief finance officer explained a number of points in relation to the report namely that:

- Reserves were held for a number of reasons;
- School reserves were held on behalf of council run schools;
- The financial resilience reserve had been established a few years earlier in recognition of the difficulty of projecting future council income and was being topped up each year through the minimum revenue provision;
- Reserves could also be called on to fund invest to save programmes that could not be delivered through day to day budgets;
- The pension risk reserve represented an adequate reserve with the pension fund having had a good run on investment returns and being over 90% funded;
- The government had indicated that roll out of business rate retention would be delayed for at least another year so the business rates smoothing reserve would help to deal with unknowns and guard against successful business rate appeals which could result in significant costs to the council;
- Unused grants would be examined to see if they could be spent, depending on any conditions attached;
- Unused schools grants included the devolved schools grant which was held centrally for schools, £400k for high needs and other small grants that the schools forum would determine how to spend;
- The settlement monies reserve related to an ongoing dispute and would be available once the legal process was concluded;
- Reserves were reviewed annually and reported to cabinet, in some cases figures were based on estimates of what was required while others related to actual grants received.

The cabinet member housing, regulatory services and community safety explained the background to the proposal to create an earmarked reserve to explore options for delivery of housing in the county. She highlighted that:

- Residents were facing difficulty in finding suitable housing across the board;
- There were a number of ways in which the council could deliver additional housing and all would be considered;
- The investigation would support a business case that would inform consideration of further investment.

The chief finance officer reminded cabinet members that the current proposal would create the new reserves and set out what the money was to be spent on. How it was to be spend would be subject to a further decision at a later date.

Cabinet members were keen to explore all avenues and to consider issues such as the right to buy. It was noted that with the reduction in grants from central government the council had to look for ways to maintain financial stability.

The cabinet member children and families spoke on the proposal to create an additional reserve for children's safeguarding noting that:

- The council had historically high levels of LAC and as well as being a matter of concern for the wellbeing of young people in the county it resulted in significant expense for the council;
- Edge of care services would be an investment in reducing the numbers of children who needed to be taken into care;
- The proposals had been discussed for some time and there was an opportunity to move ahead during the current financial year by use of this reserve.

Cabinet members noted the comments that had been made during consideration of previous items on the corporate parenting strategy and the need to reduce demand on children's social care services.

The director for children and families confirmed that the need for this service had been discussed for some time and that a full business case was in the process of being finalised. Part of the proposal would see additional social workers recruited who would not work on child protection but who would reduce workload for the child protection team overall. As with the reserve for housing options, actual spend would require further decision processes.

Group leaders were invited to present the views of their group. The need for the council to hold reserves in order to be able to react to uncertainty was stressed. Demand led services could not always meet all pressures within an annual budget and once reserves were spent it would not be possible to compensate without putting pressure on council tax payers.

Cabinet members recognised that the council was in a positive financial position because of good management by officers and councillors in previous administrations and had the opportunity to invest in delivering the new corporate plan that was currently being drawn up.

The option for the full cabinet to take decisions on actual spend rather than delegate to individual portfolio holders was discussed but it was noted that the same processes in terms of publication of the decision and opportunity for call in would apply in either case. The importance of keeping all councillors and members of the public engaged was stressed.

It was resolved that:

The following changes be made to the reserve balances held, as shown in appendix 1:

- i. **Establish a new earmarked reserve of £150k, utilising funds held in the financial resilience reserve, to fund the investigation of different models of delivering council housing; and**
- ii. **Establish a new ear marked reserve of £550k, utilising funds held in the financial resilience reserve, to fund the initial implementation in 2019/20 of an enhanced edge of care service for young people and support a high quality children's social care service.**

The meeting ended at 8.08 pm

Chairperson

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 24 October**Question 1****Mr D Howerski, Eaton Bishop****To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport**

There are 137 Parish and Town councils in receipt of precept income. Their total spending value in 2019 is approximately £4,622,000. A small 1.25% portion of the £376 Million, that Herefordshire County Council will spend this year.

From the 137 Parish and Town Councils, how many completed an “expression of interest” in Community Commissioning with Balfour Beatty Living Places? From those who did, how many of the Annual Maintenance Plans submitted for each were, “Generic Versions” with no budget figures, which have subsequently been accepted by Balfour Beatty Living Places for the year 2019-2020?

Response

For 2019 / 2020 the ‘Community Commissioning Model’ scheme has had 48 requests to date with 13 completed and 17 progressing. 18 have not been progressed by the relevant parish councils.

Expressions of interest and annual maintenance plans are not part of the community commissioning model requirement but relate instead to the Parish Paths Partnership Scheme (P3 Scheme) and the Parish Lengthsman Scheme. For 2019/2020, 85 parish councils submitted an expression of interest. Of those, 66 parish council annual maintenance plans identified budgets for the schemes to progress. Of these 53 parishes are doing both the P3 and Parish Lengthsman Scheme, 1 is doing the P3 scheme only and 12 are doing the Parish Lengthsman Scheme only.

If any parish council wants to be part of the scheme they should submit the maintenance plan with the identified budget.

Further information is available at

https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/info/200231/parish_councils/207/lengthsman_scheme

Question 2**Dr N Geeson, Hereford****To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport**

This time last year at the Public Inquiry for the Southern Link Road CPOs we were told that the business case for the Southern Link Road was being finalised, but this did not happen during the last four months or so of the previous administration. What were the main reasons for the Southern Link Road business case not being ready to be submitted to the Department for Transport before April/May 2019?

Response

The development of the final full business case for the SWTP progressed following the public inquiry in November 2018. However Department for Transport guidance sets out that the final full business case cannot be formally submitted until all statutory consents have been obtained and a tender price for the scheme has been agreed and included in the business case.

The statutory compulsory and side roads orders for the Southern Link Road were not confirmed (following the public inquiry) until middle March 2019 in the week before the purdah period for the May 2019 local elections began. In addition the tender process for the SLR had not concluded before the purdah and election of a new administration. As a result the business case has not yet been finalised or submitted.