

Minutes of the meeting of Council held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Friday 9 February 2024 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor Roger Phillips (chairperson)
Councillor Stef Simmons (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Polly Andrews, Bruce Baker, Jenny Bartlett, Chris Bartrum, Graham Biggs, Dave Boulter, Harry Bramer, Jacqui Carwardine, Ellie Chowns, Simeon Cole, Frank Cornthwaite, Pauline Crockett, Dave Davies, Barry Durkin, Mark Dykes, Matthew Engel, Toni Fagan, Elizabeth Foxton, Carole Gandy, Catherine Gennard, Peter Hamblin, Helen Heathfield, Robert Highfield, David Hitchiner, Dan Hurcomb, Terry James, Jim Kenyon, Jonathan Lester, Nick Mason, Bob Matthews, Ed O'Driscoll, Aubrey Oliver, Rob Owens, Justine Peberdy, Dan Powell, Ivan Powell, Philip Price, Ben Proctor, Adam Spencer, Louis Stark, Pete Stoddart, John Stone, Elissa Swinglehurst, Richard Thomas, Kevin Tillet, Allan Williams, Rob Williams and Mark Woodall

Officers: Chief Executive, Chief Finance Officer, Democratic Services Manager, Corporate Director - Economy and Environment, Corporate Director, Children and Young People, Corporate Director Community Wellbeing and Chief Executive

*denotes virtual attendance

37. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Clare Davies, Liz Harvey and Diana Toynbee.

38. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Phillips declared:

- i) An interest in agenda item no. 10 – 2024/25 Budget Setting - as chairman of the Rural Services Network.
- ii) An interest in agenda items no. 11 – Pay Policy Statement – as the vice chairman of the National Joint Council (NJC) – local government, Chief Executives and Chief Officers.

Cllr David Hitchiner declared an interest in agenda item no. 9, 2024/25 Capital Investment Budget and Capital Strategy Update, as a local resident to the proposed Southern Link Road.

39. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

40. CHAIRMAN AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Council noted the Chairman's and Chief Executive's announcements as printed in the agenda papers.

41. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Pages 9 - 16)

A copy of the public questions and written answers, together with supplementary questions asked at the meeting and their answers, is attached to the Minutes at Appendix 1.

42. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL (Pages 17 - 22)

A copy of the Member questions and written answers, together with supplementary questions asked at the meeting and their answers, is attached to the Minutes at Appendix 2.

43. COUNCIL TAX PREMIUMS ON SECOND HOMES AND EMPTY PROPERTIES

Council considered a report by the Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services to confirm the council's policy on the levying of empty homes and second homes Council Tax Premiums.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services proposed the recommendations and introduced the report.

The Leader seconded the recommendations for approval.

Council debated the report.

A named vote was held to agree the proposed changes to Council Tax liabilities set out in the report. The proposed changes were carried unanimously.

FOR (48): Councillors Andrews, Baker, Bartlett, Bartrum, Biggs, Boulter, Bramer, Chowns, Cole, Cornthwaite, Crockett, Dave Davies, Durkin, Dykes, Fagan, Foxton, Gandy, Gennard, Hamblin, Heathfield, Highfield, Hitchiner, Hurcomb, James, Kenyon, Lester, Mason, Matthews, O'Driscoll, Oliver, Owens, Peberdy, Phillips, Dan Powell, Ivan Powell, Price, Proctor, Simmons, Spencer, Stark, Stoddart, Stone, Swinglehurst, Thomas, Tillet, Allan Williams, Robert Williams, and Woodall.

Against (0)

Abstentions (0)

RESOLVED: That

a) That implementation of the following be approved:

- I. application of the current premium of 100% for all dwellings which are unoccupied but substantially unfurnished (empty dwellings) from a period of 1 year with effect from 1 April 2024;**
- II. application of a premium of 100% for all dwellings which are unoccupied but substantially furnished (second homes) with effect from 1 April 2025; and**
- III. that the S151 Officer has delegated authority to implement the policy in line with the council's requirements and guidance issued by the Secretary of State or regulation.**

44. 2024/25 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

Council considered a report by the Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services to agree the council tax reduction scheme for 2024/25.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services proposed the council tax reduction scheme for 2024/25 and introduced the report.

The Leader seconded the council tax reduction scheme for 2024/25 for approval.

Council debated the report.

A named vote was held to agree the council tax reduction scheme set out in the report. The scheme was carried unanimously.

FOR (48): Councillors Andrews, Baker, Bartlett, Bartrum, Biggs, Boulter, Bramer, Chowns, Cole, Cornthwaite, Crockett, Dave Davies, Durkin, Dykes, Fagan, Foxton, Gandy, Gennard, Hamblin, Heathfield, Highfield, Hitchiner, Hurcomb, James, Kenyon, Lester, Mason, Matthews, O'Driscoll, Oliver, Owens, Peberdy, Phillips, Dan Powell, Ivan Powell, Price, Proctor, Simmons, Spencer, Stark, Stoddart, Stone, Swinglehurst, Thomas, Tillett, Allan Williams, Robert Williams, and Woodall.

Against (0)

Abstentions (0)

RESOLVED: That

- a) The Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024/25, with the same parameters as the existing scheme, be approved.**

45. 2024/25 CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET AND CAPITAL STRATEGY UPDATE

Council considered a report by the Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services to approve the 2024/25 capital investment budget and capital strategy update.

The Cabinet Member Finance and, Corporate Services moved the report and proposed the recommendations.

The Leader seconded the report and the recommendations.

Council debated the report.

The 2024/25 capital investment budget and capital strategy update was put to the recorded vote and carried by a simple majority.

FOR (39): Councillors Andrews, Baker, Bartrum, Biggs, Boulter, Bramer, Cole, Cornthwaite, Crockett, Dave Davies, Durkin, Dykes, Fagan, Foxton, Gandy, Hamblin, Highfield, Hitchiner, Hurcomb, James, Kenyon, Lester, Mason, Matthews, O'Driscoll, Owens, Phillips, Dan Powell, Ivan Powell, Price, Proctor, Stark, Stoddart, Stone, Swinglehurst, Thomas, Tillett, Allan Williams and Robert Williams.

Against (5): Bartlett, Chowns, Heathfield, Spencer and Woodall.

Abstentions (4): Gennard, Oliver, Peberdy and Simmons.

RESOLVED: That

Council:

- 1. Approve the revised capital programme for 2024/25 attached at appendix C; and**
- 2. Approve the capital strategy at appendix D.**

There was an adjournment at 11:12 a.m.; the meeting recommenced at 11:29 a.m.

Councillors Carwardine and Engel joined the meeting at 11:29 a.m.

46. 2024/25 BUDGET SETTING

Council considered a report from the Leader to set the 2024/25 budget. Council noted the following supplements published following the despatch of the agenda:

- Budget Council meeting procedure 2024 published on 2 February; and
- Budget amendments 2024/25 published on 8 February.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services introduced the report and moved the budget.

The Leader seconded the report and the budget.

Councillor Terry James, as Group Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group spoke on the budget.

Councillor Ellie Chowns, as Group Leader of The Green Party Group spoke on the budget.

Councillor David Hitchiner, on behalf of the Group Leader of the Independents for Herefordshire Group spoke on the budget.

Councillor Bob Matthews, as Group Leader of the True Independents Group spoke on the budget.

Council debated the budget recommended by the Cabinet.

Amendment – Proposed by Councillor Toni Fagan and seconded by Councillor David Hitchiner

To retain proposed SEN Transport savings (£200,000), but to remove savings in Children’s Directorate budget of £2,303,000 in service areas where no targeted savings have yet been delivered:

Saving Category	Ref	Name of proposal	Description	Saving £’000
Reduce	S1	Reduce Children’s High-Cost placements	Current activity to step down higher cost placements and reunite some families	959
Reduce	S2	Reduction in Social Worker establishment	Achieving a reduction of 14 social workers posts by 31	338

			March 2025 based on the assumption of reduced demand	
Transform	S3	Reduce numbers of agency social workers	Convert 20 posts from agency to permanent by end of June 2024 (Q1) to realise 3/4yr effect	1,006

The balancing figure to be provided, for one year only, from the funds held in the following earmarked reserves:

- **Care Market Costs: £959,000**
- **Financial Resilience Reserve: £1,344,000**

Any savings that actually get delivered during 2024-25 by the Directorate be required to be used to repay these reserves – and that these repayments are reported publicly in the Quarterly Performance Reports produced by the administration during the year.

This amendment is proposed to give Council and the public greater assurance of the setting of a balanced budget for 2024-25. It follows track record and evidence from two consecutive years of significant overspends in the Children’s Directorate (£6m in 2022-23 and (Q2) £13.8m 2023-24). It also is informed by there being no track record and no evidence of delivery during 2023-24 of the Directorate’s £4.5m of agreed savings in Looked After Children care costs and in reduced agency and staff costs – the exact same service areas proposed to deliver immediate, front-loaded savings in 2024-25.

Councillor Fagan proposed the amendment.

Councillor Hitchiner seconded the amendment.

Council debated the amendment.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services, as the mover of the original motion, spoke before the vote on the amendment.

The amendment was put to the recorded vote and was carried by a simple majority.

FOR (26): Councillors Andrews, Bartlett, Bartrum, Boulter, Carwardine, Chowns,, Crockett, Dykes, Engel, Fagan, Foxton, Gennard, Heathfield, Hitchiner, James, O’Driscoll, Oliver, Owens, Peberdy, Dan Powell, Proctor, Simmons, Spencer, Stark, Tillet and Woodall.

Against (23): Councillors Baker, Biggs, Bramer, Cole, Cornthwaite, Dave Davies, Durkin, Gandy, Hamblin, Highfield, Hurcomb, Kenyon, Lester, Mason, Matthews, Ivan Powell, Price, Stoddart, Stone, Swinglehurst, Thomas, Allan Williams and Robert Williams.

Abstentions (1): Phillips.

The 2024/25 budget and associated medium term financial strategy and treasury management strategy, as amended by the above budget amendment motion, was put to the recorded vote and was carried by a simple majority.

FOR (47): Councillors Andrews, Baker, Bartlett, Bartrum, Biggs, Boulter, Bramer, Carwardine, Cole, Cornthwaite, Crockett, Dave Davies, Durkin, Dykes, Engel, Fagan, Foxton, Gandy, Gennard, Hamblin, Highfield, Hitchiner, Hurcomb, James, Kenyon, Lester, Mason, Matthews, O'Driscoll, Oliver, Owens, Peberdy, Phillips, Dan Powell, Ivan Powell, Price, Proctor, Spencer, Stark, Stoddart, Stone, Swinglehurst, Thomas, Tillett, Allan Williams, Robert Williams and Woodall.

Against (0)

Abstentions (3): Chowns, Heathfield and Simmons.

RESOLVED:

That Council approves:

- a) the council tax base of 71,999.97 Band D equivalents in 2024/25;
- b) an increase in core council tax for 2024/25 of 2.99%;
- c) an additional precept in respect of adult social care costs of 2% applied to council tax in 2024/25 resulting in a total council tax increase of 4.99%, increasing the band D charge from £1,786.61 to £1,875.76 for Herefordshire Council in 2024/25;
- d) the balanced 2024/25 revenue budget proposal totalling £210.5 million, subject to any amendments approved at the meeting, specifically the net spending limits for each directorate as at appendix C;
- e) delegates to the section 151 officer the power to make necessary changes to the budget arising from any variations in central government funding allocations via general reserves;
- f) the allocation of additional funding of £2.5 million announced in the Local Government Settlement in December 2023 to support strategic housing (£1.0 million), to reverse planned parking charge increases (£400k), an allocation of £300k to the Leominster Heritage Action Zone, removal of proposed savings in Community Wellbeing to reduce library hours (£55k), £56k to provide funding officer resource to identify external funding opportunities, £200k of funding to support the community and voluntary sector across Herefordshire and a £500k transfer to the Financial Resilience Reserve;
- g) the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2024/25 to 2027/28 at appendix A be approved;
- h) the Treasury Management Strategy at appendix D be approved;
- i) following the announcement by Government on 24 January of additional measures for local authorities, the allocation of £1,835k additional Social Care Grant to a Social Care Resilience Reserve and £945k increase in Rural Services Grant to provide additional funding for the Lengthsman Scheme (£250k), additional funding for drainage works across the county (£445k) and improvements to Public Rights of Way (£250k); and
- j) To allocate to Children's Services £2.303m (£0.959m to Children's High Cost Placements, £0.338m to Social Worker Establishment, £1.006m to Agency Social Workers) from Care Market Costs Earmarked Reserve (£-0.959m) and Financial Resilience Earmarked Reserve (£-1.344m) as a one off charge. These reserves are then to be repaid in-year with any of the originally proposed savings in the Children and Young People directorate which do get delivered during 2024-25.

47. PAY POLICY STATEMENT

Council considered a report by the Chairperson of the Employment Panel to approve the pay policy statement for 2024 – 2025.

The report and recommendation was moved by the Leader (as chairperson of the employment panel) and seconded by Councillor Ellie Chowns (as vice-chairperson of the employment panel).

The pay policy statement was put to the vote and carried unanimously.

RESOLVED – That:

(a) the pay policy statement at appendix A is approved for publication.

The meeting ended at 12:53 p.m.

Chairperson

Agenda item no. 5 - Questions from members of the public

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1	Ms Banks, Hereford	<p>A comment from central government, published by the Guardian Newspaper on January 30 stated that:</p> <p>“Ministers plan to push cash-strapped English councils to sell assets.”</p> <p>What is the position of Herefordshire Council regarding this proposal?</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: A balanced revenue budget is proposed for 2024/25. The proposal does not include plans to sell council assets to support the revenue budget in 2024/25.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: By what lawful right can the council sell-off what it does not own but is public property merely entrusted to the council to manage?</p>			
<p>Response to supplementary question from cabinet member finance and corporate services: There are no plans or intentions to dispose of council assets in the near or medium term up to 2029.</p>			
PQ 2	Mr Banks, Hereford	<p>While there are significant reductions proposed for vacant posts across directorates, the plans are silent on executive pay. With the Chief Finance Officer highlighting 'unprecedented economic conditions' putting pressure on finances, what is being done to control senior management costs at the top? Is this being considered alongside frontline cuts?</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: The 2024/25 budget recognises that the council will need to transform as an organisation to ensure the future sustainability of the council and the services it delivers and this will require a review of the size and shape of the workforce to create a lean and resilient council for the future. The proposed savings, at Appendix B, reflect these transformation plans. In addition to removal of vacant posts across Directorates, the council-wide savings include additional measures: S1 Mutual Early Resignation Scheme 2024 and S3: Transformation (Target Operating Model). These proposals include a review of the council’s management structure, corporate services and business support functions across the council.</p>			

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Supplementary Question: I understand the proposed Council-wide savings aim to deliver a "lean and resilient" workforce. However, the response is still unclear on whether senior and executive pay is in scope for those transformation initiatives. If frontline staff face uncertainty while leadership layer costs are protected and opaque, how does that align with shared sacrifices in challenging financial times? Specifically, will executive salaries and discretionary spending like travel come under review alongside direct public services facing cuts?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member finance and corporate services:

Thank you Mr Banks for your supplementary question.

I can confirm all discretionary spend is in scope for the transformation initiatives we outlined in our previous response and some of our plans to reduce the size and shape of our workforce are specifically targeted towards management costs.

It's important to note that our executive salaries are neither protected nor opaque and annual pay increases are determined nationally and are outside of the control of the council. Salaries for our senior team are transparent both in the pay policies we adopt and in the amounts that are paid. Our pay policies are reported annually in our 'Pay Policy Statement' and the amounts received by individuals are reported in our 'Statement of Accounts'. Both documents are publically available.

The council is clear that the solutions to our financial challenges require a 'whole council' response at all levels throughout the organisation.

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PQ 3	Ms Russell, Hereford	Residents raised the importance of protecting community facilities and spaces, especially for vulnerable groups like the elderly. If any sale or change of use of current Council properties, such as community centres, is under consideration to raise capital, how would you ensure equivalent spaces and accessibility remains for those residents reliant on these services?	Cabinet member adults, health and wellbeing
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Response:

Thank you for your question. I can confirm that the council does not directly own or operate any community centres.

Developing and protecting community facilities and spaces is very important. The council's Talk Community service works closely with local communities to ensure that local needs are met through a wide variety of assets and settings, including using existing facilities to provide warm spaces. The community capital grants scheme which will be launched in 2024-2025 will be a further means through which the council will support investment in community facilities, as well as the direct investment it is making in the new library and learning centre in Hereford.

Herefordshire Council continues to keep under review the properties it owns or uses to ensure that they remain aligned with the needs of the council and its communities.

PQ 4	Mr McGeown, Weobley	<p>The Hereford Times has recently reported that the “Revised Draft City Master Plan” is to be submitted for public consultation early this year.</p> <p>I can not find a dedicated entry for it in the public reports pack.</p> <p>So where is it and more importantly what amount has been budgeted to resource this most important consultation?</p> <p>Will the consultation methods be of sufficient breadth and adequately financed so they will satisfy the council constitution?</p> <p>Article 3 – Citizens and the council</p> <p>2.3.2 Citizens have the right:</p> <p>(d) to be consulted or in some other way participate in council decision making in accordance with the arrangements the council has for such consultation and participation;</p> <p>5.8.67 Consultations</p> <p>5.8.68 The council encourages as many people as possible to give their views on decisions which affect them.</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
<p>Response:</p> <p>The development of the Hereford City Masterplan has been paused, to allow for the Local Plan, the New Hereford Road Strategy and the Local Transport Plan to be progressed. Once this work is complete, the council will be in a position to review the City Masterplan, ensuring Hereford is well placed to play its critical role in realising the ambitions of the county wider strategies. Further information will be available in due course on the process and timescales for stakeholder consultation and public engagement for the Hereford City Centre Masterplan.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question:</p> <p>I am most pleased that the “Draft City Master Plan” is soon to be submitted for public consultation.</p>			

From the council constitution, Citizens Rights, 5.8.67 Consultations

5.8.68 states: The council encourages as many people as possible to give their views on decisions which affect them.

But I note from Summary results of the 2024/25 budget consultation events, carried out for the council by Impact “Consultancy and Research” pages 305-338

That the pop-up consultation stands etc only managed to engage 652 people.

But Herefordshire contains around 200K good folk. So this sort of consultation is not going to be any use in fulfilling “as many people as possible to give their views”.

Now when I was helping with Dilwyn’s Parrish Plan consultation, it was impressed upon me, that the gold standard, was to deliver a printed copy with reply questionnaire, to every household.

Will sufficient funds be included in the budget to allow this gold standard of democratic consultation to be applied to the draft city master plan? Will a copy be delivered to all Herefordshire households?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member transport and infrastructure:

No – the council did not have sufficient resources to provide a copy of the consultation document to all households in Herefordshire.

PQ 5	Mr Pugh, Leominster	Is it not a breach of council duty and ethics (Section 149 Equalities ACT 2010 general duties Section A) to discriminate against second property or private property owners by implementation of any fiscal penalty that actively discriminates against them as a group, solely because they are deemed by council, or any others, to be “vacant” property owners.	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
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Response:

The Equality Act 2010 provides protection against discrimination on the basis of protected characteristics. Property owners (as a group) are not protected by the Equality Act 2010.

The discretion given to councils to charge a premium is intended to be used as part of a wider strategy to encourage homeowners to bring their properties back into use for the benefit of the local community and economy.

Supplementary Question:

What public funds will be needed defending the legal and lawful challenges inevitably to be adopted by outraged second home owners over being labelled as cash cows by the council?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member finance and corporate services:

The council is not practising discrimination against a protected characteristic, it's a separate group that is not protected by the equality act. The intention is to bring properties back into use to benefit the economy and community across the county.

PQ 6	Mrs Pugh, Leominster	It is noted in the council budget breakdown the expenditure allotted to repair and refurbish both roads and pavements in Herefordshire. Bearing in mind the number of Herefordshire inhabitants that have been injured on uneven dangerous pavements or suffered physical injury or damage on private or commercial transports of all types because of the appalling surfaces of our largely neglected pavements and highways is the budget sufficient to achieve better results and avoid accelerating the present neglect?	Cabinet member roads and regulatory services
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Response:

Herefordshire's highway network is over 2,100 miles in length, which is long enough to stretch from Land's End to John O'Groats some two and a half times. We also have over 410 miles of footways, mainly centred in the city and market towns but also providing essential links in our villages. Our Officers and contractors work proactively to maintain and improve our highway network. Our Cabinet recognises that more is required for the council to match the aspirations of its residents and so to help address this we are committing £10 million pounds of additional investment into highway resurfacing between 2024-2026; thus investing for the future. In addition, Government has also recently announced that this council will receive an additional £106,918,000 for investment in the network, over the next 10 years as a part of its Network North initiative. This funding will help to address the maintenance and also improve Herefordshire's roads and pavement network to a good and safe condition.

Supplementary Question:

If the council knows what funds are available, the works required and the costs of the works, can the council confirm that there are sufficient funds in the budget to restore Herefordshire roads and footpaths to a good and safe condition? If not, what % of the outstanding works can we expect to see expedited?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member roads and regulatory services:

A written response would be provided.

Written response to supplementary question provided on 23 February 2024:

Herefordshire's highways are subject to regular highway safety inspections to ensure that they are in a safe condition day to day. Where defects are identified through our inspection process or are reported to us by members of the public they are prioritised using a risk based approach and necessary works completed within the relevant timescales to correct the defect. This work is funded each year to ensure our roads are in a safe condition.

In terms of our longer term plans, we have calculated that our carriageways have an asset value of £1,624m and currently require £113m of investment. Our footways have an asset value of £88.4m and currently require £1.5m of investment.

To address this need we are committing £10 million pounds of additional investment in to highway resurfacing between 2024-2026 and we will be investing every penny of the additional funding the government has allocated to Herefordshire, following the changes to HS2, into our highway network. This will mean a further £106 million pounds being invested over the next 10 years into local roads alongside the £14 million pounds we receive from Government each year to maintain our road network.

PQ 7	Mr Evered	To reduce the CO2 level of Herefordshire's atmosphere by 0.16 PPM (parts per million) or 0.000016%, how much is the council tax payer contributing to the council in order to achieve its Net Zero goal? If not known, what is the council's projected figures for this?	Cabinet member environment
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Response:
In the financial year 2022/23 the Council invested £4,773,000 in capital projects to support our net zero carbon and nature rich goals. Of this amount £4,431,000 was external grant funding secured by the Council, the remaining £342,000 capital coming from the Council's own budgets. Much of Council's spend is in 'invest to save' projects such as installing solar photovoltaic panels on schools.

Supplementary question:
Current Atmospheric CO₂ is 425.89 ppm. The council's NetZero policy, if fully achieved, will cause a reduction to 425.73ppm. The council received £4,431,000 in external grant funding to help achieve this spectacular reduction! From whom was the grant received and are there any conditions the council has to fulfil to receive it?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member environment:
Herefordshire Council does not measure performance towards net zero targets in terms of atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) but in terms of carbon emissions measured in tonnes of CO₂ per annum. More information can be found [on our web pages](#).

The grant monies were received from numerous funding sources including the following:

- **Getting Building Fund** (administered by the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP))
- **The Levelling Up Fund** (LUF) (administered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Department for Transport (DfT))
- **Local Transport Plan** (LTP) (administered by the Department for Transport (DfT))
- **Natural Flood Management** (NFM) programme (administered by Environment Agency (EA) and Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA))
- **Sustainable Development Fund** (SDF) (administered by Welsh Government)
- **National Peatland Action Programme** (administered by Natural Resources Wales (NRW))

- **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)** (administered by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the European Commission(EC))
- **Warm Homes Fund (WHF)** (administered by National Grid and Affordable Warmth Solution (AWS))
- **Green Homes Grant Local Authority Delivery (GHG LAD)** (administered by Department for Energy Security and Net Zero and Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy)
- **Home Upgrade Grant (HUG)** (administered by Department for Energy Security and Net Zero)
- **Stronger Towns Fund (STF)** (administered by Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG))
- **Basic need allocations** (administered by the Department for Education (DfE))

These grant allocations are each subject to their own funding agreements which were satisfied to enable the Council to defray the grant.

Agenda item no. 6 - Questions from members of the Council

Question Number	Questioner	Question	Question to
MQ1	Cllr Toni Fagan, Birch	<p>https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/directory/23/changes-to-public-rights-of-way/category/44</p> <p>There are 50 footpaths under temporary closure orders, including 28 bridges needing repairing, some dating back to 2018.</p> <p>OC10 in Orcop, closed since Feb 2020, is a vital link through the parish.</p> <p>According to the Destination Management Plan for Rural Herefordshire tourism is worth half £billion to our economy (9% of county employment). Walking rural Herefordshire contributes substantially to this economy, is important to the leisure and wellbeing of our residents, and provides important routes connecting rural communities.</p> <p>The administration has acknowledged that urgent investment is needed in our footpath assets. When is that investment likely to impact the 50 closed footpaths and bridges?</p> <p>Does the PROW team have sufficient capacity and resources to deliver this work?</p> <p>If not, how will this be addressed ensuring repairs can be undertaken at pace to get footpaths reopened and bridges repaired?</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
<p>Response:</p> <p>Public Rights of Way is an area that the Council needs to invest in given the challenges that we face in dealing with such a large network.</p> <p>There is a proposal in the budget to invest further in the Public Rights of Way network from this April and that investment will be used to address the challenges and issues we face and our ambitions to develop the network.</p> <p>In terms of capacity and resource, the Council is currently out to tender for local contractors to assist with the delivery of works and the team is intending to use them from April.</p> <p>Separately, I am pleased that a Public Rights of Way Volunteer Development Officer started with us last month. This Officer will play an important role in enabling our volunteer cohort to undertake works, to an agreed standard.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question:</p> <p>I'm pleased that local contractors will be involved in the repairs to bridges and footpaths. Can you confirm please that Balfour Beatty will not be relied upon to deliver these works? Also, at the Local Access Forum meeting recently it was reported that there was 72 outstanding council projects. In this</p>			

current financial year £200k was allocated by the previous administration towards footpaths. Please can I have a project specific breakdown in writing of how this funding was spent and what the barriers were to the funding having an impact on the PRoW network in this instance?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member transport and infrastructure:

A written response would be provided.

Written response provided on 23 February 2024:

The framework that is currently out to tender will allow Officers to compare against Balfour Beatty and identify the delivery approach that offers the best value for money to the Council for works on the Public Rights of Way network.

Opportunities to allocate the £200k are being worked up by Officers and if necessary any underspend will be carried over to the next financial year.

MQ 2	Cllr Matthew Engel, Golden Valley South	<p>I am pleased that the Lengthsman Grant Scheme is being continued by the present administration. Could the Cabinet Member explain:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the qualifying criteria are for parishes to participate in the scheme? • how do you calculate each parish's grant allocation – clarifying in particular whether there a difference for urban and rural parishes? And • what changes in allocation are being made for 24-25 – clarifying whether there is an adequate increase for inflation or a real terms cut? 	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

For the 24-25 Lengthsman Scheme, a sum of £60 per KM of C and U road network will be awarded to Parish Councils. Parish Councils can also submit a request for match funding as follows:

Urban Parishes: Any Parish Council could choose to allocate funding from its precept and then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £2 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £100 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £2000 parish precept will receive an additional £1000 of HC match.

Utilising match funding means that an urban parish could allocate up to £400 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work

Rural Parishes: Where the Parish chooses to allocate funding from its precept then Herefordshire Council will match this on a £1 parish, £1 HC basis. There is a cap set at £60 per km for the HC match. For example, a parish that has 10km of eligible network and chooses to allocate £600 parish precept will receive an additional £600 of HC match.

Utilising match funding means that a rural parish could allocate up to £180 per km to carry out Lengthsman type work

In terms of the allocation for 2024/25, I am pleased to say that there is a proposal within the budget to increase the funding by £250k. It should be noted that the amount of Parish Councils taking part in the scheme ultimately determines whether the £60 per km base sum can be increased.

MQ 3	Cllr David Hitchiner, Stoney Street	<p>The Children’s Directorate has not only overspent significantly in the last two financial years by nearly £20m, but in 2023-24 is so far forecasting to deliver NONE of its £4.5m savings. These were due to come from reducing the number of agency staff employed and the number and cost of Looked After Children.</p> <p>Both the Scrutiny Management Board and Children’s Scrutiny Committee have made it clear that, without there being any evidence of such in-year savings being declared, it is unsafe to balance this council’s budget by presuming that Children’s Directorate will deliver £2.5m savings – particularly with the delivery profile suggested – in 2024-25.</p> <p>Before this council considers your 2024-25 budget, will the Cabinet Member for Children’s and the Cabinet Member for Finance each confirm that the Q3 Performance Report (completed in Dec 23) will include LAC and Agency Staff savings.</p>	Cabinet member children and young people
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Response:

The Children & Young People Directorate Delivery Plan 2024/25 was presented to the Scrutiny Management Board at its meeting held 10 January 2024. The Plan detailed the proposed savings and profile of delivery in 2024/25 and provided further information to confirm that sufficient funding has been allocated in the revenue budget to support increased demand and cost pressures in 2024/25. Additional supporting information and evidence has been provided through the Children & Young People Directorate Budget Task & Finish Group at the two meetings held in December 2023, including relevant assumptions, risks and dependencies. The delivery of proposed savings will be monitored as part of routine financial monitoring arrangements in 2024/25 and reported quarterly by Cabinet.

At Quarter 3 (Period 9) of 2023/24, £0.3m of the Directorate savings are forecast as on target for delivery in respect of approved saving S18: Placement Management. In addition, the forecast outturn at P9 notes a reduction of £0.2m in agency staffing costs.

Supplementary Question:

Thank you for providing with a preview of the 23/24 savings of £300k for residential placement costs which are likely to be forecast in this administration’s Q3 performance report. These savings represent a disappointingly small amount, £300k out of around £4.5m and an amount that could so easily be reversed by changes in demand. Can the cabinet member clarify if the £200k of savings he refers to in staff costs are being used elsewhere to offset in year pressures in the directorate?

Response to supplementary question from cabinet member children and young people:

A written response would be provided.

Written response provided on 26 February 2024:

The Q3 report notes a reduction in the forecast for agency staffing costs. This is a reduction in a forecast overspend and not a saving or underspend in 2023/24 and therefore cannot be used to offset other expenditure. This reduction in forecast expenditure for 2023/24 has a positive impact on the overall Directorate forecast outturn position.

MQ 4	Cllr Aubrey Oliver, Saxon Gate	<p>Herefordshire Council was awarded a grant of £952,037 by the Government for the year 2023/24 to improve the frequency of bus services across the county.</p> <p>It is a major concern that no funding has yet been allocated for improvements in the 2023/24 financial year. If this funding is not used by 31 March 2024 does it have to be returned to the Government?</p> <p>Has the council made any attempt to put forward a bus service improvement plan? If so, when will it be published?</p>	Cabinet member transport and infrastructure
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Response:

The original Bus Service Improvement Plan was introduced by the Department for Transport (DfT) following COVID, to deliver “more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, cheaper, or greener bus services”. All authorities were encouraged to submit ambitious bids, Herefordshire’s was for £18million. Unfortunately the Council was not successful. However, despite being unfunded, I am pleased Herefordshire’s BSIP is in place, and is published on the Council website, [here](#).

DfT then released a new funding pot, BSIP+, which was for all authorities that did not receive anything in the first round to support those services at risk. We were awarded and have received £952,037, and we have been awarded the same amount the following year. Under BSIP regulations, the delivery of a BSIP plan is through either a franchising model or an Enhanced Partnership board; hence we have convened an Enhanced Partnership board. This consists of the council and all the bus operators who operate a service in the county (even if that service also runs into neighbouring areas). It is the board who agree and make decisions on where the BSIP+ money should be spent, (not the council).

Regarding our actions against the plan, we have received the money from DfT, and so we have given a deadline to operators to come back to us with their proposals for those services in the plan, where they would want to see extra support. From this we will create the tenders to deliver these services and present them to the Enhanced Partnership.

We will not lose the funding, nor need to return it to the DfT. The tenders will be seen, assessed and administered by the Enhanced Partnership Board well within the DfT’s time frames for spending. I would be happy to discuss the Bus Service Improvement Plan and how the Enhanced Partnership board works further if that would be helpful.

MQ 5	Cllr Liz Harvey, Ledbury North	<p>Scrutiny Management Board has recommended that the present administration provide this Council with additional information in the form of an indicative forecast of which earmarked reserves it proposes to raid to cover the £13.8m overspend being forecast by Children's Directorate at Q2, and to provide impact statements as regards the proposed reductions made in each earmarked reserve utilised.</p> <p>It is clear from the information contained in the agenda pack for this meeting that this minority administration has chosen to ignore SMB's request.</p> <p>I request again the Cabinet Member provide this information to Council, so in advance of voting on this budget all councillors can see where this money may be taken from and can understand the possible impact that doing so will have upon funds previously earmarked for investments and for risk mitigation .across all areas of this Council's operation.</p>	Cabinet member finance and corporate services
<p>Response: In the meeting held 25 January 2024, Cabinet noted the recommendations from Scrutiny Management Board and agreed they would be given due consideration. A forecast of earmarked reserve balances to 31 March 2024 is included per Appendix E to the Budget Setting Report. This confirms a forecast of £57.2m in earmarked reserves at 31 March 2024 after adjusting for the forecast overspend for 2023/24 of £13.8m as at Quarter 2; Cabinet intend to use these Earmarked Reserve balances to fund the 2023/24 overspend. Reserve balances will remain under review over the remainder of the 2023/24 financial year and the proposed reserve transfers to fund the 2023/24 overspend will be confirmed in the Quarter 4 outturn report as part of routine year-end closedown procedures.</p>			

