Herefordshire Council

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Management Board held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 7 November 2023 at 2.00 pm

Present: **Councillor Liz Harvey (chairperson)**
Councillor Jenny Bartlett (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Ellie Chowns, Simeon Cole, Frank Cornthwaite, Pauline Crockett, Toni Fagan, Peter Hamblin, Louis Stark and Richard Thomas and Clare Davies

Officers: **Simon Cann (Clerk), Ross Cook (Corporate Director for Economy and Environment), Rachael Hart (Head of Strategic Finance - deputy S151) and Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer)**

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from: Councillor Bruce Baker, Councillor Bob Matthews, Councillor John Stone and Councillor Peter Stoddart (Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services).

12. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Clare Davies was the named substitute for Councillor Bob Matthews.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

14. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

15. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

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

16. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from councillors.

17. WORKFORCE STRATEGY 2024-2027 - DEVELOPMENT AND CONSULTATION

The chair informed the board that the item had been deferred until the next board meeting on 21 November 2023, so that the cabinet member (Councillor Peter Stoddart) could be present to discuss the strategy.

18. INCOME AND CHARGING

The Corporate Director for Economy and Environment introduced the item and provided the board with an update on income and charging, focusing on work that had been carried out in identifying opportunities to improve the Council's service cost recovery position. The director stated that any questions that couldn't be answered during the meeting could be taken away and responded to during the board meeting of 21 November.

Principle points arising from the update were:

- The areas of opportunity examined included: moving services to a full cost recovery position, upscaling services, uplifting services and establishing new services.
- Herefordshire had lower fees and charges than its comparators across 4 out of 7 categories assessed, there was potential to identify and implement changes within those categories.
- There was no 'fees and charges book' or combined list of all Council fees and charges, but work had commenced to review this and put together a centralised record/source.
- The initial review of "Service Cost Recovery" had shaped future priorities and work.
- The review of fees and charges was on-going

The Scrutiny management board debated the update, principal points related to:

- It was noted that scrutiny had looked at fees and charges back in 2011 and produced a set of recommendations for cabinet. The Corporate Director for Economy and Environment explained that these had largely been implemented in subsequent years, although the absence of a 'service charges book' may have made implementing some of the recommendations more complicated than was necessary.
- The board acknowledged that this was an ongoing programme of work, but felt that additional detail around timelines and priorities (including identifying quick and big wins) of proposals and how they linked in with the 2024/25 budget and the policy framework would be helpful.
- The board discussed the need for clearer examples to illustrate how income generated related to the services it supported, and cited car parking as a potentially good example for demonstrating this.
- The board was keen to receive more information about the development of existing/known consultancy offerings that predated the recent involvement of PricewaterhouseCoopers.
- The board discussed how fees could be used to drive and encourage positive behaviour - planning was given as an example - where a greater emphasis could be placed on seeking 'permission rather than forgiveness' in relation to retrospective planning applications.
- The board enquired about the cost of the consultancy work carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers and how/if the most recent work linked back with earlier consultancy work carried out by the firm.

The board voted unanimously in favour of the following recommendations to be considered in relation to the service cost recovery position, with a view to feedback being provided by the Corporate Director for Economy and Environment at the board meeting of 21 November 2023.

Resolved:

That:

a) **assurance be given on how income and charging items that are going to be built into the 2024/25 budget will relate to the policy framework, and**
b) **detailed information on 'quick wins' 'and 'big wins' be provided, and**
c) **details of the priority order in taking work on income and charging forward be broken into a timeline of first, second a third tranches, and**
d) **details be provided of the plans and timeframes for the piloting/development of consultancy offerings of which the council were already aware, prior to PricewaterhouseCoopers' involvement, and**
e) **a service charges handbook be compiled, including what the ambition and priority framework is in terms of what is expected for the budget for the coming year and what will then continue to be a work in progress, and**
f) **parking charges be used as an example of how net income is linked explicitly to the service it supports, and maintaining an understanding of that through in-year delivery, so that the two can be tied together in a way that has them hardwired, and**
g) **consideration be given to options, particularly in the area of planning, for fees to drive positive behaviours in the community, and**
h) **assurance be provided that public money is not being used to subsidise the delivery of services that compete with the commercial sector, and**
i) **assurance be given that Herefordshire Council will recover the cost of the consultancy carried out by PricewaterhouseCoopers and that a payback period will be identified for that.**

19. 2024-25 PROPOSED BUDGET CONSULTATION APPROACH

The Head of Strategic Finance (deputy S151) introduced the item and gave an overview of the report on the 2024-25 Proposed Budget Consultation Approach.

It was explained that appendix 1 provided a timeline and details of proposed community-based budget consultation and engagement activity for 2024/25 and appendix 2 provided an overview of community engagement within a public sector context, including setting out the statutory duties of a local authority to consult and to clarify the difference between engagement and consultation. The paper set out the proposed approach for the budget consultation 2024/25. The paper also included information on the role of scrutiny in the consultation process and different types of engagement activity and when they should be used.

The Head of Strategic Finance (deputy S151) introduced Sarah Fishbourne and Maxine Bassett of Impact Consultancy & Research, who were present in person.

It was explained that the proposed budget consultation approach would include the delivery of:

- Seven locality-based pop-up consultation events mid-October to early December in Hereford High Town and one in each of the other market towns. Using a range of interactive methods to gauge public opinion on the key issues

relating to the 24/25 budget. The final approach and focus of consultation would be developed in conjunction with the Director of Resources & Assurance.
- Two consultation sessions with specific hard-to-reach groups, e.g. young people, families in hardship.
- An online consultation session with businesses via the Economic Development Teams quarterly business briefings.
- A consultation session with the Community Partnership (22 November).
- A consultation session with Parish & Town Councils.
- An online feedback session sharing the results of the consultation. The output from the consultation would be a report and a PowerPoint presentation summarising the consultation findings.

The chair thanked the Head of Strategic Finance (deputy S151) and the attendees from Impact Consultancy and Research for the report and update, and then opened the item up to the board for lines of enquiry and questions.

The scrutiny management board debated the report raising principal points relating to:

- The need to review lead times and marketing to enable greater engagement of parish councils and other seldom-heard, hard-to-reach groups, and those with protected characteristics.
- The consideration of the viability of targeted sample groups and enabling people to self-select for future surveys as a way of building up a pool of consultees.
- The importance of structuring engagement with high-level themes early on, with more detailed engagement to follow later in the year.
- Learning lessons from the previous successful consultation exercises such as the medium term financial strategy consultation of 2015.
- Investigating the increased use of meaningful graphical representations/videos to swiftly and easily communicate complex budgetary information at a glance.

At the end of the debate, the board voted unanimously in favour of the following recommendations to be considered in relation to the proposed budget consultation approach, with a view to feedback being provided by the Head of Strategic Finance (deputy S151) at an appropriate future board meeting:

Resolved:

That:

a) **The scrutiny management board be provided with the question framework to be used for the budget consultation, and**
b) **a web-based public consultation questionnaire be put in place for a sufficient amount of time for people/parishes to be able to engage with it as part of the consultation process, and**
c) **a plan be provided outlining the approach that will be taken to engage with hard-to-reach and equality impacted groups, and**
d) **targeting questionnaires and random sampling be used in future consultations, along with a longitudinal mechanism for allowing people to self-select by giving permission to be contacted in future, and**
e) **contextual information on the budget be provided, which is not solely restricted to Herefordshire, and**
f) **meaningful graphical representations of the budget be included.**

20. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMMES

The chair opened the item by allowing the chairperson of the CYPSC (Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee) to make a request to the SMB (Scrutiny Management Board) to consider undertaking a piece of work in relation to the budget The chair of the CYPSC stated that the work programme for that committee did not have capacity to build in proper scrutiny of the potential pressures that children's services were putting on the budget and asked if the SMB had the capacity to take a detailed look at the issue.

The chair of the SMB and the board members agreed that historic and forecast budgetary spending on children's services was an issue that needed to be examined, in detail, as a matter of urgency. The board agreed to draw up terms of reference for a task and finish group that, pending approval, would look into the subject.

Resolved

That:

a) **That the statutory scrutiny officer would draw up draft terms of reference for a task and finish group to scrutinise the current expenditure and future budget of the children and young people directorate, these terms of reference would be presented for approval at the 21 November 2023 board meeting.**

The chair noted that there wasn't sufficient time to go through the work programmes of each scrutiny committee and proposed that a workshop be held in December, where the board could go through each individual committee work programme in detail and then feed into the Scrutiny Management Board work programme at the end.

Resolved

That:

a) **The board hold a scrutiny committee work programme workshop during December 2023.**

21. WORK PROGRAMME

The chair noted that there wasn't sufficient time to go through the work programme of the Scrutiny Management Board and proposed that a workshop be held in December, where the board could go through each individual committee work programme in detail and then feed into the Scrutiny Management Board work programme at the end.

Resolved:

That:

a) **The board hold a scrutiny committee work programme workshop during December 2023.**

22. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 21 November 2023 2pm

23. APPENDIX 1 - QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Questioner:	Mark Banks (via email)
Scrutiny Meeting:	Scrutiny Management Board 7 November 2023

Question:

As a frequent user of Herefordshire Council's MyHerefordshire resident services portal, I want to submit a question regarding plans for improving the website's accessibility, transparency, and communication around service requests.

Despite repeated contact, I continue to face issues like service requests being misleadingly labelled as "Closed" immediately upon submission, inconsistent email confirmations, and general non-compliance with WCAG accessibility standards.

I have lodged a formal complaint outlining these concerns but wanted to bring the matter directly to this committee's attention as you oversee the website and online systems.

My question is - can you provide details on what priority is being given to updating MyHerefordshire's accessibility, what specific timeline commitments exist for implementing changes, and how the Council plans to address misleading practices like inaccurate service request statuses in the interim before system upgrades?

As an engaged resident, I am very supportive of plans to improve MyHerefordshire. However, I believe urgent interim solutions must also be implemented in parallel to benefit all users. I welcome your insights on how to balance long-term upgrades with prompt communication improvements.

Thank you for your oversight of this vital public resource. I look forward to your response on how accessibility, transparency, and accuracy will be enhanced.

Regards,

Mark Banks

Response:

Thank you for your question.

We take accessibility very seriously and our website should always be compliant with the accessibility regulations for Local Authorities - WCAG2.1, Level AA. No content is added without first being checked it is compliant with the accessibility regulations and we regularly review the website in line with the accessibility requirements.

We have carried out an accessibility audit (in compliance with WCAG2.1, Level AA) on the MyHerefordshire area of the website – The findings of this were that there was some alt-text missing from the map markers, maps are not required to be compliant with the regulations, however we have now rectified and added alt-text to the markers, also there was missing alt-text from the image of the local councillor – this we have passed to our developers to be implemented as soon as possible.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention.

Questioner:	Mark Banks (via email)
Scrutiny Meeting:	Scrutiny Management Board November 2023

Supplementary Question:
In light of concerns regarding misleading service request statuses on the MyHerefordshire site, could the Council provide specific details on their planned strategies and timeline to address and rectify these inaccuracies, ensuring transparency and reliability for users?

Regards
Mark

Response:

The service request labelling is dependent on the type of form that is used for a process. What we term a 'single stage process' which is a one-step transaction form such as the one you have used, we are currently unable to change the status to received, the default software functionality is "Closed" for a single stage process that has effectively been completed once it has generated an email and we have no facility to change that directly.

Where we have built more complex processes (non-single stage forms) that either feed into other systems or a route that hands the service off to another party (rather than just generating an email) the statuses are more complex/reflective of the stage it's at and will not show case closed until the whole transaction is completed for the customer.

However, we are in the process of reviewing all our forms and processes through our transformation programme and will be upgrading forms, so that the majority of our forms will be built on more complex processes (in terms of the back end – not a more complex process for the customer) so there will be more intuitive statuses available to the customer.

The meeting ended at 05:19 pm **Chairperson**