Herefordshire Council

Draft for decision
Writing and Publishing Council Plans, Policies and Procedures
2020-2023

Illustrative picture of documents, computer and administration

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1. Purpose

This is an internal policy to give guidance on producing key documents of Herefordshire Council. This information sets out how the council will ensure that it has:

a) clear, meaningful and accessible plans, policies and procedures which incorporate strategies and statements

b) outlines key requirements including meeting accessibility standards, and

c) arrangements for publishing documents.

2. Introduction

All well run organisations have clear and easy-to-follow plans, policies and procedures that communicate how aims will be achieved. This is important for employees and external audiences to understand how a service will operate, its priorities and future plans. Plans, policies and procedures provide the foundation for decision making as the grounding and rationale for activity - this is particularly important to councils in providing clarity on responsibility and accountability as a public body.

The first question to ask is whether a policy needs to be written, for example, if existing local or national guidance already exists which may suffice. The council will have statutory requirements to produce policies which it must do as part of its legal obligations, whilst it may produce a document based on outlining the intentions of a particular service with high public interest or required to having a policy as part of a funding agreement.

Plans, policies and procedures will have different purposes and audiences - therefore it is recognised and accepted that style and format may differ. However a degree of consistency is required to help people navigate documents and recognise when something is part of Herefordshire Council's plans and intentions.

This document links to the council's county plan and delivery plan in giving guidance on how committed activity should be framed within plans, policies and procedures. Though touched on in this document there is different guidance on report writing for decision making found on the governance intranet pages.

3. Aim and Objectives

The aim: For the council to use plans, policies and procedures to provide clarity on why and what it does as part of its statutory role and priority service areas.

Objective 1: Provide a framework for producing policy documents whilst recognising the purpose and intended audiences will influence different requirements.

Objective 2: For external policy documents to be published on the council's website and internal documents on the council's intranet, being easily accessible and clearly written for the audience.

Objective 3: The production of policy documents to outline how the vision and priorities of the council will be met.

4. Definition of Documents

Plans, policies and procedures which also incorporates strategies and statement are different things as defined below:

> **Plans** - A plan outlines the reason and method to achieve intended outcomes, impacts or goals – making clear what is intended to be done, how and by when. Plans can also be referred to as a strategy or strategic plan which tends to be a high level document.

> **Policies** - A policy lays out a defined course of action or principles that the organisation will work to, ie what has to be done (or not done). A policy statement is also a declaration as to what an organisation's stance is on a given service, function or topic. These can also be referred to as statements.

> **Procedures** - A procedure tells people how to implement the policy or an approach. Procedures (also called protocols) are specific, factual and to the point. Guidance notes may be similar to procedures, however they will be less specific, more of a "guide" to what to do rather than precise instruction.

Example of some of the documents produced by the council:

Plans
- The County Plan
- Local Transport Plan
- Children and Young People's Plan

Policies and Statements
- The Equality Policy
- Environment Policy
- Housing Enforcement Policy
- Modern Slavery Statement

Procedures
- Unreasonable behaviour procedure
- Data security incident procedure
- Disclosure and barring service (DBS) procedure

Fundamental principles to producing plans, policies and procedures are:

Accessible – easy to follow, understandable and jargon free as otherwise can create a barrier for people in accessing the information they need.
Accurate – facts and figures correct and referenced, up to date and meeting the required purpose.
Accountable – outline of commitments with methods to monitor and report on actions.

5. Key content requirements

Preproduction of a document will include relevant research, consultation and approved business case. The content of documents will vary based on their requirements, however, it is important that the reader knows early on the purpose and intent – it is very frustrating to be half way through a document to realise it is not the right one. The document needs to flow and "tell the story" – so what is the reason for the document, what is the context, which leads to the core purpose outlined in aims and objectives. It is also important to outline the outcomes to clearly say what is going to be done and how those outcomes will be measured. Below is a

guide to basic requirement of a plan or policy (rather than a statement or procedure which will usually have set content).

Title – on the front page, indicating if a plan, policy or procedure. The start date and end date (or review date) based on the year. Include the Herefordshire Council branding.

Executive Summary – this is suggested when the document is long and complex with a summary page used to outline the key points.

Purpose – to be clear at the start what the document intends to do, why it is being produced and who the audience is.

Introduction– to give context and background. How the document links to vision and priorities of the council and particularly the county plan. Include background information and any legal requirement.

Aim(s) – this could be several or one aim that spells out what is trying to be achieved.

Objectives – is based on how the aim(s) will be delivered. Sometimes referred to as priorities.

Outcomes – to understand what difference will result from the plan or policy. This can be included in a separate document (e.g. appendix) but should include timescales and outcomes. These need to be measurable to support monitoring and communication on what has been achieved.

Consultation – outline details of where this has taken place and how feedback has influenced the plan or policy.

Appendix – only include appendix if needed to supplement points made in the document but do not fit into the body of the text. Appendix could also be further reference such as templates. List appendix in order they appear in the document.

Reference to policies - how the outcomes will impact on the council's intentions to address climate change (environmental policy commitments) and can also include reference to well being and equality where relevant.

6. Other Requirements

Other requirements to consider are as outlined below:

- Facts and figures should be based on evidence that can be referenced in the document as an end note or foot note
- Outlined methodology where evidence is based on research and consultation
- If co-owned by another organisation this needs to be made clear – this not stakeholders but joint authors e.g. where externally funded or cross county programme of work (this can be demonstrated in the use of logos on the front cover but also explained in the text)
- Cross-referencing to other relevant documents – remember that all hyper-links need to be maintained
- Glossary – list abbreviation, acronyms and terms at the end of the document (pre appendix)
- Outline risks and implication for data management (cross referenced in the council's risk register)

Procedures will have different requirements – clarity of requirement and instruction is essential for a procedure or guidance note whether an internal or external audience.

Environment policy commitment of this document – firstly this document outlines that each plan and policy is tasked with outlining commitment to addressing climate change. More specifically is the requirements that documents are not printed. Not only does this reduce waste and un-necessary use of raw materials it reduces energy consumption within buildings to store paper documents.

Equality commitments of this document – this document follows the accessibility standards to support people to access information, along with the standards expected in all plans and polices.

7. Summary of relevant approval process

A key element on deciding the governance route is the impact on communities, financial implications and level of risk. A summary is below, with full guidance found on the governance intranet pages along with the scheme of delegation and contractual / financial procedural rules within the council constitution.

Decisions reserved for full Council
These decisions are the most significant strategic decisions taken by the council and are required by law to be taken by full Council. They cover items such as setting the council tax each year, agreeing the council's budget, adopting particular high level plans and certain employment or constitutional matters.

Executive decisions
These are decisions required by law to be taken by the executive. These are decisions taken by the cabinet, joint committee of cabinet, an individual cabinet member or delegated to officers. Most executive decisions can be called-in by other councillors including the relevant scrutiny committees with scrutiny also playing a part of shaping policies.

Key decision
Taken at a cabinet meeting, by an individual cabinet member, or a joint committee of the executive. Any decision which results in the council incurring expenditure or savings of £500,000. A decision of strategic nature or whether the outcome will have an impact, for better or worse, on the community or quality of service provided by the authority to a significant number of people living or working in the locality (two or more wards in Herefordshire) affected.

Non key decision
Taken by cabinet member or officer based on the scheme of delegation. In some instances a cabinet member may seek to take this decision if significant public interest but unlikely to be a cabinet decision. They are less significant in terms of community impact and financially but they are still subject to call-in before they can be implemented.

Non-executive decisions
Non-executive functions are those which the cabinet does not have the power to carry out, they are functions that, by law, cannot be dealt with by the executive. Full Council has the power to appoint committees with power to carry out its non-executive and other functions (e.g. planning and licensing).

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> **Operational decision**
> Taken by Management Board or Assistant Director. Operational decisions can be described as the 'day-to-day' management of the council taken by officers of the council or the implementation of executive functions under specific delegation. A change in procedure can be done this way or a statement agreed by the Head of Paid Service. The decision must not conflict with agreed council policies or attempts to set out a new policy (these decisions are reserved for the executive and/or full Council).

At whatever decision level, the project sponsor (sometimes referred to at the Senior Responsible Owner) or the Director / Assistant Director of the relevant service should have final sight and sign-off of the plan, policy and procedure. It is important to keep a record of the sign-off for audit purposes. It might also be relevant to be approved by management board and consultation for internal groups such as Information Governance Steering Group, based on:

- Having the resources confirmed to deliver the ambitions
- Highlight risk to the organisation as a whole
- Performance and outcome measures that might be beyond one service area
- Instigating a change in approach or requirement on how the council operates
- Of high public interest that the senior management should be aware of
- Has a data or IT implication.

8. Publishing plans, policies and procedures

It is a legislative requirement for our policy decisions to be published and as part of the council's commitment to openness and transparency. Therefore the default position is that every policy, plan or procedure of public interest is published on the council website – there may be policies for an internal audience that might be of interest to the public which are also published on the council's website. All documents intended for internal use will be published on the council intranet. Each document to have a landing page on the website covering:

- The name of the document
- Summary outlining the purpose (2-3 lines)
- Hyperlink to document
- Date (month and year)
- End or review date (month and year)
- Related webpages (if relevant)

The council intranet will hold the register of plans, policies and procedures. To keep this up to date there will be a specific owner of the policy (or reverts to the assistant director) with a reminder six months beforehand that the document needs updating or a decision made to withdraw it if no longer needed. A document can be updated and replaced before the review period following the relevant decision making process.

9. Documents Style and Promotion

Audiences will be looking at plans, policies and procedures to extract the information they need, so being concise and clear is important.

The documents need to meet the [accessibility standards](#) along with the following points when publishing:

- Give the document a structure - documents must always be formatted using the template styles to create a hierarchy of headings - 'heading 1', 'heading 2' and so on, and use of numbering to help guide the reading.

- Language – whilst kept simple, easy to follow and readable this does not mean "damping down" but using language that is clear with sentences and paragraphs not too lengthy. Avoid underlining, except for links, all caps or italics as interrupts the flow of reading. Use the Accessibility Checker on the document when it is reviewed - details on how to do this can be found on the [Microsoft website](#).

- Terms - where you need to use technical terms, abbreviations or acronyms, explain what they mean the first time you use them and then at the end of the document.

- Tables - Only use tables for data and not to format information. If have to use tables keep them simple: avoid splitting or merging cells. Do not use colour alone to get across meaning. Template styles need to be used to format table data.

- Layout - use single, continuous columns of text as easier to make accessible than documents with a more complex layout. In addition, if using word or PDF there is no need to leave gaps for things like page breaks as the reader will then need to scroll down empty space. However, you can break up your document to make it more readable by using things such as bullet points, numbered steps and meaningful subheadings.

- Images - if you are using images, think about how you will make the content accessible to people with a visual impairment. Two options are:
  - Provide alt text ('alternative text') for the image
  - make the same point in the text of the document (so people with visual impairments get the information they need - the image is there as an extra for people who are able to see it)

- Publishing - wherever possible, publish as an HTML webpage. This is better than PDFs, which makes content harder to find through searches and often does not work very well with assistive technologies like screen readers. Provide the word version of a document to the web editing team to convert to PDF or HTML pages. Considering some readers may wish to print a document (at their own expense) so the use of any block print needs to be kept to a minimum.

- Saving - when saving documents the author, tags and title fields need to be included. To include an end note for record (format at the end of this document) to help keep an accurate record and reference.

- Print - being mindful of the environmental and the cost impact of print and paper the default position is publish documents online – however it may be relevant that reference copies are made available at public outlets such as libraries (any legal requirement to print takes precedence). No internal procedures are to be printed.

- For internal plans, procedures and policies to be promoted to the workforce within a month of their publication.

- All promotion of public plans and policies to be through the communications team – this could give a wider opportunity to promote the work of the council.

For more information view the guidance on creating accessible documents on [.gov.uk website](#) and for practical advice on how to achieve the required formatting of documents see the guidance on the [MSOffice website](#)

10. Responsibilities

Beyond the lead officer in producing or commissioning documents and the governance process, responsibility in the organisation is as follows:

Members are responsible for requesting assurance that the council has policies and procedures in place for all relevant areas of legislative compliance and risk, and for consideration, approval and ratification of those documents required under the policy framework.

Management Board are responsible for ensuring that the council has an effective mechanism in place for producing, maintaining and reviewing relevant policies and procedures, and for agreeing corporate policies and procedures.

Service Managers are responsible for implementing all policies and procedures relevant to their service area and for approving their own local policies and procedures.

Team Managers are responsible for implementing corporate and local policies and procedures in their teams.

All employees are responsible for acting in accordance with the requirements in policies and procedures.

End note for record

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