

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 30 September 2021 at 2.30 pm

Present: Councillor David Hitchiner, Leader of the Council (Chairperson)
Councillors Felicity Norman, Ellie Chowns, John Harrington and Diana Toynbee

Group leaders and representatives in attendance Councillors Terry James, Jonathan Lester, Bob Matthews, Toni Fagan and William Wilding

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance Councillors Elissa Swinglehurst, Jonathan Lester and Phillip Howells

Other councillors in attendance: Councillors Gemma Davies and Liz Harvey

Officers in attendance: Acting deputy chief executive - chief finance officer, Interim Head of Legal Services and Interim director of economy and place

48. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor Ange Tyler.

Councillors Gemma Davies and Liz Harvey attended the meeting remotely and did not vote on the decisions taken.

49. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

50. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 September 2021 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

51. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There were no questions at this meeting.

52. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

There were no questions at this meeting.

53. REVISION OF CAPITAL PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR PRIORITY FLOOD WORKS

The cabinet member infrastructure and transport introduced the item. He summarised the background to the report and highlighted the recommendations made by the general scrutiny committee at its recent meeting.

Cabinet members discussed the scrutiny recommendations and the proposed response to them. It was noted that it was important to keep the option open to use capital monies as well as revenue to fund detailed design processes. It was clarified that additional information would be included in the report to Council but that a detailed breakdown of the outturn would not be available at that meeting. It was suggested that a report be made back to the scrutiny committee on the detailed costs rather than to Council.

The chairman of the general scrutiny committee commented on the discussion that had taken place in the scrutiny meeting and the need to understand the costs of projects. A scrutiny committee member had queried who would quality control the work and it was suggested that someone within the council should ensure that works were done to its satisfaction separate from the contractor, BBLP.

Group leaders and representatives offered the views and queries of their group. There was general support for the recommendations in the report and for learning lessons for the future.

Reflecting on the points raised, cabinet members noted that a contract was in place with BBLP for inspections and that they would bear consequences for any failures. In future the council was looking to move to a different way of monitoring and bringing more technical staff in house to be able to offer greater assurance.

It was resolved that:

- (a) the executive response to the recommendations of the general scrutiny committee at appendix 1 be approved, with an amendment that in the response to recommendation (a) the report will be provided to the general scrutiny committee rather than to Council;**
- (b) having regard to the recommendations of general scrutiny committee, cabinet recommend to council in year adjustments to the capital programme set out in paragraph 11 below to allow realignment of capital spend to flood repair projects that require the allocation of budget within the programme budget of £4.027m as follows:**

Fownhope Landslip Budget reduced from £1.565m to £0.510m

Fownhope Retaining Wall Collapse budget increased from £1m to £1.15m

Unallocated budget of £905k from combined Fownhope budgets remains as contingency for remaining flood works; and

- (c) The Cabinet member for infrastructure and transport is delegated authority (in consultation with the Section 151 officer) to realign the Whitney on Wye and/or the Various Damage site budgets as costs for these works are confirmed.**

54. UPDATE ON THE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME WITHIN THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES DIRECTORATE FOLLOWING PUBLICATION OF OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT JULY 2021

The cabinet member children and families introduced the report and highlighted the key points. She noted that all of Ofsted's findings were things the council had already identified itself. An action plan was being put together and reports would be made regularly to the improvement board.

The interim assistant director MASH, Assessment, CP Court & CIN explained that while there had been no surprises in Ofsted's findings, they had also recognised strengths and good work that was being done.

Cabinet members recognised that this had been a difficult period for council staff and commended the positive way they had responded.

The interim assistant director explained that the leadership team were working closely with the workforce to develop a recruitment and retention strategy which would be completed by November. Staff had access to the senior leadership and while the improvement process did have an impact on staff there had also been positive feedback. Changes made had allowed staff to spend more time working directly with children and a participation officer was to be recruited to lead on engaging children to make their voice heard.

The chair of the children and young people scrutiny committee commented that the report was a useful guide to what the committee should be scrutinising and that additional meetings of the committee were being held to focus specifically on the improvement process. The scrutiny committee would be working with the centre for governance and scrutiny and the LGA on support, training and mentoring for committee members to improve scrutiny of the service.

Group leaders gave the views of their group. There was concern at the findings of the inspection, the length of time that the service had been underperforming and how the situation had been handled. It was hoped that improvements would be secured this time.

Cabinet members agreed that the challenges were longstanding but a lot of diagnostic work had now been done. It was stressed that any councillors with concerns could raise these with the leader, cabinet member, chair of the scrutiny committee or the chief executive.

It was noted that the recruitment process for a permanent director for children and families was underway and the employment panel was expected to be convened in early November to make an appointment.

It was resolved that:

- a) **Cabinet note the outcome of the Ofsted focussed visit on the 7 – 8 July; and**
- b) **Cabinet note the progress to date against the service priorities identified by Ofsted and other independent reviews undertaken.**

55. Q1 BUDGET & PERFORMANCE REPORT

The acting deputy chief executive – chief finance officer introduced the report and explained that projections at the end of the first quarter showed a small overspend for 2021/22. The council had received a large number of grants to deal with costs arising from covid and these had been well spent to manage pressures.

Cabinet members discussed the report and noted that grant money would help to cover some of the shortfall on car parking income and that work was underway to understand the longer term patterns. They also heard that officers were working through systematically with teams to update the performance measures and that the number of 'grey' items would reduce in the next quarterly report.

Group leaders gave the views and queries from their groups. It was noted that:

- As expected more households were struggling to pay their council tax and the impact of the end of the furlough system and increasing inflation would be monitored, however the arrangements put in place in the budget in February 2021 were helping and anyone struggling to pay was urged to make contact with the council at the earliest opportunity;
- Data was available on the number of people still on furlough in the county and this would be shared;
- The number of people shopping in the city centre appeared to be improving so the reduction in car parking income might reflect more people using active travel measures;

- A significant backlog in planning cases had arisen during covid and it was planned to employ consultants to provide additional resource to clear this bulge;
- The planning service was overdue for transformational change work, learning from examples in other councils, and it was hoped that some additional resource could be provided to improve the work of the service in the future.

It was resolved that:

- a) Cabinet review the performance and financial forecast for year 2021/22, as set out in appendices A – F, and identifies any additional actions to be considered to achieve future improvements.**

56. ANNUAL REVIEW OF EARMARKED RESERVES

The cabinet member finance, corporate services and planning introduced the report and explained that she had requested officers rationalise some of the small pots of money and amend the way the reserves were presented.

The acting deputy chief executive – chief finance officer explained that the council had been holding covid grants, which showed as a bulge at the end of March, but that all of this money would be used during this year.

Group leaders noted the content of the report and in response to a query it was confirmed that the council was continuing to distribute covid grants as quickly as possible and based on the guidelines provided by central government.

It was resolved:

- (a) The reserves position, detailed in appendix A, be noted.**

The meeting ended at 4.16 pm

Chairperson