

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at The Conference Room, Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 31 March 2022 at 2.30 pm

Cabinet Members Physically Present and voting: Councillor David Hitchiner, Leader of the Council (Chairperson)
Councillor Liz Harvey, Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairperson)

Councillors Ellie Chowns and Diana Toynbee

Cabinet Members in remote attendance Councillors Pauline Crockett, Gemma Davies and John Harrington

Cabinet members attending the meeting remotely, e.g. through video conferencing facilities, may not vote on any decisions taken.

Cabinet support members in attendance Councillors John Hardwick, Peter Jinman and Kath Hey

Group leaders / representatives in attendance Councillors Terry James, Peter Jinman, Jonathan Lester, Bob Matthews and Toni Fagan

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

Officers in attendance: Chief Executive, Director of resources and assurance, Director of Public Health, Service Director - All Ages Commissioning, Corporate Director - Children & Young People, Corporate Director - Economy and Environment, Director of Governance and Legal Services, Corporate Services and Communications manager

96. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr Ange Tyler, cabinet member housing, regulatory services and community safety.

97. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

98. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 24 February 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

99. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Pages 7 - 12)

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

100. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

There were no questions from councillors.

---o0o---

The leader of the council announced that the order of items on the agenda would change. The item on Herefordshire Children's Services transformation would be taken first as this had greatest interest.

101. HEREFORDSHIRE CHILDREN'S SERVICES TRANSFORMATION

The cabinet member children and families introduced the item. She summarised the requested investment from the Financial Resilience Reserve, a total of £11.49m to support the ongoing delivery of the Children's Services Improvement Plan. This funding would be allocated in two tranches, with £5m in tranche one from April 2022 and a further £6.49m from July 2022, with detail on progress to be reported back to Cabinet. The cabinet member thanked councillors who had attended recent presentations for their comments and challenges and also thanked officers for their work in putting together the investment proposal.

The cabinet member summarised the previous investment made in children's services, the importance of ensuring the momentum was maintained and the key objectives of this additional investment proposal.

The corporate director for children and families spoke on the need for significant improvement, the progress that had been made over the past year in stabilising the service and understanding the challenges and the next stages in transforming the service. Improvements were starting to be seen in a number of areas but this needed to be maintained and embedded. It was expected that the transformation would take three years overall.

The corporate director then set out the key points of the proposals and explained the governance surrounding future decisions.

Cabinet members discussed the proposals and it was noted that:

- This represented a significant investment in children's services and showed the importance placed on addressing the issues that had been identified;
- It was important to address recruitment and retention;
- The scale of the investment was more than double what had originally been expected but this reflected the scale of the work required and was in keeping with the level of spend in other councils going through similar improvement journeys;
- Areas of deprivation in the county create huge social problems and it would not be just for children's services to address these, but would also involve public health, education providers and other services;
- All councillors had supported the implementation of the improvement strategy for children's services and it was hoped that they would understand the need for this investment and support it.

The chairperson of the children and young people scrutiny committee spoke on the report. The committee had not yet scrutinised the investment but the chair and vice chair had discussed the proposal and supported it in principle. He commented that it was realistic to say that a three year period was required to deliver sustained improvement and that increased capacity was needed to deliver the improvement plan. Good project management was critical to ensure that improvement and it was also important to keep councillors informed about progress.

Responding to points raised by the scrutiny chairperson, officers confirmed that the grant of £1.7m from the Department for Education had mostly been used to support increased improvement activity including scoping of some of the early help services. They also confirmed that progress would be reported back to Cabinet quarterly and that all councillors would receive updates bi-monthly. An independent assurance review and challenge system was also being set up.

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

- Investment in improvements to the service needed to be supported but value for money had to be demonstrated;
- It was important that the investment showed results and that there was accountability through the project management and assurance systems;
- It was a pity that the detailed proposal had not been available when the budget was scrutinised at the start of the year, briefings had been provided to all councillors as soon as possible once the proposal had been finalised;
- The financial resilience reserve would cover the requested investment and the S151 officer was comfortable that the council had sufficient other reserves;
- Benchmarking against other councils was important to understand what comparator councils were spending and how Herefordshire services compared;
- Early help services had to be part of the solution, a broad partnership approach would provide wider support;
- The council wanted to increase the number of permanent staff as while agency staff were good, the costs were significant;
- Recruitment of social workers remained difficult due to a lack of experienced social workers in the market, the council was looking at options including approaching retired staff and developing staff within the council;
- The reintroduction of service managers had already delivered significant improvement as a result of frequent and good quality supervision;
- Average caseloads were given as mean data and officers were examining how these figures could be presented better, the majority of teams were seeing reduced average caseloads and most good and outstanding councils typically had caseloads of 15 to 18 cases;
- There was support and gratitude for the social work teams and the difficult job they did.

It was resolved that:

- a) **The drawdown of up to £11.49m from the Financial Resilience Reserve, in two tranches as laid out above, is approved to support resourcing the transformation stage of children’s services; and**
- b) **Cabinet note the increased base budget requirement for 2023/24 onwards.**

102. DELIVERY PLAN 2022/23

The cabinet member finance, corporate services and planning introduced the report. She explained that the delivery plan sets out what had been achieved in the last 2 years, taking account of the pandemic and severe weather events, and the key objectives for the year ahead. It should be noted that the council’s routine business as usual continued alongside the projects set out in the delivery plan.

Cabinet members spoke to highlight key areas of progress and objectives for the year ahead in their portfolio areas. They thanked officers for their work over the period of the previous plan and for the comprehensive forward planning for the new delivery plan.

Group leaders gave their comments and questions on the report. It was noted that:

- Works to repair the Shirehall would take time due to the nature of the historic building, the council was working closely with the court service to make sure relationships were maintained during the period of closure;
- The delivery of superfast broadband to 93% of premises represented a number of years of investment;
- Having less than 1% of waste going to landfill was a huge achievement;

- Not all of the flats at Station Approach were currently occupied but this was for City Heart to manage and there had not been any request for payment of rents from the council;
- The report was well laid out and easy to digest;
- The achievements of the last 2 years had been shaped to a degree by events such as the pandemic, the council had reacted well to the challenges posed and would need to continue to be resilient.

It was resolved that:

a) Cabinet approves the Delivery Plan, as set out in appendix A.

103. COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY 2022-2025

The leader of the council introduced the report. He highlighted key points in relation to the strategy and accompanying protocols and principles and noted that:

- the previous strategy had expired in 2020 and it was appropriate to have a new start with the new delivery plan;
- the functions of the strategy were in line with the government guidelines to help residents and stakeholders feel informed and engage with them;
- the strategy linked to key objectives and messages in the county plan.

The head of communications explained that:

- the strategy was based on the principles of good strategic communication;
- it established a framework for proactive communications work with greater focus on campaign-led activity, stakeholder engagement and internal communications;
- the corporate narrative had been developed working with cabinet members, senior officers and a communications advisor from the local government association;
- feedback provided as part of the consultation on the strategy was attached to the report.

Cabinet members discussed the report and welcomed the continuation of the Herefordshire Now publication as it was important to still have something physical to distribute.

Group leaders generally welcomed the strategy and supported the continued provision of hard copy information for those without access to the internet. It was important to provide information to residents and stakeholders so they could engage with the council.

Some minor amendments to the wording of the strategy were suggested during the discussion. It was noted that the head of communications would make minor alterations and corrections to the documents as necessary, in consultation with the cabinet member, housing, regulatory services and community safety, before final versions were published.

With this caveat, it was resolved that:

a) The Communications Strategy is approved

b) The accompanying Communications Protocols and Principles are approved.

104. MARKET TOWN INVESTMENT PLANS (MTIP'S) - TO APPROVE THE INVESTMENT PLANS

The cabinet member environment and economy introduced the report. She explained the key objectives of the plans and the need for investment in the market towns. Not all

projects would be able to generate a return that would pay for themselves so opportunities to bid for grant funds would be sought. The plans would evolve, with additional projects added in future and the council would work closely with stakeholders in each of the market towns.

Cabinet members discussed the report, highlighting some of the key projects in each of the market towns. The process of creating the plans was also highlighted. The connections made through this process were equally important in delivering for the market towns.

Group leaders welcomed the proposals to invest in the market towns and gave the views and questions of their groups. The role of rural villages was noted and it was hoped investment in the market towns might also benefit these communities.

It was resolved that:

- a) The market town investment plans (MTIPs) in appendices 1 to 5 to the report are approved and adopted as providing direction for the identification of future economic development projects in the market towns;**
- b) The MTIPs be used to guide the council's capital investment in market towns, which will support the economic recovery and development of the market towns; and**
- c) The Corporate Director, Economy and Environment, following consultation with the Section 151 officer and the Cabinet member for Environment and Economy is delegated authority to take all operational decisions required to implement the above recommendations.**

The meeting ended at 5.08 pm

Chairperson

PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 31 MARCH 2022**Question 1****From: C Wood, Hereford****To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport***This question was carried forward from 24 February meeting.*

Can the cabinet and Cllr Harrington confirm that they will look at investing in improving the pavements in our market towns as part of the Market Town Investment Plans (MTIP's) because I am aware that many of them in these locations are not currently accessible for those using wheelchairs and mobility scooters.

Response

The market town investment plans have identified a number of projects, including improvements to the public realm including refurbishment and improved accessibility for high streets. This will encourage people to use the high streets more and encourage further investment. There isn't yet funding allocated for this projects but Herefordshire Council will work with the town councils to get quality plans drawn up and will then seek to identify funding streams once Cabinet has approved them. We will make sure that accessibility for wheelchairs and mobility scooters is considered fully and that we design any public realms schemes with those considerations in mind.

Supplementary question

Thank you for your response to my original question however I would like assurances from the Cabinet and Councillor Harrington that you will consult wheelchair and mobility scooter users when taking accessibility considerations into account for the market towns as part of the MTIP's.

Response

The cabinet member confirmed he was happy to give such an assurance.

Question 2**From: Mr P McKay, Leominster****To: cabinet member, commissioning, procurement and assets**

Does Herefordshire Council have any map showing the location of our open spaces, such as common land, parks, children's play areas, and similar, that could be made viewable on the 'Highways and Public Rights of Way Map' webpage, so that all may see where they are and how to access them, and if not is there any prospect of such a map being raised?

Response

Thank you for your question Mr McKay and I can see the benefit of linking the PROW map to our open spaces maps.

Our open spaces maps, which show all of the Parks, Play Areas and Sports Pitches in the County are available on our Herefordshire Council Website at:

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/things/parks-play-areas-open-spaces>

Users are able to search via a map application and via Postcode. There is also a link to the list of Commons within Herefordshire:

<https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/community-1/commons-village-greens>

Currently these maps are not integrated into the “Highways and Public Rights of Way Map” but I will ask officer to explore the possibility of developing this integrated approach.

Supplementary question

The Council Websites you make reference to pinpoint the locations, which may be OK for a small play area, but less so for large or linear open space land, and I ask if you would ask officers to explore the possibility of showing the shape, area or boundary on the 'Highways and PROW' Map, as part of developing an integrated approach?

Response from cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

The cabinet member confirmed that this had already been requested.

Question 3

From: Ms E Cairns, Hereford

To: cabinet member, commissioning, procurement and assets

Why did Hereford not get funds from the Changing Places allocation funds?

A further £6.5m will be made available later in the year, will Hereford be applying?

Response

Herefordshire Council did not apply for the first round of Changing Places funding. However, subject to the requirements of the next round, we would intend to make an application. We understand that the next application round will be available from the summer 2022.

The importance of public toilets and changing areas are crucial to both the visitor economy and public health. A year or so ago the council was able to open back up the Maylord Orchards toilets to a great response. This year I will be speaking with our Director of Public Health, Corporate Director of Economy and Environment and partners to identify a way in which we can not only apply for these funds but also look to open as many public toilets in the county as possible, I will be particularly focussing on the disproportionate effect that not having public toilets has on those with disabilities, those with young children and on women.

Question 4

From: Mr M Willmont, Hereford

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

The Council have placed 17 planters containing trees along the central reservations of Station Approach/Link Road. I do not have the true cost of this but understand it would have been at least £140,000.00.

I believe that the quote below is from Councillor Harrington?

“We have managed to secure funding to put tree planters along the road that can be re-used when we are able to put in a proper tree planting system.”

What was so complicated about planting the trees in the ground now?

This surely would have been a better solution financially. It surely would have resulted in a better appearance (in my opinion), saved money on maintenance and avoided having to find and move the planters to an alternative location at some time in the future (if one could be found!)?

Response

Mr Willmont thank you for your questions, which I always appreciate and value, in part because of your expertise and past experience (I would welcome your input into the City Masterplan that is being drawn up currently if you want to get directly in touch).

The simple fact is I would like to see as many trees as possible planted in and around the City of Hereford and indeed all our county towns. Although a rural county with good tree cover around the County we have below the national average when it comes to tree cover in our urban areas. I would like as many good specimen trees planted back into the ground wherever possible and that is the direction we have given officers and will be supporting in new policy documents like the City Masterplan.

There are constraints to putting trees in the ground though, as you are no doubt aware (including capital funding time limits where grants are concerned) and we need to try to plan for them properly, spend good money on bedding them in carefully and solidly and future proof their siting to make sure someone like me doesn't come along in another few years and rip them out for some reason – spurious or otherwise. We particularly have to be careful about the glut of utilities that have gone into trenching underground around the City, often with little thought, in my opinion, because until we came in as an administration we didn't even have a proper Permitting scheme for the highways and public realm. It's not to say we can't plant where utility trenches lie but we need to put extra thought and resource into putting them in so their roots are protected and services aren't likely to be affected by roots – and roots are unlikely to be damaged by upgrading of utilities in the future.

On the City Link Road, the issue here is what we may want to do in the near future in terms of any changes and better provision of active travel measures (such as a segregated cycle lane as should have been originally delivered). Planting in-ground trees

now may restrict or curtail best design in that regard, so we need to sort the needed changes first.

So whilst I share your preference for in-ground trees, and we will plan and budget properly in good time for trees in-ground going back into our City which desperately needs greenery back, we have also chosen to introduce tree planters to help green the City – and as we build up more in-house capacity in our transport and highways teams this will allow us to make the best choices for siting good in-ground trees which I hope will be allowed to grow for many decades without being disturbed. The planters along the City Link Road and elsewhere will bring enjoyment and pleasure to our residents – and there will always be somewhere to put them in the future, they will remain an asset.

Question 5

From: Ms M Albright, on behalf of Herefordshire Construction Industry Lobby Group

To: cabinet member, infrastructure and transport

Are Herefordshire Council confident that they are doing all that is possible and within their powers to find and implement restoration solutions (and create effective future protections) for the River Wye Catchment?

Various high level reports and recommendations have been published since 2019 focusing on the need to change land use and industrial agricultural practice yet the main action taken by HC remains the moratorium preventing small scale housing development in a section of the catchment. Restrictions and controls do not seem to apply up or downstream of The Lugg or against any other sector.

Response

Ms Albright, thank you for your question, earlier this week I was passed a copy of the Lichfield's Economic Impacts Report compiled for the Homebuilders Federation which sets out their assessment of the enormous economic cost of the environmental challenges faced nationally and in particular here on the Lugg Catchment. We are all very conscious of what a severe impact that this has had upon homebuilders, construction workers and people wanting new homes in the North of the county.

As you know Herefordshire is in the process of purchasing three Integrated Wetland Sites and will consider purchasing further sites to protect the Lugg and if it is eventually necessary the Wye Catchment too. Subject to the completion of expert technical and legal reviews and the assessment of new advice from Natural England published last week, I am hoping that our next Cabinet meeting will be able to consider proposals to offer developers credits which will begin to get the north of the county building again.

We are also in the process of completing a new Agricultural Supplementary Planning Document which will contains a phosphate calculation tool which will enable a much better assessment of proposed agricultural developments in the catchment. We know that land use has to change if soils are to become healthy again and our rivers are to be protected. Our Agricultural SPD will help measure this but we very much depend on the statutory responsibilities held by Natural England and the Environment Agency being

actively discharged to see such change happen and we will continue to press for change through the Nutrient Management Board (NMB).

That said, and following recent calls for a Water Protection Zone, we also believe that many of the issues the catchment faces are systemic and need much greater attention than the NMB is equipped to deliver, important though this body is. This is why we have been calling for a Phosphate Commission to bring together English and Welsh counterparts from across all the agencies, and with assistance from recognised industry experts, to focus greater attention on solving intractable cross border and cross partner issues such as those you mention in your question. I do hope you will support proposals for a Phosphate Commission and we shall continue to keep you posted on the proposal as plans for its delivery develop.

We are also actively engaging with representatives from the farming community providing proactive assistance to encourage Environmental Land Management Schemes especially where this will bring cutting edge approaches to prevent further pollution and to accelerate the safe encapsulation of the deposits already built up in our soils. We also continue to engage with the Poultry industry who now recognise they have a part to play in finding solutions too.

Finally, I want to assure Hereford Constructors Information Liaison Group that we will continue to do all WE can to get the north of the county building again and to seek the restoration of our rivers which I am sure we all want to see.

Supplementary question

HCILG would like to reiterate that the current situation is harming the wider county and our communities in all sorts of ways - not simply the construction sector, jobs and delivery of new homes.

Having attended yesterday's Nutrient Management Board meeting it is now clear that any progress from the agencies, neighbouring authorities, NGO's and the agricultural sector remains slow, uncertain and unlikely to deliver river and soil restoration and so end the moratorium.

HCILG would therefore implore Herefordshire Council to now seek, embrace and support any privately delivered nutrient and ecology betterment projects from businesses, individuals and charities such as The Wildlife Trust.

Do you agree that creating a supportive, dynamic and agile environment where neutrality and betterment can be welcomed and secured from innovative private projects, alongside your wetlands which will be paid for by the construction sector, is the most viable way for us all to take control over the situation and finally begin the long process of ecological restoration alongside sustainable growth?

As always HCILG would be happy to help find ways to accelerate this.

Response

The cabinet member thanked the construction industry lobby group for their work and lobbying on behalf of builders and noted the implications for them of the moratorium. He confirmed that the council was very happy to work with groups such as the CILG and the wildlife trust but the council would be taking a risk if it granted planning permission against

the advice of the statutory agencies. The council was trying to mitigate the risk by bringing in wetlands and hoped to start trading credits with developers. All parties would continue lobbying government agencies and MPs to make sure they were taking an active role but action was not happening as quickly as the council would like. The council was supporting the creation of a water protection zone and would continue to try and move things forward.