

## PUBLIC QUESTIONS TO CABINET – 21 December 2023

### Question 1

#### 1. Trish Marsh, Leominster

**To: Councillor Lester, corporate strategy and budget**

(Councillor Stoddart, finance and corporate services is on leave)

I note the Cabinet have to cut 2024/25 spending by £19.5 million.

At Council budget setting meetings in 2022 and 2023 the Conservative group put forward motions to freeze the council tax precept. Both times the True Independents and nearly all the Liberal Democrats voted with them. In 2023 the Conservatives did not even suggest what cuts would need to be made in order to achieve a 0% rise.

However, alongside most principal councils across the country, the Independent Green alliance agreed the top precept increase allowed by government to protect valuable public services in Herefordshire.

If Herefordshire's precept had remained at its 2021/22 level:-

- What would have been the cumulative reduction in precept collected to end of 23/24?
- What level of cuts in £ would be required for 24/25 revenue spending to balance the books without drawing on reserves?

### **Response**

The amendment to the 2022/23 budget was fundable, in February 2022 Council choose to deploy the funds in a different way.

The amendment for the 2023/24 budget was not for a 0% increase, it was a proposal to fund further investment in our rural C and U roads.

We have inherited a medium term financial strategy from the previous administration that has budget shortfalls in future years. We are working to close these future years' gaps.

If Herefordshire's precept had remained at its 2021/22 level without any increase in council tax charge in 2022/23 and 2023/24, the cumulative difference in council tax charged to 31 March 2024 is £13.0 million.

If Herefordshire's precept had remained at its 2021/22 level without any increase in council tax charge, there would be an additional funding gap in 2024/25 of £16.1 million.

### **Supplementary question**

Thank you for calculating that, if council tax had been frozen as the Tories proposed in 2022 and 2023, an additional £16.1 million of cuts to vital services would now be obligatory - on top of the painful £19.5m service damaging cuts already required next year.

The minority Tory administration – sensibly - proposes a precept rise of 5% for 2024/25 - the highest level permitted. Inflation is currently 4.6%.

Cllr Lester says in the Hereford Times that this is because “The council is still facing significant inflationary pressures”.

Yet in opposition the Tories proposed a 0% precept increase in February 2022 when inflation was 6.2% - and in February 2023 when inflation was 10.4%.

Can the Cabinet member tell us if he would prefer to be making service cuts of £36.5 million for next year?

### **Supplementary response**

Question is for Councillor Stoddart who is on leave. As the Chair I would like to say that the conservative administration is always keen to limit council tax increases where possible and deliver value for money for the council tax payers. The proposals we put forward in 2021/22 were predicated on the ability of the then administration to deliver value for money. The financial picture we've inherited, with significant overspends leaves this administration with little choice but to propose a council tax increase of 4.99% in order to maintain a balanced budget. I would just like to stress though that it's a draft budget and we will be listening to the views of all members of the public as part of the consultation process.

### **Question 2**

**Ms Reid, Hereford**

**To: Councillor Powell, Children and Young People**

Children's Services Commissioner's report (12/2023):

"Families in Herefordshire have experienced practice that has been intrusive and over-reliant on process, leading to unnecessary use of formal mechanisms [eg Section 47] to engage families and a disproportionate use of intervention in family life and too many children being looked after when there could have been opportunities to safely keep them with parents or the wider family [Leeds report]"

"I [Commissioner] have mentioned some of areas that have been slow to progress including the use of external support, return to face to face conferences and reviews, reviewing family contact time, developing early help arrangements and discharging care orders. In addition to those we have been concerned about delays in ... setting up family group conferencing, and developing locality working."

How and by when will Herefordshire Council increase the pace of discharging care orders?

### **Response**

Children and Young People's Services is working to prioritise permanency plans with children, young people, their parents/carers and family members to ensure that the plans are in the best interests of children and young people, reflect their changing needs and circumstances and those of their parents and wider family members.

The discharging of a Care Order can only be exercised by the Courts following careful consideration of the evidence.

The Reunification Practice Guidance and Permanence Planning Guidance form part of our wider Permanence Strategy which was reviewed and relaunched earlier this year. This sets out clearly that the preferred option for permanency for children in our care is for them to return or remain in the care of their parents where this is safe and meets children's needs.

A dedicated Permanence Team is in place to offer increased capacity and expertise to consider permanency planning and to undertake assessments to inform court applications to request the discharge of a Care Order. Since August 2023, this team has supported the discharge of 11 Care Orders with Court dates being scheduled by the Court for a further 12 children and young

people. There are 18 children for whom assessment is currently in process. For 8 children an assessment was undertaken but a discharge of Care Order was not currently appropriate.

The progress of the Permanency Team is overseen by Senior Officers and a Permanency Panel has been established to ensure that plans for children and young people meet their needs.

Due to the unique nature and circumstances of each individual child / young person in our care it would not be appropriate to set targets or specific expectations in respect of the discharging of Care Orders specifically, however, as outlined above, there is an increased focus in relation to achieving permanency.

### **Supplementary question**

The Children's Commissioner's report stated that the rate of children in care continues to remain high. The costs are very high, for example, on average over £260,000 per child for one year in a children's home, with a forecast budget overspend of over £8m.

Only 11 Care Orders were discharged during the past almost five months. Per the Permanence Strategy, Family Group Conferences facilitate children returning to their family network including with a Special Guardianship Order. During Quarter 2 of 2023-24, there were only eight Family Group Conferences "when established" and only two Special Guardianship Orders were issued.

Sadly, too many children are in care and therefore will be separated from their families at Christmas. I suggest the council's New Year's resolution should be to quicken the pace of reducing the number of children in care. Will the council commit to this resolution?

### **Supplementary response**

With specific regard to reducing the number of children in our care, moving forwards the answer to that question is yes, absolutely we are committed to delivering against that.