

# Herefordshire Council Plan - findings of the board working group

## Outline

The Scrutiny Management Board originally scrutinised work to deliver the Herefordshire Council Plan and its delivery plan at its meeting on 21 November 2023. At that meeting the committee agreed to set up a task and finish group in order to track delivery of the plan and to contribute to its development.

During the meeting the board members worked through the document page by page. In doing this, the board also highlighted a couple of more general matters concerning the plan. Their commentary is accounted below, section by section, followed by more general commentary on the plan itself. This report concludes with the board's observations on the delivery plan.

Although the committee had drafted a terms of reference for this work, there was insufficient time to carry out the work contained in the terms. Accordingly, the committee agreed to hold a working group session with officers of the council and members of Cabinet. The committee received a copy of the draft Herefordshire Council Plan and its delivery plan in advance of this meeting.

The workshop took place on 3 April 2024 and was attended by:

- Chair, Scrutiny Management Board
- Four other members of Scrutiny Management Board
- Leader of the Council
- Deputy Leader of the Council
- Cabinet portfolio holder for Finance and Corporate Services
- Director of Strategy and Transformation
- Statutory Scrutiny Officer
- National Management Graduate

At the meeting, due to pressure of time the board focussed their scrutiny of the overarching plan. It then circulated both the plan and delivery plan to members of the board, inviting comment specifically on the delivery plan.

It should be noted that the group limited its works to offering feedback on drafts of the Herefordshire Council Plan and its delivery plan. It did not critically appraise the necessity for the plans or whether the underlying format for either was correct. As the timescale for carrying out this work and sharing it with officers was shorter than anticipated, the feedback was provided directly to officers and Cabinet members in the meeting and through written

comments on a draft of the delivery plan. This report therefore provides an account of the feedback provided to officers, rather than a more general appraisal of the strategy. As such, it should be read as an account of the work undertaken, rather than an appraisal of the plans.

## **Findings from discussion of the Herefordshire Council Plan**

The group worked through the sections of the draft plan, offering their suggestions on each section in turn. These findings and suggestions are offered in the order that the report was written.

### ***Vision and Foreword***

The group agreed that the draft vision for the council was too focussed on safety and protection. Although the group accepted that Herefordshire People had identified community and personal safety as priorities, it would like to see the vision emphasise wellbeing more.

The group heard that the executive had made a decision to de-emphasise the political leadership in the foreword, and to focus instead on the council as a whole. The chair of the Scrutiny Management Board disagreed, and suggested that a more visible leader of the council would offer assurance of leadership.

This iteration of the council's corporate plan is called the Herefordshire Council Plan, rather than its previous name of Herefordshire County Plan. The group heard that the name was changed to make it clearer that this was the council's plan, and to recognise that other public sector bodies such as West Mercia Police and NHS trusts are responsible for much of the public sector service delivery in Herefordshire. The group agreed that this distinction should be made more clearly in the plan. It also agreed that the report should provide more ambition for the council's partnership working, offering more challenge to our partners.

### ***What is Herefordshire Council?***

Although the group accepted that this section was useful and interesting, they questioned whether it was appropriate for this plan. The group agreed that it was too detailed and would be better displayed as an infographic. Alternatively, as the plan will not be printed, a far shorter overview could include a hyperlink to more detailed information on the council's website.

### ***Overview of Herefordshire***

The group was broadly happy with this section. It suggested using photography to fill a significant area of white space on the right hand page of this section.

### ***Strengths and Challenges***

Group members welcomed the recognition that although unemployment was low in the county (a strength), a high proportion of that employment was relatively low wage (a challenge). The group suggested that high employment (rather than low unemployment) would make for a better strength, and that the report should not emphasise Herefordshire's

significant employment in low wage industries. Another potentially useful strength to highlight would be the county's landscape and scenery.

The group also suggested that the strengths and challenges highlighted in this section are also referred to the relevant thematic section of the plan.

### ***People***

The working group members were largely happy with this section. A member suggested an emphasis on a 'good start in life' would not apply to everyone, although other members felt that the balance overall was good. A member also suggested copy emphasising Herefordshire as a place where everyone was welcome.

### ***Place***

Scrutiny Management Board members made a number of suggestions to correct the layout, minor typographical errors and a factual error. The attending officers agreed to the corrections in the meeting. A scrutiny committee chair attending suggested adding an objective concerning fuel poverty.

### ***Growth***

The group agreed that this section contained too much about the barriers to economic growth in Herefordshire, which would sit better in the earlier 'challenges' section of the report. There was surprise that there was not more emphasis on the opportunities arising from tourism, in particular within the Wye Valley

This section includes aspiration to build 16,100 new homes by 2041. A group member pointed out that the wording of this aspiration could give the impression that the construction of these homes was a given, and should be amended accordingly.

### ***Transformation***

Everyone participating in the session agreed that transformation should emphasise changes to service delivery rather than structures, as delivery would be considerably more relevant to Herefordshire people. Group members therefore suggested that the photos used in this section could instead show community service delivery.

### ***Budget***

Members of the group corrected a factual error in the report concerning the size of the council's budget.

### ***Delivery Plan***

The board agreed that the framework of the council's strategic plans provided some reassurance that the council had plans in place to carry out much of the work listed in the delivery plan. A board member suggested that the section on local democracy, either as text or listed as hyperlinks, might be better placed here.

## **Findings from discussion of the Herefordshire Council Plan delivery plan**

Unlike the Herefordshire Council Plan, many of the suggestions made by group members are common to the entire report. Accordingly the feedback in this section of this report, which pertains to the delivery plan, is ordered thematically.

### ***Plan format***

Group members commented that a tabular format to the action plan provided a sound structure to the overarching strategy. Ordering actions under objectives, which in turn were ordered under the Plan's four strategic themes, makes it clear to the public and partners the objectives for the council's work, as well as providing some accountability through assigning actions to council directorates.

The group suggested the addition of two columns to the action plan. Each action should have a timescale for its delivery, and "RAG" (Red, Amber, Green) to provide an indication of which actions were being delivered.

A group member also suggested that the objectives in the action plan should be listed in the same order that they are in the overarching strategy.

### ***SMART deliverables***

Group members noted that many of the actions listed in the 'deliverables' column were not as SMART as possible, i.e. they were not specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-limited. As a result it would not be possible to determine whether many of the actions had ever been delivered. In some cases too there was confusion about what was considered an objective and what was considered a deliverable. The members gave the following example:

*Transform the offer for carers, including developing and delivering the All Age Carers [sic] Strategy*

The group suggested that in this case, the deliverable should be "delivering the All Age Carers [sic] Strategy", with "transform the offer for carers" as an objective. Even then, the action does not operationalise "transform", making it difficult to know whether delivery of the strategy would result in transformation of the offer.

### ***Use of plain language***

Members of the group felt that the delivery plan's language was often aimed at officers and partners of the council, rather than the public. The delivery plan authors have taken care to avoid acronyms, but have included phrasing that would make sense to people within the council, but less so to those outside of it. An example given was:

*Deliver Solihull Approach training to schools, parents and parents which promotes emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people.*

Plainer language would likely lead to a longer document, but would demonstrate more clearly to the public the council's objectives and its work to achieve them.

### ***Aligning deliverables to objectives***

The delivery plan contains some objectives which lack deliverables. In one instance there is an objective “Support People to feel safe and respected in their communities” with no stated deliverables to achieve it. Other objectives stated that the work to achieve them was “TBC”. This could lead the council open to an accusation that it was failing to take action to meet its own stated objectives.

### ***Ensuring a geographic balance of activity***

The Place theme includes an objective to “Support our local culture and heritage and make Herefordshire a thriving, safe and attractive place to live and visit.” Within this are five deliverables, four of which are located in Hereford. Similarly, the objective to “Expand and maintain the transport infrastructure network in a sustainable way and improve connectivity across the county” features deliverables mostly in Hereford or applicable across the entire county. The group agreed that this section should feature where possible deliverable projects across the county.

### ***Greater environmental and agricultural protections***

Group members noted that the Council Plan states that agriculture is “one of our strengths”, yet there is nothing in the delivery plan to “Support agricultural practices which minimise pollution and maximise biodiversity.” The one stated deliverable, adoption of the Minerals and Waste Local Plan has already been delivered and does not relate to agriculture practices.

The group also noted that there was no tangible deliverable to improve water quality in the River Lugg.

### ***Strategies as deliverables***

The group noted that two of the deliverables in the delivery plan concerned the production of strategies. Group members felt that strategy production was ‘business as usual’ and that it would be more useful to focus on supporting actions plans, and to ensure that major actions in any action plan can be found in the overarching Council Plan.