

Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at Herefordshire Council Offices, Plough Lane, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 16 May 2024 at 2.30 pm

Cabinet Members Physically Present and voting:	Councillor Jonathan Lester, Leader of the Council (Chairperson) Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst, Deputy Leader of the Council (Vice-Chairperson) Councillors Graham Biggs, Harry Bramer, Barry Durkin, Carole Gandy, Ivan Powell, Philip Price and Pete Stoddart
Cabinet Members in remote attendance	None <i>Cabinet members attending the meeting remotely, e.g. through video conferencing facilities, may not vote on any decisions taken.</i>

Cabinet support members in attendance Councillors Dan Hurcomb

Group leaders / representatives in attendance Councillors Ellie Chowns, Bob Matthews, Liz Harvey and Kevin Tillett (as representative for Terry James)

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance Councillors Ellie Chowns, Liz Harvey and Toni Fagan

Other councillors in attendance:

Officers in attendance: P Walker, A Lovegrove, Communications Team, R Cook, C Porter, H Hall, R Hart, M Pearce and S Walmsley (clerk)

117. **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

There were apologies from Councillors Terry James, Louis Stark and Dan Hurcomb.

118. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None.

119. **MINUTES**

Resolved: **That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 March and 25 April be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.**

120. **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC** (Pages 7 - 8)

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

121. **QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS**

Questions received and responses given are attached as appendix 2 to the minutes.

122. **REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES**

There was one report from Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee.

- (a) Recommendations of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee: Fostering services

The chairperson for the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee (CYPSC) detailed that the meeting on 7 May 2024 focused on fostering and the importance of sufficiency in placements for young people in the care system. The committee noted that fostering had been at a low level but there were improvements and an action plan in place. The committee felt that an elected member would help support foster carers. Six recommendations were put forward for consideration by Cabinet.

It was unanimously agreed that the recommendations on the Fostering Service report, made by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 7 May 2024 be noted, and that an Executive Response to the scrutiny recommendations be prepared for consideration in due course.

123. HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL PLAN 2024-2028

The cabinet member for finance and corporate services provided an overview, it was noted that consultation had taken place widely and an all member briefing took place in February 2024. The Council Plan has aspired to be accessible for all and the intention is to deliver the best for Herefordshire.

The priorities for the next four years were highlighted as; People (for residents to realise their potential), Place (to protect and enhance our environment), Growth (to create conditions to deliver sustainable growth) and Transformation (to be an efficient council that embraces best practice).

Cabinet members discussed the report and it was noted that the Delivery Plan will set out the strategy and confirmed that use of the word endeavour within the Council Plan reiterates the Council's ambition to strive for the best.

It was noted that the Council Plan contains the Council's intentions and it is an easy plan to use.

It was referenced that the underpinning theme of 'Safe, happy and healthy' ran throughout the Council Plan. Whilst the Council Plan could not contain all the detail, it is focused on the importance of working in partnership.

Group leaders gave the views of their groups. The Council Plan was welcomed, it's clear and plain language along with the use of diagrams connecting all key documents was helpful. It was acknowledged that input from the Scrutiny Management Board had been received and noted that the recent recommendations had been incorporated into the Plan. Inclusion regarding the river was also welcomed. It was suggested that a children's version of the plan to set out how it will impact children's and families would be welcomed.

Concerns were expressed that the strategy wasn't as strong as it could be and causing more damage, congestion and pollution in the North in respect of the proposed bypass than residents currently experience in the South. It was noted that residents of Southwyke had placed congestion and pollution as a clear priority. Concerns were raised regarding difficulty in raising inward investment and attracting people to the County. It was noted there was inconsistency and lack of detail within the Plan regarding housing, affordable housing and the Place objective.

In response to the queries it was confirmed that the Council are investing in employment land, there is a plan to promote the County which, alongside the growth corridor planned

with housing, employment land and better transport infrastructure, will feed into the success of the Council Plan.

Confirmed that housing is mentioned under the Growth priority and this will be underpinned by the Delivery Plan and the cross party working group.

It was lastly noted there had been assistance from councillors, officers and cabinet and thanks was extended to all especially to the officers.

It was unanimously resolved that:

(a) The Herefordshire Council Plan 2024-2028, as set out at appendix A, is approved by Cabinet to go forward to the annual Council meeting for agreement

124. QUARTER 4 BUDGET REPORT

The cabinet member for finance and corporate services advised the 2023/24 overspend of £8.7m demonstrated a significant reduction from forecast over spend at Quarter 2 and the £8.7m had to be funded from reserves.

Confirmed that a detailed overview of ear marked reserves had been undertaken to identify balances with no future commitments or planned use to fund the £8.7m overspend. The total reserve balance as of 31 March 2024 was £82.8m and will undergo routine monitoring across 2024/25.

The 2023/24 approved revenue budget was £193.3m. Table 1 sets out the revenue outturn by Corporate Director portfolio and Table 2 sets out the management recovery actions implemented during the last year, the impact of these recovery actions were set out.

It was noted that full Council approved £20m of savings for 2023/24 and as of 31 March 2024, 79% had been delivered. Confirmed that £15.8m savings had been delivered and £4.2m had not. Confirmed the full details were set out in Appendix E. Confirmed that this was the evidence requested by Scrutiny Management Board earlier in the year.

Confirmed the capital outlay and the revised 2023/24 capital budget of £68.4m which included additional grants and approved changes. The capital budgets had been re-profiled in line with expected delivery, set out in Appendix B Table C. This has reduced the 2023/24 capital budget by £78.9m which has been reallocated across the following three years, set out in Table 4. The final spend position is £47.3m which represents an underspend of £21.1m against a budget of £68.4m. Full details for each project area were set out in Appendix B. The underspend is as a result of projects being delivered under the project budget.

Confirmed that the Council's financial position remains very stable with a deliverable balance budget for 2024/25, a Medium Term Financial Strategy which shows the Council will be able to deliver balanced budgets over the four year period and confirmed that the Council has strong reserves.

Cabinet members discussed the report and it was noted that whilst the majority of the Community Wellbeing budget is demand driven, it has still saved £6.1m and has come in on budget. The cabinet member for adults, health and wellbeing stated that the hard work to achieve this is due to the director and their staff.

The Children Services Improvement Plan was discussed and it was noted that the Council approved the budget which enabled the delivery of that Plan and included a three year financial plan based on assumptions in three key areas. Firstly, regarding a

reduction on the number of children in care. It was noted that operational practice is informed by careful assessment of the individual children's needs, the risks, their best interests and the circumstances. The assumption was to reduce children in care to 395 and it was confirmed the current figure is 389. It was acknowledged that more progress was needed and the cabinet member for children and young people provided assurances to Cabinet and thanked officers for their continued hard work. Secondly, the conversion of agency to permanent staff. It was confirmed that 25 permanent members of staff have already been recruited, against a target of 30 by June 2024. Thirdly, a reduction in the overall establishment. It was confirmed that a reduction of four posts, against a target of six posts had already been achieved.

The cabinet member for environment acknowledged the overall work of the Council and thanked officers for what had been achieved between Quarters 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Group leaders gave the views of their groups. It was acknowledged that there has been a tight control on the finances. It was noted there had been improvements in children's and young people directorate but there was an ongoing need to monitor and report the projected savings. Clarification was also sought as to whether the reduction in children coming into care was as a result of early intervention. Improvements in the presentation of the data was suggested, with a recommendation of presenting the percentage of underspend or overspend against projections would assist. The underspend on highways, environment and waste was queried compared to the overspends in economy and management. Concern was raised that the Council are underspending on front line services. Queried why the Capital Developments fund has not been spent and why the Home Upgrade Grant has been underspent. Clarification was sought regarding the change in the reserves position between end of year forecast provided when the budget was set and the figures presented today. Queried which lines in the reserves provided the funds to cover the £8.7m overspend.

Clarification was sought regarding which lines in the reserves will provide the £2.3m required to balance the current year's budget in line with the budget amendment which was approved at full Council in February.

Also, information was requested regarding how much of the additional income received from interest receipts in year has been used to support the low income households as originally intended when the budget was set in February 2023.

In response to the queries it was noted that the presentation of the report was improving but noted the comments. Regarding the under delivery in the Home Upgrade Grant it has been underspent due to re-procuring and delay in instructions from Government. However, the Council are delivering more than most other counties. It was confirmed to qualify for the Home Upgrade Grant you needed to live in Herefordshire, have no mains gas heating, own or rent an energy insufficient home and have a household income below £36k per year.

In respect of children in care and early help, the Council has seen significant increases in the number of partner agencies conducting early help assessments which means the family and children concerned are supported by targeted early help. Also, confirmed that the Council are working with the children's safeguarding partnership and has received funding from the department to improve the Council's early help offer. It was noted that there are a range of operational matters in hand to reduce the number of children in care and there is continuous proactive activity to improve the early help offer to support families at an earlier stage and prevent matters escalating.

In respect of the reserves identified by the budget amendment at full Council in February, it was confirmed that these have been fully preserved as required. The Care

Market Costs of £959k and the Financial Resilience Reserve of £1,344m are fully untouched and are reserved for exactly the purpose that was specified in the amendment. It was also confirmed that all financial transactions in the year will be subject to detailed testing by the external auditors over the summer months. It was confirmed that a written response would be provided to Councillor Harvey regarding the detailed reserve movements.

It was unanimously resolved that:

- a) reviews the financial outturn for 2023/24, as set out in the appendices A-E, and identifies any additional actions to be considered.**

125. QUARTER 4 PERFORMANCE REPORT

The cabinet member for finance and corporate services provided an overview of the report and noted that this is the final report on the previous administration's County Plan and its associated Delivery Plan for 2023/24. It was confirmed that the performance reports based on the 2024/25 financial year will be based on the Council Plan themes of People, Place, Growth and Transformation. The measures will be detailed in the Delivery Plan. Noted where comparisons can be made with last year, performance was generally better than 12 months ago. It was confirmed that where the status of items was amber or red, there is a corresponding comment from the relevant project manager explaining why.

Within Economy there are 52 activities on the Delivery Plan, 27% were completed, 37% are on track, 35% are on amber and 2% were red. Where performance measures were set 58% are on target which was an improvement on the 50% at Quarter 3.

Within Environment there are 37 activities on the Delivery Plan with 33% complete, 46% are green, 19% are amber, none are red and 3% are currently paused. It was noted that Environmental Health and Planning continued to carry vacancies which has impacted performance and confirmed that both services are part of the transformation program to improve efficiencies, introduce new planning and regulatory software and review structures. In respect of the new household waste contract, FCC has been appointed as the Council's new provider for the collection of household waste and the new contract will provide the Council with new vehicles across the fleet and two electric vehicles will operate in the city centre.

Within Community there are 84 activities on the Delivery Plan, 38% are complete, 36% are green, 20% are amber, none are red and 6% are paused. Progress is continued to be made in relation to short breaks for children including mobilisation of new providers offering group based activities and one to one daytime support. In February 2024, Ofsted carried out their fourth monitoring visit focusing on children in care aged 16 and 17 and care leavers. It was noted that the Council's practice is still too variable and whilst some children and young people received a better service, not enough did. Ofsted acknowledged improvements had been made but not all quick enough and basic practice is not consistent for all children and young people. Improved practice across the service is focusing on the quality of assessments, the quality of plans and planning, supervision and management oversight, purposeful visiting and safely reducing numbers of children in the Council's care. It was confirmed that the Ofsted annual conversation has been moved to 21 August 2024 and the self-evaluation form was being prepared. A fifth Ofsted monitoring visit is likely to take place in the summer and the SEND inspection is also anticipated. The refreshed improvement plan is due to be presented to Cabinet in June 2024. Confirmed that Deborah McMillan has taken over from Gladys Rose White as the Council's DfE improvement advisor and Eleanor Brazil remains a children's commissioner, the progress review report was published in December 2023. The next review is expected to take place in June 2024.

Within Corporate the percentage of invoices paid within target was 92.26% for the 12 months of this financial year, this was better than target and performance at the same point last year. Confirmed this was despite the increase in invoices being processed. The processing of new housing benefit claims and change of circumstances continued to remain steady and within target. Council Tax collection rates hit target for 2023/24 and the business rate collection gap is closing significantly. Whilst response rates to complaints is still behind target, it has improved during the last couple of months and there has been significant improvement in the response times across all directorates. Through the last year the annualised sickness absence rate has increased from 8.81 days at the end of February 2023 to 9.17 days at the end of February 2024. The service continues to proactively manage absence and greater focus is being given to supporting employees to be healthy in order to improve attendance. Workplace stability is improving, with turnover decreasing from 18.18% at the start of the year to 12.65% in February 2024. The Council approach to reward and recognition continues to be reviewed to ensure that the overall employment offer is competitive and that Hereford Council is seen as an employer of choice. Noted the continued move to parking transactions taking place by card or phone, 62.02% of transactions have been made by card or phone in the last 12 months. The Office for Local Government (Oflog) provides information about the performance of local government and the Council has improved across most metrics, these are reported in Appendix B.

Cabinet members discussed the report and it was noted that in respect of the Home Upgrade Grant there was slow processes within the Department of Energy which has prevented the Council from proceeding at a faster pace. It was noted from the 60 Local Authorities within the Consortium, the Council has been the top performer by a significant margin. The Council are inviting more households to take advantage of this grant.

Group leaders gave the views of their groups. It was noted there was an improvement in the performance figures. Queries were raised regarding what the estimate of cost of sickness absence would be and whether discounted membership for Halo can be provided as a preventative step and to help improve staff wellbeing. In respect of tourism, it was queried what steps are being taken to build up tourism and support in the County. Concern was expressed that deliverables and measures of performance in the Children's and Young Persons directorate had not been given the sufficient attention it required. It was raised that meaningful milestones need to be put in place alongside identifying performance measures. It was hoped that the Scrutiny Management Board can assist when the Delivery Plan is considered. It was acknowledged that the statistics within Oflog were not wholly reflective of the Council's actual position.

In response to the queries it was noted that there was no cost associated with sickness as the Council doesn't back fill and the activity cost will be looked at separately. It was confirmed that Halo membership is already offered to all employees at £37.75 per month and the first six weeks are free. Noted access to leisure and fitness facilities were important for physical and mental wellbeing. It was important for staff to be made aware of all offers available and the matter will remain to be reviewed by management. In respect of the tourism query, it was confirmed that Cllr Matthews would be put on the circulation list regarding Destination Bid which covers what they have achieved.

It was unanimously resolved that:

- a) To review performance for Quarter 4 2023/24, and identify any additional actions to achieve future performance measures**

The meeting ended at 4.30 pm

Chairperson