

Title of report: Including Children's Voices in Council Policy

Meeting: Children and Young people Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 26 November 2024

Report by: Democratic Services

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

All Wards

Purpose

For the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee to consider this report, which provides an overview on how the council includes children's voices when developing and making council policy and practice.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) **The committee note the report.**
- b) **The committee determines any recommendations it wishes to make to relevant bodies to encourage further activity and improvement in respect of including children's voices in council policy.**

Alternative options

1. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee could choose not to review information contained in this report; this is not recommended as including children's voices in council policy is one of the council's priorities.

Key considerations

2. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee identified how the council includes children's thoughts, opinions, and interests as a priority for its work programme. This came

about partly from conversations with the current and previous directors of children’s services, who wanted assurance that the needs of all children and young people were met within the council’s universal services.

- At two planning meetings with the Chair of the committee and officers of the council, it was agreed to provide a joint report for the committee that would consider how different areas across the council: engaged with children and young people, shared data/information internally and with partners and developed policy based on input from young people. The challenges faced in doing so would also be considered.

Intelligence Unit

- The Intelligence Unit is part of the Corporate Performance service area. The team is involved in providing support for two different ways of collecting information about the voice of children and young people, which services can then use to inform policy and operational decisions. These two different ways are (i) The Herefordshire Children and Young People’s Quality of Life Survey, and (ii) consultations and engagement.
- The Herefordshire Children and Young People’s Quality of Life Survey is primary research with Children and Young People (CYP) about growing up in Herefordshire, commissioned by Public Health on behalf of the CYP Partnership. It asks questions on a range of topics related to overall wellbeing, experiences, behaviours and feelings about life. The results provide a comprehensive and timely local evidence base to identify needs. It *does not* ask CYP about their views of particular council services or policies.
- The survey most recently took place in 2021 and 2024, and was undertaken by a specialist research company: The Schools Health Education Unit ([SHEU](#)). Most fieldwork was carried out in schools, with pupils completing questionnaires as part of a Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) or similar lesson. All schools were invited to take part, with those that did receiving a statistical report of their own results and a comparison with the county. A number of Further Education (FE) colleges and training providers also took part, and there was an online survey open to all.
- The numbers involved in each year are shown in the table below:

Number of participating:	2021	2024
Primary schools	25 (32%)	29 (37%)
Secondary schools	10 (67%)	10 (67%)
FE/training providers	2	2
Special schools	All (between 2021 and 2023)	The special school surveys will be co-produced for 2025
Children and young people in total	4,900	5,050

Topics covered by the survey include:

- Characteristics and family circumstances
- Healthy lifestyles: food, dental health, physical activity
- Community and participation
- Smoking, vaping, alcohol & drugs
- Relationships and sexual health (Y10 & up)
- Emotional health and wellbeing, including resilience
- Safety and bullying – physical and online
- School and future

8. For the Herefordshire system, the results of the survey filled significant data gaps, informing for example:
 - [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment 2021 Key Findings](#)
 - [Commissioning of the public health nursing service 2024](#),
 - [Carers' strategy 2024-29](#)
 - Mental health needs assessment (not yet published)
9. The survey provided a robust post-covid baseline for monitoring outcomes (if collected routinely), for example:
 - [Health & well-being strategy 2023-33](#)
 - SEND data dashboard
10. Special school surveys were a catalyst for training with the schools on healthy diet and supervised tooth brushing
11. For schools themselves, the school-level reports provided:
 - An opportunity to understand and take action about their pupils' specific needs – for example to inform Personal, Health, Social and Economic (PHSE) programmes.
 - A robust, benchmarked dataset to include in self-assessment towards the new Healthy Schools accreditation.
12. The county level results for 2021 were published on the [Understanding Herefordshire website](#) as part of the evidence base for the county's joint strategic needs assessment (JSNA). JSNAs are a continuous process of assessing need to inform strategic priorities and commissioning decisions. The 2024 results will be published in the same place once finalised.
13. Consultation, engagement and co-production can apply to several stages of providing services, involving both service users and non-users; for example:
 - continuous monitoring and improvement of existing services
 - commissioning or re-commissioning of services
 - development of new plans and strategies
14. Herefordshire Council does not have a central team which is responsible for co-ordinating consultation and engagement for all services. Individual services carry out these activities as part of their operations and delivery.
15. A corporate consultation process was established in 2018 with the aim of ensuring that the council take a consistent and co-ordinated approach to formal public consultation where significant change or service development is proposed and people can actively influence the outcome.
16. This process requires such consultations to be logged with the intelligence unit, legal department and communications team. These teams then work together with the service to design consultation that is meaningful and meets the council's legal responsibilities.
17. The process covers formal consultation which is high in impact or large in scale.

18. The intelligence unit role in supporting consultations generally involves:

- Providing advice and guidance on the design of surveys and methods of data collection
- Providing logistical support to collect responses (SNAP software)
- Analysing and interpreting responses where agreed, and providing the results to the responsible service to include in their decision-making evidence.

19. None of the recent (2024/25) consultations that the team have supported were specifically targeted at children and young people.

Public Health

20. When Public Health contracts come to their contractual end a “commissioning cycle” is followed, which includes undertaking a needs assessment, stakeholder and user consultation to inform any service redesign. This is important to ensure any new service meets the needs of the service user and captures the voice of young people in public health service redesign decisions.

21. An example of this can be found by looking at the re-commissioning of the sexual health service in 2023. The process included consultation with young people through an online survey, face-to-face in the sexual health clinic and through focus groups at the colleges, and provided an opportunity to obtain young people’s input and views on the service and what they would like to see from the service in the future. Access, opening times and website details were all areas that young people commented on which enabled commissioners to make changes in the new service.

Children’s Rights and Advocacy Service

22. “Hear Me” is the name given to this service, which is a confidential and independent support service for children and young people in receipt of services from Herefordshire Council’s Children’s Services. Advocates support children and young people with a particular issue, difficulty or complaint. The service is opt-in, child-led and issue based.

23. A document with additional information and detail around “Hear Me” can be found at appendix 1.

Talk Community

24. The Let’s Talk Project was a large-scale engagement that included community-based events, focus groups, and surveys, capturing insights from over 1,500 children, young people, and families. Key feedback included the need for better mental health support, local activities, and safe spaces for teenagers. Insights from Let’s Talk highlighted the importance of local accessible support, which has informed the development of the virtual family hub.

25. The Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Program involves large family fun days attended by over 450 people offering an opportunity to hear directly from children and families. Young people’s feedback on desired activities continues to directly shape the program, resulting in more creative and inclusive opportunities.

26. Mental Health Engagement through Talk Community has generated feedback from young people about the importance of mental health, which has in turn helped inform the development of targeted programs including:
- Enhanced Personal, Health, Social and Economic (PSHE) lessons in primary schools, focusing on mental health awareness and resilience.
 - Peer support mental health programs in secondary schools, encouraging young people to support each other.
 - Mental health awareness and first aid training for anyone working with children, equipping adults with the skills to support young people effectively.

Commissioning and Accommodation

27. It is envisaged that children and young people will engage across all stages of the commissioning cycle. They will participate in consultations on specification and be involved in activity such as formulating questions for bidders to respond to.
28. A recent example of engagement involved a tender for a children residential home. The commissioning team worked with Chase to consider what young people look for in a new children home and what would make them feel safe and cared for. The young people developed a tender question and were involved in the scoring of the question, they will also be engaged in relation to the review of communication documents and relevant policies. The young people who eventually move to the home will be involved in deciding how they want to furnish and decorate their room, the garden etc.
29. There are plans in place to ensure that going forward the service considers how children and young people could be part of quality assurance and monitoring, by involving them as mystery shoppers and including them in joint visits, but these plans are not embedded yet.
30. Commissioners attend the Corporate Parent Panel and are engaged with operational managers including participation workers, who share feedback
31. In regard to accommodation, a number of engagement and co-production sessions with young people have taken place recently. These involved using a mix of individual and group face-to-face sessions and a digital survey to identify what their priorities are for service improvements as part of a supported accommodation recommissioning plan.
32. The face-to-face sessions focused on young people living in Herefordshire. The survey was shared with the children and young people participation team, who supported by sharing it with young people aged 16-25 both in and out of county.
33. Young people have worked with commissioners to support the development of the service specification, including the key principles, outcomes and statements.
34. Commissioning colleagues have shared the feedback with locally commissioned providers to improve services across Herefordshire. Feedback has also been shared with children and young people teams to convey what young people feel is important to them .
35. Feedback from children and young people has shaped policies of providers and will be used in a local Herefordshire protocol that is being refreshed. As an example of how this works, feedback regarding one provider has resulted in improvements being made in relation to how referrals and allocations are managed, along with improvement to the welcome guide that is provided to young people when they move into a service.

36. The local care leavers protocol is being refreshed and commissioning are developing a pre- eviction guide, this will be shared shortly with young people to obtain their feedback.
37. Along with partners, the council is currently developing a Domestic Abuse Strategy. Commissioners are working with West Mercia Women's Aid to engage people with lived experience in the development of this strategy through focus group work. Following feedback from young people two further focus groups are planned with young people aged 11-14 and 15-18 respectively, to capture their views on what would have helped / will help them and what they would like to change about the service responses that they and their families have received. Housing often forms part of this response.
38. Sustaining engagement with young people can be a challenge, some workstreams can take time to develop and pull together and there have been instances where interest was expressed and then did not progress. A co-production approach is in place for community wellbeing and it would be of benefit to have something similar in the children and young people area.
39. The Children and Young People's Quality of Life Survey is looked at by commissioning when designing service, however it only covers young people up to 18 so the health and wellbeing strategy was also considered and is referenced within the service specification.

Transport

40. Herefordshire Council is developing a new Local Transport Plan (LTP) for the county, which covers the period 2024-2041. The LTP sets out what, where and how the council intends to invest in transport in Herefordshire.
41. LTP engagement was scheduled alongside the council's Local Plan Regulation 18 consultation; given the interdependencies between the two plans. Engagement was delivered through a variety of methods; in-person roadshow events, email, internal newsletter, post, stakeholder groups and an online survey.
42. In total, 873 people attended the roadshow events, 630 responses were received to the online survey and 27 stakeholder groups (totalling 131 different stakeholders) were engaged. Younger people (16-24 year olds) represented 6% of the overall total of respondents. The age distribution of respondents was similar to the age profile of Herefordshire residents as a whole.
43. Under the stakeholder category of youth groups there were three stakeholders: Hereford City Council, Powerhouse Creative and Close House. Under the Education Stakeholder group were four subgroups: High School, Colleges, University and special schools.
44. The Local Transport Plan (LTP) has had good engagement with young people, who have been able to submit their views within face-to-face sessions, or in an online survey. The consultation for the new LTP has been delayed due to re-allocation of housing numbers, however when this restarts next year the consultation will be made available to young people through schools, college and youth groups. Whilst it is recognised that not every young person will respond to the consultation; making it available and then publicising it through schools and colleges is a valid approach to engaging across a wide demographic.
45. The transport team is currently undertaking engagement for the 2024 Local Cycling, Walking and Wheeling Infrastructure Plan (LCWWIP). This involves an online mapping tool, where individuals and groups can see the proposals and make their own suggestions. The sixth form college have recently sent out our LCWWIP information on their college bulletin and social media channels. There will also be, similar to the LTP, a consultation period, where following the engagement work, a draft document will be available online for which the team will undertake communications, to spread the message that it would value responses from the public, and stakeholders.

46. Challenges in engaging young people include the broad scale of the county and the distribution across different areas, coupled with dwindling resources to be able to work face-to-face with CYP. This results in a very much digital-first approach. For strategic documents such as the LTP this is an acceptable method of engagement, as it drives forward the overall strategy for the county. However, it is less useful to fully understand the needs and desires of young people; so there is a need to get smarter at working with other departments who are engaging with young people more regularly. Simply laying more things out for young people will not raise engagement, so there is need to work through and with others.
47. Experience suggests that the council needs to be wide ranging across multiple groups and sources, rather than, as some local authorities do, relying on a small group of engaged young people to act as representatives - as this does not necessarily give full voice to the variety of different situations young people encounter across the county.

Special Education Needs (SEN)

48. The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Partnership has been working very closely with its Parent Carer Forum to ensure that it captures the voice of children and young people with SEND and their families. The partnership working has gone from strength-to-strength over the past two years, with the development of a co-production charter, 'Working Altogether', which was developed with strategic partners at Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board, Herefordshire Council and Parent Carer Voice Herefordshire.
49. When conducting any work that requires the voice of the child, the service engages with its partners and / or children and young people in a variety of ways, including: online surveys, focus groups, individual annual reviews and face-to-face workshops and engagement activities. Children and young people with SEND are involved in participation with Herefordshire Council through the SEND Participation Network, 'Herefordshire Helpers'. This is based on a 'hub and spoke' model with a recently appointed SEND Participation Officer coordinating engagement through a number of children and young people's groups who have signed up to be a part of the network. The work of the Herefordshire Helpers is evolving but includes opportunities for children and young people to be involved in a variety of ways to ensure that opportunities are inclusive and meet the needs of the children and young people that are participating.
50. Recent opportunities include making a video about the SEND Strategy, in which young people came to Plough Lane and interviewed the Director of Education, Skills and Learning as well as presenting their views on why it is so important to listen to young people.
51. The youngest children with SEND who attend an Early Years setting have their voices 'heard' through careful observations of their behaviour, preferences and interests. Early Years professionals use their observations to inform children's 'Play Plans', a document that outlines the child's interests, likes and dislikes and this is used to directly influence targets for their next steps on their SEND journey. This also helps to identify children who require additional funding to support their needs whilst they attend an Early Years setting.
52. The SEN team has worked in a joined-up way with various council services and partners to share data/information gathered through engagement with young people (appendix 2).
53. When telling the team their priorities for the SEND Engagement and Participation Framework (appendix 3), children and young people told the team that they wanted their voice to be heard at a strategic level. The SEND Strategic Assurance Board now requires that at least 2 meetings per year include direct work with children and young people with SEND- in the form

of workshops for members of the board that are hosted and driven by children and young people with SEND.

54. The SEND Strategic Assurance Board has met with children and young people at Beacon College, and they have another meeting scheduled at Herefordshire and Ludlow College. Children and young people with SEND can use this opportunity to share what's important to them, tell the service where they want to see change and help it to understand how it should work with them to ensure their voice has an impact at a strategic level.
55. Engagement and participation, when done well, requires significant officer time and capacity, which can present a challenge. The service has recently appointed a dedicated SEND Participation Officer whose role is to ensure that children and young people with SEND feel visible and valued. Their work will ensure that children and young people's voice is championed across the service.
56. The voice of children and young people with SEND is captured in their annual reviews, however this is currently difficult to extract as it is not currently done through a digitalised system. The service is investigating artificial intelligence as a possible route to enable it to interrogate and analyse annual review paperwork digitally, alongside exploring possibilities for digitalisation of paperwork and processes on its existing IT systems.

Strategic Planning

57. Herefordshire Council is in the process of developing a new Local Plan for Herefordshire, when adopted by Herefordshire Council the new Local Plan will provide a framework for guiding development within the county until 2041.
58. Between 25 March 2024 and 20 May 2024 the council consulted with stakeholders, including statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as local communities within the county, in order to seek views on the draft Local Plan 2021-2041.
59. A young person's summary was created as part of the consultation and hosted on the Commonplace platform (<https://hlp.commonplace.is/>). This provided an executive summary of the Local Plan and was available on both the council's website and Commonplace website, it was also emailed to all secondary schools in Herefordshire.
60. An event was held at Hereford Sixth form College on 23 April 2024, where members of staff took display materials and spoke to students about the plan and gave out literature on how to engage with the youth survey. 156 students were directly spoken to during this session. Literature was also posted by the college on its digital platforms.
61. The summary document and leaflet can be found in appendix 4 and appendix 5.
62. Herefordshire Youth Council was directly consulted and completed their representation through the Commonplace platform, it also provided the following feedback (summarised):

"We think it's amazing that you are considering young people's ideas in the plan.

The Youth Council don't feel that this survey caters to young people. Most young people don't know about housing and such, and how the survey is structured will discourage young people from finishing it. If you would like young people's thought then feel free to get in touch and we would love to collaborate with you on this, we also recommend going to local youth groups and present them with the plan and ask their thoughts."

63. The youth survey for the draft local plan consultation received 46 comments, these were all received via Commonplace. The main topics areas that arose mirrored the responses to the main plan in terms of environment and infrastructure, with a specific concern for the need to protect green spaces, creating natural habitats and access to recreation space, as well as the access to healthcare being highlighted as popular themes.
64. The need for highway improvements, such as fixing the roads and improvements to public transport was raised. It was highlighted that there was a need for more schools as it is currently felt that there is a lack of provision, as well as the need to create communities and make sure people feel safe when they are out, as it was also felt that there were high levels of crime and that something needed to be done to tackle anti-social behaviour.
65. Among other questions, young people were asked how the plan made them feel, the graph below shows the results of this:

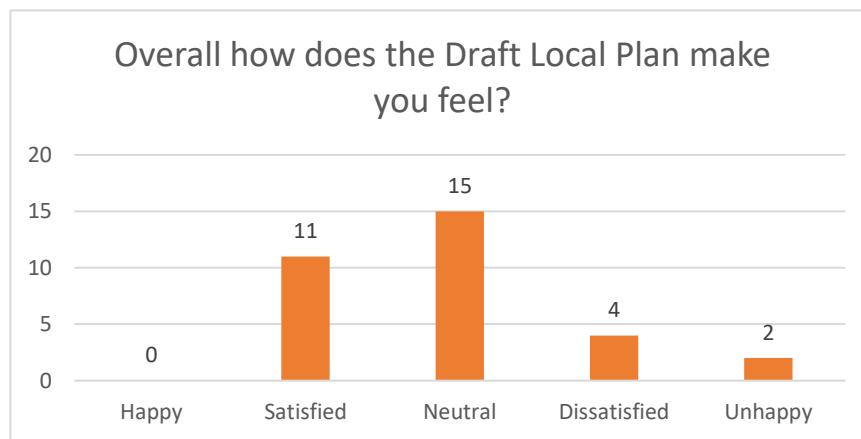


Figure 1 Summary results of youth response to Local Plan

66. Full representations will be detailed in the consultation report which will be published on the Herefordshire Council website shortly.
67. Post the Regulation 18 Local Plan consultation the team has reviewed processes and outcomes. It has specifically looked at how the Youth Survey was received and engaged with, as well as considering the issues raised, which will ultimately be fed into the review of policies for the next iteration of the plan.
68. Consultations require careful planning and appropriate resourcing with out-of-hours events and meetings ongoing throughout. The in-person events, such as the one held at the college, are one of the more informative means of getting young people's views. The service is also looking at potential changes to its consultation platform to ensure it has the best response rate for any future stages.
69. The team has looked at how it could improve engagement, particularly with youth groups. This could be done by contacting more young person's groups, hosting more events focused on young people in Hereford and sending officers to visit and speak to schools about planning in general.
70. The idea of 'merch' such as stickers or pens, was discussed as this can often be a talking point and can encourage conversation around a topic, as well as creating visibility.
71. The use of the QR code has proved positive and will be used on further consultations. Many students at the college event did not want to take a leaflet but chose to scan the QR code.
72. The Youth Council has offered their help in directing the service to groups and communities and also what type of things will help make the content engaging, the service will be taking them up on this offer for the next stage of consultation regarding youth involvement.

Community impact

73. Effective scrutiny enables the committee to reflect community concern. Overview and scrutiny is a key part of the council's governance arrangements and provides accountability and assurance, as well as a vehicle for elected councillors to contribute to policy development and review. Scrutiny committees have the overall aim of driving improvement to services to the local community.
74. As well as scrutinising the council's own services, scrutiny committees have the power to look into the provision of local health services and issues which affect the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of the county.

Environmental impact

75. This report contains no direct environmental impacts. However the work that the committee will undertake resulting from agreeing this work programme may have direct impacts. Reports arising from or supporting this work will outline their potential environmental impact.

Equality duty

76. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. This report contains no direct equality impacts. However, the report and issues that the committee will consider may have direct impacts.

Resource implications

77. This report constitutes part of the typical function of this committee. There are no direct resource implications arising from this report. However, any recommendations made by the committee may have a resource implication if agreed by Cabinet or the portfolio holder. These risks will need to be evaluated and if necessary mitigated before any recommendation is accepted.

Legal implications

78. The remit of the scrutiny committee is set out in part 3 section 4 of the constitution and the role of the scrutiny committee is set out in part 2 article 6 of the constitution.
79. The Local Government Act 2000 requires the council to deliver the scrutiny function.

Risk management

80. There are no risk management implications associated with providing this report to the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee.

Consultees

81. There have no consultations required to produce this report.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - About Hear Me children's rights and advocacy service
- Appendix 2 - SEN Joined up and collaborative working
- Appendix 3 - SEND Participation Framework 2023
- Appendix 4 - Flyer for school newspaper and college hand out

Appendix 5 - Young Persons Reg18 Draft Local Plan Leaflet

Background papers

None