

“Encouraging communities to shape the future of Herefordshire”

Herefordshire Council’s Strategy for Community Involvement



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1. Introduction

Herefordshire Council has a strong tradition of engaging and consulting with local people and recognises and acknowledges the benefits that good quality community involvement offers to local communities, communities of interest and to Herefordshire Council and our partners. This commitment is also rooted in its core values. The Council has, through its commitment to delivering quality services and supporting the delivery of the Herefordshire Plan, been involved in a variety of good practice initiatives over recent years intended to drive up the levels and quality of community involvement in decision-making, both within the Council and externally.

2, The National Context

Local Authorities are increasingly expected by Central Government and external funders to base their decisions on direct communication with local people, interest groups (so called stakeholders), and do so in a planned and coordinated way. Audit Commission guidance on *Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)* emphasises the role of community involvement in improving Council performance and in identifying the needs and aspirations of local people.

The 2005 CPA Key Lines of Enquiry for Corporate Assessment will *“measure how well local councils understand their local communities (...)* (Audit Commission, *CPA Key Lines of Enquiry, 2005, p. 2*)

The need for a strategic approach to Herefordshire Council’s community involvement and consultation has been highlighted through a number of routes, including widespread consultation around the Herefordshire Plan and Community Development Strategy, the annual audit of community involvement undertaken by the Community Involvement Co-ordinator in 2002, ongoing dialogue with stakeholders and internal and external inspection, particularly the 2001 and 2004 CPA inspections. It is also recognised that the continued development of this work is significant with benefits to the Council and our partners in supporting the ambition to “Encourage Communities to shape the future of Herefordshire” (Herefordshire Plan).

3. Purpose

... better to understand the needs and preferences of service users and Council-tax payers, and to tailor services accordingly ...
(Herefordshire Council Corporate Plan 2005-8, p. 17)

This Strategy will ensure that action is being taken so that Herefordshire people are able to express their views and aspirations and shape the development of the Council's policies and services that affect them. It follows the 2005 Inspection focus, suggesting that "... *consultation recognizes the range and complexity of service user needs, makes provision for choice and does not make unnecessary demands on those consulted.*" (CPA p. 7). This will be achieved by making sure that the Council's mechanisms for involving and consulting the communities of and in Herefordshire are coordinated and that best use is made of resources. In particular the strategy seeks to ensure that:

- Community Involvement and consultative activity is accessible to and inclusive of the views of all Herefordshire people within the meaning of the current and future equalities legislation¹
- The aspirations in the current and future [Corporate Plans](#) of Herefordshire Council are being addressed
- Community Involvement and consultation are mainstream activities for all Council departments and services
- Guidance is provided to Council staff, staff in partner organisations and residents in Herefordshire who are or wish to be involved in their communities to ensure that high and consistent standards of community involvement and consultation practice are adhered to;
- Activity is coordinated to ensure lack of duplication and best use of resources which will lead to increased levels of participation;
- The findings of involvement and consultative activity are fed back to participants and promoted to ensure maximum value
- The impact consultation has had on service planning and delivery be explained on a regular basis and Best Practice being shared;
- People who live and work in Herefordshire are provided with clear information to them about their opportunities to get involved and what their involvement can achieve
- A variety of mechanisms are developed and used to consult with residents and partners, including new technologies.
- all stakeholders are committed to the achievement of its aims and objectives

The strategy will ensure that our partners, other stakeholders and communities themselves are clear about how, why and in what ways communities can influence the Council's decisions. The strategy also serves as Herefordshire Council's commitment to meeting the aims and objectives for community involvement as set out in the Herefordshire Plan, the [Corporate Plan](#), and associated documents:

¹ Insert here details of legislation

- **The Herefordshire Plan**
- **The Council's Corporate Plan**
- **Herefordshire Community Development Strategy**
- **Herefordshire Council's communications strategy "Connecting with Communities"**
- **Best Value Performance Plan**
- **Statement of Community Involvement**
- **Race Equality Scheme**
- **Local Agenda 21 (LA21) Plan**

This strategy will also link in with other (strategic) Partnerships, such as the Community Safety and Drugs Partnership, the Primary Care Trust's Patient Advisory and Liaison Service (PALS) and the Learning and Skills Council.

4. The Strategy

Our aim is to:

"Improve Community Involvement in the process of decision making".

The definition of community involvement as used in the Herefordshire Plan:

"Community Involvement describes the full range of research, consultation and participation of communities and individuals in the decision making process".

This might include:

- *Communities of interest (e.g. young people, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, farmers, carers and service users)*
- *Communities of place or "Geographical communities" (e.g. towns, parishes, wards and estates)"*

Our objectives are²:

Objective	measures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To enable more people to be engaged in the democratic process • To continuously improve the ways we involve residents and partners through information, training and sharing of best Practice • To ensure the appropriate involvement of Herefordshire people in the decisions which affect their lives • To enable everyone, especially hard-to-reach groups and groups at risk of disadvantage to make their voices heard, particularly <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Older People, ○ Children and Young People, ○ Disabled People and ○ people from ethnic minorities ○ people who live in geographical isolation (e.g. in small villages) ○ people who are otherwise isolated • To increase transparency and accountability • To make best use of available resources and techniques for community involvement and consultation, including the emerging electronic means of consultation. 	<p>%age of residents who feel that they can influence decisions the council makes (based on survey)</p> <p>%level increase in active involvement through volunteering</p> <p>%age of Parish Council seats uncontested</p> <p># of/representation of respective groups to participate in decision making processes</p> <p>%age increase of formal volunteering across the county</p> <p>% of Parishes uncontested in local elections</p> <p># of Parish Plans adopted³</p> <p>%age of reports of consultations published</p> <p>Demonstrated by publication of Consultation guide and feedback from consultees.</p>

² actions and targets are specified in the Long Term Action Plan

³ see relevant section in the Council's Corporate Plan and Annual Operating Plan

Ultimately this should enable the Council, with its partners, to make better decisions and provide better services

To achieve these objectives this strategy sets out a framework of:

- a. [Roles and responsibilities](#) to ensure the successful implementation of the strategy
- b. [Quality Standards](#) to ensure community involvement is inclusive and effective
- c. Action Planning to commit us to actions that will deliver the strategy
- d. Appropriate [methods for consultation and involvement](#) activity
- e. particular mechanisms to involve those who find it difficult to make their voices heard (to be developed)
- f. Targets to enable us to keep track of where we are aiming to be
- g. Monitoring and evaluation framework to enable us to keep track of progress

4. Roles and responsibilities

Council Members already identify and represent the needs and views of their local communities. Various departments and officers have clear roles in involving and consulting the wider community.

This strategy sets out proposed key roles and responsibilities for community involvement across Herefordshire Council:

- Responsibility for the implementation of this strategy lies with the ***Director of Corporate and Customer Services***;
- Herefordshire Council will nominate elected members, who will have the lead responsibility for action plans designed to ensure that [hard-to-reach groups](#) will be targeted by this strategy.
- Council Members and Chief Officers receive and consider six monthly progress reports, including an annual audit report concerning community involvement in Herefordshire Council.

- **Directors are responsible for:**
 - Including community involvement activities in service plans and contributing these to the Annual Directorate Consultation Plan and Service Plans.
 - Ensuring these are logged on the Community Involvement Database
 - Ensuring that elected members are kept fully informed of proposed activities in their ward;
 - Ensuring that consultations are consistent with the Community Involvement Strategy and discussed with the Community Involvement Coordinator or Principal Research Officer prior to commencement.
 - Ensuring staff are enabled to carry out effective community involvement activity
 - Ensuring that results are fed-back to all stakeholders with clear outlines of how they will be used in service planning

The Community Involvement Coordinator will be responsible for

- An annual community involvement audit and other stakeholder involvement throughout the year to
- Advise the Chief Executive's Senior Management Team on the organisational capacity within Herefordshire Council to ensure that principles of community involvement are being adhered to and quality standards met
- An annual community involvement report will be submitted to the Chief Executive's Management Team, reporting on progress against set targets and recommendations for improvements

5. Quality Standards for Community Involvement

These performance standards are intended to ensure that the basic principles of community involvement are adhered to across Herefordshire Council. These principles have been agreed as recently as January 2005. Advice and support will be provided to Council and staff from partner organisations to ensure that we can meet these standards.

- 1. Adequate time will be given to ensure the effective involvement of all stakeholders from the very beginning in planning (staff) and participating (consultees) in involvement activity.**
- 2. The needs of all communities should be considered to ensure that involvement activity is inclusive and ensures equality of opportunity to participate**
 - a. Information will be freely available and in an **accessible** format
 - b. All consultees have been given appropriate assistance to participate in consultation activities
 - c. As far as possible, venues will be chosen which are accessible within the meaning of the Disability Discrimination Act.
 - d. Involvement and consultation techniques will be chosen commensurate with the target audience and the purpose of the consultation
- 3. All community involvement activity responds to Herefordshire Council's Corporate Plan and will be built into service and departmental plans and information entered on the Community Involvement Database (see Co-ordination arrangements**
- 4. Best practice guidance will be followed, and examples of best practice shared.**
- 5. Consultation resources will be built into departmental and service budgets or additional resources sought**
- 6. Appropriate training and support will be provided to staff to enable them to undertake consultation on behalf of Herefordshire Council.**
- 7. Those consulted will be informed speedily about the outcome of the consultation within 3 months of the end of the consultation**
- 8. Feedback will be given showing what the result of the consultation was and how community involvement has influenced policy, service delivery and decision-making.**

9. All involvement activity is to be [evaluated](#) and where appropriate this evaluation will include participants

Herefordshire Council will use these performance standards and associated targets as the basis of evaluation for community involvement across the authority.

6. Action Planning

This strategy is accompanied with a [long-term action plan](#), broken down into annual action plans, which form part of Herefordshire Council's Corporate Plan. Targets set in this action plan will be reviewed annually in line with other targets and the results will be published on our Community Involvement web pages. This strategy also forms the umbrella for specific action plans, which will be agreed during 2005/6. These action plans will show Herefordshire Council's commitment to serve particular groups in the community, as outlined in para 5 above.

Specific Action Plans will be developed for

- o Older People,
- o Children and Young People,
- o Disabled People and
- o people from ethnic minorities

7. Consultation methods

Herefordshire Council will strive continuously to update and improve the methods used for its consultations. Not every method is appropriate for the various groups and individuals in our communities, and we need to tailor the methods we use accordingly. This strategy will therefore identify a range of methods for staff to use in accordance with the Quality Standards and Principles of Community Involvement stated. (as appendix in hardcopy, e-version will have link).

8. Our commitment

The Council commits itself to the following Principles of Community Involvement (courtesy of Bristol City Council)

Opinion should be informed

Consultation will aim to seek informed public opinion and not just instant reaction. Whenever possible, the council's communication mechanisms will be used alongside consultation to inform and stimulate public interest, particularly in relation to major strategic and city wide issues.

Decisions should be based on evidence

The council will adopt clear processes of consultation which, wherever possible, produce results that are measurable and can be evaluated objectively.

Purpose should be clear

Any consultation will contain a clear statement describing why it is being carried out and how the results will be used. The way the consultation links to the council's wider corporate aims, work programmes and statutory policy framework will also be described.

Consultation should be well planned and timely

Consultees will be given adequate time to prepare their response. It is recognised that the length of time will vary depending on the time of year and the level of response that is being sought. Sufficient time will be allowed for the results of consultation to be collated, analysed and considered, so that the results of consultation feed directly into the decision making process.

Consultation should be inclusive

Consultation will aim to be inclusive. To achieve this, the council will give particular consideration to the needs of people with impaired sight or hearing or who have learning difficulties; people whose first language is not English or who cannot read at all and people who might have problems with physical access such as people in wheelchairs and people with pushchairs. In addition, the council will take steps to ensure that the views of younger people, older people, people from ethnic minority communities and others whose views are frequently excluded or overlooked, are actively sought as part of consultation that is inclusive and representative of the community as a whole.

Methods should be appropriate and well managed

The council will use a wide range of public consultation methods. They will be used appropriately, reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of each method and will be managed with a clear understanding of the particular skills, knowledge and resources that consultation requires.

Results should be acknowledged and fully considered

The full range of views expressed during consultation will be acknowledged and attention drawn to areas of agreement and disagreement. The results of public consultation will be weighed carefully together with other evidence and considerations.

Accessible feedback should be given

Accessible feedback will be provided both on the results of consultation and on how they have been used, in order to encourage greater public participation in the future.

Effectiveness should be evaluated The effectiveness of major public consultation will be evaluated and the results shared to encourage broader lessons to be learned. Evaluation will consider not only the number of responses received but also the quality, cost and timeliness of the consultation and the overall usefulness of the results in helping to inform decisions.