

Staff Budget Consultation

2021/2022 Budget

Key findings

Herefordshire Council
Issued by: Corporate Finance & Human Resources
January 2021

The Consultation

All staff were contacted via email by the Acting Deputy Chief Executives on 8 January 2021 to contribute ideas to budget setting, with a deadline for responses of 18 January 2021.

The survey aimed to capture the ideas and views of staff from across the organisation to highlight ways that that the council can be even more effective in delivering services for Herefordshire in the most efficient way possible.

The 6 questions we asked were:

1. How long have you worked in Herefordshire Council?

0-2 years	2-5 years	5-10 years	Over 10 years
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2. Do you have any proposals for cost saving initiatives within Herefordshire over the next 12 months?
3. What specific services/areas of Herefordshire Council do you feel should not be impacted by budget savings and why?
4. What are your main concerns with regards to cost saving within Herefordshire Council?
5. Herefordshire Council is aiming to be carbon neutral by 2030, do you have any suggestions regarding how to assist in this objective or additional ways in which the council could reduce its energy consumption further?
6. Are there any questions that you would like to put forward with regards to the budget and requirement to save money?

Summary of Main Themes

Executive Summary

There are a number of key themes which came out from the responses:

1 Home Working

When asked about cost saving initiatives and becoming carbon neutral, the option of home working was a recurring theme with the majority of employees considering this to be a positive change and one which had proved successful throughout Covid-19 restrictions. Employees cited improved wellbeing and work/life balance as positive outcomes to a more versatile way of working. This also translated into real potential for saving money with a significant reduction in council premises leading to a cost saving in rent, or premises being used as rental income where possible.

It was identified that some form of office base was required where staff could meet on a regular basis but the general view remained that home working had been a positive outcome of the restrictions. There were also some reservations regarding home working with isolation cited as a factor although there are steps which could be taken to mitigate this moving forward.

A reduction in home to work travel was also considered as a positive in reducing congestion on the roads and parking issues experienced by staff in the past.

2 Agency Staff/Consultants/Projects

Staff considered that the Council's use of agency and consultancy staff did not provide value for money and that a preferred option would be to recruit permanent staff or to carry out this work in house. This was also considered the case by respondents for external organisations where work is contracted out. Although it would be preferable in many situations for all work to be carried out by substantive employees, this is not always feasible. Consultants and agency workers provide added flexibility and a set of skills and experience required for particular projects. In addition, work currently being undertaken to form one project management team under Corporate rather than project managers in each directorate should remove the disjointed approach to project management currently in place, standardise the process and assist in controlling all projects across the council to ensure cost effectiveness, transparency and a more consistent management.

3 Impact on Staff

The survey requested a response from staff regarding their main concerns in relation to cost savings. The main responses were in relation to reduction or loss of service for residents, particularly the most vulnerable in the community, and the potential for redundancy. Job losses, particularly in the current economic climate, were of particular concern and one view put forward suggested that roles graded at HC8 and below and frontline staff were often the group which suffered the most detriment.

There were also concerns that staff who were left would suffer as a result of redundancies due to smaller teams and the subsequent additional work which they would be expected to carry out. Some other suggestions included reduction in pay or hours for all of Herefordshire Council staff

Voluntary redundancy and early retirement were also put forward, however, the effect of the public sector exit cap may significantly reduce the number of people who would like to apply for this request and would impact on what the council were able to pay in order to exit an employee.

A few responses suggested that there is an imbalance, with some services operating with maximum staff numbers where this wasn't required and others struggling with capacity as well as a high number of managers in comparison to frontline workers and a suggestion that the structure should be considered with a view to delayering.

4 Communications

There are contradicting views from staff regarding major road scheme work and plans to address the climate emergency where people are not aware of the future direction of these projects. Improved communication to staff particularly regarding where we are in terms of potential working from home plans, the reason why consultants and agency are utilised and the benefits of this and identifying any areas from responses which may not be factual (counsellor expenses and parking etc.) would be a useful way of addressing some of these anxieties.

There is also significant concern regarding reduction in services and ensuring that the public are aware of the potential cost saving measures to be implemented so that they fully understand the priorities in the community and where the budget is spent. This may assist in the justification of increased council tax payments where required.

5 Planning

'Money put into prevention is money well spent'

There is a general view that the council opts for quick wins with regards to budget savings. Reducing posts and service provision is considered as the 'go to' response to achieve savings. Respondents felt that there is little strategic planning in decisions around longer term cost savings which would make these changes more sustainable and easier to manage. It is likely that staff do not see those cost savings achieved where there is little impact on them directly and in this case, more transparency may assist staff in understanding longer term plans and what other action the council is taking.

A response to question 2 identified:

'Budgets will be cut and will have longer term dire consequences. Not just with social care but for example... bin collections reduce, people will just fly tip... it becomes a false economy. If we ignore children's support services, we end up paying tenfold for broken adults.'

Further detail on the six questions asked is shown below.

Question 1

Employee Responses – Length of Service

There were 106 employee responses, the breakdown of their years of service are as follows:

How long have you worked in Herefordshire Council?	Number of respondents	% of respondents
0-2 years	21	20%
2-5 years	24	23%
5-10 years	19	18%
over 10 years	42	40%
Total	106	100%

Question 2:

Do you have any proposals for cost saving initiatives within Herefordshire over the next 12 months?

Sample feedback:

'Reduction in the number of council owned buildings, review all contracts in place to establish savings'

'Promoting a long term approach to home working would save money on maintenance/rent. It's worked well during the pandemic and there's no reason it shouldn't work in the future'

'Achieving value for money on outsourced services'

'We need to focus on our statutory duties and forget the extras. We have streamlined services and resources within the regulatory departments to the extent that further cuts would render us incapable of performing even just our statutory functions'

'Buy care homes that will charge ASC rates so we are not held hostage by private sector homes. Increase collaborative working systems between Health and ASC to form a seamless holistic service with shared access to information'

'Provide more support to small businesses and incentives to grow the city centre commerce - this will increase footfall into the city and expenditure, create jobs and could increase the number of people wanting to live in the city - thus increasing council tax income'

Question 3:

What specific services/areas of Herefordshire Council do you feel should not be impacted by budget savings and why?

Sample feedback:

'Social Care'

'That too much money is tied up in 'mandatory' services, and too little is left for services which can promote new and better ways of working in more 'discretionary' fields'

'That services to vulnerable people may be affected'

'The impact it will have on residents with limited or no income'

'There are little in the way of cost savings left after many years of efficiencies'

'Job cuts and leading to more pressures on services which are already under resourced'

Question 4:

What are your main concerns with regards to cost saving within Herefordshire Council?

Sample feedback:

'Ongoing job losses. Restructures are always hard and will be particularly difficult as so many people have contributed to the 'Covid-19' effort this year'

'The pressure on central government funds and the lack of support for local government from central government. Also, local people do not 'own' their Council, rather they complain about it and to it. If cost

savings have to be made local people need to understand exactly why and which factors have affected the difficult choices'

'That cuts to resources in services will result in us not being able to carry out our basic functions, let alone anything else. The few staff we have are feeling the strain, so please don't cut our resources further. I understand why social care is a priority, but it cannot be the only thing Herefordshire Council is left able to deliver'

'That the general public see us cutting services yet again but they still question what we do with all our money especially with council tax likely to go up again. We need better coms, spell out to the general public what savings we have made, how our funding from central government has been reduced and by how much by and show how we have still continued to deliver services, getting the public on side is half the battle, we are not transparent'

'Short term gain but long term loss - short sighted planning'

'That residents do not suffer and continue to have excellent frontline services'

Question 5:

Herefordshire Council is aiming to be carbon neutral by 2030, do you have any suggestions regarding how to assist in this objective or additional ways in which the council could reduce its energy consumption further?

Sample feedback:

'Again invest in and encourage home working to avoid unnecessary traffic as people commute to work'

'Park and ride. With reasonable charges. There's no getting away this county relies on cars'

'I think that the traffic team, air quality and energy team would benefit working jointly in this project as this would allow for further ideas and technical information to support this project'

'Investment in more sustainable energy such as solar/wind could reduce overall energy expenditure'

'Home working appears to have some positives. I feel that closing larger offices, such as Plough Lane to all staff on a Friday would allow vast savings and reduction in carbons in the future. This also reduces the need for staff to travel to and from the office, reducing carbon emissions further'

'Get out of old, inefficient buildings'

Question 6:

Are there any questions that you would like to put forward with regards to the budget and requirement to save money?

Sample feedback:

'I would like to ask what the projections look like for future cost / revenue - are we heading, based on current trends, toward a point where social care will consume the entire council budget?'

'Money put into prevention is money well spent'

'Plan for the next 3 - 5 years, let's make long term savings not savings on a whim'

'How has Covid-19 changed any budget plans and when in the future are we likely to see the impact of this?'

'Are the council pressing for extra government funding? How involved are our MP's and are they doing enough for us?'

'Will redundancies be inevitable? Will projects which are not immediately time dependent be postponed until a better financial status can be achieved?'

Thank you to all colleagues who responded to this staff suggestion survey as part of the budget consultation. Your full responses will be reviewed and will form part of the budget setting process for the next financial year.