

DRAFT - Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 5 February 2026 at 3.00 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, Barry Durkin, Carole Gandy, Dan Hurcomb, Ivan Powell, Philip Price and Pete Stoddart

Cabinet Members in remote attendance

Councillor Bramer

Cabinet members attending the meeting remotely, e.g. through video conferencing facilities, may not vote on any decisions taken.

Group leaders / representatives in attendance

Councillors Clare Davies, Liz Harvey and Stef Simmons

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance

Councillors Ben Proctor and as substitute Group Leader (for Councillor Terry James), Toni Fagan, Louis Stark, Pauline Crockett

Officers in attendance:

Alastair Campbell, Hillary Hall, John Hobbs, Claire Porter, Donna Thornton, Rachael Sanders, Paul Walker.

59. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies from members of the cabinet.

There were apologies from Councillor Terry James.

60. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

61. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 January 2026 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

62. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC (Pages 17 - 24)

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

63. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS (Pages 25 - 26)

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

64. REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) met on 23rd January 2026. The chair of SMB, Councillor Proctor, made the following points.

It was noted that the Fair Funding review had placed Herefordshire in a very difficult position but Cabinet had approached the funding challenge rationally. It was noted there was a risk associated with the delivery of savings for next year and scrutiny would be working with cabinet to ensure these savings can be delivered.

The key areas of focus in the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy appeared sensible but needed more detail.

It was positively noted that there were investments in the proposed capital programme that would reduce revenue costs.

Lastly, SMB noted it had a long standing position that the council should be better at showing the links between the capital programme, the revenue budget, service delivery and ultimately the outcomes. It was raised that the draft Delivery Plan should be presented alongside the draft budget.

In response it was noted that there was confidence in the budget proposals given the challenges the council has faced with the unfair allocation of funding for local government and thanks were extended to the SMB for their positive contribution.

It was confirmed that the recommendations were acknowledged and responses had been included in the reports which were covered below.

65. 2026/27 BUDGET, MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL AND TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY - REVENUE

Councillor Stoddart, cabinet member for finance and corporate services introduced the report

The Cabinet received an update on the consultation undertaken during the development of the 2026/27 draft revenue budget. Members were advised that extensive briefings had been provided to Group Leaders, political groups, Scrutiny Committees and council employees throughout the process.

The public consultation ran from 9 December 2025 to 4 January 2026, generating 359 responses, an increase from 201 in the previous year. Feedback indicated strong opposition to reductions in highways maintenance and street lighting, and significant support for asset development and digital service improvements over service reductions. A majority favoured increased charges for non-statutory services.

The Scrutiny Management Board considered the budget proposals at its meeting on 23 January. Cabinet noted the additional assurances provided and the formal responses set out at Appendix G to the report.

Cabinet noted the provisional local government settlement published on 19 December, confirming significant reductions arising from the Fair Funding Review. The final settlement was awaited.

The draft balanced revenue budget for 2026/27 totals £234.1m and includes a council tax increase of 4.99%, resulting in a Band D charge of £2,067.63. Savings proposals of £20m, use of £3.2m from the Business Rates Risk Reserve, and establishment of a Contract Inflation Fund were included.

Cabinet acknowledged that local authorities continue to face significant pressures due to rising demand for statutory services and reductions in central government funding. Analysis indicated a £17.3m reduction to Herefordshire's allocation following the Fair Funding Review, with rural councils significantly disadvantaged compared with urban authorities.

Members noted that although 30 councils received Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) in 2025/26, Herefordshire Council would not seek such support, instead maintaining responsible financial management.

The Cabinet considered the proposed base budgets for 2026/27:
Community Wellbeing: £89.667m, reflecting pressures linked to rising complexity of needs, temporary accommodation demand, and inflation.

Children & Young People: £58.413m, with continued delivery of multi-year savings and stable workforce arrangements following an underspend in 2024/25.

Economy & Environment: £38.291m, supporting major projects, waste contract pressures and the new public realm operating model.

Corporate Services: £22.496m, including £1,000 per Ward Member for community projects and £0.6m capital receipts for transformation.

Central: £25.253m, driven by increased interest payments and capital programme commitments.

Cabinet noted a total of £19.954m in savings proposals across all Directorates, covering cost control, demand management, income generation and efficiencies. It was reported that £6.9m (35%) was expected to be delivered from 1 April 2026.

The Cabinet noted that external auditors had identified no significant weaknesses in financial planning arrangements and that all financial planning measures were assessed as green. Herefordshire continued to be one of the first authorities nationally to publish audited accounts.

Cabinet received the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) for 2026/27 to 2029/30, noting an estimated cumulative funding gap of £83.418m, largely attributable to the Fair Funding Review. Work to address the 2027/28 gap would commence in April 2026. Key areas of future focus include maximising commercial income, efficiency improvements with specialist partners, review of subsidiary relationships, workforce restructuring, benchmarking and digital investment.

Cabinet noted the Treasury Management Strategy, including loan debt of £135.5m and investments totalling £55.74m. Earmarked reserves were forecast at £75.3m as at 31 March 2026.

Cabinet noted that a balanced budget had been achieved and that risks and reserves continued to be monitored appropriately. Cabinet resolved to recommend approval of the draft budget, the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, and all associated recommendations, including arrangements for allocating any additional funding received.

Comments from cabinet members:

Thanks were reiterated for including funding for parish council schemes. The previous cabinet meeting confirmed the introduction of a “pop and shop” scheme, offering 30 minutes’ free parking in all council-owned car parks. The Leader also confirmed that market towns already benefiting from periods of free parking would be treated fairly, with the pop and shop offer extended to on-street parking. This will be incorporated into the new parking policy starting in April.

In respect of the five recommendations:

Recommendation 1: It was confirmed that ‘no action required, activity already planned’ referred to that point that there’s no action required as the council was already taking those actions referenced in the recommendation.

Recommendations 2 and 3: It was clarified that instead of full scenario planning, the council carries out sensitivity analysis, assessing the impact of changes—such as 1%, 2% or 3% variations—on key financial measures. Full scenario modelling, such as factoring in an 8% inflation change across all areas, is not commonly undertaken by councils nationally and was considered disproportionate given the effort involved. Therefore, sensitivity analysis is used to focus on the factors that matter most, and examples of this will be demonstrated to the Scrutiny Management Board at its next meeting. Appreciation was expressed for the constructive scrutiny session, which was described as valuable and an important part of democratic accountability.

It was emphasised that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy was a live, continuously updated document rather than a static, one-off exercise. Officers regularly revised it to ensure it reflected the most up-to-date financial information, and sensitivity testing was carried out throughout the year to understand the impact of changes in key financial factors. While there may be differing views on the use of scenario planning, the council reiterated that the MTFs remains a dynamic assessment tool, not a document that is produced and then set aside.

Recommendation 4: It was confirmed this would be covered in the Ear Marked Reserve report later in the agenda and that any changes would be reported in the quarterly reports.

Recommendation 5: It was confirmed the format will be reviewed and the reporting will become more output based.

It was confirmed that the final funding settlement will be announced on 9 February 2026 and the Government would be pressed to reexamine fairer funding for Herefordshire but it was unlikely the Government would make any changes. It was noted that this is the 15th consecutive year of cuts from Government, it was austerity for rural authorities not for urban authorities.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

Councillor Davies, Group Leader for the True Independents, had left the meeting.

The Green Group outlined their views and noted that:

Concern was expressed about the continued impact of the Government’s funding settlement, noting that rural areas such as Herefordshire receive significantly less funding per capita than urban areas and face growing financial pressures, including low wages and increasing service demands. They cautioned that ongoing reductions in reserves are not sustainable and highlighted the risks posed by climate change, which may increase future financial pressures. Thanks were offered for securing £50,000 from Extended Producer Responsibility funding to help address roadside litter, and appreciation was expressed for community volunteers supporting clean-up efforts. Concerns were also raised about the proposed restructure of Talk Community and its potential impact on voluntary sector and youth support, given the need to rebuild strong relationships within the Children and Young People directorate. Finally, clarification was sought on the cost and funding source for extending the “pop and shop” free-parking offer to on-street parking, and whether this had been assessed by the Section 151 Officer.

The Independents for Herefordshire outlined their views and noted that:

A query was raised regarding the level of public engagement in the budget consultation, noting that participation amounted to less than 0.2% of the county's population. It was highlighted that nearly 60% of respondents live in properties below Band D and concerns were expressed about the continued reliance on council tax increases within a low-wage economy. It was also noted that the council does not track what proportion of average or disposable income council tax represents for residents. A further question was posed as to when it may no longer be viable for the council to continue applying the maximum council tax increase permitted in order to offset reductions in central government funding.

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined their views and noted that:

Concerns were expressed about the introduction of the 30-minute free "pop and shop" parking initiative. It was noted that the scheme had not been included in the previous cabinet papers and was announced only briefly during debate before being publicised through a press release. Questions were raised about who the scheme is intended to benefit, how it will work in practice, and whether it is realistic for many residents, particularly in central Hereford. It was also highlighted that councillors representing the city and market towns, as well as local business groups such as the BID and town and parish councils, had not been consulted. The view was put forward that greater collaboration, openness, and engagement with partners is needed when developing initiatives, and concerns were raised about the potential for further insufficiently considered proposals to be approved as part of the revenue budget.

In responding to the comments raised, the Cabinet Members noted that:

It was acknowledged that although the budget consultation received more responses than the previous year, overall engagement remains low. Efforts had been made to increase participation through town-centre engagement events and online activity, and further work will continue to encourage wider involvement. The importance of improving engagement with young people was highlighted, with plans to work with schools and the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People to help younger residents understand local government and the relevance of council tax decisions.

It was noted that while the long-term viability of the council tax base raises important questions, financial planning must focus on what is known and can be reliably forecast within the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). Reference was made to last year's position, where the council tax increase had initially been set at 3.99% but had to be revised following the withdrawal of the Rural Services Grant, resulting in a £9m loss. Under the Fair Funding Review, central government has indicated that councils are expected to apply a minimum council tax increase of 4.99% this year, leaving the council with no flexibility on that point. It was also highlighted that even with the proposed Band D charge of just over £2,000, government assessments assume councils should be raising council tax based on a figure of £2,200, limiting the council's ability to generate income. In response to concerns raised, it was confirmed that support for residents would be addressed further under the Council Tax Reduction Scheme later in the meeting.

It was confirmed that the community development roles previously funded within the Children's Directorate are being transferred into Children's Services rather than removed. This follows a review of children's and young people's community-based youth provision across the county. Locating these roles within Children's Services will strengthen alignment with Families First, family help and early help pathways, ensuring continuity of existing relationships and partnership work during the transition. It was noted that Talk Community will continue to focus on prevention, and that all proposals

remain subject to consultation. Councillors, service users and members of the public were encouraged to provide feedback.

It was noted that generating new income remains a significant challenge, and a recent cross-party task and finish group had been unable to identify any clear additional income options. The administration welcomed contributions from all councillors, regardless of political group, and emphasised that any constructive ideas to support the council's financial position would be gratefully received.

Lastly, it was confirmed that the cost of introducing the "pop and shop" 30-minute free-parking offer would be absorbed within the new parking cost model through increased activity and charges. The initiative was described as a positive gesture intended to support local traders by encouraging short visits to shops, similar to the existing free-parking provision offered at Christmas. Despite wider financial pressures and the need to find £20m in savings, Cabinet considered the scheme an important and fair measure to benefit both Hereford and the market towns.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Stoddart proposed the recommendations and the Leader of the Council seconded for the decision before them which is that Cabinet:

That Cabinet recommends to Council for approval:

- a) **the council tax base of 74,315.25 Band D equivalents in 2026/27;**
- b) **an increase in core council tax for 2026/27 of 2.99%;**
- c) **an additional precept in respect of adult social care costs of 2% applied to council tax in 2026/27 resulting in a total council tax increase of 4.99%, increasing the Band D charge from £1,969.36 to £2,067.63 for Herefordshire Council in 2026/27;**
- d) **the balanced 2026/27 revenue budget proposal totalling £234.1 million, subject to any amendments approved at the meeting, specifically the net spending limits for each directorate as at appendix C;**
- e) **delegates to the section 151 officer the power to make necessary changes to the budget arising from any variations in central government funding allocations via general reserves;**
- f) **the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2026/27 to 2029/30 at appendix A be approved;**
- g) **the Treasury Management Strategy at appendix D be approved;**
- h) **the responses to scrutiny committee recommendations at appendix G to be approved; and**
- i) **that any further additional funding above that assumed in this revenue budget and received in the Final Local Government Finance Settlement for 2026/27, is applied to fund the revenue budget with a corresponding reduction in the reserve funding assumed from the Business Rates Risk Reserve.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

There was a ten minute break

66. 2026/27 CAPITAL INVESTMENT BUDGET AND CAPITAL STRATEGY UPDATE

It was noted that Councillor Harvey had to leave the meeting and Councillor Hitchiner acted as substitute for Group Leader for the remaining items.

Councillor Stoddart, cabinet member for finance and corporate services introduced the report.

The Cabinet received the final version of the 2026/27 Capital Investment Budget and accompanying Capital Strategy. It was noted that the capital programme reflects long-term investment (over one year) and that inclusion in the programme does not constitute approval to proceed; all projects will be subject to full governance and business case processes.

No changes had been made since the draft report was previously presented on 20 January 2026.

Public consultation (November to December 2025) showed strong support for the proposed additions, particularly for maintaining investment in highways maintenance and street lighting. The Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) reviewed the programme on 23 January 2026 and had no comments on the capital programme.

The proposed additions to the 2026/27 Capital Programme will enable the Council to:

- Increase temporary and emergency accommodation (£10m).
- Address revenue pressures through alternative school provision and Pupil Referral Units.
- Improve technological infrastructure and innovation.
- Support housing growth through new infrastructure.
- Strengthen school and property assets.
- Improve public rights of way access.
- Continue investing in the county's road network.

Appendix A set out the 14 capital proposals totalling £44m, funded through prudential borrowing, capital receipts, and revenue reserves.

It was noted that responding to housing needs remains a high priority; an additional £10m has been allocated to deliver new housing solutions, reducing reliance on temporary accommodation and lowering revenue costs by £1.7m per year. The Strategic Housing Team has supported the delivery of over 1,491 homes since April 2020.

A new £5m Historic Building Fund has been created to support works at key heritage buildings. The S151 Officer will allocate funds once final contract prices are confirmed.

A review of the current capital programme took place which has removed or re-funded several projects (identified at paragraph 13 of the report), releasing £2.65m and reducing reliance on borrowing.

The Capital Strategy (Appendix D) has been developed in line with CIPFA guidance and outlines the Council's approach to prioritisation, borrowing, and risk.

The Cabinet Member endorsed the report, highlighting alignment with the Council Plan and the administration's commitment to delivering for Herefordshire, and commended the three recommendations to Cabinet for approval.

No comments from cabinet members.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined their views and noted that:

Support was expressed for progressing Phase One of the bypass, noting it should have been completed years earlier to avoid the current revenue impact. They also welcomed the temporary accommodation investment for affordable housing, recognising the benefits for homeless individuals and families. However, they highlighted the absence of significant investment in expanding social and affordable housing within the capital

programme. Although work on a housing development company had been ongoing since December 2023, and a business plan indicated longer-term viability, no capital funding had been allocated. It was raised whether remaining barriers were financial rather than structural and suggested that a lack of political will was preventing progress. The Group urged Cabinet to reconsider and include meaningful investment in social and affordable housing.

The Green Group outlined their views and noted:

Concerns were raised about elements of the capital budget, noting that while some proposals such as borrowing for strategic housing and investment in alternative and SEND education provision would help reduce future revenue costs, other areas were more problematic. Particular concern was expressed about the proposed £5m loan for the Southern Link Road, with the total cost now estimated at £45.3m. It was argued that this financial burden would fall entirely on Herefordshire taxpayers without evidence of value for money, a full business case or transport modelling.

It was emphasised that previous administrations had not received or returned government funding for the scheme, and that the project would not deliver a river crossing or meaningful reductions in congestion.

They noted that repaying the loan would reduce the council's ability to fund measures that benefit residents particularly young people. Reference was made to the council's previous commitment to explore extending college bus passes for 16–19-year-olds; however, members were advised that the proposal had been withdrawn and would not proceed. Concerns were raised that this decision undermined support for young people in accessing education, training and leisure opportunities.

It was highlighted a £1.2m reduction in spending across market towns due to changes in public realm investment, pending clarification. They commented that while parts of the capital programme were positive, the overall package required the council to accept proposals they found deeply concerning.

The Independent for Herefordshire Group outlined their views and noted:

Councillor Hitchiner declared an interest due to owning property near the bypass.

Concerns were raised about the deteriorating condition of roads and the recurrence of potholes despite previous repairs. The appropriateness of committing to high levels of capital expenditure when reserves were projected to fall significantly, noting that continued reductions could leave very limited funds in future years was queried. Ongoing investment in school projects at Aylestone Hill and Peterchurch were welcomed. It was suggested that further opportunities may exist for capital investment that delivers future savings, while acknowledging that decisions on major schemes must be made carefully and should not place undue pressure on council resources.

In responding to the comments raised, the Cabinet Members noted that:

The importance of continued partnership working with housing providers to expand the supply of social and affordable housing was emphasised. It was reported that the Strategic Housing Team had supported the delivery of 1,298 homes between 2020 and March 2025, with a further 193 homes delivered so far in 2025/26, including social rent, affordable rent, shared ownership, low-cost market housing and first homes. The administration reaffirmed that housing remained a priority and highlighted ongoing work to bring empty properties back into use.

It was further noted that investment in new housing solutions will significantly improve

the lived experience of individuals and families currently placed in temporary accommodation, providing better quality support than existing arrangements. Such investment was also expected to have longer-term benefits by helping people stabilise their lives and potentially reducing future demand on adult social care services.

In relation to affordable housing, it was confirmed that while significant work had been undertaken to progress a business case, current budget pressures prevented the council from investing at the scale originally intended. However, the commitment to work with partners and make best use of available resources remains, and further progress in leveraging partnership arrangements will become increasingly evident to councillors and residents as work continues.

The recent spike in potholes was acknowledged, noting that this is typical during periods of wet and cold weather. It was emphasised that this must be viewed in the context of the record levels of investment being made in road improvements. Ongoing resurfacing, patching and surface-dressing works were being delivered based on condition intelligence, with a more strategic approach helping to address recurring defects where previous repairs had failed.

It was reported that there had been around 9,000 pothole reports in January, of which approximately 3,000 had already been repaired. The increase in defects was attributed in part to historic under-investment in the network over the last five to six years. By comparison, £46–47m had been invested in 2025/26, whereas £27m had been invested in the previous year. It was noted that the backlog caused by earlier under-investment was still being addressed. It was further noted there was severe deterioration on certain routes due to longstanding issues. Upcoming works were referenced, including a three-week closure for essential repairs and preparation for future surface-dressing. Seasonal increases in potholes were acknowledged as a recurring annual issue, and the current strategy for addressing them was reaffirmed.

The comments around continuation of investment in schools was welcomed, with education and support for young people identified as a key priority.

It was noted that all capital projects were assessed for their potential to reduce future revenue expenditure. In Children and Young People services, the proposed investments in alternative provision and the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) were highlighted as clear spend-to-save initiatives. The current cost of educating a child within Herefordshire is approximately £17,000 per year, compared with around £75,000 when placements are made outside the county. With 60–75 children currently placed externally, at an estimated transport and placement cost of around £60,000 per child, the new facilities will significantly reduce these high ongoing revenue pressures.

Regarding the bypass it was stated that previous administrations had been working to secure funding for the scheme, including pursuing support from the Treasury for a £180m package, but that this funding did not progress following changes in administration at the end of 2019. It was also noted that earlier proposals for an Eastern River crossing had been assessed and found to be significantly more expensive than suggested. It was additionally noted, following a Freedom of Information request, that £2.3m had been repaid to the LEP under an agreed arrangement.

In relation to the proposal for extended bus passes for young people, it was clarified that the bus service team had undertaken detailed work to assess the potential costs. The figures indicated that delivering the offer at scale would be unaffordable within the current budget. Work remains ongoing with local bus operators to explore options for a feasible pilot scheme within the next 12 months, though no scheme has yet been identified. Assurances were made that all options will be considered to keep all councillors appraised regarding bus passes for young people.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Stoddart proposed the recommendations and the Leader of the Council seconded the proposal for the decision before them which is that Cabinet:

Recommendations:

That: Cabinet recommends the following to Council

- a) **To approve the revised capital programme for 2026/27 attached at appendix C;**
- b) **Approve the capital strategy at appendix D; and**
- c) **Approve the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts of up to £1.0 million in 2026/27, to support transformation to generate ongoing revenue savings and reduce service delivery costs in future years.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

67. ANNUAL REVIEW OF EARMARKED RESERVES – 2025/26

Councillor Stoddart, cabinet member for finance and corporate services introduced the report.

The Cabinet received a report on the annual review of Earmarked Reserves and the General Fund for 2026/27. The report outlined the rationale for each reserve and the reasons for maintaining them at their stated levels, ensuring the Council can meet known future commitments and mitigate unforeseen financial risks.

It was noted that earmarked reserves support specific priorities, contingencies, and cash-flow management, while the General Fund acts as a strategic reserve for emergencies. As at 31 March 2025, the General Fund balance stood at £10.1m (4.3% of the 2025/26 net revenue budget), within the required 3–5% threshold.

Earmarked reserves totalled £80.7m at 31 March 2025, including reserves for liabilities and risk (£16.8m), budget resilience (£14.1m), strategic priorities (£9.3m), accounting reserves (£1.8m), grants and contributions (£27m), and schools-related balances (£11.7m). This included £18m in unspent grant funding carried forward in line with CIPFA guidance.

Forecast balances indicated that earmarked reserves were expected to reduce to £65.2m by 31 March 2026 and £41.6m by 31 March 2027, before accounting for any new grants received. The Quarter 2 Budget Report (2025/26) projected a £7m overspend, reduced to £3.7m after management action, with any final overspend to be funded from reserves.

The Medium-Term Financial Strategy highlighted ongoing financial risks and the need to minimise and replenish reserve usage to maintain resilience. Annual review of reserves aligns with CIPFA best practice, and the Section 151 Officer's statutory responsibilities under Section 25 of the Local Government Act 2003 were noted.

No comments from cabinet members.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The Independent for Herefordshire Group outlined their views and noted:

Concern was expressed about the significant projected reduction in reserves, falling from

around £80m to approximately £41 to 42m around a 50% decrease. It was queried how reserves could realistically be rebuilt through grants, with scepticism that substantial additional funding would be forthcoming from central government. It was suggested that the financial position was moving in a worrying direction over the coming years.

The Green Group outlined their views and noted:

It was noted that reserves exist to provide a cushion for unforeseen expenditure and emerging risks. Reference was made to the increasing impact of climate change, including higher levels of rainfall and flooding, which are causing significant damage to council assets beyond what can be managed within normal road-maintenance budgets. It was highlighted that further pressures on assets and residents are likely, and that this may necessitate drawing on reserves. Concern was expressed that the council is moving into an increasingly challenging financial position.

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined their views and noted that:

No comments.

In responding to the comments raised, the Cabinet Members noted that:

It was clarified that while no additional central government funding was expected, any future financial surpluses identified through the council's financial strategy will be directed into reserves.

It was further noted that the costs associated with cancelling the bypass had ultimately been borne by Herefordshire residents, with an estimated impact of around £280 per household. Reference was also made to £27m previously returned to the LEP, and it was stated that had the bypass proceeded when fully funded, these financial pressures would not now be reflected in the capital programme.

It was noted that decapitalisation costs of cancelling the bypass were a matter of public record of the full Council meeting of February 2021.

Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Stoddart proposed and the Leader of the Council seconded for the decision before them which is that Cabinet:

Recommendations:

That:

That:

- a) **The earmarked reserves and balances held by the council at 31 March 2025 are reviewed and confirmed as prudent to meet future financial commitments and risks; and**
- b) **The Earmarked Reserves and General Balances Policy Statement 2026/27 is approved and forecast balances to 31 March 2027 are noted.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

68. 2026/27 COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

Councillor Stoddart, cabinet member for finance and corporate services introduced the report.

The Cabinet received a report proposing that the Council Tax Reduction (CTR) Scheme for 2026/27 be maintained at the current maximum discount level. Members were

informed that over 11,000 households in Herefordshire receive CTR, including more than 6,000 working-age claimants. The existing local working-age scheme, approved in February 2025, continues to mirror the nationally set pensioner scheme by offering up to 100% discount unless household income exceeds the threshold.

The administration noted that public consultation undertaken during November–December 2025 showed strong support for maintaining council tax discounts for those most in need. Although no changes are proposed for 2026/27, feedback from the consultation will be used to improve future engagement.

It was highlighted that additional council tax discounts are also available and listed on the council's website.

Maintaining the maximum CTR discount is expected to help reduce financial pressure on vulnerable residents. The report's recommendation was endorsed for Cabinet approval.

Comments from cabinet members:

None

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The Green Group outlined their views and noted:

Full support was confirmed for maintaining the scheme, noting it is essential given the maximum council tax increase being proposed and expressing their appreciation that it is being continued.

The Independent for Herefordshire Group outlined their views and noted:

It was noted that the Conservative administration had previously set the maximum Council Tax Reduction discount at 80%, and that the former Independent / Green Alliance administration had increased this to 100%. Appreciation was expressed that the current Cabinet was continuing the full discount. Reference was also made to a previous decision to allocate interest earned on council deposits to support the scheme, and it was queried whether this approach was being applied under the current proposals.

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined their views and noted that:

No comments

In responding to the comments raised, the Cabinet Members noted that:

It was imperative that the council has this option to address hardship and it would be checked when the 100% reduction was introduced.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Cllr Stoddart proposed and the Leader of the Council seconded for the decision before them which is that Cabinet:

Recommendations:

That: Cabinet recommends the following to Council

- a) **The Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2026/27, with the same parameters as the existing scheme, be recommended to Council for approval.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

69. CHILDREN'S IMPROVEMENT PLAN PHASE 3

Councillor Powell, cabinet member for children and young people introduced the report.

The Cabinet received a report outlining the outcome of the Ofsted inspection of Children's Services, which awarded an overall judgment of Good, with all service areas rated Good and the impact of leaders on social work practice judged Outstanding. This was described as a significant achievement for Herefordshire, reflecting the work of practitioners, managers, elected members and partners in delivering the improvements set out in the Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan.

Ofsted found that children's services are treated as a high priority by the council and praised the visible and effective leadership of the Corporate Director, whose aspirational and child-focused approach has driven rapid improvement. The report highlighted that, at the time of her appointment in July 2024, permanent social worker levels were low (29%), and the pace of change had been a concern; permanent staffing has since risen to around 70%.

Key strengths identified by Ofsted included:

- A strong culture that places children at the centre of service delivery.
- Mature and effective partnership working that has improved quality and consistency.
- Successful workforce stabilisation, supported by nurturing and visible leadership.
- A comprehensive quality assurance framework enabling a clear understanding of practice and impact.
- Effective early help, well-considered assessments, and appropriate application of safeguarding thresholds.
- Skilled practitioners supporting children to remain with or return to their families where appropriate.
- A strong multi-agency response to children at risk of exploitation.
- Good support and training for foster carers, including kinship carers.
- A robust service for care leavers, supported by dedicated personal advisers.

Two areas for development were noted: management oversight of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) function and identification/assessment of children in private fostering arrangements. Ofsted acknowledged that improvement plans were already in place.

The Cabinet Member expressed thanks to the Director of Children's Services, the children's workforce, partners, scrutiny members, the Chief Executive and the Leader for their contribution. Appreciation was also extended to families who provided feedback, with 85% reporting they felt able to share their views and 83% confirming the council's intervention made a positive difference.

Significant improvement was also reported in financial performance: following £10.8m investment in 2024/25, the directorate delivered £2.5m savings last year, is forecast to deliver £3.9m this year, and has proposed £2.7m savings for next year. An underspend of £2.7m was also delivered, totalling £12.5m in savings and underspends over two years.

Comments from cabinet members:

It was highlighted that the Ofsted outcome demonstrates it is possible to deliver high-quality, high-value services while also achieving savings. Thanks were expressed to the Director of Children's Services, the leadership team and the workforce for their dedication and the significant improvements delivered for children and families in Herefordshire. It was noted that the combination of strong technical grip, such as effective performance management, and a compassionate, child-centred approach had driven a remarkable turnaround. Members praised the substantial improvement in

recruitment and expressed confidence that the service is now on a strong and sustained upward trajectory.

The Chair of the Children's Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Fagan:

Welcomed the Ofsted judgement and praised the dedication of the children's services workforce and the strong leadership of the Corporate Director. The significant and challenging journey undertaken to reach this outcome, highlighting previous scrutiny work that challenged the pace of change, culture, and quality assurance processes were noted.

It was noted that scrutiny had observed clear improvements, with the service demonstrating a strong understanding of itself and the ability to track and evidence change. It was advised that the Scrutiny Committee had not yet reviewed the Ofsted report but would do so at its next meeting. Current scrutiny work includes a task and finish group on early help and the voice of children and young people.

The council's ambition to become a child-friendly county, strengthening children's and young people's involvement in decision-making was emphasised. While acknowledging remaining challenges, particularly in supporting young people not in education, employment or training.

The workforce stability and expressed confidence in continued progress toward achieving an outstanding service was welcomed.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined their views and noted that:

Added their congratulations and recognition of all the hard work. It was emphasised that the council must continue to listen to the voices of children, not only in relation to safeguarding, but across all aspects of their lives, and ensure that the feedback received is acted upon.

The Independent for Herefordshire Group outlined their views and noted:

Welcomed the Ofsted outcome as a positive result for children and young people in the county, noting that the improvements made have significantly changed future prospects for many families.

The increase in permanent workforce was highlighted as a crucial factor in creating a stable and attractive environment for practitioners. Support was expressed for the development of a new Children's Services Business Plan, viewed as the next essential step to ensure continued progress and prevent regression once external oversight is fully withdrawn.

It was noted that scrutiny looks forward to reviewing the new plan and to seeing continued improvements that will benefit children growing up in Herefordshire.

The Green Group outlined their views and noted:

Welcomed the positive Ofsted judgement and acknowledged the significant progress made in Children's Services. It was noted that substantial improvements had been achieved following a long and challenging journey, with strong leadership from the Corporate Director, supported by the Cabinet Member, scrutiny, partners and officers.

The pace of change was praised, with particular recognition of the rapid progress made since the Director's appointment. It was emphasised that, while the outcome was highly

positive, the improvement journey must continue, with ongoing commitment of time, effort and resources to progress towards achieving an outstanding service.

In responding to the comments raised, the Cabinet Members noted that:

The Leader expressed thanks to the Chief Executive and all involved, noting that improving Children's Services had been set as the administration's number one priority. The commitment shown by the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People was highlighted, praising his professionalism, experience and direct engagement with families.

Thanks, were also extended to the Corporate Director for Children's Services, whose leadership was described as outstanding. It was noted that their combined efforts had galvanised staff, built confidence within teams and ensured a strong child-centred focus throughout the service. The Leader emphasised that, although further work remains, the service is now well-positioned to embed high-quality practice as the norm, with future work progressing through a Children's Services Business Plan rather than an improvement plan.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Powell proposed and the Leader of the Council seconded for the decision before them which is that Cabinet:

Recommendations:

That:

- a) **Cabinet note the outcome of the ILACS – Appendix A**
- b) **Cabinet authorises the Corporate Director for Children and Young People in consultation with the council's Corporate Leadership Team and Partnership to lead the completion of the Phase 3 improvement plan and Ofsted outcome action plan, bringing this work together in a Children Services business plan for 2026/27 with future governance and monitoring in line with other council directorates.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

It was confirmed the next meeting of cabinet was 26th March at 2:30pm.

The meeting ended at 6.00 pm

Chairperson

Agenda item no. 4 - Questions from members of the public

Question No.	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1.	Huw Sherlock, Hereford	<p><i>'The LA Capital Finance and Accounting Regs 2003 require assessment of capital projects to be shown to be affordable over a 3-year rolling period according to strict borrowing guidelines for financing capital works set by CIPFA ("the Prudential Code").</i></p> <p><i>If the cost overruns aren't within the existing contingency allowance for the project, and so could cause overshoot of the (statutorily mandated) 'prudential indicators' (that control allowed debt/capital expenditure) the officers are required to look again at the project finance.'</i></p> <p><i>Therefore, in relation to the 40 plus million of borrowing to fund the western bypass (phase 1): Are the projected overruns within contingency - if the answer is no, then how can it be shown to be consistent with adherence to the prudential code and 'sustainable' according to the Capital Strategy?</i></p> <p><i>If it is, then it remains an argument over the cost benefits, but if it isn't, will it be stopped or delayed for refinancing?</i></p>	Councillor Stoddart
<p>Response: Current forecasts for the delivery of Phase One of the bypass are within budget. The budget includes contingency to manage the risk of potential increases in costs during construction.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: None</p>			
<p>Supplementary Response:</p>			
PQ 2.	Amanda Martin, Hereford	<p><i>"Does a full business case exist for Phase 1 of the Western Bypass formerly known as the Southern Link Road?</i></p> <p><i>If it does, how was it produced without validated traffic modelling data?</i></p> <p><i>If it does not, why did the Leader advise the Secretary of State for Transport in a letter of 1st October 2025 that Phase 1 has a "robust business case with a strong cost-benefit ratio"?"</i></p>	Councillor Price

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Response:
 A case for investment document is in the final stages of completion and will be published by the end of March. We were able to advise the Secretary of State in our letter of the 1st of October based on initial findings. As the case for investment document has developed and the Full Business Case develops further, these statements are being validated. The Full Business Case will be published in July.

Supplementary Question:
 The request for funding sent by the Leader to the Secretary of State for Transport on 1st October 2025 explicitly referred to the Southern Link Road as having a “robust business case”. However, government guidance provides that, in order for the business case to be regarded as “robust”, the transport appraisal used to inform it must include validated traffic data; failure to observe this requirement renders it inadequate for funding purposes and exposes it to legal challenge. Therefore there was no robust business case at the time and the Leader’s information to the Secretary of State was incorrect.

Is it accepted that the Leader’s attempt to obtain DfT funding relied on misleading information and that this was a serious lapse likely to cast doubt on his integrity and that of other pro-road members within the Administration?

Supplementary Response:
 In reply to your question, is it accepted that the Leader attempted to obtain DfT funding relied on misleading information? The answer is no. Thank you.

PQ 3.	Paul Newman, Hereford	The updated Outline Business Case for the Southern Link Road claims benefits for the road between the A49 and A465 that “By removing unnecessary through traffic from the city centre local retail, leisure and hospitality businesses will be better placed to welcome visitors to the city”. With the City Centre located to the north of the River Wye and this road over a mile to the South of the Wye, what “unnecessary through traffic” will the Southern Link Road remove from the City please explain the evidence to support this answer?	Councillor Price
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Response:
 The Outline Business Case refers to the benefits the whole western bypass and Phase One is an enabler to its delivery. Phase One will specifically remove traffic from Belmont Road, Walnut Tree Ave and Holme Lacy Road improving congestion and safety on these City Centre routes.

Supplementary Question:

The Capital Budget is requesting councillors to approve capital funding for a road between the A49 and the A465 and not for the whole Western Bypass scheme.

Why is the Outline Business Case for the Southern Link Road claiming benefits that relate to a much bigger road project for which capital approval is not being sought?"

Supplementary Response:

Phase One is an enabler for the wider bypass. It clearly demonstrates the Council's commitment to see the full bypass realised and sets the baseline for future discussions with government and developers on how to fund and realise the full bypass.

PQ 4.	Susie Laan, Hereford	<p>Wye Valley NHS Trust declared an Internal Critical Incident this week, due to running at extremely high levels of bed occupancy. Many people retire to the County from the South East, increasing the proportion of older people living in Herefordshire.</p> <p>With this administration looking to significantly grow the population of Herefordshire, what assistance and infrastructure is this Council providing, in particular through its Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy to address what will become a growing problem and to ensure that these Critical incidents will not happen in the future?</p>	Cllr Swinglehurst
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Response:

Thank you for your question. The council works closely with Wye Valley NHS Trust to support discharges from hospital on a day-to-day basis and has supported them through the recent critical incident.

In terms of your wider question, through their revised National Planning Policy Framework (launched at the end of 2024) the government set the county a mandatory housing growth target of over 27,000 new homes. However this will be a managed and phased development of new housing and associated wider services and infrastructure over the next 2 decades. We recognise that, as a result of this direction, there will be a significant increase in the county's population and impact on public services. Through the development of the Local Plan, which defines planning policy including the location of land allocated for these new homes, we are and will continue to work with partners to fully understand the likely impact and define the increase in capacity of public services and infrastructure required to meet the future needs of the county. The development of the Local Plan is also subject to extensive public consultation and an independent examination in public to ensure it is viable before it can be adopted and implemented.

Supplementary Question:
None

Supplementary Response:

PQ 5.	Hayden Osborne Brooks, Hereford	<p><i>Herefordshire Council traffic modelling reports in the past have shown that the school run can increase peak time congestion in Hereford by over 50%, especially in the North East quadrant of Hereford and on Aylestone Hill in particular.</i></p> <p><i>This is due to students and children accessing education and training, by private motor car. What is the impact of the 2026/27 Budget changes on enabling the young people of Herefordshire to safely access education, training and jobs by means other than by private car and how will these changes help reduce City congestion arising from the school run?"</i></p>	Councillor Price
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Response:
There is no impact from the changes in the budget on the ability of young people to access education, training and jobs by sustainable modes of transport. Herefordshire Council base budget for subsidising contract routes with bus operators is over £1.1million. This year we will be adding an extra £751,000 from BSIP and S106 funding. The Council is also currently delivering the Transport Hub at Hereford station which will enable better connectivity between bus and rail services, as well as subsidises the Beryl bike scheme, enabling cheap and easy access to bicycles across Hereford city. The Council is also investing in the delivery of School Streets which encourages parents to consider walking and cycling children to school. The Council encourages the use of sustainable transport modes and it is for resident to determine and chose how to they wish to travel.

Supplementary Question:
None

Supplementary Response:

PQ 6.	Mrs Morawiecka, Hereford	The Capital Programme Position January 2025/26 shows that by the end of this financial year the Council will have spent £2.456million on the Hereford Southern Link Road.	Councillor Price
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		What is the breakdown of this expenditure and what is the Value for Money achieved?	
<p>Response: The figure quoted relates to spending across two financial years. There are three main areas of expenditure. 1 – Land purchase: The Council taking control of the land for the project to be progressed. This includes land agent and survey fees as well as land valuations. 2 – Professional Services fees: The Council has incurred costs to get the project back to a stage that it can be delivered. This includes everything from professional advice to ensure the specification for the road is compliant with required standards as well as affecting the interfaces with Network Rail and National Highways, utility surveys, updating ecology surveys, producing business cases, tender documentation and reviewing tender submissions. 3 – Internal resources: A project of this nature requires internal resources and the project costs reflects the input of staff from across the Council.</p> <p>Projects of this nature require early investment in planning and preparation to ensure costs at construction phases are understood, controlled and value for money is achieved through the delivery.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: Thank you for the answer. But sadly, neither the actual financial split nor the value for money achieved on this £2.456m expenditure was provided. In the 2026/27 capital investment budget and capital strategy update report, para 16 says inclusion in the capital program is not approval to proceed. Each project will be subject to its own governance. A full business case will be presented for approval to cabinet where required and compliance with the council's contract procedure rules as applicable. With no full business case or other evidence available what information did the cabinet have to approve spending £2.456m to date on the Southern Link Road? And with a capital programme showing expenditure on this scheme of £13.5m in 2026/27, what information is available for councillors to decide that this expenditure is value for money and should be included in the capital programme.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Response: <u>Answer in meeting:</u> There are several items in that. I will give you a written answer to address all the points in your question.</p> <p><u>Written answer provided:</u> Council agreed £10.3m of Capital Investment Budget to develop Phase One and spend against this was authorised by Cabinet on 28th March 2024. The £2.456m is the spend against the £10.3m budget to develop the Full Business Case, make land purchases and progress the design and tendering of the scheme.</p>			
PQ 7.	P J McGivern, Hereford	<i>Can you please explain, in very simple terms, how borrowing vast, unquantifiable -, because we all know project cost always escalate from day 1- amounts of money to build a Bypass can in anyway be seen as wise?</i>	Councillor Price

Response:			
The Council has put in place a project team, governance processes and a risk-based contingency that will control costs within the available budget envelope. The delivery of a bypass is essential to the future growth and prosperity of Herefordshire and given that it is the wisest course of action.			
Supplementary Question:			
None			
Supplementary Response:			
PQ 8.	Jeremy Milln, Hereford	<i>I note that Herefordshire Council plans to capitalise the costs of legal and finance staff in relation to capital projects, hence removing £225,000 from the Revenue Budget for 2026/27 and yet the Net Budget for the Strategic Finance staff has increased by over 9.5% from 2025/26. Why have the Strategic Finance costs risen by so much despite these notional “savings” and in respect of the Library and Museum and other capital projects that are funded by grants, what will be the effect on funding by capitalisation of these costs against grant claims for capital projects lagging behind their original completion dates?</i>	Councillor Stoddart
Response:			
The increase in the Strategic Finance budget in 2026/27 represents increases in the council's insurance premiums for 2026/27 of £539k and a £180k increase in banking fees as a result of increased volume in online transactions in 2026/27.			
Capitalisation of eligible staff costs in legal and finance teams will be within individual project budgets and grant conditions where applicable.			
Supplementary Question:			
None			
Supplementary Response:			

PQ 9.	Jim Hardy, Hereford	How can Cabinet recommend to Council for approval a capital investment budget which includes some £40 million pounds for the first phase of a 'bypass' when the latest traffic modelling and a Full Business Case have not been published? Would Council not be acting at best recklessly, and at worst illegally, to approve such a 'pig in a poke'?	Councillor Price
<p>Response: A case for investment document is in the final stages of completion and will be published by the end of March. The Full Business Case will be published in July ahead of the Cabinet making the final decision on the investment in Phase One. This authority is being responsible in planning and investing in the future growth and prosperity of the County.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: None</p>			
<p>Supplementary Response:</p>			

Agenda item no. 5- Questions from councillor

Question No.	Questioner	Question	Question to
PQ 1.	Cllr Hitchiner	<i>There are surely opportunities for Hoople to provide additional services to others within the Teckal framework including Wye Valley Trust and other local authorities if an agreement can be reached. Done the right way this could result in savings to the Council and other customers resulting in reduced budget pressures for both and so benefiting the community we serve. Would the Leader agree with me that this is an opportunity that should not be missed? What steps will the Leader take to advantage if this?</i>	Leader to the Council
<p>Response: The council will continue to explore opportunities through its subsidiary company, Hoople Ltd, to deliver savings and efficiencies in services delivered to the council via the Service Level Agreement and as part of the company's wider growth strategy.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: This concerns Hoople. Your answer didn't really answer my particular question. You referred to exploring opportunities for savings and efficiencies at Hoople which probably means reducing fees with a consequent almost inevitable reduction of service levels. You also refer to a service level agreement. Given the past history is he able to confirm that a service level agreement exists for the current 2025/26 year? So far as going forward is concerned, its very helpful if the service level agreements can be put in place before the beginning of the year and a contract and surely this should be happening at this time. So maybe he would be able to confirm to the next Shareholder Committee that a new service level agreement for next year is in place.</p> <p>As asked in my question, is Hoople taking advantage of the opportunities? He refers to Hoople having a wider growth strategy. I look forward to hearing about this at the next Shareholder Committee meeting because I believe the council is missing out on opportunities for working at other councils and also with the NHS. This requires investment rather than cost cutting. Perhaps the Leader, may wish to comment.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Response: Thank you Councillor Hitchiner. Making sure that Hoople has the right strategy, it's a great company and making sure they are moving forward and progressing as a key company for Herefordshire to provide services for Herefordshire people. We want that to continue and improve, and we will work with them as best we can to ensure that they're going in the right direction. Obviously, also a good partnership working relationship with Hoople addresses the savings that we need to make. So all of those actions will continue to take place and with regard to the service level agreement as you suggest, we will report back at the next Shareholder meeting. Thank you.</p>			

PQ 2.	Councillor Charlotte Taylor	<p><i>Despite being funded by taxpayer's money, the Cabinet has not made the Traffic Modelling Study 2025 available to other Herefordshire Councillors or to the public. Withholding evidence that would inform Councillors in decision making is against the Nolan Principles and the Constitution.</i></p> <p><i>How does the Cabinet expect Herefordshire Councillors to make an informed decision on the Budget proposals around transport, and particularly the borrowing of £40million for a new road, when import evidence such as the Traffic Modelling Study 2025 is withheld from them</i></p>	Councillor Price
<p>Response: The modelling information is not being withheld, the work on the business case that frames and puts the modelling work into context is being completed and will be published by the end of March. A Full Business Case will also be published before July and in advance of the Cabinet making its final decision to award the construction contract</p>			
<p>Supplementary Question: Thank you for confirming that the Traffic Modelling Study 2025 is not being withheld. Given that the Full Council meeting to consider the Capital Budget is scheduled for the 13th February 2026, just eight days away, would the Cabinet member please provide me, and other Herefordshire Councilors, with a copy of the Traffic Modelling Study 2025, in advance of that meeting? This would enable councilors to comply with the Council's Constitution and the Nolan Principles around decision making, and I will have evidence to confirm the claim in the Outline Business case, that spending £45.3million on a road between the A49 and the A465 for motorised traffic will reduce congestion and journey times in Hereford and free up space for bus services, making them more reliable.</p>			
<p>Supplementary Response: Thank you. As stated previously and in respect of the funding already approved as part of the budget, the outline business case provide sufficient information for cabinet to propose approval from council to add this financial commitment to the capital investment budget. It is not considered that a copy of the traffic modelling study 2025 was required in respect of a decision to approve the additional 28/29 funding for this scheme in the capital investment budget. Importantly, council agreeing the budget is not approval to spend. Additional governance will be required which will include cabinet decisions supported by a full business case before any further progress is made or spend committed. Cabinet has also been clear that the further modelling that has been referred to has not yet been published. It is the intention to publish this in due course.</p>			