Herefordshire Council

Title of report: Recommissioning of Family Help Service

Decision maker: Cabinet member children and young people

Decision date: 16 September 2026

Report by: Commissioning officer

Classification
Open

Decision type

Key

Notice has been served in accordance with Part 3, Section 9 (Publicity in Connection with Key Decisions) of the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Meetings and Access to Information) (England) Regulations 2012.

Wards affected
(All Wards);

Purpose
To approve the recommissioning of the Family Help Service

Recommendation(s)
That:

a) **To approve the recommissioning of a Community Family Help Service through an open procurement process for an initial period of three years from 1 April 2027, at an initial contract value of £930,000, with options to extend for up to a further two years. If both extension years are used, the anticipated total contract value would be £1.55m, based on 180 referrals per annum; and,**

b) **To authorise the Corporate Director Children and Young People to purchase additional services should the need arise during the contract term up to a maximum budget of £3.2m (inclusive of the £1.55m anticipated spend) provided within the approved Council's budget and /or within any subsequent in-year additional Government grant funding; and**

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c) To delegate authority to the Corporate Director Children and Young People to take all operational decisions necessary to complete the procurement process and to award, implement, manage, vary, extend or terminate the contract in accordance with the approved budget and contract terms.

Alternative options

1. Do nothing and allow current contract to end on 31 March 2027 without commissioning replacement provision. This is not recommended as it would create a gap in the Community Family Help offer and disrupt support for families already receiving a service. It would reduce the availability of early, community-based support, increasing the risk that needs escalate and require statutory or longer-term intervention. This option would not support the council's priorities for early help, prevention and improved outcomes for children and families.

2. To expand in-house provision so the council has sufficient capacity to deliver the service directly. This option is not recommended as the proposed blended model provides a clear separation between statutory children's social care and community-based family help support. This distinction is important in supporting earlier engagement with families, as some families may be more willing to access support from community providers rather than from children's social care. It also provides a more appropriate route of support for families stepping down from social care involvement. The recommended approach therefore supports earlier intervention, reduces the risk of needs escalating, and strengthens the wider family help offer within the community. Expanding the in-house service would also require additional workforce capacity, management arrangements and infrastructure, which cannot currently be delivered within the required timescale.

Key considerations

3. The current Community Family Help contract ends on 31 March 2027. A decision is therefore required to ensure continued access to targeted, community-based support for children and families from 1 April 2027. The proposed service has been developed in response to local need, learning from the existing contract and the implementation of the national Families First Partnership Programme

4. A priority in Herefordshire's County Plan (2024-2028) is to ensure all children and young people in the county have a great start in life, and to be healthy, safe, and inspired to be the best they can be.

5. Herefordshire Children & Young People Strategic Partnership Vision is for children and young people to:

   a. Feel included, valued, happy, healthy and safe in their homes and in their community as they grow up.

   b. Have access to good quality education, housing, sport, leisure and play facilities, that enable them to thrive in their physical, emotional, intellectual and social development, as they grow to be young adults.

   c. Live in a county of towns and villages that value them as Children and Young People be the next generation to help keep Herefordshire, the place people want to live and work.

6. The Childrens safeguarding partnership "Think Family" approach acknowledges that a whole community approach is needed to ensure the right help is provided at the earliest opportunity, so that every child is well prepared for their next steps in life.

7. The long term aim of helping more families in Herefordshire is for them to be able to help themselves and therefore improving their overall well-being and quality of life. Herefordshire's Community Family Help offer focuses on providing services at the right time based on the levels of need thresholds and is directly linked to the Governments Families First Programme.

8. The Families First Partnership Programme is reforming children's social care through a single Family Help system that brings together targeted early help and Child in Need support. In response, the council is developing a single Family Help offer based on one assessment, one evolving plan and coordinated support led by a named Family Help Lead Practitioner.

9. The externally commissioned Community Family Help Service will operate alongside the council's provision as part of a blended model. It will provide targeted support to children and families with complex needs who require an early help assessment multiagency response.

10. The service will support a minimum of 180 families each year and will undertake the Lead Practitioner role for at least 90% of accepted support packages. The provider will work with families and partner agencies to deliver coordinated Family Help plans, improve family resilience and reduce the risk of escalation to statutory services.

11. The contract has been designed to secure a minimum level of provision while retaining flexibility to increase capacity where required. The recommendation includes a delegation to the Corporate Director to purchase additional service provided that adequate budget has been made available.

12. As the contract allows for the Council to call off additional referrals and training, the absolute maximum spend via the contract over the five years is £3.2 million. The absolute value represents the absolute maximum spend permitted under the contract, including any permitted extensions, variations, call-off activity or additional commissioned provision. The recommendation includes a delegation to the Corporate Director to purchase additional referrals and or training provided that adequate budget has been made available.

13. The service will also provide an appropriate route of support for families stepping down from children's social care intervention, helping to sustain progress and reduce the likelihood of repeat referral.

14. The service will incorporate the voice of children, young people and families in both delivery and ongoing service development, ensuring that support is responsive, personalised, and shaped by lived experience.

15. The recommended approach will maintain community-based provision as part of a coordinated Family Help system. It supports earlier engagement, provides continuity for families stepping down from social care and enables the council to retain a clear focus on statutory responsibilities. An open procurement process undertaken in line with the Councils Contract Procedure Rules and the Procurement Act 2023, will provide an opportunity to test the market, secure a sustainable delivery model and demonstrate value for money.

Community impact

16. Government ambitions for the national Families First Programme are:

    a. To see vulnerable families thrive, building their resilience by providing effective, whole family support to help prevent escalation into statutory services.

    b. To drive system change locally and nationally, working with local authorities and their partners to create joined up local services, able to identify families in need, provide the right support at the right time, and track their outcomes in the long term.

17. The recommissioned service will provide targeted support to vulnerable children and families across Herefordshire. It will contribute to improved family resilience, better school attendance, successful completion of Family Help plans and reduced escalation or repeat referral to statutory services.

18. The provider will be required to work closely with statutory partners and community, voluntary and faith organisations. This will strengthen local support networks, improve the early identification of need and help families maintain positive outcomes after formal intervention ends.

19. Performance will be monitored through agreed contractual measures, including service capacity, completion of Family Help plans, repeat referrals, family experience and evidence that positive outcomes are sustained following support.

Environmental impact

20. Herefordshire Council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.

21. The environmental impact of the proposal has been considered in the development of the service specification. The provider will be required to minimise the environmental impact of service delivery and support the council's environmental policies and carbon reduction objectives.

22. This will include reducing unnecessary travel, using active or sustainable transport where appropriate, minimising paper and energy use, and making effective use of digital delivery where this is accessible and suitable for families. Environmental performance will be considered through contract management and monitored alongside wider social value commitments.

Equality duty

23. Due to the scope of this project and its potential impact on certain protected characteristics, an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is attached as an appendix to this report.

24. In summary, this decision impacts on protected characteristics as follows:

    a. The service will provide earlier, coordinated support to improve outcomes for children and families.
    b. Support will be accessible and responsive to individual, cultural and communication needs.
    c. Some families may experience barriers due to rurality, disability, digital exclusion or language and communication needs

25. Although this decision may have a negative impact as noted in the EIA, we plan to mitigate this by:

a. Providing flexible, countywide support, including community and home-based delivery where appropriate.
b. Making reasonable adjustments and providing accessible information, interpreting and translation.
c. Monitoring access, experience and outcomes, with action taken where inequalities are identified.

Resource implications

26. The final budget has yet to be confirmed. However, it is anticipated that the initial contract value will not exceed £1.55m, equivalent to £310,000 per annum.

27. The annual contract expenditure will be met from existing approved budgets using a combination of Children's base budget and Department for Education grant funding. The contract will be managed within the available budget and in accordance with the conditions attached to the relevant grant funding.

28. The £3.2m maximum contract value provides procurement flexibility to purchase additional capacity where required. It is a contractual ceiling and does not represent an approved budget or a commitment to spend. No expenditure above the anticipated £1.55m may be committed unless there is assessed demand, an approved and identifiable funding source, written finance approval and budget-holder authorisation in accordance with the council's Financial Procedure Rules. A further key decision will be taken should purchase of additional capacity be required.

29. Contract expenditure will be monitored through routine budget and contract management arrangements. Any extension, variation or purchase of additional capacity will be subject to affordability, satisfactory performance and continued value for money.

30. The procurement will seek to secure a sustainable service within the available budget and demonstrate value for money through the evaluation of quality, social value and price. Financial performance, activity and demand will be monitored through routine contract management and budget monitoring arrangements.

31. By providing effective early intervention, the service is expected to reduce pressure on higher-cost statutory services, including Child in Need and child protection interventions. This supports the Council's wider approach to managing demand within Children's Services and improving system sustainability.

Legal implications

32. This report seeks authorisation to continue the current service provision and there are no specific legal implications.

33. The relevant legal provisions for this decision can be found in the council's constitution, www.herefordshire.gov.uk/constitution.

Risk management

34. The key risks associated with the proposed procurement and contract are set out below. Risks will be monitored through the Children and Young People Directorate risk management arrangements, procurement governance and routine contract management. Significant risks or emerging pressures will be escalated in accordance with the council's established governance arrangements.

Risk	Mitigation
Service continuity and mobilisation. There is a risk that the procurement and mobilisation period does not allow sufficient time for a smooth transition to the recommissioned service from 1 April 2027.	The procurement timetable will include a defined mobilisation period and clear transition milestones. The council will work with the incumbent and incoming provider to agree handover arrangements, prioritising safeguarding, high-risk cases and families already receiving support. Mobilisation progress will be monitored through contract management arrangements, with issues escalated promptly where delivery is at risk.
Budget and affordability. There is a risk that the approved budget is insufficient to secure a sustainable provider response, particularly given workforce, travel and rural delivery pressures across Herefordshire.	Market engagement and financial modelling will inform the final specification and pricing approach. The procurement will be undertaken within the approved maximum contract value, with tenders assessed for affordability, deliverability and sustainability. Expenditure, activity and financial performance will be monitored throughout the contract, with emerging pressures addressed through contract and budget management arrangements.
Demand and capacity. There is a risk that referrals exceed the contracted capacity, resulting in waiting times or families not receiving support at the earliest appropriate opportunity.	The service specification will set minimum capacity and performance requirements. Referral levels, waiting times, outcomes and provider capacity will be monitored through contract management. Additional provision may be purchased only where supported by assessed demand, available budget and budget-holder approval.
Market response and provider sustainability. There is a risk that the procurement does not attract a suitable or sustainable provider response.	Market engagement has informed the development of the service specification and will help ensure the procurement is deliverable and attractive to the market.

	Tender evaluation will consider quality, cost and deliverability to reduce the risk of awarding a contract that cannot be sustained.
TUPE and transition costs. There is a risk that potential TUPE implications or unknown transition costs could affect bidder interest or mobilisation arrangements.	Anonymised TUPE information will be requested from the incumbent provider and shared with bidders as part of the procurement process, where appropriate. The procurement timetable will allow sufficient time for bidders to consider TUPE implications and for any successful provider to plan transition arrangements.
Workforce recruitment and retention. There is a risk that provider recruitment and retention pressures affect mobilisation or ongoing delivery of the service.	Bidders will be required to set out their proposed staffing model, recruitment approach, supervision arrangements and mobilisation plan as part of the procurement process. Workforce capacity and stability will be monitored through contract management and quality assurance meetings. Any workforce-related delivery concerns will be addressed through the contract management process, including improvement planning where required.
Impact on children and families during transition. There is a risk that families experience disruption during transition from the current contract to the recommissioned service.	A clear handover process will be agreed, with safeguarding and high-risk cases prioritised. Transition arrangements will focus on maintaining flexible, joined-up and appropriately monitored support, with continuity for families already receiving a service.

35. Regular budget control meetings give assurance on the robustness of budget control and monitoring, highlight key risks and identify any mitigation to reduce the impact of pressures on the council's overall position.

Consultees

36. Engagement has been undertaken with key internal and external stakeholders to inform the commissioning approach, and in developing the service specification.

37. Market engagement has been undertaken, which has included;

- A “Request for Information” issued via the council’s electronic procurement portal, generated responses from eight providers.
- An in-person market engagement (meet the buyer) event was held in August and attended by six providers.

38. The information and feedback received supported the development of the service specification.

39. Corporate Director of Children’s Services and Service Manager Families First have been consulted and are in agreement with the decision.

40. A Political Group Consultation was held on 18 August 2026. Members were supportive of the proposed recommendations. A query was raised regarding the potential cost of referrals above the anticipated 180 per annum. It was confirmed that any additional referrals would be commissioned at the rates submitted by the successful provider and that pricing forms part of the evaluation process to ensure best value. Feedback has been considered in finalising the recommendations within this report.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Equality Impact Assessment

Background papers

None