

Minutes of the meeting of Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Tuesday 27 May 2025 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor Toni Fagan (chairperson)
Councillor Ben Proctor (vice chairperson)

Councillors: Frank Cornthwaite, Clare Davies, Dave Davies and Robert Highfield.

In attendance: Councillor Liz Harvey (substitute for Councillor David Hitchiner), Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People), Chief Inspector Ross Jones (West Mercia Police), Rob Thomas (CEO Vennture).

Officers: Rachel Gillott (Service Director, Early Help, Children in Need and Safeguarding), Alfie Rees Glinos (Governance Support Assistant), Lianne Rees (Specialist Safeguarding Nurse Advisor MASH), Donna Thornton (Governance Support Assistant), Danial Webb Statutory Scrutiny Officer), Christine Wellington (Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment).

Remote attendees Niall Crawford (Lead Officer for Education Safeguarding Social Inclusion and Elective Home Education), Lindsay MacHardy (Public Health Principal), Bronwen McCarthy (Head of Service Delivery West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre), Lorna Tilley (Head of Service West Mercia Youth Justice Service).

64. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Cllr David Hitchiner and from Jan Frances (Co-opted representative for families).

65. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

The committee heard that Cllr Liz Harvey had stepped down from her role as vice chair of the committee and as being a member of the committee. Cllr David Hitchiner would be joining the committee as a member.

Cllr Harvey was the named substitute for Cllr Hitchiner.

66. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

67. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

68. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There had been two questions received from members of the public, which had been published, along with responses, as a supplement to the meeting agenda on the Herefordshire Council website

A record of a supplementary question and a verbal response provided during the meeting, are attached at Appendix 1 to these minutes.

69. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

There had been no questions received from members of the council.

70. CHILD EXPLOITATION

The Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding provided a brief overview of the report and then the Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police and the Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment delivered a short presentation on the topic. The Key points were:

The Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police provided the committee with broad definitions of child exploitation including: child criminal exploitation (CCE) and child sexual exploitation (CSE). Data and trends demonstrated that there was a relatively low prevalence of child exploitation in Herefordshire compared to other counties, which was largely due to the county's proactive safeguarding work.

It was pointed out that county lines was the most common form of CCE in Herefordshire and that children were often trafficked in from larger cities such as Birmingham and Wolverhampton to distribute drugs.

A breakdown of the strategic framework in place to tackle child exploitation explained that multi agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings were held regularly:

- MACE 1 meetings focused on individual children and direct support.
- MACE 2 meetings identified themes, hotspots and recurring risks.
- An exploitation and missing subgroup was in place to provide strategic oversight and to escalate systemic needs.

The Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment explained the role of the Safe Team in providing targeted interventions for at-risk and missing children. It was explained that:

- The process for return home interviews had been increased beyond the existing 72-hour timeframe.
- A new protocol with Ofsted was in place for early intelligence sharing around online exploitation.
- A collaboration with health partners meant a unique alert system within medical records was in place to flag exploitation risk across health settings.

The Chair invited comments and discussion from the committee in relation to the report. The key points of the discussion are detailed below:

1. The committee asked about the current extent of child criminal and sexual exploitation in Herefordshire.
 - The Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police explained that Herefordshire reported low levels of organized CCE and CSE relative to other areas. However, local agencies remained vigilant and exploitation was actively monitored through MACE processes and safeguarding referrals.
 - It was pointed out that county lines, especially from Birmingham and Wolverhampton, were the main form of CCE.
2. The committee enquired about local hotspots and trends in child criminal exploitation.
 - The Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police pointed out that most county lines activity involved children from outside of the county. Drugs were trafficked into Herefordshire and exploitation primarily occurred in private properties used as distribution hubs.
 - Local children were more likely to be involved in low-level supply and usage, with hotspots including parks, certain housing areas and colleges.
3. The committee enquired as to why Herefordshire was less impacted by child exploitation compared to other areas.
 - The Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police partially attributed the lower prevalence of child exploitation to proactive disruption, rural geography, and strong local partnerships. It was expected that ongoing reviews and force-wide and county-specific threat profiles would provide further clarification on the matter.
4. In relation to quantitative data the committee requested figures for the number of children assessed in Quarter 4 and the levels of concern involved.
 - The Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding provided Quarter 4 figures from Get Safe assessments:
 - 73 assessments completed
 - 17: No concern
 - 35: Emerging risk
 - 15: Moderate
 - 6: Significant (3 on Child Protection Plans under contextual harm)
5. The committee enquired about the accuracy of the available data and whether it was accessible to the right agencies.
 - It was acknowledged that current data was fragmented due to lack of a distinct criminal offence for CCE. Officers were encouraged to flag concerns broadly, which resulted in some over-reporting, but national legislation was expected to improve consistency.
6. The committee asked how a 'Get Safe' plan interacted with child protection plans.
 - It was explained that Get Safe was often the child's own safety plan and could run alongside formal statutory plans. When child protection was needed, "contextual harm" was used as a category to avoid blaming parents for peer/environmental exploitation.

7. The committee enquired as to whether parents were typically aware of the exploitation.
 - The Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding stated that often, exploitation was not recognised by parents until advanced. Children often did not identify as victims and believed they were in a relationship or friendship.
 - Significant outreach efforts had targeted parents via conferences, schools, and public campaigns. Work was ongoing and aimed to raise parental awareness and identify emerging risks early.
8. The committee asked for details regarding the red flags or early warning signs of exploitation.
 - The Early Help and Prevention Service Manager explained that red flags included:
 - Truancy
 - Sudden wealth (trainers, phones)
 - Withdrawal
 - Risky online activity
 - Social exclusion
 - Frequent missing episodes
9. The committee asked whether red flags were systematically identified across services.
 - It was explained that the Get Safe risk tool was embedded across services and offered prompts for each type of exploitation. The Safe Team and police were trained to respond to the signs of exploitation.
10. The committee discussed online exploitation and asked how agencies were responding to children being targeted online.
 - The Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment stated that grooming, live-streaming, coercion and blackmail were common, and that new challenges were posed by artificial intelligence and encrypted platforms.
 - The police were supported by a centralised online CSE team and worked with national crime agencies, this was backed up by preventative outreach through schools and community events.
11. The committee discussed the role of community and volunteers and enquired as to how organisations and charities such as Vennture were contributing to intelligence gathering.
 - The Chief Executive Officer of Vennture explained that one area of support for detection and prevention of child exploitation came through street patrols (weekends and holidays), which involved volunteers (including sixth formers) who had been trained in safeguarding and exploitation awareness. Intelligence from the patrols was shared directly with the police and used to adjust patrols.

12. The committee considered disruption and prevention and asked how the police disrupted exploitation before children were criminalised
 - The Chief Inspector of West Mercia Police stated that the partnership focused on early help, not criminalisation. Criminalisation was only used when children posed a risk to others (recruiting other children for example). Individual children were monitored and supported through targeted plans.
13. The committee discussed schools and social inclusion and asked what was being done to support children who appeared socially isolated but attended school.
 - The Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment explained that social exclusion was treated as a red flag and that Get Safe assessments and school engagement helped identify children at risk and intervene early. Home-educated and part-time-attending children were also monitored.
14. The committee looked at the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) and enquired how the Modern Slavery Act applied to exploited children committing offences.
 - The Head of Service West Mercia Youth Justice Service explained that the Youth Justice Service screened for eligibility for NRM and if exploitation was suspected, a referral would be made and considered during court proceedings. The aim was to ensure there was a contextual understanding of offending behaviour so that outcomes could be adjusted accordingly.
15. In relation to separated and unaccompanied children the committee enquired about how children arriving through the National Transfer Scheme were being safeguarded.
 - The Head of Service Vulnerable Children in Need of Support and Assessment, explained that age assessments, health screening and exploitation risk assessments were completed post-arrival. Materials were translated and support provided to aid understanding, and weekly visits and oversight continued even when a child was placed out-of-county.
16. The committee raised concerns about apparent gaps in data being provided, which made it difficult to identify longitudinal trends and outcomes. It was suggested that it would be useful for the committee to be given an explanation of 'what good looks like' along with relevant key data, so that it could determine whether or not children in the county were safer.
 - The Cabinet Member Children and Young People, and the Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding provided an explanation for the lack of data and suggested that a discussion/briefing to establish what data the committee would like to be provided with could be held outside of the meeting.

Action: Meeting around data dissemination to be arranged with the committee chairs, statutory scrutiny officer, corporate director and cabinet member for children young people.

17. The committee enquired if an update could be provided on the implementation of recommendations made by the task and finish group who had previously carried out an inquiry into child exploitation in the county.

Action: Copy of the historic task and finish group report on child exploitation in the county to be forwarded on to Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding for comment.

18. The committee noted that there wasn't adequate time left to formulate any recommendations on the item during the meeting and it was proposed that any recommendations on the item be discussed and compiled ahead of the next committee meeting.

Resolved That:

The committee discuss and compile any recommendations it might have before the next meeting, where they could be presented and voted on.

71. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered and agreed the work programme as set out in the agenda. It was also agreed that the committee would meet before its next meeting to discuss what it could bring to the programme and how it would work for the rest of the year.

The committee considered the work programme included at item 8 of the agenda and unanimously approved the following recommendation:

Resolved that:

- 1. The committee agree the work programme for the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee contained in the work programme report attached as Appendix 1.**

72. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 24th June 2025, 2pm

73. APPENDIX 1 - PUBLIC SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION AND RESPONSE

Supplementary questions from members of the public – Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, 27 May 2025

Question Number	Questioner	Supplementary Question	Question to
SPQ 1	Ms Reid Hereford	The Constitution states: “An answer to a supplementary question will be provided by the member to whom the question was put ... [4.1.56].” I would like the Chairperson to answer. The response to my public question mentions	Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

		<p>scrutiny of Herefordshire Children's Services by Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and the Improvement Board but it does NOT mention accountability for past wrongdoing.</p> <p>The website - www.families4change.org.uk - of the Families' Alliance for Change (Herefordshire) - gives rigorous and comprehensive information about past and current wrongdoing. I consider that only a statutory public inquiry would fully investigate the wrongdoing so that lessons are learnt, recommendations made and implemented. This would ensure that the council's resources would be focused on optimising expenditure by Herefordshire Children's Services.</p> <p>Would you, Councillor Fagan, support a statutory public inquiry into Herefordshire Children's Services? If not, why not?</p>	
<p>Record of verbal response from CYPSC Chair provided during the meeting: <i>Thank you for the question Miss Reid. I would like to say that I have enormous sympathy for the experiences of families in the past that have suffered at the hands of Herefordshire's children's services. However, I am not convinced that a public inquiry is the way to go. I think that that would be a decision that would be made by the Minister for Education and as we are aware the Department of Education has invested significant resources in the improvement journey in Herefordshire. My concern is that in a public environment, where finances are extremely tight, any diversion of resources to looking at historic injustices will prevent us from actually moving forward to a position where children's services are fit for current and future generations. In my time as Chair I've spent a lot of time with councillors from other authorities and I do not believe that Herefordshire's problems have been particular only to our county. I think a lot of the problems have been structural with social care for children in the UK. I think that we are going a long way in Herefordshire to improve the situation through restorative practice having been embedded in the service and a renewed focus on early help and the acknowledgment that families need support. While we cannot undo the wrongs of the past we have had a family's commission look at the historic complaints and we've had the previous director and the current director look at historic cases in detail, and I think that we've gone a long way to actually try to address the issues that have plagued the service in the past and I feel that we need to really look forward and make sure that the service is in a much better position to deliver for the children of Herefordshire. Thank you.</i></p>			

The meeting ended at 14:50

Chairperson