

Draft - Minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Thursday 21 May 2026 at 2.30 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 Barry Durkin, Carole Gandy, Dan Hurcomb, Ivan Powell, Philip Price and Pete Stoddart

Cabinet Members in remote attendance None

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 Hitchiner (substitute for Cllr Harvey), James (online) and Simmons (in person), Clare Davies (online)

Scrutiny chairpersons in attendance Councillors Stark (online) and Fagan (online)

Other councillors in attendance Councillor Highfield

Officers in attendance: G Dando, H Hall, J Hobbs, S O'Connor, T Russell, R Sanders and P Walker
S Gregory (clerk), D Thornton

88. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were apologies from councillors Bramer and Biggs.

89. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

90. MINUTES

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2026 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairperson.

91. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

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

92. QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS

No questions from councillors were submitted

93. REPORTS FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

There were no reports from scrutiny committees for consideration at this meeting.

94. CARBON MANAGEMENT PLAN 2026/27-2030/31

Councillor Swinglehurst, cabinet member for culture and environment introduced the report.

It was noted that Herefordshire Council began its carbon reduction journey several years prior to the declaration of a climate emergency and ahead of the UK Government's net zero legislation. Early action focused on pragmatic, cost-effective measures, including the transition to 100% LED street lighting, reducing energy consumption from 4.7m kWh to 1.7m kWh and delivering significant financial savings.

Further progress includes the installation of over 4,000 solar PV panels and the rollout of electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure. Following the declaration of a climate emergency in 2019, the Council accelerated its net zero target from 2050 to 2030. The fourth Carbon Management Plan (2026/27–2030/31) sets out the pathway to achieving this target and, for the first time, incorporates carbon offsetting.

It was noted that emissions have reduced from 27,498 tCO₂e in 2008/09 to 5,357 tCO₂e at the start of the current plan, representing a 63.5% reduction. The plan has been developed through a task and finish group and provides a refined scope of greenhouse gas emissions, focusing on areas within the Council's direct control, aligned with international reporting protocols.

It was emphasised that this is a Council-specific plan and does not cover wider county emissions, which are addressed separately through the Herefordshire Environment Board. The Board will continue to support county-wide initiatives, including farm engagement and carbon reduction programmes.

It was acknowledged that further emissions reductions will become increasingly challenging and will require consideration of carbon impacts across all Council decisions and operations. However, the transition to net zero was highlighted as an opportunity, supporting economic growth, skilled employment, public health, and environmental benefits. The local low carbon sector is currently valued at approximately £495m annually and is forecast to grow significantly.

The plan includes proposals for offsetting residual emissions, including potential investment in biochar (via pyrolysis), which has demonstrated positive results in neighbouring authorities and offers both financial returns and environmental benefits.

In response to consultation feedback, it was confirmed that:

- Waste emissions are excluded as they fall outside direct Council control.
- Pyrolysis technology is considered established and already in use regionally.
- Decarbonisation of heating is being explored, although heat pumps are not suitable for all assets.
- Fleet transition and EV strategy are underway.
- Contracted services include net zero requirements.
- Work is ongoing to improve local data on commuting patterns.
- Efforts will be made to present information in clear, accessible language.

The Cabinet Member thanked contributors to the consultation process and noted the inclusion of a written submission from the Independents for Herefordshire Group.

Comments from cabinet members:

Members welcomed the alignment of the report with the Council's core strategic plans. It was noted that the introduction of a new public realm contract, including the use of electric vehicles, is expected to support further emissions reductions in the coming year. The report was supported and fully endorsed.

Members noted homeworking and the plan suggests the council could make better use of the council spaces that are heated and used. Concern was also noted regard homeworking's potential contribution to the Council's carbon emissions and if the council's estate should be reviewed and use of space to make the best use of what was available.

It was reported that changes within the public realm contract are expected to deliver significant savings, including a reduction of approximately 34,000 litres of diesel use through the transition from diesel trucks to electric vehicles for locality stewards, equating to an estimated saving of 85 tonnes of carbon.

It was noted that a requirement for M Group included a requirement for vehicles over 3.6 tonnes to use hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), while vehicles under 2 tonnes are to be fully electric. It was acknowledged that these updated measures are not yet fully reflected in the current plan but will be incorporated as the transition progresses.

Members noted that, while the Carbon Management Plan was appropriate within the context of the Council's responsibilities, it may have different implications when considered more broadly, particularly in relation to farming and food production. It was confirmed that, despite these wider concerns, the plan is supported in its capacity as a Council document.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The True Independents Leader outlined the views of their group and argued that:

Congratulations were extended to Councillor Swinglehurst and the work that had been completed on the Plan.

The representative for Independents for Herefordshire outlined the views of their group and argued that:

Concern was expressed that the draft Carbon Management Plan was not made available in sufficient time to inform Policy and Governance Committee discussions, reiterating the importance of early consultation and timely sharing of draft decision reports.

It was noted that the proposed biochar approach could account for a significant proportion of carbon savings; however, concerns were raised regarding the lack of clear delivery timelines and the absence of corresponding provision within current budget plans. It was suggested that, if biochar was to be pursued seriously, greater clarity and commitment was required.

The importance of recognising Herefordshire's agricultural economy was highlighted and the need to balance decarbonisation with impacts on farming and food production. It was emphasised that, while the Council cannot achieve net zero alone, it should lead by example and support wider community engagement.

Support was expressed for evidence-based measures, cross-party collaboration, and a fair transition to achieve net zero by 2030/31. Some concerns were noted regarding the practical use of electric vehicles in rural conditions, although it was acknowledged that overall benefits may outweigh these challenges.

The Liberal Democrat Group Leader outlined the views of their group and argued that:

The progress that had been made was welcomed.

The Green Group Leader outlined the views of their group and argued that:

The Carbon Management Plan was welcomed but expressed concerns that some actions taken by the administration did not fully reflect the urgency required and, in some cases, were perceived as counterproductive. It was noted that funding previously allocated from the West Midlands Energy Dividend for climate action had not been maintained, which members felt limited the Council's ability to progress key initiatives.

Concern was raised regarding the plan's reliance on carbon offsetting, particularly the significant contribution expected from the proposed biochar project. Members highlighted the lack of detailed analysis within the plan, including clarity on timelines, feedstock availability, costs, and delivery risks. It was queried when a full business case would be presented to Cabinet, including lifecycle carbon assessment, financial modelling, planning considerations, governance arrangements, and risk mitigation.

The need for a clear funded implementation plan was emphasised, with defined annual actions, costs, savings, and emissions reductions. Without this, there was concern that the plan could lack transparency and accountability and may not deliver the required outcomes.

While acknowledging that the plan focused on Council emissions only, the Council's wider leadership role in influencing county-wide emissions through policy areas such as transport, planning, housing retrofit, farming, land use, nature recovery, and public health was stressed. It was suggested that this broader leadership role was not sufficiently addressed.

Overall, members supported the plan in principle but considered that it could have been strengthened significantly

In response to the comments made:

It was confirmed that the vehicles that have been scoped were suitable for the job.

The potential of alternative fuels was noted, particularly pyrolysis, and supported further exploration of this approach. It was recognised that delivery of the actions within the plan would require the development of separate, detailed business cases, which were already being prepared, with initial confidence drawn from progress in neighbouring authorities.

Members also highlighted the Council's leadership role in the wider carbon reduction agenda, particularly in relation to agriculture. It was noted that farm carbon audits undertaken to date have been instrumental in increasing understanding of carbon sequestration potential, with some farms already identified as carbon negative or close to achieving this. The significant opportunity within the agricultural sector was acknowledged, and it was confirmed that the Council will continue to support and build on this work.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Swinglehurst proposed the recommendations, with Cllr Stoddart seconding. The Leader directed that the decision to be put before Cabinet is:

That:

- a) The Carbon Management Plan 2026/27 – 2030/31 is approved.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved.

95. Q4 2025/26 BUDGET REPORT

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

It was noted that Herefordshire Council achieved a balanced revenue outturn for 2025/26 despite a challenging financial environment and initial forecast overspends. This was attributed to strong financial management, effective expenditure controls, prudent use of reserves, and delivery of recovery plan actions.

It was highlighted that previous years' forecast overspends had also been successfully managed, demonstrating consistent financial discipline. Key achievements included reduced reliance on the Budget Resilience Reserve, early repayment of reserve contributions from the Children & Young People Directorate, and strengthened reserves to manage future risks, including inflation and rising costs.

It was noted ongoing financial pressures arising from demographic and service demand factors, including adult social care, temporary accommodation, and SEND and home-to-school transport costs. Plans to address these pressures included continued demand management, cost control measures, and service transformation within the Community Wellbeing Directorate.

The central budget outturn reported a net underspend, primarily due to higher treasury management income, additional business rate income, and investment returns. It was recommended that a portion of this would be allocated to bad debt provision and reserves, with the remainder offsetting directorate overspends.

It was noted that savings delivery was strong, with £13.2m achieved (84% of target), although some savings would be carried forward. The Dedicated Schools Grant deficit increased but remained subject to a management plan, with anticipated government support expected to significantly reduce the Council's long-term liability.

The capital programme recorded its highest ever annual expenditure, with £86m delivered. Variances were largely due to project reprofiling and timing differences, with robust monitoring arrangements in place to manage risks including inflation, delivery delays, and grant compliance.

It was further noted that draft accounts would be published ahead of the statutory deadline, with external audit planned for early summer.

Overall, it was highlighted that the outturn demonstrated strong financial stewardship, supporting service delivery and maintaining the Council's financial resilience.

Comments from cabinet members:

Congratulations and thanks were extended to Cllr Stoddart and the team.

Thanks, were also extended to Tina Russell for their work in Children's Services. The positive outcome of the Ofsted inspection was noted, with Children's Services rated good with outstanding leadership.

It was emphasised that, alongside financial performance, feedback from families through surveys and follow-up activity provided an important measure of service quality and demonstrated clear improvement. It was highlighted that the Council had achieved financial stability while continuing to improve service delivery, which was considered a significant achievement. Appreciation was extended to all officers involved.

The Council's financial position in the context of neighbouring authorities was noted. It was highlighted that nearby councils, including Worcestershire, were facing significant overspends of approximately £50m, and that this comparison emphasised the strength of Herefordshire's financial management.

Group Leaders were invited to offer their views:

The representative for Independents for Herefordshire outlined the views of their group and argued that:

It was raised that delivering a balanced budget was a statutory requirement and, while not an achievement in itself, the manner in which it was achieved was notable. Particular recognition was given to the ongoing improvement in Children's Services, which continued to deliver better outcomes while operating within budget. In contrast, pressures within Adult Services were acknowledged, with increasing demand requiring difficult decisions and a focus on service transformation, workforce development, and managing expectations.

It was noted that the outturn had been supported by the prudent use of reserves and additional income streams, including treasury management and investment income. However, concerns were raised regarding transparency, particularly in relation to significant income items and the use of reserves, where more detailed explanation was requested.

With regard to the capital programme, members highlighted a lack of clarity in reporting on major projects, including those funded through the Stronger Towns Fund, and requested further information on progress and delays. Questions were also raised about significant variances between Quarter 3 forecasts and final outturn figures, with concerns expressed about the robustness of forecasting and project management.

Additional queries were raised in relation to specific schemes, including wetlands and property transactions, as well as coordination across departments. It was noted that reduced capital expenditure had resulted in savings but also meant that some expected projects had not been delivered within the anticipated timeframe.

The True Independents Leader outlined the views of their group and argued that:

The strength of the budget was recognised in the context of ongoing financial challenges, particularly the increasing demand for services supporting vulnerable adults and children. It was noted that balancing these pressures was significant, and appreciation was expressed for the work undertaken. Congratulations were extended to all those involved in delivering the budget.

The Liberal Democrat Group outlined the views of their group and argued that:

The use of the term "balanced budget," was commented on noting that, in practice, this included reliance on reserves to meet expenditure. Concerns were raised that this could

give a misleading impression of financial stability, as drawing on reserves does not represent a sustainable long-term position.

While the improved outturn position was welcomed, the need for caution was emphasised, highlighting the significant use of reserves and the uncertainty over whether these could be replenished in future years.

The Green Group Leader outlined the views of their group and argued that:

The significant efforts of the Chief Financial Officer, finance team, and directorates in delivering a balanced outturn despite challenging circumstances was acknowledged and congratulations were expressed.

However, concerns were raised that the position had been achieved through the use of one-off income, including £4.4m of unspecified additional funds, and reserves, alongside reductions in some service areas. The sustainability of this approach was questioned in light of ongoing demand pressures, particularly within Adult Services, and noted that some savings remained outstanding.

Concerns were highlighted regarding the capital programme, including substantial variances between approved and delivered expenditure, delays to key projects, and risks of cost inflation or non-delivery. Specific reference was made to limited reporting on major schemes and the perceived impact of delays on residents.

It was suggested that stronger project management and oversight were required to ensure delivery of planned outcomes and that greater clarity and accountability should be provided regarding progress and use of resources

In response to the comments made:

Cabinet members clarified that, while the Council is legally required to set a balanced budget, it is not guaranteed that the outturn will be balanced. Reference was made to a previous year where an overspend was recorded despite the use of reserves.

It was noted that, in comparison, the current financial position involved a lower reliance on reserves, and this was contrasted with the higher overspend reported under the previous administration, even after reserve use.

Cabinet members referred to the importance of setting a realistic and deliverable budget, noting that the key measure of success was whether the Council had accurately forecast and secured sufficient funding to meet its commitments.

It was highlighted that, in contrast to previous budgets set by earlier administrations which resulted in significant overspends and required substantial use of reserves, recent budgets had been delivered in line with expectations.

Cabinet members noted the challenging financial context for local government, including reduced central government funding and rising demand for services, particularly for vulnerable residents, as well as pressures faced by other authorities requiring exceptional financial support.

Against this backdrop, cabinet members highlighted the scale of delivery achieved, including the Council's largest ever capital programme in a single year and substantial investment in infrastructure such as road resurfacing. It was concluded that, given these circumstances, the financial and capital delivery represented a significant achievement.

Cabinet members emphasised their focus on delivering for the residents of Herefordshire and reaffirmed that processes were transparent and professionally undertaken. It was noted that external auditors had recognised the quality of the Council's financial reporting. The comment was subsequently withdrawn.

Clarification was provided that certain income referred to as "contractual income" was confidential in nature, although assurance was given that it was properly accounted for. It was confirmed that reserves relating to broadband rollout were sufficient to complete delivery to remaining areas, with responsibility now sitting with national programmes and ongoing liaison in place.

Cabinet members acknowledged the challenging financial and operational environment but stressed that significant progress and delivery continued to be made. This included major capital works, such as extensive road resurfacing and other infrastructure projects, with further schemes due for completion.

While concerns had been raised about delivery, cabinet members maintained that substantial progress had been achieved for the benefit of residents, and expressed frustration at criticism which did not recognise this.

Greater clarity on the status of key projects, particularly those under review such as the Library and Learning Centre was requested by Group Leaders and it was acknowledged that this was a fair and constructive point. It was confirmed that further detail on project status, including cost reviews and delivery considerations, would be provided in future reporting, including within the Quarter 4 performance reports.

The Leader of the Council concluded the discussions. Councillor Stoddart proposed the recommendations, with the Leader seconding. The Leader directed that the decision to be put before Cabinet is:

That Cabinet

- a) reviews the balanced revenue financial outturn for 2025/26, as set out in the appendices A-D, and identifies any additional actions to be considered to achieve future improvements; and**
- b) approves the proposed transfers to/from reserves outlined in paragraphs 11 to 13; and**
- c) notes the capital outturn position for 2025/26 of £86.0 million investment in Council priorities.**

The recommendations were unanimously approved

It was confirmed the next meeting of cabinet was 25 June 2026 at 2:30pm.

The meeting ended at 3.40pm

Chairperson

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

| Question No. | Questioner | Question | Question to |
|--------------|----------------------------|--|--------------------|
| PQ 1. | Peter McKay, Leominster | I enquire if the draft addendum to the ROWIP, amplifying your Public Right of Way Glossary that says CRF's and CRB's were intended to be shown as RUPP's (Roads used as Public Paths), acknowledging were shown as Footpaths and Bridleways, in consultation with Members, Officers and Local Access Forum members, so that could be worked through, developed and incorporated in the ROWIP when reviewed in 2028, as recorded reply to question 17 July 2025, will include an evidence base identifying Government Circular 81 of 1950 as being the cause of the parishes submitting data for non-statutory CRF and CRB rather than for RUPP's, with your consulting with Government requesting that they acknowledge their error, advise most cost effective manner for Counties that showed these as Footpath and Bridleway to rectify this, and accepting any costs incurred? | Councillor Hurcomb |

Response:
 Under the provisions of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (NCPA 1949) Parishes were given specific guidance in how to claim what they considered to be Public Rights of Way within their areas in order to form what we now refer to as The Definitive Map. This gave them four status options which were FP (Footpath). BR (Bridleway), CRF or CRB (Cartroad or Carriageway or green unmetalled lane mainly used as a footpath or mainly used as a bridleway). This resulted in routes being added to the Map as either a footpath, a bridleway or a Road Used as a Public Path (RUPP). Many routes originally claimed as CRF's or CRB's resulted in being recorded as RUPP's on the map. However, due to the status of RUPP's being unclear subsequent legislation was put forward under the Countryside Act 1968 and under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to try to establish the exact rights on RUPP's to ensure clarity. Whilst many authorities did reclassify these routes under the provisions of the WLCA1981 there was a large backlog which resulted in provisions being brought in under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (CROW Act 2000) to redesignate all remaining RUPP's as Restricted Byways in 2006.

Throughout these processes representations and objections could be made if the public, users or landowners considered there to be an error. This took place in Herefordshire therefore it is not considered that an addendum is required within the Rights of Way Improvement Plan (ROWIP). There are clear provisions within the WLCA1981 which allow applications to be made should there be evidence to show that the Definitive Map is in error. The sole recording of a route as a CRF or CRB alone would not be sufficient to warrant an alteration to the Definitive Map and would need to be further substantiated with all available evidence.

Supplementary Question:

Will you consider including a paragraph in the ROWIP (Rights of Way Improvement Way) when reviewed in 2028 saying that, amplifying your glossary that says CRF's and CRB's (Cartroad or Carriageway or green unmetalled lane mainly used as a footpath or mainly used as a bridleway) were intended to be shown as RUPP's (Road Used as a Public Path) ?

Supplementary Response:

Thank you. The council are happy to accept that CRFs and CRBs are added to the glossary when reviewed in 2028 stating that these categories were often recorded as RUPP's.

| | | | |
|--------------|--|--|--|
| PQ 2. | | | |
|--------------|--|--|--|

Response:

Supplementary Question:

Supplementary Response: