

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 18 March 2025 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor Toni Fagan (chairperson)
Councillor Liz Harvey (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Frank Cornthwaite, David Davies, Robert Highfield and Ben Proctor

In attendance: Jade Brooks (Director of Operations and Delivery - Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board), (Debbie Hobbs (Parent Carer Voice Herefordshire), Susan Moody (Associate Chief AHP) Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People).

Officers: Simon Cann (Committee Clerk), Jessica Davies (Service Manager Children with Disabilities), Liz Farr (Service Director Education, Learning and Skills), Hilary Jones (Head of Additional Needs), Zoe Richards (Head of Service Starting Well), Tina Russell (Interim Corporate Director Children and Young People), Donna Thornton (Governance Support Assistant), Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer)

53. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Cllr Clare Davies, and from Jan Frances (Co-opted representative for families).

54. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There had been no named substitutes.

55. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

56. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

57. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

There had been one question received from a member of the public, which had been published, along with a response, as a supplement to the meeting agenda on the Herefordshire Council website.

58. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

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

59. FINDINGS OF THE OFSTED AND CARE QUALITY COMMISSION AREA SEND INSPECTION

The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills introduced and gave an overview of the report.

A joint Ofsted and CQC inspection of SEND services had been conducted in Herefordshire during December 2024.

The inspection process had been spread over three weeks and included two weeks of onsite activity, involving case tracking of individual children and the services wrapped around their families.

The outcome had been the middle of three possible ratings and reflected the variable experiences of children and families across Herefordshire.

Strengths identified within the service and partnership included:

- Strong leadership across the partnership.
- An adaptable workforce that was able to swiftly respond to growing demand for services.
- Positive relationships between children and their workers.
- Co-production across the partnership such as the recently opened Youth Employment Hub, which had been developed with input from local young people.
- The SENCO Network, Early Help Services and the Children with Disabilities Team had been praised for working in a collaborative, innovative and effective manner.

Four priority areas requiring improvement had been identified:

- Reducing the length of waiting times for young people to access health services, especially in relation to neurodivergence assessment and diagnosis
- The local area partnership needed to ensure sufficient capacity, stability and improved quality across all health services to improve service consistency, development and delivery.
- Young people who had recently been diagnosed with or were waiting for treatment for a neurodivergent condition needed to be well-informed about accessing available support.
- The local area partnership needed to ensure that high-quality and accurate information regarding the range of services available to children and young people with SEND, their families, and professionals was promoted and communicated in an accessible form.
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The Director of Operations and Delivery Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board pointed out that work was already underway to change the model of neurodivergent support through the introduction of workshops and improvements to the Local Offer.

The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills stated that the inspection outcome was partly good news and that the next full inspection would take place in three years.

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 enquired about how the SEND financial deficit was being managed.
 - The Director of Finance, confirmed that the £11.1 million deficit in Herefordshire's High Needs Block (HNB) was relatively low compared to other councils. The local authority was not yet eligible for intervention programs like Safety Valve due to its smaller overspend. The council was using its reserve balances under statutory override, but recognised the urgency to manage and contain future overspends. A Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) deficit management plan was in place, and capital investment was being targeted to create more in-county specialist provision to reduce reliance on costly external placements.
2. The committee raised concerns about open-ended spending and asked how value for money was measured in relation to SEND services.
 - The Director of Operations and Delivery Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board emphasized the need to balance high-quality provision with cost-efficiency. It was noted that investment in early support and technology-enabled care could lead to long-term savings. It was pointed out that there were moral and statutory obligations to support all children and the complexities of individual SEND needs made financial decisions more nuanced.
3. The committee enquired as to whether there was coordination between NHS and council funding.
 - The Director of Operations and Delivery Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board explained that children with complex needs often required both NHS and council services. Joint planning was key to removing duplication and ensuring cost-effective streamlined support. The most complex cases could cost the NHS up to £500,000 annually. Strategic investment in early care reduced long-term costs by improving children's ability to self-manage their care into adulthood.
4. The committee raised concerns about rising demand for SEND services and asked what was driving the increase.
 - The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills highlighted several contributing factors including: COVID-19's impact on early development, increased screen time, and broader diagnostic pathways, particularly around neurodivergence. The rise in mental health needs and greater awareness of SEND had also contributed to the rise. It was noted that growth in demand had slowed slightly, but high levels of need persisted.
5. The committee asked if the increase in SEND demand was a temporary spike or a long-term trend.
 - The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills explained that monitoring suggested the trend would likely continue, with early years children showing significant needs. Some leveling off had been observed, but structural challenges in the system and national funding gaps meant that high demand was expected to remain.

6. The committee enquired as to whether short breaks were adequately meeting family needs.
 - The Service Manager Children with Disabilities stated that short breaks had been praised in the inspection. Children with complex needs received swift access to breaks post-assessment and there was currently no waiting list. The number of providers and types of break available had broadened, and communication with families relating to services and support had improved.
7. The committee considered why there had been a discrepancy between the Ofsted and Parent Carer Voice (PCV) survey responses.
 - The representative from Parent Carer Voice pointed out that parents tended to respond more readily to Ofsted surveys due to a perceived belief that they had greater impact. Local surveys were ongoing, with PCV using regular forums to gather consistent feedback and encourage trust and engagement.
8. The committee asked how the Local Offer was publicized and understood.
 - The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills explained that the Local Offer was shared via websites, newsletters, events, QR codes, SENCO networks, and family sessions. There were concerns about the term 'Local Offer' being unclear to families. Rebranding it as a support directory was under consideration and efforts were ongoing to make its function clearer and more accessible.
9. The committee enquired about the current status of specialist school capacity.
 - The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills stated that Herefordshire's special schools were full, with limited space to expand. A new free special school had been approved, but had been delayed due to slow central government processes. Capital grants were small and had been used creatively to add classrooms, but most schools were now at capacity. Business cases for new provision were being developed.
10. The committee requested details regarding how mainstream schools were supported to deliver SEND provision.
 - The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills pointed out that over 900 children with EHCPs were currently in mainstream settings within the county. A dedicated school improvement advisor focused on inclusion, and resource bases in mainstream schools had been expanded. Staff training, networking events, and advisory services were being provided to encourage inclusive practices and boost confidence and capability within mainstream settings.
11. The committee requested details regarding how SEND service outcomes were measured.
 - The Head of Additional Needs explained that annual EHCP reviews traced individual progress. Broader metrics like education participation, independence, and employment readiness were also monitored. The council used a SEND dashboard with over 400 metrics to monitor system-wide performance and guide strategic decisions.

12. The committee enquired as to if and how voluntary and community sector organisations were being engaged.

- The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills stated that groups like Marches Family Network were crucial and played a vital role. The council supported them through referrals, joint working, and exploring funding options to help them expand their reach and scale-up their services. However, demand exceeded capacity.

13. The committee asked if Ofsted's findings matched local expectations.

- The Service Director Education, Learning and Skills stated that the findings aligned with the council's self-assessment and no surprises were noted. The four improvement areas had already been identified locally and were being followed up on.

At the conclusion of the debate the committee discussed potential recommendations and the following resolutions were agreed.

Resolved:

1. That the committee note the report.

60. SUPPORTING CHILDREN WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

The Head of Service Starting Well introduced and gave an overview of the report, which showed progress in relation to the sufficiency of short breaks available to children, young people and their families within Herefordshire. The report identified opportunities for further development and confirmed how the service was moving forward to co-produce the Local Offer.

It was explained that following the SEND inspection the service had challenged itself to answer the following four questions:

- How do we publicise information re short break services at a universal, targeted and specialist level and how effective are we in doing so?
- Are we assured that there is transparency and equity across the system giving opportunity to children of all ages, disability and level of need?
- Are we using the services that we have in place efficiently and do they offer safe, flexible and cost-effective choice to families?
- How are we going to develop increased sufficiency that delivers flexibility and choice for families ensuring that they can access a short break safely and easily?

The Head of Service Starting Well provided an overview of the response from the service to the questions.

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 for an outline of the main issues around recruitment in short breaks and foster care placements.

- The Head of Service Starting Well explained that recruitment remained a key challenge, particularly for complex needs and overnight care, it was pointed out that a dedicated fostering post was currently vacant due to staff illness. Task-and-finish groups and marketing initiatives were underway and a collaboration with 'Shared Lives' was being explored to extend support for young people
2. The committee enquired about feedback provided by families regarding short breaks.
- The representative from Parent Carer Voice (PCV) explained that parents had welcomed improvements relating to prepaid card usage and spending guidance. Families especially appreciated broader and clearer guidance on how and where to spend allowances, and a direct debit function - added via a new provider - had been well received.
3. The committee asked whether supply for short breaks was currently meeting demand
- The Service Manager Children with Disabilities stated that regarding group-based short breaks there was enough capacity in numbers, but not always in fit, such as location and appropriateness for child.
 - Families in areas such as Ross-on-Wye and Leominster were underserved due to the centralisation of provision in Hereford.
 - It was explained that regarding overnight provision there was a clear gap due to staffing issues at the NHS-run Osborne Court, which had paused service. The local authority and Integrated Care Board were urgently reviewing options for children with complex health needs.
4. The committee asked if the council was able to work with economic development colleagues to grow a local provider market?
- The Head of Service Starting Well stated that a market engagement strategy was launching in April/May and open-ended questions would be sent out to local and regional providers about appetite and feasibility.
 - The council was part of a 14-strong local authority regional partnership sharing provider innovations.
 - Procurement rules were being simplified to support small and informal providers, such as those run by parents or in community halls.
5. The committee asked how the council was supporting personal assistant (PA) development, and how it was listening to their needs?
- The Head of Service Starting Well explained that the hourly rate had been raised from £13.80 to £14.31 and new training and continuing professional development offers were in place for PAs.
 - There had been a collaboration with schools to grow the PA pool. For families hiring PAs privately, the council had limited structured engagement, but recognized the need to develop this while respecting family autonomy. The service was looking to create a pool of trained, available PAs with shared information on availability and skillsets.

6. The committee asked whether services were quality assured and equitably accessed?
 - The Head of Service Starting Well pointed out that work was ongoing to gather qualitative and geographic data such as the child's age, needs and where they lived.
 - The QA team was embedded in commissioning to work directly with providers beyond current requirements, and transparency in decision-making and data monitoring was improving.
7. The committee asked whether families were breaking down due to a lack of short breaks, and whether there was any data relevant to that.
 - The Service Manager Children with Disabilities confirmed that there had been no recent cases where families had broken down solely due to a lack of short breaks.
 - When crises emerged, multi-agency support packages were put in place in relation to mental health, education and social care.
 - Short-term breaks were used tactically to alleviate crisis risk. Family breakdowns were typically multi-factorial and not attributed only to short-break availability.
8. In relation to social needs and peer relationships for teens with SEND, the committee enquired how the council was replicating the social environment lost with Old Ledbury Road, especially in regarding teenagers.
 - The Head of Service Starting Well explained that this had been recognised as a gap and that current short breaks did not always foster social interaction or friendships.
 - The aim was to create peer-based group activities and overnight options, but providers preferred block-booked arrangements and families preferred flexible, personalised care. Trying to strike a balance between provider viability and family choice was ongoing.
9. The committee considered whether it would be possible to explore a last minute-style booking model to utilize spare care capacity?
 - The Service Manager Children with Disabilities stated that there was not currently such a system in place, but acknowledged it was an innovative idea and the council would be willing to explore tech-based, flexible booking systems in future market development work.
10. The committee enquired about family involvement in service design and whether families could be more involved in trade-off decisions around block bookings and flexible services.
 - The Head of Service Starting Well pointed out that this was already being discussed with Parent Carer Voice and other stakeholders.
 - It was acknowledged that other local authorities had successfully used collaborative funding discussions and that informed co-design was essential when making decisions about how to spend limited funding.

11. The committee asked whether community groups were better positioned than formal providers to respond flexibly?
- The Head of Service Starting Well suggested this was possibly the case in relation to targeted or universal support, but less so for complex health needs.
 - Safer Communities grants had received an unprecedented level of interest and the council was following up with grantees to explore conversion into longer-term short break provision.
12. The committee asked if the council was tracking long-term outcomes from changes in short breaks provision?
- The Service Manager Children with Disabilities stated outcome tracking was not explicitly longitudinal yet, but the service was starting to build better data to track impact in relation to service use, PA employment and parent satisfaction.
 - It was pointed out that the 'Visible and Valued Week' in May would serve as a community benchmark to build awareness and confidence.
13. The committee acknowledged the substantial work and progress in developing and improving the short breaks offer for children and families, and thanked all contributors for their feedback and involvement.

At the conclusion of the debate the committee discussed potential recommendations and the following resolution was agreed.

Resolved:

- 1. That the committee note the report.**

61. RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer gave an overview of the responses received in relation to recommendations made in 2024 and advised that the committee would need to decide what it wished to do with the responses in a future meeting.

The committee suggested that it might be helpful to arrange a workshop to help committee/council members to better understand - through officer feedback - how to make recommendations that would help improve the work of the executive.

Action: A workshop to be arranged with committee members and officers to discuss crafting effective recommendations.

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer read out a recommendation that had been made by the Herefordshire Council Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee at its meeting of 12 March 2025 and the Chair proposed that this be approved by the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee:

Resolved:

That Herefordshire Council:

- 1. Ensures that the statutory scrutiny officer drafts a cross-scrutiny committee protocol, to ensure timely responses with faster escalation as required to outstanding recommendations.**

62. WORK PROGRAMME

The committee considered the work programme included at item 10 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.**

63. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 27 May 2025, 2pm

The meeting ended at 17:09

Chairperson