

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 22 July 2025 at 2.00 pm

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

Councillors: Frank Cornthwaite, Clare Davies, Dave Davies, Robert Highfield and David Hitchiner

In attendance: Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People),
Councillor Aubrey Oliver (observer)

Officers: Simon Cann (Democratic Services Officer/Clerk), Alfie Rees-Glinos (Democratic Services Support), Tina Russell (Corporate Director Children and Young People), Suzanne Sims (Head of Service Safeguarding and Review), Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer)

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence had been received.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There had been no named substitutes.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest,

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 May 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

5. 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

6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

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

7. HEREFORDSHIRE CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND PARTNERSHIP IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Corporate Director of Children and Young People introduced and gave an overview of the report, the key points included:

Three Ofsted monitoring visits had taken place over the last 12 months. The October 2024 visit had focused on harm to children outside of the home, it was pointed out that the 'Get Safe' team had been praised for its effective partnership working in this area. The February 2025 visit had looked at work being carried out by the assessment teams, with strong performance in referrals, assessments and multi-agency collaboration being noted by Ofsted. The most recent visit had taken place in June 2025 and had focused on children in care, with findings highlighting positive outcomes, along with improved relationships and planning - due to workforce stability.

Ofsted had acknowledged how Phase 2 of the Improvement Plan had seemingly sustained the pace of improvement within the service and resulted in better outcomes.

Regarding Phase 3 of the Improvement Plan the Corporate Director provided details of the continuation of the 'Plan on a page' approach, which incorporated the 'Family First' programme. Engagement with the West Midlands Regional Improvement Alliance, and contributions to regional/national best practice initiatives were also detailed.

The Corporate Director explained that the Quality Assurance (QA) Framework was based on three pillars: case file audits, service user feedback and key performance indicators (KPIs). QA activity had revealed that the voice of the child and diversity considerations had been strong and that families had reported improved participation and engagement with the service.

Areas requiring improvement had been identified, specifically in relation to including the voice of the parent in assessments and the need for more child-friendly language to be used in documents. It had been noted that managerial oversight needed to be more visible in case files and that follow up and recording activity relating to cases needed some improvement.

The report acknowledged that there had been and continued to be challenges with syncing Mosaic (case management) and Power BI (reporting) systems and that a national shortage of skilled analysts had complicated data extraction and tracking within the service. The piloting and adoption of AI tools such as Magic Notes would potentially ease the work burden on staff.

The Corporate Director stressed that Phase 3 could be viewed as more of a Children's Services business plan rather than a reactive Improvement Plan. Emphasis on maintaining improvement would come through: continued QA and KPI monitoring, scrutiny involvement, Cabinet and corporate leadership support and embedding relational practice and think family culture.

In summary, it was explained that the pace of improvement could be attributed to the simplification of plans, fewer and more effective meetings, clearer leadership and decision making, and greater stability within the workforce.

The Corporate Director and Cabinet Member Children and Young People provide the committee with an assurance that the improvement momentum would be sustained post-Ofsted and that there had been cross party agreement in prioritising Children's Services.

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 more detail around areas of the service that the QA process had indicated needed more focus.
 - The Corporate Director Children and Young People explained that overall the practice was improving, but there was a need for clearer separation between parental views and social work analysis. The QA feedback had indicated that assessments and documents would benefit from more consistent use of child-friendly language. The service was currently developing improved questions to better assess the impact of multi-agency working.
2. The committee enquired as to how elected members would be kept informed and involved on the post-Improvement Board journey of the service.
 - The Corporate Director Children and Young People stated that the Improvement Board would continue until a new full inspection of the service had taken place. In addition to this, updates on progress would be available through quarterly QA reports, KPI dashboards, which were embedded within analysis from the senior leadership team. An assurance was given that the political leadership team was committed to continued visibility and challenge around the service and that non-public KPI briefings could be presented to scrutiny for deeper understanding of issues.
3. The committee raised concerns about the ability to integrate Mosaic and Power BI and asked how problems around this issue were being addressed and whether there were plans in place for when these systems became insufficient/outdated.
 - It was explained by the Corporate Director Children and Young People that integration issues stemmed from the independent development of both systems, but that coordination between Mosaic and Power BI had improved significantly over the past 12 months. A replacement for Mosaic was not currently required and the focus was on making existing tools more efficient, however the technical capacity of the service was limited due to a national shortage of Power BI developers/consultants. In the meantime, AI tools such as Magic Notes were being piloted in a bid to see if efficiency could be improved.
4. The committee requested detail regarding how the Council was budgeting for the increased demand for data and technology skills.
 - The Cabinet Member Children and Young People stated that the Cabinet fully supported the resource needs of Children's Services. The current focus was on achieving more and maximising the potential of existing resources, such as Mosaic, and exploring transformation/innovation before asking for additional funding.
5. A committee member asked what specific leadership actions had enabled the pace of improvement and why it had taken so long to reach the current level of improvement.

- In relation to what had enabled the pace of improvement the Corporate Director Children and Young People pointed to simplified plans (such as the plan on a page approach) and a reduction and shift away from unnecessary meetings/talk shops towards action-focused leadership, which had empowered managers to make decisions.
 - With regards to why it had taken so long to reach the current level of improvement it was suggested that previous plans had lacked focus, clarity and QA measures. Anxiety and indecision had slowed progress and audit findings hadn't been looped back into practice or used for performance management purposes.
6. The committee enquired how it would be possible to ascertain that relational/restorative practice had been embedded across the service.
- The Corporate Director Children and Young People explained that evidence would come through KPIs, audit findings on relational work and family feedback surveys. It was noted that 73% of looked after children were in family settings and a year-on-year reduction in care proceedings was indicative of better early intervention and family support.
7. The committee asked for an explanation as to why certain children were re-entering the child protection system.
- The Corporate Director Children and Young People highlighted the distinction between repeat referrals ever and repeat referrals within two years. Although repeat referrals within 2 years could be seen as a potential failure of the system, they were driven by necessity and was a sign that the partnership continued to work closely with the families and would intervene if it was felt support might be required again to keep things on track. Re-entry into the system after 2 years could, for example, be driven by the return of risk factors such as a parent or partner to a situation. In both instances it was important that the focus was on understanding the reasons for re-referrals being made and not just the numbers involved.
8. A committee member enquired as to whether non-random cases and flagged problem cases could be involved in audits.
- The Corporate Director Children and Young People stated that not only failed outcomes were audited. Successful cases were handled as case reviews or targeted audits to assess whether outcomes had been achieved efficiently, particularly in instances where new processes had been introduced or staff had raised concerns or identified inefficient processes.
9. The committee asked whether the service benchmarked its improvement against other authorities and whether other authorities learned from Herefordshire.
- The Corporate Director Children and Young People confirmed that Herefordshire Council and partners were active in regional networks around the West Midlands. Learning was shared through collaboration via director-level forums, subgroup meetings, peer reviews and diagnostic meetings. Shared priority plans and regional learning networks ensured Herefordshire had both learned from and contributed to peers.

10. The committee considered how the Council would sustain political and strategic commitment once the 'inadequate' label was removed, and the Improvement Board dissolved.
- The Cabinet Member Children and Young People pointed out that even when the Improvement Board dissolved, the statutory roles within it would be retained. Scrutiny and political oversight would be maintained and the culture of cross-party cooperation and recognition of safeguarding as a priority would remain. The Cabinet member stressed that 'Child-Friendly Herefordshire' remained a strategic priority for the Cabinet.
11. The committee asked whether the 'Child Friendly Herefordshire' approach would be formalised within council policy?
- The Cabinet Member Children and Young People pointed out that currently an informal approach was being driven through practice and culture. There were ongoing discussions across departments as to how implement the child friendly approach and suggestions about developing a formal policy or framework had been noted.

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

Recommendations:

- 1. For the executive to ensure that the council's digital, data and technology teams are sufficiently staffed, and properly resourced in the next budget, to ensure that all of the data needs of the children and young people directorate are met.**
- 2. For full Council to debate and commit to the principle of working for a child friendly Herefordshire.**

8. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S QUALITY ASSURANCE BRIEFING

The Chair noted that the papers for the item had been published late and proposed that a vote be held as to whether the item should be deferred to the September meeting - to allow the public and the committee members enough time to consider and respond to the report.

The committee members voted unanimously to defer the item to a future committee meeting:

Resolved: That the 'Children and Young People's Quality Assurance Briefing' item be deferred until a future committee meeting.

9. EARLY HELP TASK AND FINISH GROUP

The Chair introduced the proposal to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine Early Help provision across Herefordshire. It was noted that the committee has considered Early Help on several occasions, but formal scrutiny meetings had not provided sufficient time or flexibility to explore the topic in detail. The Task and Finish Group approach was guided by the Council's Scrutiny Review and would enable more in-depth, inclusive and flexible working.

The Statutory Scrutiny Officer outlined the proposal explaining that the group would consider both targeted early help (delivered by the Council and safeguarding partners) and universal/pastoral provision across communities.

The approach would adopt an 'Appreciative Inquiry' model, looking at what worked well and how services could be improved. The group itself would use methods such as roadshows, focus groups, site visits, and provider engagement.

Membership would be limited to a small group of 4-7 councillors, with scope to co-opt members/individuals with expertise or local insight. It was pointed out that all councillors (excluding members of the Executive) would be invited to express interest in the group, with final membership selected by the Chair.

The committee unanimously agreed the terms of reference for the Task and Finish Working Group

The terms of reference and following actions were agreed unanimously by the committee:

Resolved that:

a) The committee agree to form a task and finish group according to the terms of reference attached as appendix 1.

10. WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair note that a discussion outside of the meeting would be required to consider if and how the deferred 'Children and Young People's Quality Assurance Briefing' item could be included within the agenda of the committee's September 2025 meeting.

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.

11. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 16 September 2025, 2pm

12. APPENDIX 1 - SUPPLEMENTARY QUESTION AND RESPONSE

Supplementary questions from members of the public – Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, 22 July 2025

Question Number	Questioner	Supplementary Question	Question to
SPQ 1	Ms Reid Hereford	My public question asked: "How and by when will the Committee appoint ... and (I hope) appoint two non-statutory co-optees [Families' Representative and Families' Representative (SEND) co-optees]?"	Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

		<p>However, the response has not answered this.</p> <p>Since Jan Frances was appointed on 14 November 2023 as Families' Representative co-optee, she has attended three (one remotely) of ten meetings she could have attended (last attending in September 2024).</p> <p>The report about the Improvement Plan includes the section entitled "Feedback from Children and Families" highlighting its importance.</p> <p>Will the Committee appoint a Families' Representative co-optee and Families' Representative (SEND) co-optee as soon as possible so that their perspectives can be heard?</p>	
<p>Record of verbal response from CYPSC Chair provided during the meeting: <i>"Thank you Ms Reid for your question, just to clarify that the constitution was amended, so we're not committed to having family co-optees or SEND co-optees, but I take your point on board and we will actually be looking at the situation with our co-optees when we have our work programming session and we will have a discussion around the co-optees. So we will be looking at how we can supplement our committee with some expertise to make it more efficient. Thank you."</i></p>			

The meeting ended at 16:08

Chairperson