

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 10 March 2026 at 2.00 pm

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

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

In attendance: Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People)

Officers: Simon Cann (Committee Clerk/Democratic Services Officer), Rachel Gillott (Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding), Tori Lynch (Service Director Corporate Parenting), Tina Russell (Corporate Director Children and Young People), Donna Thornton (Democratic Services Support Officer), Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies 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 11 November 2025 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

5. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received from members of the public.

6. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from members of the council.

7. ILAC INSPECTION AND ACTION PLAN

The Corporate Director Children and Young People, Service Director, Early Help, CIN and Safeguarding, and Service Director Corporate Parenting provided an overview of the report and answered questions from the Committee:

1. The Director explained that Herefordshire had a strong internal leadership pipeline, a stable and increasingly permanent workforce, and a robust Quality Assurance (QA) framework -- using KPIs, random audits, and random service-user feedback -- that ensured continuity and sustained improvement beyond individual leaders. It was emphasised that simple plans, clear expectations, and an embedded child-centred culture had made the service resilient to organisational or political change.
2. Members questioned how vital services such as early help would be protected if future administrations pursued budget cuts. The Director explained that Children's Services was a statutory function and that Herefordshire had learned the cost of under-investment. It was noted that any future political group would be informed by officers and lead members around the potential risks of cutting preventative services, however early help would need to continue demonstrating impact to justify investment.
3. A query was raised about how early warning signs of deterioration would be identified to prevent a repeat of past failures. The Director explained that the improved QA framework -- quarterly data, random audits, and direct feedback from families -- would highlight problems quickly. It was further noted that previous issues had stemmed from overly complex reporting, whereas current reporting was simpler and therefore easier for councillors to interpret and challenge.
4. In response to a question, the Director did not feel that the previous "Inadequate" judgment had represented a governance failure, and stated that although various oversight boards had existed, information had been too complex and had lacked meaningful connection to frontline practice. The improved simplicity and alignment of reporting now provided clearer and stronger governance.
5. Questions were raised about Government proposals to reduce/remove fostering panels. The Director stated that the service opposed the reforms, explaining that panels provided essential scrutiny, challenge, and quality assurance. The Director warned that removing them would not reduce cost or delays, and might reduce foster carer approval rates because agency decision-makers would lack the depth of information panels helped uncover.
6. Members asked whether future regional devolution or council amalgamation could weaken Herefordshire's children's services. The Director clarified that devolution did not merge services and emphasised that Herefordshire now approached partnership discussions from a position of strength. The service would not be "done unto," and any significant collaborations -- such as regional fostering hubs -- would need to be properly funded, with core resources protected.
7. A question was raised about low resilience among young parents and whether the ECHO service addressed this. The Director confirmed that ECHO had provided rapid, relationship-based support to families experiencing difficulties, helping them stabilise, build coping capacity, and strengthen natural networks to avoid dependency.

8. Members queried whether a 0.5 FTE increase for Family Group Conferencing had been sufficient. The Director pointed out that staffing levels at the time had been adequate, but would be reviewed as outcome data improved. It was noted that improvements had focused on ensuring family plans directly fed into statutory review processes and supported sustained change.
9. A question was asked about the previous gap in English language provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people. The service explained that although the Kindle Centre had historically offered lessons, young people had disliked its adult-learning environment. From January, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) had been delivered through the local college, which better met the needs and preferences of students.
10. Members asked about the high proportion of care leavers who were not in education, employment, or training (NEET). The Director and Service Director explained that care leavers often required tailored support due to resilience challenges. Work had included collaboration with the Youth Employment Hub, bespoke mentoring, and high-quality pathway planning. Progress had fluctuated, but the service continued to promote aspiration and had seen notable individual successes.
11. A question was raised about whether the complaints process had been accessible and fair. The Director confirmed it had been redesigned to be more person-centred, with early meetings to clarify issues, semi-independent investigation by the QA team, and feedback loops to support service learning. It was noted that compliments had been captured alongside complaints.
12. Members sought reassurance on how Ofsted had verified that children's voices were heard. The Director reported that inspectors had spoken directly to children and families, reviewed case files, assessed written feedback, and tested staff knowledge of each child's lived experience. Ofsted had concluded that practitioners held a strong and detailed understanding of the children they worked with.
13. Councillors asked about under-recognition of young carers within statutory children's plans. The Director explained that the commissioned young carers service had been strong, but a small number of children on social care plans had not been simultaneously recognised as young carers. Processes had been strengthened to ensure identification and referral.
14. Members questioned why private fostering had remained difficult to capture. The Director explained this had been a national problem: many carers did not recognise their situation as private fostering, and some were reluctant to contact the local authority. Additionally, some children supported under Children in Need plans had not been registered as privately fostered. Awareness campaigns and procedural corrections had been put in place.
15. Members asked whether neglect had been a particular issue in Herefordshire. The Director clarified that neglect was the largest national safeguarding category. Ofsted's finding had related only to a small number of plans where cumulative harm and lived experience had not been sufficiently explicit. The strengthening of consistent child-centred planning was already underway, with benchmarking showing Herefordshire aligned with statistical neighbours.
16. A query was raised about support for kinship carers and Special Guardianship Order (SGO) carers. The Director confirmed the new SGO finance policy guaranteed payments to age 18 and that kinship carers received additional

bespoke training, particularly around managing complex family and contact arrangements. The wider support offer was assessed as strong.

17. Members sought advice on how scrutiny could best balance challenge with support. The Director stressed that quarterly QA reporting, trend analysis, and insistence on clarity should guide effective scrutiny. The Director stated that any reduction or dilution of QA processes should prompt immediate challenge from members.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

1. The committee agreed that several additions to the work programme were needed, including briefings on upcoming SEND changes, the schools' white paper, and the consequences of losing funding for the SEND school. Members also suggested adding updates on the Baby Steps project and exploring the high percentage of 16–17-year-olds not in education, employment or training.
2. Members discussed whether school capacity planning was keeping pace with changing housing projections and considered involving the scrutiny committee responsible for planning.
3. Councillors provided an update on the launch of the Child Friendly Herefordshire programme and agreed to meet the participation lead to embed the voices of children, young people and families across all scrutiny committees. This approach was expected to be reflected in future versions of the work programme.

9. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 12 May 2026, 2pm.

The meeting ended at 4pm

Chairperson