

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 Wednesday 22 July 2026 at 10.00 am

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

Councillors: Clare Davies (virtual), Dave Davies and David Hitchiner
Co-opted member: Sarah Beard (Diocese of Hereford)

Officers: Simon Cann (Committee Clerk), Dawn Knight (Service Manager Families First), Victoria Leader (Service Manager Family Help North) Lindsay MacHardy (Public Health Principal), Tina Russell (Corporate Director Children and Young People) and Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

20. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillor Frank Cornthwaite, Councillor Robert Highfield and Councillor Ivan Powell (Cabinet Member Children and Young People).

21. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There had been no named substitutes.

22. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

23. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 May 2026 be confirmed as a correct record and be signed by the Chairperson.

24. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received from members of the public.

25. QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

No questions had been received from members of the council.

26. FAMILIES FIRST PROGRAMME

1. Officers explained that the Families First Programme forms part of national children's social care reforms and the Children's Wellbeing and Schools agenda. Herefordshire is in the first quarter of year two of a three-year implementation programme. Progress has included strengthened partnership working,

development of a single Family Help Assessment, practitioner training and establishment of new Family Help Teams.

2. Reflecting on year one, officers reported that the focus had been on transformation and co-production with partners, schools, health services and families. A multi-agency steering group has been established and more than 170 practitioners have completed Families First training. Feedback indicated increased confidence in holding supportive conversations with families and greater understanding of partner roles.
3. Officers advised that service redesign had created dedicated Families First Teams to support partners undertaking Family Help work. These teams provide training, consultation, meeting support and community development expertise. Three locality-based Family Help Teams covering the north, south and central areas of the county became operational on 1 July.
4. Members welcomed progress and asked how success would be measured. Officers explained that a quality assurance framework combining performance data, audits, practitioner feedback and family feedback had been established. This would be benchmarked against existing measures, with quarterly monitoring used to identify issues and assess whether outcomes and experiences were improving.
5. Concerns were raised regarding long-term sustainability and funding. Officers advised that the programme is currently supported by a three-year government grant, but much of the approach has already been embedded within core services. Evidence gathered through monitoring could support future budget growth bids if required.
6. Members asked how value for money would be assessed. Officers explained that indicators would include reductions in repeat referrals, repeat assessments and repeat child protection plans, alongside evidence that earlier intervention was reducing the need for statutory involvement.
7. One member questioned whether nationally mandated reforms could disrupt arrangements that were already working well locally. Officers stated that Herefordshire had anticipated these changes and that the reforms align closely with existing restorative and strengths-based practice. Experience from national pathfinder authorities suggests the approach strengthens early help and partnership working.
8. Discussion turned to the new digital self-assessment tool. Officers confirmed that families would be able to seek advice, identify support services and potentially begin a Family Help Assessment. However, no family would be expected to complete this independently and practitioner support would remain available.
9. Members explored how use of the digital platform would be monitored. Officers explained that overall usage data, referral patterns and service demand trends would be reviewed to determine whether families were accessing support earlier and more effectively. Family feedback would also inform future development.
10. Questions were raised about ongoing costs and development of the platform. Officers advised that maintenance costs should be relatively low following implementation. While uptake levels remain uncertain, testing and evaluation form an important part of the wider reform programme. Children and families have helped shape the content, language, design and support links through co-production activity, with further testing planned before launch.

11. Officers confirmed that the county's support directory would be integrated into the new approach, enabling families to be directed towards appropriate local services based on their responses.
12. Members raised concerns about support for parents experiencing abuse from their children. Officers explained that assistance can be accessed through parenting support, family services and referrals via the Children's Help and Advice Team, including to specialist services such as PEGS (Parental Education Growth Support).
13. Reflecting on hidden need within communities, members highlighted the importance of trust and relationship-based practice. Officers agreed that Families First aims to strengthen links with schools, health professionals and community organisations so families can access help earlier and with confidence.
14. Discussion moved to workforce development and training. Officers explained that the 170 practitioners trained represent the start of a much larger programme, with strong demand and further courses already fully subscribed. Training is delivered through a range of formats to maximise participation.
15. Members asked about barriers to professionals taking on the Family Help Lead Practitioner role. Officers reported that concerns around risk and capacity had been identified through surveys. In response, the council has developed support arrangements, consultation services and targeted training to build confidence across sectors.
16. A broader discussion considered the challenges of implementing Families First alongside education reforms. Officers advised that strong governance arrangements are in place across education, children's social care and SEND services to maintain alignment and shared priorities.
17. The committee also examined pressures on schools and the role of locality working. Officers acknowledged current challenges but highlighted support available through school networks, safeguarding forums and specialist council teams. The locality model was described as improving communication, coordination and accessibility.
18. Members discussed whether schools could become the principal hubs for family support. Officers recognised the importance of schools' relationships with families but stressed that schools must remain focused on education. Family hubs would provide complementary community-based venues for support and engagement.
19. Finally, members asked how children and young people would influence the programme. Officers explained that their views are already gathered through quality assurance processes and will continue to inform evaluation. New digital engagement tools, including Mind of My Own, are being developed to support participation and feedback.
20. The committee welcomed the progress achieved to date and emphasised the importance of ongoing monitoring, partnership working and meaningful engagement with children, young people and families as implementation continues.

27. EARLY HELP TASK AND FINISH GROUP

1. The Chair introduced the findings of the Early Help Task and Finish Group, noting that the review had examined the Early Help landscape across Herefordshire. The review identified a strong and developing system supported by effective partnership working and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children, young people and families.
2. Members highlighted the importance of the Families First programme and Family Hubs in strengthening preventative support and improving service coordination.
3. Officers provided an update on the implementation of Families First. Members were advised that Early Help teams had been integrated into locality structures, with family help teams operating across all areas. Training programmes were supporting implementation and a new Family Help Assessment had been successfully piloted. Positive feedback had been received from families, particularly regarding opportunities for self-assessment and greater involvement in the process. Full implementation was scheduled from 1 August.
4. Members sought clarification on whether the new arrangements would simplify access to support. Officers confirmed that referrals would continue through the Integrated Front Door but that processes would be streamlined. Partner agencies would be able to submit Family Help Assessments directly, reducing administrative barriers and improving efficiency.
5. The committee discussed arrangements for identifying and supporting young carers. Officers outlined plans for a "No Wrong Doors" approach, including a screening tool within Family Help Assessments to support earlier identification and access to appropriate services. Members also discussed the national challenge of under-identification, noting that training, awareness raising and new screening arrangements were expected to improve identification rates.
6. The committee received an update on the Family Hub programme. Members were advised that the initiative forms part of a national programme bringing together a range of support services for families, with a focus on younger children while maintaining an ambition to support young people up to age 19, or 25 for those with SEND.
7. Officers outlined progress in establishing Family Hubs across the county through the transformation of existing children's centres and the development of additional sites. Provision would include parenting support, speech and language services, infant feeding support, mental health services, SEND support and activities to improve school readiness. Members noted the importance of accessible, welcoming environments where families could seek support at an early stage.
8. Members raised questions regarding long-term sustainability, including funding arrangements and workforce capacity. Officers advised that sustainability planning was underway and included embedding successful initiatives within commissioned services, developing workforce capacity, encouraging community ownership and building an evidence base to support future investment opportunities. While ongoing grant funding could not be guaranteed, the programme was intended to demonstrate impact and strengthen future funding bids.
9. Members reflected on challenges faced by partnership initiatives once time-limited funding ended and noted the importance of using the Family Hub programme to demonstrate the value of collaborative working. Opportunities to explore alternative delivery models were also highlighted.

10. The committee sought clarification on support for older children and young people. Officers acknowledged that current funding was focused largely on younger children but advised that planning for older age groups was already underway, including links to youth services, safe spaces, substance misuse support, resilience services and schools. Parenting programmes for older children were also being delivered and increasingly linked to Family Hub provision.
11. The committee discussed development of the emerging Youth Strategy. Members were advised that the strategy had been informed by engagement with young people and partners and that work was underway with local councils, voluntary organisations and community groups to strengthen youth provision and develop local delivery networks. The creation of safe spaces for young people was identified as a key priority. Officers noted that consultation had concluded and that the strategy was being finalised alongside an initial one-year action plan.
12. Members also received an update on youth services more broadly. Existing provision continued to be delivered through partnership funding arrangements, while work was underway to position the council and its partners to benefit from future opportunities arising from the recently published national Youth Strategy. Efforts to develop qualified youth workers and strengthen local sector capacity were also highlighted.
13. Members raised questions regarding children's language development and wider developmental outcomes. Officers outlined arrangements for assessing children's development during the early years and explained that those requiring additional support could be referred to specialist services and targeted interventions.
14. In concluding the discussion, the committee recognised the breadth of Early Help provision available across Herefordshire and the positive contribution of partnership working. Members noted the continued progress of Families First and Family Hubs and the opportunities these programmes present to strengthen preventative support and improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

Resolved that:

- **The committee formally endorsed the Task and Finish Group report and its recommendations.**
- **Progress updates be reported to scrutiny in early 2027, including information on the implementation of Families First, Family Hubs and the operation of new self-assessment referral processes.**

28. WORK PROGRAMME

1. Members considered the current work programme and received an update on the next steps for its development. The Chair explained that further strategic work was still required before the programme could be updated. To facilitate this, a dedicated work programming meeting would be held over the summer to review priorities and agree any necessary changes.
2. In response to members' comments, officers confirmed that the work programme would be revised and reissued before the October meeting. This assurance was noted by the committee.

29. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 6 October 2026, 2pm.

The meeting ended at 4:17pm

Chairperson