

EARLY HELP IN HEREFORDSHIRE

**HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
EARLY HELP TASK AND FINISH GROUP**

FINAL REPORT

Table of Contents

Chair’s Foreword	2
Task and Finish Group Members	4
Acknowledgements	6
Introduction	7
<i>Early Help in Herefordshire</i>	8
<i>Implementing Families First</i>	8
<i>Locality-Based Early Help</i>	9
<i>Schools</i>	10
<i>Commissioned Targeted Early Help Services (Vennture)</i> ...	11
<i>Midwifery Services</i>	11
<i>Health Visiting Services</i>	12
<i>School Nursing Services</i>	13
<i>Support for Young Carers</i>	14
<i>Youth Provision and HVOSS</i>	14
<i>Community Development</i>	15
Conclusions	18
Recommendations	19
Glossary	20
Appendix 1 – Early Help Roadshow Participants	21

Chair's Foreword



For Herefordshire to thrive, its children, young people and their families must thrive too. Herefordshire Council makes this belief clear in its council plan, which states the priority to *support children and young people to thrive, be safe, and for families to be supported*. Our children are the future, and their future is best safeguarded in their families and communities.

The council has reinforced this belief in its commitment to a Child-Friendly Herefordshire, a major long-term partnership commitment to making the county a place where every child feels included, valued, happy, healthy and safe in their homes and communities.

Children are most likely to thrive when they are supported by strong family networks, attend high-quality schools, and live in vibrant, connected communities. That is why it is so important for the council to support not only children and young people, but also the families and communities around them. This support is delivered through effective council services, strong partnerships with schools, and our ongoing commitment to strengthening communities across Herefordshire.

Providing the right help at the right time enables families to build on their strengths, overcome difficulties, and flourish. Supporting families from the earliest days and through the often-challenging journey of parenting is likely to strengthen them, develop resilience, and help prevent difficulties from escalating into issues that require more intensive and intrusive intervention. By working together to offer timely and compassionate support, we can help children, young people, and their families achieve the best possible outcomes.

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has long recognised the value of early help for children, young people and their families, and the need to provide this in partnership with our schools and communities. This has been an incredible opportunity to explore the depth and complexity of early help available in Herefordshire. The committee has met with many of the council services and community organisations that provide this support and has been impressed by their hard work, creativity and commitment to a shared vision of flourishing children, young people, families and communities. Herefordshire is lucky to have so many people dedicated to improving the lives of its residents.

Providing this support is not without its complexities and challenges, as we recognise an increased need to support vulnerable children and those with additional needs. The committee heard about new ways of supporting all children and families earlier, and helping family life to thrive, through initiatives such as Families First, Family Hubs and changes to youth services. We welcome these positive developments, while recognising that bringing them into practice can be challenging. It requires organisations to adapt and work together in new ways, and it is important that the dedicated professionals supporting families have the right guidance, resources and support to help them manage both opportunities and risks within families and their communities.

The committee recognises these realities and has made its recommendations with the aim of helping these services to build on their achievements and to continue to grow, develop, and succeed.

We hope this review highlights the outstanding work taking place across Herefordshire every day and acknowledges the dedication of the people, communities, and organisations who make it possible. By recognising these achievements and sharing opportunities for improvement, we aim to support partners in building on their successes and continuing to make a positive difference to the lives of children, young people, and their families.

I am grateful to everyone who took part in this review. We thank you for taking the time to share your work, your challenges and your ambitions for the children and families of Herefordshire.

Toni Fagan
Chair, Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Task and Finish Group Members



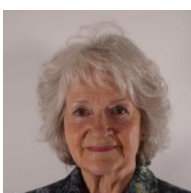
Cllr Toni Fagan – Chair

Cllr Toni Fagan is a Green Party councillor representing Birch ward on Herefordshire Council. As ward member for a rural ward, she is familiar with the challenges that rural isolation poses for children and families. She serves as chairperson of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee, helping oversee services affecting children, young people and families across the county. Cllr Fagan previously sat on the Children's Services Improvement Board through the improvement journey and is also a member of the Scrutiny Management Board.



Cllr Frank Cornthwaite

Cllr Frank Cornthwaite is the Conservative councillor for Holmer ward. He serves as vice-chairperson of the Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee, contributing to scrutiny of community services, local engagement and council performance.



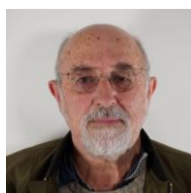
Cllr Clare Davies

Cllr Clare Davies represents Bromyard West ward and is leader of the True Independents Group on Herefordshire Council. She also serves as vice-chairperson of the Planning and Regulatory Committee, helping oversee major planning applications and regulatory matters.



Cllr David Davies

Cllr David Davies is the Conservative councillor representing Dinedor Hill ward. He serves local residents through his role on Herefordshire Council and contributes to council decision-making on services, budgets and policy. He is the chair of governors for Little Dewchurch CofE Primary School. He is also a member of the Hereford and Worcester Fire and Rescue Authority, as well as being a member of the Children and Young Peoples Scrutiny Committee, Scrutiny Management Board, Planning and Regulatory Committee, and Healthcare and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee.



Cllr Robert Highfield

Cllr Robert Highfield is the Conservative councillor for Castle ward. As a member of Herefordshire Council, He is also a member of the council's Adoption Panel.



Cllr David Hitchiner

Cllr David Hitchiner is an Independents for Herefordshire councillor representing Stoney Street ward. He serves as chairperson of the Audit and Governance Committee, overseeing governance arrangements, risk management and financial accountability within the council.



Cllr Ben Proctor

Cllr Ben Proctor is the Liberal Democrat councillor for College ward. He serves as chairperson of the Scrutiny Management Board and Vice-Chairperson of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee. Beyond Herefordshire Council, he is a representative on the Hereford City Youth Council and Stronger Hereford, supporting community engagement and youth participation initiatives.

Acknowledgements

The Early Help Task and Finish Group wishes to formally express its sincere appreciation to all those who generously contributed their time, insight, and expertise throughout this review.

Name	Role	Organisation
Abigail Allcock	Children's Community Development Officer (formerly)	Herefordshire Council (formerly)
Susan Brace	Director and Founder, Herefordshire Young & Young Adult Carers CIC	Herefordshire Young and Young Adult Carers CIC
John Burgess	Commissioning Manager, Living Well	Herefordshire Council
Niall Crawford	Education Lead for Safeguarding, Social Inclusion and Elective Home Education	Herefordshire Council
Dawn Knight	Service Manager, Families First	Herefordshire Council
Victoria Leader	Service Manager, Early Help	Herefordshire Council
Will Lindesay	Chief Executive hvoss	hvoss
Wendy Long	Practice Lead, School Nursing Team	Wye Valley NHS Trust
Lindsay MacHardy	Public Health Principal	Herefordshire Council
Jane Marshall	Team Manager, Families First/Early Help South Team	Herefordshire Council
Sian Jenkins	Maternity Outpatient Manager	Wye Valley NHS Trust
Victoria Roe	Team Manager, Families First/Early Help North Team	Herefordshire Council
Tina Russell	Corporate Director Children and Young People	Herefordshire Council
Tracey Spencer	Team Manager, Families First/Early Help Central Team	Herefordshire Council
Julia Stephens	Public Health Lead (Children and Families)	Herefordshire Council
Emily Strange	Named Midwife for Safeguarding	Wye Valley NHS Trust
Nicola Stroud	Community Capacity and Partnerships Manager	Herefordshire Council
Hilary Thomas	Families Team Programme Lead (formerly)	Vennture (formerly)
Michelle Trussler	Children's Community Development Officer	Herefordshire Council

Introduction

The Early Help Task and Finish Group was established to take a holistic, evidence-based look at how Herefordshire supports children, young people and families at the earliest stage of need.

The early help system in Herefordshire operates across several levels of need, beginning with universal services that are accessible to all families, such as schools, health visiting and community provision. These services play a critical role in early identification and prevention.

Where needs become more complex, families may receive targeted early help, typically aligned with Level 3 of the [Right Help Right Time Levels of Need Framework](#). This involves structured multi-agency support, coordinated through an Early help Assessment and led by a designated practitioner and at the highest level, the involvement of statutory services.

Across the review, partners consistently demonstrated commitment, creativity and a shared ambition to strengthen early intervention. The evidence gathered from Herefordshire Council, the Families First team, schools, health services, voluntary organisations and community partners, shows a system that is evolving with purpose and optimism. The Families First reforms underway nationally and locally present a genuine opportunity to reshape early help into a more integrated, accessible and family-centred offer.

At the same time, the group recognised that transformation brings challenges. Partners described pressures relating to workforce capacity, clarity of roles, rural access, mental health demand and the complexity of navigating multiple reforms simultaneously. These concerns were raised constructively and with a shared desire to improve the system rather than criticise it. The group's role has been to listen carefully, identify themes, and translate them into practical recommendations that support sustainable improvement.

The report that follows presents twelve thematic sections, each offering an overview of progress, a balanced reflection on challenges, and a forward-looking account of how these challenges can be overcome. Together, they provide a comprehensive picture of early help in Herefordshire and a clear pathway for strengthening support for families.

Early Help in Herefordshire

Implementing Families First

The group heard that Herefordshire's implementation of the [national Families First reforms](#) is progressing well, with a clear sense of purpose from officers delivering the reforms. The county is already well aligned with the Department for Education's expectations, meaning partners have been able to refine existing practice rather than undertake wholesale redesign. The introduction of Family Help, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) and Family Group Decision Making has been met with strong professional engagement, and early signs suggest these reforms are helping to streamline processes, reduce duplication and improve the experience for families. The development of the Family Help Assessment, co-produced with practitioners and families, reflects a genuine commitment to designing services around the lived experience of families. The expansion of community development officers, the creation of a Families First Team to support those acting as family help lead practitioners in universal and community settings and strengthening the community-based early help offer, all demonstrate a positive shift towards earlier, more accessible support.

Despite this strong progress, partners raised potential areas of concern. Schools expressed concerns about workload, particularly around the family help lead practitioner role, and some uncertainty remains about the distinction between Early Help and Family Help. There were also concerns about administrative burden, the pace of change and the need for clearer communication across agencies. The removal of traditional early help assessment and referrals and introduction of a single assessment model, represents a significant cultural shift, and some practitioners described the transition period as challenging. Additionally, while MACPTs are welcomed, partners emphasised the importance of ensuring they are fully resourced and supported to deliver consistent, high-quality safeguarding decisions.

The group heard that these concerns are being addressed with collaboration and practical action. Training programmes have already been expanded, including sessions on risk, thresholds and restorative conversations. Schools are receiving targeted support, including case studies, In-service Education and Training (INSET) engagement and clearer messaging that the reforms are designed to simplify – not increase – workloads.

The Families First Team is providing hands-on assistance to partners in supporting the administrative burden, it continues to offer direct work with children as part of a Family Help plan alongside parenting programmes and the new assessment is being piloted gradually to allow feedback from families and practitioners to shape improvements. Communication is being strengthened through glossaries, visual process maps and regular briefings.

MACPT operating principles have been co-designed with police, health and education, ensuring shared ownership. Overall, the task and finish group is confident that Herefordshire's positive culture, strong partnerships and commitment to continuous improvement will ensure Families First becomes a well-embedded, effective and valued model of early support.

Family Hubs

The development of [Family Hubs](#) in Herefordshire represents one of the most exciting opportunities within the early help system. The programme is ambitious, well-funded in its development and implementation years and strongly aligned with national priorities to improve early childhood outcomes, reduce inequalities and strengthen integrated support.

The first Family Hub at Widemarsh has already launched, and plans to convert five existing children's centres into Family Hubs demonstrate a clear commitment to accessibility and continuity across the county. The group noted that the hub-and-spoke model, including library-based provision and community venues, is particularly well suited to Herefordshire's rural geography. It concluded that the service the hubs offer is rich and varied, including parenting programmes, infant feeding support, speech and language interventions, SEND services, universal portage, inclusion practitioners and expanded outreach. The programme's strong focus on improving [Good Level of Development](#) (GLD) outcomes shows a clear strategic link between the [Healthy Babies Programme](#) and long-term educational success.

Funding for family hubs is time-limited to 2029, creating understandable concern about the long-term future of services. Rural communities face challenges relating to transport, digital access and outreach, and some families may struggle to engage with hub-based provision. National workforce shortages in health visiting, midwifery and early years services also present potential risks to delivery. Additionally, partners highlighted the need for stronger co-production with families and clearer communication about the role of hubs within the wider Families First system.

The group learned that officers are already engaged in sustainability planning with partners, exploring how successful interventions can be embedded within core provision should funding not be renewed after 2029. They are strengthening outreach models, including library Stay-and-Plays, community spokes and targeted rural engagement. Workforce development is being supported through skill-mix approaches, local recruitment and strong professional supervision. The council is also expanding co-production through family engagement activities, feedback loops and community events. The alignment between Family Hubs, Families First, the [Holiday Activities and Food](#) (HAF) programme and the Youth Strategy ensures a coherent system rather than isolated initiatives. With continued partnership working, continuity planning and strategic oversight, Family Hubs are well positioned to become a lasting foundation of early help in Herefordshire.

Locality-Based Early Help

Recent developments in locality-based working have delivered clear and meaningful benefits across Herefordshire. Co-location of multi-agency partners in the north and south of the county has strengthened partnership relationships, improved communication and enabled more responsive support. Families experience smoother transitions, practitioners benefit from shared intelligence, and rural travel pressures have been reduced. Feedback from Team Around the Family processes shows that families value the timeliness and coordination of support. The model reflects the strengths of Herefordshire's communities, recognising the importance of local knowledge, trusted relationships and place-based delivery. The group found strong evidence that locality working is helping to embed early help more deeply within communities and improve outcomes for families.

Co-location in the central locality is not yet complete, limiting the full benefits of the model. While qualitative feedback is strong, partners noted the need for clearer performance measures to demonstrate impact on outcomes, referral times and family satisfaction. Some practitioners described variation in multi-agency practice across localities, and there were concerns about capacity pressures as Families First reforms increase demand for locality-based support. Additionally, partners highlighted the need for clearer communication about locality roles within the wider early help system.

The group learned that these issues are being addressed. Plans to complete co-location in the central locality are progressing, and partners are working collaboratively to ensure the model is fully embedded countywide. Development of a quality assurance programme for Families First is underway to ensure the partnership can understand impact and experiences of families under the reforms. Similarly, multi-agency practice is being strengthened through shared training, locality meetings and cross-locality learning. Capacity concerns are being mitigated through the Families First team, community development officers and strengthened partnership working. Overall, migration to locality-based early help across the county is a clear success story, and continued investment will ensure it remains a strong foundation for future service development.

Schools

Schools play a central and highly valued role within Herefordshire's early help system. They are often the first to identify emerging concerns, hold trusted relationships with families and provide consistent daily contact with children. The group found strong evidence of commitment, professionalism and compassion across the education sector. Many schools already undertake substantial early help activity, and recent improvements in publishing early help offers have increased transparency and awareness. The locality model has strengthened connections between schools and early help practitioners, and designated safeguarding leads have welcomed training on thresholds, risk and restorative practice. Schools' contribution to safeguarding, early intervention and multi-agency working is both significant and deeply appreciated.

Schools described pressures relating to workload, particularly around early help assessments and the family help lead practitioner role. Some schools remain uncertain about thresholds, referral pathways and the distinction between universal support, early help and statutory intervention. The consent-based nature of early help can create challenges when families are reluctant to engage. Schools also face an increasingly complex safeguarding landscape, including mental health pressures, online harms, misogyny, AI-generated abuse, harmful sexual behaviour and substance misuse. These issues are undermining the wellbeing of our children and placing enormous additional demands on schools and highlight the need for strong multi-agency support.

In response to challenges, threshold training is being expanded, and revised level of need guidance is being developed to support consistent application and decision-making supporting the "right services at the right time". Schools are receiving targeted support through locality teams, Families First practitioners and specialist services. Communication with parents is being strengthened to reduce stigma and encourage engagement. Emerging risks are being addressed through updated safeguarding training, multi-agency pathways and stronger links with mental health services. As a result, the group is confident that schools will continue to play a vital role in

early help, supported by clearer guidance, stronger partnerships and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for children and families.

Commissioned Targeted Early Help Services (Vennture)

Commissioned by the local authority's children's services, targeted early help services play a vital role in Herefordshire's early help system, and the contribution of [Vennture](#) stood out to the group as a clear strength. The organisation brings a deeply relational, family-centred approach that complements statutory provision and offers families a trusted route into support. The group noted that Vennture's practitioners work with compassion, persistence and skill, often supporting families with complex needs who require sustained engagement. Their ability to build trust, navigate systems and provide tailored interventions has also been widely praised by partners. It found strong evidence that Vennture's work helps prevent escalation, improves family resilience and supports children's wellbeing. The organisation's flexibility, community presence and commitment to relationship-based practice make it a valued partner within the wider early help system.

Vennture reported that the nature of need among families has changed significantly, with increasing levels of mental health difficulties, neurodiversity-related challenges, emotional-based school avoidance and behavioural concerns. These issues often require specialist knowledge and longer periods of support, stretching capacity and increasing pressure on staff. The organisation also highlighted challenges relating to diagnosis-led thresholds within education and SEND systems, which can leave families waiting for assessments before receiving appropriate support. Sustainability was a major concern: the current contract does not fully cover delivery costs, requiring Vennture to subsidise provision through charitable income. This creates financial vulnerability and risks undermining long-term stability. Additionally, the group noted that early help terminology can be confusing, with families and professionals sometimes unclear about the distinction between universal, targeted and statutory support.

To meet these challenges, Herefordshire Council Children's Services is reviewing commissioning arrangements as the current contract comes to an end and will ensure they reflect the complexity of modern early help work and support long-term sustainability. Partners are working together to strengthen integration between early help, education and SEND, promoting needs-led approaches rather than diagnosis-dependent thresholds. Vennture's relational model is being recognised within performance frameworks, ensuring that quality of engagement is valued alongside quantitative measures. The Families First reforms, including the Family Help Assessment and Family Help Lead Practitioner role, will help reduce duplication and streamline pathways, making it easier for families to access support.

Midwifery Services

Midwifery and [antenatal care](#) services provide one of the earliest and most trusted points of contact for families, and their contribution to early help is both significant and deeply valued. The group found strong evidence that midwives play a crucial role in identifying emerging needs, supporting parents during pregnancy and helping families access appropriate support. The named safeguarding midwife provides strategic oversight, training and professional advice, ensuring that safeguarding practice remains robust. Midwives' ability to build relationships,

observe family dynamics and offer compassionate support place them in a unique position to identify concerns early and act upon them. Improvements in joint working with health visiting services, including near-100% compliance with handover standards, demonstrate a positive commitment to integrated early help. The [Baby Steps](#) programme for care-experienced young parents was highlighted as an example of excellent practice, reducing unnecessary safeguarding involvement and supporting vulnerable families effectively.

Midwifery services nationally and locally face significant staffing challenges, with increasing demands limiting capacity for preventative work. The named safeguarding midwife role carries substantial responsibility, and the group heard concerns that strategic oversight can be constrained by operational pressures. Short appointment times, high caseloads and complexity of referral forms can limit opportunities for professional curiosity, reducing the ability to explore wider family circumstances. Referral processes were identified as a key barrier: early help referrals were described as lengthy, complex and prone to technical issues, while safeguarding referrals through MASH were seen as quicker and more straightforward. This creates an unintended incentive to escalate concerns unnecessarily. The discontinuation of the First Steps programme for young parents also created uncertainty, with practitioners unclear about replacement support.

To address these challenges, Herefordshire Council Public Health is reviewing safeguarding capacity within maternity services, exploring options for additional roles or team-based models to strengthen oversight. The group was reassured to learn that early help referral processes are being redesigned to be simpler, digital-friendly and co-produced with frontline practitioners. Training and reflective supervision are also being prioritised, with protected learning time recognised as essential for staff wellbeing and effective early intervention. The Families First reforms will help clarify thresholds, reduce unnecessary escalation and support midwives to make confident decisions about early help. Work is underway to assess the impact of withdrawing First Steps and identify alternative support for young parents. As a result of this work, the group is confident that with strengthened pathways, improved referral processes and continued partnership working, midwifery services will remain a strong and valued component of early help in Herefordshire.

Health Visiting Services

The [health visiting service](#) is one of the strongest pillars of early help in Herefordshire. As a universal public health offer for children aged 0–5, health visitors provide consistent, trusted and relationship-based support that reaches families at the earliest stage. The group found clear evidence that health visitors are highly skilled at identifying developmental concerns, parenting challenges, health inequalities and emerging risks. Enhanced reviews at 4–6 months and age three demonstrate a proactive, data-led approach to early identification, particularly around speech and language, oral health and school readiness. Health visitors' ability to work flexibly, through home visits, clinics, group sessions and digital communication, helps ensure families receive support in ways that suit their circumstances. Their role is especially important in rural communities, where isolation, transport barriers and limited access to services can make early help harder to reach. The service's commitment to prevention, relationship-based practice and multi-agency working is a clear strength to the group.

The group noted that the historical reduction of children's centre services and informal drop-in support has created gaps in early preventative provision, leaving health visitors as one of the few remaining universal contacts for families. This increases pressure on the service and risks over-reliance. Workforce shortages, particularly in qualified health visitors and school nurses, present challenges to sustainability. Some families, particularly migrant communities, transient populations and those not registered with a GP, remain harder to reach. Parents often seek advice from informal networks before engaging with professionals, and the system can feel difficult to navigate when concerns do not meet statutory thresholds. These issues highlight the need for stronger universal provision, clearer pathways and targeted outreach.

The Family Hubs programme will help rebuild universal early help provision, offering accessible community-based support that complements health visiting. Targeted outreach strategies are being developed to improve engagement with underrepresented communities, supported by interpreters and specialist organisations. The council is strengthening workforce sustainability with skill-mix models, local recruitment and strong professional supervision. The additional health reviews are being evaluated to demonstrate impact and inform future practice. The group believes that the Families First reforms will help simplify pathways, reduce duplication and ensure families can access support earlier.

School Nursing Services

The School Nursing Service provides essential preventative and early intervention support for children and young people aged 5–19, and its contribution to early help is evident to the group. School nurses are trusted, approachable, and skilled at identifying emerging health, wellbeing and safeguarding concerns. Their open referral routes, school drop-ins, one-to-one interventions and health education programmes reach thousands of young people each year. It was clear to the group that school nurses act as a vital bridge between universal services and more formal early help or social care pathways. For example, their ability to engage young people who may be reluctant to access statutory services is a clear strength. The service plays an important role in addressing public health concerns, including vaping, healthy relationships, sexual health and school readiness. School nurses' commitment to prevention, early identification and multi-agency working is appreciated across the system.

Mental health concerns now account for 80–85% of the service's caseload, with anxiety, self-harm and eating disorders increasingly common. Many referrals do not meet [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services](#) (CAMHS) thresholds, creating a "missing middle" where young people have needs too complex for school nursing but not severe enough for specialist intervention. This places significant pressure on school nurses, who often support complex cases without access to appropriate escalation pathways. Workforce capacity is stretched, with around ten specialist nurses covering a large rural county - a lack of safe youth spaces also makes it harder to deliver services, especially outside of central Hereford. Preventative work has been reduced as staff respond to immediate need. Demonstrating impact is challenging, with evidence often based on activity data rather than long-term outcomes. Sustainability is a concern, as commissioning arrangements can create uncertainty and inhibit long-term planning.

The group learned that partners are exploring additional mid-tier mental health provision - such as that provided by [Wellbeing and Emotional Support Teams in Schools](#) (WEST) - to bridge the gap

between school nursing and high-tier CAMHS, ensuring young people receive timely support. Workforce capacity is being reviewed, with consideration of targeted investment and skill-mix approaches. The council's public health team is developing outcome measurement frameworks to capture improvements in health appointment attendance, wellbeing and prevention of escalation. Public health programmes are being strengthened, with increased focus on vaping, emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships. Communication strategies are being refined to reduce stigma and encourage earlier engagement with early help. The group was pleased to learn of this development work, and looks forward to seeing improved pathways, stronger commissioning and continued good partnership working.

Support for Young Carers

Support for young carers in Herefordshire is an area of service the group felt was notable for compassion, commitment and a growing recognition of the unique challenges these children and young people face. The group found strong evidence that practitioners work with sensitivity and care, offering whole-family support that helps young carers feel seen, understood and valued. The early help team provides assessments, home visits, advocacy, emotional support and liaison with schools, ensuring that young carers receive tailored assistance that reflects their age, circumstances and caring responsibilities. The voluntary sector, particularly bodies such as [Herefordshire Young and Young Adult Carers CIC](#) (HYYAC CIC), plays a vital role in reducing isolation, building resilience and creating safe spaces where young carers can connect with peers. The proposed [No Wrong Doors for Young Carers](#) model represents a positive step towards a more coordinated, consistent and accessible system of support.

The group noted that only 39 young carers were recorded in the 2024 School Census, far below comparable authorities, suggesting that many young carers remain hidden. Some do not recognise themselves as carers, while others fear stigma or intervention. Caring roles linked to parental mental ill-health or substance misuse are particularly difficult to detect. Support pathways can vary depending on which service first encounters the child, creating potential inconsistency and delays. Limited funding for practical assistance and reliance on grant-funded voluntary provision add further pressure. These challenges highlight the need for clearer identification processes, stronger multi-agency coordination and more sustainable support arrangements.

The No Wrong Door model will introduce a shared screening tool, clearer pathways, improved information sharing and dedicated young carer assessments. Awareness programmes for schools, health professionals and frontline staff will help ensure young carers are identified earlier and supported without stigma. Whole-family approaches are being strengthened across children's and adult services, ensuring that adult needs are considered in relation to their impact on children. Rural access barriers are being tackled through outreach, satellite provision and digital support. With these improvements already underway, the group believes Herefordshire is well positioned to create a more visible, consistent and supportive system for young carers.

Youth Provision and HVOSS

Youth provision in Herefordshire is characterised by passion, creativity and a strong voluntary and community sector that steps up to support young people across the county. The group found clear evidence that youth organisations provide safe spaces, trusted relationships and positive

activities that help young people build confidence, resilience and social networks. [Herefordshire Voluntary Organisations Support Service](#) (hvoss) plays a vital enabling role, supporting around 2,000 voluntary organisations and facilitating collaboration across the sector. The [Herefordshire Youth Provision Roadmap](#), developed with input from around 80 youth practitioners, provides a clear strategic vision for strengthening youth work, rebuilding workforce capacity and improving access to training. Youth provision aligns closely with early help principles, offering preventative support that helps young people thrive before difficulties escalate.

Youth services exist in areas such as Ledbury, Leominster and parts of Hereford, while some rural communities face significant gaps. The national decline of youth work as a viable career has reduced access to training and made recruitment difficult. Short-term funding creates instability, limiting continuity of relationships and inhibiting long-term planning. Smaller voluntary organisations can struggle with complex commissioning processes, despite delivering highly valued local services. Transport barriers make it difficult for young people, in both rural and urban areas, to access provision, even when services exist. Safeguarding requirements, while essential, can feel daunting for volunteer-led groups.

The group learned that the local authority children's services-led reforming of a core Youth Forum partnership, which has engaged each of the town councils and key partners, is developing a Youth Strategy, which will align the Youth Provision Roadmap, agreed partnership priorities and national policy within a shared framework. A mixed funding model – combining commissioning, small grants and support for anchor organisations – will create a more accessible and sustainable funding environment. Hvoss and the council are exploring practical safeguarding support, including training and advisory services, to reduce barriers for community groups. Mapping of provision and unmet need will help target resources more effectively. Engagement with town and parish councils is being strengthened to increase local ownership and investment. Transport considerations are being integrated into service planning, with outreach models and community transport explored as potential solutions. These developments should ensure that identified gaps within the youth provision network are filled and that youth provision continues to become a stronger and better coordinated contributor to early help.

Community Development

The work of children's community development officers (CCDOs) is rooted in building relationships, connecting services, and nurturing the strengths already present within neighbourhoods. CCDOs spend time in schools, community centres, voluntary groups and local networks, helping partners identify emerging needs early and shaping support that feels accessible and human. They champion prevention, encourage collaboration, and act as a bridge between families and the wider system. Their involvement in early help roadshows has broadened professional networks, improved awareness of local services and clarified referral pathways. In many communities, CCDOs have become trusted figures who understand local contexts deeply and help create the kind of joined-up, place-based support that families say makes the biggest difference.



Image 1: Early Help Roadshow – Kindle Centre, Hereford

To support the work of the Task and Finish Group, the CCDO team organised a series of roadshow events in Leominster, Hereford and Ross-on-Wye. These events brought together councillors, community organisations, council teams and local families to showcase the wide range of community-based early help services available across Herefordshire.

The roadshows provided Task and Finish Group members with an early opportunity to engage directly with local providers and gain a deeper understanding of the support available to families throughout the county. A list of the organisations that generously contributed their time and expertise to the roadshow events can be found in **Appendix 1** at the end of this report.

The breadth of the role can make expectations wide and sometimes unclear, particularly where partners are still learning how CCDOs fit within existing early help pathways. Some officers have faced pressures linked to rural geography, where travel time and dispersed communities make relationship-building slower. In a few areas, schools and voluntary groups have needed more clarity about how CCDOs complement – rather than duplicate – other roles such as family help practitioners or community coordinators. As the role has grown, CCDOs have also encountered capacity pressures, with demand for their support sometimes outpacing the time available to build the deep, sustained relationships that community development requires.

These challenges are being steadily resolved through clearer role definitions, stronger partnership communication, and more structured locality working. The introduction of Families First and Family Hubs has helped anchor CCDOs within a wider, coherent model of prevention, giving partners a shared understanding of how community development supports early intervention. Locality teams are now meeting more regularly, reducing duplication and strengthening joint planning. Rural pressures are being eased through smarter scheduling, shared outreach with partners, and better use of community venues.

Data-led early intervention, supported by the [Crisis and Resilience Fund](#) (CRF) and the [Low Income Family Tracker](#) (LIFT) platform, enables CCDOs to focus effort where it will have greatest impact, identifying households and areas of heightened need and supporting targeted outreach such as Healthy Start vouchers, free school meals and, from September 2026, the [Holiday](#)

activities and food (HAF) programme. Improved communication through schools, hubs, parish councils and community venues ensures families who are less digitally confident receive clear information - ensuring CCDOs can continue to build strong, connected communities where children and families feel supported early and well.

Conclusions

The Early Help Task and Finish Group found a system with considerable strengths, clear commitment across the services, a significant appetite for self-reflection and a willingness to constantly develop alongside a deep appreciation of the value of relational practice. Across all evidence sessions, partners demonstrated a shared ambition to improve early help, strengthen multi-agency working and deliver better outcomes for children, young people and families. The Families First reforms, Family Hubs programme, Youth Service development and locality model, alongside school partnerships, health services, voluntary sector and community networks should all contribute to a rich and evolving early help landscape. The group was impressed by the compassion, professionalism and creativity shown by practitioners across the system.

Critical reflections were raised constructively and with a shared desire for improvement, concerns included workforce pressures, rural access, mental health demand, sustainability, clarity of roles, data sharing, and the complexity of navigating multiple reforms. These challenges are real but not insurmountable. They reflect the pressures facing early help nationally and the need for continued investment, coordination and strategic oversight.

It is clear to the group that Herefordshire is well placed to overcome these challenges. The reforms underway provide a clear framework for improvement, and partners are already taking steps to strengthen pathways, simplify processes, improve communication and build sustainable models of support. It hopes that the recommendations developed through this review offer practical and evidence-based actions that will help ensure early help becomes more accessible, consistent and effective for the children and families of Herefordshire.

Herefordshire's early help system is building on its strengths by encouraging earlier intervention, building stronger partnerships, clearer pathways and more family-centred support. With continued collaboration, investment and shared commitment, the county can deliver an early help offer that gives every child, young person and their family the best possible start.

Recommendations

The committee makes four recommendations.

Develop a Long-Term Sustainability Plan for Family Hubs Beyond 2029

Family Hubs represent a major opportunity to rebuild universal early years support, improve Good Level of Development outcomes and strengthen integrated pathways from conception to age 19 (or 25 for SEND). However, funding is time-limited. Herefordshire should develop a sustainability plan that embeds successful interventions into core budgets, strengthens rural outreach models, expands coproduction with families and aligns Family Hubs with Families First, Talk Community and the Youth Strategy. This recommendation mitigates the most significant strategic risk identified in the report: the long-term viability of universal early help infrastructure.

Increase the availability of safe youth spaces

As part of the Youth Strategy work the partnership should ensure there is a workable plan to increase the availability and range of spaces young people can access which are safe, free to access and welcome young people. These may include youth clubs but should go wider to public open spaces, libraries, and informal hang out spaces. This is to emphasise within the Youth Strategy work the need for this very specific type of youth provision.

Request the council's Scrutiny Management Board reviews the council's support for the voluntary and community sector

This review highlighted the key role played by the voluntary and community sector in a range of aspects of early help and the significant pressures on the sector and individual organisations. We are not in a position to make recommendations to the executive about ways in which the sector might be strengthened. We recommend that SMB consider this issue in the overall scrutiny work programme as it has consequences across the organisation.

Share the good practice

The task and finish group identified a range of long-established good practices in early help that deliver good outcomes to families. The principles of good practice here should be shared across the authority and across the system (beyond Children's Services) for other services to consider when addressing their challenges.

Herefordshire Council and its partners should identify, share and embed the wide range of good practice demonstrated across the early help system. This includes using the service user feedback framework, coproduced assessments, relational practice, locality working and other community development models. Partners should share these strengths through simple tools such as a good practice pack, short case studies and locality learning sessions. Sharing the full Early Help Task and Finish Group report widely will also help services see what is working well in early help.

Glossary

CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CCDO	Children's Community Development Officer
CIN	Child in Need
CYPS	Children and Young People's Services
DfE	Department for Education
EHA	Early Help Assessment
FGDM	Family Group Decision Making
FHLP	Family Help Lead Practitioner
FHA	Family Help Assessment
FFP	Families First Partnership
FSM	Free School Meals
FNSP	Family Network Support Package
GLD	Good Level of Development
HV	Health Visitor
HYYAC CIC	Herefordshire Young and Young Adult Carers
ILACS	Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services
INSET	In-Service Education and Training
LCPP	Lead Child Protection Practitioner
LIFT	Low Income Family Tracker
MACPT	Multi-Agency Child Protection Team
MASA	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements
MASH	Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
PLO	Public Law Outline
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SCCIF	Social Care Common Inspection Framework
TAF	Team Around the Family
WT	Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026)

Appendix 1

Early Help Roadshow Participants

To support the task and finish group, Herefordshire Council's Children's Services arranged a series of roadshow events in Leominster, Hereford and Ross-on-Wye. These roadshows brought together councillors, community organisations, council teams and local families to share the wide variety of community-based early help available to families in Herefordshire. The events enabled everyone to gain a better understanding of the available support throughout the county.

The committee would like to offer its thanks to the following organisations who gave their time to participate in the roadshow events.

	<u>Citizens Advice Herefordshire</u> We aim to provide the advice people need for the problems they face and improve the policies and practices that affect people's lives. We provide free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities. We value diversity, promote equality and challenge discrimination.
	<u>NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services WEST</u> The Wellbeing and Emotional Support Teams (WEST) in schools service is designed to help children and young people ages 5-18 years access mental health and wellbeing support early on in educational settings.
	<u>Home Start Herefordshire</u> Home Start Herefordshire is an independent, local charity run by Trustees. It has provided invaluable support and friendship to families since 1982 and achieved positive outcomes for hundreds of families across Herefordshire.
	<u>Hope Support Services</u> Hope is the UK's leading registered charity helping young people aged 5-25 when a loved one has a serious illness.
	<u>SENDIASS</u> Free, confidential and impartial SEND advice for parents and young people. Get clear SEND information and support to understand your options.

	<u>Tu Vida</u> At TuVida we support thousands of carers and people they care for. It's our aim to provide individualised support that helps carers live life with independence, choice and peace of mind.
	<u>The Cart Shed</u> Based in north Herefordshire, we use enriching and engaging woodland activities such as woodcraft and coppice craft as well as horticulture to empower people to self-manage their mental and physical health in a sustainable way.
	<u>Catch 22</u> Catch22 is a social business: a not-for-profit business with a social mission. For over 200 years we have designed and delivered services that build resilience and aspiration in people and communities.
	<u>Children's Help and Advice Team (CHAT)</u> This confidential service is open to all families living in Herefordshire, with a child or children aged 0 to 18 years, or up to 25 years old for those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Our friendly and professional team will listen to your concerns and offer advice and support to help you and your family.
	<u>Early Help</u> Our Early Help Team work with children, young people and their parents and carers, to support families to deal with problems as soon as they start to emerge and to help prevent situations from escalating.
	<u>Health Visitors</u> Our health visiting teams work with families, early years, health colleagues and other agencies to support the health and wellbeing of pre-school children across Herefordshire. Health visitors are qualified nurses or midwives who have additional training in specialist community and public health nursing. They have specialist training in children's development and health promotion.

	<u>Healthy Lifestyles</u> Talk Community Directory is a website for all residents in Herefordshire. You can use the website to find helpful information and advice, discover hundreds of local groups and activities and find out what events are happening across the county. It's a way to enable people to stay happy, healthy and independent, by providing clear, up-to-date information, when people need it. It's a great way to connect people to what's on in their local area, to the variety of voluntary and community groups in Herefordshire.
	<u>Mentor Link</u> Mentor Link has been in operation for over 23 years and provides a one-to-one mentoring service to children facing social or emotional difficulties in school. We provide dedicated long-term listening and therapeutic support from a safely recruited and professionally trained mentor.
	<u>School Nursing Team</u> School Nurses are public health nurses working in the community, they are registered nurses with an additional public health nursing qualification. School Nurses have specialist knowledge and skills to enable them to work with children and young people aged from 5-19.
	<u>Hereford Food Bank</u> Committed to the relief of poverty in Hereford and the surrounding area through the provision of seven-day emergency food parcels.
	<u>Megan Baker House</u> Megan Baker House (MBH) provides conductive education sessions for children and adults with motor disorders such as Cerebral Palsy, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), Parkinson's, Stroke and Acquired Brain Injury, and other movement disorders.
	<u>Stonewater Domestic Abuse Services</u> We can support you if you're experiencing domestic abuse. Stonewater is Domestic Abuse Housing Alliance accredited.

	<u>Herefordshire Wildlife Trust</u> Herefordshire Wildlife Trust's mission is to lead local action for nature's recovery. With the support of our 8,000 members and over 300 volunteers, we care for a network of nature reserves, collaborate with others to restore nature to our rural and urban landscapes and inspire people of all ages to discover and take action to restore Herefordshire's wildlife.
	<u>Marches Energy Agency</u> Marches Energy Agency is an independent charity offering impartial, truly person-centred expert energy advice, promoting wellbeing and supporting households to save energy.
	<u>The Real Birth Studio CiC</u> Supporting pregnant women, people and birth partners with, midwifery & clinician-led antenatal education, postnatal preparation and specialist workshops. Supporting you to feel confident, informed and ready for the journey ahead.
	<u>Hereford & Worcester Fire and Rescue Service</u> Responsible for providing day-to-day fire and rescue services across the two counties of Herefordshire and Worcestershire.
	<u>Leominster Food Bank</u> Working to relieve and prevent food poverty. Supporting people in Leominster and the surrounding area.
	<u>Get Safe Team</u> The GET SAFE partnership is committed to tackling child exploitation and supporting victims and their families who experience this. Our Herefordshire partnership includes: West Mercia Police, a range of NHS health services, Education, Youth Justice, Early Help services and our voluntary sector all working together with district councils and other support agencies

	<u>West Mercia Police</u> West Mercia Police provides a policing service to the people and businesses of Herefordshire, Shropshire (inc. Telford & Wrekin) and Worcestershire 24-hours a day, 365-days of the year
	<u>Vennture</u> Our mission is simple: to support those in need and ignite positive change. From lending a helping hand on the streets of Hereford and nurturing families in their homes, to supporting individuals through life's challenges.
	<u>WMRASAC</u> WMRSASC offers specialist support to anyone across Herefordshire & Worcestershire who is experiencing, or who has experienced, any form of sexual violence or abuse at any times of their lives.
	<u>NCLP Parenting Programmes</u> NCLP is a not for profit organisation with charitable aims which provides educational and welfare-based courses with embedded life skills for young people, parents, and parents to be. We promote partnership working with professionals from government, statutory, community and voluntary organisations.
	<u>Kindle Centre</u> We work with the community & for the community to provide resources such as hall space, meeting rooms, internet access & activities for all.
	<u>Herefordshire Council Libraries</u> Herefordshire Council libraries provide welcoming community spaces, free book lending, digital resources, learning opportunities, local history collections, public computers, and events promoting literacy, inclusion, creativity, and lifelong learning for residents.
	<u>Challenge Community Church</u> Challenge Community Church is a place where Sunday worship is central to everything we do. Our gatherings are relaxed but reverent, with teaching that's practical and easy to understand, helping you apply biblical lessons to everyday life.

	<u>Halo Leisure</u> Supporters of active lifestyles providing eight sport and leisure centres across Herefordshire. Dedicated to providing the best, inclusive sport and leisure facilities for everyone
	<u>Portage</u> Portage is a home-visiting educational service for preschool children (between 0 and 4 years old) and their families who may have special educational needs or disabilities. Portage can be offered to children who are not in an educational setting or who attend an educational setting for less than 15 hours.