

Minutes of the meeting of Scrutiny Management Board held at Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE on Monday 6 July 2026 at 9.30 am

Present: Councillor Ben Proctor (chairperson)
Councillor Louis Stark (vice-chairperson)

Councillors: Jenny Bartlett, Simeon Cole, Dave Davies, Toni Fagan, Ed O'Driscoll, Diana Toynbee and Rebecca Tully.

In attendance: Councillors: Carole Gandy (Cabinet Member Adults Health and Wellbeing), Ivan Powell (Children and Young People) and Councillor Peter Stoddart (Cabinet Member Finance and Corporate Services).

Officers: Simon Cann (Committee Clerk), Stacey Carter (Head of Strategic Finance), Emma Evans (Head of Delivery and Improvement), Liz Farr (Service Director Education, Skills and Learning), Hilary Hall (Corporate Director Community Wellbeing), Quentin Mee (Head of Educational Development), Rachael Sanders (Director of Finance) and Danial Webb (Statutory Scrutiny Officer).

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been received from Councillor Pauline Crockett and Councillor Liz Harvey.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor Rebecca Tully was substituting for Councillor Pauline Crockett.
Councillor Diana Toynbee was substituting for Councillor Liz Harvey.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

4. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 April 2026 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 COUNCILLORS

No questions had been received from councillors.

7. DEDICATED SCHOOLS GRANT HIGH NEEDS BLOCK DEFICIT MANAGEMENT PLAN

1. The Committee received an update on the DSG High Needs Block Deficit Management Plan. Demand for SEND support, particularly EHCPs, continued to place significant pressure on resources. The projected cumulative deficit at the end of 2025/26 was £36.3 million, reflecting an improvement from previous forecasts.
2. Members were advised that the SEND Reform Plan and Deficit Management Plan served different functions. The reform plan focuses on inclusion and earlier support within mainstream settings, while the deficit plan remains necessary to manage costs and financial sustainability.
3. The projected deficit has reduced from around £40 million to £36.3 million following management actions. Officers reported that Herefordshire's SEND Reform Plan has been positively received and was considered advanced compared with many authorities.
4. Approval of the reform plan could make the council eligible for High Needs Stability Funding, covering approximately 90% of the current deficit. Members were advised that financial controls would still be required throughout the planned three-year transition period.
5. Discussion acknowledged continuing national funding pressures. Officers highlighted ongoing efforts to contain costs through increasing local provision, reducing reliance on out-of-county placements and promoting inclusion within mainstream education.
6. Members noted significant shortages in specialist provision. Existing special schools were operating at capacity and the loss of government funding for a proposed special free school was recognised as a setback. Planned expansion projects, including Westfield School and alternative provision schemes, were intended to increase capacity.
7. Questions were raised regarding increasing numbers of children qualifying for support. Officers advised that reforms would place greater emphasis on inclusion and early intervention, although demand for specialist placements would remain for children with complex needs.
8. Officers confirmed that the reform programme was supported by five-year financial modelling. Forecasts took account of future demand, expenditure trends and the need for both systems to operate during transition.
9. It was clarified that stability funding could only be used to address the deficit. Expansion of provision relied on separate capital funding streams, which were supporting projects across specialist and alternative provision.
10. Officers advised that a new standalone special school was currently unaffordable. The council was therefore exploring more cost-effective options using existing buildings and continued to pursue future government funding opportunities.
11. Members discussed the balance of capital investment priorities. Existing capital commitments included funding for alternative provision and pupil referral developments alongside wider SEND expansion plans.
12. Officers advised that the priority was ensuring appropriate specialist provision existed within the county, recognising that schools were generally designed to meet specific categories of need rather than provide identical services in every

locality. While increased local provision might reduce some transport costs, officers cautioned that many pupils with complex needs would continue to require transport support.

13. The Committee welcomed progress in reducing the deficit while recognising continued financial and operational risks. Assurance was provided that both the deficit and wider SEND reforms remained under close review. Members also noted the importance of ongoing co-production with parents and carers in shaping future SEND services.

8. ADULT SOCIAL CARE

1. The Director of Adult Social Care explained that the CQC assessment, published in May, resulted in an overall rating of *Requires Improvement*. While strengths were identified in safeguarding and partnership working, the assessment highlighted several areas requiring further development. Officers stated that the findings broadly aligned with the council's own self-assessment, providing confidence that improvement efforts were focused on the correct priorities.
2. Members sought assurance that the improvement plan focused on the right priorities and would deliver meaningful improvements. Officers advised that the plan drew upon both the self-assessment and themes emerging from the CQC process. Priorities including strengthening the front door, supporting carers, improving occupational therapy services and managing demand more effectively had already been identified locally before the inspection.
3. Concerns were raised about the absence of measurable outcomes and performance indicators. Officers acknowledged that the published plan was a high-level document and confirmed that a more detailed action plan was being developed, incorporating performance measures, evidence of impact and resident feedback to enable more rigorous monitoring.
4. Members questioned whether the narrative nature of the CQC report provided sufficient evidence to support the selected priorities. Officers accepted limitations within the report but emphasised that priorities had also been informed by operational performance information and local intelligence.
5. Discussion turned to the relationship between service improvement and financial sustainability. Officers explained that many improvement initiatives focused on prevention, reablement and early intervention, which could both improve outcomes and reduce future demand for more costly services.
6. Questions were asked about progress against the improvement plan. Officers reported that many actions were already underway before the inspection and that progress was being monitored monthly through established governance arrangements.
7. The Committee explored the role of data and performance information in supporting improvement. Officers outlined developments including improved reablement tracking, enhanced case monitoring and better oversight of referrals through the front door. These arrangements aimed to strengthen evidence of outcomes and support decision making.
8. Members examined the effectiveness of the front-door approach and the ability to track individuals signposted to alternative services. Officers advised that return contacts could be monitored but further work was underway to capture information on destinations and outcomes for those directed elsewhere.

9. The Committee considered how resident feedback was being used to shape services. Officers explained that existing feedback mechanisms would be expanded to gather views from residents at different stages of their journey, including those accessing alternative forms of support.
10. A recurring theme throughout the discussion was the importance of stronger corporate data and analytical capability. Members suggested improved investment in these areas would support service improvement across the council. Officers agreed and confirmed that performance and intelligence functions formed an important component of the programme.
11. Members discussed prevention, community support and the role of Community Connectors. Officers reported that Community Connectors were increasingly providing practical assistance to residents as well as signposting, helping individuals engage with services and reducing barriers to access.
12. Significant attention was given to Occupational Therapy services and waiting lists. Officers cited workforce shortages, rising demand and historical data issues as contributing factors. Work was ongoing to improve assessment pathways, waiting-list management and triage arrangements.
13. Members sought reassurance that a stronger focus on prevention would not increase risks for vulnerable residents. Officers emphasised that waiting lists were actively monitored, needs regularly reviewed and prevention was intended to delay or reduce need where appropriate rather than restrict access to care.
14. The Committee explored broader demand pressures affecting Adult Social Care. Officers highlighted the continuing impact of Covid-19, increasing complexity of need and higher demand levels, although growth was beginning to stabilise.
15. Members examined partnership working and questioned how external organisations were involved in the improvement plan. Officers confirmed that NHS and voluntary-sector partners were engaged through established arrangements, including the One Herefordshire Partnership, although this could have been reflected more clearly within the documentation.
16. Discussion broadened to the role of the voluntary and community sector in prevention and early intervention. Officers stressed that community organisations should be supported rather than expected to replace statutory services and highlighted work exploring more flexible commissioning arrangements.
17. The Cabinet Member highlighted loneliness and social isolation as significant underlying factors affecting wellbeing and service demand. Members questioned whether this was sufficiently addressed within the improvement plan. Officers confirmed that a wider prevention strategy was being developed and agreed to consider strengthening references to loneliness within that work.

Budget and Financial Sustainability

18. Members asked how confidence could be established that Adult Social Care was receiving sufficient funding. Finance officers explained that budgets were based on activity trends, demand forecasts and performance information, although future demand could never be predicted with complete certainty.
19. Members queried whether recurring overspends suggested budgets had been set too low. Officers responded that budgeting relied on informed assumptions

and that changes in demand and operational pressures could create in-year variations.

20. The Committee explored links between savings plans and the improvement programme. Officers advised that both had been developed alongside one another and were intended to be mutually supportive. Detailed monitoring arrangements were in place and early indications showed several planned savings had already been achieved.
21. The importance of maintaining a balanced budget was emphasised. Cabinet Members argued that financial discipline was essential to maintaining long-term service sustainability.
22. Members also explored opportunities to use capital investment to reduce future revenue costs. Officers highlighted Disabled Facilities Grants, care-home improvements and housing initiatives that supported independence and reduced long-term care requirements.
23. Questions were asked about external funding and specialist support for the improvement programme. Officers advised that although significant new funding streams were limited, regional bodies such as ADASS could provide expertise in areas including transformation, data and performance.
24. The Committee concluded by considering benchmarking and partnership arrangements. Officers advised that Adult Social Care expenditure was broadly in line with comparable authorities and highlighted ongoing work with health partners on Continuing Healthcare funding and integrated service delivery.
25. In closing, members recognised the scale of the improvement programme and noted that data capability, performance management, partnership working and prevention had emerged as key themes for ongoing scrutiny.

9. COMMERCIALISATION TASK AND FINISH GROUP FINAL REPORT

The committee heard that the report was largely written, but there had been a delay in publishing it. It was agreed that a draft copy of the report would be circulated with members ahead of the next committee meeting in October -- when the final report would be published.

10. WORK PROGRAMME

1. Members agreed that the Scrutiny Management Board should add a longer-term work programme item to explore how the council's capital programme could better support improvements in adult social care and help reduce associated costs.
2. The Board also noted the forthcoming Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting on major capital infrastructure projects and recognised the relevance of these schemes to SMB's oversight of organisational performance and capital delivery.
3. Concerns were raised regarding the delivery of major capital projects, including issues experienced on significant schemes, prompting discussion about whether the council's current approach to planning and managing its capital programme remains effective. Members suggested this could become a future scrutiny work programme item.

11. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING

Listed as Tuesday 1 December 2026, 2pm, but October 2026 to be confirmed..

The meeting ended at 16:55

Chairperson