

SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2025-26

HEREFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

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Chairs' Introduction

I am pleased to introduce this annual report on the work of scrutiny at Herefordshire Council. This has been an important period for scrutiny. The 2025 review gave us an opportunity to step back and consider how we work and where we can make the greatest difference. The review highlighted the importance of good evidence, focused questioning, practical recommendations and choosing the right scrutiny approach for each issue.

This report shows those principles being put into practice. Our five scrutiny committees have considered issues that touch many aspects of life in Herefordshire, from children's services, health and social care and environmental sustainability to transport, infrastructure, council finances and performance. Alongside formal committee meetings, members have increasingly used briefings and task and finish groups to build their knowledge and give complex subjects the time and attention they deserve.

There have been tangible results. Scrutiny has contributed to changes in policy and investment, strengthened the evidence available to decision-makers and encouraged clearer measures of performance. Scrutiny recommendations have helped secure additional investment in public rights of way bridges, extend consultation on the Local Transport Plan, strengthen assessment of the Hereford Bypass and help secure unanimous Council support for the principle of a child-friendly Herefordshire. Other recommendations are shaping how the council approaches areas ranging from early help and adult social care to active travel, housing retrofit and land management.

This report also reflects the determination of scrutiny committees to follow recommendations through. Making a recommendation is only the beginning. We need to understand the response, whether action has followed and what difference that action has made. This annual report therefore places greater emphasis on demonstrating the impact of scrutiny alongside describing the work undertaken.

We need to make more progress on member training and establishing a clearer shared purpose for scrutiny. Both of these were identified in the scrutiny review. I am confident that all five committees will continue to build on what has worked and learn from what has not. I know that all scrutiny members are committed to ensure that scrutiny remains constructive, independent and firmly focused on improving decisions and outcomes for the people of Herefordshire.

Cllr Ed O'Driscoll
Cllr Toni Fagan
Cllr Louis Stark
Cllr Pauline Crockett
Cllr Ben Proctor

Chair, Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee
Chair, Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee
Chair, Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee
Chair, Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee
Chair, Scrutiny Management Board

Scrutiny Review 2025 Update

A comprehensive review of Herefordshire Council's scrutiny function was completed in 2025. This followed a commitment made when the revised scrutiny structure was introduced in May 2022 to review the arrangements after two years. The review considered:

- the committee structure
- the culture and effectiveness of scrutiny
- the use of evidence
- the development of recommendations and
- how scrutiny could best contribute to the council's governance and decision-making arrangements.

The review was informed by extensive engagement and comparative research, including

- an online survey, which received 63 responses from elected members and officers
- interviews with
 - eleven senior officers
 - all five scrutiny committee chairs
 - Leader of the Council and
 - the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Services
- focus groups with Cabinet members and political group leaders
- desktop research examining
 - the council's constitution
 - arrangements in other unitary authorities
 - approaches to public questions and the recommendations made by scrutiny committees in Herefordshire and neighbouring authorities.

A central finding was that, while there was widespread individual understanding of scrutiny, there was less evidence of a shared understanding of its purpose. The review therefore identified the need for a clearer common purpose across Cabinet, scrutiny and officers, supported by continued member and officer development. In particular, there were differing expectations about the balance between holding the executive to account and contributing to policy development, highlighting the need to strengthen relationships between scrutiny, Cabinet and senior officers.

The quality of evidence and the effectiveness of committee meetings were another area of focus. Strengthened topic-planning and lines-of-enquiry arrangements were already beginning to provide greater structure and purpose. Nonetheless, members raised concerns about the timeliness and quality of information, while officers reported that questioning could sometimes focus on requesting further information rather than testing the evidence already provided. Recommendations to address this covered member briefings and training, scrutiny-specific report formats, and skills including chairing, critical thinking, questioning and drafting recommendations.

Recommendation-making was also considered, both in terms of volume and quality. Herefordshire's five scrutiny committees made 175 recommendations during 2024, but responses had been received to only 47% of them. Concerns were identified about recommendations sometimes being numerous or developed too quickly, leading to proposals to give committees greater opportunity to formulate focused and practical recommendations.

Scrutiny's structure and the methods used to carry out its work formed another strand of the review. Although comparative research suggested Herefordshire had more scrutiny committees than was typical for a council of its size, there was no consensus about an alternative structure. The review concluded that many of the identified problems related more to how scrutiny operated than to the number of committees. It therefore recommended retaining the five committees while placing greater emphasis on choosing the most appropriate method for each investigation, including greater use of task and finish groups.

Public participation was considered in its own right. This resulted in recommendations for changes to the rules governing public and supplementary questions at scrutiny meetings.

The resulting report and recommendations were considered by Council on 23 May 2025. Council subsequently agreed the review and the Statutory Scrutiny Officer's recommendations, retained the existing committee structure and authorised the necessary consequential amendments to the constitution. The following page provides an update on the agreed recommendations.

Theme	Recommendation	Recommendation Update
A shared purpose for scrutiny	Herefordshire Council elected members to agree a common purpose for scrutiny in Herefordshire.	This recommendation has not yet been progressed formally. However it has been recognised that scrutiny committees should provide a clear rationale for work that they wish to carry out, and to carry out that work using the appropriate means to do so. Each committee topic is now planned in partnership with the committee chair, vice-chair, and the officers leading on the topic. This has resulted in work with greater focus, and that officers feel may be useful to them. It has also resulted in scrutiny committees forming task and finish groups if they wished to support the administration with policy development. Work to develop a culture of shared purpose with the incoming administration and the chairs and vice-chairs of the scrutiny committees will take place following the May 2027 elections.
	Scrutiny committee chairs and vice chairs meet their Cabinet counterparts and corporate directors at least quarterly to identify priorities and shape topics for scrutiny.	Meetings between scrutiny committee chairs, vice-chairs and corporate directors are now a well-established part of the scrutiny planning process. This has proven to be an effective way to develop committee work programmes that are timely, relevant and useful. These meetings form part of an iterative process alongside committee work-programming sessions. The process ensures that corporate directors, committee members, committee chairs and portfolio holders all contribute to the work programming process. At present only Scrutiny Management Board holds regular quarterly meetings with the respective Cabinet portfolio holder. However the relevant portfolio holders now regularly attend scrutiny committee meetings, and meet on a ad-hoc basis with scrutiny chairs. Action: Include portfolio holders in quarterly strategy meeting between corporate directors and scrutiny chairs.
	Scrutiny to produce and deliver a rolling programme of training on the role of scrutiny, to both elected	There has not been a rolling programme of training. All elected members received a 'refresher' mid-term programme of briefings. Rather than repeat the training that took place during the induction period in 2023, this session instead focussed on effective scrutiny within Herefordshire Council's particular political makeup. This training

Theme	Recommendation	Recommendation Update
	members and Herefordshire Council officers	emphasised the need for collaborative working across political parties, and the central role of scrutiny as a critical friend to the administration. Scrutiny's induction programme following the 2027 elections will be broader than the single initial induction training session that introduces scrutiny to new and returning councillors. As well as the introductory session, there will be separate workshops covering asking good questions and drafting recommendations. Additionally, there will be a module for chairs and vice-chairs on how to chair a meeting effectively.
Using evidence well and making good recommendations	Scrutiny to collaborate with the Democratic Services Manager to produce a programme of elected member briefings, aligned to scrutiny work programme and forward plan of key decisions.	Herefordshire Council already has an established means to brief elected members on important forthcoming decisions through its all-member briefing programme. Scrutiny has complemented this with a series of committee-specific briefings to develop committee member knowledge. Examples include changes to home-to-school transport, quarterly budget outturn, and counter terrorism. These online-only briefings have also sometimes been open to all elected members, broadening their impact.
	Herefordshire Council provide a funded training programme for members of scrutiny committees	This has not been actioned. There is currently no funded training programme for elected members, relating to scrutiny or any other aspect of elected member duties. The training programme for scrutiny committee members and chairs will be delivered by Herefordshire Council officers, for which there will be no funding requirement.
	Scrutiny to provide a report on training offered and taken up in its annual review of effectiveness.	This has been covered in the update given to other recommendations arising from the 2025 scrutiny review.
	Herefordshire Council review its report template for scrutiny, removing superfluous sections suited to decision-making committees.	This was introduced in early 2026. The new template removes superfluous sections that are relevant only to decision reports. The new reporting process also removes required sign-off from council teams not directly related to the report, such as risk, communications and finance. Instead, scrutiny reports now only require sign-off from democratic services and the relevant corporate director. This slimmed-down sign-off process has allowed the democratic services team to provide greater support to officers producing reports to scrutiny. This includes setting

Theme	Recommendation	Recommendation Update
		up topic-planning meetings with committee chairs and officers producing reports, followed up with subsequent report briefs to officers. This has resulted in more relevant reporting to committees, virtually eliminating requests for additional information in meetings.
	To draft a programme of training on scrutiny skills, to include: • Effective scrutiny chairing • Critical thinking • Asking questions • Drafting recommendations	This programme is in the process of being drafted and will be introduced as part of the induction training for new and returning councillors after the May 2027 Herefordshire Council local elections. At present there are draft modules covering effective chairing, asking questions and drafting recommendations.
	Scrutiny committees take a pause during their committee meetings in order to draft their recommendations.	The process for developing scrutiny recommendations has been strengthened. Where members wish to make recommendations, these are now developed at the conclusion of the relevant committee item, with members able to suggest draft wording during the meeting. This enables recommendations to be formulated promptly and refined collectively during pauses in proceedings. This has been bolstered by committees sometimes drafting recommendations during their planning of their lines of enquiry in advance of the meeting. This allows committees to test recommendations with officers before formally making them. The approach also enables attending officers to provide timely advice on the feasibility and practical implications of draft recommendations. As a result, committees are better able to produce focused, realistic and actionable recommendations, improving their value and increasing the prospect of successful implementation.
The right structure for scrutiny	Herefordshire Council to retain its current structure of committees.	Herefordshire Council maintains five scrutiny committees whose remits collectively cover the full range of local authority activity and relevant partnership arrangements, including the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership and its equivalent for

Theme	Recommendation	Recommendation Update
		adults. Alongside these committees, six task and finish groups have operated, each accountable to one of the five parent committees. The Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee also exercises specific powers in relation to the scrutiny of NHS services affecting the county. In 2025, Herefordshire Council held exploratory informal discussions with Worcestershire County Council about the potential for joint scrutiny of health and social care matters affecting both areas, recognising their shared Integrated Care Board arrangements. The proposed merger of the Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Coventry and Warwickshire ICBs from April 2027 provides an opportunity to revisit this approach. The council may therefore wish to consider whether there would be value in developing a wider joint scrutiny arrangement with Worcestershire County Council, Warwickshire County Council and Coventry City Council, enabling issues of common concern across the enlarged ICB footprint to be scrutinised collaboratively.
	Scrutiny committees to provide, as part of their work programme planning, the rationale for the approach chosen for each scrutiny investigation. Scrutiny committees to demonstrate in their work programming that they are using the right forum to carry out their work (such as formal committee meeting, working group or task and finish group).	A clear rationale for establishing each task and finish group or spotlight review is now included within its terms of reference. This is supported by the use of a proforma, signed by the relevant corporate or service director, confirming their commitment to providing the resources required to support the review effectively. Although this approach is not formally replicated when planning the work programmes of committees and their public meetings, the same principle is applied in practice. The work programming process requires a clear purpose to be identified for each proposed agenda item, which is then stated in the published work programme. This is then refined with officers during an initial planning meeting, to ensure that the topic is timely and useful. Topics whose primary purpose is to provide information can therefore be considered through informal member briefings where appropriate, rather than automatically being brought to a formal scrutiny meeting.

Theme	Recommendation	Recommendation Update
		This approach helps to ensure that formal committee time is focused on matters where scrutiny can add value, rather than items that would simply be noted. It also enables larger or more complex areas of work, such as services providing early help to children and young people, to be considered in greater depth through dedicated task and finish groups.
Public Questions	Herefordshire Council restricts public questions to scrutiny committee matters that can be answered directly by the committee chair or statutory scrutiny officer.	This recommendation was implemented on 29 May 2025. Following Council's agreement to the recommendations of the scrutiny review in May 2025, the necessary amendments were made to the constitution. The constitution now states that "questions will only be accepted for scrutiny committees if it relates to the agenda, task or finish group terms of reference or final report, or to the management of the committee's programme or its recommendations. This means that it will be the scrutiny chair (on behalf of the committee) to determine (in consultation with the Statutory Scrutiny Officer) who is the most appropriate person to respond to the question." The change has produced two principal benefits. First, scrutiny committees no longer routinely act as intermediaries between members of the public and Cabinet members on matters for which the relevant portfolio holder is better placed to provide a response. Such questions can instead be directed to Cabinet, reducing duplication between the two processes. As a result of this, the number of questions to scrutiny committees has dropped since the change to the constitution. Since May 2025 there have been 17 questions to scrutiny committees, compared to 37 in the period May 2023 to November 2024. Second, the revised arrangements have resulted in scrutiny chairs receiving questions directly about the work of their committees, including requests to consider particular topics for scrutiny and questions about how planned scrutiny will be undertaken. This places greater emphasis on the accountability of scrutiny itself, improving transparency around work programming and strengthening opportunities for public engagement with the scrutiny process.

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	Herefordshire Council subjects supplementary questions to the same rules as initial public questions.	This was also implemented on 29 May 2025. This has removed the risk of inappropriate supplementary questions, for example those naming individuals, being read out during scrutiny meetings.
	Herefordshire Council re-introduces the six-month rule, whereby the same, or very similar question, cannot be asked within a six-month period of the answer being given, for scrutiny committees.	This was also implemented in May 2025. As a result of this, there has been an end to very similar questions being put to consecutive committee meetings.

Impact of Scrutiny 2026

The work of the five scrutiny committees demonstrates that scrutiny is having a practical impact across a wide range of council services and priorities. Recommendations have influenced policy, changed the way proposals are developed, strengthened performance information and, in some cases, contributed directly to decisions about investment and service delivery.

The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee has helped strengthen quality assurance and the influence of children and young people, including securing unanimous Council support for the principle of a child-friendly Herefordshire. The Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee secured significant changes to the assessment methodology for the Hereford Bypass and an extension to consultation on the Local Transport Plan. The Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee's work has contributed to improvements in rights of way, retrofit, land management and environmental performance, including £1 million of capital funding for bridges on the public rights of way network.

The Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee has established opportunities for continued scrutiny of health services and influenced practical responses, including support for a recognised carers' card scheme. Scrutiny Management Board has strengthened oversight of finances and performance, while its recommendations have contributed to clearer monitoring of savings, progress on infrastructure and housing, and changes to the council's adult social care improvement plan.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate different forms of scrutiny impact: influencing decisions before they are made, improving policies and plans, strengthening accountability and performance information, securing practical changes and investment, and establishing arrangements through which committees can continue to monitor delivery and outcomes

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee



Chair: Cllr Toni Fagan

This committee provides scrutiny of services affecting children, young people and families, including children's social care and safeguarding, education, health and wellbeing, and the council's children's services improvement journey. Members have explored important issues including child exploitation, early help, youth justice, safeguarding, neglect and the council's response to the Prevent duty.

A major focus has been ensuring that improvements in Children's Services are sustained. In considering the Improvement Plan and subsequent Ofsted findings, the committee welcomed evidence of greater workforce stability and better outcomes, while continuing to ask how the council would manage performance, maintain effective quality assurance and protect preventative services such as early help.

Members have also looked closely at the experience of children and families. Scrutiny of complaints explored

- response times
- the independence of investigations
- informal resolution and
- how learning from complaints and compliments could improve practice.

This constructive challenge extended to partner organisations, with members questioning safeguarding leaders about partnership effectiveness and challenging West Mercia Police on how improvements following inspection would be sustained, including how the experiences of children and families could better inform practice.

Briefings

The committee received detailed briefings from senior officers and partners on Improvement in Children's Services, safeguarding, child exploitation, youth justice, the Prevent programme and neglect. This helped members to develop their understanding while questioning those responsible for delivery about performance, emerging risks, partnership working and the practical difference services were making for children, young people and their families.

Early Help Task and Finish Group

The Early Help Task and Finish Group provided a detailed examination of support available before families' difficulties escalate. Members engaged with council services, schools, health partners and voluntary and community organisations, including through roadshows across the county. The review welcomed strong partnership working, relational practice and locality-based services, while identifying challenges around workforce capacity, rural access, mental health demand and longer-term sustainability. It made recommendations on Family Hubs, safe youth spaces, voluntary-sector support and sharing good practice.

Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Key recommendations made by the committee include:

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Children and Young People's Quality Assurance	Ensure quarterly performance monitoring and the annual complaints report include learning from compliments, complaints that are declined and the reasons why, and evidence of informal resolutions from case-file audits.	The council agreed that the recommended information would be incorporated into the 2025/26 annual report and quarterly case-audit reports, with a summary reflected in the annual report.	This broadens the evidence used for quality assurance and embeds it within recurring quarterly and annual reporting, strengthening service oversight and organisational learning.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Safeguarding Children Partnership Yearly Report 2024- 25	The partnership should explicitly report what it learned from children and families and how this influenced policy and practice, using a “you said, we did” approach.	The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership reported that feedback from children and families had been considered through its multi-agency Quality and Effectiveness subgroup. Its 2025/26 annual report would report what partners learned and how this influenced policy and practice.	This strengthens accountability by requiring the Partnership to demonstrate how feedback from children and families influenced policy and practice, rather than simply recording that engagement took place.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare	The Director of Children's Services, through an all-member briefing, should brief elected members on Pursue, Prevent, Protect and Prepare and elected members' corporate parenting duties concerning Prevent.	Briefings took place in March 2026.	The requested briefings gave elected members an opportunity to strengthen their understanding of the four strands and their responsibilities concerning Prevent within their wider corporate parenting role.
Including children's voices in council policy	Review and promote good practice in soliciting, capturing and sharing the voice of children across council services, partners and stakeholders, ensuring their views influence decisions and that reasons are explained where their wishes cannot be adopted.	Children's and Corporate Services are developing council-wide engagement guidelines with children and young people, redesigning webpages and the intranet, developing a newsletter sharing feedback, and establishing a Children and Young People's Council.	This supported a more systematic approach to children's participation, including shared engagement guidelines, greater visibility of consultation findings and a Children and Young People's Council.
	Ensure scrutiny committees embed the need to consider the voice of children and young people when carrying out their work.	The response identified the same wider programme of engagement improvements, including council-wide guidelines developed with children and young people, improved sharing of consultation activity and feedback, and development of a Children and Young People's Council.	This extends consideration of children's voices across the wider scrutiny function, helping ensure that young people's perspectives are considered when committees examine decisions affecting them.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan	For Full Council to debate and commit to the principle of working for a child-friendly Herefordshire.	A motion was proposed at Full Council on 10 October 2025 and carried unanimously.	The recommendation secured formal, unanimous Full Council support for a child-friendly Herefordshire, helping embed consideration of children and young people across wider council policy.
	Ensure the council's digital, data and technology teams are sufficiently staffed and resourced in the next budget to meet the data needs of the Children and Young People Directorate.	A review of ICT and Corporate Performance and Intelligence resources supporting directorates was to be undertaken as part of development of the council's 2026/27 revenue budget, with resource requirements prioritised within available funding and the council's overall financial position.	This maintained a corporate focus on capacity to meet Children's Services' data needs, with the subsequent budget recognising the need for adequately resourced and skilled enabling services.

Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee

Chair: Cllr Ed O'Driscoll



The Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee has continued to examine some of the council's most visible services and major projects, combining constructive challenge with an emphasis on ensuring that decisions reflect the needs of communities across Herefordshire. Its work has included the Cultural Strategy, Local Transport Plan, gully cleansing, tourism, the Parking Strategy and major capital projects.

Transport and infrastructure have been particularly important themes. Members scrutinised the Local Transport Plan, including the need to engage younger residents and improve transport choices, and successfully recommended extending its public consultation. The

committee later heard that the consultation response rate was one of the highest in the country. Members also examined gully cleansing, pressing for better mapping of drainage assets, clearer progress reporting and a maintenance approach capable of responding to heavier rainfall.

The committee has provided detailed pre-decision scrutiny of major policies and investments. Examination of the draft Parking Strategy tested the rationale for charges, accessibility of consultation and differing needs of Hereford, market towns and rural communities. Its scrutiny of the Hereford Bypass methodology focused on ensuring that Cabinet receives robust, transparent and sufficiently detailed evidence before taking major investment decisions.

Members also scrutinised delivery of major capital projects, questioning project risk ratings and hearing directly from bus operators about operational and safety concerns surrounding the new Transport Hub.

Briefings

The committee's work has been supported by evidence and briefings from council officers, Cabinet members, external partners and specialists across its wide remit. This has enabled members to test proposals with those directly involved in their development and delivery. The use of independent expertise during scrutiny of the bypass assessment methodology was particularly valuable in helping members examine the proposals against Green Book and Department for Transport good practice.

Placemaking and Public Participation Task and Finish Group

The Placemaking and Public Participation Task and Finish Group is examining how residents can have a more meaningful role in shaping development in Herefordshire. Its work considers best practice and innovative approaches to participation and will inform replacement of the council's Statement of Community Involvement with a new engagement framework. The group aims to

move beyond minimum consultation requirements, making engagement more inclusive and accessible and placing community voice at the heart of planning and placemaking, pursuing growth with, rather than to, communities. It will present its final report to the committee later in the year.

Connected Communities Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Key recommendations made by the committee include:

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Hereford Bypass Phase 1 methodology	Move from pass/fail assessments to scored or graded assessments, providing greater granularity across traffic, safety, land acquisition, carbon reduction, biodiversity, construction price, social value, affordability and value for money.	The criteria were redrafted for the final Cabinet report, reorganised around the Department for Transport Five Case Model and expanded from 21 to 41 criteria, including more qualitative and quantitative measures.	Scrutiny secured a substantial change to the assessment methodology, almost doubling the number of criteria and replacing a binary approach with a more detailed framework aligned with the Department for Transport Five Case Model.
	Widen the criteria for measuring social value to include the distribution of impacts on people in Herefordshire.	An additional qualitative criterion covering overall social benefits was introduced, with these to be reported through a benefits distribution table in the revised Cabinet paper.	Scrutiny widened the assessment of social value to consider how impacts are distributed. The benefits distribution table gives Cabinet clearer information about the scheme's social consequences.
	Ensure the report to Cabinet incorporates high, medium and low growth risk scenarios.	The Full Business Case was changed so that modelling information would show low, medium and high growth scenarios.	Requiring different growth scenarios strengthened the Full Business Case by making assumptions and uncertainty more visible, giving Cabinet a stronger evidence base for its decision.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Local Transport Plan	Increase the number of residents participating in the Local Transport Plan consultation and extend the consultation deadline to 30 June 2025	The council agreed that the public consultation would be extended until 30 June.	Scrutiny secured an extension to the consultation, giving residents more opportunity to participate and strengthening the report as a result. The subsequent consultation achieved one of the strongest response rates nationally for a Local Transport Plan consultation.
Gully Cleansing	Provide an update on the new maintenance schedule that anticipates heavier rainfall across the county, including an expected publication date.	The drainage service was expanding programmed cleansing to all gullies on A, B and C roads. The new Public Realm Contract would include an annual cleansing programme and move towards a risk-based approach, providing more frequent cleansing in identified areas of risk.	Scrutiny helped support a more targeted approach, using risk information and previous events to determine cleansing frequency alongside an annual programme under the new Public Realm Contract.
	Consider early adoption of upgraded mapping software before the new Public Realm Contract comes into force in June 2026.	An interim online solution was already operating, while upgraded mapping software was included within requirements for the new contract, expected to be mobilised from late January/February 2026. Existing knowledge and data collected by town and parish councils would be added once the software was available.	Scrutiny maintained focus on improved drainage mapping, with the new system bringing together existing information and data collected by town and parish councils to strengthen understanding of drainage assets.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Local Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan	Ensure performance indicators include measures showing reduced collisions, reduced emissions and increased walking and cycling.	Officers agreed to review relevant Local Transport Plan key performance indicators and include additional measures covering the areas identified by scrutiny.	Scrutiny strengthened performance monitoring by seeking measures covering safety, emissions and travel behaviour, providing a clearer basis for assessing outcomes and holding future delivery to account.
	Ensure targets in the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan are Specific, Measurable, Agreed/Achievable, Realistic and Time Bound.	Officers agreed to review the document and ensure that targets were given measures as prescribed by the recommendation.	Requiring measurable targets provides a clearer basis for tracking progress and identifying underperformance, strengthening performance management and opportunities for future scrutiny.
	Publish the LCWIP implementation plan, prioritisation list and programme of work by the end of 2025.	The council reported that projects were being prioritised and that, following confirmation of external funding, a programme of work would be completed and returned to Scrutiny Committee for review.	Scrutiny helped move the LCWIP towards a transparent delivery programme, with project prioritisation and the subsequent programme returning to the committee for further review.
Tourism in Herefordshire	Recognise the positive impact of the Herefordshire Destination Business Improvement District and ensure council departments support the Destination Management Plan through planning, regulatory services, transport and highways.	The council stated that relevant departments had contributed to developing the Destination Management Plan and committed to ensuring it is considered when relevant new council policies are developed and services delivered.	Scrutiny promoted a more integrated approach to tourism, helping embed consideration of the Destination Management Plan across council policy development and service delivery.

Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee



Chair: Cllr Louis Stark

The Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee has continued to take a constructive but challenging approach to some of the major environmental issues affecting Herefordshire. Its work has ranged across road safety, carbon-neutral housing, land management, public rights of way, active travel and transport, reflecting the committee's broad responsibility for supporting a more sustainable and resilient county.

Members have looked closely at how environmental ambitions translate into practical delivery. Its road safety work examined collision evidence, perceptions of safety, enforcement and the administration of Traffic Regulation Orders, bringing council officers together with partners including the police and fire service. Scrutiny of carbon-neutral housing tested the council's preparedness for the Future Homes Standard, including implications for housing viability, affordable housing, construction skills, electricity-grid capacity and the readiness of planning and building-control services.

The committee has also examined the council's responsibilities for land management, drainage and public rights of way. Members questioned whether enough emphasis was placed on preventative action, challenged weaknesses in enforcement and explored how the council works with farmers and landowners to prevent damage to public infrastructure. This resulted in recommendations seeking better landowner information, more preventative partnership working, improved rights of way reporting and a more coordinated approach to enforcement.

Bus and Passenger Services Task and Finish Group

The Bus and Passenger Services Task and Finish Group undertook detailed scrutiny of how Herefordshire can develop passenger transport that better serves its rural communities. The review explored the evidence available to understand demand, partnership working with operators, passenger information, accessibility, integration between bus and rail, and the important contribution made by community and not-for-profit transport. It also considered how the council can respond to changing travel needs and make best use of innovation in rural mobility.

The group's recommendations seek stronger transport data, a more effective Enhanced Partnership, better passenger information, improved bus and rail integration, support for community operators and a longer-term integrated approach to transport planning. The overall emphasis is on practical improvements that help residents access services, employment and communities, while recognising the particular challenges of running sustainable public transport across a large rural county.

Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Key recommendations made by the committee include:

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Public Rights of Way and Greenway Policy	Prioritise funding over time to replace or repair the 40 to 50 bridges vital to maintaining a joined-up Public Rights of Way network.	Herefordshire Council allocated £1 million of capital funding in 2026/27 specifically to address bridges on the network, enabling replacement and repair of key structures and removal of closures.	The £1 million investment directly addresses the infrastructure problem identified by the committee and is intended to repair and replace key bridges and remove closures.
	Strengthen the Parish Path Partnership through better organisation, engagement, coordination and communication so parishes, footpath officers and volunteers can play their full part in maintaining the network.	The Rights of Way Grant Scheme continued into 2026/27; a volunteer handbook was developed; and induction, strimming, hedge-cutting and bespoke RoSPA risk-assessment and safety training were provided to Parish Footpath Officers.	Scrutiny helped strengthen community involvement in maintaining rights of way by supporting access to grant funding, practical guidance and training for parishes and volunteers.
	Expand and improve the map-based system for reporting defects so that parishes and volunteers can better identify and potentially undertake remedial work.	The map-based reporting system remains operational. Under the new Public Realm contract, work has been undertaken to improve feedback to customers, including parishes and Parish Footpath Officers, alongside the Rights of Way Grant Scheme.	Improved reporting and grant support make it easier for parishes and volunteers to understand network problems and participate directly in appropriate local maintenance.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
	Develop or reintroduce key indicators, with interested stakeholders including the Local Access Forum, for assessing changes in the underlying health of the Public Rights of Way network.	The standard Local Access Forum PROW report now includes data on legal orders, inspection and maintenance and enforcement. Following member requests, the data was revised to provide rolling quarterly information, allowing progress to be viewed through the year.	Rolling quarterly data provides a clearer picture of changes in network performance over time, strengthening the information available to the council and Local Access Forum.
Energy Efficiency and Retrofitting	Develop a plan for improving energy efficiency and retrofitting across Herefordshire, including targets and the associated benefits for health, wellbeing and the cost of living.	A retrofit strategy was subsequently produced, setting out how the council will directly and indirectly support retrofit, with the strategy intended to be shared with the committee.	Scrutiny prompted development of a strategic framework through which the council can coordinate and assess future energy efficiency and retrofit activity.
	Analyse what would be required to bring all private rented accommodation to EPC C and identify the action the council could take.	The council identified 9,294 private rented properties, provided their EPC distribution and estimated that bringing the relevant properties to EPC C would require approximately £367 million, calculated using the Parity Pathways tool.	The analysis provides a stronger evidence base for future policy and funding decisions, giving members clearer information about the scale and cost of achieving EPC C.
	Promote the PAS 2035 standard for council-funded retrofit and investigate equivalent standards that could be considered for privately funded schemes.	PAS 2035 is being used for government grant-funded schemes, including the Warm Homes Local Grant Scheme. The council also identified alternatives available to private homeowners, including Passivhaus/EnerPHit, BS 40104 and traditional approaches.	Scrutiny strengthened assurance around standards for publicly funded retrofit while encouraging consideration of alternative approaches available to private homeowners.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Tree and Hedgerow Management	Set a percentage target for increasing tree coverage on council land by 2030.	The council agreed in the first instance identify the existing percentage of canopy coverage upon its own estate. Once undertaken it will be necessary to establish the land available for tree planting, as certain land such as Highways is likely to be constrained. From this figure a proportionate target can be established, quantifying the number of trees this would approximately equate to. In this instance it may be more appropriate to quantify number of trees given that Ash Die Back is necessitating removal and reinstatement of new planting the percentage of canopy coverage may show a deficit in the early years.	Scrutiny helped move increased tree coverage from a general ambition towards a measurable objective, subsequently reflected through baseline information and objectives in the Tree, Hedgerow and Woodland Strategy.
Land Use Management	Review and amend the Public Rights of Way reporting framework so that it better reflects the process followed by the service.	Under the new Public Realm arrangements, the system used to manage the network has been developed to improve reporting and customer feedback. The PROW team is also working with system managers to improve the detail and searchability of information about actions and works undertaken.	Improved reporting should make actions and completed works easier to examine, providing a clearer connection between reported problems and the service's response.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
	With partners, develop a plan to strengthen work on innovative methods, preventative practice and carbon mitigation in land-use management to reduce risks to the public realm.	Delivery is being taken forward through Farm Herefordshire and the Wye Catchment Partnership, alongside projects testing innovations and planned knowledge-sharing activity. A communications plan has also been drafted for further development with communications officers.	Scrutiny encouraged a preventative and collaborative approach through existing partnerships, with practical activity including innovation projects, knowledge sharing and improved communications.

Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee



Chair: Cllr Pauline Crockett

The Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee has continued to provide constructive challenge across adult social care and local NHS services.

Members examined major changes to the NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care Board, questioning how substantial reductions in running costs and closer working with Coventry and Warwickshire could affect Herefordshire's influence and whether new models of neighbourhood healthcare would properly reflect the needs of a rural county.

Adult social care demand and financial sustainability have been an important focus. Members examined budget pressures arising from increasing numbers of people requiring care and greater complexity of need, while exploring prevention, technology-enabled care, commissioning and opportunities to support more people at home. The committee maintained this oversight into 2026/27, questioning whether expenditure achieves better outcomes and examining the support available to people who move from funding their own care to council support.

The committee has also used its health scrutiny powers to examine significant changes to NHS provision. Members scrutinised the Wye Valley NHS Trust Winter Plan 2025/26, including hospital discharge, emergency demand and additional care capacity, and examined the suspension of home birth services, questioning the Trust on safety, staffing, training and the steps needed to reinstate the service. Scrutiny of proposed changes to adult mental health rehabilitation services also challenged the practical implications for Herefordshire residents, including rural access, transport, housing and community provision.

Briefings

The committee has received evidence directly from senior council and NHS leaders on changes affecting health and care services. This has included the strategy of the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust, where members explored workforce, mental-health provision, inappropriate out-of-area placements, discharge and partnership working. Members have also examined detailed neighbourhood health profiles, using local evidence on inequalities, access to services and wider determinants of health to inform future scrutiny.

Adult Social Care Demand Task and Finish Group

The Adult Social Care Demand Task and Finish Group Chair's interim report and recommendations examined why demand and expenditure are increasing and how pressures might be better managed. It found that long-term support increased by 10% between 2022/23 and 2024/25, while spending rose 29%, with particularly rapid growth among working-age adults with

physical disabilities. The group also highlighted doubled assessment waiting times, gaps in key management information and uncertainty about outcomes for people diverted from formal care. While recognising encouraging results from reablement and community prevention, it found that their financial and service impact is not consistently measured. The group has therefore focused attention on improving data, understanding demand, strengthening prevention and better demonstrating the contribution of voluntary and community services.

Health, Care and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Recommendations

Key recommendations made by the committee include:

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust Strategy	The Trust should provide the committee with an annual update on its strategic priorities, covering workforce capacity, recruitment and retention, training compliance, staff survey results and Freedom to Speak Up activity, including actions where performance requires improvement	The Trust agreed to attend scrutiny to present its annual report	This establishes an ongoing mechanism for scrutiny to monitor important workforce and organisational issues, giving members a regular opportunity to examine performance, challenge areas requiring improvement and maintain oversight of the resilience of local health services.
	Provide the committee with the findings of the national workforce survey when available, with information relating specifically to Herefordshire where possible		This strengthens the workforce evidence available to scrutiny and, where Herefordshire-specific information is available, enables members to distinguish local issues from Trust-wide performance and question the Trust about areas requiring improvement.
Carers' Partnership Board Annual Report 2025	Support the introduction of a carers' card for all carers	The Carers' Partnership Board decided to support and promote the nationally recognised Carers Card UK scheme rather than establish a separate Herefordshire card, while also exploring recognition by local businesses	Scrutiny prompted consideration of a practical identification scheme for carers. Although the proposed solution changed, the underlying objective progressed through adoption of a recognised national scheme, with potential for additional local benefits.

Scrutiny Management Board



Chair: Cllr Ben Proctor

Since the beginning of 2025, the Scrutiny Management Board has kept a close watch on the council's finances, performance and delivery of key services. Its scrutiny of the 2025/26 budget covered the draft revenue and capital budgets, proposed savings, directorate budgets, the Medium Term Financial Strategy, Treasury Management Strategy and fees and charges. This resulted in recommendations on issues including adult social care

pressures, capital programme profiling and treasury income.

During 2025/26, this financial focus continued through examination of the year-end position and quarterly monitoring, with members exploring undelivered transformation savings, recurring pressures in adult social care and housing, capital slippage and the council's plans for managing demand. The Board also examined the 2026/27 budget in detail, testing the assumptions behind the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the deliverability of savings, use of reserves and the relationship between capital investment and longer-term revenue pressures, alongside significant investment proposals for housing, education and infrastructure.

Alongside finance, members maintained a strong focus on council performance, questioning the consistency of RAG ratings and seeking clearer, more outcome-focused measures across areas including homelessness, SEND and alternative education provision. In July 2026, the Board brought several of these themes together through detailed consideration of the Dedicated Schools Grant deficit and adult social care, examining the Care Quality Commission assessment, financial pressures, transformation plans and the council's improvement response. Recommendations focused on evidence and data, prevention, community-sector commissioning, outcome measures and the costing of improvement activity.

Inequality task and finish group

The Inequalities Task and Finish Group was established to examine the causes and consequences of inequality in Herefordshire and to identify practical actions that could improve life chances for residents. As its work has progressed, the group has narrowed its focus to inequalities in educational attainment, skills, employment and social mobility, particularly for children and young people. Evidence gathered has highlighted persistent gaps in educational outcomes and access to higher education for disadvantaged young people, alongside barriers to employment and training opportunities. The group will present its final report and recommendations by the end of the year.

Commercialisation working group

The Board's Commercialisation working group reviewed fees and charges, asset management and opportunities for greater income generation. It found limited scope for fees and charges alone to make a significant contribution to the council's longer-term financial challenges, but identified a need for a clearer understanding of service costs and any resulting subsidies. It recommended

linking charges and subsidies explicitly to Council Plan priorities and applying a similar approach to council assets, with assets expected to support priorities and achieve revenue neutrality where practicable. More broadly, the group concluded that commercialisation should be a long-term programme of organisational change, supported by stronger governance, commercial skills, workforce development and a culture that enables innovation while managing risk effectively.

Scrutiny Management Board Recommendations

Key recommendations made by the committee include:

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
Q4 2024/25 Budget Outturn	To provide Scrutiny Management Board with the delivery plans for all undelivered 2024-25 savings that have been built into the Council's 2025-26 base budget, and the savings to be delivered in the 2025-26 budget.	A focused review of undelivered recurrent savings was undertaken and revised savings plans developed where appropriate. These are subject to Directorate Savings Boards and Budget Boards and monthly monitoring. Undelivered savings carried forward into 2025/26 were subsequently reported within the Quarter 1 Budget Report.	The recommendation strengthened transparency around previously undelivered savings. Revised plans were developed and brought within formal monitoring arrangements, while the schedule subsequently published at Quarter 1 gave members a clearer basis for tracking delivery and identifying savings remaining at risk.
	The executive should model the necessary capital investment to increase the supply of affordable housing such that it will significantly reduce the number of people becoming homeless.	The council had already allocated £5 million for housing provision and was exploring a council-owned housing development company. Further acquisition and development opportunities were being investigated to respond to housing demand and reduce temporary accommodation costs, with additional capital proposals to be considered through 2026/27 budget development.	The response demonstrates substantial activity consistent with the recommendation, including existing capital investment, exploration of a council-owned development company and further housing opportunities. Importantly, this work explicitly connects increasing housing provision with reducing the financial pressures associated with temporary accommodation.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
	The existing financial facility to enable the council to accelerate the delivery of S106 funded infrastructure be actively used by this administration.	The council confirmed it can internally borrow to begin eligible infrastructure works after an S106 agreement is completed, planning permission granted and development commenced. This facility was used during 2025/26 to provide an education grant for school works ahead of receipt of the associated S106 funding.	This provides a particularly tangible example of the approach advocated by scrutiny being applied in practice. The existing financial mechanism was used to release funding for education infrastructure in advance of the future S106 receipt, enabling earlier delivery of the relevant works.
	The executive should ensure there is no further delay in delivering the Planning and Regulatory Services software capital project by urgently appointing a new provider to deliver the necessary software solution.	Accepted and actioned. The Planning and Regulatory Services software contract was signed on 15 July 2025. Implementation was due to begin from September 2025, with planning and building control planned to go live by December 2026 and other services following subsequently.	The response records concrete progress following scrutiny of the delayed project. Appointment of a provider moved the project into implementation and established a timetable for introducing the replacement system across planning, building control and the remaining regulatory services.
Adult Social Care	The executive strengthens the adult social care improvement plan so that it is underpinned with a strong evidence and data base, supporting the actions prioritised for funding.	The improvement priorities are based on the findings of the Care Quality Commission assessment, with the suite of measures included in the plan directly related to its identified outcomes and actions.	This provided a clearer evidence base against which priorities, activity and subsequent improvement can be assessed.

Area of scrutiny	Recommendation	Response	Impact
	The executive prioritises the delivery of the prevention strategy and the voluntary and community sector commissioning framework and ensures these link to the improvement plan and to each other.	The Prevention Strategy and a pilot of the voluntary and community sector commissioning framework for lower-level care needs were scheduled for September 2026. Both were integrated into the improvement plan and the council's prevention duties.	The response demonstrates that prevention and voluntary and community sector commissioning have been incorporated into the wider improvement programme rather than developed separately. It also identifies concrete delivery activity through the Prevention Strategy and commissioning-framework pilot.
	The executive provides clarity on the outcome measures they will use to evidence the impact of the improvement plan.	Following feedback from Scrutiny Management Board, measures relating to delivery, impact and assurance were incorporated into the final improvement plan agreed by Cabinet.	Measures of delivery, impact and assurance were added before Cabinet approval of the plan.
	The executive ensures there is adequate resource available for data analysis to deliver the adult social care improvement plan.	Data and insight forms one of the improvement areas within the plan. Expertise from Public Health, Corporate Performance and the directorate will support analysis, with external resource commissioned where required.	The response embeds data and insight within the improvement programme and identifies resources available from across the council to support it. The ability to commission additional external expertise also provides a route for supplementing internal capacity where required.

Conclusion

This report shows a scrutiny function that has changed considerably since the 2025 review. The emphasis has increasingly shifted towards choosing the right method for each piece of work, improving the evidence presented to members and developing recommendations that are focused, practical and capable of being implemented. Task and finish groups and member briefings have complemented formal committee meetings, while changes to report formats, work programming and the way recommendations are developed have helped scrutiny make better use of committee time.

There is also good evidence that scrutiny has made a difference. Across the five committees, recommendations have influenced policies, strengthened performance and monitoring arrangements and contributed to changes in investment and service delivery. Examples range from additional investment in public rights of way bridges and changes to the assessment methodology for the Hereford Bypass, to improved consideration of children's voices, stronger measures within the adult social care improvement plan and greater transparency around delivery of budget savings. This demonstrates that scrutiny is at its most effective when it concentrates on issues where member challenge can add practical value and then follows recommendations through to understand what has changed as a result.

There remains more to do. In particular, two important elements of the 2025 review require further development: establishing a clearer shared purpose for scrutiny, and providing a more comprehensive programme of scrutiny skills development for members. The report identifies how these will be taken forward, including work following the 2027 elections and planned training on effective chairing, questioning and drafting recommendations.

The overall picture, however, is one of progress. Scrutiny has changed how it works, undertaken substantial and effective scrutiny and demonstrated meaningful impact. The task now is to embed those improvements, complete the outstanding work from the review and continue to strengthen scrutiny's contribution to good decision-making and better outcomes for Herefordshire.