

START WELL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Remote meeting held on 23rd March, 2026.

The Committee agenda is available [here](#).

The recording of the meeting is available [here](#).

Present: Councillor R.R. Thomas (Chair); Councillor H.M. Payne (Vice-Chair); Councillors A. Asbrey, J. Aviet, W. Gilligan, E. Goodjohn, S.M. Hanks, W.A. Hennessy and N.P. Hodges.

Co-opted Members: Dr. M. Price (Roman Catholic Church), K. Riddick (Parent Governor – Secondary Sector), G. Scott (Welsh Medium Education), M. Werrett (Church in Wales) P. Bond and R. Davies (Vale Youth Council).

Also present: Councillors R.M. Birch (Cabinet Member for Education, Arts and the Welsh Language), G. John (Cabinet Member for Leisure, Sport and Wellbeing), I.A.N. Perry, N.C. Thomas and E. Williams (Cabinet Member for Social Care and Health).

751 ANNOUNCEMENT –

Prior to the commencement of the business of the Committee, the Chair read the following statement: “May I remind everyone present that the meeting will be live streamed as well as recorded via the internet and this recording archived for future viewing”.

752 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE –

These were received from Councillors S.J. Haines and J. Lynch-Wilson; and L. Barrowclough (Parent Governor – Primary Sector).

753 MINUTES –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the minutes of the meeting held on 19th January, 2026 be approved as a correct record.

754 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST –

The following declarations of interest were received:

Councillor A. Asbrey	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the
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	Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was that Councillor Asbrey was a Governor of Dinas Powys Primary School, which was covered in the report and the Councillor remained in the meeting during the item.
Councillor J. Aviet	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was that Councillor Aviet was a Governor for Colcot Primary School and also had a family member that worked at Pencoedtre High School. Councillor Aviet remained in the meeting for the duration of the item.
Councillor N. Hodges	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was that Councillor Hodges was a Governor of Ysgol St. Baruc, which was covered in the report and the Councillor remained in the meeting during the item.
Councillor H. Payne	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was they were a Governor of Palmerston Primary School, which was

	covered in the report and remained in the meeting during the item.
Dr. M. Price (Co-opted Member)	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19 th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was they were a Governor of St Richard Gwyn School and a member of the Vale of Glamorgan's Governors Association, which was covered in the report and remained in the meeting during the item.
K. Riddick (Co-opted Member)	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19 th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was they were a Governor of Pencoedtre and Whitmore High Schools which were covered in the report and remained in the meeting during the item.
M. Werrett (Co-opted Member)	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19 th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was they were Head of Education for the diocese under whose remit several schools in the Vale came under. M. Werrett remained in the meeting during the item.
G. Scott (Non-voting observer – Welsh Medium Education)	Declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 5 – Presentation – School Budget Recovery Plans – Update from the Director of Learning and Skills on progress in tackling school budget

	deficits since the previous Start Well Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 19 th January, 2026. The nature of the interest was they were a Governor of Ysgol Pen Y Garth which was covered in the report and remained in the meeting during the item.
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755 TO CONFIRM VOTING RIGHTS FOR CO-OPTED MEMBERS OF THE START WELL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the voting rights for those Co-Opted Members present at the Committee meeting be noted.

Reason for recommendation

To confirm the agenda items and voting rights for those Co-Opted Members present at the meeting with voting rights.

756 PRESENTATION – SCHOOL BUDGET RECOVERY PLANS – UPDATE FROM THE DIRECTOR OF LEARNING AND SKILLS ON PROGRESS IN TACKLING SCHOOL BUDGET DEFICITS SINCE THE PREVIOUS START WELL SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 19TH JANUARY, 2026 –

The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources provided an update summary of the school financial context and recovery work.

National context was that schools across Wales were under significant financial pressure. Around one-third of primary schools and half of secondary schools were projected to be in deficit. Key pressures included, increasing demand for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) provision, underfunded pay awards and rising workforce costs.

In terms of the local context, the Vale had one of the lowest average per-pupil funding levels in Wales (18th of 22 Authorities in 2025/26), due to lower allocations for deprivation and sparsity. However, the Vale spent relatively high amounts on ALN learners (4th highest overall; 2nd highest delegated spend). That created a tough financial environment locally despite a strong commitment to ALN support.

With regard to the School Funding Framework, it was advised that funding was received from Welsh Government's Revenue Support Grant, the Council's education budget, and a substantial number of grants. Funding was distributed via a strictly regulated formula, 70% of which had to be linked to pupil numbers.

Schools were required to prepare their own spending plans by 31st May each year, carrying forward any surplus or deficit. With 85% of school budgets spent on staff, savings options were limited and often dependent on staffing changes.

In terms of the deficit position and direction of travel, at the end of 2024/25, the deficit across Vale schools was £4.1m. Projected deficits had improved since earlier estimates:

2025/26 now £13.4m (was £15.3m)
 2026/27 now £27.2m (was £30.3m)
 2027/28 now £41.2m (was £45.9m).

The number of schools forecasting deficits had reduced from 38 to 33, however, financial variation between schools (surpluses vs. deficits) was widening. Ten schools were initially reviewed of which seven required formal warning notices after insufficient early progress. It was reported that required recovery plans had produced significant savings:

£851k in-year
 £2.9m in year two
 £5.8m in year three.

Due to this progress, formal notices were withdrawn, with ongoing monitoring instead.

With regard to next steps, that would include:

- Continued close monitoring of the seven schools and wider work to intervene early with schools showing emerging risks;
- Substantial support for headteachers and governors during the budget-setting period;
- Additional council resource allocated to oversee recovery planning and monitoring;
- Development of case studies from successful schools, and increased partnership working with other Authorities;
- Continued exploration of system-level improvements in pedagogy, additional learning needs support, and allocation practices;
- Transformation and efficiency projects.

The Committee was advised that procurement and contract management reforms were already delivering savings, including £155k saved on waste services, now bought directly from the Council. Further work was underway on grounds maintenance, lettings, supply/agency staff, and digital/AI opportunities to support efficiency and reduce workload.

In terms of the overall position, the Vale had made meaningful progress in reducing projected deficits and supporting schools to stabilise finances. However, the financial situation remained challenging and would require:

- Continued early intervention;
- Sustained collaboration with schools;
- System changes;

- Ongoing efficiency work to achieve balanced budgets over the coming years.

Councillor W. Hennessy queried where could schools achieve budget savings given that the vast majority of a school's budget was staff related. The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources advised that there was a range of ways that schools could make savings, some of which could lead to a reduction in staff. Schools could also look at additional payments made to staff and structures of its leadership team. The way that courses were delivered and the number of options at GCSE and A Level could also be reviewed and schools would also look at natural staff reductions through retirement and voluntary redundancies.

The Committee noted that the withdrawal of warning letters to the seven schools was because sufficient progress had been made and revised recovery plans had been submitted.

Councillor I. Perry, not a member of the Committee but with permission to speak, commented on the declining birth rate and declining number of children going through primary school education, which had led to 2,500 empty primary school places. Councillor Perry referred to the development of new schools at a time when current school places could not be filled with some schools at 50% capacity. In response, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources advised that surplus capacity was something that the Council wanted to avoid, which was why it regularly reviewed both pupil numbers on roll and future projections to ensure that an efficient education system was maintained. Any changes to school organisation required a significant statutory consultation process, and this was something that the Council kept under review as it responded to ongoing budget pressures. Part of that wider picture included assessing the overall structure of the education system. It was important to note that schools should be planning their budgets based on the number of pupils on roll, not on their total capacity. Funding was allocated according to the number of children attending. Therefore, when schools developed their class structures and staffing models, they should do so based on their current pupil numbers.

Dr. M. Price (Co-Opted Member) raised two points. The first was that school deficits were a systemic funding problem, not just a school-level issue, although the overall deficit had reduced this year, the projected deficits for the next two years exceeded the Vale's available reserves. With two-thirds of schools already in deficit, that indicated structural underfunding at Vale-wide or Wales-wide level and not a series of individual school failures. Schools were being asked to meet regulatory and Estyn expectations without sufficient resources. The second point was about headteacher and governor well-being that was being overlooked. While support was being offered to help leaders review budgets and structures, little attention was being paid to their well-being. Pressures on headteachers were extremely high, and the financial situation they were managing was not of their own making. That again highlighted that the challenges were systemic. In response, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources acknowledged that school funding pressures were a Wales-wide issue, as highlighted in WLGA documentation. Despite that, the local authority was prioritising education by allocating funding above the Welsh Government's Standard Spending Assessment - approximately £4 million more, with further increases expected next year. It was emphasised that the Council worked

closely with schools to ensure a fair funding formula, but there were significant variations in financial positions between schools with similar profiles. Work was under way to understand why these differences occur. The current projected deficits (£27m and £41m) were based on outdated plans. Schools had now received updated three-year budgets, and the Council expected the financial outlook to change once new spending plans were submitted at the end of May. Headteachers were being encouraged to implement early savings to maximise impact across the full three-year period. The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources added that they had already met many headteachers, especially those in the most challenging circumstances. Additional guidance would be sent after Easter, with an open invitation for headteachers and chairs of governors to discuss their plans further. It was too early, however, to comment on any implications for well-being.

P. Bond and R. Davies (Vale Youth Council) commented that a reduction in teaching staff would have a disproportional effect on pupils with additional learning needs and asked what support would be available for staff facing redundancy. In response, the Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources advised that schools were not being asked to focus reductions on any particular staff group. Instead, they would review their entire staffing structures to decide what was essential for delivering the curriculum going forward. That included both teaching and non-teaching roles. Supporting learners with additional learning needs remained a high priority, and a significant share of the education budget was directed toward that. However, the Council was also exploring whether there were alternative ways to support learners just as effectively, potentially with less financial pressure, including providing more support within mainstream educational settings.

Councillor S. Hanks queried why the overall school budget deficit had increased from £4m to £13m. The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources clarified that the rapid rise in school deficits stemmed from large COVID-related grants that temporarily inflated school surplus balances. Many schools appeared financially stable because they had used those surpluses to cover in-year overspends. Now that those surpluses had been exhausted, the underlying deficits were exposed, creating a much larger funding gap. As schools were able to carry surpluses and deficits across financial years, their budgets could shift quickly. Once surpluses disappeared, schools must address both their ongoing in-year overspend and the additional amount previously masked by surplus funds, making recovery significantly more challenging.

The Chair, Councillor R. Thomas, queried whether there had been any conversations with representatives of Welsh Government about the funding for education. The Head of Strategy, Community Learning and Resources commented that the Vale of Glamorgan received less funding through the national allocation formula because it scored lower on two key measures that attracted additional resources for many other Councils such as deprivation and sparsity. The Vale was neither highly deprived nor geographically sparse, so it did not benefit from those funding elements. Despite that, the Council supplemented the education budget with extra local funding, and it recognised the importance of scrutinising how Welsh Government distributed funding and continued to report the challenges it was facing. The Council would maintain dialogue with Welsh Government, especially as similar financial pressures may emerge in other Authorities in future years.

In being asked to comment, the Cabinet Member, Councillor R. Birch, stated that challenges about the funding formula had been raised with colleagues in Welsh Government on several occasions and it would be brought up again.

There being no further comments or queries, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the update on School Budget Recovery Plans be noted.

Reason for recommendation

Having regard to the contents of the presentation and discussions at the meeting.

757 SUMMARY OF ESTYN INSPECTION OUTCOMES FOR AUTUMN TERM 2025 AND UPDATE ON SCHOOLS IN STATUTORY FOLLOW-UP (DLS) –

Estyn inspected quality and standards in education across Wales. A new inspection framework had been introduced in September 2024. From September 2024, Estyn would be engaging more regularly with schools. Schools would now have a core inspection and an interim visit within the 6-year inspection period (2024 – 2030).

During the autumn term 2025, three schools from the Vale of Glamorgan received a core inspection: Gladstone Primary, Colcot Primary and Ysgol Sant Baruc.

No follow up work was identified by Estyn in relation to three schools that received a core inspection during the autumn term.

A ‘spotlight’ highlighting interesting or innovative practice was included within the inspection reports of all three schools inspected. The inspection report for Gladstone highlighted the school’s highly effective enabling environment for younger pupils, as well as its strong partnership working to support pupils and their families. Colcot’s inspection report also noted the school’s effective partnership working and its provision to meet the needs of families. At Ysgol Sant Baruc, the use of a staff charter to support the performance evaluation process was highlighted as a notable feature.

During the autumn term 2025, one school, St Helen’s Catholic Primary, received an interim visit.

Pencoedtre High School remained in special measures. The progress of the school was monitored by Estyn on a termly basis.

Fairfield Primary and St Richard Gwyn Catholic High were both in the statutory follow up category of significant improvement. St Richard Gwyn’s school’s post-inspection action plan (PIAP) was approved by Estyn in November 2025.

Having considered the report, the Committee

RECOMMENDED –

(1) T H A T the outcomes of the Estyn inspection outcomes be recognised and congratulations sent to Gladstone Primary, Colcot Primary and Ysgol Sant Baruc on their core inspection with no Estyn follow-up activity.

(2) T H A T the progress of Pencoedtre High School in addressing their Estyn recommendations and the work that has begun in relation to Fairfield Primary and St Richard Gwyn Catholic High School to address the recommendations within their inspection reports be recognised.

Reason for recommendations

(1&2) Having regard to the contents of the report and discussions at the meeting.

758 LEARNING AND SKILLS DIRECTORATE PLAN 2026/27 (OUTLINING YEAR 2 ACTIVITIES, PERFORMANCE MEASURES AND ASSOCIATED PERFORMANCE TARGETS) TO DELIVER VALE 2030, THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PLAN 2025-30 (DLS) –

The report presented for Members' consideration the planned activities, performance measures and associated performance targets in the Learning and Skills Directorate Plan 2026-27 (Appendix A). The Directorate Plan aligned primarily to the remit of the Start Well Scrutiny Committee. The other Directorate Plans were being considered by relevant Scrutiny Committees, and their collective comments and recommendations were to be considered by Cabinet on 16th April, 2026.

The Directorate Plans had been informed by the Council's 50 commitments detailed in Vale 2030 and actions and measures had been aligned to the five well-being objectives in the Council's Corporate Plan for the period 2025-30.

Progressing the activities and associated performance targets outlined in Directorate Plans would help to meet the Council's statutory obligations under the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WCFG). Both pieces of legislation placed specific duties on the Council in relation to reviewing and setting objectives, keeping performance under review and reporting on performance, with a focus on improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Vale of Glamorgan citizens.

Scrutiny Committee Members were asked to review the Learning and Skills Directorate Plan 2026-27 (planned activities, and proposed performance measures and associated targets) and how they would support delivery of the commitments and outcomes in Vale 2030.

Members were asked to refer any comments and recommendations with regard to the Learning and Skills Directorate Plan 2026-27 to Cabinet for their consideration and endorsement. Cabinet would consider the views and recommendations from all Scrutiny Committees alongside their review of the five Directorate Plans on 16th April, 2026.

Councillor E. Goodjohn queried Action 8 – Transport Review and whether a formal implementation plan was expected to come back through Scrutiny. Councillor Goodjohn added that some early actions may start before the final plan to avoid delays, and the final product should give clear milestones so Scrutiny could track progress and confirm the review was completed this year. The Committee was advised that a report would be provided.

Councillor E. Goodjohn referred to Action 12 – School Councils & Youth Engagement, the aim of which was to create a regular, structured engagement programme with school councils. He asked whether that would include scheduled sessions and a feedback loop so young people could see how their input influences decisions. Engagement would go beyond political education sessions to become routine across the year. In reply, the Director of Learning and Skills stated that the Council wanted to create a more consistent and structured way of engaging with young people, because traditional consultation methods did not always work well for them. The aim was to use more varied and youth-friendly engagement methods and build engagement skills across all Directorates, so every service could gather young people's views directly. The Youth Service was a facilitator, helping Directorates to reach different groups and avoid relying on the same group of young people each time by ensuring a wider and more diverse range of voices were included. Overall, it was about making engagement easier, more inclusive, and better embedded across the Council.

Councillor E. Goodjohn also referred to Action 14 – Tackling Poverty & Youth Support, and would that mean working alongside youth services, and strengthening links with Citizens Advice and money-advice services. The Director stated that this was a new pilot project, and the detailed approach was still being developed. The first step was to map the process internally across and within Directorates to make sure no child slipped through gaps in support. The pilot would be delivered jointly with key partners, including schools and later local businesses. The goal was to build a comprehensive network, so every child was identified and signposted to the right support. As the pilot was at an early stage and only recently proposed, full answers were not available yet, with details to be finalised over the next few months and officers open to giving regular member briefings as the work progressed.

Councillor H. Payne (Vice-Chair) referred to free school meals provision and challenges relating to absenteeism in Year 11, and what measures were being put in place. In reply, the Head of Standards and Provision advised that Year 11 remained a main area of concern, particularly regarding attendance among pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM), where a noticeable gap existed compared with non-FSM learners. One school with a high proportion of FSM pupils had made significant progress overall, especially in improving attendance in Years 10 and 11. However, some older pupils were still finding it a challenge to adapt to new expectations, linked to legacy issues in the school. Encouraging improvements had been seen in Years 7 and 8, and the school was working closely with the Council to continue this progress. The Youth Service was also actively involved, supporting young people through engagement both on-site and through alternative curriculum options when appropriate. Those approaches aimed to keep learners engaged, maintain their

safety, and reduce the risk of them becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) after the age 16.

Dr. M. Price (Co-Opted Member) queried how deliverable was the Directorate's Plan, given the challenges around school budget deficits and the increased demand of additional learning needs, both of which were identified Corporate Risks with increasing risk scores. In reply, the Director of Learning and Skills acknowledged that the current situation was challenging for both schools and internal Council services. To ensure that the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) plan remained deliverable, the Council was working closely with neighbouring Authorities to identify good practice and explore more effective ways of meeting ALN learners' needs. That work focused on improving efficiency rather than reducing provision. It was noted that the Council was already the fourth highest spender on ALN, so the priority was to make sure funding was used effectively to support learners. A key aim was to help schools become more confident and competent in meeting ALN needs. Regarding risk scores and school finances, the new risk-scoring approach introduced this year included established ALN-related risks. A new set of mitigating actions and monitoring arrangements had been developed, and progress would be reported regularly, including at the upcoming Scrutiny meetings. The focus was on supporting schools to manage their budgets more effectively despite known pressures.

Subsequently, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the Learning and Skills Directorate Plan (Appendix A to the report) and associated measures and performance targets for 2026/27 contained within it be endorsed.

Reason for recommendation

To ensure that the planned activities, associated measures and performance targets for the Learning and Skills Directorate as detailed in the Plan were relevant and together with the other four Directorate Plans became the main means through which performance against Vale 2030 was monitored and measured during 2026/2027.

759 TASK AND FINISH REVIEW – ADDITIONAL LEARNING NEEDS RESOURCE BASES (DCR) –

The report, presented by the Group's Chair, Councillor H. Payne, requested the Start Well Scrutiny Committee to consider the findings and recommendations of the investigatory group work (Task and Finish Review) reviewing the provision of Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Resource Bases.

The Task and Finish Group (the Group) examined staffing, funding, quality, access, and value for money across the Vale of Glamorgan's 10 ALN Resource Bases, plus outreach and sensory services. Members also conducted multiple site visits and met with gathered parents, pupils and officers. The overall impression was high quality, nurturing provision, but with systemic pressure points and calculated risks, particularly around funding and staffing.

The membership of the Scrutiny Committee's Additional Learning Needs Resource Bases Task and Finish Group was 6, consisting of Councillors H. Payne (Chair), W. Hennessy (Vice-Chair), A. Asbrey, J. Aviet, W. Gilligan and S. Hanks.

The Group's terms of references was agreed at its first meeting held on 4th September, 2025, a copy of which was attached at Appendix A to the report.

The Group's overall conclusion was that the ALN provision across the Vale of Glamorgan provided high quality, child centred accessible education tailored to the needs of the learner, but some significant strategic risks were identified:

- Grant reliance;
- Cost for therapy;
- SEMH demands;
- Staffing pressures and recruitment difficulties.

Recognised strengths included:

- Highly committed and skilled staff;
- Good practice evident across all bases;
- Effective outreach services;
- Strong pupil engagement and wellbeing;
- Evidence of thoughtful, inclusive learning environments;
- Creative use of building space.

The Group expressed strong appreciation for staff commitment and emphasised the need for sustainable long-term funding and system improvements.

Having considered the report, it was

RECOMMENDED – T H A T the report be referred to Cabinet for its consideration and approval of the Task and Finish Group's recommendations provided in paragraph 2.43.

Reason for recommendation

To allow Cabinet to consider the findings, observations and recommendations of the Additional Learning Needs Resource Bases Task and Finish Group.