

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 29th April, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chair)
County Councillor Rachel Buckler, (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Su McConnel (substituting for John Crook)

Also in attendance County Councillors:
Ben Callard, Cabinet Member for Resources,
Ian Chandler, Cabinet member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Accessible Health Services
and Martyn Groucutt, Cabinet Member for Education

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Acting Chief Executive
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Scott Hereford, Service Manager Residential and Resource Management
Nicholas Keyse, Estates Development Manager
Ed Pryce, Assistant Director, EAS

APOLOGIES: County Councillor John Crook

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Pavia declared a non-prejudicial interest in Item 5 as he works for Practice Solutions Ltd. that holds the business delivery contract for the Association of Directors of Social Services in Wales.

Councillor Neill declared a non-prejudicial interest in Item 4 as Chair of the ARIC committee of EAS.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Key Stage 4 Results

Ed Pryce (Assistant Director, EAS) delivered a presentation, introduced the report, and answered the members' questions with Will McLean.

Members' Questions:

- What does it mean for pupils to have base qualifications and how does it affect their life outcomes?

Base qualifications help pupils access the next level of education, such as FE and HE, and are increasingly required for many jobs. Achieving qualifications can improve attendance and engagement, leading to better life outcomes.

- Are we limiting schools by grouping them in families, and how does this affect the support for pupils attaining the lowest third results?

Grouping schools in families allows for comparison and support, but schools also look at other families and focus on individual learners. The aim is to hold leaders accountable and ensure school improvement processes are in place.

- How do we know that the Welsh Government's expectations are good enough for pupils in Wales and Monmouthshire, and how can we change the lower attainment in Wales compared to the UK?

Welsh Government uses international tests like Pisa to compare performance. There are challenges in comparing with other UK countries due to different assessment systems, but qualifications are recognized by UK universities.

- What measures are being done for the lowest third attainment?

Measures for the lowest third attainment include improving attendance, addressing deficits, and ensuring the curriculum is appropriate. Schools focus on individual needs and support through pupil deprivation grants.

- Does relying solely on PISA for international comparisons of young people's performance, and only providing data specific to Wales, limits the ability to confidently ensure that young learners are receiving the best opportunities globally, not just within Wales?

There are challenges in comparing educational performance across borders, particularly between England and Wales, due to differences in grading systems. We need to get to a position of confidence by the end of statutory education, where students' success in vocational or academic paths is determined by employers or standardised exams like A-levels, which are comparable across the UK. Tools like the Alps system help to model prior attainment and A-level performance to add value to specific subject areas. The border counties are in a unique position and there is a need to consider various educational opportunities, such as those in nearby regions like Bristol. Despite the lack of direct comparability, the focus remains on supporting students in making informed choices and maximising their potential.

- Are there any obvious reasons for the slight difference in Caldicot's performance, and are recent difficulties improving?

The answers for Caldicot's performance are for the governing body of Caldicot to address, and it is not appropriate to delve into individual school diagnostics in this report.

- Is there any difference expected in the comparisons as a result of the new curriculum coming through the schools?

Differences are expected due to the new curriculum, which will increase the variety and differentiation of provision available to learners. The frameworks for accountability are still being developed.

- Are deficits linked to behaviour, and are we working towards emotionally healthy schools and social and emotional learning and development?

Deficits can be linked to behaviour, and schools focus on attendance, well-being, attitudes to learning, and behaviour. There is significant work on supporting learners' emotional health and development.

- How are you going to use this data with governors, teachers, parents, and pupils?

Data is shared with governors through reports and training sessions. Schools provide simplified digests of the information to their governing bodies, which can be shared in parental reports.

- Are any other – more qualitative – measures taken e.g. the happiness index, parent/pupil satisfaction?

*It is certainly important to understand the overall development of young adults beyond academic qualifications. Schools use various commercially available systems to gather feedback on students' feelings and attitudes, though this data is typically used at the school level and not aggregated upwards. Additionally, the Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) led by Cardiff University provides significant quantitative data on student well-being, involving all schools. – **ACTION: to bring a report to the committee explaining this data and its insights***

- Can true parity be achieved between male and female students?

Achieving true parity between male and female students might be challenging. However, the new curriculum and a wider range of qualifications could provide more flexibility, allowing learners to choose qualifications that highlight their strengths. This approach may create more opportunities for parity, but it remains difficult to predict the outcome.

- Have the weighted formula for free school meals families and the Index of Multiple Deprivation been challenged or reviewed for fairness?

The weighted formula for free school meals families and the Index of Multiple Deprivation have been determined and reviewed by Welsh government statisticians. The data is refreshed regularly, with the last update in 2024 and future updates planned every three years. However, there is no current work being undertaken to specifically review the fairness of the model.

- Was this data shared with Estyn, and how does it relate to recent inspections at, for example, Caldicot?

Estyn has seen the data, along with a broader range of data. They do not give this data more weight than other data. During inspections, Estyn focuses more on firsthand observations of teaching quality, learning, and student progress, rather than second-hand data like qualifications data. Three of our secondary schools have had visits this academic year. In terms of the recommendations that were identified by Estyn at Caldicot, the school has to complete what is called a post-inspection action plan and the local authority also has to complete a statement of action. So there is a huge amount of resource and support going towards Caldicot's improvement journey.

- How confident are we that the current improvement strategies are sustainable, especially given issues with school finances?

It is difficult to ever be fully satisfied with improvement strategies, as there is always room for betterment. However, the outcomes for 2024, which reset to 2019 levels, were broadly pleasing. There is

confidence in the current teaching and learning developments in schools, and the local authority believes there is still room for improvement. Financial issues are recognised as a risk, but the focus remains on maintaining a secure and effective workforce and ensuring schools use their resources efficiently. Despite financial pressures, the commitment to supporting students and improving performance remains strong.

- What mitigation strategies will be put in place, given teachers' concerns about the new curriculum coming in in September?

The new curriculum starting in September will make it difficult to maintain trending comparisons of performance. While this year's exams will be comparable to those from 2023 and 2024, the changes will affect comparisons from 2025 onwards. This will present challenges in understanding performance trends, but the current exams will still provide some continuity for comparison.

- How can teachers use this information in individual schools to improve performance?

Teachers use detailed data within schools to improve teaching and learning practices. The data helps in generating conversations with individual learners and improving future cohorts.

- Are there any plans to have parents' meetings with year 10 and year 11 parents and pupils to help them understand this data?

Schools are encouraged to share performance data in their annual governance report to parents, which is a legal requirement. This helps parents understand the data and its implications.

- Are we contacting the press to ensure they understand this data and avoid any misleading headlines?

The data is publicly available online on the Welsh Government's "My Local School" website, ensuring transparency and accessibility for the press and public.

- Are we encouraging teachers to become GCSE examiners to help improve performance?

Encouraging teachers to become GCSE examiners is a valuable suggestion, as it can provide insights into the examination process and improve teaching strategies.

- Trying to close the gender gap can be frustrating, as measures to improve males can lead to improvement in females as well, so both improve but a gap remains. Is that reflected in the national trends?

Yes, that can be an unintended consequence, but a positive consequence, of interventions that can not lead to closing a gap – but to improve the performance of both groups is positive.

- Is the number of pupils leaving with no qualifications not statistically relevant as the numbers are so low?

The number of pupils leaving with no qualifications is indeed very small. However, the focus is not on the numbers themselves but on the detailed conversations that take place in each school between the school improvement partner and the head teacher. These discussions involve understanding each learner's background, what has been done to support them, the positives, and what can be improved for future learners in similar situations. The quality of these conversations is what truly matters.

- How does the language of "expectation of outcomes" influence schools, particularly in terms of management and teaching staff? Could this language condition attitudes towards the potential outcomes and abilities of young people, potentially being detrimental to them?

It is important to maintain high expectations for all learners to raise attainment levels. The Education Endowment Foundation's work highlights that having high expectations is crucial, especially for learners eligible for free school meals. The RADI (Raising the Attainment of Disadvantaged Youngsters) approach, used effectively in some schools, advocates for a blind approach where all learners are treated with the same high expectations, setting aside preconceived ideas about their potential achievements. There is a need to continue promoting high expectations to ensure learners are not limited by perceived restrictions. The concern is not about high expectations but rather the detrimental impact of low expectations based on grouping.

Chair's Conclusion:

The Chair thanked the officers and Cabinet Member for the report, the thorough explanation of it, and the responses to the committee's questions. On behalf of the committee, the Chair recognised and expressed appreciation for all of the fantastic work going on in Monmouthshire's schools.

4. Development of Children's Placements

Jane Rodgers introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Scott Hereford and Cabinet Member Ian Chandler.

Members' Questions:

The Committee undertook thorough scrutiny of the report, highlighting the following important issues for the Cabinet Member's consideration:

- The report at section 3.5 mentions significant changes to the for-profit provider market introduced about 18 months to two years ago. How have these changes destabilised the market and increased placement costs? What do the increased costs look like, and how are they related to the committee's concerns flagged two years ago about excluding for-profit providers?

The market for residential children's homes and placements is complex, making it difficult to determine cause and effect. Even before the Welsh government's policy changes, there were already indications of placement shortages and high competitiveness, with both Welsh and English children in Welsh placements. The market has become more competitive and destabilised further, coinciding with the policy changes and local authority developments. Despite this, there remains a high demand for for-profit private placements. The costs have risen significantly, with average weekly costs increasing from around £5,000 per child a couple of years ago to around £9,000-£10,000 per child now.

- Given the increase in costs from £5,000 to £9,000 per week over two years, which is a significant rise in a short period, how have you managed your budgets to cope with these unanticipated changes?

The strategy involves safely reducing the number of children requiring placements, recruiting and retaining sufficient in-house foster placements, and developing their own placements. Despite these

efforts, managing high-cost placements remains difficult. The challenges are shared by all local authority children's services in Wales. The strategy emphasises increasing in-house foster placements, noting that residential placements involve a small number of children compared to fostering.

- Do we have any further sense of which providers will stay, convert, or exit the market following the new legislation?

It is too early to predict which providers will stay, convert, or exit the market, as many are keeping their business plans confidential. Efforts are being made to engage with providers to understand the situation better.

- What alternative strategies are being considered for sourcing suitable properties in the north of the county, including potential cross-border provision?

Developing and sharing placements with other regions and local authorities is being considered, though it is complicated. Mechanisms for exchanging placements and ensuring no voids are being discussed at regional levels.

- What are the contingencies if we cannot secure further grant money for placements?

The business cases for placements have been made considering scenarios with and without capital grants. Even without grants, there is a strong business case for accessing borrowing through the Council.

- Are there any lessons learned from the success of Caldicot that can inform the development in Monmouth?

The success of Caldicot is noted, and lessons learned include the importance of engaging with local residents and ensuring smooth transitions for young people. Specific operational details and staffing structures are being reviewed to inform future developments.

- Regarding the delays in Monmouth due to structural work, have we checked with the initial surveyor to see if there were any oversights that could be addressed commercially?

The issue of structural work delays in Monmouth is acknowledged, and it is suggested that any potential oversights by the initial surveyor should be addressed to mitigate costs.

- Do you think transitioning to non-profit care will save money, given the significant costs of providing care?

The business cases presented to the cabinet have demonstrated the potential for cost savings through non-profit care. The focus is on providing high-quality placements in a cost-effective manner, without the need to generate profit.

- How is the non-profit angle working with cross-border collaborations, especially with areas like Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, and Bristol?

Cross-border collaborations are complex due to registration requirements, but efforts are being made to share placements regionally and improve mechanisms for regional cooperation.

- How are you monitoring and keeping control of the impact on young people, particularly care leavers, during this transition period?

The impact on young people is managed through close engagement, honest communication, and support during transitions. Social workers are trained to handle uncertainties and ensure that young people are well-supported throughout the process.

- Are we able to measure the success of the placements beyond occupancy and cost metrics, such as educational attainment and transition to independence?

Success is measured through various criteria, including stability in placements, readiness for independent living, and direct feedback from children and young people. External evaluations by CIW also play a role.

- Do we have many children currently in profit placements, and how will we transition them to non-profit placements in time for Welsh Government deadlines?

The number of children in profit placements is significant, especially in independent fostering agencies. Transition plans are in place for each child to ensure compliance with future non-profit rules.

- What plans are in place to ensure that third-party providers used for supported accommodation will comply with future non-profit only rules?

Compliance with non-profit rules will be ensured through legal requirements for both placement and provider registration, monitored by CIW and Welsh Government.

- Are we seeing any uptick in fostering to reduce the number of children in care?

There has been a net increase in fostering households, and efforts continue to recruit more in-house foster carers, which is crucial for reducing the number of children in care.

- Do you think transitioning to non-profit providers will save money?

The business cases presented to the cabinet for each project have demonstrated the capacity to save money. Over time, the financial impact will be more evident, but the primary focus is on providing quality placements for children and young people.

- How are we monitoring and keeping control of how the transition period is affecting the young people we are here to provide care for?

Monitoring the impact on young people involves evaluating placement stability, planned versus unplanned ends, and direct feedback from the children themselves. Additionally, external evaluations by CIW will provide an independent overview of placement effectiveness.

Chair's Conclusion:

The Chair thanked the officers and Cabinet Member for the report and their responses to the committee's questions and wished the team every success in implementing the new strategy.

5. Investment and Commercial Interests Update

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Nick Keyse.

Members' Questions:

- At what stage does MCC look at investments like Castlegate Business Park and decide they are no longer working and take action?

The decision to review investments like Castlegate Business Park is based on the asset investment policy, which sets a 2% return on investment target. The ongoing management involves assessing risks and attractiveness of the space. If tenants vacate, the space is considered for re-letting based on demand. The decision to take further action would depend on the continued assessment of these factors.

- Regarding the farms, is the policy still for the Council to hold on to Council farms?

The policy is to hold on to Council farms as they are considered valuable assets for delivering various policy objectives, such as locally grown food and regenerative agriculture.

- How do we feel about the stability of Cineworld as a tenant for Newport?

The stability of Cineworld as a tenant for Newport Leisure Park is being monitored, and the report reflects adjustments in projections based on their current situation. Specific details about their stability are commercially sensitive.

- Do you feel there is more potential for risk from arrears for rental, either farm or commercial from Castlegate or Newport?

Rent arrears are being managed, with ongoing negotiations and actions to recover payments. The report indicates that arrears are within a manageable range, and steps are being taken to address non-payment issues.

- Where would the EV charging be in Newport Retail Park?

The EV charging bays are expected to be located between Cineworld and Harvester, as this area has the best frontage and visibility.

- Has there been any progress in moving MCC business to the site adjacent to the Solar Farm?

The land surrounding the Solar Farm is being promoted as part of the replacement LDP. Any future development for MCC business will depend on the planning process.

Chair's Conclusion:

The Chair thanked the officers and Cabinet Member for the report and their responses to the committee's questions.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Councillor Bond requested that more information be included on items in the Planner; in particular, how reports and decisions listed will affect residents. She also reminded officers of the intention to scrutinise

grant funding following the call-in to People committee of the decision regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund – **ACTIONS**

7. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Forward Work Programme

A reminder of the Special meeting on 3rd June and Members' workshop on 16th June.

8. Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were agreed.

9. Next Meeting: 3rd June 2025 (Special), 10th June 2025

The meeting ended at **1.23 pm**