

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 3rd June, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: Jill Bond, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, and Ann Webb

Also in attendance County Councillors:
Ben Callard, Cabinet Member for Resources and
Laura Wright, Cabinet Member for Education

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Richard Jones, Performance and Data Insight Manager
Hannah Carter, Performance Analyst
Jacquelyn Elias, Principal ALN Officer
Morwenna Wagstaff, Head of Service , Inclusion
Lucie Doyle, Educational Psychologist
Hayley Page, Additional Learning Provision and Partnership Lead

APOLOGIES: None

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Alistair Neill was proposed by Councillor Rachel Buckler, seconded by Councillor Peter Strong.
All were in favour: Councillor Neill was elected as Chair.

2. Appointment of Vice Chair

Councillor Rachel Buckler was proposed by Councillor Martin Newell, seconded by Councillor Paul Pavia.
All were in favour: Councillor Buckler was elected as Vice-Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest

None.

4. Additional Learning Provision / Specialist Resource Bases -Scrutiny of MCC ALP / SRBs in line with the expectations of the Additional Learning Needs Code for Wales 2021 (12 month follow up)

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff introduced the report, Jacquelyn Elias and Hayley Page delivered a presentation, and they answered the members' questions:

- The Chair requested that acronyms and initials be properly explained in reports and asked about the possible stigmatising effect of terminology.
The team acknowledged the importance of avoiding acronyms and stigmatising terminology in reports.
- A member asked about the additional learning provision and partnership lead role, evidence for statements in the report, and numbers of children in the service.

The additional learning provision and partnership lead role was initially a two-year secondment, extended for another year. The role is funded by Welsh Government grant funding. Evidence for improvements comes from the additional learning provision reviews conducted in 2023 and 2025, with summary reports and action plans available. There are currently 194 children placed in specialist resource bases, with a total of 229 available spaces.

- A request was made for evidence to support statements in the report.
*Summary reports of the additional learning provision reviews and action plans can be shared, and the team will consider making these available on the external site – **ACTION***
- The Chair asked to what extent terminology is used within range of the pupils, thinking in terms of stigma.
Efforts are made to ensure children in Specialist Resource Bases feel part of their host school community, and the language used within schools is more inclusive.
- A member asked about annual spending on out-of-county placements, the quality of individual development plans (IDPs), and funding models for Specialist Resource Bases.
Annual spending on out-of-county placements is approximately £2.3 million, excluding transport costs. The Council aims to reduce this figure by developing more local provision to keep children within their communities, which also helps to reduce transport costs. The quality of IDPs varies, and there is ongoing work to ensure consistency through cluster meetings and sharing best practices. Funding models for Specialist Resource Bases are being reviewed to ensure they reflect actual needs and staffing demands. Partnership agreements have been developed with host schools.
- The Chair asked if transport dependency has changed in light of home to school legislation changes?
*Transport dependency has not changed following the home-to-school legislation changes. This is because there remains a statutory entitlement to transport for children attending specialist provisions. The local authority continues to work closely with the pupil transport unit to identify efficiencies. Where appropriate, families are offered personal transport budgets if they choose to transport their children themselves. However, decisions are needs-led and based on what's best for the child and family. The high cost of transporting children with disabilities – particularly out of county – also motivates efforts to develop more local specialist provision – **ACTION: to provide transport costs***
- Clarity was sought about the number of pupils currently in out-of-county provision.
There are currently 55 pupils in out-of-county independent or specialist provisions.
- A member asked about the impact of travel time on attendance and well-being, capturing learner and family experiences, and risk of non-compliance with legislation.
Travel time is carefully considered, and its impact on attendance and well-being is monitored through regular reviews. Strategies are in place to support children during travel, and efforts are made to keep children as close to their communities as possible. Learner and family experiences are captured through annual reviews, one-page profiles, and ongoing communication. Non-speaking children's views are gathered creatively, involving parents and professionals. The team is confident in their compliance with the ALN Act and its requirements, ensuring all old statements are converted to IDPs by the deadline.
- A member asked about out-of-county placements in England and whether Monmouthshire hosts any.
Out-of-county placements in England are considered when appropriate, and Monmouthshire does host children from neighbouring counties in its specialist resource bases.

- A member asked if the recommendations from the previous year's report were achieved, and if any were carried over to the current report.
*Some recommendations from the previous year are ongoing or progressing, and the detailed report will be shared as soon as possible – **ACTION: to provide further detail previously supplied as an appendix***
- A member asked how the Council is mitigating the impact of budgetary pressures on additional learning needs coordinators and support staff.
The Council supports schools through professional learning and development programs, regular forums for additional learning needs coordinators, and ongoing training for support staff.
- A member asked how the Council plans to meet increased demand from pupils with social, emotional, and mental health challenges and neurodevelopmental needs.
The Council is aware of the growing needs and is working on forecasting and projecting support for these learners. They have implemented the Autism in Schools and Settings programme and ensure that needs are met regardless of diagnosis.
- The Chair asked if, in practice, a child could be placed on a pathway without a diagnosis.
Yes, a child can be placed on a pathway without a diagnosis. The approach is needs-led and person-centred, focusing on the individual child's barriers to learning rather than requiring a formal diagnosis. Tools like the one-page profile help identify what support is needed based on how the child presents. For example, a child who later receives an autism diagnosis might initially receive support for speech and communication needs. Provision is tailored and monitored over time in partnership with the child and their family. The model emphasises inclusive, high-quality teaching and strategies that benefit all learners, regardless of diagnosis, with more specialist interventions used only when necessary.
- A member asked what the criteria are for pupils to go to the bases, and whether they need a statement.
Pupils accessing Specialist Resource Bases typically have a statutory plan, such as an individual development plan, reflecting their additional learning needs. These placements are determined by a panel.
- A member asked if the Monmouthshire model has removed the need for parents to go through long appeal processes to get a statement of special educational needs.
While the model aims to meet needs effectively, there are still processes in place for appeals. Currently, there are no ongoing appeals for placements in Specialist Resource Bases. The Council works closely with parents to resolve disagreements, often using mediation and disagreement resolution.
- A member asked if there are any plans to provide our own specialist provisions given the reliance on out-of-county placements and rising needs.
The Council considers their network of Specialist Resource Bases as their special school. They believe in keeping children close to their communities and feel that their current model is effective. They are one of only two local authorities in Wales without a discrete special school building.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the report and their responses to the committee's questions and wished to extend the committee's appreciation for the team's valuable work.

5. Supporting Vulnerable Learners - Scrutiny of the effectiveness of approaches in supporting the needs of vulnerable learners (12 month follow up)

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Dr Lucie Doyle, Jacquelyn Elias and Hayley Page:

- A member asked if ELSA training is available to all pupils, and if we are promoting emotional literacy in schools.

ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) training is for staff, not pupils, but emotional literacy support is available to all pupils. ELSA training is targeted at teaching assistants, and every school in Monmouthshire has at least one trained ELSA. While the training itself isn't for pupils, schools use it to deliver time-limited interventions and ongoing support like morning check-ins. Additionally, there's a broader commitment to emotional well-being through the Healthy Settings service, aligned with Welsh Government's statutory framework. This includes action plans for schools to become emotionally healthy environments. Universal, trauma-informed professional learning is also offered to ensure all pupils benefit from inclusive, preventative approaches.

- A member asked for more qualitative and quantitative information about the 68 to 70 placements that have been maintained.

The 68 to 70 placements refer to the number of children who have been maintained in their current placements due to the support provided. The Council is working on providing more detailed qualitative and quantitative information in their reports.

- More information on the risks or concerns mentioned in the report was sought, specifically regarding schools having the time and commitment to changing processes, and the over-reliance on grant funding.

The concerns highlighted in the report include:

- *Time and Commitment: Schools face pressures on the availability of support staff, which can impact how situations are responded to, especially with children presenting distress or dysregulation. The Council supports schools with ongoing professional development and training.*
- *Changing Processes: Schools are in the process of aligning with new statutory frameworks and guidance around emotional health and well-being, which requires changes in policies and practices.*
- *Over-reliance on Grant Funding: The trauma-informed work initiated post-COVID is funded by Welsh Government grants, which are provided on a year-by-year basis. The Council is developing an in-house model of professional learning and training to ensure sustainability should the grant funding end.*

- It was noted that additional reports that are linked in the main report can't be opened – **ACTION**
- A member asked for more information about the concerns in 3.4.10.

The key issues include staffing pressures, systemic change and funding uncertainty. There is a risk that schools may not always have enough emotionally attuned adults available to support children in distress, due to limited support staff. Schools are adapting to new statutory frameworks on emotional health and well-being, which requires ongoing support from the local authority to align policies and practices. Much of the trauma-informed work began with Welsh Government COVID-related well-being grants. While this funding continues, it's allocated annually, creating uncertainty. In response, Monmouthshire is developing a sustainable in-house training model in partnership with Traumatic Stress Wales to ensure continuity if external funding ends.

- A member asked about the provision of educational psychologists, and whether officers feel they can manage the expectations from parents and schools.
There is a national shortage of educational psychologists, but Monmouthshire is fortunate to have a full team. They support Cardiff University, including by having trainee educational psychologists work with the team. The team engages in preventative work and offers professional learning to schools. Each school has a link educational psychologist who works closely with the additional learning needs coordinator to prioritise individual young people. The service also offers various ways for schools to access support, including anonymous consultations and problem-solving sessions.
- A member asked if, in future, numbers or percentages be given in place of words like 'most' and 'many', e.g. in 3.5.2.
The language used in the reports follows Estyn's standardised terminology. This language is intentionally used because it aligns with Estyn's quantifiable categorisation system and reflects expected inspection language. Clarifying these terms and quantifying their meaning can form part of the glossary that will be created and included in future reports.
- A member asked what provisions are in place for the one pupil not covered by the figures in 3.7.6.
The apparent omission was due to a wording issue in the report. The pupil in question was supported through a managed move to another mainstream school. So, all pupils were accounted for; the confusion arose from how the sentence was structured.
- A member asked if there any special provisions provided for our children looked after.
The Council prioritises children who are looked after within all their provisions for vulnerable learners. They have a vulnerable learner lead role and a statutory officer specifically responsible for children looked after. These children are given priority access to services such as the education support team and the educational psychology service.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the report and their responses to the committee's questions and reiterated the committee's appreciation for the team's work.

6. Risk Register Update - To update members on the Council's Risk Register and to agree any future areas for scrutiny.

Richard Jones introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Ben Callard:

- A member asked for more detail on the identification of major, substantial, moderate, minor, and likely, probable, and unlikely risks.
*The identification of these risks is underpinned by the strategic risk management policy, which includes categorisation of different levels of impact and probability. This policy can be shared with the committee for further clarity – **ACTION: to send further detail***
- A member asked who checks the equivalence of these assessments, and how consistency is applied.
The risk assessments are initially identified in service business plans and reviewed by the senior leadership team. They ensure the assessments are robust and consistent, guided by the risk management policy.
- A member asked if there is a risk matrix that shows how risks like major adult social care provider failure fit into the risk register.

The risk radar identifies potential risks that could impact the Council or the community. The strategic risk register focuses on high or medium-level risks to the delivery of objectives. Specific risks like adult social care failure are considered and can be escalated if needed.

- A member reiterated the request for more detail on the forward work plan to understand the impact on residents and identify what needs to be scrutinised.

*The comments will be fed back to those responsible for coordinating the work planner to consider when updating it – **ACTION: to follow up with SLT***

- A member asked if the criteria for risk identification could be appended to the document for residents to understand without searching for another document.

A summary of the different levels of categorisation used to inform the risk assessments can be included in future reports.

- A member asked if there a lack of mitigation detail in the risk register, and if there are specific mitigation actions, progress to date, or timescales?

The risk register captures significant mitigations in place to address risks. More detailed mitigations may be found in directorate risk registers and service plans. The key mitigations are included in the strategic risk register to ensure they are maintained and up to date.

- A member asked if there is an underdeveloped link between risk and budget, and how budget implications or reserve strategies are captured.

The risk register identifies specific risks related to finances. It informs budget considerations and decision-making, ensuring that risks are taken into account within the limited resources available.

- A member asked how the climate emergency is integrated into the risk register and Council budgets and plans?

The risk register identifies risks related to the climate and nature emergency, which are linked to the objectives in the Community Corporate Plan. The register captures significant mitigations and considers how risks integrate with other priorities and plans.

- A member asked why the threat of legal challenges has been de-escalated, given the increasingly litigious nature of society.

The risk of legal challenges has not necessarily diminished but will be managed within the legal team's directorate risk register. This ensures that specific risks are managed at the appropriate level and can be escalated if needed.

- A member asked if the implication is that there is less threat of legal challenge, or that our ability to deal with such risks has improved.

The implication is that our ability to deal with legal challenges has improved, allowing the risk to be managed at the directorate level rather than as a strategic risk.

- The Chair asked how the financial risk can be graded as having reduced if the financial pressures and medium-term financial gap have increased?

The financial risk grading reflects the overall management and mitigation efforts. While the financial pressures and gap have increased, the Council's ability to manage these risks has improved, leading to a reduced risk grading. The upcoming outturn report will provide further details on the financial position.

- The Chair asked how the risk of increasing school deficits is being addressed in the risk register?

The risk of increasing school deficits is considered within the broader financial risks and is managed through ongoing financial oversight and support to schools. The specific details of school reserves and deficits will be addressed in the outturn report.

- The Chair asked how risks are prioritised, such as comparing the risk of not meeting Net Zero by 2030 with the risk of not returning school attendance to pre-pandemic levels?
The risk register assesses each risk based on its specific impact and likelihood. The prioritisation of risks considers the Council's capacity to influence and mitigate them. While both risks are important, the Council's ability to address them may differ, influencing their prioritisation.
- The Chair further asked if we really understand the consequences of non-attendance at school –
ACTION: to provide detail as to how and why 9B, the risk of school non-attendance, is at Medium (8), given its importance
- A member noted the reduction in the risk score for item 11B – from 16 to 12 – being questionable given ongoing risks of flooding in areas like Caldicot.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers and Cabinet Member. He emphasised the importance of the risk register in identifying and managing strategic risks to the organisation. He highlighted the need to understand the risk environment, the progress of mitigations, and the potential need to refer issues to other committees. He noted the key changes in the risk register, including adjustments to workforce risk, reduction in school attendance risk, division of climate risk, and de-escalation of two risks to directorate risk registers.

7. Date of Next Meeting: 10th June 2025

The meeting ended at **12.38 pm**