

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 18th February, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Laura Wright (Chair)
County Councillor Jackie Strong, (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler, Simon Howarth, Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, and Peter Strong substituting for Maria Stevens

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

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Diane Corrister, Head of Children's Services

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Maria Stevens

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting at [People Scrutiny Committee - 18th February 2025 - YouTube](#)

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Penny Jones declared a non-prejudicial interest as an Independent Member of Aneurin Bevan University Health Board.

2. Public Open Forum

No public present.

3. Inclusion Strategy and Additional Learning Needs Policy

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff and Jacquelyn Elias introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People.

What has been the effect of the vulnerable learner lead role on the numbers of pupils with reduced absences and levels of exclusion?

The vulnerable learner lead role has been in place since March 2023. While there have been high levels of exclusion recently, this trend is mirrored regionally and nationally. There is

ongoing work to manage and reduce exclusions, with schools are now being better supported and challenged regarding exclusions, and there is a greater understanding of using exclusion as one of the tools in their toolkit.

Are there significant cost benefits from the King Henry School model?

The potential benefits for children with additional learning needs are the continuity and consistency offered by the model at the school, which is expected to provide smoother transitions and build long-lasting relationships with key staff. The inclusion of a Specialist Resource Base (SRB) at King Henry School will further support children with additional needs. This can prevent situations from escalating and potentially offer cost savings by keeping children in local mainstream schools.

Are we seeing pressure from children coming out of private education due to increased fees?

There are not significant numbers of learners leaving the independent sector to join MCC schools. However, there is capacity in the system to accommodate any such students, and the inclusion service would support those with additional learning needs through the usual process.

Have we had any children with additional learning needs coming from private education?

There are around 10 children who have moved from private education to Monmouthshire schools. She also mentioned that there is one child with additional learning needs currently going through an assessment process after moving from an independent setting.

How do you identify children of service families and are you confident that you are identifying them all?

The identification of children of service families is done through close work with the Armed Forces Covenant. There is a service family worker who helps in this process. While there is confidence in the identification process, it is acknowledged that there might be hidden cases, especially among reservist families.

What work is done in relation to supporting service children?

The local authority works closely with the Armed Forces Covenant to ensure support for service children. This includes applying for grants where there are clusters of service children and recognizing the unique challenges they face, such as frequent school changes.

Councillor Peter Strong also paid tribute to Raglan School for their excellent work with service children, noting their recent bronze award from the Supporting Service Children in Education Cymru group.

How much work is done in schools with head teachers and staff in identifying young people with specific learning difficulties (dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia)?

There is an ongoing program of raising awareness and training in the whole school community for literacy and numeracy aspects of specific difficulties. The Monmouthshire Specialist Teaching Service supports schools in meeting the needs of children with literacy-based needs or dyslexia. The approach is holistic, focusing on upskilling school staff and making reasonable adjustments in the classroom.

Has the identification and support for children with specific learning difficulties improved, and who decides the direction of support?

The identification and support for children with specific learning difficulties have improved. The process is needs-led, and the Monmouthshire Specialist Teaching Service plays a key role in supporting schools. The decision on the direction of support is made through a person-centred approach, considering the individual needs of each child.

How do we ensure that children with specific learning difficulties are identified early, especially before transitioning from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3?

The focus is on identifying children early in Key Stage 2 and ensuring consistent support during their transition to secondary education. Professional learning offers and reasonable adjustments are emphasized to support children even before receiving care plans from health services.

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What percentage of Monmouthshire children are having to go outside the county for specialist provision, and how do we ensure the needs of children with low incidence disabilities are met? How do we ensure that children with specific communication needs, such as those who are deaf, receive the best education possible?

The local authority works with the regional service CENTCOM to support children with low incidence disabilities such as deafness or visual impairments. Most children with these needs are included in mainstream settings with appropriate support. The approach is person-centred, involving the child and their family in decision-making. There are very few children who go outside the county for specialist provision.

Do we have statutory responsibility for home-schooled children, and is there a process to physically see these children regularly?

Yes, there is a statutory responsibility for home-schooled children. The local authority has an elective home education officer who visits families when a child is deregistered from school and conducts regular reviews to ensure the education provided is suitable. However, parents can opt out of visits unless there are safeguarding concerns.

How do we ensure that children with additional learning needs are identified and supported effectively?

The local authority uses a needs-led approach, focusing on individual needs rather than labels. The Monmouthshire Specialist Teaching Service supports schools in identifying and meeting the needs of children with specific learning difficulties. Professional learning and reasonable adjustments are emphasized to support children effectively.

How do we support children with specific learning difficulties in mainstream settings?

The approach includes upskilling school staff, making reasonable adjustments in the classroom, and using technology to support children with severe writing and spelling difficulties. The focus

is on holistic support within the classroom rather than removing children for separate interventions.

How much provision is made for children when they get to the age of 18 onwards?

Under the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act, provision extends from 0 to 25 years. The local authority supports post-16 learners in further education or vocational paths, ensuring continuity of support for those with individual development plans (IDPs).

Do we have the same facilities as in England for supporting children with special needs until they are 26?

Yes, Wales now mirrors the English system, supporting children with additional learning needs up to the age of 25. This includes maintaining IDPs and ensuring appropriate further education placements.

Do we have statutory responsibility for home-schooled children and is there a process to physically see these children regularly?

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Is the number of home-schooled children rising significantly, and if so, why?

Yes, the number of home-schooled children has increased significantly across Wales. The reasons for this rise are varied, including lifestyle choices and other personal reasons. The local authority monitors these numbers and provides support where needed.

Do we provide funds or allowances to families who home-school their children?

No, the local authority does not provide funds or allowances to families who home-school their children. Occasionally, grants may be available for learning resources, but it is not the local authority's responsibility to provide educational provision for these families.

How much provision is made for children when they get to the age of 18 onwards?

Under the new Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal Act, provision is made from ages 0 to 25. Monmouthshire supports children post-16, either in college or independent specialist colleges, and ensures that they receive appropriate education and vocational training.

Do home-schooled children miss out on social interactions with other children?

While home-schooled children may not attend a traditional school, many are part of networks and groups that provide social interactions through various activities and events. These networks help ensure that children still have opportunities for socialisation.

What strategy do we have for identifying children educated 'other than school'? Is there a process to address those needs if it's felt they aren't being met at home?

The strategy for identifying children educated 'other than school' (EOTAS) involves several key components. EOTAS includes children receiving education outside of a school setting and Monmouthshire has an updated policy out for consultation. The elective home education (EHE) officer within the Education Welfare Service plays a crucial role in tracking and monitoring the numbers of homeschooled children and exploring the reasons behind parents' choices to homeschool. Support and monitoring for homeschooled children are emphasised, with a focus on understanding whether parents are choosing to homeschool due to unmet needs and supporting and challenging this decision when necessary.

If a homeschooled child has an Individual Development Plan (IDP), the local authority must review and decide whether to maintain it, ensuring that the additional provision identified in the IDP is met. Discussions with parents focus on how they plan to meet the additional provision, and if they are unable to do so, the local authority may intervene to ensure the child's needs are met. If the local authority feels a child is not receiving suitable education through homeschooling, they may take further steps through the Education Welfare Service to address the situation.

In terms of children of offenders – how are they identified and what specific support is in place for them?

Children of offenders are typically identified through schools. A person-centred approach is used to assess their support needs and those of their families. Often, a trauma-informed approach is applied to help these children understand and cope with their situation, especially if the offense has had a significant impact on them. A team around the child is formed to provide necessary support, which may include educational psychology services, school-based counsellors, or other relevant professionals. The needs of these children can be complex and vary greatly, requiring tailored support to help them develop a sense of self separate from their offending parent.

Is there a process to regularly see the children who aren't in school? Do we flag to any other organisations or authorities?

The Education Welfare Service has a dedicated Elective Home Education (EHE) officer who visits families when a child is deregistered from school for homeschooling. This officer conducts initial visits and follows up within a few months to ensure the education plan is progressing. Additionally, there is a "Children Missing in Education" policy to ensure that children who come off school rolls are accounted for and receiving suitable education. The EHE officer also offers regular reviews and monitoring of the homeschooling situation to ensure that the education provided is suitable, effective, and efficient. However, parents can currently opt out of visits from the local authority, which poses a challenge. If there are any safeguarding concerns, these are referred to the appropriate systems for further action.

How many children are home educated currently? Is the number significantly raised? Should we be worried about the number being homeschooled?

There are around 150 children being electively home educated in Monmouthshire, which is a number that has grown over time. Parents may choose to homeschool for a variety of reasons, including lifestyle choices and other personal reasons. The Council ensures contact with homeschooling families, providing support and ensuring they can access their own support networks, but does not provide funds or allowances for homeschooling. Sometimes grants are available and learning resources and materials may be provided.

Does home schooling have an effect on children's social development?

Whilst homeschooled children are not attending school, many are part of strong networks and social groups, which organise events and activities, allowing children to socialize and participate in educational outings, such as museum visits. Elective home education is often a conscious lifestyle choice by parents, and the Council aims to ensure these children receive the necessary support.

Chair's Summary:

The Committee would like to keep a watching brief on trends related to exclusions, and to keep an eye on numbers coming in from private school. There is an action for the Chief Officer for Children and young People to provide the specific number of home educated children.

We ask the Chief Officer for Children and Young People to highlight to Welsh Government the need to consider the safety and monitoring of home educated children, in line with the imminent change in English legislation – action for Chief Officer for Children and Young People).

4. Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals

Cabinet Member Ben Callard delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Davies, Cabinet Member Ian Chandler, Jenny Jenkins and Tyrone Stokes.

Are there any caveats on the £2.9 million expected from the Welsh Government?

Some of the additional funding from the Welsh Government is expected to be earmarked specifically for social care and health. This earmarked funding will offset other funding, allowing redistribution to other services as required. The exact details are still being finalised, but there is confidence in closing the remaining gap without further impact on services or Council tax.

When will the police and Crime Commissioner's precept be available to the public?

The police and community councils have recently provided their precept proposals. This information is being processed and will be included in the final budget papers, which will be presented to the cabinet on March 5th and to the Council on March 6th.

Do we charge for the administration of the police precept?

No, the local authority does not charge an administration fee for the police precept due to regulatory restrictions. The arrangements around the Council tax base and collection rate are strictly regulated.

How does the £125,000 staffing review saving within the home care teams equate with the increased demand and pressure on home care teams?

The saving is part of a broader strategy to right-size care packages and support people within their communities for as long as possible. The review aims to consolidate existing vacancies without compromising the quality of care or delaying transfers of care from hospitals. The Cabinet Member confirmed they believe it is sustainable without impacting service delivery. Officers added that they are confident in maintaining service levels despite the vacancies, as they have been managing with these vacancies for a considerable time and are changing the way services are delivered.

What changes are planned for youth clubs in rural areas?

The plan is to withdraw the standalone rural youth service provision in the South of Monmouthshire and focus on the youth service provision within the four main towns (Caldicot, Chepstow, Abergavenny, and Monmouth). The services required in rural areas will be absorbed by the existing provisions in these towns.

How successful are we in getting maximum Continuing Healthcare (CHC) funding from the NHS?

Securing CHC funding remains a challenge, particularly for younger people with mental health and learning disabilities. While there is more success with older people, the process is complex and often involves long-standing disputes. The local authority is actively lobbying Welsh Government to address these challenges.

Is any of the increased investment in key infrastructure specified for bridge maintenance, particularly the chain bridge?

The work required for the Chainbridge is not specifically covered in the budget. However, a grant application has been submitted to the Resilient Roads Fund to cover the necessary work, and the outcome is expected by the end of March.

How do we budget for the costs associated with bed blocking and how the social care budget manages these costs, particularly when there are delays in discharging patients from hospitals?

The local authority provides care packages based on needs assessments, and the costs are part of the normal budget for externally commissioned services. Negotiations with the health board determine whether costs are covered by social care or continuing healthcare funding.

Does the revenue from car parking fees have to be reinvested into car parking?

The revenue from car parking fees is ring-fenced and goes back into highways, not specifically into car parks.

Please can you explain what the £46,000 allocated for the Together Works project in Caldicot is?

The Together Works in Caldicot was funded by the Shared Prosperity Fund, not the revenue budget. The Shared Prosperity Fund has been cut, putting services at risk, but Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths has been working on a solution to keep Together Works open. The £46,000 mentioned was the remaining allocation from the Shared Prosperity Fund.

What are the savings related to Welsh language services?

The savings are achieved by utilising technology to deliver Welsh translation services more cost-effectively, reducing the labour content while maintaining quality through human validation.

How are the savings in Mon Life's budget being achieved, particularly in leisure services?

The savings in Mon Life's budget are achieved through various measures, including an options appraisal for the Old Station in Tintern, reducing subsidies for the Borough Theatre, and increasing income from leisure centres. The income shortfall across Mon Life is due to the diverse nature of its portfolio, which includes both commercial and non-commercial services. Leisure centres have seen strong income and increasing memberships. The plan is to continue this trend to provide additional income.

Where are the £110,000 savings for community hubs going to come from and are there any redundancies planned? Is the resulting disservice to the community worth it, as reducing opening hours might negatively impact residents, as these services are crucial for the community.

The Cabinet Member explained that savings will come from reducing the opening hours of the four main hubs (Abergavenny, Caldicot, Monmouth, and Chepstow). There are no changes proposed for Usk and Gilwern hubs. The importance of the services provided by the hubs was acknowledged and it was stated that if the financial situation allowed, there would be consideration given to not reduce the opening hours. However, due to the budget pressures, the savings are necessary, the aim being to manage demand, while bringing a budget saving forward.

Could the ceasing of insurance for cybersecurity be explained?

The cybersecurity insurance policy costs just under £100,000 a year and is considered not to represent good value for money. The local authority will self-insure in the event of a data breach, and this decision does not impact the cybersecurity provisions in place, which remain robust and are managed in collaboration with the SRS.

Does the SRS (Shared Resource Service) has its own insurance for cybersecurity?

It is unlikely the SRS would be covered specifically for the costs associated with a data breach, as this type of insurance is quite niche.

Are there plans to extend the opening times of leisure centres to support the trend of increasing memberships?

Despite the reduced opening hours implemented last year, the leisure centres have continued to see strong growth in memberships. Extending the opening hours would incur additional costs, which would reverse the savings achieved and that there are no current plans to revert to the previous opening hours. Should the financial situation improve, extending the opening hours could be reconsidered, however, given the current budget constraints, maintaining the reduced hours is necessary.

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Has an Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) been undertaken for the withdrawal for the standalone rural youth service provision in the south of Monmouthshire?

Yes, Integrated Impact Assessments (IIA's) have been undertaken for all budgetary proposals.

Are the documents relating to the capital side of the budget available, to detail specific projects like school modernization and infrastructure improvements?

All the information related to the capital budget proposals is available on the website if there are further questions ahead of the Council meeting, Cabinet Members and officers are available to assist.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair advised that the questions and responses would be summarised and presented formally to the Cabinet, together with the draft minutes of the meeting for the Cabinet meeting on 5th March 2025.

5. People Scrutiny Committee Forward work Programme and Action List

Councillor Jackie Strong requested 'Age-friendly status for Monmouthshire' be added to the forward work programme, with an invitation to the Older Person's Commissioner. It was felt the Committee should have an oversight of the Council's plans for achieving age-friendly status and actions taken over the past year.

Councillor Laura Wright (Chair) raised mentioned discussing with officers the specifics of what the committee wants to cover regarding Tudor Street and when it should be brought to the committee.

In terms of actions from the last meeting in respect of the Homeseach policy, further information would be sent to the committee.

Councillor Simon Howarth highlighted that the forward work programme had many items listed with unconfirmed dates and requested this be taken up with officers and relevant Cabinet Members to ensure there was a clear direction.

6. Cabinet and Council Planner

This was noted.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting held on 21st January 2025

The minutes were agreed, proposed by Councillor strong and seconded by Councillor Jones.

8. **Next Meeting: 2nd April 2025 at 10.00am**

The meeting ended at **12.49 pm**

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