

# Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 20th February, 2024 at 10.00 am**

## Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)  
County Councillor Laura Wright (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Alistair Neill, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ann Webb and Laura Wright

Also in attendance County Councillors: County Councillor MaryAnn Brocklesby, Leader and County Councillor Ben Callard, Cabinet Member for Resources

## Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager  
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer  
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources  
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place  
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People  
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health  
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.  
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance  
Alexis Edwards, Assistant Director (School Improvement)

**APOLOGIES:** County Councillor Martyn Groucutt

**Note:** the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2npsS\\_9yCjU&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=16](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2npsS_9yCjU&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=16)

### **1. Declarations of Interests**

The Chair declared a non-prejudicial interest as chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee for the Education Achievement Service.

### **2. Public Open Forum**

None.

### **3. Month 9 Budget Monitoring - To scrutinise the budgetary position (revenue and capital) for services falling within the committee's remit at Month 9.**

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Frances O'Brien, Tyrone Stokes, Peter Davies, Jane Rodgers, Peter Davies, Jonathan Davies and Dave Loder:

#### **Key points raised by Members:**

1. How do you propose that we ensure schools are able to provide a good education to children, with 16 of them now in deficit?
2. What are your views on the additional responsibilities being transferred by Welsh Government e.g. free school meals – what can be done about those? Is there anything else that is pertinent that we can be informed about?

3. As we are looking retrospectively and can see the areas where there is an overspend, what are the proposed recovery measures? Can residents be reassured that they will be dealt with?
4. We have heard about the conditions that need to be met every year by the council, but in terms of £3.6m forecast to be over budget, what's different this year?
5. Could residents reasonably ask about the strength of our forecasting given that £3.1m overspend was predicted at Month 6 and that has increased to £3.6m at Month 9?
6. The £180k deficit for Borough Theatre is surprising – what are the reasons for that? Is there anything that we can do as Councillors to help with promotion etc.?
7. It is good to see a surplus for Newport Leisure Park but there was a £47k shortage – is that being addressed? And Castle Gate, at £96k?
8. What is the explanation for the cost of ALN transport from Carmarthenshire?
9. The report shows an increase in income for Monmouth Leisure Centre which is very encouraging, but the budget proposal is to reduce hours there – is that counterproductive, just as we are seeing increased use?
10. Concerning in-year pressures for Social Care, particularly Adult Social Care, what do we anticipate the progress on budget savings to be at the end of the year?
11. Is the increase in Care Home placements short-term e.g. for those coming out of hospital or who need to recover from a fall, or is it a matter of those who have had their needs assessed and that is the best place for them?
12. A huge amount of pressure is put on unpaid carers and family members to support individuals at home – can we understand more about that?
13. Regarding children's placements, are we actively rebalancing services, looking to register more non-specialist placements? Or are those issues presenting specialist placements and we have no choice than to source from the market?
14. Concerning the significant increase in providers fees, do we fully understand their costs and requirements?
15. Is it correct that there has been a total deterioration of £686k in the deficit forecast between Month 6 and Month 9?
16. What is the expectation of the actual forecast overspend in our services, as opposed to measures taken in-house to try to balance them, and what assumptions are being made for the budget about whether or not we will be in balance within our services by the end of next month?
17. Is it correct that the three principal services that drive expenditure within the council have deteriorated by £617k between Month 6 and Month 9, and that the forecast overspend for the year for those services is now £5.04m? And if the law, governance and resources overspends are added, it would take the forecast overspend to £5.1m for the year-end?
18. In Highways, what is the explanation of why there is an underspend £26k when we have seen an increased fee income of £339k?
19. Can you expand on what the capital budget underspend of £3.5m and slippage means in terms of the delivery of capital projects, and how we are managing and using those funds?
20. Regarding the time slippage for completion of King Henry school, is there a revised time for opening, at this stage?

**Summary:**

The committee considered a number of points including the provision of education to children, the transfer of additional responsibilities by the Welsh Government, recovery measures for overspending, the strength of forecasting, the deficit for Borough Theatre, the surplus for Newport Leisure Park, the cost of ALN transport from Carmarthenshire, the increase in income for Monmouth Leisure Centre, in-year pressures for Social Care, the increase in Care Home placements, the pressure on unpaid carers, children's placements, the increase in providers' fees, the deterioration in the deficit forecast, the expectation of the forecast overspend in services, the deterioration in the principal services that drive

expenditure within the council, the underspend in Highways, the capital budget underspend and slippage, and the time slippage for the completion of King Henry school.

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and officers. The recommendations and report were moved.

#### **4. Exam Performance - Scrutiny of the latest exam performance data.**

Leader Mary Ann Brocklesby and Ed Pryce (EAS) introduced the report. Will McLean and Ed Pryce answered the members' questions:

Key points raised by Members:

P60, how can we improve and learn the lessons from the schools that are doing well, to help the schools in the lower third?

What are other schools in Wales doing to close the gap for FSM pupils that we should be doing?

Is there a benefit in extending the way we look at this beyond Wales, and including what's going on in the rest of the UK?

Could a report like this be prepared with the lay reader in mind?

Is the definition of 'family average' too narrow? Could we compare more, in a wider sense in Wales and England as well, albeit noting that we have a different system of scoring from England?

Are you satisfied with the attainment in Monmouthshire, particularly given that Wales has the lowest attainment in the UK?

The report states that figures aren't comparable but is there not a way to see things more clearly right at the start? It is difficult to see how we can assess them.

Is it correct that we can't compare with our neighbour but also can't compare with the last 3 years?

Regarding comparisons, why has Wales diverged so much from England? An explanation of the difference in grades would be very helpful.

Relating to the UK, is it possible to relate black and white passes/fails? How do ranges help – presumably there needs to be a pass/fail situation?

Why are Free School Meals numbers less, and what are we doing about it?

Why is Caldicot not doing so well – is it linked to any of the recent measures there?

Key issues in the report are more about process than what the information tells us – it would be useful to up front in the report exactly what the data is telling us.

Is inflation in exam results still built into the data? Where we are, in terms of the baseline?

Will future years see a marked drop between schools where there has been a difference in performance?

Summary:

The committee considered a number of points including improving and learning from successful schools to help lower-performing schools, closing the gap for FSM pupils, extending comparisons beyond Wales to include the rest of the UK, preparing reports for lay readers, defining and comparing key metrics and making figures more comparable and clear, assessing attainment in Monmouthshire and Wales, understanding the differences in grades and performance between Wales and England, the performance of specific schools such as Caldicot, clarifying inflation in exam results and predicting future performance trends between schools.

Thank you to the Leader and officers. The report was moved.

## **5. School Attendance - Scrutiny of the latest school attendance data.**

Leader Mary Ann Brocklesby and Sharon Randall-Smith introduced the report. Sharon Randall-Smith and Will Mclean answered the members' questions:

Key points raised by Members:

Regarding primary level attendance and the comparison figures, was 5% not attending on a given day deemed good in 2018/19, or would that 95% attendance still be an unacceptable level to return to?

To clarify the figures for secondary school, in 22/23 FSM attendance improved to 88.4%, but still below the pre-pandemic of 95.1%?

Is it correct that for male FSM pupils, attendance is still only 79%?

A clarification of what the percentages mean in numbers and versus UK data would be useful. The inclusion of range and median would also be useful.

Table 1 has a different Y axis than Table 2 and 3. When nearing 100% could the tables be on a similar axis so they can be more easily compared?

P10, which are the four schools listed?

What are the effects from Covid still being dealt with? Why have these pupils and families become so disengaged?

Over 20% of secondary pupils are absent – are they those that generally have FSMs?

Is the significant level of non-attendance driven by a relatively small number of pupils not attending a great deal of time, or is it spread more evenly across the student body?

The grant for the 5 education welfare officers runs out in March 24 – have we secured funding for their ongoing employment?

P11, 30 primary schools are numbered 1-30, it would be useful to have them listed or a key given.

A breakdown of the reasons for illnesses would be useful in the future.

Do we have the necessary data to allow us to see where pupils are now from when they left the school system, to ensure that we're properly monitoring their attainment levels?

Are we in a danger of creating a gold standard level of support, creating a downward spiral where more pupils could fall out of the system, with us providing great levels of support at additional cost? That we become victims of our own success in providing support?

Summary:

The committee considered a number of points including attendance levels for primary and secondary schools, including comparisons with pre-pandemic levels and UK data, clarification of figures and percentages for attendance, including breakdowns by gender and FSM status, presentation of data in tables, including the use of consistent axes for comparison, identification of specific schools and their attendance levels, the effects of Covid on pupil and family engagement, analysis of non-attendance, including its distribution across the student body, funding for education welfare officers, including a breakdown of reasons for illnesses, the monitoring of attainment levels for pupils who have left the school system and potential risks and challenges in providing support to pupils.

Thank you to the leader and officers. The report was moved.

**6. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List**

Note that the Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy was added to 15th October, with the committee's agreement.

**7. Council and Cabinet Work Plan**

**8. To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 30th January 2024**

The minutes were confirmed.

**9. Next Meeting: 19th March 2024**

The meeting ended at **12.28 pm**