

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Thursday, 26th January, 2023 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Sue Riley (Chairman)
County Councillor John Crook (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Christopher Edwards, David Jones, Jayne McKenna, Maureen Powell, Maria Stevens, Jackie Strong

Also in attendance County Councillors: Rachel Garrick, Cabinet Member for Resources and Martyn Groucutt, Cabinet Member for Education

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance

APOLOGIES: County Councillor T. Thomas, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Accessible Health Services

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

No submissions were received.

3. Budget Scrutiny: Scrutiny of the budget proposals for 2023/24. A presentation tailored to scrutiny of the areas falling within the remit People Scrutiny Committee will follow.

The Cabinet Member for Resources presented to the committee the proposals for 2023-2024 (presentation available online) prior to the committee asking questions.

Challenge:

In terms of how this budget may affect children and young people, you mention that the capital programme oversees the maintenance and enhancement of our roads schools and leisure centres etc, so with the 3% efficiency saving proposal, would you expect that across the board? Some schools are new and have undergone major improvements in recent years and most schools were in a sound financial position during the pandemic, thanks to the additional money allocated during that time. However, Chepstow School is unfortunately in deficit due to historical reasons. My main concern is the continuation of

school improvement in the school environment, so that pupils can keep with their peers in schools in other parts of Monmouthshire, particularly whilst funding from the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme (formerly known as 21st century schools funding) is awaited. Chepstow is the final school in Monmouthshire to benefit from the programme and Cabinet confirmed before Christmas that they were content with the progress, but I wanted to check that Chepstow School and other schools are still due to receive this funding?

Cabinet Member for Education: There is no intention that the quality of facilities at Chepstow School will suffer. The council has spent substantial money in updating facilities there, such as solar power generation and I know that the school is delighted with the investment the Council has made so far. We are at an early stage of discussion with Chepstow as the 4th school about what that provision will look like and I hope I have reassured you that the school is firmly in our sights. The new Welsh Medium provision in Monmouth has benefitted from this Welsh Government and Council joint funding and therefore, even in difficult times, we do not forget the needs of our children and young people and that's why we are proposing to increase the schools' budget at a rate that has not been seen for some time.

Regarding bringing in additional income via discretionary fees and charges, such as increased car parking and waste services, surely this will deter people from using the car parks and is likely not to bring in the income expected, whilst annoying residents in the process. Charging more for waste services is likely to increase flytipping or burning of waste at properties, causing more problems for Council staff, so I would like to hear your views on that.

Cabinet Member for Resources: We are aware of these issues, so we are not changing the frequency of kerbside collections like other councils. In terms of car parking, we are very aware of the interactions between thriving community and town centres and accessibility. We are making use of active travel plans and the funding available there and we have a parking review scheduled for this year which takes into account the needs of communities as well as how we operate and charge for car parking.

I have concerns about the reduction in opening hours of the hubs and the contact centre, which you have said is being reduced by 2.5 members of staff, and changes impacting on response times, these resources being the kind that might be more needed in these difficult times. I'd like to know if you have considered this in terms of the proposal?

Cabinet Member for Resources: We have no intention to change the opening hours of the contact centre. It is the hubs that we are looking to change the opening times. We have taken into account the need for services offered in the hubs and that's why all the hubs will remain open. In terms of changes relating to the contact centre, we anticipate there may be some increased wait time at high volume time, but it will still be available. There will also be the ability to use 'My Monmouthshire' services via the app for those that are able to do that.

The increase in adult social care budget is projected by £1 million, whilst there are proposed savings of £2 million. How is this going to be achieved whilst ensuring a decent level of support?

Chief Officer: This is an extremely challenging task and people are rightly concerned how we will preserve the quality of the service. This is an opportunity for us to regroup in light of the challenges following the pandemic where the priority was 'preservation of life'. Now we need to consider prevention and early intervention and try to work from a strength-based approach, so that we are looking at how people's needs are met through the community and through their own individual and family resilience. We are ensuring we align with our partners to make sure that every resource that is available collectively across health and social care is channelled towards the same aim, so we aren't working against each other and focussing on prevention and reablement should reduce the number of care packages we have to provide and deliver better outcomes for people over the longer term. We are trying to build on things that we have been good at and things we know work, such as community night support services, assistive technology and practicing in a way that gives people early on in their social care journey 'a sense of place', to reduce loneliness and isolation. When it comes to staff efficiencies, we will always look to do things differently, such as the use of digital technology, rather than reduce staffing. The other side of the coin is that we only have a certain amount of money, so we need to maximise the best value, whether this is through direct payments or micro-carers and also by analysing our spend and commissioning of services. We will not compromise on safeguarding ~ looking at people's individual needs takes time to ensure we make the right assessments for people under the Social Services and Well-being Act and also build individual and community resilience.

You talked about strength-based approach and family support, but aren't we talking about increasing the burden there on unpaid carers?

Chief Officer: This has been one of our strategic aims to give the maximum support to unpaid carers as they are vital and understanding how we can best support them is crucial. We do assessments for these carers alongside the assessment for the person and try to support the whole family, but support for unpaid carers is right at the heart of the work we are trying to do.

Are we helping to recruit personal assistants for people who need them?

Chief Officer: We are trying to support people to use the direct payments for micro-carers, so yes, we are supporting people in this way.

Children's services ~ there are savings projected of £1.4m, so how are you going to review service delivery and how is this going to be achieved?

Chief Officer: Our redesign work in Children's Services is focussing on placements and implementing a 'not for profit service delivery module', which involves looking at all of our children who are in a range of different placements to see how we can safely transition children from placements to a longer term arrangement and looking to build our in-house capacity, either through contracting 'not for profit providers' or through joined-up arrangements either with health or with our local authority regional partners. So there's a lot of work being undertaken with housing, working with each child individually, to see how we can support that child to get back into provision in Monmouthshire. We also have to think about best value for money and spending the money in the right way to get the best outcomes for the young person.

There is a chronic shortage of foster carers. Would it be sensible to review what financial and support benefits for foster carers are in place and to assess why there is such a lack of foster carers? There is a vital need to attract people in different circumstances, such as those in full time jobs and I feel there's a need for better linked help. The support seems to be generally daytime and perhaps it isn't matched with the needs of people who would like to become foster carers, so if this could be alleviated, it could assist the situation with the high cost of residential care. There seem to be increasing numbers of children to be looked after, so what policies are in place to support families, so children don't enter the system, as surely it is better to keep families together if at all possible.

Chief Officer: Your points are at the heart of what we do and we would like to see over the next 1-3 years the majority of our children supported by in-house quality Monmouthshire foster carers. It's an ongoing national issue, but we trying to recruit foster carers via our fostering strategy and major media campaigns that can bring a local focus. The gains are slow, but the trajectory is an upward one. So we are focussing

on increasing and expanding placement opportunities as discussed, but we are also focussing on the preventative agenda, so preventing young people from needing to be taken into care and we feel that the stabilisation of numbers of children coming into care over the last 3 years has been greatly affected by the significant investment in early help and preventative family support services that seek to de-escalate the situation, working alongside the family for up to 18 months to try to turn complex family situations around. We know the pandemic will have brought about new challenges, but we feel we have a good suite of family support services, which are well placed to assist and we are extending the in-house service for high risk rehabilitation, where we are currently relying on other providers. This will be a more cost-effective model for us but will also deliver better outcomes.

The service you refer to will be for families where a need has been specifically identified, whilst I question whether this resource may be better spent even earlier, at the anti-natal stage, rather than the points where problems occur?

Chief Officer: The ante-natal work is more outside of our remit and is more the brief of Flying Start, but the service I just discussed will be for families where intensive support is required, however we have a full suite of family support preventative service for each tier of need, seeking to help with issues as soon as they are first identified.

The learning disability and mental health teams, what proposals are there in this area? I see a proposed £300k saving through modelling, does this include the closure of Tudor Street.

Chief Officer: There's only a small portion of this that is set against staffing changes, the majority is looking at making sure we are pursuing all of our continuing health care cases and making sure that the packages of care delivered to people are the right ones. With regard to your final point about Tudor Street, the answer is no, it does not.

I see Gwent Music funding has been reduced. Has this been discussed with them, as they do self-fund also?

Cabinet Member for Education: It was with a heavy heart that we had to make the reduction and we were the last Council to do this. We have retained a hardship fund to support pupils if their families are unable to afford it. We have discussed it with the head of the music service and whilst it was very disappointing for them, there was an acknowledgement of the position.

How much is in the Gwent Music Hardship fund and how many pupils do you think will access it?

Cabinet Member for Education: It's £9k and Gwent Music work with us to identify pupils in need, so it's not based on the Free School Meals assessment as we wanted to widen it.

In terms of the shortage of low-cost housing, how can we chase the development, as planning permission has already been granted on some sites.

Chief Officer: We try to do everything we can to hasten developers, and as you know we want to encourage affordable housing, but it is a difficult position for us.

The borrowing costs of £7.1m to meet capital expenditure costs, does that include repayments?

Deputy Chief Executive: Yes, it does.

The proposal of a 5% net increase in the schools' budget for next year, but a 2.8% efficiency saving needed to close the resource gap, requiring schools to tap into reserves. Some schools have very small reserves, so are they at particular risk, and can you give us an example of where the efficiency saving may come from?

Cabinet Member for Education: You are quite right. Schools are funded via the funding formula so we can provide support to the head teachers, but it will be difficult for a few schools. The Council delegates money to the schools and cannot tell the governing body how to use the money. We do keep a small amount centrally, but these cover statutory things such as school transport and support for additional learning needs, so the term efficiency saving is a misnomer. We will seek to minimise the reductions to individual schools budgets, whilst still retaining all of the services. An example for a saving is in the education psychology service where there is a vacant post. It is difficult to have to make savings in the education budget, but we are in unprecedented times. We have increased the overall budget to schools by 5%. We are expecting some grant funding that we hope may mitigate the effects of budgetary savings proposed, for example to the education psychology service.

In respect of Children's Services, I note a £1.4m resource gap to be met from £1.4m proposed savings as a result of reviewing service delivery to ensure a more cost-effective service. We have discussed mechanisms to save money in previous meetings, so what more can be done in this regard?

Chief Officer: The most cost-effective way of saving money is to not have children needing to be looked after, but to achieve this, you need to have really good preventative services in place at every single stage and you need to be able to respond as soon as vulnerabilities are identified. We sometimes don't know about crises at an

early stage, but mostly, you can identify them and intervene early. When children do need to come into care, we cannot compromise on outcomes and so the ideal is to place them in Monmouthshire with Monmouthshire carers, so we are reviewing the financial support that is provided and are really driving that agenda and doing so at a national level, to avoid being in competition with each other. I spoke earlier about the residential placements and the need to change the way we commission that care so that we can deliver the best outcomes for people, either via in-house or 'not for profit' placements.

I'm still unclear about the cuts to the education psychology service and I'm concerned about SENCOM services for children and young people. Is there a commitment to carry on the SENCOM service?

Cabinet Member for Education: It was very difficult to identify where to make savings and we felt strongly services should remain in schools, so we had to balance services and we decided that we could defer the appointment of the vacant education psychology post, but continue to support schemes that the education service has been promoting that are delivered day to day in schools, which are making a tremendous difference, such as every primary school having a skilled higher level teaching assistant to provide support for emotional behaviour. So the reassurance I can give you is that we thought very carefully about where the greatest impact is made.

Finance Manager: There are no planned reductions for SENCOM.

The exercise referral schemes, are there any proposed cuts as a reduction of leisure centre hours?

Deputy Chief Executive: There are no planned reductions to the exercise referral scheme for next year.

Why are the income shortfalls £800k and what can be done to address them? I believe as a rural county that expecting people to not use cars to travel is unrealistic.

Deputy Chief Executive: The shortfalls and savings have been referenced in the report, however market circumstances post pandemic have exacerbated the situation, an example being leisure centre footfall. We've discussed the social services position in significant detail.

In your presentation, you referred to homelessness standards being 'modern Wales' standards. What does this mean?

Cabinet Member for Resources: I was referring to the legislation by Welsh Government as they felt some councils weren't providing a base level of support for homelessness.

In terms of the MENCAP contract for adult services, which is due for renewal in April, with £2m savings proposed, are there likely to be implications? I understand contracts were previously allocated on a 3 year basis, and due to the uncertainty, they have had to reduce service users from 60 to 40, which has caused distress and anxiety for service users.

Cabinet Member for Resources: Whilst we are waiting for the outcome of the review, it is our intention to renew the current contract for 1 year to allow the review to conclude.

MENCAP haven't been contacted yet as part of the review, so are we renewing the contract or are will there be an assessment of what they are providing?

Deputy Chief Executive: The three-year contract has come to an end and the contract will be extended within the current contract term, but there is a desire to review the contract, which is standard practice, acknowledging that MENCAP is the only provider in the south of the county.

In terms of the Education Achievement Service (EAS), I note that we reducing our contribution by 10%, as are some other authorities, so what is likely to be the impact?

Cabinet Member for Education: Each of the partners in the partnership are suggesting reductions, but not equally, so I cannot comment on those of other partner authorities. I have met with the EAS and they are considering how they will be able to plan for further cuts this year.

In respect of the pressures on schools and the impact on teaching staff, what is morale currently like?

Cabinet Member for Education: I think sometimes teachers are frustrated and angry and whilst I made a statement about industrial action at Council recently, I hope that unions and teachers can resolve issues to reduce impact on learners after 2 very difficult years.

It's mentioned that the funding for the Monmouthshire and Torfaen Youth Offending Service is due to be reduced. What will be the likely impacts?

Chief Officer: One of the main costs is the accommodation, so that will be the key area for consideration, along with some realignments of duties and business support functions.

Summary:

The Committee undertook thorough scrutiny of the budget proposals for 2023-2024. During the discussion, questions focussed on a wide range of issues and explanations were given, however the following key issues were highlighted in debate:

- Ensuring schools continue to receive funding from the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme and that Chepstow Comprehensive receives it's long-awaited share.
- Whether there will be negative implications of the proposals to increase charges for waste services and also negative implications of the proposals relating to car park charging.
- The changes to contact centre opening times and any impacts on service users due to potentially longer call times.
- The savings relating to Adult Social Care budget and the need to ensure that these don't impact on the Council's ability to provide high quality services.
- Children's Services redesign, the cost of placements and the need to increase foster carers.
- Understanding the savings proposed for learning disability and mental health teams.
- Understanding the education savings, particularly the education psychology service saving and the implications for schools currently in deficit of proposed savings.
- The implications if reduced funding for the Education Achievement Service.
- Gwent Music ~ request for pupil numbers accessing Gwent Music Hardship fund.

4. Date of the Next Meeting: 28th February 2023 at 10.00am

The meeting ended at **11.56 am**