

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Tuesday, 23rd July, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Laura Wright (Chairman)

County Councillors: Jan Butler, Simon Howarth, Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Jackie Strong, Jill Bond, Peter Strong, Ian Chandler and Martyn Groucutt

Also in attendance: Ben Anderson (Care Inspectorate Wales)

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Diane Corrister, Head of Children's Services
Deb Hill-Howells, Head of Decarbonisation, Transport and Support Services

APOLOGIES: Councillors Christopher Edwards, Maria Stevens, Alistair Neill and Paul Pavia

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Care Inspectorate Wales Inspection

Jane Rodgers and Ben Anderson introduced the report which was a performance evaluation of the children's services by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), highlighting the strengths and areas for improvement identified by the inspection report. Ben Anderson, CIW, commented that the inspection overall was positive and that there was evidence of ongoing development of the service since February. He highlighted the focus going forward would be to focus on practice and quality to ensure compliance with statutory duties and to capture the voice of children. Diane Corrister answered the members' questions in detail, together with Jane Rodgers and Ben Anderson.

Key points made by Members:

- Members asked how leaders are having greater oversight of the quality of assessments and plans and noted that training, quality assurance, and implementation support was being provided to staff.
- A member asked for an explanation of the new practice model and the Early Help Assessment Team.
- Clarity was sought on what improvements are being made to bring practice in line with Welsh safeguarding procedures.

- Another member sought clarity on the compliance with paperwork for child protection conferences and how much advocacy parents are offered prior to a case conference stage.
- The committee questioned the main strengths and areas for improvement identified by the inspection report, noting the report had recognised the positive outcomes achieved for children looked after, the family support offer, and the morale and leadership within the service as strengths. Areas for improvement were acknowledged to include responding to and dealing with the impact of demand across the service, and making sure that the workforce corresponds with those levels of demand.
- Members asked for an explanation as to how the team was addressing the issue of demand and workforce capacity in the service, to retain staff and reduce the reliance on agency workers.
- Members sought to ensure that the voice of children is captured in a consistent and meaningful way and according to the age of the child and then reflected in assessments and care plans.
- A member referred to paragraph 4.8 in the report which suggested a cautious approach to risk management, questioning whether given our lower than national average number of children looked after, there may be a contradiction. The officers clarified that to an extent, this is because of the impact of demand on the front door; and that strengths-based practice needed to be more consistent across all areas of the service.
- Members asked for clarity on the outcomes of the platform service for young people's emotional health.
- Another member queried the increase in referrals and also inappropriate referrals and how these could be reduced, noting that this is currently subject to a data and audit analysis to understand the sources and the reasons for the referrals. Members requested a report on this be brought back to them at the appropriate point, with officers confirming this should be available after September. **Action: Jane Rodgers and Diane Corrister.**
- A member commented that the threshold document assisted the addressing of the increase in figures, and asked whether the team engages with partner agencies in a way that they can understand and share their perspective.
- Members queried how the referrals from education and health compare with other Gwent authorities and what might be possible gaps in the support structures of these agencies.
- A member asked for more clarity on how the single point of access operates in practice and whether it could be replicated in other areas.
- The committee questioned the timeliness of child protection visits and case conferences outlined in paragraph 1.4 and asked whether the desired improvement had been achieved in terms of ensuring conferences take place on an earlier and timely basis.
- Members asked for clarity on the role of the coach and how their impact would be measured.
- The reasons for the difference in the volume of referrals and how that was being managed was clarified.
- The committee asked whether the service had streamlined their processes to become more effective.
- A member asked officers how confident they were that there aren't cases that were not on the radar of Social Services. Officers advised that it would be naive

to think all cases would be on the radar of social services, but that they were confident that the Council was doing more over-intervention than under-intervention. Officers added that the Council has good safeguarding structures and training across the organisation, but they could never be 100% confident that cases could occur.

- The report under paragraph 2.10 refers to 'most staff' being supported, CIW were asked for further clarity on this, as in what are the reasons for the small number of staff not being on board and whether you believe working practices since Covid have had an effect.
- The committee commented on the use of acronyms and that a glossary would be helpful, particularly for reports in the public domain.

The Cabinet Member drew some closing remarks, and the committee were satisfied with the answers to questions asked.

Chair's Summary:

The committee congratulated the service on the positive inspection and the leadership comments and children and foster care feedback. The chair concluded that the committee had undertaken detailed scrutiny of the report together with members of the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee and was satisfied with the outcome of the inspection.

4. Home to School Transport Policy

Cabinet Member Martyn Groucott introduced the report, explaining that the purpose of the consultation and the report brought to the committee was to consider whether to adopt the statutory distance eligibility criteria for the provision of free home to school transport. He answered the members' questions with Debra Hill-Howells.

Key points made by Members:

- Members asked for clarity on the two options for changing the statutory distance over which free transport is provided and queried how much savings each of these options would generate. The member commented that the consultation didn't offer alternatives to changing the statutory distance for the public to consider, for example, an increase in council tax. Councillor Groucott confirmed that increasing the council tax by approximately one percentage point, would generate about £700,000 per year, but that this needed to be considered as part of the wider budgetary process as there are other budgetary pressures that will need to be considered.
- A member highlighted that the time of year is not particularly good for achieving responses from the public to consultations, as many people would be on holidays. It was confirmed that the consultation commencement date had been delayed by the general election, however, all emails had been sent to existing users of transport, schools, stakeholders and operators to make them aware of the consultation. Officers confirmed that there will be sessions in hubs and there is documentation online explaining the purpose of the consultation as well as a survey that invites people to provide their feedback on the proposals.

- A member shared their concerns about increasing the in-house service, and staffing implications. The officer confirmed that the cost of in-house provision is compared to external tenders and the in-house service only undertakes the service if they are the best financial option.
- A member asked how the council would monitor the environmental impact of increasing personal transport budgets and car use and officers responded that the council has a carbon reduction plan in place and has made a climate emergency declaration, and that they will assess the carbon footprint of the different transport options and work with schools and parents to promote sustainable travel choices whilst considering the environmental impact as part of the decision-making process, to mitigate any adverse effects.
- A member asked how the council would support working parents who may face difficulties due to the changes and what mitigations would be offered. Cllr Groucutt responded that there is already discretionary support to help families and that the details would be shared.
- Members asked how the available walking routes are assessed for safety and suitability and heard that there is a standard Road Safety GB assessment process which is normally undertaken by Highways officers. Where an assessment is challenged, officers will walk the route with parents and members.
- A member asked why the draft policy wording wasn't included in the consultation document and was advised it's because it hasn't changed, except for the three options that are being considered and that if any of these were to be adopted, the distance eligibility criteria will be amended accordingly. The member asked for clarity that the policy wording would stay the same, apart from the three options. Officers confirmed the policy wording will stay the same apart from the three options, and the proposed amendments will be included in the Cabinet report.
- The committee asked how the proposals would affect the faith transport, and the faith schools and officers confirmed the proposals will not change the eligibility criteria for accessing faith transport but any changes to the distance eligibility criteria will apply to all learners, including faith. They advised that the consultation document includes a question about the impact of the proposals on religion and belief, and parents are also able to provide comments or suggestions on this issue.
- A member asked if transport that had been provided as there wasn't an available walking route would be ended at the end of the academic year and the answer given was that it wouldn't, unless works had been completed to make the route safe, such as a crossing point or changes to the speed limit.
- A member asked if there would still be dedicated school transport from Goytre to King Henry for the new academic year and heard that the intention was to reinstate the public bus service for home to school transport from Goytre for the forthcoming academic year, as the bus service route had been altered, so that learners do not need to cross the A4042.
- A member highlighted that it was important that council attempts to reduce its carbon footprint by using its own transport as opposed to that of sub-contracted supply.
- Members expressed doubt that in adverse weather, children in rural areas would be walking 2 miles and a member asked for clarity on the process where applicants had not been successful in the first choice of school and had been awarded transport to an alternative school. He asked if they would continue to

receive free transport in the subsequent year, the rules around siblings, extended family and separated families. Officers confirmed that where a learner had been granted free transport as they were attending their nearest school as allocated by CYP then they would continue to free transport, unless there were changes in their personal circumstances, such as moving house and they would be re-assessed. Siblings would not be entitled to free transport where a parent had exercised parental preference.

- A member asked what would be considered if the consultation response is very negative and commented that in their view, question 1 not asking if the person answering will be affected may skew the answer. It was confirmed that the survey responses would form part of a Cabinet report to enable Members to decide whether or not to proceed with all or any of the options.
- A member queried whether the findings of the consultation would be reported back to the People Scrutiny Committee ahead of Cabinet decision and it was confirmed that statutory timescales for implementation meant that the item was not scheduled to return to scrutiny ahead of Cabinet decision and that this meeting constituted pre-decision scrutiny during the consultation period.
- Members requested that the link to the consultation be kept on the Council's front page of the website until the end of the consultation period. **Action: Deb Hill-Howells to request this via Communications Team.**

Chair's summary:

The chair sought the committee's views on whether the policy could be supported and there were no stated views expressed to the contrary, however a member expressed their concern about how the data arising from the consultation would be interpreted.

5. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

Noted.

6. Cabinet and Council Planner

Noted.

7. Next Meeting: 24th September 2024 at 10.00am

Noted.

The meeting ended at **12.46 pm.**