

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 15th July, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ben Callard and Mary Ann Brocklesby

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Richard Jones, Performance and Data Insight Manager
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance/Section 151
Hannah Carter, Performance Analyst
Craig O'Connor, Chief Officer, Place and Community Well-being
Gemma Ellis, Ardal Interim Head of Procurement
Tyrone Stokes, Finance Manager
Stacey Jones, Performance/Finance and Resources Manager
Sian Hayward, Head of Information Technology and Security and SIRO (Senior Information Risk Owner)
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services Manager
Nicholas Keyse, Head of Landlord Services

APOLOGIES: None.

1. Apologies for Absence

None.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. Revenue & Capital monitoring outturn

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Davies, Peter Davies, Matt Gatehouse, Debra Hill-Howells, Nicola Wellington.

- *How will the council mitigate the long-term structural risk from the persistent overspend in social care and housing?*

The council is working on reablement and managing demand pathways to improve quality of life and reduce local authority burden. There is recognition that savings targets in social care have not always been fully met due to increased demand and complexity, as well as inflation. The council continues to work on these challenges, acknowledging statutory responsibilities and external factors affecting demand.

- *Significant capital slippage is reported. What measures are we using to mitigate this?*

Capital slippage is mainly due to late grant notifications and some planning issues. The council is working with budget holders and external contractors to improve planning and delivery, but recognises that capital schemes are multi-year and subject to change.

- *What assurance/mitigation can be given to the risk of relying heavily on one-off grants?*

Reliance on grant funding is significant, but late notifications make planning difficult. The council would benefit from earlier and more certain grant information to plan and use funds more effectively. There is ongoing dialogue with Welsh Government about moving some grant funding into core revenue funding. There is generally constructive dialogue with Welsh Government about grant design and funding, but uncertainty remains about future budget approaches. The council is working to ensure its interests are protected, especially regarding recurrent grants that underwrite core costs.

- *Is the real cost of social care underrepresented in our budget?*

The council has learned from past ambitious reform targets in social care, which led to overspends when savings were not fully realised. Recent years have seen some improvement, with early indications that forecast overspends are lessening, reflecting progress in reform and budget management.

- *What is the impact of increased National Insurance costs on the council's budget, including schools, and what mitigation is in place?*

The increased National Insurance is a cost pressure. Some additional funding was provided but did not cover the full liability. A contingency fund was set in last year's budget to mitigate this risk.

- *What is being done about council tax arrears and debt recovery, given the lack of movement in outstanding arrears?*

There are various reasons for arrears, not all due to refusal to pay (e.g., probate cases). Council tax arrears and social care debt have increased post-pandemic, reflecting national trends. The council uses the Council Tax Reduction Scheme to support those in need and is focusing on recovery efforts. There has also been an increase in discounts and exemptions, moving towards the Welsh average. The shared service team works to support taxpayers and ensure robust recovery measures. The council maintains a high long-term collection rate (over 99%), though delays in probate have affected in-year rates. Welsh Government is reviewing advice and legislation to support appropriate enforcement and support for those in challenging circumstances.

- *Should probate issues significantly influence Council tax arrears, given that probate is a constant factor? Are the main factors affecting arrears more likely related to the ability to pay, or avoidance of payment?*

Delays in probate over recent years have impacted collection rates, making it take longer to collect payments than previously. This has affected in-year collection rates. The duration for probate has increased from three to six months to more like twelve to twenty-four months in many cases, which has contributed to the delays in collection.

- *Can you provide a breakdown of where staff vacancies have been held the longest across the Council, how long these posts have remained unfilled, whether each vacancy is still essential, and what is being done to address risks to service continuity? How sustainable is the current use of vacancy freezes, and what are the implications for service quality, staff morale, and organisational capacity going forward?*
- Specific data on which directorates have the most vacancies is not available during the meeting, but it is likely proportional to directorate size (e.g., more in health and social care). The council has raised the threshold for recruitment, requiring higher-level management review to determine if vacancies should be filled. – **ACTION: to secure the data and share with the committee** The intention is not to keep vacancies permanent; if a role is no longer needed, the structure should be changed. If the intention is to re-recruit when conditions allow, vacancies are held temporarily. Each vacancy is assessed against criteria set by the strategic leadership team, including health and safety and risk to service users. Directorates review vacancies, and all recruitment is signed off by senior management. The process aims to avoid unnecessary harm or risk to communities and encourages creative solutions for service delivery.
- *How does the increased threshold for recruiting affect the delivery of frontline services? How is the balance maintained between financial constraints and the need to deliver essential services?*

Directors within their services are best positioned to judge the impact of holding vacancies on frontline services. There is a need to balance minimal impact on services while achieving budget recovery. Criteria were set at the strategic leadership team level to assess vacancies, including health and safety risks and the well-being of individuals. Each directorate management team considers these criteria before vacancies are signed off by senior management, ensuring that essential services are not unduly affected.

- *The passenger transport overspend of £555,000 – does this relate to regular bus services or home-to-school transport, and what can be done to mitigate these costs?*

The overspend relates to home-to-school transport, not public buses. Costs have risen due to increased numbers of learners and higher operator costs. Contract handbacks require rapid retendering or in-house coverage. Routes and vehicle sizes are continually reviewed to manage variations and new learners.

- *Regarding school deficits, how is the council working with schools to find savings, especially around supply teaching, and are there efforts to reduce reliance on agencies?*

Schools in deficit must produce recovery plans, which are monitored and supported by finance, HR, and school improvement teams. Schools are encouraged to employ staff directly for long-term cover (e.g., maternity leave) rather than use agencies. There is a Welsh Government agency staff framework, and schools have requested the council explore alternative supply staff models, such as a council-run pool.

- *15 schools are in deficit and the overall deficit has grown from around £1 million to just over £4 million. Are the recovery plans for these schools pushing towards an improved situation this year?*

When a school goes into deficit, they are required to create a recovery plan. Several schools are already in the second year of their recovery plans and are making progress. She noted that the timing of staff changes, which typically start in September, means that the first year only sees seven months of savings. Therefore, while the situation may initially worsen, improvements are expected over time as the full impact of the recovery plans is realised.

- *Is supply teaching still a cost pressure, and can we employ teachers directly rather than through agencies?*

Schools are encouraged to employ staff directly for long-term vacancies, such as maternity leave, to ensure consistency and reduce costs. There has been a recent audit around supply staff, and schools have asked the council to look at alternative ways of providing supply staff, such as creating a pool of supply staff employed by the council. This would help to reduce reliance on agencies and potentially lower costs.

- *How does the council decide the need for a position versus holding a vacancy? Has a process mapping exercise been done for all services to determine the right resource levels, and are the results available?*

The Council has a clear set of criteria for evaluating vacancies, which includes considering health and safety risks and the well-being of individuals. Each vacancy is reviewed by directorate management teams and signed off by senior officers. While there isn't a central process mapping exercise for all services, regular reviews and

evaluations are conducted at the service level to ensure the workforce is right-sized. Restructures and changes are made as needed to optimize service delivery.

Chair's Summary:

The committee agreed the recommendations and the report was moved.

5. Medium Term Financial Strategy

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Davies and Peter Davies.

- *Regarding the £20m shortfall for 2 years hence, last year we were looking at £12.2m for this year – so comparing like with like the shortfall has gone up next year to £13.6m and the medium term cumulative shortfall last year was at £34.7m and that is now £38m – are those the relevant comparative numbers?*

The comparison figures are correct. The figures represent a point-in-time assessment and that they are subject to change as the budget process progresses. The figures provide a context for understanding the financial challenges and planning for the next financial year and the medium term.

- *Is it correct that Monmouthshire has the lowest reserve cover in Wales, and is this a cause for concern?*

The statement refers to an Audit Wales report from about 18 months to two years ago, which identified that Monmouthshire's reserves, as a proportion of its total revenue budget, were the lowest in Wales. The context is important, as reserves include both usable and unusable reserves, with many being earmarked for specific services. Local authorities are at different stages in their reserve investment journeys, which affects their reserve levels. So, while the statement is accurate, the context and specific circumstances of each authority must be considered.

COUNCILLOR NEILL LEFT THE MEETING, AND COUNCILLOR BUCKLER TOOK OVER AS CHAIR

- *Does the council have enough sustainable plans to bridge the projected funding shortfall?*

The concerning outlook is acknowledged but the council has successfully mitigated pressures in recent years, has robust controls and systems, and is well placed to address future challenges. The council assumes £7.5 million annually for demand pressures and inflation, and there are ongoing and planned transformation programmes across services to address the budget gap.

Chair's Summary:

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

6. Enabling Strategies (including Procurement)

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report. Matt Gatehouse, Nick Keyse, Sian Hayward, Richard Jones Peter Davies and Gemma Ellis (Ardal) answered the members' questions.

- *Is 60% of staff satisfaction due to an underlying cultural issue and are the increased pressure from vacancies affecting staff well-being and skills development?*

A recent staff survey provided a baseline, and actions have included consolidating well-being resources and increasing engagement. There are ongoing efforts to improve staff involvement and skills development, including new e-learning platforms and change programmes, and future surveys will measure progress.

- *Can you clarify the figures given for the difference in pay between males and females?*

The pay gap figures refer to the difference in hourly rates, with the mean and median differences being 85 pence and 49 pence, respectively. While men and women are paid equally for the same job, the gap exists due to more men in higher-paid roles and more women in lower-paid roles (e.g., care). The council is working to address this through career development and encouraging broader career choices.

- *What is the reason for the delay in the affordable housing development at Caldicot Comprehensive School and what is the proposed timeline?*

The land was sold to Monmouthshire Housing Association, which initially failed to appoint a contractor but has since re-tendered and appointed one. The target is to start on site by the end of summer, with a commitment to proceed as soon as possible.

- *Regarding the council's digital and data strategy, how is digital transformation being used to improve operational efficiency, data-driven decision making, citizen engagement, and procurement processes?*

Improving digital and data maturity is an ongoing task, with continuous efforts in service areas to enhance digital capabilities. A new assessment is planned across the SRS partners (Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, and Monmouthshire) to ensure a coordinated approach. The assessment will help to target resources effectively, but work is already underway to improve digital maturity. Digital maturity assessments should not slow down progress on digital and data initiatives, especially given the financial challenges facing the council. There is a need to inject pace into digital and data work, and that it is not necessary to complete all digital/data maturity assessments before prioritising and moving forward with key projects.

E-procurement tools and systems are a high priority due to new transparency requirements from the Procurement Act, which require more notices and digital processes. Currently, "Sell to Wales" and "Proactis" are used for e-tendering, sourcing, and contract management; there have been some teething problems with the digital platform but there is ongoing collaboration with Welsh Government and other authorities

to resolve these. Microsoft Forms is used for scoping and governance documents to improve procurement visibility. While improvements have been made, the digital procurement system is not yet perfect, and the team continues to investigate better solutions and learn from other local authorities.

- *Is a particular local authority leading on this, and how will processes be coordinated?*

Monmouthshire will lead this process, using a common template to identify skills gaps and inform investment. The assessment will be integrated into business planning, with the aim of supporting service redesign, efficiency, and better use of data for decision making.

- *How has the self-assessment process evolved over the last 3 years, and are there other ways that the process can be still more sophisticated? What about benchmarking against other local authorities?*

This is the first year for the enabling strategies self-assessment report, aligning with the broader authority self-assessment. The process is evolving, with more benchmarking information included in the main self-assessment report where data is available. Benchmarking will be considered where it is meaningful and relevant, and the process will continue to be refined to provide greater clarity on outcomes and impact as strategies are implemented over time.

- *What efforts are being pursued to stay on track for the Net Zero ambition?*

The Council is building a baseline of evidence to support leveraging external grant funding for transition goals. This includes costed surveys for decarbonising the built environment and developing business cases for grant funding. The council is also working on fleet transition plans and collaborating with Welsh Government Energy Services for electric vehicle charging infrastructure. The council is focusing on improving data collection from the supply chain to better understand and reduce Scope 3 emissions. This involves working with suppliers to capture carbon emissions data and supporting SMEs through available funding.

- *Does talk of tools extend to internal tools e.g. My Monmouthshire? Could we do a review to see if it is used as optimally as it could be? What has been the uptake of the "Let's Talk Monmouthshire" tool?*
- There are limitations of the "My Monmouthshire" tool; a review is underway to improve its use and integration with other systems. There is a need for behavioural change and consistent feedback loops. "Let's Talk Monmouthshire" is in its infancy and is being developed further, with updates to be provided by Paul Sullivan (Head of Customer, Communication & Engagement)

Chair's Summary:

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

7. Self-Assessment 24/25

Hannah Carter and Leader Mary-Ann Brocklesby introduced the report. Richard Jones and Craig O'Connor answered the members' questions.

- *What are the barriers to FSM uptake? Are meals produced regardless of registration?*

The uptake of free school meals is about 72%, and the council is working to improve this through various schemes. The council is collaborating with Sustainable Food colleagues to provide food education in schools.

- *Has Flying Start increased in Caldicot? How do we help people to get meal kits? What is the reason for the increase in permanent exclusions between 2010-22? Where do the students go and what is the effect on social and emotional learning?*

Specific updates on Flying Start, meal kits, and permanent exclusions will need to be provided in writing. – **ACTION**

- *What are the measures of processes and project management, the number of reviews conducted with users, and the assessment of the impact on residents?*

The Council's performance management framework includes service business plans, performance measures, and annual self-assessments to track progress and learn from outcomes.

- *Could an external body – such as Audit Wales or the Future Generations Commissioner's office – validate whether the right data is being collected and the right things are being measured? Perhaps we could hold a collaborative workshop with the Commissioner's office and invite officers to consider this suggestion – such leadership could position the authority as an example across Wales?*

External scrutiny is already embedded in the self-assessment process through the inclusion of findings from regulators like CIW, Audit Wales, and Estyn. Audit Wales recently reviewed the council's performance management arrangements and found them sound, while also recommending improvements – such as better reporting on underperformance – which have been addressed in the current report. Additionally, the council is preparing for a peer panel performance assessment, scheduled for February, to further strengthen external evaluation. We welcome the idea of working more closely with the Future Generations Commissioner's office, noting existing good contact and alignment with the Well-being of Future Generations Act. There is also ongoing collaboration through WLGA networks to improve performance management and share best practice.

- *To clarify, did Audit Wales take into account our reporting in their review of performance management?*

Audit Wales did consider the council's self-assessment as part of their review of performance management arrangements. Their findings were reported to the Governance and Audit Committee, and the officer offered to share the report more widely. One key recommendation was to improve how underperformance is explained – an area that has been a focus in this year's reporting.

Chair's Summary:

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

8. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

Councillor Bond reiterated her request from Place committee that this plan be amended to show more clearly which reports have already gone to Cabinet/Council, and which are still forthcoming. Officers reassured members that this point has been passed on to Democratic Services to form part of the overall changes being made to the planner.

9. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Work Programme and Action List

A Special meeting has been added on 3rd December, and another is being arranged for January. Note that some of the 3rd June Actions have been sent to the committee since the agenda was published.

Councillor Pavia noted that there are too many items on each agenda, and that this volume of work needs to be worked through with the Chair. Officers assured members that this is already something that they wish to address, and will indeed discuss options with the Chair as soon as possible. – **ACTION**

Councillor Bond noted that the Grants item should ideally be covered before Spring so that there is the possibility of the committee's comments feeding into next year's strategy. The scrutiny team will pass this point on to the finance officers – **ACTION**

10. To confirm the minutes of previous meetings

The minutes were confirmed.

11. Date of Next Meeting

23rd September 2025 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.49 pm**