

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 10th June, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Angela Sandles and Tudor Thomas

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Nia Roberts, Welsh Language Officer
Pennie Walker, Equality & Welsh Language Manager
Huw Owen, Principal Environment Health Officer (Public Health)
Alun Thomas, Principal Environmental Health Officer
Jennifer Walton, Registration Service Manager
Gareth Walters, Trading Standards & Animal Health Team Leader
Kristian Williams, Public Protection

APOLOGIES: Councillor Steven Garratt

1. Apologies for Absence

Steven Garratt, Tudor Thomas as substitute.

2. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Howells declared a pecuniary interest in Item 5 as his wife's business has made an Osteopathic dry needling application under special procedures.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. Welsh Language Annual Report 2024-25 - To scrutinise the Council's performance

Cabinet Member Angela Sandles and Pennie Walker introduced the report. Nia Roberts answered the members' questions with Pennie Walker:

- *What is the latest situation regarding the 3 options for more cost-effective delivery models?*

The most desirable option currently is to join with Torfaen for translation services. This is due to the similarities in the types of documents translated, which would make the

process more efficient and consistent. The collaboration with Torfaen is still being finalised to ensure smooth operations.

- *What is a 'non-opinion review' under internal audit?*

A non-opinion review is an internal audit that helps identify areas of compliance and non-compliance with Welsh language standards. It is not an official audit but provides valuable insights for developing an action plan to address areas needing improvement.

- *Is there a target for compliance with Welsh language standards?*

The aim is always 100% compliance, although it may not always be achievable. The non-opinion review helps identify areas for improvement, and regular monitoring is conducted to resolve issues as they arise.

- *In the list of standards, some are missing e.g. 23, 69, 85, 94-8 – are they not relevant?*

The report is guided by the Welsh language Commissioner's guidelines, which determine the included standards. Officers can provide updates on any standards not covered in the report.

- *Of the 53 staff who completed courses in 24/25, at what level were these courses?*

36 staff members completed the beginner level (Mynediad) and 12 completed the foundation level (Sylfaen).

- *How will you ensure that the Welsh and English versions of the website and apps remain aligned in content and functionality?*

There are challenges in maintaining consistency between Welsh and English versions of digital platforms. Regular monitoring, training, and communication with the website officer help to maintain consistency and ensure alignment.

- *If someone wanted to speak in Welsh to someone at a senior level, to whom could they speak?*

It would be difficult to find a senior-level person who can speak Welsh fluently. Learning Welsh is a significant commitment, and officers are working on improving resources to help senior leadership integrate more Welsh into their work.

- *The member noted a recent fire incident in Abergavenny for which the council couldn't provide a Welsh speaker to speak to S4C. He emphasised the importance of having someone who can speak Welsh to the media.*
- *How successful have initiatives such as lanyards to identify learners, the Cymraeg Teams channel etc. been? Are there any further plans to promote them?*

Lanyards have been effective in identifying Welsh speakers and learners, making it easier to recognise and engage with them. Welsh language course participation is increasing annually, indicating growing interest and impact. Welsh tips in the staff newsletter receive positive engagement, often prompting follow-up questions from staff. Feedback from course participants shows they enjoy the sessions but want more opportunities to use Welsh at work, and therefore future plans include exploring new initiatives to create more opportunities for staff to use Welsh. Welsh language celebration days like Shwmae Day are recognised, though planning can be challenging due to limited resources.

- *Are there opportunities to work within Monmouthshire with other public authorities like police, Fire and Rescue, NHS to share practices and improve Welsh language services?*

Monmouthshire is part of the Welsh language officer group in Southeast Wales, where they share good practices. They also collaborate on the "More than just words" social care plan to ensure the active offer is given.

- *A member expressed a desire to work with officers outside the meeting on how to push out learning to the wider community, given the strong appetite in the general public to learn, to which the officers agreed.*
- *The report mentions 176 Welsh standards – there's nothing that displays how much this work costs residents, given that the vast majority of them aren't Welsh speakers. Is there a reason why we don't collate what this work costs?*

The main cost associated with Welsh language compliance is translation, which has consistently gone over budget. The council is exploring joining the Torfaen service to help reduce these costs. Other costs include the present officers' salaries, but most compliance work is integrated into the day-to-day responsibilities of all council officers, so it isn't tracked separately. That's why a full cost breakdown isn't collated. The total cost for last year was £226,940.95.

- *With the development of AI, is there a possibility of using it for translation purposes? Does it offer new opportunities to bring costs down after an initial investment?*

AI does present opportunities to lower translation costs, but it can't fully replace human translators due to the need for proofreading to ensure accuracy. Currently, translations are outsourced and charged per word, which limits the ability to integrate AI directly into the process. However, other councils like Torfaen use tools such as translation memory systems that recall previously translated content, which helps reduce effort and cost. Exploring similar systems could offer future savings, especially as the council looks to stay within budget.

Chair's Summary:

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

5. Public Protection Performance 2024/25 - To review the performance of the service area

Jane Rodgers, Alun Thomas, Kristian Williams, Huw Owen and Gareth Walters introduced the report and answered the members' questions:

- *Can you give more information on high-risk premises inspections? Are some food outlets more high-risk than others?*

High-risk food premises are categorised based on the nature of the food they produce, the risk of cross-contamination, and the level of compliance. High-risk categories include manufacturers, butcher shops, and takeaways, with inspection frequencies varying from every six months to 18 months depending on the risk level.

- *Why has there been a fall in FOI requests this year?*

The fall in FOI requests is partly due to a particularly difficult case the previous year that generated significant social media interest. While the number of FOI requests has decreased, it remains higher than in previous years.

- *What is the threshold for an event needing to be referred to the Event Safety Advisory Group (ESAG)?*

There is no specific threshold for referring an event to ESAG. The process is voluntary, and larger or riskier events are encouraged to notify ESAG. The group responds based on the risk and works closely with fire and police services to ensure safety.

- *Can you discuss the impact of the unfilled head of public protection post on strategic oversight?*

The vacancy of the head of public protection post is acknowledged and is under review by the senior leadership team, with potential options being considered to address the gap.

- *There seems to be a decline in performance in some key areas like fly-tipping and noise complaints. What actions are being taken to improve response times and resolution?*

The decline in performance is due to an increasing workload and the need to prioritise certain tasks. The team is focusing on outcomes and risk assessment to manage the workload effectively.

- *Are you being proactive in addressing concerns about housing above takeaways, particularly regarding overcrowding and fire safety?*

While officers did not fully deliver on housing above takeaways inspections last year, it is a priority for the current year.

- *Have you seen an increase in animal welfare concerns?*

There has been an increase in animal welfare issues, particularly in farm-based animals, due to the cost-of-living crisis. There are challenges in dealing with these cases, including the need for resources and the importance of working with government to address the issues.

- *344 notifiable diseases are listed – do we have individual figures for E.Coli, in particular? What level of investigation goes into identifying the sources of these incidents?*

Yes, figures can be broken down by individual diseases like E. coli, Salmonella, and Campylobacter. Each case is investigated thoroughly, with a history taken based on the specific pathogen's incubation period. For example, Campylobacter investigations may look back 11 days to assess food history, animal contact, swimming in rivers, and other exposures. Investigations are logged in a shared database called Taran, which allows tagging of potential sources. This helps identify patterns across cases—such as multiple people visiting the same location—triggering further investigation if a common source is suspected.

- *Do you have enough resources to handle the enforcement issue of single-use vapes?*

The significant enforcement issue of single-use vapes is a challenge, and Welsh Government has been proactive in providing information and support. There are also challenges relating to the circumvention of legislation and the need for additional resources.

- *How will you address the challenge of online purchasing of single-use vapes?*

The online purchasing of single-use vapes is a significant challenge, and efforts are being made to address it through regional approaches and collaboration with HMRC and other authorities.

- *With reactive service demand continuing to rise, what actions are being taken to protect and prioritise proactive work, especially in areas like private housing standards?*

The team is constantly balancing reactive and proactive work, with a focus on maximizing public health outcomes. The team prioritises based on risk assessment and service plans, ensuring that important proactive work, like housing above takeaways, is addressed.

- *Are there any other areas where proactive work has been reduced or postponed due to service pressures, and what are the risk implications of that?*

Some proactive work, such as housing above takeaways, was postponed due to reactive work demands. The team is aware of the risks and is focusing on delivering these important areas in the current year.

- *What mechanisms are in place to regularly review and rebalance priorities through the year as demand fluctuates?*

The team regularly reviews and rebalances priorities based on daily risk assessments and service plans, ensuring that both reactive and proactive work are managed effectively.

- *How are staff kept safe with enforcement at premises and at what stage are the Police involved?*

Staff are protected through risk assessments and, when necessary, the involvement of the police. They also have measures such as sending two officers for corroboration and backup in contentious visits. There is an upcoming visit where the police will be involved.

Chair's Summary:

This is very important work for our residents, for which the committee is very grateful – please pass that on to every member of staff. Thank you to the officers for the report and their responses today. The report was moved.

6. Registration Services Annual Report 2024/25 - To review the performance of the service area

Jane Rodgers and Jennifer Walton introduced the report and answered the members' questions:

- *Regarding the percentage of registrations within statutory time for both births and deaths, are there issues affecting delivery for people suffering after the death of someone?*

The lower percentage for births is due to the small number of births in Monmouthshire, where each birth has a significant percentage impact. For deaths, the new statutory process involving the medical examiner's role has affected the numbers. Officers are confident that next year the targets will be met as the new process becomes more embedded.

- *Is there a reason for the remarkable statistic of Monmouthshire having the highest percentage increase in wedding ceremonies from 2019 to 2022?*

The initial increase in wedding ceremonies was due to the backlog from COVID restrictions. Monmouthshire has become a popular destination for weddings, attracting people from across the country due to its beautiful venues.

- *There are constant developments in legislation and changes in the local environment – what do these changes mean and is there any specific legislation in the pipeline?*

Upcoming changes are mostly technical, aiming to digitise the registration process, which is currently very paper-based. These changes are expected to take effect in the future, but the exact timeline is uncertain.

- *Is there system pressure during peak season, with ceremonial staff being part-time, and what is the impact on service?*

Managing demands during the summer is challenging, but the team members deserve praise for their support and flexibility – despite the pressure, they have never failed to conduct a ceremony. The team enjoys their work and supports each other, ensuring appointments are offered within statutory timeframes.

- *What are your views on the government response to the Law Commission's review on marriage law reforms, and are you concerned about the lack of progress?*

There has been no response from the government yet, and the recommendations are still under review. Registrars will continue to play a role in identifying predatory, sham, forced, and coerced marriages. The exact changes and their implementation are uncertain, but the team will manage them as they come.

- *Can you clarify the number of births and deaths within Monmouthshire i.e. 633 births and 1019 deaths? Are these numbers actual in the county?*

The actual number of births within Monmouthshire was 21, while the 633 figure includes births registered on behalf of Torfaen. The 1019 deaths figure represents actual deaths within Monmouthshire.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for the report and their responses, and please pass thanks to the wider team. The report was moved.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

8. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and Action List

Councillor Bond reminded officers of the request to scrutinise Grants, particularly in light of the SPF, and the SRN. Officers noted the number of full meeting agendas through to next year and the likelihood of needing to call further special meetings to accommodate extra items.

9. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were agreed.

10. Next Meeting

9th July 2025 at 10.00am (Special Meeting).

The meeting ended at 12.08 pm.