

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Wednesday, 30th April, 2025 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Laura Wright (Chair)
County Councillor Jackie Strong, (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler,
Christopher Edwards, Penny Jones,
Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Jackie Strong,
Jill Bond, John Crook, Tony Kear, Su McConnel
and Peter Strong substituting for Maria Stevens

Also in attendance County Councillors: Jill Bond,
John Crook, Tony Kear, Su McConnel

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young
People
Hannah Jones, Head Of Economy, Employment
And Skills

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Simon Howarth and Maria Stevens

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Stevens, who was being substituted by Councillor Peter Strong, and apologies were also received from Councillor Simon Howarth. Four additional councillors attended the meeting: Councillor Tony Kear, Councillor John Crook, Councillor Jill Bond, and Councillor Sue McConnell.

2. Declaration of Interest

None received.

3. Public Open Forum

There was an attendance by "The Gathering Community", who had notified the Chair in advance that they would like to present some slides. The Committee had agreed to allow additional time to the Public Open Forum to enable members to also ask questions.

Jenny Powell and Scott Price from the Gathering Community presented their work at Tudor Street in Abergavenny, focusing on providing accessible services for people with disabilities and mental health issues. They advised that the aim of the Gathering Community is to provide accessible services for people with disabilities and mental health issues at Tudor Street in Abergavenny.

They explained that The Gathering Community had taken over a 12-month lease starting from January 15th 2025. Their presentation included before and after photos and statistics on the progress of their work. They highlighted the progress made since

taking over the lease, including cleaning, repairs, and setting up various activity spaces. They also mentioned the increase in attendees and volunteers, as well as the grants and fundraising achieved.

They discussed the following key points:

- The Initial Condition of the building: The building had broken windows, an overgrown garden, random furniture, and a broken water pipe causing ceiling damage. Following extensive cleaning and redecoration, they also set up classroom spaces for craft activities, obtained an electrical safety certificate, and completed fire safety equipment tests.
- Attendees have increased by 50%, and volunteers tripled in number.
- In terms of grants and fundraising, they have achieved £5563 in grants and £2150 in fundraising over two events.
- A range of fundraising events and activities had helped raise funds and engage the community.
- Sensory and Music Spaces had been created together with garden and outdoor Space, including clearing overgrown areas, creating raised beds, and planting vegetables.
- Counselling Services had been introduced Emily Watson, a qualified counsellor and Well-being Manager for the Gathering Community, providing mental health support and well-being activities for attendees every Tuesday.
- Future plans include converting the back kitchen into a commercial kitchen for cooking lessons and working with local chefs. They advised that they would be seeking a longer lease to ensure the sustainability of the project and to secure additional funding to continue their work.

Members expressed their admiration and support for the Gathering Community's achievements and emphasised the importance of learning from their experience.

Councillors raised concerns about the lease terms, financial sustainability, and the need for accessible facilities. Jenny Powell and Scott Price addressed these concerns and highlighted the support they have received from local businesses and the community to help sustain the project.

The chair summarised by emphasising the success and community impact of The Gathering, recognising the hard work and dedication of Jenny, Scott, and the volunteers and she thanked them for attending and presenting to the Committee.

4. Yprentis - Shared Construction Apprenticeship Scheme

Hannah Jones introduced the proposal to close the Apprentice shared construction apprenticeship scheme and transition it to a project under Cyfle, a similar scheme based in West Wales.

- The Apprentice scheme was established in 2012 by Monmouthshire County Council and Melin Homes to address the need for socially procured goods, services, and work in the construction industry across Southeast Wales.

- Hannah discussed the successes of the scheme, that has trained over 340 apprentices, secured more than £1.95 million in funding, and worked with five colleges and 149 contractors.
- She also advised that the scheme had faced challenges such as declining completion rates, difficulty sourcing placements, apprenticeship wage deficits, and financial losses over the past two years.
- A review had been undertaken by Monmouthshire County Council and Torfaen Borough Council, which presented two options: cease operations or redesign the delivery model. She explained that in January 2025, Melin Homes who was a shareholder had withdrawn, so the proposal was to transition the scheme to Cyfle.
- Cyfle is an established shared apprenticeship scheme in West Wales, which could take over the delivery of the scheme, ensuring a seamless transition for staff and apprentices.
- Monmouthshire County Council conducted due diligence checks on Cyfle, confirming its suitability to take over the scheme. The current company has a surplus of £100,000, which will be transferred to Cyfle to support the transition.
- In terms of future plans, Monmouthshire County Council aims to develop a skills centre to meet the needs of children, young people, businesses, and industry in the region.
- Cyfle will provide strategic leadership, to ensure the completion of apprenticeships and support the long-term sustainability of the scheme.

Key Points raised by Members:

- What guarantees do we have that the scheme will be high profile and not just a small part of a bigger beast? Is there any evidence to suggest that it being run by three organisations based in West Wales is the ideal way forward?

Hannah expressed confidence in Cyfle's delivery model and business focus, noting their engagement with Welsh government and contractors, stating that she believes Cyfle's expansion into Southeast Wales will be effective.

- What are the historical figures of apprentices from Monmouthshire, and why is the current figure only one out of 60 apprentices?

Hannah acknowledged the low number of apprentices from Monmouthshire and explained efforts to source more opportunities. She noted that the scheme is regional, and higher numbers are expected in other authorities.

- The report mentions a recommendation that the Council has a seat on the new Directors Board. Will this be a Cabinet Member or an officer? How often does the board meet, and what is the role of directors in taking the scheme's plans forward?

Hannah suggested that an officer would be more suitable for the board seat, given the need for knowledge and regular updates.

- Why have completion rates declined significantly over the past three years, and what has been done to remedy this? What is the feedback from apprentices and employers?

Hannah attributed the decline in completion rates to the challenges of the Level 3 qualification and other barriers. She mentioned ongoing conversations with Welsh government and contractors to address these issues.

- Is the figure of 340 apprentices and £1.95 million in funding specific to Monmouthshire or the entire region?

Hannah clarified that the figures are for the entire region, with Monmouthshire having a proportionate number of apprentices.

- We have concerns about the geographical location of Cyfle being in West Wales and not having a base locally and whether this would create travel issues for apprenticeships and affect local business engagement. Also we are concerned there may be a lack of knowledge and connections to Southeast Wales. Why couldn't we find more businesses to support the existing provision, and what has Cyfle said about coming into the region? Have they done any research?

Hannah acknowledged the concern and mentioned that Cyfle has engaged with colleges in the region and is having conversations with contractors. She expressed confidence in Cyfle's ability to build up knowledge and have ongoing conversations across the region.

- Will Cyfle retain the existing staff from YPrentis?

Hannah confirmed that Cyfle would ensure a seamless transition for staff and apprentices, retaining the existing staff.

- Why can't we recruit quality apprentices, and what will we get back from the transition to Cyfle? Is there a need for this scheme?

Will explained that the scheme is no longer meeting the needs of Monmouthshire's young people and businesses. The transition to Cyfle will allow current apprentices to complete their qualifications and enable Monmouthshire to develop a more suitable vehicle for future apprenticeships.

- Why have some apprentices not been paid? Is it because they haven't completed or haven't been turning up? Who is supervising them?

Hannah acknowledged there had been challenges in completion rates and barriers faced by learners.

- What are the key successes of YPrentis, and how do they reflect the achievement of grants?

Hannah highlighted the training of over 340 apprentices and securing £1.95 million in funding as key successes. She acknowledged the challenges but emphasised the importance of these achievements.

- What are the risks of apprentices not completing, redeployment of staff, and the risk of reputation?

Hannah outlined the risks, including apprentices not completing their qualifications, redeployment of staff, and potential damage to reputation. She emphasised the importance of a seamless transition to mitigate these risks.

- Is the proposed project within the Cyfle Shared Building Skills Shared Apprenticeship Scheme the ideal way forward, considering it is run by organisations based in West Wales?

Hannah explained that they have been meeting regularly with Cyfle and are confident in their delivery model and business focus. They have engaged with Welsh Government and believe the match is fit for purpose going forward.

- What guarantees do we have that the scheme will be high profile and not just a small part of a bigger beast?

Hannah assured that Cyfle is keen to expand into Southeast Wales and has already engaged with colleges and contractors in the region. They are confident that Cyfle will build up the necessary knowledge and presence.

- What is the feedback from apprentices on the reasons for declining completion rates, and what has been done to remedy this over the last two years?

Hannah acknowledged the concerns around declining completion rates and explained that the lack of a Level 2 qualification in Wales has been a significant barrier. They have spoken to Welsh Government about this issue and are aware of the challenges.

- What is the feedback from employers, and how has this been constructively dealt with to improve the situation?

Hannah mentioned that they have been in discussions with employers and Welsh Government to address the challenges and improve the completion rates.

- In terms of the completion rates of apprentices, is there a record of completed apprentices having got permanent jobs?

Hannah responded that the scheme has trained over 340 apprentices, and those are the figures that would reflect sustainable employment. She mentioned that she could provide more detailed breakdowns if needed.

- In terms of the sustainability of the project, I'm concerned about the £1600 overspend, the reliance on grants, the negotiation of the next lease and the potential urgent costs. I don't feel I have enough information and have concerns about the proposal.

Hannah responded that they are aware of the overspend and have income coming in a number of grant funding streams and from contractors. There has been added costs over the past few years. She acknowledged the Member's concerns, but advised this is the best option moving forward.

Chair's Summary:

- The Committee thanks officers for a detailed report and presentation and highlighted key points discussed, including the challenges faced by the YPrentis scheme, such as declining completion rates and the lack of a Level 2 qualification in Wales.
- Members acknowledge that the proposed transition of the YPrentis scheme to become a project under Cyfle would offer potential benefits, including a seamless transition for staff and apprentices and the strategic leadership which would be provided by Cyfle.
- We have expressed our concern about the proximity to Monmouthshire, Cyfle being based in West Wales and therefore we feel there is a need for regular updates on the progress of the transition to ensure the scheme's success in Southeast Wales.
- We have had a rounded debate and Members have expressed a range of views, however, there is consensus to support option 3, which is the cessation of YPrentis and its transfer to Cyfle.

Upon the vote, 8 were in favour for the cessation of Y Prentis and its transfer to Cyfle with 1 abstention.

5. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

- The Chair advised that the next meeting would include the Audit Wales Report on hospital discharge and pre-decision scrutiny of the Play Sufficiency Assessment.
- Councillor Jackie Strong suggested reviewing Council policies on inclusion, diversity, and impact assessment. It was noted that the strategic equality plan will be discussed in the meeting on July 22nd, which could include discussion of these matters.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

7. Minutes of the meetings held on 18th February 2025 and 4th March 2025

The minutes of the meetings held on February 18th and March 4th 2025 were accepted as true and accurate records of the meetings held.

8. Next Meeting

17th June 2025 at 10am.

The meeting ended at 4.03 pm.