

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 24th February, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jackie Strong (Chair)
County Councillors: Jan Butler, Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth, Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Martyn Groucutt and Peter Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Diane Corrister, Head of Childrens Services
Pennie Walker
Rory Clifford, Adult Employment & Skills Lead
Lisa Knight-Davies, Head of Organisation Workforce Development
Lucy Cunningham, HR Advisor

APOLOGIES: Councillors Sue Riley and Maria Stevens

1. Apologies for Absence

Sue Riley, Maria Stevens, Peter Strong as substitute.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. Corporate Parenting Strategy

Cabinet Member Ian Chandler and Diane Corrister introduced the report and answered the members questions:

Councillor Ian Chandler:

- Presented the updated corporate parenting strategy, emphasizing shared responsibilities for children and young people in care across all council members, officers, and partner organizations.
- Stressed that corporate parenting is a council-wide commitment, not limited to children's services.
- Explained the strategy updates reflect progress since 2022, including placement strategies, enhanced foster carer recruitment, and treating care experience as a protected characteristic.

- Highlighted changes in external context, such as eliminating profit from children's care, and clarified priorities and actions.
- Invited feedback before presenting to full council, underscoring the importance of corporate parenting responsibilities.

Diane Corrister:

- Noted the strategy sets out vision, priorities, and roles for corporate parents, with little change in core priorities.
- Detailed recent changes, including demographic shifts and reduced numbers of looked-after children due to investment in prevention services.
- Explained active planning for children in care, leading to a significant drop in numbers and improved outcomes.
- Addressed the inclusion and support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and the impact of the national transfer scheme.
- Discussed development of local residential care units to align with council vision and Welsh Government policy, supporting local placement and family relationships.

Questions:

How are care experienced children and young people involved in writing the strategy, and how does their input shape the final document? How often does Cabinet hear directly from young people?

Care experienced young people are involved through a range of formal and informal mechanisms, including twice-yearly meetings with the corporate parenting panel, participation in recruitment panels for staff and foster carers, and visits to residential homes to provide feedback. Their priorities – education, employment, accommodation, and mental wellbeing – directly inform service development, particularly in relation to accommodation for those aged 18 and over. The strategy is shaped by continuous engagement rather than a single consultation exercise. Cabinet members attend engagement sessions to hear directly from young people, rather than young people attending Cabinet meetings.

How is staff instability in the long-term support team being addressed, and what is being done about significant staff turnover in the looked after nursing service, which has led to delays in health reviews?

The backlog in health reviews was raised at senior level with the Health Board, leading to a regional approach that has reduced the backlog from 76 to 35 children. Recruitment challenges remain due to the complexity of cases, but the situation is improving and closely monitored through safeguarding and partnership meetings.

Why were foster carer recruitment targets not met in previous years, and what is being done to achieve the target of 10 new foster carers this year?

Monmouthshire faces demographic challenges in recruiting foster carers, as many residents are retirees or less likely to take on challenging placements. The strategy now focuses on consistent community engagement and making fostering appear as a real option. Currently, 14 people are in assessment, so the target is expected to be met. Competition from independent fostering agencies has been a challenge, but the council has improved its financial and support offer to make in-house fostering more attractive.

Has COVID affected the complexity of presenting children?

The pandemic has led to a significant rise in mental health and emotional well-being issues, compounded by social media pressures and family dysfunction. This has resulted in more complex needs and challenging behaviour among children. The council has increased the number of children residing with parents under shared parental responsibility, allowing for rehabilitation and safer family placements.

The support offered to foster carers is more than just "soft" support, emphasizing the importance of reassurance, experience, and knowledge available to foster carers, which helps retain them. This level of support is comparable to what independent fostering agencies provide, including access to experienced staff and financial incentives.

"Soft" refers to non-tangible support, such as building a fostering community, regular coffee catch-ups with senior managers, and partnership working groups. These initiatives allow foster carers to directly share issues and actively shape processes and documents used by children's services.

A member noted that some foster carers have transferred from private agencies to the council because they value the comprehensive support available, rather than financial incentives alone. Membership of the corporate parenting panel is a powerful reminder of the responsibility to support children who have experienced significant disadvantage.

Appreciation was expressed for the commitment of staff, particularly personal advisers supporting care leavers and care-experienced young people through advocacy, ongoing support, and preparation for independent living. It was emphasized that young people continue to receive support throughout their transition to adulthood.

How are placements with friends or other connected persons safeguarded and monitored?

Placements with connected persons are subject to clear regulatory requirements. These include both kinship carers (family members) and connected carers (friends or individuals with an existing relationship with the child). All connected carers undergo the same safeguarding checks, training, and assessments as foster carers. Placements are overseen by independent reviewing officers and fostering panels, and carers are encouraged to join the wider fostering community for support. The local authority retains shared parental responsibility.

How many children are currently placed in private sector provision, and what is the impact of the Eliminate agenda from April 2026?

Two young people are currently placed in private sector provision and will remain there until their placements end. Welsh Government policy aims to eliminate profit from children's care by 2029-2030. From April 2026, no new for-profit children's homes will be registered, and the regulator ceased accepting new applications after December 2025. Existing homes will continue to operate pending further guidance. The council remains in contact with providers regarding the future use of their properties.

Why does the private sector appear to recruit staff more easily than the council?

Recent recruitment to council run children's homes has attracted experienced staff from the private sector, largely due to instability created by forthcoming policy changes. The council has benefited from this shift and has strengthened its workforce as a result.

Will private children's homes be able to accept children from England following implementation of the Eliminate agenda?

The Welsh Government is still working through this issue. There may be a small number of homes allowed to take children from England, but the details are not yet clear. The government is aware this could be a loophole and is considering how to regulate it.

How robust is the foster carer recruitment and retention process, and is the terminology used in the strategy appropriate (e.g. "resignation")?

The recruitment process is lengthy (six to eight months), with extensive training and checks. Some candidates drop out during the process, and some resign after experiencing the reality of fostering. "Resignation" is the formal term used for any foster carer leaving, whether due to retirement or other reasons. Most resignations are due to life changes, not dissatisfaction. The process is designed to be open and honest to ensure suitable matches.

How does the strategy reflect Welsh identity while remaining inclusive, given Monmouthshire's context as a border county?

References to Welsh identity could be retained with additional context. While promoting Welsh language and culture remains important, the council works to meet the cultural needs of all children, including those from diverse backgrounds.

Is the council improving its approach to preventing unplanned placement disruptions?

Placement stability is closely monitored, recognising its importance for positive outcomes. While emergency moves are sometimes unavoidable due to market pressures, teams work quickly to stabilise placements. All placement moves are tracked and reported, enabling targeted support. The size of the authority supports detailed oversight and close understanding of individual circumstances.

Councillor Peter Strong emphasized the importance of maintaining Welsh identity for young people in Monmouthshire, noting that even if they do not identify as Welsh, knowledge of the Welsh language and political context is valuable for full citizenship and

future opportunities. He advocated keeping Welsh identity in the strategy, while recognizing the diverse backgrounds of care-experienced children.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair recapped the thorough scrutiny of the strategy, highlighting discussions on care-experienced children's involvement, input into new homes, recruitment challenges, the eliminate agenda, support for foster carers, the role of the corporate parenting panel, clarification of placement types, and technical aspects like acronyms and private sector challenges. She acknowledged positive steps and staff contributions.

The Chair asked for clarification on how progress would be reported back to the committee or cabinet.

Councillor Chandler explained the strategy would go to full council for adoption, with mid-term reporting planned (every 18 months), and regular monitoring via the corporate parenting panel. Annual reports from the Chief Officer of Social Care would also come to the committee, and specific topics could be revisited if requested.

Councillor Howarth suggested updates on government legislation affecting the private sector, noting potential risks and the need for committee updates as regulations evolve. Councillor Chandler confirmed the legislative timetable is fixed, with unresolved issues mainly affecting England, and reassured the committee about oversight and reporting mechanisms.

5. Disability Confident Pledge

Cabinet Member Angela Sandles and Pennie Walker introduced the report and answered the members questions with Lisa Knight-Davies and Rory Clifford:

The Cabinet Member stated the Council is a Disability Confident Level 2 employer, committed to inclusive recruitment and supporting disabled people, guaranteeing interviews for qualified disabled applicants, offering reasonable adjustments, and providing mandatory equality and disability training, occupational health, and colleague support networks. She highlighted regular review and continuous improvement, with Pennie Walker as the scheme lead.

Pennie Walker outlined progress in embedding inclusive practices, strengthening manager and workforce awareness, developing colleague support, and partnership working to widen employment access. She noted updates to work experience and well-being policies, collaboration with Job Centre Plus, expanded disability data collection, and improved accessibility at County Hall. She emphasized ongoing improvement, challenges in workforce data and employment pathways, and actions for regular review and accountability.

Questions:

Is there a time limit for completing actions described as "looking into" or "exploring" within the employer evidence template?

All actions are expected to be completed by the end of the council's three-year Disability Confident membership period, with the ambition to achieve Disability Confident Leader status. The council has committed to a broader range of actions than the minimum required and aims to have all actions in place by the deadline.

Do pay commitments apply to those involved in the Disability Confident scheme?

All council employees, disabled or not, are paid according to their role and pay grade, with no difference in rates.

How does the council support employees who develop long-term conditions or disabilities later in their working lives?

The Council is aware of the changing and aging workforce, has updated internal systems to capture when employees become disabled during their employment, and is actively gathering information to offer appropriate support as circumstances change. The Council is working with workforce data and new tools to track age and health changes over time, aiming to adapt and flex support throughout employees' life cycles, not just at a single point in time.

How does the council support employees who wish to work beyond retirement age?

The Council aims to enable all colleagues to maintain a good work-life balance for as long as they wish to work, uses data to understand workforce demographics, and offers options like internal work experience to help employees transition to different roles if needed, ensuring continued purpose and wellbeing.

Is Access to Work support still available for employees who develop long-term conditions and need to change roles?

Access to Work support remains available through the Department for Work and Pensions. However, there are significant delays for individuals applying after starting employment. Internal work experience opportunities provide an additional layer of support and do not replace existing HR policies on reasonable adjustments or redeployment.

Do outside organisations in Monmouthshire contact the council for guidance on the Disability Confident scheme, and what is gained from this relationship?

The Council is working with other organisations and the DWP to involve more local employers in the scheme, aiming to be a leader and example of good practice. 33 Disability Confident employers have been identified in Monmouthshire; a survey has been conducted to understand their needs, and found requests for more support and resources. There are ongoing efforts to liaise with businesses and support individuals with disabilities into employment through government-funded programs.

How do staff without computer access receive training and information about development opportunities?

The Council is introducing Page Tiger, an app allowing staff to access training via mobile phones, and that face-to-face training will be offered for frontline staff. Training

completion is monitored, and support for both physical and mental health, including initiatives for neurodivergent staff, is being strengthened. Mandated training is delivered face-to-face for frontline colleagues, with about 80% completion, and these sessions also help improve digital skills.

How accessible is the council's training platform, Thinqi, to members and staff? There are concerns Members are unaware of the platform.

Concerns regarding awareness and use of the training platform are noted. Further promotion and support are recommended to ensure wider engagement and understanding of available learning opportunities, while any issues should be flagged to John Pearson (Local Democracy Manager).

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked committee members and acknowledged the importance of tracking progress over the next few years. She noted the value of receiving evaluation and feedback from a range of colleagues within the Council. She expressed appreciation for the team's attendance and contributions, emphasizing the significance of ongoing improvement and monitoring.

6. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Plan and Action List

The committee agreed to add the Caldicot Leisure Centre investment item to the March meeting, if possible, noting its recent addition to the planner and the importance of timely scrutiny.

7. Council and Cabinet Forward Work Programme

Councillor Howarth raised concerns about items being added to the planner after meetings, potentially missing scrutiny opportunities, and highlighted past issues with items like Tudor Street and County of Sanctuary not being properly tracked or included.

Hazel Ilett clarified that the planner is updated live and accessible via the Council hub, and that scrutiny chairs and the team receive email notifications when new items are added. She encouraged members to check the planner regularly and noted the safeguard for scrutiny involvement.

The committee discussed the need for more advance notice and transparency, with Councillor Howarth emphasizing that last-minute additions undermine effective scrutiny and requesting improvements in planner management.

Hazel explained the planner's new features, including date stamps for item additions and the requirement for officers to indicate scrutiny relevance, aiming for earlier and clearer planning.

Members agreed to keep monitoring the planner, ensure items are not redacted, and maintain oversight of upcoming topics, including the Youth Service and Public Library Strategy.

Hazel agreed to clarify the decision-making arrangements for the Tudor Street item and advise the Committee accordingly.

8. To approve the minutes of the previous meeting

Councillor Bond had noted there was no Impact Assessment on the report and asked for it to be provided in future.

The minutes were agreed.

9. Next Meeting: 31st March 2026

The meeting ended at 12.19 pm.