

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK
on Wednesday, 16th July, 2025 at 10.00 am**

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jackie Strong (Chair)
County Councillor (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler,
Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth,
Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Emma Bryn,
Jill Bond, Louise Brown, Sara Burch, John Crook,
Su McConnel, Alistair Neill, Peter Strong and
Ann Webb

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Communities Manager
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Trudy Griffin, Housing Support Commissioning
Operational Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors Penny Jones and Martyn Groucutt

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received from Councillors Martyn Groucutt, who was being substituted by Councillor Jill Bond and Councillor Penny Jones, who was being substituted by Councillor Ann Webb.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Review of the Housing Social Grant Programme

Cabinet Member Sara Burch introduced the report and Ian Bakewell delivered a presentation, following which, they answered the members' questions.

Introduction by Cabinet Member Sara Burch:

- Councillor Burch discussed the diverse range of services commissioned using the housing support grant from the Welsh Government, emphasizing their importance in meeting housing needs.
- She highlighted the Council's long-standing relationships with third sector providers, which offer support to people with specific needs or in difficult situations, helping them avoid homelessness or transition to independent living.
- Councillor Burch noted that most current services and funding arrangements predate the pandemic and are funded by the annual housing support grant allocation.

- She stressed the excellence of current services and the productive partnerships developed over many years.
- The recommissioning process aims to be transparent and objective, focusing on the citizens receiving support and ensuring the best outcomes for public money spent.
- Councillor Burch expressed the importance of not treating this as a routine procurement exercise and appreciated the opportunity for scrutiny before proceeding.
- She mentioned the approval of the rapid rehousing transition plan in 2023 and the ongoing engagement with service providers to adapt services as needs evolve.
- The Council's legal duties around homelessness have changed since the pandemic, with further changes expected as new legislation is enacted.
- Councillor Burch emphasised the need for fair funding, robust monitoring, and avoiding duplication of services, aiming for three to five-year funding arrangements with service providers.
- She concluded by acknowledging the hard work of everyone involved in these services and the housing options team.

Key Points made by Ian Bakewell:

- Ian emphasised the importance of housing support services in preventing homelessness and supporting individuals in maintaining their homes.
- The Welsh Government's vision for homelessness is to make it rare, brief, and unrepeatable, with housing support playing a key role.
- Monmouthshire receives nearly £3.5 million from the Welsh Government for housing support, but this is insufficient to meet the identified needs.
- The types of support provided include assistance with accessing suitable accommodation, financial help, daily living skills, and bridging to wider support services.
- Monmouthshire faces high demand for homelessness and housing support services, with around 2,000 referrals per year and significant needs related to mental health, domestic abuse, and substance misuse.
- There are currently 900+ people receiving support, but there is still unmet need, including waiting lists for supported housing and housing first services.
- The Council aims to align services with its priorities, increase value for money, support worker salaries, and reduce the number of small, less resilient projects.
- The review and tendering process will help ensure compliance with legal requirements and improve contract management.
- Despite the review, gaps in services will remain due to budget constraints, including the need for dedicated mental health supported accommodation and more comprehensive domestic abuse services.
- The upcoming Welsh Government legislation may increase demand for housing support and place additional duties on the Council.

Key Questions and points made by Councillors

- Councillor Powell - asked if the increase in Council tax on empty houses would lead to more of these houses being released for rent.

Ian responded that the premium on empty homes has positively impacted the number of long-term empty homes. However, these homes have not significantly been made available for Council use, as they are often brought back for personal use or sold/rented outside of Council channels.

Ian offered an example whereby a resident attended a Council 'cost of living event' needing benefits and tenancy advice due to a relationship issue making their property unaffordable. A housing support officer helped the resident by providing rent top-ups and assisting with a homeless application. The landlord served an invalid notice, which the Council identified, allowing the resident to stay for an additional six months. The resident received assistance with accessing benefits and health services for their child. Due to ongoing issues with the landlord, the Council offered temporary accommodation, which the resident declined, preferring to stay in the property. The resident was supported in obtaining an emergency housing allocation and moved to a new property within a week. The Council provided additional security measures for the new property to ensure the resident's safety.

- Councillor Howarth - How have the new criteria for landlords and the changes in the law affected the quality, quantity, and service provided by landlords? Has the relationship with Melin Homes changed since they moved to Newport City Council, and has it affected the consortium with other partners in the Gwent area?
- What is the impact of Severn View on homelessness, considering its location and the need for similar facilities across the county?
- Does the current capacity and reliance on Welsh Government grants affect the ability to deliver services, and should the Council fill vacant posts to save money in the long run?

Ian Bakewell explained that the new Rent Smart Wales changes and the Renting Homes Act have not significantly deteriorated the situation with landlords. The requirement for landlords to give six months' notice has provided more breathing space.

The relationship with Melin Homes, now Hedyn, remains strong and supportive, with no negative impact from their move to Newport City Council.

Severn View is a valuable resource, but there is a need for similar facilities across the county. The allocation of temporary accommodation is based on availability and suitability, and efforts are made to place people as close to their home area as possible.

Ian acknowledged the Council's support in increasing staffing and budget. While additional resources are always beneficial, the focus should be on making improvements within the current budget and addressing the shortfall in housing support grants.

- Councillor Riley - How does the need for services compare to the exact location of people, especially with services provided in Newport for those at risk of taking their own lives?
- Are properties being acquired all around the county rather than concentrated in Chepstow?
- Does living in a property where the landlord doesn't want you anymore increase stress on mental health?
- Would hiring people in-house be better than duplicating services that are not proving to be good value for money?

Councillor Burch acknowledged the importance of considering need and location, emphasizing the need to ensure support is available, whether through housing support or health and social care responsibilities.

She confirmed that properties are being acquired around the county, with recent purchases in Abergavenny and efforts to address the lack of temporary housing in Monmouth.

Ian explained that the case study illustrated the complexities and support provided in such situations.

Councillor Burch mentioned that while some specialist expertise might be better provided by external organisations, the Council evaluates whether services are better provided in-house or by third parties.

- Councillor Jackie Strong - Can housing support be spot purchased for specific needs, through specialist organisations?

Ian explained that spot purchasing is not the practice. Instead, the Council collaborates with providers and social services to create bespoke support packages for individuals with specific needs.

- Councillor Edwards - How does the Council see itself as an educator of landlords, especially in cases where landlords may not know or are ignoring the rules?
- Can you provide more details about the alarming increase in domestic abuse referrals, including how many of these referrals concern children?
- How are we doing this current year in the general number of referrals across the board, and is there an increase compared to this time last year?
- What additional indicators are being established to improve the understanding of housing support needs, service delivery, and quality of outcomes?
- How much of an issue is staff retention in relation to the number of referrals waiting for support?

Ian explained that landlord support is an important part of the mix, with environmental health and landlord forums playing roles in educating landlords. The Council has also been involved in regional projects like BOOST to support landlords.

Ian acknowledged the increase in domestic abuse referrals and mentioned that it could be due to a combination of increased awareness and proactive engagement with agencies. He did not have specific figures on how many referrals concern children but promised to provide more detailed information.

Ian stated that the number of referrals is fairly consistent, with around 2000 referrals per year. The current year is on track to have similar numbers.

Ian mentioned the need to better understand the quality of support and how individuals progress through their support journey. The Council is working on establishing additional indicators to measure this progress.

Ian noted that staff retention is slightly improving but remains a challenge. The issue is not the main reason for the waiting list, which is more due to the overall capacity of projects.

- Councillor Jan Butler - Can you clarify the use of money for 24-hour security rather than 24-hour support at Severn View?
- Is there anywhere in the Council's estate currently being looked at for a similar facility in the North of the county?
- Do we have any cross-border agreements, especially for areas close to the boundaries with other counties or countries?

Ian explained that the ideal scenario would be to provide 24-hour supported accommodation, but due to funding limitations, they use 24-hour security to manage the front door and protect the building. This security is funded through rental income.

He confirmed that the team meets weekly to discuss opportunities and has looked at buildings in Monmouth, but they have not found suitable projects for conversion into accommodation. They continue to work on acquisitions that are suitable and will not cause long-term problems.

Ian mentioned that there are no formal cross-border agreements, but there are informal arrangements with neighbouring authorities like Newport and occasional cooperation with the police for safety reason.

- Councillor Louise Brown - Can resources be set aside to deal with the gap between when someone says they are homeless and when they are determined as homeless, and the weekend gap due to the Gwent-wide basis?

Is there any potential expansion of accommodation in Abergavenny and Monmouth? Is the Council responding to the Welsh Parliament about the Wales bill and its resource implications?

- How does Abergavenny's status as a town of sanctuary impact housing need for homelessness, and which area of the Council deals with this?

Ian explained that the out-of-hours arrangements are minimal but ensure that no one is left vulnerable. Any issues arising over the weekend or at night are picked up the next working day.

Ian and Councillor Burch confirmed that there is an ongoing quest for additional accommodation across the county, including Abergavenny and Monmouth. They are working with Registered Social Landlord partners to focus on town centres and have identified provisional opportunities.

Ian mentioned that there is significant engagement with Welsh Government regarding the bill, with local authorities lobbying about resource implications. The Council has responded to consultation exercises and anticipates grant funding to help implement new legislation.

Councillor Burch clarified that the town of sanctuary status does not influence the number of refugees or asylum seekers but helps them integrate into the community. Ian added that the Council is preparing for a more direct role in accommodating asylum seekers and refugees, ensuring no impact on existing housing needs.

- Councillor Bond - Is there enough resource to handle the change process given the plan timeline, and how can risks to employees of service providers be mitigated during the contract transition?
- Is there an opportunity to involve local members in representing vulnerable people during the process, and what role will the Council play in the decision-making process?

Ian explained that significant preparatory work has already been done, and the team, supported by Cardiff City through Ardal, is confident in managing the tender process. The staggered approach will help manage the workload. Regarding risks to employees, Ian mentioned that TUPE obligations would apply, allowing staff to transfer between organisations if necessary. Market engagement events have been held to ensure providers understand the process and can provide feedback.

Ian acknowledged the importance of including the voice of service users and mentioned that the team is considering how best to involve them in the process. The Council's team will be part of the panel for the tender process, and there is consideration for including service users in the decision-making process. Ian also welcomed feedback from local members based on their experiences with residents.

- Councillor Riley - asked about the cost of temporary accommodation for working individuals, noting that it places them in the "working poor" category. She enquired if there is anything that can be done to address the high costs for those who work.

Ian acknowledged that the rents for temporary accommodation are on the higher side and that the current model aims to provide a financially sustainable service. He recognised the issue of disincentives to work and mentioned that the goal is to replace shared accommodation with self-contained units to improve the situation.

Councillor Burch added that the ultimate solution is to have more affordable accommodation to move people out of temporary housing quickly. The development of new affordable housing is ongoing, and the approval of the replacement local development plan will help address the under-provision of affordable housing in the county.

- Councillor Webb - How many times can a person refuse an offered accommodation before they lose their chance?
- How is mental health screening conducted, and is it done through another authority?

Ian stated that homeless applicants are allowed one refusal of offered accommodation. This policy was changed from two refusals to expedite the process of moving people through temporary accommodation.

Ian explained that the ideal scenario would involve having a mental health professional within the team to provide specialist advice and bridge the gap between housing officers and mental health workers. Currently, there is no dedicated mental health screening service within the team, and previous attempts to recruit a mental health social worker were unsuccessful. The team is keen to revisit this idea to improve service quality for individuals with mental health issues.

- Councillor Bond - emphasised the importance of representing residents' voices and clarified that her suggestion was not about political involvement in the tendering process but about ensuring that residents' voices are heard. She also mentioned that she had provided some possible measures in the chat for further discussion.

Councillor Burch acknowledged the importance of representing residents' voices and stated that she is familiar with the core forms mentioned by Jill. She encouraged all councillors to share any experiences or issues they encounter with the services, as this feedback is valuable for identifying gaps and improving services.

- Councillor Butler asked about the current hoarding support being provided, mentioning that it is listed in the forward planning post the change in the act. She wanted to know more about the current support available.

Ian explained that the Council is working with an agency called Holistic Hoarding. This is a relatively new project, less than a year old, which has experienced considerable demand. The service is associated with mental health and is not a quick fix, but it has been a good and very positive new project.

Chair's Conclusion:

We have conducted thorough scrutiny of this report. There have been some suggestions from the Committee that we should monitor the progress of the procurement process, particularly given the timeline for issuing and awarding the tender. Councillor Howarth has emphasised the importance of ensuring that the process is transparent and that any issues are identified early.

Ian has agreed that it would be beneficial for the committee to receive updates on the procurement process and has advised that the decision to start the procurement process would be for the cabinet to decide and that the committee would receive progress reports.

Councillor Burch has suggested incorporating updates on the procurement process within the regular reports on the rapid rehousing plan to ensure that the committee is kept informed about the progress and any potential issues.

The committee has agreed to receive a progress report in January 2026 to ensure that everything is on track and to address any potential issues early. The committee supports the recommendations in the report.

The meeting ended at **12.25 pm.**