

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 29th September, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair)

County Councillors: Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, Martin Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, C. Werrett, Jill Bond, Maureen Powell, Maria Stevens, Ian Chandler, Penny Jones and Jackie Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance/Section 151
Diane Corrister, Head of Childrens Services
Jenny Jenkins, Head of Adult Services
Jess Scarisbrick, Safeguarding and Early Help Service Manager
Tyrone Stokes, Finance Manager
Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services Manager
Stacey Jones, Performance/Finance and Resources Manager
Dave Loder, Finance Manager - Directorate Management Accountant

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Ben Callard

1. Apologies for Absence

Cabinet Member Ben Callard.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. 2026/27 Financial Update - To scrutinise progress against the Council's revenue budget for the 2026/27 financial year

Jonathan Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will McLean, Peter Davies, Deb Hill-Howells and Jane Rodgers:

Will a reduction in employer pension contribution rates, similar to the changes being made to the Teachers' Pension Scheme, also apply to the Local Government Pension Scheme, and what impact would that have on the Council's finances?

The Council is expected to see a similar reduction in Teachers' Pension Scheme contribution rates, but this will not generate a direct saving because the associated funding is provided through Welsh Government and will be offset accordingly. For the Local Government Pension Scheme, the Council agreed contribution rates with the pension fund approximately 12 months ago, resulting in rates that are already 3% lower than the previous level for the next three financial years. This reduction is already benefiting the Council's budget and reflects the strong financial position of the pension fund. The expectation is that these lower contribution rates could continue beyond the current three-year period.

The report shows significant underlying financial pressures, including undelivered savings, a shortfall in planned children's placement savings, and worsening school deficits. Given that some schools are now significantly behind their recovery trajectories, what specific interventions are being put in place for the highest-risk schools, and at what point would the Council conclude that existing recovery plans are no longer credible and require a fundamentally different approach?

The Council recognises that the financial position in schools has worsened and has been transparent about those risks. However, these challenges have developed over a number of years and are not unique to Monmouthshire. Recovery plans are already in place and are being actively monitored by officers, governors and schools. The current focus is on reviewing whether those plans remain realistic, whether they are being implemented effectively, and whether different measures may be needed where circumstances have changed. The Council considers it essential that recovery plans remain flexible and reflect the actual financial position of each school. Schools themselves, through headteachers and governing bodies, retain responsibility for managing their budgets and delivering recovery plans, although the Council will continue to provide support and challenge where required.

The Council is carrying out detailed professional discussions with schools involving finance, education and inclusion officers to assess financial risks and provide assurance. These discussions have shown that some schools may not be making full use of available central support and contingency funding, particularly in relation to learners with additional learning needs. The Council is working with schools to ensure they understand the resources available and is challenging schools to review staffing structures where costs have become unaffordable. While there is no single point at which recovery plans are automatically abandoned, the review process is intended to test whether existing plans remain achievable or whether a different approach is required to address the financial challenges. The Council has been clear with schools

about the financial risks they present and acknowledges that difficult discussions and decisions will be needed to close funding gaps.

The Member welcomed the explanation but emphasised that, although the problem is not unique to Monmouthshire, the Council should do everything possible to address it. She also highlighted that school governors are volunteers rather than financial professionals and suggested that providing them with more support, training and understanding of school finances could help improve the situation.

The Council already offers professional learning and training to governors on school finance, budget management, additional learning needs and inclusion. Governors are supported to understand how budgets are set and monitored, as well as how schools can organise support for learners more effectively. The Council is encouraging schools to adopt sustainable staffing and support models that meet learners' needs while remaining financially affordable, and this support is available to all governing bodies.

School deficits have worsened significantly over recent years, moving from a surplus position to a substantial overall deficit. Given the description of the situation as a serious financial risk and a crisis affecting schools across Wales, what is driving this deterioration, what support is available to schools, what interventions could be taken if recovery plans fail, and does this mean schools will need to reduce the number of teaching assistants?

The deterioration in school balances is not a recent issue. Deficits had been increasing before the pandemic, with more schools entering deficit positions between 2016-17 and 2019-20. Additional funding provided during the pandemic temporarily improved school balances, but it did not resolve the underlying structural financial pressures facing schools. As that temporary funding came to an end, the underlying challenges re-emerged.

The financial pressures facing schools are being experienced across Wales. Demand for support, particularly for pupils with additional learning needs, has increased significantly, and discussions are taking place nationally about additional funding. Monmouthshire maintains contingency funding to support schools where unexpected additional learning needs arise outside the normal funding cycle, although these funds are limited. Changes to Welsh Government funding arrangements are expected to allocate these resources directly to schools in future, reducing the Council's ability to hold contingency funds centrally.

The Council is undertaking enhanced engagement with schools that present the highest financial risks. This includes reviewing the adequacy of recovery plans and determining whether additional support, challenge or intervention is needed. The Council has statutory powers to issue warning notices to schools that fail to manage their budgets appropriately. In the most serious cases, budget management responsibilities could be removed from a school and brought back under Council control, although this would have significant practical and resource implications.

The Council is not proposing the automatic removal of teaching assistants from classrooms. Teaching assistants are funded where there are pupils with additional learning needs. However, schools are not funded through the formula to provide a

teaching assistant in every Key Stage 2 classroom. Where schools choose staffing arrangements that go beyond the funding provided, this can create additional budget pressures. The Council expects schools to review staffing and class structures and consider more financially sustainable arrangements, such as mixed-age classes where appropriate, while remaining within required pupil-to-teacher ratios and continuing to meet learners' needs.

What coaching and practical support is available to school governors and school leaders, beyond formal training, to help them manage budgets and address financial challenges?

School governors play a critical role in financial management, safeguarding, and providing support and challenge to school leaders. Where schools face particular difficulties, the Council works closely with both the Chair of Governors and the Headteacher through regular discussions and engagement. While there is no separate formal coaching programme for governors, officers provide ongoing support through constructive and informed conversations that are intended to help schools work through challenges and identify solutions.

The Council's approach is to work closely with schools when problems arise, offering guidance and support tailored to individual circumstances. Through bodies such as the Monmouthshire Association of School Governors, governors are also encouraged to raise concerns and seek advice. The emphasis is on maintaining a collaborative relationship with schools and helping governors and leaders understand and respond to financial pressures in a practical way.

What progress has been made on the review of surplus school places, and can reducing surplus capacity across school clusters help address the current financial pressures facing schools?

The Council has reviewed surplus places across its four school clusters. The position is broadly balanced in the Abergavenny and Caldicot clusters, but there are significant levels of surplus capacity in the Monmouth and Chepstow clusters. Officers are currently analysing the latest pupil numbers, live birth data and other local information to assess future demand and determine the most appropriate way to address those surplus places. Reducing surplus capacity is recognised as one factor that could help deliver a more sustainable and efficient education system and support the long-term financial position of schools. The Council expects that specific proposals will need to be developed for the Monmouth and Chepstow clusters, but further work and local engagement are required before those proposals can be brought forward.

Why is the Council reporting a £464k revenue overspend when school balances are forecast to move to a cumulative deficit position of £9.337m by 31 March 2027, including a forecast £2.456m deterioration during 2026/27? In the interest of accuracy and transparency, shouldn't the actual local authority forecast overspend be combined with the school deficit forecast for 2026/27? Is the 10-year school recovery forecast still credible given deficits have worsened by around 30% since this forecast was produced just a few days ago? Was there ever a 5-year, or even 1-year forecast showing deficits reaching today's level?

The figures are reported separately because the Council's centrally managed budgets and delegated school budgets operate under different financial arrangements and responsibilities. While both are important to the Council's overall financial sustainability, schools are responsible for managing their own delegated budgets through headteachers and governing bodies. The report aims to be transparent by presenting both the Council's forecast position and the schools' deficit position together within the same financial reporting framework, while maintaining the distinction between areas directly controlled by the Council and those delegated to schools.

The ten-year recovery forecast was introduced to provide a strategic view of the schools' financial position over time. Officers acknowledged that the starting position is now weaker than anticipated and that this raises legitimate questions about whether the projected recovery trajectory remains realistic. The forecast is therefore not intended to be fixed, but rather a tool to support ongoing challenge and scrutiny of school recovery plans.

A significant proportion of the overall deficit is concentrated within a relatively small number of schools, particularly several secondary schools and the pupil referral service. Officers stated that the greatest opportunity for improvement lies in achieving successful recovery in those schools. While the position remains challenging and recovery will take time, the Council's focus is on ensuring recovery plans are robust, realistic and actively monitored.

The schools' financial position requires significant scrutiny and intervention, but responsibility for school deficits rests primarily with the schools themselves rather than the Council's central budget holders. For that reason, it would not be appropriate to merge the two figures into a single overspend figure. Both the schools' position and the Council's own financial pressures are serious challenges and should receive equal attention, but they represent distinct areas of accountability.

The £464,000 forecast overspend does not tell the whole story of the Council's finances. The report identifies substantial underlying pressures across services, particularly in adult social care, children's services, transport and other demand-led areas. Some one-off funding and grants help offset these pressures in the current year, but the underlying financial challenges remain significant and will be examined further through the Medium Term Financial Plan process.

What is causing the £227,000 overspend at CastleGate Business Park, what are the ongoing discussions with tenants about, and how might the outcome of those discussions affect the financial position?

The overspend is linked to ongoing challenges in fully letting the building, with approximately 38,000 square feet of space currently unoccupied. The Council remains in active discussions both with prospective tenants and with existing tenants regarding rental and service charge arrangements, while also working with the Cardiff Capital Region to explore opportunities to attract high-value occupiers to the site.

Specific details of the negotiations could not be provided because they are commercially confidential and involve both current and potential tenants. Officers confirmed, however, that an update on the investment property portfolio, including

CastleGate, is scheduled to come before the committee later in the year. It is anticipated that some of the more detailed discussion will need to take place in a closed session because of the commercially sensitive nature of the information.

The report refers to further pressures associated with CastleGate Business Park. Are these ongoing and recurring pressures likely to continue affecting the Council's resources position?

The pressures at CastleGate Business Park are principally linked to vacant units within the building. While parts of the site remain unoccupied, the Council experiences a shortfall in rental income and must also meet service charge costs that would otherwise be paid by tenants. These factors are contributing to the forecast overspend currently being reported.

The Council's priority is to secure tenants for the vacant space, as doing so would increase rental income and transfer responsibility for service charges from the Council to the occupiers. Officers confirmed that active work is continuing to fill the empty units, and improving occupancy remains the key mechanism for reducing the ongoing financial pressure associated with the site.

The report shows an underspend of £268,000 in passenger transport due to changes to home-to-school transport eligibility. Given ongoing concerns about pupils experiencing late buses, buses not arriving, or overcrowded public services, are savings being made at the expense of service quality, and could some form of contingency support be considered for affected pupils?

Savings have been achieved by increasing the number of eligible learners travelling on public bus services rather than dedicated school transport. The Council monitors passenger numbers with operators and has introduced dedicated school transport where overcrowding has been identified. Increased use of public bus services has been linked to the £1 fare scheme, which has led to more fare-paying passengers using routes previously relied upon by school pupils. As a result, some eligible learners have been moved from congested public services onto dedicated school transport.

Current monitoring shows no capacity issues on some of the routes that have attracted complaints, and observation work has found that, in some cases, pupils are standing despite seats being available, including on double-decker buses. The Council stated that it will continue reviewing services and will introduce dedicated transport where evidence demonstrates a capacity problem.

Concerns were also raised about buses that fail to arrive as scheduled.

Officers they liaise regularly with bus operators and will investigate and challenge any reported non-arrival of services.

If pupils are standing when seats are available, do bus drivers not have an obligation to ensure that pupils are seated before the vehicle moves off?

There is a distinction between dedicated school transport and public bus services. On dedicated school transport, each learner is allocated a seat. On public bus services,

however, different regulations apply and operators are permitted to carry standing passengers up to a specified standing capacity. Drivers can ask pupils to sit down, but if seats are available and passengers choose to stand, the regulations for public services allow the journey to continue, provided overall capacity limits are not exceeded.

Could drivers be instructed not to move off when pupils are standing and seats remain available, or could clearer guidance be issued to require this?

Guidance is already issued encouraging drivers to remind pupils to sit down. However, because these are public bus services rather than dedicated school transport, the legal rules allow standing passengers. Drivers can ask passengers to sit but cannot compel them to do so, and the service may continue operating within the permitted standing capacity. Council staff travelling on buses had witnessed drivers asking pupils to sit down, with some pupils choosing to remain standing.

A number of budget pressures are attributed to an inability to achieve staff vacancy factor savings. Using community hubs as an example, what does this mean in practice, and is the Council regularly reviewing whether these vacancy assumptions remain realistic and fit for purpose?

The staff vacancy factor is a budget assumption that a proportion of posts across the organisation will be vacant during the year because of staff turnover, retirement, promotion or people moving jobs. The Council currently assumes a level of vacancy savings based on an overall staff turnover rate of around 8%.

Where services are unable to achieve those savings, it is often because staffing levels need to be maintained to ensure services can continue to operate safely and effectively. In some areas, organisational structures are already relatively lean, leaving little opportunity to leave posts vacant without affecting service delivery. Services are expected to manage these pressures within their overall budgets.

The vacancy factor is reviewed annually as part of the budget-setting process. Officers stated that assumptions can be increased or reduced following discussions with directors and senior managers if they are no longer considered appropriate.

The number of children looked after has increased by around 13-14% over recent months, despite the Council's focus on prevention and early intervention. What has driven this increase, and is there a pathway to reducing those numbers again in the future?

The Council had previously succeeded in stabilising the number of children looked after, but an increase has been seen since the start of the current year. A significant factor has been a small number of large sibling groups entering care, including one family that moved into the area from elsewhere. In children's services, the arrival of a few large family groups can have a substantial impact on overall numbers and placement costs.

Wider social and economic pressures are affecting families and communities, creating increased demand for support and, in some cases, leading to more children requiring care. While individual family circumstances are at the heart of each case, these broader pressures are contributing to the rise in numbers being seen.

The recent increase appears to have been influenced by a combination of exceptional cases involving large sibling groups and growing demand pressures within communities.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for the report and their responses. The report was moved.

5. Annual Director's Report for Social Care - To scrutinise the progress and strategic direction for the service area

Jane Rodgers introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jenny Jenkins:

The social care budget appears broadly balanced overall, but this masks a children's services overspend and an adult services underspend. Can assurance be provided that the adult services underspend reflects genuine management of demand rather than unmet need or staffing constraints?

The Adults services underspend was supported by late-year grant funding, particularly funding intended to support hospital discharges and community-based care. These grants were used to offset core care costs, including residential care and care-at-home provision. Officers stated that the underspend did not result from unmet need or reduced service provision, but reflected the availability of additional grant funding that helped manage expenditure while continuing to meet people's care and support needs.

What measurable benefits are expected from the Council's investment in developing in-house residential and fostering provision? How many children are currently in external placements, what are the associated costs, and can it be demonstrated that in-house provision delivers savings once staffing, property and support costs are taken into account?

Developing in-house provision is helping to reduce reliance on external placements while also improving outcomes for children. During the year, the Council opened a residential children's home in Monmouthshire and developed additional bespoke placements. At the end of the reporting year, seven children were living in in-house residential provision, increasing to eight by the time of the meeting. The Council also had four young people in supported accommodation provision, with plans to open a further children's home and another supported accommodation facility during the current year.

External residential placements can vary significantly in cost, ranging from around £4,000 to £4,500 per week at the lower end to £15,000 to £17,000 per week for children with the most complex needs. The Council's in-house provision has delivered the savings anticipated in the original business cases and provides better outcomes for children while contributing to the service's savings targets.

In addition to residential provision, the Council has invested in strengthening its in-house fostering service by improving the financial support and wider offer available to foster carers. Officers reported that the authority had achieved a clearer distinction

between children placed with its own foster carers and those placed through independent fostering agencies, resulting in both financial benefits and improved placement stability. The contribution of in-house foster carers was highlighted as a significant factor in reducing costs and increasing capacity within the service.

The Member welcomed the explanation and noted the importance of evidence that in-house provision is delivering positive outcomes for children and young people as well as value for money.

The fostering element of the strategy is equally important as the residential provision programme and highlighted the progress made in increasing the use of in-house foster placements, which has reduced reliance on more expensive independent agency placements while helping to achieve better outcomes for children.

The report indicates that external residential placements can cost between £200,000 and £800,000 per child per year. How many in-house children's homes does the Council now operate, and how does that compare with the number of externally managed children's homes operating within the county?

The Council currently has three registered in-house children's homes and is expecting to open a fourth during the current year. In addition, there is one supported accommodation provision currently operating, with a further provision due to open this year and another planned for the following year. This would eventually provide three supported accommodation schemes alongside four children's homes.

(Officers could not provide the exact number of externally managed children's homes in the county during the meeting but will provide the precise figure separately. – **ACTION: to provide the exact figure**)

How many of Monmouthshire's looked-after children are placed in externally managed residential homes within the county, and how many are placed outside the county? Given the growth of local in-house provision, it would be useful to understand how many children are still in externally provided placements nearby.

The existence of many externally operated children's homes within Monmouthshire does not mean that they are occupied by Monmouthshire children. Many of the Council's children placed in external provision are located outside the county, while children from other authorities are often placed within Monmouthshire because of its location close to the England-Wales border. Securing external placements remains highly competitive.

(The precise breakdown of placements within and outside the county was not available at the meeting but this information will be provided afterwards. – **ACTION: to provide the exact figures**)

Only 57% of care leavers are in education, employment or training. What support is available for the remaining 43%, how many young people does that represent, and what is being done to address the higher risks of isolation and poor outcomes experienced by care leavers?

The 43% figure relates to a relatively small cohort, although the exact number was not available at the meeting and was to be provided later. A significant proportion of those not in education, employment or training are unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people whose immigration status means they do not yet have the right to work. Others may not be ready for employment or education because of their personal circumstances, may be parents themselves, or may be affected by benefit-related issues linked to their accommodation arrangements.

Every care leaver has access to a Personal Adviser and receives ongoing support to plan their transition into adulthood. Efforts focus on helping young people build support networks, maintain connections with services, access peer support, and develop pathways into education, training or employment. Support can continue until the age of 24 or 25, helping to reduce isolation and provide a consistent source of assistance when needed.

The complaints table is difficult to understand, particularly the outcome column. What do terms such as "upheld", "not upheld" and combinations of different outcomes mean, and what learning has been taken from complaints about financial assessments, charging, care planning and communication?

The outcome column records the findings of independent investigators who review Stage 2 complaints. "Upheld" means the complaint was found to be valid, "not upheld" means the evidence did not support the complaint, and "partially upheld" means some aspects were supported while others were not. Some complaints contain multiple elements and sub-elements, which is why several different outcomes can appear against a single complaint. It was acknowledged that the presentation could be made clearer for readers.

Complaints are used as a source of learning for both individual practitioners and wider services. Where recurring themes emerge, such as concerns about financial assessments and charging arrangements, additional staff training and guidance are introduced. A large proportion of complaints relate to communication, particularly where complex care processes and legal requirements need to be explained to families who are often under considerable stress. Ongoing professional development, supervision and training are used to help staff communicate more clearly and ensure families understand the decisions being made, their options, and the support available to them.

The outcome table contains entries showing combinations of upheld and not upheld findings for the same complaint. Why is this so complicated?

Some complaints are broken down into a number of separate allegations and sub-allegations. Investigators assess each element individually, meaning one part of a complaint may be upheld while another is not. This can produce a series of mixed outcomes that appear confusing when viewed in summary form without the full investigation report. It was acknowledged that a more consolidated presentation could improve readability in future reports.

Why do some people receive the social care survey while others do not, and how is the survey sample selected?

The survey follows a Welsh Government methodology and is sent to a specific cohort of people who meet defined criteria, enabling results to be compared consistently across Wales. The exact selection criteria are determined nationally rather than locally. The survey process runs continuously throughout the year. Approximately one-twelfth of people who have an active care and support plan are selected each month, subject to a number of filters. For example, people who have asked not to be contacted are excluded. This rolling approach means feedback is gathered throughout the year rather than through a single annual exercise. Anyone with concerns about their care or support can contact the service directly rather than waiting for a survey.

Could the criteria used to select survey recipients be shared with members?

The request was noted, and it was confirmed that the survey operates according to specific national criteria and filtering arrangements. – **ACTION**

For unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers and may not have the right to work or access benefits, what ongoing responsibilities does the Council have towards them? Are language barriers a significant issue, and what support is available to help them?

The Council continues to have responsibilities towards unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people when they become care leavers. Support remains in place until their immigration and asylum status is resolved, and the Council has an ongoing duty to ensure they have access to accommodation and appropriate support. Young people are connected to language support, legal advice relating to their immigration status, and culturally appropriate services while they are in care and as they move into care-leaver status. Experience built up over a number of years has enabled the service to provide ongoing support tailored to the needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people.

The service remains involved throughout this period to help ensure they are supported until their circumstances are resolved.

What are the current levels of vacancies and sickness absence within social care services, are these a cause for concern, and are they improving or worsening over time?

Vacancies remain a challenge across both adults' and children's services, with around 30 vacancies typically existing at any one time. In adults' services, the workforce is large, with over 400 full-time equivalent staff, and some turnover is inevitable because of retirements, career progression and people moving jobs. Recruitment has improved over the last 18 months, particularly within direct care services, although vacancies remain within reablement services.

Vacancies can affect the ability to provide services at the right time and can place additional pressure on existing staff. In statutory services, where individuals must have an allocated social worker, agency workers are used where necessary to maintain required staffing levels. Recruitment remains difficult in some specialist areas, particularly child protection social work.

Turnover in children's services is around 10%, which was described as comparatively positive for a service of that nature. Turnover is slightly higher within adults' services. Recruitment is supported through targeted campaigns, training opportunities, student placements and efforts to promote social care as a career.

Sickness absence is actively monitored through an individualised approach that focuses on supporting staff back into work and maintaining regular contact. Managers receive detailed information on both long-term and short-term sickness absence, which helps them respond appropriately. Some sickness absence reflects the nature of social care work and the age profile of parts of the workforce. While sickness levels remain a challenge, they are managed proactively through support, supervision and workforce management processes.

What impact could the proposed Gwent-wide Social Care Workforce Development Service have on the issues raised through complaints and on workforce learning and development more generally?

Learning from complaints is primarily delivered within social care services themselves through line management, supervision, team support and professional development arrangements. The way complaints are reviewed and used to improve practice is embedded within day-to-day service management and is not dependent on the workforce development team.

The workforce development team has a more specific role focused on supporting student placements and delivering the formal training programme funded through the Social Care Wales Workforce Development Grant. This includes statutory and professional training, some of which can be tailored to local service needs, and training is often shared with neighbouring local authorities.

The deeper professional learning that comes from individual cases, complaints, supervision and service experience remains the responsibility of managers and teams within the service itself. As a result, learning from complaints and the ongoing development of practitioners is expected to continue through existing service management and supervision arrangements.

If the proposed move to a Gwent-wide Social Care Workforce Development Team goes ahead, how can it be ensured that the close relationships, local knowledge and support currently provided to Monmouthshire staff, student social workers and foster carers are maintained?

The Workforce Development Team plays a vital role in supporting student placements, newly qualified social workers, professional training and workforce development across social care services. It also provides more tailored support to help services implement changes and new ways of working.

The proposal seeks to balance the benefits of a larger, more resilient regional service with the need to retain strong local connections. A regional arrangement could reduce duplication, improve resilience, strengthen links with universities and provide greater capacity for commissioning training. At the same time, the proposed business partnership model is intended to ensure that Monmouthshire retains dedicated links into

the service so that local workforce needs, service changes and training requirements continue to receive direct support.

The aim is to retain the benefits of local responsiveness while gaining the advantages of a larger shared service.

What does the new "START" reablement model look like, what progress has been made in implementing it, and how are external care providers being supported to work within this approach?

The START model places reablement support at the beginning of the care pathway, enabling people to receive assessment and intervention as soon as they enter the system. Reablement workers have been trained and upskilled to undertake functional assessments, reducing reliance on social workers for every initial assessment and helping people access support more quickly.

This approach has increased the number of people receiving reablement services and reduced waiting times for assessment. Reablement staff now undertake assessments, work closely with social workers and support more responsive decision-making about care needs.

A programme of therapist-led training and competency development has been delivered to support staff. Work is also underway with external care providers through a "trusted assessor" approach, enabling providers to share information more effectively and alert the Council more quickly when a person's care needs increase or decrease.

The longer-term aim is to create a more outcome-focused model of assessment and commissioning across the whole system. While further development is still needed, significant progress has already been made in embedding the START approach and improving responsiveness for residents.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the Chief Officer for the excellent report, in content and accessibility; the inclusion of Case Studies, as previously requested, was gratefully noted. He expressed the Members' thanks for the hard work from officers and associated teams. He noted that it would be helpful for the directorate to reflect on whether AI could play a role in improving outcomes for service users, increasing efficiency, or supporting the delivery of social care services, and potentially develop this issue further in future reporting. The report was moved.

6. Safeguarding Annual Evaluation Report - To scrutinise the performance of safeguarding arrangements

The members' questions were answered by Jessica Scarisbrick, Diane Corrister and Jane Rodgers:

The report refers to the use of the "strike process" in relation to antisocial behaviour. The report appears to suggest that police resource pressures are affecting the effectiveness of this approach, particularly in identifying individuals and following

through with appropriate intervention. More broadly, does the lack of police resources affect safeguarding work, and does it create difficulties in operating preventative processes such as the strike system?

The reference in the report related to the development of an adult strike process, rather than the well-established children's strike process. Progress on implementing an adult version has proved more difficult because of the complexity of antisocial behaviour cases involving adults and the resources required to support the process. Strong working relationships exist with the police and these relationships are important in supporting safeguarding responsibilities. While police resource pressures are recognised and can create challenges, collaborative arrangements mean safeguarding work is able to continue effectively. Where resource issues affect safeguarding activity, these concerns are raised through the regional safeguarding board.

Police resource constraints are acknowledged as a genuine issue and can make some aspects of safeguarding and community safety work more difficult. However, close working relationships between agencies help ensure that safeguarding responsibilities continue to be met, even where there are pressures on police capacity.

Is it fair to say that the police resource situation does affect safeguarding work and that additional police resources would assist the effectiveness of these processes?

Additional police resources would be beneficial. However, because of the strength of existing working relationships and a shared commitment to safeguarding, agencies continue to work together effectively. The lack of resources is a recognised issue, particularly when trying to develop new approaches such as the adult strike process, but it has not prevented safeguarding partners from carrying out their core responsibilities.

Training compliance for Group B safeguarding training is reported at only 64%, child protection conferences have increased by 20%, and cases involving harmful sexual behaviour are becoming more severe and complex. At what point would these issues trigger escalation, and what additional intervention or capacity is being put in place to address them?

The 64% Group B training compliance figure reflects the recent inclusion of housing staff within the Social Care Directorate. Additional Group B training sessions are being delivered to ensure housing colleagues receive the same level of safeguarding training as other staff within social care and public protection. The expectation is that compliance levels will rise significantly over the coming year and move closer to the 80-90% level that would normally be expected.

The rise in harmful sexual behaviour had been a significant concern during the previous year, particularly among younger age groups. Increased joint working between education, social care and youth services has helped reduce the number of such cases. However, a smaller number of cases are now presenting with greater severity and complexity, reaching a criminal threshold. These cases are managed through established child protection and court processes.

Child protection conferences have increased compared with the previous year, but the numbers remain broadly consistent with longer-term trends. Capacity has been built into

the service to allow workloads to increase or decrease as demand changes, and there is currently no concern that the service lacks the capacity to meet those needs.

Councillor Buckler noted that the increasing severity of harmful sexual behaviour was particularly concerning and welcomed the explanation of how these cases are being managed.

The response emphasised that earlier intervention through partnership working had reduced overall instances of harmful sexual behaviour, while the more serious cases are addressed through established safeguarding and child protection procedures.

The report shows 57 out of 75 children's Position of Trust cases concluded and 50 out of 68 adult cases concluded. Would there be value in comparing these numbers with figures from across Wales or the UK to help understand whether the number of concerns being raised is proportionate and whether there is learning that can be shared?

New Welsh Government reporting requirements following the publication of the Wales Safeguarding Procedures and Owen's Law reforms will increase the emphasis on reporting and comparing Position of Trust and Section 5 referral data across Wales. This will make it easier to compare referral numbers on a population basis and identify trends.

Position of Trust and Section 5 referral data are already monitored regionally through the safeguarding board. Both significant increases and significant decreases in referral numbers would prompt questions and further analysis. Information is reviewed by source, profession, organisation and type of concern to identify patterns and learning opportunities. For example, trends relating to domestic abuse, particular services, or specific sectors could trigger further investigation or intervention.

With increasing levels of misogynistic behaviour, harmful sexual behaviour and the use of AI-generated sexualised images of young people, when would these issues meet safeguarding thresholds, and what support would be available to the young people affected?

Safeguarding referrals would be expected where those behaviours presented safeguarding concerns. A multi-agency approach would then be used to assess risk, identify protective measures and determine the most appropriate support for those involved. The response would focus on the wellbeing of the young person and on identifying which agency was best placed to provide ongoing support.

Where Children's Services were not the most appropriate agency to remain involved long term, arrangements would be made for another service to provide support. The immediate priority would be managing risk and ensuring appropriate safeguarding measures were in place.

In response to the wider issue of misogynistic behaviour and AI-generated imagery, it was noted that these themes are already being identified through the Monmouthshire Exploitation Group. The issues have been escalated to the Gwent Safeguarding Board

and are now being considered for further work through multi-agency forums at a regional level.

The self-assessment scores the safeguarding workforce highly, but four of the five priority areas in the action plan remain rated Amber rather than Green. How should this be interpreted, and why do actions with target dates of March 2026 still appear as Amber?

An Amber rating reflects work that is progressing but not yet complete. Safeguarding is an area where new issues and emerging risks continually arise, meaning that actions often evolve and expand as more information becomes available. As a result, some actions do not have a simple start-and-finish point and require ongoing development and review.

Some areas of work are also dependent on regional or national developments, such as training standards, which can affect timescales. The workforce self-assessment score reflects the strength of the safeguarding culture and workforce, while the Amber ratings indicate that improvement work is still underway rather than completed.

It was acknowledged that the reporting could be clearer. Longer-term priorities may be better reflected through multi-year actions or by providing a fuller explanation of what the Amber rating signifies, particularly where original target dates have passed but the work remains ongoing.

The Chairman suggested that a brief explanatory note in the report would help readers understand why actions remain Amber after their target date had passed, particularly where the work is continuing because of its complexity rather than because progress has stalled. He stressed that he was not advocating additional bureaucracy, simply greater clarity in the reporting.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the report, the officers' responses today, and the work being done. He highlighted the positive findings from the recent Estyn report, which stated that Monmouthshire promotes a strong safeguarding culture, thanked staff, managers and committee members for their contribution to safeguarding and noted that the report had identified scrutiny by the committee itself as a strength. The report was moved.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

8. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Work Programme

Noted.

9. To confirm the following minutes of the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee:

The minutes were confirmed.

30th June 2026

3th September 2026 (Special Meeting)

10. Next Meeting

13th October 2026 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.52 pm.**