

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Wednesday, 29th April, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jackie Strong (Chair)
County Councillors: Jan Butler, Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth, Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, John Crook, Jill Bond and Angela Sandles

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Richard Drinkwater, Community Hub Manager (South)
Paul Sullivan, Head of Customer, Communication and Engagement

1. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Riley, substituted by Councillor Bond and Councillor Maria Stevens, who was substituted by Councillor Crook.

2. Declarations of Interest

The Chair declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a member of Caldicot Friends of the Library.

3. Public Open Forum

George Millman asked the following questions:

When will the public officially know what will happen to Tudor Street? Please can the Council confirm their plans?

Angela Trett, also raised questions about the accessibility and location of community hubs and libraries in Monmouthshire, with a particular focus on Abergavenny. She referred to the 2024–25 health and social care report and asked whether community hubs were intended to be accessible for disabled and vulnerable people, and whether libraries were due to be relocated into community hubs. She specifically asked which community hubs in Abergavenny would host library services and whether those facilities would be accessible.

In response, officers explained that the community hub in Abergavenny operates from the Market Hall. It was described as a slightly unusual model compared with other hubs, as it is a split-level facility, with the library located on the first floor and council services provided at ground floor level. It was confirmed that this is the current arrangement.

Angela then asked a supplementary question about whether the Tudor Street building could be considered as a potential location for a library or community hub in the future,

noting its good disabled access, parking, toilets, and overall capacity. The Chair advised that this was a matter for the relevant Cabinet Member and that her question and comments would be noted and passed on for a response.

Angela expanded on her reasoning, explaining that while she recognised the existing provision, she felt Tudor Street had the physical space and facilities to support a wider range of activities and could attract more people if developed as a community hub or library. The Chair then closed the public open forum, thanked Angela for her contribution, and confirmed that her comments would be forwarded to the appropriate Cabinet Member for consideration and response.

- ACTIONS: to request a response from the Cabinet Member

4. To scrutinise the Monmouthshire County Council Public Libraries Strategy 2025-2030 following public consultation

Cabinet Member Angela Sandles introduced the report by emphasising the fundamental importance of public libraries as one of the few genuinely universal services provided by the Council: free at the point of use, open to everyone, non-judgemental, and trusted by communities. She highlighted that libraries support a wide range of needs, including children learning to read, adults developing skills, people who are digitally excluded, and those who need a safe and welcoming place.

She stressed that although libraries are a statutory service, the strategy goes beyond meeting legal requirements. It is framed around fairness, prevention, and enabling people to thrive through access to information, digital support, learning opportunities, and social connection. She noted that libraries have evolved over the last decade into vibrant community hubs that sit at the heart of local service delivery, contributing to wellbeing, lifelong learning, and community resilience.

She explained that the refreshed strategy provides a clear and practical framework for the next five years. She argued that, at a time when digital access is essential and inequalities persist, reducing library provision would disproportionately affect those facing the greatest barriers. In contrast, investing in libraries is preventative, supporting independence and confidence while relieving pressure on other parts of the system.

She highlighted that the strategy has been shaped by meaningful consultation, with strong input from friends' groups, volunteers and communities, whose feedback reinforced the focus on access, local identity and partnership working. She also made clear that the strategy is deliverable and responsible, building on existing provision, fitting within current budgets, aligning with wider wellbeing and equality priorities, and including clear measures of success against national standards and community outcomes.

Richard Drinkwater delivered a presentation. Paul Sullivan added introductory remarks:

Paul Sullivan, Head of Customer Communication and Engagement, spoke in support of the Public Library Strategy following Richard Drinkwater's presentation. He reflected on his experience of working with the library service since recent portfolio changes and reinforced the point that each community hub and library feels different. He described

this variation as a positive strength, as the buildings and services are shaped to meet the specific needs of their local communities.

He placed particular emphasis on the importance of implementation, noting the progress made over the previous 12 months. He highlighted the passion and commitment shown by staff across community hubs and libraries, stressing that the level of support provided to residents on a daily basis should not be underestimated. He described community hubs as a significant asset, providing a single, accessible location within towns where residents can use library services, access council services, and receive support.

Paul also drew attention to the increasing synergy between services now brought together within his portfolio, including central communications, community development, the contact centre and community hubs. He explained that these services collectively form the Council's main point of contact with residents. He referenced recent staff training and reported a noticeable improvement in staff morale, indicating that the service is moving in a positive direction. While acknowledging that further work remains, he concluded that progress is being made and the overall direction of travel is strong.

Richard Drinkwater answered the members' questions with Paul Sullivan and the Cabinet Member:

- *What lessons have been learned from integrating libraries into community hubs over the past ten years, and how have these informed the strategy?*

The integration of libraries into community hubs has been an ongoing, iterative process that continues to evolve. Changes have been made over time in response to how services are used, ranging from building layouts to opening arrangements. The service has adapted continuously to residents' needs and is expected to keep changing as those needs evolve. The strategy reflects this learning by recognising community hubs as dynamic spaces rather than fixed service models.

- *What role do volunteers play in libraries and community hubs, and is there any risk of volunteers replacing paid staff?*

Volunteers are involved in the service, but there is no intention or aspiration to replace paid staff with unpaid roles. Volunteering is seen as a way to enhance services and provide individuals with opportunities to contribute or gain experience. A specific example was given of a volunteer with significant learning difficulties who contributes a small number of hours each week and is treated as a valued member of the team. Volunteering is about adding value, not substituting professional roles.

- *How are community and voluntary groups supported to enhance library services rather than undermine core provision?*

Friends of the Library groups operate in nearly all community hubs and play a key role in supporting services. These groups are constituted organisations that can undertake activities the Council cannot, such as fundraising and applying for external grants. Examples were given of friends groups securing funding for resources like newspapers and magazines that could not otherwise be provided within existing budgets. Their role is to complement and enhance core services through partnership working.

- *Why does the offer of community learning courses vary significantly between different community hubs?*

The variation in course provision is driven primarily by local demand rather than resources alone. Some hubs have strong demand for accredited courses such as literacy, numeracy, digital skills or ESOL, while others see greater demand for leisure and wellbeing activities. The learning offer in each hub reflects the interests and needs of the local community, with services adapting accordingly rather than applying a uniform model across the county.

- *Councillor Bond expressed strong support for the Public Library Strategy and thanked officers for their passion and commitment. Drawing on her experience representing residents in West End and Caldicot, she spoke positively about the quality of service provided through the library and community hub, emphasising the professionalism, helpfulness and welcoming nature of staff.*

She highlighted specific aspects of the service that she believed were particularly valuable to residents, including the home delivery of audiobooks and books for older residents who are unable to visit the library in person. She also praised the range of activities delivered for children and young people, such as rhyme time and other events, describing them as excellent and well received.

Councillor Bond noted the importance of the library and hub as a central place for information and support in the community, referencing the presence of partner organisations and services operating from the space. She also pointed to additional benefits such as the availability of rooms for small businesses or individuals working independently, which she saw as a valuable extension of the service offer.

She concluded by noting that her questions about implementation and measurement had already been addressed through the presentation and discussion, particularly in relation to monitoring through footfall, surveys and engagement with users. She reiterated her view that the service she had experienced locally was of a very high standard and thanked officers for their work.

- *Councillor Penny Jones expressed strong support for the Public Library Strategy and described it as a positive and non-contentious area of work that the committee could support unanimously. She thanked Richard Drinkwater and Paul Sullivan for their leadership and contributions, noting Richard's long-standing role in transforming libraries into community hubs across Monmouthshire.*

She highlighted specific successes, including the introduction of a Post Office into Usk library, which she described as highly successful and of significant benefit to the local community. She praised the innovation and creativity of library and hub staff, emphasising the wide range of courses and activities available for all age groups and the constant sense of vibrancy within the buildings.

Councillor Jones stressed the importance of libraries and hubs in preventing social isolation, describing their presence as reassuring and valuable for residents. She concluded by thanking officers and staff for their work and emphasised the need to continue to protect and support public libraries in the future.

Residents in secondary settlements, such as Goytre and Raglan, have limited access to leisure and wellbeing classes. Provision is largely based in town hubs, as delivering classes locally in village halls often makes sessions more expensive due to venue hire costs, leading to insufficient take-up and classes not running. How can the council address the cost and viability barriers that prevent leisure and wellbeing classes being delivered in smaller communities? Are there alternative models or funding approaches that could enable provision to be offered more locally in secondary settlements where demand exists?

Officers acknowledged the issue and described it as a difficult problem within community education. It was explained that community learning is grant-funded and does not have core funding, meaning there is a fixed and limited budget. Historically, very low levels of funding required all courses to be run on a full cost-recovery basis, which resulted in different prices depending on venue. Although funding has since increased significantly, allowing course fees to be reduced and standardised across hubs, this assumes delivery from Council-owned buildings where no additional venue costs apply.

Officers explained that delivering outreach classes in village halls or community centres creates additional venue costs that the current budget cannot absorb. While this makes outreach provision more challenging, officers were clear that they did not see the issue as insurmountable. They indicated that resolving it would require creative thinking, innovation, and further discussion with members and senior colleagues, and committed to giving the matter further consideration.

Paul Sullivan added that the Council is seeking to strengthen community-based support through the community development function and the “Be Community” offer, which is designed to support and enable volunteering and locally-led activity. He emphasised the importance of understanding local need and working with members to identify where demand exists. He reinforced the view that these activities are about more than classes, highlighting their role in building social connections, reducing isolation, and supporting wider wellbeing and prevention agendas.

- *The Chair emphasised the wider importance of libraries and community hubs within Monmouthshire’s commitment to being an age-friendly authority, in line with World Health Organization principles. She highlighted the role these services play in reducing social isolation, supporting independence and keeping people well through social connection, participation, and mutual support.*

She reflected on libraries as inclusive, life-course facilities, describing how they support residents from early years through to older age. Examples included baby and toddler sessions, activities that encourage learning and interaction at all stages of life, and support for people with dementia or those who rely on library computers because they lack access at home. She specifically referenced initiatives such as memory boxes, which help stimulate conversations and cognitive engagement.

- *The Chair noted that many residents may not fully appreciate the breadth of activity taking place within libraries and hubs, observing that their value becomes clear when people see services in operation first-hand. She concluded by*

underlining the libraries' central role in learning, wellbeing and community connection before moving the discussion on to the next speaker.

- *Has there been a marked increase in library membership in recent months?*

Officers reported a steady increase in library membership based on the most recent quarterly data available (up to quarter three). Growth has been seen particularly among younger readers attending with parents and among adults aged 35 and over. However, there remains a notable drop-off in engagement during the later primary and secondary school years. Work is underway with local schools, particularly in the Monmouth area, to re-engage this age group through targeted initiatives such as reading groups and grant-funded activities.

- *How is the service meeting the needs of older people in Monmouthshire?*

A range of activities and support is provided for older residents, including social activities within libraries that reduce isolation. Particular emphasis was placed on the "Reaching Out" service, which supports people who are unable to visit libraries due to health or mobility reasons. Through this service, staff deliver books, audiobooks or digital resources directly to people's homes on a regular basis and provide social contact. The service currently supports around 100 readers and plays an important role in tackling isolation, though capacity is limited due to staffing levels. 2

- *Is Welsh language provision within libraries and hubs keeping pace with need?*

Welsh language provision has been strengthened through closer working with Coleg Gwent. From September, Welsh for Adults courses will operate from all community hubs, with the level of provision shaped by local demand. Libraries and hubs were described as ideal, non-judgemental spaces for residents to engage with Welsh language learning alongside other services.

- *How is the additional funding recently awarded to libraries being used, and what difference will it make?*

Officers explained that they are still finalising spending plans for the additional funding. Historically, acquisition budgets were very limited, resulting in long waiting times for popular titles. The increased funding allows for greater flexibility in purchasing stock, reducing waiting times, and better meeting demand across physical and digital lending. Decisions are being informed by borrowing patterns to ensure the funding delivers the greatest benefit, particularly by improving access to high-demand titles and sustaining strong engagement levels across the county.

- *Is access to library and hub services equitable across Monmouthshire, particularly for residents in rural and smaller communities? Rural residents often perceive services as town-centred despite contributing to their funding. There are practical barriers for rural communities, including the need to travel into towns, associated costs, and limited access to local leisure and community activities.*

Library and hub provision is currently focused on the four main towns, alongside the Usk Community Hub and a standalone community library at Gilwern. While town hubs

have higher footfall, officers recognised that access issues differ between urban and rural areas and that different approaches may be required to meet local need.

- *Is there greater potential to make better use of existing village-based facilities, such as community centres and partially Council-funded community libraries, to expand local provision? How could the Council more actively support these facilities to improve access to services in rural communities?*

Officers are open to exploring additional community library or “micro-hub” opportunities where there is clear local demand and a sustainable operating model, including consideration of staffing and stock costs. However, they cautioned that larger, integrated hubs have generally proved more financially sustainable and allow services to be better integrated, enabling residents to access multiple services in one location.

- *How many libraries currently operate across Monmouthshire, including those outside the four main towns?*

Monmouthshire operates libraries within the four main towns, the Usk Community Hub, and one standalone community library at Gilwern. The Gilwern library operates as a “micro-hub” in partnership with the local Community Council, is staffed and funded by the Council, operates from a community building on a peppercorn lease, and provides 25 hours of library access per week. Although footfall and borrowing levels are lower than in town hubs, it is considered a success as it meets a genuine local need and works closely with the primary school and wider community.

- *Over the next five years, is there an aspiration to develop additional hubs or similar provision, particularly in growing settlements, or is the intention broadly to maintain the existing network?*

Future development should be driven by local need rather than a predetermined model. Improved outreach, better use of courier services, and alternative methods of providing access to resources may offer more realistic solutions than establishing new physical buildings, particularly in the context of financial constraints.

Paul Sullivan emphasised that understanding local need is critical and that improvements to access do not necessarily require new buildings. He highlighted recent reinvestment in the courier service as an example of how access to resources can be widened without physical expansion. He stressed that ongoing engagement with members and communities will be essential to shaping future developments and ensuring services respond to what communities want and need.

- *Councillor Powell spoke in strong praise of the library service, noting that she has been a library member since 1980 and has long regarded libraries as essential community assets. She highlighted the success of the Abergavenny library following its relocation, describing it as an excellent facility that brings multiple services together in one place and creates a welcoming, shared environment for people of all ages.*

She reflected positively on the range of activity observed within the library, from children’s sessions and storytelling to quiet study spaces for students, emphasising how

effectively the space accommodates very different uses simultaneously. She described this as evidence of the library's value as a vibrant, inclusive social and learning space.

Councillor Powell also addressed earlier comments about accessibility, pointing out that the Abergavenny facility includes lift access suitable for large mobility buggies, including an additional lift located at the rear of the Market Hall, which she felt was not widely known. She concluded by thanking officers and staff for the quality of the service provided and stated that she had learned a great deal from the discussion, reiterating her appreciation for the role libraries play in supporting the community.

- *What scope is there to link primary school visits to libraries with children joining the library automatically?*

Library staff explained that primary school engagement already includes a strong focus on supporting membership. Library membership forms are sent to schools in advance of visits so that parental or guardian consent can be obtained. Where forms are completed beforehand, children can be registered as library members during their first visit and leave with a library card. This approach balances safeguarding requirements with the aim of making joining the library as seamless as possible.

Officers also highlighted additional targeted initiatives to make libraries more accessible to children and families, including a pilot supporting neurodiverse young people. This includes dedicated periods of additional library access in Abergavenny and Caldicot, allowing children to use the space without behavioural expectations associated with traditional library environments. Early outcomes were reported as positive, with new adult and junior memberships resulting directly from these sessions.

- *How do libraries support older residents facing loneliness and digital exclusion, and how is the social value of libraries captured beyond usage figures?*

There is a range of activity aimed at tackling loneliness and exclusion among older residents. Central to this is the "Reaching Out" service, through which staff deliver books and other materials directly to people who cannot visit libraries due to health or mobility issues. The service also provides regular social contact and plays a meaningful role in reducing isolation, although capacity is limited by staffing.

More broadly, libraries were described as non-judgemental, welcoming spaces that support social connection through informal activities such as reading sessions and social groups. Officers emphasised that much of this value is relational rather than transactional, and therefore not fully captured by footfall or membership data alone. Examples were given of practical problem-solving and personal support provided through libraries that help residents maintain independence and wellbeing. While numerical data remains important, officers stressed that the true social value of libraries lies in these outcomes, which are not always reflected in headline statistics.

- *Goytre previously had a thriving Welsh language group which did not restart after COVID – can this be revisited?*

Officers explained that Welsh for Adults provision is being delivered in partnership with Coleg Gwent, with community hubs providing free space for teaching and the college

funding the tutor. This allows courses to be offered free to residents. Officers indicated that the model is deliberately low-cost and demand-led, and they were open to further conversations about local opportunities such as Goetre within that framework.

- *Can residents donate recently purchased books to libraries after reading them, acknowledging possible issues around condition or suitability?*

Officers confirmed that book donations are welcomed in most cases. If donated books are in good condition and meet required standards, they can be processed, catalogued and added to library stock. Where books are not suitable for lending, they may be sold at library book sales, with small proceeds used to fund activities and materials such as craft supplies or children's sessions. Donations are therefore seen as valuable even when books do not enter the lending collection.

- *Many people use informal book exchanges but are not library members – how can libraries reach this “two-thirds” of residents who do not formally use library services?*

Officers expressed strong support for community book exchanges, describing them as complementary to libraries rather than a threat in principle. However, they explained that because library performance is measured through formal book issues, informal exchanges are not captured in statutory data, which creates some tension. Officers outlined emerging thinking about whether withdrawn or surplus library stock could be formally issued and then placed into community settings to give books a second life while still recording usage. They indicated that this is an area under active consideration as a way of supporting rural communities and maximising the use of stock.

- *Councillor Howarth commented on his experience with a community library at Llanelly Hill, noting that despite having a large number of good-quality, up-to-date donated books, usage had declined significantly. He questioned whether this model still meets community needs and reflected on the difficulty of ensuring books are read rather than simply stored.*
- *Councillor Butler responded by contrasting this with Goytre, where the book exchange is popular but constrained by access, as it is located in a village hall that is often closed or privately booked. She observed that while books are plentiful in some communities, the challenge is ensuring they are accessible and reach the right readers.*

Richard Drinkwater explained that the library service operates a book sponsorship scheme, which allows individuals to donate money towards the purchase of a specific book for the library. The scheme originated in Caldicot and has since been taken up, to a smaller extent, across other libraries in Monmouthshire.

He described the scheme as similar in principle to sponsoring or dedicating a park bench. Donors suggest a book title and provide a reason or dedication, and the donation is made via the relevant Library Friends group. The Friends group purchases the book, which is then added to the library catalogue and becomes part of the circulating stock rather than remaining in a single branch.

A bookplate is placed inside the book acknowledging the donor and the reason for the donation. Richard stressed that donors are made aware that sponsored books will travel

across the county rather than staying permanently in one location. He noted that the scheme has been particularly successful in Caldicot and provides a useful additional way of increasing stock and offering more titles for library members to borrow and enjoy.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked members, officers and contributors for a wide-ranging and constructive discussion. She noted that the debate had clearly demonstrated that libraries and community hubs are about far more than books, drawing parallels with earlier scrutiny of services such as community meals, where the real value lies in relationships, social contact, and support rather than the service transaction alone.

She reflected that the discussion had highlighted the libraries' role in building community connection, supporting wellbeing, reducing isolation and providing trusted points of contact for residents of all ages. She emphasised that this people-centred role was a consistent theme throughout members' contributions.

The Chair confirmed that there was clear support from the committee for the Public Library Strategy. She therefore recorded that the committee formally endorsed and approved the strategy going forward.

The meeting ended at 11.39 am.