Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk on Tuesday, 30th June, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present	**Officers in Attendance**
County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair) County Councillors: Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong and Ben Callard	Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance/Section 151 Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships. Richard Jones, Performance and Data Insight Manager Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health Dave Loder, Finance Manager - Directorate Management Accountant Tyrone Stokes, Finance Manager Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services Manager Deb Hill-Howells, Chief Officer Infrastructure Stacey Jones, Performance/Finance and Resources Manager Craig O'Connor, Chief Officer, Place and Community Well-being

APOLOGIES: Councillors John Crook and C. Werrett

1. **Apologies for Absence**

   John Crook and Clare Werrett.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

   None.

3. **Public Open Forum**

   None.

4. 2025/26 Financial Outturn Report - To scrutinise the budgetary position (revenue and capital) for services falling within the committee's remit

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report with Jonathan Davies, and they answered the members' questions with Will Mclean and Deb Hill-Howells.

Questions:

Six primary schools have deficits of more than £100,000 and only one appears to have reduced its deficit during the year. Are the school recovery plans proving effective, and why are some schools continuing to struggle while others hold significant surpluses?

School deficits have been recognised as a significant financial risk for several years and recovery plans were always expected to take a number of years to achieve results. The largest factor affecting school budgets is staffing costs, which make up the majority of school expenditure. Where pupil numbers are lower, schools receive less funding, but many staffing costs remain fixed because classes still require teaching staff regardless of whether there are 20, 25 or 30 pupils. Education and finance officers are working with schools to support the delivery of recovery plans. However, it is disappointing that some deficits are continuing to increase rather than showing a clear downward trend. Schools, governing bodies, education officers and finance teams all have a role in ensuring that spending decisions are prudent and contribute to financial recovery.

The financial position is also being affected by wider pressures. Additional Learning Needs (ALN) are creating significant costs across schools, with schools often providing support beyond what can be funded centrally by the local authority. Staffing pressures and workforce volatility are adding further costs, while a small number of schools have experienced exceptional circumstances, including prolonged absences of senior staff, which have generated additional expenditure. In some cases, recovery plans may involve an initial increase in deficits before improvements are realised because of the timing of staffing changes.

Are school deficits largely explained by common pressures such as ALN, or are there school-specific factors that explain why some schools are performing differently from others?

Additional Learning Needs pressures are a significant common factor affecting many schools and are contributing to rising expenditure. Staffing pressures are also being experienced across the school system and are placing budgets under increasing strain. However, common pressures do not explain all of the variation between schools. Some schools are facing particular local circumstances, including exceptional staffing issues and other factors that have increased costs. As a result, there is no single explanation for the differences in financial performance between schools.

Further detailed examination is therefore needed to understand why some schools facing similar pressures are managing to maintain balanced budgets or surpluses while others are experiencing significant and growing deficits. Identifying the relative importance of county-wide pressures and school-specific factors will be an important part of understanding the causes of the largest deficits and the effectiveness of recovery plans.

What are the current council tax and business rates collection rates compared with last year, and how are these expected to progress in the coming year?

Council tax collection remains a live financial risk for 2026/27. The issue is not solely about collection performance, but also the combined impact of affordability pressures on households, increasing levels of discounts and exemptions, and growing arrears. During 2025/26, the council experienced a pressure of approximately £345,000 in relation to council tax collection, although this was offset by favourable movements elsewhere within the service.
It cannot be assumed that these favourable offsets will continue into 2026/27, and even relatively small changes in collection rates can have a significant impact on council finances because council tax is such an important source of funding. Collection performance and arrears trends will therefore require close monitoring throughout the year. At the same time, recovery action will need to be proportionate and sensitive to the cost-of-living pressures being experienced by residents, particularly in light of new regulations governing debt recovery processes.

Are there any budget pressures or services that are currently being sustained by one-off grants or reserves that could create problems in future years?

The positive financial position achieved in 2025/26 was supported in part by year-end funding and grant financing. While this has helped the council adapt to a challenging financial environment, underlying service pressures remain and will not disappear when one-off funding ends. There is a need to continue finding ways to address these pressures either through ongoing grant support or through organisational change and transformation programmes. The financial outturn should therefore be viewed in the context of continuing pressures that still need to be managed over the longer term.

Are there any emerging financial risks or concerns that are not fully reflected in the report?

Social care remains one of the council's most significant areas of financial risk. Demand-led services can experience substantial fluctuations in expenditure, and relatively small changes in the number or complexity of cases can create major budget pressures. The cost of supporting individuals with high levels of need can be particularly significant. In addition to social care, the council continues to monitor risks associated with council tax collection, inflation, pay awards and other demand pressures. Early identification and management of emerging trends will be essential, and financial monitoring reports throughout 2026/27 will be used to assess whether any developing pressures require corrective action.

Demand for the Pupil Referral Service (PRS) continues to increase. What proportion of this increase is due to worsening pupil needs, and what proportion reflects mainstream schools being unable to cope?

The nature of the PRS has changed significantly since the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the service supported only a small number of pupils, mainly those in Years 10 and 11 who were at risk of permanent exclusion, together with a small number of children unable to attend school because of serious illness or injury. Since the pandemic, demand has increased substantially. One major factor has been a significant rise in the number of pupils who are at risk of permanent exclusion and require alternative provision. The service is also supporting children whose placements in independent specialist schools have broken down because of the complexity of their needs. However, the largest area of growth has been children who are educated other than at school because they are medically unable to attend, particularly those experiencing anxiety and other social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

The increase in demand therefore reflects both growing levels of need among pupils and the requirement to provide appropriate education for children whose needs cannot currently be met through existing arrangements.

What is the average length of time that a pupil spends in the Pupil Referral Service before successfully returning to mainstream education, and is this improving?

The average length of time spent in the PRS was not available at the meeting and officers committed to providing this information subsequently. **– <u>ACTION</u>: to provide information on the average length of time pupils spend in the PRS before returning to mainstream education**. However, there has been a noticeable improvement over the last two years in returning pupils who are at risk of exclusion back into mainstream education. The service is increasingly operating as a turnaround provision, helping learners re-engage with education before returning to school. Despite this progress, some pupils may remain in the service for extended periods. In certain cases, pupils may enter the provision in Years 7 or 8 and remain there until the end of their compulsory education. This is not the intended purpose of the service, which seeks wherever possible to support children to return to mainstream education.

If demand continues to rise over the next two years, what is the service's capacity limit before standards or statutory duties are put at risk?

No specific capacity limit was identified during the discussion. However, the service was described as being under significant pressure due to increasing demand and the complexity of pupil needs. The PRS budget is challenging, and work is underway between education officers and finance colleagues to develop a more sustainable model for the future. The service must continue to respond to a wide range of individual circumstances, including pupils at risk of exclusion, children with highly complex needs and those unable to attend school because of physical or mental health issues. Managing this growing demand while maintaining appropriate provision remains a significant challenge.

What are the wider implications of the rise in anxiety and mental health issues among young people, and how are schools responding?

Schools are increasingly investing in early intervention and support to help children manage anxiety and other emotional wellbeing issues. This includes nurture provision, small-group support and Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs), who are specially trained to support pupils' emotional needs. Mainstream schools are working to become more inclusive so that a wider range of pupils can be supported within ordinary school settings. However, there is often a tension between providing the intensive support some children need and the financial costs associated with smaller groups and additional staff.

Particular challenges arise when pupils move from primary to secondary education. The transition from a familiar primary environment to a much larger and more complex secondary setting can be difficult for some learners. Schools are therefore working more closely together across the primary-secondary transition to minimise disruption and ensure pupils receive appropriate support. The focus is on creating inclusive learning environments that support all pupils, recognising that anxiety and emotional difficulties can affect any child at different points in their education. Officers indicated that providing this support within mainstream schools is a key priority, although it is increasingly challenging in the current financial climate.

Appendix 7 shows a surplus balance of approximately £2.668 million for the Welsh-medium school and nursery project. Is this money still available for development of the school or a future site, or is it no longer under local control?

The surplus relates to funding that had originally been allocated to support the planned development work involving Ysgol Gymraeg Trefynwy and the provision in Usk. However, following the discovery of significant issues on the proposed site, that particular programme of work will not proceed in its original form. The funding has not been identified as lost; instead, discussions are ongoing with the Welsh Government's Welsh-medium education division regarding how future support for the school can be provided. Any future development proposals will be subject to a further capital funding bid to Welsh Government. As a result, the balance reflects funding associated with the original project, but the next steps for investment will depend on future proposals and discussions with Welsh Government.

When a pupil is permanently excluded and moves into the Pupil Referral Service (PRS), does the funding allocated for that pupil follow them into the service?

Yes. When a pupil is permanently excluded and moves into the PRS, a proportion of the funding associated with that pupil transfers from the original school. Specifically, the remaining proportion of the pupil's funding for that academic year is allocated either to the new school in the case of a managed move or to the PRS where appropriate. However, this transfer only recovers a relatively small proportion of the actual cost of provision. For example, the funding associated with a secondary school pupil may be around £5,000 per year, but the level of support required by a pupil entering the PRS can be significantly higher than the funding transferred. As a result, the funding that follows the pupil does not cover the full cost of providing.

To what extent does the council's reported surplus rely on one-off funding, treasury movements and capital receipts, and what level of dependence does this create on funding that may not be available in future years?

The council's positive financial outturn was supported by a combination of one-off grants, grant funding received later in the financial year, favourable treasury management outcomes and corporate budget movements. It is difficult to produce a single figure showing the overall value of this support because grant funding often affects multiple budgets simultaneously. For example, additional late-year funding for

Additional Learning Needs was distributed across schools, the PRS and central education budgets rather than benefiting a single service area. The council has sought to maximise the use of grant funding where possible by aligning eligible expenditure with available grants, which has helped protect the core revenue budget. In addition, the council benefited from not having to draw on a contingency budget of just under £900,000 that had been set aside to manage financial risks during the year.

While the outturn reflects prudent financial management, it is recognised that some elements of the position were supported by one-off factors. The council therefore continues to work with Welsh Government and other partners to secure greater certainty around funding streams and reduce reliance on short-term or annually allocated grants. The budget for 2026/27 has not been built on the assumption that additional unbudgeted grants will be received during the year. It has been based on known funding allocations. Support from capital receipts continues within the budget, but this is planned to reduce over time. Approximately £2.7 million of capital receipts are being used in 2026/27 to support organisational change, with this funding expected to taper down to zero over the following two to three years. **– <u>ACTION</u>: to provide further information quantifying the contribution made by grants, treasury movements, capital receipts and other non-recurring measures to the final outturn position.**

The report shows an overspend on fleet maintenance of approximately £325,000, while there is also an underspend in the capital budget for vehicle replacement. Why is the council continuing to incur higher maintenance costs on an ageing fleet while not spending all of the available capital funding for fleet replacement?

The position reflects the challenges of transitioning the fleet to ultra-low emission vehicles (ULEVs) in line with Welsh Government requirements. The council is replacing vehicles where possible, but for some vehicle types, particularly refuse collection vehicles, leasing arrangements are currently being used rather than purchasing replacements. This is because suitable ULEV alternatives that can operate effectively within Monmouthshire's geography and service requirements are not yet readily available.

The transition to low-emission vehicles also involves higher costs, with replacement ULEV vehicles often costing significantly more than conventional vehicles. Delays to the depot redevelopment programme, linked to the Replacement Local Development Plan process, have also affected the timing of some capital expenditure. The maintenance overspend is not solely due to an ageing fleet. Additional costs arise when vehicles are involved in accidents and temporary replacement vehicles need to be hired. There have also been instances where newly purchased vehicles have developed faults and had to be returned to manufacturers, requiring the council to hire replacement vehicles. To address these issues, a Fleet Management Board has been established to examine maintenance costs, vehicle utilisation, fleet size and driver behaviour, with the aim of reducing future expenditure.

Is the main issue with introducing ultra-low emission vehicles a lack of vehicle availability, with councils competing for a limited supply of suitable vehicles?

The issue is not primarily one of vehicle availability. The main challenge is that the available electric refuse collection vehicles do not currently provide the operational range required to serve Monmouthshire's geography and routes effectively. Welsh Government guidance sets deadlines for transitioning fleets to low-emission vehicles, including a target of replacing heavy goods vehicles by 2030. However, the council's current assessment is that existing electric refuse collection vehicles cannot yet meet operational requirements. Work is therefore being undertaken with specialist consultants to review collection routes and service operations to identify how the council can transition to ULEV-equivalent vehicles in the future.

Following the recent Welsh Government supplementary budget, is there any indication of how much additional funding the council is likely to receive?

At the time of the meeting, the only clear additional funding identified for local authorities from the supplementary budget related to school maintenance and education capital investment. No further allocations had yet been confirmed. Officers indicated that they were continuing to review the information available and would provide updates should further details emerge about funding that may benefit the council.

What is meant by the £45 million of capital slippage reported in the outturn, why has it occurred, and does it indicate that planned projects are not being delivered as expected?

The majority of the reported capital slippage reflects the rephasing of approved schemes rather than the loss of funding or failure to deliver projects. Many capital projects are multi-year in nature, and expenditure does not always occur in the year originally profiled. A variety of factors have contributed to the slippage, including grant conditions, external approvals, design and feasibility work, procurement processes, contractor availability and internal capacity constraints. In some cases, budgets were initially phased into a single year and subsequently needed to be carried forward when projects took longer than anticipated.

A review was undertaken of the schemes proposed for slippage to ensure they remained realistic, affordable and deliverable. Some proposed carry-forwards, particularly in property maintenance and infrastructure, were not supported because there were concerns about affordability or deliverability, and these schemes will require further assessment before future funding is approved. The focus for 2026/27 will be on improving project delivery, profiling and management to ensure that schemes progress in line with expectations.

What is the rationale for using £3.55 million of capital receipts to support revenue expenditure?

The £3.55 million has been used under the capitalisation directive to fund organisational change and service transformation activity that would otherwise have needed to be financed from the council's limited revenue reserves. This approach has been used for around six or seven years and supports programmes that are intended to improve service efficiency, transform service delivery and reduce longer-term costs. The expenditure funded in this way is detailed in Appendix 4 of the report.

The use of capital receipts is considered an important tool in supporting organisational change. It has allowed investment in transformation activity while preserving revenue reserves, which are relatively low compared with many other authorities. Officers indicated that evidence of success should be seen through more efficient service delivery and reduced costs arising from these transformation programmes.

Previous discussions highlighted concerns that major capital projects were not always benefiting from dedicated project management. What progress has been made in introducing project management arrangements for major capital schemes?

The council has appointed three dedicated project managers within the Infrastructure service and they are expected to take up their posts during the summer. These officers will lead the delivery of major infrastructure projects, including schemes such as Llanfoist Bridge, Old Dixton Bridge and other significant structures projects. Previously, project management responsibilities were often undertaken by consultants, in-house designers or lead engineers alongside their existing duties. Given the scale and complexity of the capital programme, this was not considered sustainable. The introduction of dedicated project managers is intended to improve project delivery, oversight and communication with members, residents and businesses. Officers advised that an update on the new arrangements is expected to be brought to scrutiny later in the year.

You mentioned that the pool of capital receipts is becoming restricted. What does that mean and what are the implications?

The council's available capital receipts are projected to reduce significantly over the medium term. As a result, the amount of capital receipts available to support the revenue budget and fund organisational change is becoming more limited. This is why support from capital receipts is being tapered down over the coming years. While additional receipts may become available once the Replacement Local Development Plan is agreed and generates future opportunities, planning assumptions currently rely only on receipts that can already be reasonably anticipated.

The declining balance means capital receipts cannot continue to be relied upon indefinitely to support either capital investment or revenue-funded transformation programmes. Consequently, the council is reducing its dependence on this funding source as it plans for future years.

Chair’s Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and officers for the report and their responses. Noting the recommendations in the report, the committee has undertaken detailed scrutiny of the key financial issues arising from the report and received significant clarification through the questions and answers provided.

5. **Self-Assessment - To scrutinise and be updated on the 2025/26 performance of the Council's Community & Corporate Plan objectives as part of the Self-Assessment process (Self Assessment report to follow)**

Richard Jones delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members’ questions with Matthew Gatehouse, Will Mclean, Craig O’Connor, Deb Hill-Howells and Jane Rodgers.

Questions:

The Community and Corporate Plan involves a significant amount of work and reporting. To what extent does the plan actually shape the council's activities and decision-making, rather than simply describing what is already happening across Monmouthshire?

The Community and Corporate Plan is intended to set the strategic direction of the council rather than simply record activity. It is developed at the beginning of the council term and approved by Council, translating the ambitions and priorities of elected members into objectives and actions that guide the organisation's work. The plan provides the framework that shapes the council's priorities, its areas of focus and the activities that are undertaken to deliver those priorities. It therefore acts as a key mechanism for directing the organisation's work and resources.

However, the council does not operate in a static environment. New opportunities, challenges, risks and funding streams emerge during the life of the plan, while others may disappear. As a result, the plan is not followed rigidly and is supplemented by further decisions and reports that are brought to Council, Cabinet or individual Cabinet Members when new priorities or actions need to be introduced. The plan therefore provides the overall direction of travel for the organisation, while allowing flexibility to respond to changing circumstances and emerging issues over the course of the council term.

The report describes performance as being "on track", showing "good progress" or containing "important strengths". What objective evidence is there that residents would actually recognise improvements in the services they receive, particularly in the areas that residents most commonly raise, such as roads, waste services, schools and getting issues resolved? Is there a risk that the council's self-assessment is more positive than residents' experience?y

The assessment draws on a wide range of evidence, not just the council's own performance information. It includes feedback from residents and service users, findings from the National Resident Survey, service-specific feedback mechanisms and evidence from external assessments and inspections. The report also seeks to reflect challenges as well as successes. For example, while it highlights strong recycling performance and rates that exceed national targets, it also acknowledges continuing difficulties in areas such as highway maintenance and identifies these as areas requiring further improvement.

A key aim of the current year's approach is to strengthen the use of resident feedback in the assessment process. The draft report will be shared with the Let's Talk resident forum to obtain further views and challenge the findings. This is intended to help ensure that the assessment reflects residents' experiences as well as internal performance measures. In terms of overall performance, none of the strategic objectives have deteriorated compared with the previous year. Each objective has either maintained its previous assessment level or improved. However, the report recognises that progress is mixed within each objective and identifies specific areas where improvement is still required. One area highlighted for further development is community resilience and how the council works with and supports communities. This reflects findings from the recent Panel Performance Assessment and has been identified as a priority area for improvement.

Which objective has performed least well this year, and what lessons has the council learned from that?

No single objective was identified as having performed least well. The assessment concluded that all objectives showed either maintained or improved performance overall, although each contained a mixture of strengths and areas requiring further development. Rather than focusing on one objective as the weakest performer, the assessment highlights specific areas where progress remains challenging and where further improvement is required. Among these is the council's approach to supporting community resilience and community capacity, which has been identified both through the self-assessment process and through external review. The assessment process is intended to identify both successes and shortcomings so that services can learn from them and incorporate those findings into future planning and improvement activity.

Is the self-assessment process itself valuable, and how could it be improved to achieve better outcomes?

The self-assessment process is considered valuable because it provides a structured way for the council to review its performance, identify strengths and weaknesses, and inform future improvement. The process involves gathering evidence from multiple sources, undertaking detailed directorate workshops and challenging performance findings before reaching conclusions. These discussions help services to identify areas that need attention and use those findings to shape future service plans. The process also supports greater organisational self-awareness and helps embed a culture of continuous improvement.

The council recognises, however, that there is scope to improve the process further. Key areas for future development include strengthening the focus on outcomes and impact rather than activity, increasing the use of resident and service-user feedback, and ensuring that findings are communicated more clearly and accessibly. While the report must contain sufficient evidence to satisfy statutory requirements and enable effective scrutiny, there is a continued effort to make the conclusions easier for residents to understand and engage with, while still providing detailed evidence for those wishing to examine performance in greater depth.

There can be a gap between how the council assesses its own performance and how residents perceive that performance. How is the council addressing this risk?

The council recognises the importance of understanding and addressing any gap between organisational self-assessment and residents' experiences. To help bridge that gap, the draft self-assessment will be shared with the Let's Talk resident forum and the council will continue to undertake resident surveys to gather views on services and performance. However, it is also important to recognise the nature of local government services. The council often works in areas where market solutions do not exist and where residents are experiencing some of the most complex and challenging circumstances in their lives. These are not straightforward services where outcomes can always be easily measured or achieved.

The council does not always get everything right, and it must continually work alongside residents to understand what good service looks like from their perspective. Resident feedback, lived experience and ongoing engagement are therefore essential to ensuring that the council's self-assessment remains grounded in the experiences of those who use its services, while also helping to shape future improvements.

Flying Start is an important tool for tackling inequality, but eligibility is determined by postcode and can result in some families receiving support while others with similar or greater needs do not. What can be done to encourage Welsh Government to expand Flying Start and make it more flexible?

Flying Start is entirely grant-funded and the council must operate within the requirements of that grant funding. While there is flexibility in how the programme is delivered, eligibility criteria are determined through the Welsh Government framework and must be complied with. The service provides a wide range of support to families beyond childcare alone, and officers recognised the value of extending its reach. The issue is likely to become increasingly important as childcare policies develop further. The council will continue to work through its Flying Start team and maintain dialogue with Welsh Government to make the case for broader access and to maximise the level of support that can be provided within Monmouthshire.

Given the recent hot weather, should the council be encouraging Welsh Government to support "cool spaces" in the same way that it has supported "warm spaces", recognising their role in addressing heat, social isolation and community resilience?

Officers noted that discussions with the new Welsh Government administration will be important in shaping future funding opportunities and policy development. As new ministers take up their roles, the council will need to establish relationships and use evidence of local need to inform lobbying and funding discussions. The council's approach is to gather robust local evidence and use this to make the case for initiatives that would benefit residents. The principle applies equally to areas such as warm spaces, community resilience and any future approaches to cooling spaces during periods of extreme heat.

As part of the Food and Farming Strategy, could more be done to connect children with food production through school visits to farms, and to encourage Welsh Government support for this activity?

Work is already taking place to strengthen links between schools, local food production and farming. Several schools have participated in initiatives such as Food Stories and the Welsh Veg in Schools programme, which aim to help pupils understand where food comes from and connect them with local producers. Further work is being undertaken through the Food and Farming Strategy, and an update is expected to be brought to the relevant member working group. In addition, Monmouthshire has recently secured approximately £1.4 million of funding through the Marches Partnership for a four-year programme that will support local food initiatives and help strengthen links between local producers and public sector procurement, including schools.

The report shows that the percentage of pupils taking up Universal Free School Meals has fallen significantly from 75% to 68.6%, against a target of 77%. Why has take-up reduced and why are so many pupils not accessing a benefit that is available to them?

The figure reflects the average across all schools in the county, and there is considerable variation between individual schools. Some schools have take-up rates well above the target, while others are significantly lower. In some of the areas where take-up is lowest, there is particular concern because those are areas where pupils would be expected to benefit most from the provision. Understanding the reasons for lower take-up is complex. The Corporate Catering Manager has been working with pupils and parents to understand the factors influencing uptake. The council recently introduced a revised menu and has since been gathering feedback from parents on what they like and dislike about the current offer. A reduction in take-up was observed following the introduction of the new menu.

Some of the changes to menus have resulted from Welsh Government requirements, including requirements around healthy eating and meat-free provision. Feedback has also been received about portion sizes, with some parents considering portions too large and others believing they are too small. Current policy requires a standard meal size for all primary-aged pupils, although planned changes are expected to allow more age-appropriate portion sizes in future. The council is undertaking further work to improve take-up, including reviewing menu options, surveying parents and examining food waste. However, any changes must comply with Welsh Government healthy eating requirements. Alternative options such as jacket potatoes and salads are available, but some traditional menu items and sweet desserts can no longer be offered as frequently because of nutritional standards that schools are required to meet.

The overall aim is to understand the reasons for declining take-up and adapt the service where possible while remaining compliant with national policy requirements.

Why has the council decided not to have a specific Poverty and Inequality Action Plan, and how can it ensure that all relevant groups and inequalities are being addressed, including those identified through equality impact assessments?

The decision not to develop a separate Poverty and Inequality Action Plan does not reduce the council's commitment to tackling poverty and inequality. Instead, the approach is to mainstream these issues throughout all areas of the council's work rather than treating them as a standalone programme. The council continues to operate under its Strategic Equality Plan and monitors progress through its annual equality reporting processes. Poverty and inequality are intended to be embedded across services, policies and programmes, with resources targeted towards those parts of the community where disadvantage is greatest. Examples include targeted initiatives such as Food and Fun, preventative approaches within social care and wider work to reduce inequalities through community wellbeing and support services. The aim is to ensure that addressing poverty and inequality becomes part of everyday service delivery rather than being confined to a separate strategy.

On veterans and armed forces communities, officers acknowledged that there was little or no reference within the self-assessment report itself. However, the council remains committed to supporting veterans, including maintaining its Gold Armed Forces Covenant Award, guaranteeing interviews for eligible veteran job applicants, and supporting Armed Forces Day and other veteran-related initiatives.

The report shows that only 60% of care-experienced young people were in education, employment or training for at least three months. Is this level of performance good enough, and what is the context behind the figure?

The number behind the percentage is relatively small, which means that changes affecting only a few young people can have a significant impact on the headline percentage. Officers agreed that it would be helpful for future reports to include the actual numbers alongside percentages. The 60% target has remained relatively stable over recent years. While the council has high aspirations for all care-experienced young people, there are a variety of reasons why some may not move immediately into education, employment or training.

These include health issues, caring responsibilities, parenthood, immigration and asylum-related restrictions, or personal circumstances that mean an individual is not yet ready to engage with employment or education. All care-experienced young people have a personal adviser and pathway plan to support them towards independent and fulfilling lives, but progress may occur at different times for different individuals.

Why has participation in free or subsidised play provision reduced, and what impact is this having?

The reduction relates primarily to the Food and Fun programme delivered during the summer holidays. The programme remains available and free to attend, providing meals and activities for children during school breaks. However, officers explained that the fact that the provision is free creates an unintended challenge. Families can register places without commitment and may later decide not to attend, meaning registration figures do not always translate into participation. As a result, attendance rates have been affected despite the continued availability of the service. The programme itself is highly valued and well delivered, with strong benefits for participating children and families.

The report refers to Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) and support for pupils experiencing emotionally based school avoidance. Is the council being too reactive and focusing only on pupils once problems have emerged, rather than helping young people develop resilience and coping skills before difficulties arise?

Schools are already expected to build resilience, emotional wellbeing and coping skills through the Curriculum for Wales. Health and Wellbeing is one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience and includes teaching around emotional wellbeing, resilience, mental health, personal development and independence. These themes are embedded in everyday teaching and learning rather than being delivered solely through specialist interventions. Teachers and support staff work with pupils throughout their education to help them develop the skills needed to cope with challenges and transitions.

The focus on ELSA, emotionally based school avoidance and other targeted interventions reflects the fact that demand for specialist support has increased significantly in recent years. These interventions are therefore additional support for pupils who require it, rather than the sole means by which resilience is developed. The intention is that all pupils receive preventative support as part of their normal school experience, while those facing greater challenges receive more intensive assistance.

The proportion of school leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) remains above target despite improvements. Why is this measure still shown as a concern?

Performance has improved, with the proportion of young people who are NEET falling from 3.1% to 2.5%. However, this remains above the target level of 1.5%, which is why it continues to be flagged as an area requiring attention. The issue is not unique to Monmouthshire and reflects wider national challenges affecting the youth labour market. Nevertheless, substantial work is underway to support young people at risk of becoming NEET. Funding has been secured to continue support programmes, and services such as Inspire, which place workers directly in schools to support vulnerable learners, have now been transferred into the core budget. These programmes are intended to help young people remain engaged in education, training or employment and further improve future performance.

The self-assessment process has developed since 2022 and now uses more evidence from residents and service users. Are there further opportunities to strengthen resident feedback and make the assessment more robust and representative of public views?

The council recognises the importance of continuing to increase the use of resident and service-user feedback within the self-assessment process. Existing sources already include the National Resident Survey, the Let's Talk resident forum, service-specific feedback arrangements in areas such as adult and children's social care, library user surveys and a range of other engagement mechanisms. There is also potential to make greater use of feedback gathered through routine interactions with residents, including through the contact centre and other customer-facing services. Officers indicated that opportunities are being explored to use these systems more effectively to gather service feedback and monitor resident satisfaction.

The key challenge is not simply collecting information but ensuring it is used meaningfully in assessments and decision-making. The council's aim is to ensure that self-assessment findings accurately reflect the experiences and views of residents and service users and are not developed solely from internal performance information.

There are many examples of engagement and consultation taking place across the county, including activities involving young people such as the recent Climate Innovation Camp. How can the council make better use of the information and insight generated through these activities when assessing its performance?

A wide range of engagement activities already generate valuable views and evidence that can contribute to self-assessment. Examples include youth engagement work, consultation exercises, resident surveys, service-user feedback and community engagement events. We acknowledge the importance of identifying and making better use of information that is already being gathered through these activities. Feedback from young people, residents and service users can provide an important perspective on how policies and services are experienced in practice and can help strengthen the evidence base for self-assessment. The intention is therefore to continue broadening the range of evidence used, ensuring that assessments are informed not only by performance measures and internal data but also by the lived experiences and views of those affected by council services.

Matt Gatehouse welcomed the challenge around resident feedback and emphasised that there is a wide variety of existing mechanisms through which residents provide views on council services. These include social care user surveys, children's services feedback, library user surveys, the annual resident survey and youth engagement work such as the Make Your Mark survey.

He stressed that the important issue is not simply gathering more information but ensuring that the information collected is used effectively to shape conclusions about performance. The self-assessment process must reflect the experiences of residents and avoid becoming detached from the people the council serves. The council therefore continues to look for opportunities to strengthen how resident and service-user feedback is incorporated into self-assessment and service improvement processes.

Chair's Summary:

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

6. **<u>ADDITIONAL BUSINESS: Strategic Risk Assessment</u>**

To note and refer any questions arising – to be sent to officers for a response.

- *How is information about the risks associated with extreme heat and high temperatures being communicated and managed across council services?*
- *What are the implications of the delay to the Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP)?*
- *Are the council's contingency arrangements sufficiently robust to deal with cyber-attacks or hostile action affecting critical infrastructure?*
- *Is the council becoming too comfortable with carrying high levels of strategic risk?*

The Chair noted that these questions would be recorded and passed to officers for responses outside the meeting.

7. **<u>Council & Cabinet Work Planner</u>**

Noted.

8. **<u>Performance & Overview Scrutiny Committee Work Programme & Action List</u>**

Members were reminded that a Special meeting has been added on 13th October. On the Action List the cost of out of county placements has been sent to members.

9. **<u>To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting</u>**

The minutes were confirmed.

10. Next Meeting

8th September 2026 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.39 pm.**