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, 8th September, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present	Officers in Attendance
County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chair) County Councillors: Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Peter Strong, A. Blackmore, Jill Bond, Ben Callard, Phil Murphy, R. Guest and Thomas	Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer Paul Matthews, Chief Executive Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships. Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise Richard Jones, Performance and Data Insight Manager Carly Rogers, Personal Assistant to Chief Executive Hannah Carter, Performance Analyst Rhys James, Strategic Procurement Lead Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance/Section 151 Sian Hayward, Head of Information Technology and Security and SIRO (Senior Information Risk Owner) Nicholas Keyse, Head of Landlord Services Gemma Ellis, Ardal Interim Head of Procurement James Vale, Head of Customer, ICT and Digital (Torfaen County Borough Council)

APOLOGIES: Councillor Paul Pavia
C. Werrett

1. **Declarations of Interest**

   None.

2. **Enablers Update - To scrutinise the performance of the Council's Enabling Strategies 2025/26**

   Cabinet Member Ben Callard and Richard Jones introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Matt Gatehouse, Nick Keyse, Peter Davies and James Vale:

   How robust is the Council's measurement and scoring system, and how does it compare with other local authorities?

   The scoring framework is the same approach used within the Council's self-assessment process and is intended to provide an overall indication of progress against each enabling strategy. It draws on a range of evidence, including performance measures, targets, actions, customer feedback, staff surveys, resident surveys and audit findings.

The ratings are based on progress against agreed objectives rather than simply completion of actions.

There is no standard assessment framework used by local authorities across Wales or the UK for evaluating enabling strategies, so direct comparison with other councils is difficult. Benchmarking tends to take place within individual service areas rather than through an overarching scoring system. The framework is designed to be transparent and is subject to challenge through the Council's governance arrangements, including scrutiny by the Governance and Audit Committee and oversight by external regulators. The assessment process also includes evidence review, challenge and moderation through performance management processes, with the intention of ensuring that judgements are supported by evidence and are not simply self-generated scores.

The report is intended both as an accountability mechanism and as a way of demonstrating progress against published strategies. While some enabling strategies directly affect residents, others support the systems, workforce and infrastructure that enable frontline services to operate effectively. Work is continuing to strengthen the measurement of outcomes and impact, particularly in demonstrating benefits to residents.

The scoring process is moderated and challenged through the Council's performance management arrangements. The Performance Team reviews the supporting evidence and data before reaching an initial assessment, rather than relying solely on the judgement of the service responsible for delivering the strategy. Scores are then discussed with relevant officers and the Strategic Leadership Team to ensure that ratings are supported by the available evidence and applied consistently across the organisation.

How should residents view the assessment when the Council is effectively evaluating its own performance?

The assessment measures performance against objectives, actions, timescales and targets that have already been agreed and published. It uses evidence from multiple sources, including residents, staff, service users and audit activity. Publishing both the judgements and supporting evidence allows elected members, audit bodies and the public to scrutinise and challenge the conclusions reached. The process is intended to demonstrate accountability and ensure the Council measures its progress against its own commitments rather than allowing strategies to proceed without evaluation. The process also includes internal challenge and moderation. The Performance Team assesses the evidence and proposes ratings before discussions take place with responsible officers and the Strategic Leadership Team. Judgements are therefore tested and reviewed rather than being determined solely by the service being assessed.

If a strategy is rated "Very Good", does that mean there is no further room for improvement?

No. A rating of "Very Good" recognises strong performance and progress, but it is not the highest point on the scoring scale. The assessment acknowledges that further improvement is still possible and identifies areas where development can continue.

Why do the sickness absence figures appear inconsistent, and how does the Council compare nationally?

The sickness absence figures relate to different reporting periods and measures within the report. The forecast level of sickness absence is approximately 10.8 days per full-time equivalent employee. Historical local government averages have typically been around 8 to 10 days per employee, meaning the Council remains slightly above the sector average. However, sickness absence across local government and other sectors has increased significantly since the pandemic.

Different organisations use different methodologies. National figures quoted by the Office for National Statistics differ from those published by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), making direct comparisons difficult. Regardless of the source used, sickness absence levels have generally increased since the pandemic. The average figure reported publicly is only a headline measure. Much more detailed analysis is undertaken internally at service, directorate and management level, including examination of absence patterns, causes and targeted interventions.

What is being done to reduce sickness absence?

The Council has reviewed its approach to absence management and is moving away from a model based primarily on formal trigger points. Greater emphasis is being placed on early intervention, proactive management conversations, wellbeing support and preventative measures designed to address issues before they result in absence. Detailed monitoring is undertaken across services to understand the causes of absence and identify appropriate interventions to support employees and improve attendance.

Is an average sickness absence figure meaningful on its own?

The average figure is only one measure and can be heavily influenced by a relatively small number of employees experiencing long-term sickness absence. To provide a different perspective, the median sickness absence figure is around 1.9 days per employee per year, indicating that most employees experience relatively low levels of absence. More detailed management information is used internally to identify trends, causes and areas requiring intervention.

What does the Thinqi measure show, and how is training monitored?

The figure reported relates to employee uptake and use of the Thinqi e-learning platform rather than course completion. The initial priority has been ensuring staff are registered on the system and actively using it. Training is divided into mandatory and optional learning. Around 2,500 employees have access to the platform, and approximately 1,600 are fully up to date with their training requirements. For employees who have limited access to IT systems, alternative approaches are used, including face-to-face training sessions and toolbox talks delivered in operational workplaces.

How will councillors be supported to complete mandatory training?

Work is underway to improve the Thinqi portal and reporting arrangements so that councillors can more easily identify mandatory training requirements and monitor their completion status. These improvements are intended to be implemented before the next local elections.

What action is being taken to improve the appraisal completion rate, which is currently reported as 6.86%?

The appraisal system is new and is still being rolled out across the organisation. The 6.86% figure does not mean that the remaining staff are receiving no supervision or performance management. Instead, many employees have not yet moved onto the new appraisal process. Training is being provided and the new approach is being introduced as annual reviews become due. The expectation is that completion rates will increase significantly over the next six to nine months as the new system becomes embedded.

Why has Asset Management been assessed as ‘Very Good’ when a number of performance measures appear to be below target?

The performance measures listed at the end of the section relate only to one aspect of the Asset Management Strategy, including the commercial and investment portfolio. The overall assessment considers performance against all of the strategy's objectives, including maintaining a fit-for-purpose estate, improving buildings, investing in infrastructure and greening the estate. Significant progress was made across these broader areas during the year, and the overall judgement reflects all five areas of the strategy rather than a single set of commercial performance measures.

Why are some income-related targets not being achieved while the overall assessment remains highly positive?

Some individual targets, such as income generation measures, have not achieved their forecast levels, but they represent only one part of the overall strategy. The assessment takes account of a much wider range of achievements and outcomes, including improvements to council assets and estate management, many of which cannot be measured solely through financial targets.

Would it be clearer if the report explicitly explained why each strategy received its overall score?

The response acknowledged that this was a fair challenge. The rationale for the scoring is contained within the evidence presented throughout each section of the report, but setting out a clear summary of the reasons for each overall judgement at the beginning of each section could make the assessment easier for councillors and residents to understand and scrutinise. This was recognised as a potentially helpful way of improving transparency and readability.

Does the report place too much emphasis on activity and planned measures rather than measurable outcomes?

Some of the reported actions focus on establishing processes, procedures, business cases and investments because these are necessary foundations for achieving longer-term outcomes. Reporting therefore needs to demonstrate whether these actions have been completed or progressed. However, the intention of the self-assessment process is not simply to measure activity. It is designed to assess both the delivery of actions and the outcomes they achieve. The challenge is ensuring that assessments increasingly focus on impact rather than implementation. Progress has been made in identifying evidence of outcomes in some areas, but there is still further work to do to improve the way impact is measured, evidenced and reported. As strategies mature, there should be a stronger emphasis on demonstrating what difference they have made rather than simply what activities have taken place.

What evidence is there that these activities are delivering tangible outcomes for residents, rather than just simply demonstrating progress in process and governance?

Evidence of outcomes is emerging, but it is at different stages across different strategies. Some areas have only recently completed the foundational work necessary to deliver longer-term benefits, so the full impact is not yet visible. For example, in procurement, substantial effort has been devoted to responding to legislative changes, rewriting procedures and embedding new compliance requirements. These activities are intended to create the conditions for improved outcomes, but many of the benefits have yet to be realised. Similarly, investment in digital, data and artificial intelligence capabilities has only recently been made, with projects now moving into delivery phases where benefits should start to become more apparent.

The expectation is that clearer evidence of outcomes will emerge over the next 12 to 24 months as these strategies develop. In the meantime, existing evidence includes the Council's ability to manage significant financial pressures through its Financial Strategy. The value of that strategy is demonstrated through maintaining financial stability and navigating ongoing funding challenges in a structured and sustainable way. Overall, the evidence base for resident outcomes is still developing. While governance improvements, compliance measures and new systems provide the foundations for future success, the challenge remains to demonstrate more clearly how these activities translate into measurable improvements for residents and communities.

How can the Council make better use of Geographic Information System (GIS) data following the Monmouth flooding incident?

GIS data played an important role during the response to the flooding events in Monmouth and helped support the recovery effort. The information gathered is continuing to be used to understand the impact of the flooding, identify lessons learned and improve preparedness for future incidents. GIS is also viewed as a key foundation for wider ambitions within the Digital and Data Strategy, with significant potential for broader use across council services.

What value is being gained from the GIS work undertaken during the flooding response?

The GIS information provided a detailed understanding of properties, addresses and locations affected by the flooding, which supported decision-making during the emergency response. The experience demonstrated the value of the Council's mapping and location-based data and highlighted opportunities to apply this information more widely in future.

How can the Council make better use of Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) opportunities, particularly given Monmouthshire's position on the edge of the region?

The Council continues to maintain close links with Cardiff Capital Region and is actively exploring opportunities through those relationships. Particular opportunities are being considered in connection with Castlegate and the potential to attract new occupiers and investment. Discussions are ongoing, although details could not be provided because they relate to live commercial conversations.

Is Cardiff Capital Region helping to create opportunities for Castlegate?

Active discussions are taking place with Cardiff Capital Region regarding opportunities that could benefit Castlegate. There is optimism that some of those opportunities can be converted into tangible benefits, particularly in relation to attracting businesses and making use of vacant space within the development.

Can officers identify two or three examples where the enabling strategies have already delivered measurable improvements for residents, service users or taxpayers, rather than simply improving internal processes?

The enabling strategies are intended to support the wider delivery of council services, so many of their benefits are realised through frontline services rather than being visible in isolation. One example is the investment in GIS and data systems, which improved the Council's response to the Monmouth flooding event by providing detailed location-based information to help target resources and coordinate the emergency response. A second example is the Asset Management Strategy, which has supported the use of county farms to create opportunities for new entrants into agriculture through the letting of agricultural holdings. A third example is the work undertaken through the Procurement Strategy, including "Meet the Buyer" events, which have been well received by local businesses and have helped strengthen engagement with the local business community. Additional examples include reduced staff turnover, reduced agency staffing and improvements to highways systems through digital transformation work that is due to be reported separately.

Have any measurable productivity gains been identified from the Council's use of AI tools such as Copilot?

Early evidence suggests there are significant time savings from AI-enabled tools, particularly in Children's Services. A transcription tool has been introduced which allows social workers to record meetings and automatically generate transcripts and templated notes, reducing administrative work. The next stage is to translate these time savings into measurable organisational benefits, such as improved staff wellbeing, reduced sickness absence, increased productivity or reduced staffing pressures. The Digital and Data Strategy acknowledges that more work is required to evidence and quantify these benefits, which is one reason why the strategy is currently assessed as 'Adequate' rather than a higher rating.

Why has the Digital and Data Strategy not been assessed more highly if AI and digital projects are already producing benefits?

A significant amount of development work has been completed, including investment in data, AI and digital systems, but the focus is now on demonstrating tangible outcomes and measurable benefits. Governance arrangements and frameworks are in place, but more evidence is needed to show the full impact of these initiatives on services, residents and organisational performance.

Why did the initial research into the gender pay gap not result in clear actionable insights?

The gender pay gap is a complex issue influenced by a range of social, economic and workforce factors. The public sector generally experiences a smaller gender pay gap than the private sector because of established approaches to job evaluation and equal pay, but the issue remains challenging to address. Work is continuing with other local authorities, alongside engagement with academic and international networks, to better understand the causes of the gender pay gap and identify practical interventions that could make a difference.

Will a different approach be taken to addressing the gender pay gap?

Research and collaborative work are ongoing to identify more effective actions. Some measures are already in place, but the discussion did not explore these in detail because of time constraints. Further information on potential actions and future approaches could be given separately to the committee.

Chair’s Summary:

The Chair recognised the significant work that had gone into producing the report and thanked those involved in presenting and responding to members' questions. The Chair emphasised that members were highly supportive of the work being carried out across the Council. The purpose of scrutiny was to explore whether the work could be made more effective and whether the Council could be improved further.

3. **For Purpose On Purpose (F-Pop) - To update the committee about F-Pop and its implications for the reorganisation of Project Management**

Chief Executive Paul Matthews introduced the report and answered the members’ questions:

Should the vision for For Purpose, On Purpose be more outward-looking and focused on residents rather than on the Council itself?

This is a valid and constructive challenge. The vision of what the Council ultimately wants to achieve should be determined politically by elected members rather than by officers. The For Purpose, On Purpose framework is not intended to replace or redefine the Council's political vision or the Community and Corporate Plan. Instead, it is intended to describe the type of organisation that the Council needs to become in order to achieve the ambitions set by elected members.

The framework is designed to continue breaking down barriers between the Council and residents and to create a more open, permeable organisation that works alongside communities rather than acting in a distant or top-down manner. It is intended to encourage a stronger relationship between the Council and residents, with greater participation, collaboration and shared responsibility. The suggestion that the vision should be expressed in more resident-focused terms was not rejected. Paul Matthews indicated that such language was entirely consistent with the purpose of the framework, whose overall aim is to create an organisation that is increasingly connected to, aligned with and trusted by the communities it serves.

Is For Purpose, On Purpose based on high ideals without enough practical detail for residents?

The programme is deliberately ambitious because the Council should continually seek to improve and become the best version of itself. The framework is intended to drive purposeful change rather than function as a slogan. It will help the Council decide which activities matter most, concentrate resources on those priorities and stop or reduce work that contributes less to the desired outcomes.

What will the programme contain in practical terms?

The framework will guide changes across council services and influence how limited resources are prioritised. It will require clear choices about what the Council will do, what it will do less of and what it will stop doing. Activities arising from the programme are expected to feed into later budget considerations, including the budget for 2027/28, with potentially greater contributions in subsequent years.

How much will For Purpose, On Purpose cost to implement?

The cost is not zero, but no additional organisational growth has been requested to establish the programme. Existing resources have been reorganised to create dedicated programme leadership and a core programme team of approximately five or six key individuals. Their costs have been absorbed by changing existing arrangements rather than adding new expenditure. The wider cost is more difficult to quantify because colleagues across the organisation will need to devote time to understanding and embedding the framework. That time has an opportunity cost because it cannot simultaneously be spent on other work. This investment is considered necessary to create sufficient organisational alignment and bring the framework to life.

Is the programme expected to generate savings, service improvements or both?

It is expected to support both financial discipline and service improvement. The programme cannot simply add costs. It must help the Council use its declining resource base more effectively, redesign services and improve its ability to deliver political priorities. Success will require the Council to operate within its approved budget while becoming more resourceful and continuing to improve outcomes.

What practical benefits will residents receive?

Residents should experience a Council that works more closely with communities, makes better use of local skills and capabilities, and directs resources towards the priorities that matter most. The programme is intended to encourage greater resident participation, strengthen trust and help communities contribute directly to improving the county. Benefits should also emerge through redesigned services, earlier intervention, stronger partnerships and more deliberate prioritisation. The overall aim is to improve Monmouthshire as a county, rather than concentrating only on the Council as an organisation.

How will success be measured?

Success will be assessed through a combination of detailed operational indicators and broader measures. At the highest level, the Council must continue to operate within the annual budget approved by Council. This is particularly important because its low level of reserves provides limited protection against financial mistakes. Other indicators will include whether key performance measures improve, whether residents increasingly trust the Council, whether more residents contribute their skills and capabilities, and whether the organisation continues to change deliberately for the better. The programme will be continually evaluated to determine whether it is shifting these measures.

How will the programme build residents' trust?

Trust must be earned by repeatedly keeping promises, being open to different views and demonstrating that those views have influenced decisions. The Council must convince more residents that it is working with them and is on their side. This will require financial discipline, greater community participation and careful consideration of how decisions, including financial decisions, affect the relationship between residents and the Council.

How will the programme respond to the Council's difficult financial position?

The Council's ambitions and priorities should determine how it spends its available money rather than allowing the budget alone to define the organisation. Where sufficient resources are unavailable, the Council must become more resourceful, work differently or draw on the capabilities of partners and communities. The framework will reintroduce a stronger focus on opportunity cost. The Council will need to select a limited number of priorities in which it wants to excel and consciously reduce or discontinue other activity. Every chosen priority must therefore be accompanied by clarity about what will be forgone to deliver it.

How will project management be improved through this programme?

The Council is reviewing the quality of programme and project management through its benefit realisation work. The aim is to identify weaknesses, strengthen practice and achieve greater consistency across the organisation. While some projects are managed to a very high standard, performance is not always consistent, and the programme is intended to raise expectations and improve the overall quality of project delivery.

How will the Council avoid taking on too many projects and overextending its capacity?

A key objective of the programme is to improve organisational discipline around prioritisation. The Council has recognised that it can sometimes be too busy and take on more work than it has the capacity to deliver effectively. The organisation needs to become better at saying no to lower-priority activities and be prepared to defer work where taking on additional projects would reduce overall standards or displace higher-value priorities.

How will residents and stakeholders be involved more effectively in projects?
Engagement is an area where improvement is needed. Successful projects depend on listening to local communities and involving people early in the development of ideas, rather than consulting once plans have largely been finalised. There is scope to strengthen how officers engage with communities and use local knowledge to shape proposals from the outset.

How will ward members be involved in project development and decision-making?

Many officers do not fully understand the value that ward members can bring to project development. Councillors have unique knowledge of their wards, community networks and local opinion which officers cannot easily replicate. There is significant room for improvement in involving ward members earlier and more consistently, so they can help shape ideas before projects are formally developed. The best outcomes are achieved when officers and councillors work closely together. There are examples of excellent practice across the Council, but the quality of engagement is inconsistent. The programme aims to strengthen these relationships and create a culture where officers routinely work with elected members, drawing on their local knowledge to improve decision-making and reduce the likelihood of avoidable disputes later in projects.

Will project management be scrutinised further?

Yes, Infrastructure project management is scheduled to be considered by the committee on 24th November, providing a future opportunity to examine the Council's approach to project delivery in more detail and identify areas for improvement.

How will local residents know the programme exists, and how can they influence its priorities?

The programme itself will not create new priorities. Instead, it is designed to support the delivery of priorities already agreed through the Council's Community and Corporate Plan. Residents are expected to influence priorities through the normal democratic process, while the programme aims to improve how the Council works, including encouraging officers and elected members to engage more actively with communities, listen to residents' views, and involve them in conversations about local issues. Success would be reflected in more residents feeling that the Council is listening and creating opportunities for their input.

What mechanisms will there be for Town & Community Councils to be involved?

Town and Community Councils are seen as vital partners in the programme. The Chief Executive highlighted the important role they already play in supporting communities and suggested there is potential for greater involvement in the future through increased localisation of decision-making and possible transfers of powers. However, no specific framework or mechanism has yet been developed, and it was suggested that this would be a matter for the next Council to consider.

How will taxpayers know if investment has delivered value for money?

Value for money will be assessed through existing Council financial governance arrangements, including regular budget monitoring and quarterly financial reporting. Any expenditure associated with the programme will be reported transparently and subject to scrutiny by elected members through Scrutiny, Cabinet and Council processes. The longer-term test of value will be whether the programme helps the Council use resources more effectively, improve outcomes against agreed priorities, and increase community participation, although some of the measures needed to demonstrate these wider impacts are still being developed.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Chief Executive for the report and his responses today. The questions have demonstrated that we are very interested indeed in this framework and very positively disposed towards the idea that you're preparing the groundwork for the future. We will be interested in asking more questions, but also supporting the work of the whole organisation as we move forward with it.

4. <u>Next Meeting</u>

29th September 2026 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.02 pm**