

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Thursday, 7th July, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chairman)
County Councillor Tony Kear (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Ian Chandler,
Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ann Webb and
Laura Wright

Officers in Attendance

Paul Matthews, Chief Executive
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief
Officer, Resources
Matt Phillips, Chief Officer People and Governance
and Monitoring Officer
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and
Governance
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Richard Jones, Performance Manager
Emma Davies, Performance Officer
Nia Roberts, Welsh Language Officer
Dave Loder, Finance Manager
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Angela Sandles

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Alistair Neill was appointed as Chair.

2. Chair's welcome

The Chair welcomed committee members. In his remarks he stressed the importance of the committee's work, noting that effective scrutiny is important for a good council. He reminded members that the committee's role is to make recommendations, not decisions, and that their work should be impartial and non-partisan, to improve services and – ideally – avoid problems before they happen. The most effective scrutiny is in pre-decision making, to help the Executive in shaping good policy. The committee can amplify the public's voice in its work, and their concerns, as well as those of partners and stakeholders.

The committee will hold members to account for service delivery and risk management. Robust financial monitoring and holding the council to account on the corporate objectives outlined in its corporate plan will be fundamental. It will be important for the Chair and committee members to work effectively outside the meetings with officers, executive members, community groups and partners. The Chair will try to liaise with Cabinet members and supervise the work programme. The committee should ensure that the recommendations it reaches are balanced and accurate. Scrutiny needs to be

focussed and consistent – it is better if fewer areas done well, which needs to be considered when shaping the Forward Work Programme.

3. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Nominations were received for Councillor Wright, Councillor Kear and Councillor Chandler.

Councillor Kear was appointed as Vice-Chair, following a vote.

4. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

5. Public Open Forum

No public submissions were received.

6. Welsh Language Annual Monitoring Report 2021-22 - To scrutinise the Council's performance in complying with Welsh Language Standards

Matthew Gatehouse presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Is staff training open to Councillors? Are there plans to return to in-person training?

Yes, it is open to members – we want to help as many people as possible, things like lunchtime conversation classes. In September, we will probably introduce in-person opportunities, and are happy to fund courses elsewhere as well – the key thing is to get as many people speaking as possible.

What will be put in place to deal with the overspend now and for future years?

We have a legal duty to translate things, so we can't cut corners. There is the responsibility to operate within the budget set by Council for this area, so some effort has been made to make up for the overspend. For example, our Welsh Language Officer retired in an election year, leading to a gap in salary being paid for a period of time. Overall, the budget area will come in under budget, as demonstrated in the next agenda item.

How is the tendering commission for translation services done? Is it up for review? Is Cardiff helping us, given our partnership arrangement? Do we do any in-house translation ourselves? Do other authorities share any translation services i.e., collaborating with those with greater provision?

We looked at the overall commission 2.5-3 years ago – we do so regularly to ensure that our arrangements are cost-effective. We don't have in-house translation but use a stable of 6-7 translators around Wales. Our intelligence is that the rates that we are charged are very competitive, compared to the alternatives. We looked at another authority providing our translation service, but it would have been £30-40k more

expensive per year. We also asked Procurement colleagues whether there was value in going out to the market; given the size of the contract and the amount of potential savings, they felt that the contracts were not going to yield sufficient value to go out to the market. But we will keep it under constant review.

We considered bringing the service in-house partly because of the technology now available, but many of the individual businesses use software/learning tools, which enable them to keep their costs down. We don't do much in-house but there are occasional things like proofreading. For the most part though, translators can turn things around within the hour when it's urgent.

What's the total number of staff in each service area – does it include those who haven't started learning?

We don't have those numbers to hand, but they can be given later, and included in future reports to make them more useful to members.

How much of the stated improvement in the last year is staff moving up in their fluency, and how much is recruitment of new staff?

Existing staff have gained new qualifications, but a big improvement has been in the recruitment of external staff. The way technology allows us to work means that we are recruiting people from north and west Wales – people don't necessarily need to live locally. Another aspect is trying to target recruitment; for example, with home care vacancies, the Welsh Language Officer went on Radio Cymru to encourage Welsh speakers to apply. But that remains a challenge, and we are not yet where we want to be with recruitment. Because not as many have taken up courses in recent years we haven't seen the gains we would like. Key to this is advertising more jobs as 'Welsh Essential', particularly in frontline positions.

Has anything been explored further to understand the difficulty in recruitment and retention? Is it just geographical, or is there a perception of us not taking the language seriously? Is salary a factor?

It's not a unique challenge to Monmouthshire, which we have fed back to the Commissioner, with whom we have a very good relationship. We simply don't have huge numbers of Welsh speakers in this part of Wales. Many of the speakers come into higher level professional positions – many are high achievers and not necessarily then in frontline services. There are huge challenges in Home Care anyway, and many workers commute in from outside areas – particularly in Monmouthshire, given the house prices. Something we haven't done yet is go into Welsh language schools, to things like Careers evenings, to try to develop people from a much earlier stage. Also, growing our Welsh activity on LinkedIn and Careers websites to show that the language is encouraged here and that we have aspirations to grow its use. We are determined to try a range of tactics to make us a more attractive employer to Welsh speakers.

If there is a request for care provision in the medium of Welsh, can we deliver it?

Yes. We have Welsh Language Care Assistants, but don't have the numbers to hand. In a worst-case scenario where we were struggling, we would pay a market premium to bring someone in to meet a specific care need.

Are we speaking to other authorities regarding best practices?

We are part of the Welsh Language Officer's network, and we engage through the Welsh Local Government Association. We seek to learn from best practice. We are a smaller organisation than some others, which means we need to use resources effectively. But there are areas where organisations look to us e.g., about our translation services because our approach is very good. We do so for organisations like Citizen's Advice, too, as we can do so much more cost-effectively for them than anyone else could.

What in-house promotion is there for staff training?

There is, through things like Sharepoint (our Intranet site): we have a Welsh language page there, with courses published on Talent Lab. The fact that we don't have enough people doing those courses suggests that we would benefit from doing more and continuing to push them through things like the Digital Cwtch and Schmae Day. The ideas and enthusiasm that our new Welsh Language Officer has mean that there will be a big step up in promotion and activities over the coming months.

Can the importance of attracting people to the authority be linked with the wider problem of recruiting staff to certain areas? To what extent is the requirement expressed in recruitment a deterrent to some excellent potential employees coming and working in these key roles, given the shared border with England?

There is no easy answer to the general problem of recruiting staff. We can benefit in many ways as the gateway to Wales because we might find that Welsh speakers with jobs in Bristol and the West of England choose to stay living here and commute out. We have some really active conversation groups, and we work to support them to try to ensure that people who want to use Welsh, and are considering moving here for work, recognise that it is a healthy place for the language. We have tried to capitalise on the legacy of the Eisteddfod held in 2016 in Abergavenny, which gave the language a considerable boost in the county. But there are significant recruitment challenges that are not unique to our Welsh speakers.

Can we be more proactive with staff and councillors by potentially having a word or phrase of the day in Welsh when they first log on to their system each morning?

There might be limitations on popups etc. as we've tried things like that in other areas, but we will check with the digital team about what is feasible. There will be other things we can do, such as promoting apps that remind users each day to complete a learning task e.g. Duolingo.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for this comprehensive report. The committee concluded that the council needs to continue its efforts to recruit more Welsh speaking staff in frontline services, such as social care, acknowledging that recruitment in this sector is proving challenging nationally. The committee requested that further information on the numbers of Welsh speaking staff in individual service areas be emailed to the committee following the meeting.

7. Revenue Capital Outturn 2021- 2022 Budget Monitoring Report - To scrutinise the draft report and identify any areas of for future scrutiny

Jonathan Davies presented the report and answered the members' questions with Dave Loder, Peter Davies and Nicola Wellington.

Challenge:

Future challenges in service delivery are highlighted. Is there a more detailed set of assessments of likely risks? What about inflationary pressures and related issues?

Many of the risks will have been known at our budget-setting stage, when we did a full analysis of them. Some of the inflationary pressures might not have been apparent at that time; we have to respond to them quickly as they develop. Financial reporting for the following financial year will follow, with a formal Month 4 report coming to committee in September which will address some of the risks now presenting themselves. The main risks are highlighted in 3.28 and are those expected: we still see structural budget deficits related to demands on Social Care, Care Homes capacity is approaching 100%, so we are funding those placements, which we didn't have to do during the pandemic. Staffing issues in Domiciliary Care are a key feature of the service, and the external help that is being brought in to support it. Homelessness is a key area of legacy impacts – there's been a policy change from Welsh Government and there is a lot of detail still for us to work through in how to support that service.

Underspends are as much of a concern as overspends, as it suggests that services aren't being delivered as hoped. Does 'savings' mean that we set out to save that money or are they underspends that we didn't mean to incur e.g., staff cost savings in the School Psychology Service?

'Savings' or 'mitigations' primarily mean those that have been brought forward prior to the start of the financial year and which services have come forward with efficiencies or mitigations that can be made, shown in Table 2. The specific saving in the SPS was due to a staff vacancy. Underspends refer to what has happened during the year to the budget that was set, rather than savings or mitigations agreed at the start of the year, but the two are indeed sometimes conflated.

What is the explanation for the large Highways underspend?

It is comprised of two parts. The first is savings on staffing, as this area had a large number of vacancies. They are actively looking to fill those posts now. The second is the high levels of income last year, itself made up of two parts: we were able to

recharge more staff costs to capital budgets and grants, and we had an increased road closure income, not communicated to Finance until later in the year. That income doubled from what it usually is, creating a large spike in our income. It is highly unlikely that there will be a similar underspend this year.

What does the surplus in Strategic Initiatives entail?

Strategic Initiatives is a corporate budget that we hold; the £1m underspend is a late grant that we received from Welsh Government to support our difficulty in council tax collection during the year. It's in Strategic Initiatives to keep it separate from council tax, in order to report it transparently.

Where we see significant variances from budgets it would be useful to have a commentary as to the resultant impact on services. Vacancies are 'why', but what has it meant and what actions were taken to mitigate the drop in service level during that period, e.g., in Highways and Flooding?

In Appendix 1 the Director of the service looks to provide a wider commentary on the impact over the year, though not perhaps in the detail specifically asked about. The head of a service or those responsible would have a better indication of the ongoing effect that their underspend would have. Underlining features should be in the Performance reports.

For overall context, as we went through the last financial year we faced a significant overspend in the earlier months – we didn't have sight of the significant windfall grants from Welsh government that we subsequently received. We ensured that we weren't spending needlessly, sometimes holding vacancies where the impact has been assessed of doing so. Those judgements were made during the year, then the wave of grants came in. Regarding the current year 22-23, we expect a challenging position at Month 4. But when we set the budget for the current year we knew of the significant risks already mentioned and put aside reserve cover to offset some of the known risks. The issue will be the unknown risks, i.e., those emerging from the cost-of-living crisis and inflation manifesting in different ways, which might take a while to work their way through the system.

How far advanced are schools' investment plans and how are they being enabled to realise them?

Schools received a number of grants towards the end of the year that they have been allowed to move over into the current financial year. We have worked with the schools to produce 3-year budgets which are effectively the investment plans, ensuring that the money is spent appropriately, in line with grants and T&Cs. With all of our schools we have the current financial 22-23 budget in place, signed off by the governing body. Where a school is in deficit, we have a recovery plan in place. We monitor schools on a monthly/bi-monthly basis to ensure the plans are met.

Do we capture the end of year data for vacancies per department across the organisation?

The data in terms of specific vacancies is within the portfolio of our Chief Officer for People & Governance and colleagues in HR, so can be captured and made available.
Do you foresee maintenance support being a challenge in the next few years? Will that capacity issue hinder the realisation of those plans?

There is a concern that capacity is an issue, in our own workforce and in contractors. It's a case of working very closely with schools to programme in when the works can be done. The Maintenance grant doesn't have to be spent by 31st March 2023 so there is time for us to work with schools to ensure that the money is spent.

Are there plans or forecasts to cover any ongoing risk of reduced use of Spyttly Park and Castle Gate?

Those assets were affected during Covid. Welsh Government extending the use of the Covid Hardship Fund to offset those losses was laudable. Occupancy levels in Castle Gate Business Park remained very strong through the pandemic, though. Newport Leisure Park was naturally affected more, given the nature of the tenancies, but we were able to keep those tenants secure through the Hardship fund. The tenants are operating well, and we will continue to assess that through the investment committee. During the early stages of budget-setting for 22-23 there was an identified risk in CG Business Park with one of the tenants giving notice; we have expanded an existing tenant into much of that space. It is often misunderstood but these tenants contribute significant net income to the council, allowing us to sustain and deliver services.

Is there an update on the Weighted Unexpired Lease Terms?

That information isn't to hand, we will need to provide it later.

What would the pandemic impacts have been if additional funding hadn't been introduced? Do we have better sight of pressure points moving forward?

If the Hardship Fund money hadn't been forthcoming in 2020, we didn't have the reserve cover to withstand the pressures. We would have had to react with very significant changes. Wales has benefitted much more from funding into local government and the Hardship Fund than counterparts in England. We've been able to restore and replenish reserves. Without such a level from the Hardship Fund, finances would have been beyond fragile.

There will be further waves of Covid, and future pandemics. Would it be advisable to draw together what worked, what we shouldn't have done etc. in order to be prepared for future problems?

The emergency support structures from the Civil Contingencies Act came into play very successfully in March 2020. Matt Phillips, Chief Officer for People & Governance, holds the portfolio responsibility for Emergency Planning, which will have undertaken its own debrief, which will also have been done at Gwent and Welsh Government level. There are inquiries into Care Homes during the pandemic, which will lead to a body of

evidence of what has been learned at a local and national level. Perhaps a summary of the lessons learned could be sought from Matt Phillips.

Chair's Summary:

The recommendations were moved and agreed by members. The committee requested that a breakdown of the inflationary pressures be emailed to members to assist them in gaining an understanding of the impact of inflation on the Council's budgetary position. It will be important to draw together the learning from the pandemic, particularly financial impacts that led to service impacts, to ensure we are resilient as possible for whatever lies in store.

8. Monmouthshire County Council Self-Assessment 2021-2022 - To scrutinise the Council's performance during 2021-2022 against the goals outlined in the Corporate Plan 2017-2022, agreeing any areas for future scrutiny

Richard Jones presented the report and answered the members' questions with Matthew Gatehouse and Emma Davies.

Challenge:

In the work to reduce our carbon footprint and waste, is there scope for looking towards new behaviours, e.g., soaps instead of gels, emphasis on non-use rather than recycling, the understanding that plastics ultimately come from oil? Has that been considered?

We declared a Climate Emergency and put together a related Action Plan, but the report recognises that there is more to do; we are looking towards how to achieve more with our resources. The member has given some excellent suggestions for us to follow.

How are Area Committees doing, and what is their setup? Is there feedback from communities about how MCC is doing?

The key thing to recognise is that they haven't been meeting recently. There have been a number of evaluations of them in recent years. Cabinet Member Fookes will commence a piece of work on public participation soon that will incorporate work with the area committees.

Is there a difference between this version 1.0 and the 2.0 circulated for G&A committee next week?

There haven't been major changes between 1.0 and 2.0, it is more about reflecting that this report looks back on 21-22. Finalisation of some data and evidence has continued, and some performance indicators have been updated. One significant change is the addition of timescales to action plans. The vast majority of conclusions and detail are unchanged. We can set out the changes subsequently e.g., in the report that will go to council in September. For clarity, a '.0' is used when something is in the public domain, and even a minor change can see something updated from Version 1.0 to 2.0.

Do we capture staff feedback to understand the nuances of the collaboration between local authority, Social Care departments and Health?

We are very proud of our record of joint working between Health and Social Care, which goes back to 2005-6. There are clearly huge challenges in this interface. Feedback is captured in the professional supervision that social workers and others have with their immediate managers, which then informs the conclusions that the Chief Officer for Social Care puts together in their annual report. There are sometimes sensitivities, and this is how we would see that information coming through. The Care Inspectorate Wales report, produced at the end of 2021, might be useful: a lot of work was done with staff and there was a lot of feedback from them noted in it.

Do we review the questions in the Social Services user questionnaire before it is issued to ensure that we're asking the right things?

These are national questions. The design has been informed by involvement from service areas themselves, our performance team and customer relations team. It is a long-standing survey of Adult Social Care users, giving us a rich picture of trends and changes – in suggesting any changes we have to be mindful of how that would affect our ability to monitor trends over time. There is an emphasis on how we use qualitative information to inform our performance framework as well as metrics and performance measures. All of the evidence comes together in the Chief Officer for Social Care's report, which might come to this committee in due course.

The focus includes agreed outcomes but there is little explicitly assessing the impacts on residents and communities. Would it be a stronger assessment if this was included?

The self-assessment is ultimately about the effect on communities. As we develop the report further, we will look at how we strengthen when we assess the delivery of a service or policy priority, specifically demonstrating the ultimate impact that it will have on the service user – and throughout the report, not just separately at the end. The second aspect is involvement i.e., the views of residents and service users via engagement etc., especially with the duty in the act to strengthen that involvement.

Under Goal A, the rise in the percentage of Year 11 NEETs is a concern, having gone up from 0.4% to 2%. Can you comment on that?

Yes, the rise is important, albeit a relatively small number. The Employment & Skills team has more granular detail about the children's experiences and outcomes, and are working with them to support them into education and training opportunities. They would be best placed to comment further.

The 20mph scheme seems like the single measure in Goal C for keeping roads and areas safe? What other options might there be e.g., speed ramps, cameras, a greater enforcement of measures?

20mph is one measure but there is a range of issues to ensure road safety. We need to consider a range of factors as to whether we've been successful. There was a lot of work previously in a task and finish group under another scrutiny committee, and a policy is going to come to the Place Committee. So, there will be the opportunity to

scrutinise some of the detail before the policy is adopted but there isn't detail to hand today.

Chair's Summary:

The committee welcomes the report in terms of providing valuable context for new members and assisting the committee in the development of its forward work programme. The committee acknowledges a rise in the number of young people not in employment or education and are advised that there is a strategy in place which may be of further interest to the committee. Members advocate the need for the council to have demonstrable climate reduction plans across all services. The committee will await the development of the new Corporate Plan which will be brought to the committee for pre-decision scrutiny in due course and suggests that consideration be made as to how resident feedback and response could be built more strongly into the outcomes. The recommendations were moved and agreed.

9. Forward Work Programme - To consider the Forward Work Programme Report and identify areas for future scrutiny, and in doing so, to agree a draft Forward Work Programme

The following topics were suggested by members:

- Council and Community resilience, specifically in view of the next phase of Covid or the next pandemic.
- How the new administration uses Council reserves.
- Procurement: gaining an understanding of how well the relationship with Cardiff Council is working, and its benefits (Pre-decision scrutiny of the Procurement Strategy will be undertaken at the next meeting.)
- Recruitment and retention: the effect of Covid, the challenge of vacancies, and questions of salary differentials.
- The Asset Management strategy, and ways to strengthen it.

Chair's Summary:

The report is moved, and the Forward Work Programme is agreed in outline; it will be circulated following the meeting to enable members to add further suggestions. The committee agrees the agenda for its next meeting on 29th September will include Pre-decision Scrutiny of the Procurement Strategy, Scrutiny of the Chief Officer's Social Care and Health Annual Report, Budget Monitoring Month 4 and the Strategic Risk Register. The committee recognises that this may not be achieved in a single meeting and therefore agrees that the Strategic Risk Register will be received at this meeting but tabled to a future scrutiny workshop to agree future areas they wish to scrutinise in greater detail.

10. Next Meeting

Thursday 29th September 2022 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 12.27 pm.

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