

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Joint Select Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA and remote attendance on Tuesday, 11th October, 2022 at 9.30 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Fay Bromfield, Ian Chandler, John Crook (substituting for Maria Stevens) , Christopher Edwards, David Jones, Penny Jones (substituting for Paul Pavia) Jayne McKenna, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Jackie Strong, Peter Strong and Laura Wright

Also in attendance County Councillors: Paul Griffiths, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Sustainable Economy, Rachel Garrick, Cabinet Member for Resources, Martyn Groucutt, Cabinet Member for Education and Tudor Thomas, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Accessible Health Services

Officers in Attendance

Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Rachel Lewis, Planning Policy Manager
Diane Corrister, Head of Children's Services
Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Angela Sandles, Paul Pavia and Maria Stevens

1. Election of Chair.

Councillor Alistair Neill was elected as Chair.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair.

Councillor Tony Kear was appointed as Vice-chair.

3. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

5. To confirm the following minutes:

Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee dated 7th July 2022.

Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Minutes – 7th July 2022

The minutes were confirmed as a true and accurate record. Concern was expressed regarding actions arising and the timeliness of responses received.

People Scrutiny Committee dated 20th July 2022.

People Scrutiny Committee Minutes – 20th July 2022

The minutes were confirmed as a true and accurate record.

6. Safeguarding and Performance Report - To Scrutinise the performance of the service area.

Jane Rodgers presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Please can you explain what 'Thinky' training is and confirm when it will begin?

It's a database for storing safeguarding training. We do not have a date for the roll out, but the expectation is that it will be this year.

- *With reference to Appendix 4, which reviews the previous actions outlined in the action plan, there are explanations for the delay in implementing the actions in red, however, it doesn't say when these are expected to be completed. Do you have timeframes for these?*

There were 2 red actions, the first being related to the development of the core data set, which we have moved forward into our current action plan and set a completion date for March 2023. The second red action relates to the delay in the revision of the safeguarding training strategy. This was a deliberate delay because there is a national training framework being implemented, so that needs to dovetail, the expectation being that this will be April 2023.

- *In Section 3 of the report which outlines the preventative approach, I note there are professional strategy meetings, and you refer to 63 professionals for 78 children with 33 claims being substantiated ~ this seems to be a high figure, but is this a high figure compared to previous years? I'd like to ask the same question for adult services.*

It is higher than previous years. Prior to this year, for adult services, there hasn't been a statutory duty, whereas for children's services, there was a statutory duty in place. We are continuing to use the excellence we have developed to upskill teams across multiple agencies to understand what a professional concern looks like and the process that needs to happen. For example, we have trained managers at McDonalds who meet children through their occupation, so working with partners is very important.

- *Page 27-28 refers to the Violence Against Woman, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) training. I'd like to know if that training is being undertaken in schools as it doesn't feature in your report.*

Yes, it is undertaken in schools.

- *Would greater spending in targeted preventative services prevent children being on child protection plans for neglect. I'm not familiar with the contracts of shared preventative services, but my concern is around safe recruitment, being aware that the shared Emergency out of hours service has some staff retirement age. Are contracts proportional to the size of the authority?*

Yes, we have a set contract that is proportionate to the size and need of the county. We are aware of the retirement of some of the staff in that service and there are clear plans in place, so we shouldn't need to rely on agency staff.

- *In terms of how we measure ourselves, in paragraph 3 of Appendix 1, there are 6 scoring levels and of the 6, 4 are described as positive. Do you think there may be a tendency towards a positive bias? Do you have any comment on that?*

Yes, quite possibly. It's a corporate scoring framework and is just one way to describe where we are, but the body of evidence is wider than that, so we wouldn't use the score in isolation. It's the analysis of information that assesses what the score should be and allows us to assess our priorities.

- *I'm not suggesting things are more negative, but I think we may want to consider how we measure ourselves to see if there is any relevance there. For example, if prevention is measured down from a level 5 to 4 and safe services is measured up from a level 3 to 4, does that reflect some diminishment in our previous focus, in that we are picking up post prevention, when problems emerge?*

I don't think that's the case. I think it's very clear in the report that we gave that measurement because of the impact of the pandemic at that time. It's a snapshot in time and where we felt we were at that point.

Cabinet Member Councillor Tudor Thomas: I do think we have been through the most difficult period of time during the pandemic which affected the ability to undertake visits in person, so it was more difficult to identify some of the issues that you may when conducting visits in person rather than by the telephone. Also, teachers who would ordinarily be able to raise concerns weren't seeing pupils in person, so I think the pandemic certainly impacted on the score we have given ourselves at that point, which is an honest reflection.

- *We're looking analysis of key strengths in this report, but why are we also not looking at key weaknesses in the same way, to ensure there isn't a positive bias?*

I accept your point, we have tried to draw out areas for improvement in our action plan. We will bear this in mind for future reports. We have been very good at identifying risks and managing those, rather than outlining our weaknesses but I accept that point.

- *Has training been adapted to take into account the cost-of-living crisis, which may cause more family breakdowns and are you adapting your training to take account of this?*

Yes, we have had to adapt our training over the years due to different factors and this latest context will need to be taken into account as it will undoubtedly place great pressure on families. The signs of family breakdown are likely to be the same, but the context different.

- *Being a new councillor, how does the performance compare to the previous year? And are you confident the measures you are putting in will ensure your continued progress?*

I think we have been on a real journey since 2016 and it's hard to say whether we have improved, but we are very flexible and we have a good regional and local approach and a comprehensive safeguarding hub. We have put tremendous effort into embedding safeguarding into all services, into everything we do as a council and I believe we have a strong infrastructure, good skills, the right culture and a lot of experience to guide us, so I think we are well placed moving forward.

Cabinet Member Councillor Tudor Thomas: In my view, it's one of the key responsibilities of the authority to safeguard vulnerable people and as a key feature in the Corporate Plan, I can see this is embedded through everything we do.

- *In relation to previous approaches to prevent escalation, do you think the school's councillor service is adequate and is it part of the curriculum to teach self-esteem and resilience? Do we have independent visitors to support young people in this way?*

Within schools and the Looked After Population, we have undertaken training on well-being and health and young people can access advocates, however, we do not have independent visitors. I will provide the committee with a written explanation to explain the position on this (Action – Diane Corrister).

- *I have concerns that the cost of petrol is affecting the provision of some of adult services. How are we going to attract people to provide important services when the cost of petrol is inhibiting?*

Cabinet Member Councillor Tudor Thomas: This is unfortunately a national issue and as a small authority with a wide geographical span, we do inevitably have to draw on people from outside the county to provide services. There isn't a simple solution to attracting people into care when other roles are better paid and less challenging, but I agree, we need to consider how we can encourage them.

Chairs summary:

I'd like to offer thanks to all the services for their work during extremely challenging times and to officers for the report. The committee supports the report's recommendations.

7. Chief Officer for Social Care and Health: Annual Report - To conduct pre-decision scrutiny on the report and scrutinise the performance of the service area.

Jane Rodgers presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

- *Some of the language that used objectively is somewhat alarming and may need further consideration, an example being of a system that is "broken" and "in crisis" which links to a statement of "expectations of services that are shifting" and "change being the only constant". Please can you explain what is changing significantly, that is not predictable, accepting that the pandemic wasn't.*

We have a system that does feel at times in crisis, for all the reasons we are aware of such as demography and the pandemic. We have thought hard about how to solve those challenges, but the change required is to think about how we can organise ourselves from a whole system approach, re-engaging with our partners to understand practice and to determine risk in our communities. This is happening slowly, neighbourhood care networks being a new development that has been positive in developing an understanding of our communities and repurposing ourselves to do things differently. We know things are shifting but we don't know exactly how it will develop.

Cabinet Member Councillor Tudor Thomas: It's a challenging question, because the demographic in Monmouthshire is aging and that means people will need more support. The health service is under such strain and the pressure on hospitals is immense. We also have practical challenges such as recruitment, which we've spoken about.

- *What is predictable change versus unexpected change?*

Our demographic and our workforce issues are predictable to a degree, but the pandemic has brought about changes that were less predictable and we are in a different territory, trying to determine how to respond.

- *Looked after children numbers have declined whilst the number of children on the child protection register have doubled. Please can you explain potential reasons for this?*

We have had a strategy of changing the culture and practice, becoming more effective at care planning, which builds on the preventative approach, so children are staying on the register longer to seamlessly integrate them back into the community with family support services, so that's the reason for the decline in the numbers of LAC together with those higher numbers on the child protection register.

- *In terms of the future challenge, we've seen examples such as the very successful Raglan Project, where the situation required us to be creative in solving our challenges, so given that we are in a similarly difficult situation, is there a prospect doing something similarly creative?*

The question is whether we go alone or with others. I think we need to do both, working with the health board and other Gwent partners, accepting we have different challenges to our Gwent partner authorities, but we need to do it in partnership with health. I agree that we often have to find our own solutions, our Community Night Sitting Service and the Micro Carers project being key examples. We are starting to think of different ways of procuring care at home by taking a place-based approach, to put options in place that suit the community. This will require us to have a different relationship with the care provider, commissioning a different service where there is more flexibility and autonomy in the care offered, whilst providing greater security than a spot purchase contract. This direction will require us to upskill our micro carers, our direct payments, our in-house care and our procured care, but this where we are heading in trying to address the issue.

- *In terms of the data, if we are to adequately scrutinise the performance of services, we need more data, for example, rather than solely the number of children on the child protection register, we need to know how long they have been on the register and their status on the register, so I'd like to request that.*

We do collate this information so we can provide you with this following the meeting (**Action: Jane Rodgers**). In terms of what happens to children on the register, they are reviewed frequently on a multi-agency basis with the children sometimes involved in this and every 3-6 months, there is an independent review, so the review process is continuous and is robust.

- *The report refers to 89% of adults in receipt of social care being satisfied with the services they receive, however, I'm concerned that responses can be overly positive where people are reluctant to say anything negative, so how was the survey conducted?*

The adult services questionnaire is sent automatically to service users via the Council's Policy and Performance Team, so it's not a case of a service provider going through the questions with the service user. The template is a national one, but I accept your points around needing to see numbers not just percentages and I will convey that. I will provide further information on this following the meeting (**Action: Jane Rodgers**).

The report indicates a low score in terms of the participation of service users in the design of their care packages, so what are we doing to rectify that?

Unfortunately, the figure is lower, which is very disappointing. The reason for this is that there is so little choice currently, so people do not have a lot of choice in their care plan and are not able to make decisions about coming home or going into care, because of the challenges these services are facing.

- *I note in the report that there are 2000 weekly hours of unmet care which is highly alarming. The Care Inspectorate Wales has also highlighted this. It is also very concerning that people are not being able to choose their own care plan, given the Social Services and Well-being Act champions this. What are your thoughts about the financial impact of people going into residential care as opposed to receiving care at home? Has thought been given to the social price of a person losing their independence and connection with the local community? Conversely, if a person needs residential care and cannot obtain it, there would be significant pressure placed on carers to deliver care at home.*

I agree with many of your sentiments – I feel this daily and so staff. The challenges are impacting on the choice. All we can do at the moment is continuously assess and prioritise, try to broker the right care for the person and to support carers, working with people and their families to deliver the best outcomes for them. We know people are in hospital waiting to come home, rather than going into residential care and we know it has a negative effect on people and on their carers. Our staff feel very strongly about this every single day, but the circumstances are so strained. As the chief officer, this is something I carry with me every day. I want to work preventatively with partners to change the situation and to avoid people going into hospital, to increase our options around direct care, our micro carers, doing more work to support direct payment carers to support people to live the lives they want to live in the best way we can.

Cabinet Member Councillor Tudor Thomas: It concerns me greatly, but it's a very difficult situation and there are clear fundamental issues in the care system that we cannot solve ourselves.

- *Is there an opportunity to capitalise on some of the wonderful work that was undertaken in communities during the pandemic to support people in tasks such as shopping, collecting medication, running errands and cleaning.*

Yes, there is. We have new community teams that work alongside our social care colleagues, and they work closely with the Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations and Bridges Community Project to provide lower level support, such as shopping, making telephone contact and home calls and running errands. We have a new point of contact system, whereby people are redirected to that service rather than front line social care if appropriate.

- *I have personal experience of the difficulty in recruiting direct care by out of county providers, following a lengthy assessment process, with services since being cancelled, due to the increased fuel costs. Do you have any solutions for this?*

We do face particular challenges that are different to our colleagues in Gwent, particularly our rurality, the higher cost of living and our demographic, which makes it difficult to recruit carers who live in Monmouthshire, so many do come from Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent and the increased fuel costs, and the cost of living means they choose to take up work closer to home. There is no easy solution to this. As an authority, we do pay above living wage and we make sure any additional payment to carers from Welsh Government flow directly to carers, but this is a problem that we cannot dog ourselves out of financially, it needs a multi-faceted solution. The 'place-based' approach tries to reduce costs and time for carers in terms of travelling, by basing them in the community in which they live.

- *Recognising that the current economic challenges may mean some people may not occupy the same roles in coming months, is there potentially an opportunity to recruit people into social care?*

Yes, you are correct we look at any and every opportunity to attract and recruit staff.

What are the contingency plans within the services to ensure we don't lose essential skills and experience through people retiring?

I accept your concerns; we are very aware of this and note your point.

- *In terms of workforce development, you refer to a 10% staff turnover in adult services and a 12% in children's social care. Is that directly within the council? I'm*

not sure what grades or roles that refers to, but is there a similar percentage within the external sector? You talk about recruitment in the report, but I don't see much about retention.

We put a lot of effort into retaining our staff with a significant well-being offer for staff, put in place during the pandemic and continued afterwards. Our Workforce Development Team look carefully at our training offer for all different types of practitioners who are building a career in social care. There are several aspects: supporting professional development, then listening to staff on their terms and conditions and then also supporting them day to day in their work. We take this very seriously, meeting senior leaders every week for 2 hours to talk about their staff, so we know the individuals and their needs for coaching or mentoring and we look at caseloads. Also, wider than this, we think about how we can support home carers, foster carers and social guardians, because it's a highly stressful field in which to work and we know we are in direct competition with other fields where you can earn similar wages without the stress and responsibility.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you so much for bringing this report, which we have scrutinised in detail and we support. I'm aware there are staff vacancies across the council, so workforce retention is not an issue isolated to social services. One point I would like to raise, is the timeliness of reviews into need. The report indicates that 54% are completed on time, so my concern is that if 46% of reviews are delayed, people may be in receipt of services they may not need, against a backdrop of increased need. I would urge the Chief Officer to explore this further to ensure this isn't affecting the availability of services for those who need them (**Action: Jane Rodgers**).

8. Chief Officer for Education: Annual Report - To conduct pre-decision scrutiny of the report and scrutinise the performance of the service area (report to follow).

This report was deferred from this agenda after agenda publication and will be received by full Council at a future meeting.

9. Local Development Plan (LDP) annual monitoring report - To scrutinise the annual monitoring report for the current adopted LDP prior to submitting to Welsh Government.

Councillor Paul Griffiths, Cabinet Member presented the report and answered questions, together with Mark Hand and Craig O'Connor.

Challenge:

- *The shortfall in actual housing and affordable housing in particular is a key concern and the plan will be for significant growth, so please can you comment on the potential for different construction methods, such as pre-fabricated houses and timber frame houses, to make faster progress?*

One thing to note before answering the question is that the replacement Local Development Plan runs from 2018-2033, so what is coming through the system now, is counting towards our newly identified housing need. We have a desire to move at a faster pace, but large strategic sites can take some time to come forward, so we need to secure some smaller easy wins that can come forward quicker. Methods of construction is not something we can greatly influence as this is more 'a land use' document so, those are things for site developers to consider, although homes will need to meet the zero carbon and other required criteria. As part of the plan, we have to show trajectories of delivery and show how the new housing number will be delivered in the new plan. We are working with developers to put master planning in place so that by the time we are at the point of our plan being examined, we are ready to go, thus avoiding a time lag. So in conclusion, there are a range of things we can do to expedite delivery.

- *What is the definition of affordable housing, low-cost housing and what is an allocated site?*

This means a site allocated within the exiting LDP. Six of the seven residential sites have already got planning permission, it's just that there's just a time lag for construction. There are number of sites coming forward that are currently under development. The aim is to ensure sites meet the active travel requirements and are sustainable sites. We use Welsh Government's Technical advice note 2 for the definition of affordable housing, which means 'affordable in perpetuity', but I will forward the definition of affordable housing and low-cost housing to the committee (**Action: Craig O'Connor/Mark Hand**).

- *What is an unallocated site?*

We have to review the appropriateness of sites that come forward in line with policy, so we are not looking to support unallocated sites that don't meet the criteria.

- *The affordable housing delivery figures do raise concern, given that only 35 affordable houses were completed during this monitoring period, plus the ones not*

delivered in the 10-year plan. How do we compare with neighbouring authorities? Also, in terms of completed dwellings, Chepstow accounted for 90 completed units, but Monmouth only 3. In the report, you state that there isn't a significant issue with the implementation of the plan's spatial strategy in relation to the delivery of new housing in the main towns, so please can you explain how you came to that conclusion?

In terms of comparison with neighbouring authorities, we are all completing our annual monitoring reports at the same time, the end of October being the deadline to submit them, so I'm afraid that at this point, we don't have any information on how others are faring. In respect of your question around completions, there are a few things taking place at the moment. Generally, in terms of our plan's performance, it has done very well, with sites being completed. Our big issue at the moment is the difference between the number of completions in Chepstow versus Monmouth, due to one area being affected by phosphates and the other not being affected. This issue means that drawing comparison with neighbouring authorities is not helpful because Torfaen and Newport are not affected by phosphates in the same way as the north of our county, which is affected due to the non-tidal reach. We will reflect on the wording of the report in terms of whether the spatial strategy has been achieved. We measure the proportion of properties in different settlement hierarchies that are completed in the main towns, so against the plan's intention, we feel completions are being achieved, but it is possibly helped by the fact most of the site at Wonastow Road, Monmouth was completed before phosphates became a problem.

- *Is it possible to prioritise the affordable houses in a scheme, as in to build them first before the market housing?*

Not really, because housing developments tend to be built in phases, to ensure the infrastructure is in place and is ready. We have a 'pepper potting' approach in place so that properties are not distinguishable as affordable or market housing, so when developments take place, there is a balance in the delivery of market and affordable housing. That said, to reassure you that we do ensure the affordable housing is delivered, we have trigger points in our contracts with developers in which we discuss the progress of delivery.

- *I am concerned about Monmouth town's vacant shops, the vacancy rate having gone from 10% to 15.5%, so if we haven't got the housing or the jobs, I'm concerned about how many young people will be attracted to stay and work in the area and that there may be a decline of the economy. Do you have any timescale for when we will have a decision from Welsh Government on our bid for Levelling Up Funding and if we are not successful, do we have an alternative plan?*

In terms of town centre vacancies, outside of this process is the regeneration work that is ongoing. We have met with Monmouth Town Council to seek their agreement to co-produce a masterplan for the town, having been identified in a report to Cabinet in July 2022 as a key priority. From a planning perspective, our town centres have changed significantly since this plan was produced in 2011 and adopted in 2014. Considerations will include whether the central areas should be contracted and whether they should encompass more mixed use i.e. leisure use, cafes and community use as opposed to solely retail use, potentially freeing up areas surrounding for residential use.

As to when we expect to hear back from Welsh Government on whether we have been successful in our bid for Levelling up Funding (LUF funding), we hope to hear at some point during the autumn. There's a separate Welsh Government funding stream for 'transforming towns' and some work could happen simultaneously with that funding and if we aren't successful in the LUF funding, we'll have to look at what we can prioritise using other funding streams. We have a report to bring to cabinet to discuss what those priorities should be, but we can't draft that until we know whether we have the LUF funding.

- *In relation to the proposal for Raglan that was rejected, do you think this was due to the amount of housing and that a smaller number of houses would have been more accepted?*

In short no. The policy we had in place for unallocated sites did us proud for a short amount of time, but that policy is no longer in place, so this will be a discussion for determining which candidate sites to bring forward in the replacement plan.

- *I would like to request that officers reword the reference to Raglan having a village hall, when the facility referred to is in poor condition and is not usable as a village hall. **Action: Mark Hand agreed to discuss outside the meeting.***
- *The plan refers to the successful '21st century schools' programme. Are we marketing the education success story, by highlighting the learning and skills offer, thus attracting people to Monmouthshire?*

We're in discussions with colleagues around the wider skills agenda but there's an extent to which the council should influence the education curriculum and a question as to how a land use planning document can influence that. It is something we are mindful of and can give further thought to.

- *With reference to the transport strategy analysis on page 95, the report mentions that there are no new Section 106 agreements because there are no new developments and goes on to discuss existing road infrastructure and primarily rail interchanges, but there is nothing spoken about other forms of public transport or active travel. It then says, 'nothing recommended' and 'no action required at present', and I'm wondering if we giving it the attention it requires?*

Just to advise members that this is a report about historic performance at bringing sites forward, so it's not to say that changes aren't required, but this is essentially a backward-looking document.

Chair's Summary:

Thanks are given to officers for this report and to members for their questions. The recommendations are moved and agreed by members.

10. Month 4 Budget Monitoring report - Scrutiny of the Council's budgetary position (revenue and capital).

Cabinet Member Councillor Rachel Garrick presented the report, Jonathon Davies and Peter Davies in attendance to assist her in answering members' questions.

Challenge:

- *I was surprised and disappointed to hear of the £8.8m shortfall in the budgetary position and I'd like to know whether there are weaknesses in our budget management process, and I'd like to ask why we heard of this via a press release. I don't feel this was adequately communicated. Also, I object to the term 'budget recovery' when we are talking about service cuts.*

Cabinet Member Councillor Rachel Garrick: All group leaders were briefed in advance of the agendas for Governance and Audit Committee and this committee being published so this is a conversation you would need to have outside the meeting with your group leader. I can confirm that due process was followed.

- *If we are already in month 7 but are discussing a report detailing the position at month 4, given the severity of the situation, is it not appropriate that we look at the month 7 headline position, rather than waiting for the lengthy reporting schedule to catch up?*

Cabinet Member Councillor Rachel Garrick: We are reacting to the forecast and looking to see how we can recover the budget.

Deputy Chief Executive: There are times when our budget monitoring reporting and the alignment of the scrutiny committee dates may mean that we are reporting retrospectively and there is a process those reports have to go through. The first cabinet meeting was 19th October, so it's just been a consequence of this, however, the month 6 report will be available in the next couple of months. It is my responsibility to arrest and recover a budgetary position and there are times that this can be achieved without necessarily resorting to service cuts or services being withdrawn, as sometimes efficiencies can be made, and conscious decisions taken. Today's report talks to the levers we are intending to use, and the month 6 report will provide further detail on those. In terms of your question as to whether there are inherent weaknesses in our budget management process, I'd like to emphasise the budget pressures that were evident in March and the risks in the escalating social care costs reported at that time. Together with factors such as the pay award and the current economic climate, these factors together have led us to the current position. We need to arrest the position to achieve a balanced budget by the end of the year, which is something we have a track record of being very effective in doing.

- *In your role, you will have a good understanding of what month 5 and 6 look like, however I think it's important all councillors are kept up to date with the headline position, rather than awaiting the full report.*

We have management accountancy maintaining this continually, identifying where the biggest risks are and preparing updated forecasts. The month 4 report provide a very representative analysis of the situation we face at month 5.

- Has this happened before on this scale? What can councillors do to assist and what do you think the impacts are on services? Why are children's services costs so high?

We always knew there was pressure coming forward into this financial year and we know the Covid Hardship Fund was due to end on 31st March. This created uncertainty as to how quickly the legacy pressure would impact. The wider economic environment has accelerated those impacts in addition to the inflationary environment, the staffing shortages that have led to the need for agency staff and the increased demand for additional services. For example, if we consider the homelessness challenge - we knew there would be a residual pressure coming into this year as a result of the policy change by Welsh Government and we knew that sufficient consequential funding wasn't going to flow from Welsh Government, but what we didn't know was how quickly the

situation would develop and together with the cost of living crisis and the inflationary pressures, it has accelerated things and created an unprecedented overspend position early in the year, to which we knew we would have to apply a level of reserve. There are options available outlined in the report in terms of leverage measures and the senior leadership team will be keeping all options on the table given that the situation is rapidly evolving on a daily basis.

- In terms of the overall position, recognising this is not a planned monitoring report, the descriptions and language used in the report is akin to Armageddon situation, whereas you are suggesting that things haven't got any worse or any better, which could suggest there hasn't been corrective action taken at month 5 and month 6 and that now there is 5 and a half months to correct a serious situation. The question I want to answer residents in my ward is if this continues and reserves continue to be applied in the way suggested, doesn't this inevitably lead to council tax rises to fill the space that would otherwise be managed by budgetary control?

Cabinet Member Councillor Rachel Garrick: I think you may have taken a lot from some casual language on that implication, but I'll ask officers to provide an update on the actions that have been identified and that we believe we can take at this stage.

Officers: The 'no better, no worse' comment is related to the £8.8m position. The question around the used of reserves is well made and we are very cautious in drawing on those and similarly, the use of capital reserves. There are things we cannot precisely pre-determine, and we have an upcoming central government fiscal event that will talk to the position for public services. Regardless of any fiscal deficit that needs to be arrested nationally, if not next year, but over the medium term for the current government, it's difficult to speculate on the outcome of that. Council tax will be a topic for conversation for all councils across the UK with hard decisions to be made to bring a balanced budget to the council. We are not unique, all councils are in this situation. We need to communicate honestly with each other and with communities about such difficult decisions.

- *As a new councillor, please can you explain why the children services overspend is so high?*

The overspend is due to the cost of placements for children. When a child comes into care, the process begins by exploring opportunities with family and friends, but if this isn't successful, we try our in-house carers, then if that isn't possible, we seek independent carers, with a residential setting being the last resort. This is extremely challenging, as there is a national shortage of placements and foster carers across the UK. So every time we need to place a child in care, it is a major

incident for us to even find a placement, never alone to find the right placement. Often the children have complex needs and may have suffered abuse and trauma and therefore they need a bespoke package to look after them – these placements are costly at the best of times, but in the current market which is so constrained, they are even more difficult to find, and this is our statutory duty as a council.

- *Of the £8.8m budgetary shortfall at month 4, are you able to say how much of that was incurred by month 4 or whether it is building month on month? You also mention £9.8m of capital receipts that we are due. Are financial factors likely to affect receipt of that and put greater pressure on the budgetary position?*

It would be a challenge to explain the monthly progression, but we can provide further detail on the major issues and how they have progressed through the year if the committee requests it. In terms of the capital receipts that were expected, we have now received £7m of the £9.8m, so a significant part of the risk falls away.

- The committee would like to be kept as closely up to date with the situation because whilst we understand the process in forecasting and preparing the reports, members need to be informed in order to reassure their residents.
- *Are we responding to crisis in families that result in high-cost placements rather than putting in preventative provision, recognising the staffing input required and the costs of placements?*

The costs of these placements are very high, but the preventative work we do to try to avoid children going into residential care is consistent right throughout the service, at all levels to reduce and prevent children coming into care. If foster placements break down, we have services in place, and I want to reassure you that there is prevention and de-escalation of risk at every tier, but there are some instances when a residential placement is the only option. We also have our MIST service which seeks to bring children out of residential, but a key issue is our shortage of foster carers.

- *Chair: I think this is an area where members could assist, in spreading the message about how rewarding foster caring is.*
- *Will schools with a projected budget deficit be assisted to manage it?*

We have 6 schools and the Pupil Referral Service in a deficit position at present. We do not provide them with financial assistance; however, the finance teams

work with the schools over an extended period of time to produce budget recovery plans to bring them back into a surplus position.

Chair's Summary:

The Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee has scrutinised the Month 4 budget position and expressed significant concern for the Council's budgetary position at month 4. The Committee acknowledged the reasons for the deficit position and recognised that other councils will be facing similar challenges, however, the scale of the challenge is felt to be unprecedented and significantly concerning at month 4. Members have expressed concern about the use of reserves and agreed that this approach would be an unsustainable approach to fund service delivery in the subsequent year. I would like to request that, if possible, the Month 6 report be brought to the next meeting on 21st November 2022, however if that isn't possible, that an interim report be brought before members to detail the headline position. The chair expressed thanks that two cabinet members, Councillors Garrick and Thomas, attended the Scrutiny Committee and responded to questions raised, restating how important it was for the scrutiny function and for the cabinet, but also for residents, to be assured that they have a well-functioning council.

11. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

The forward work programme was noted.

12. Cabinet and Council Work Plan.

13. Next meetings:

The next Meeting was confirmed as Thursday 21st November 2022 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.56 pm**