

Summary

We want to be a zero-carbon county, supporting well-being, health and dignity for everyone at every stage of life. We will do this working with, and alongside, our communities. This is the ambition set in our Community and Corporate Plan.

This self-evaluation is one of the ways in which we hold ourselves to account. We track the progress against our priorities, identify lessons learnt and assess where improvements can be made so we can stay on track. Every council in Wales is required to do the same under the requirements of The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. This report captures the conclusions of our self-assessment covering the period 2023-24.

Local authorities deliver hundreds of services. This evaluation cannot cover every single one of them. Instead, it is structured around the six objectives of the Community and Corporate Plan set out below. To actively manage performance in all our service areas we also have scrutiny committees and business plans in place to allow our councillors to hold senior officers and Cabinet members to account for delivery of all aspects of our work.



The report also looks at some of key governance arrangements and enabling functions that support our work. This includes things like workforce planning, use of assets and our financial management arrangements. We also rely on the work of our Internal Audit team and external regulators such as Audit Wales, Estyn and the Care Inspectorate Wales.

How well do we understand our local context and place?

Monmouthshire is a great place and one which we are rightly proud of. Our county has the second most competitive economy in Wales after the capital city of Cardiff and has improved its UK ranking since 2019. People here enjoy, on average, longer and healthier life expectancy than in other parts of Wales. We have vibrant towns, great visitor attractions and enjoy good connections to other parts of the UK. However, we also face significant challenges. We know that many people are struggling. High house prices and rents relative to wages make it hard for some people to live here. We also have a carbon footprint which is above the average for Wales and the UK, caused in part by the rural nature of the county. Headline measures can also mask the diversity, and some of the inequality that exists within our communities. We have an older population, which brings huge benefits in terms of experience and social capital but can also place pressure on public services.

We have a good understanding of our place. We analyse a range of statistical information on things such as health and the local economy. We also get qualitative feedback about residents' perceptions of our area from the National Survey for Wales and our own surveys. However, we recognise that we do not have a comprehensive understanding of how well all our services and policies are meeting the needs of the people who use them.

We have 46 ward councillors who help us understand local issues in communities. We also consult directly when we are planning service changes or considering action in a particular area.

Once every five years we conduct an extensive well-being assessment and population needs assessment with partners across Gwent. We have sought active participation in decision-making, for example through promoting attendance at the public open forum we hold before our committee meetings. We recognise there is more to be done to understand peoples lived experiences as part of our commitment to work with and alongside residents, enabling them to shape their futures.

How well are we achieving our agreed outcomes?

We have assessed our progress against the six objectives of our Community and Corporate Plan using a six-point scale that rates each one from 1 (unsatisfactory) through to 6 (excellent). In the early years of this plan a lot of the activity has been about understanding challenges and developing our approach. More of the delivery actions will fall in the second half of the plan. Many of the things we have set out to do, such as improving river health and achieving net zero are complex societal challenges and will take time to deliver. As a result, some of the activities we will be reporting on now are the building blocks and milestones on the way to achieving our intended outcomes rather than outcomes themselves. These give us the foundations and set the trajectory for future improvements.

A fair place to live – Our Rating: 4 (Good)

We want to see improved life chances for people irrespective of their income or background. It will take time for us to see the impact of our work. In the meantime, we have put in place solutions to mitigate the effects of inequality on different groups of people.

Healthy meals at school help all children to learn and thrive. We have rolled out universal free school meals in primary settings. We are developing an understanding of the barriers to take up so we can take action to reduce these. The proportion of children accessing this free service increased from 64% to 75% in the 12 months to March 2024. Research shows that children from low-income families can often fall behind over the summer holidays. We have provided healthy meals and activities in the holidays to try and overcome this. We are working with headteachers to target this at those who will benefit most and doubled the number of people taking up this offer.

A good diet and being active are vital parts of improving healthy life expectancy for all people. We know that achieving these can be harder for people on low incomes. We have developed a new food strategy that includes a commitment to increasing access to healthy, sustainable and affordable food. We have also worked with partners to develop and open the new £2.9M Magor and Undy Community Hub based on the needs identified by local people.

A green place to live – Our Rating: 3 (Adequate)

We are committed to taking local action to reducing our carbon emissions and playing our part to tackle global warming. The score we have allocated reflects the complex nature of the challenge we are facing.

One of the things we can influence is the level of emissions from our own operations. We are presently building a new carbon neutral school in Abergavenny. We have also refitted a lot of our public buildings with LED lighting, solar panels and heat pumps. This has reduced energy use and carbon emissions. We have developed plans for the next phase of this work. We have been upgrading our fleet to ultra-low emission vehicles when they need replacing. The costs involved mean we cannot do this as quickly as we would like. We also want to help communities to reduce their emissions. We have secured grant funding and worked with partners and volunteers to develop 'libraries of things', reuse shops and repair cafes to reduce the amount of waste in the county. Our residents have also recycled 71.7% of household waste. This is well above the national target of 64% and our local target of 70%.

The level of phosphates in the Wye and Usk rivers remains a major problem. We have worked with partners to develop an action plan to tackle this. Welsh Water/Dŵr Cymru is installing phosphate

stripping technology in Abergavenny and Monmouth. We are in the process for approving a new Local Development Plan. This will ensure that new developments do not have an adverse effect on water quality.

The way in which we grow, transport and consume food has an effect on the environment. We have produced a new food strategy and have awarded grants to support community growing to increase access to healthy local produce with lower food miles. We have worked with local farmers to trial the use of new technologies to increase food production and supported a scheme to provide mentoring to farmers to enable them to move towards more regenerative farming methods.

The range of work that we are undertaking is helping us to understand the scale of the challenge and the path we need to take to reach our goal. We remain ambitious in our aim of becoming net zero by 2030. We are making good progress with our actions. However, unless there is significant public investment, the evidence that we are gathering suggests that reaching our target will be extremely challenging.

A thriving and ambitious place – Our Rating: 4 (Good)

We want a diverse economy, generating sustainable employment growth and creating the conditions for shared prosperity in which businesses and workers can thrive. We have produced a new Economy, Employment and Skills strategy which will guide this work.

We want to see vibrant town centres throughout our county. We have secured funding and are working with town councils, communities, and other stakeholders to develop placemaking plans to shape this work.

We want people of all ages and backgrounds to have the skills to do well in work or start their own business. We provided support to 165 pre-start-up and existing local businesses. We have also provided employment advice to unemployed people and have helped 115 people into work.

Transport and connectivity are vital to any economy. We have developed a new local transport strategy. We are working with other stakeholders to make the case for the new Magor Walkway station and have begun to develop proposals to improve bus access to existing train stations in the county. Meanwhile, we have continued to maintain our road network and delivered 100% of our planned maintenance programme.

We recognise that we are part of a global economy and have played an active role in regional economic partnerships including the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, The Western Gateway and Marches Forward Partnership. These collaborations are helping us attract and retain innovative companies, attract inward investment and grow exports. We have seen an upward trend in the number of businesses in the county. We have also improved our ranking in the UK competitiveness index.

A safe place to live – Our Rating: 4 (Good)

We want Monmouthshire to be a safe place that people are proud to call home with an increased supply of good quality, energy efficient homes. We have prepared a replacement Local Development Plan which will set out the detailed policy framework for land use up to 2033. The adoption of the plan has been delayed by a range of factors. This has limited the ability of developers and housing associations to deliver sufficient numbers of affordable homes.

We have introduced a Council Tax premium on vacant properties to encourage them to be brought back into use. Homeowners can secure grant funding to assist with this. We received 36 applications for this funding in 2023-24. This has contributed to a 17% reduction in empty homes from 541 to 447.

High property prices, a shortage of affordable private rented accommodation and the rising cost of living have all contributed to a rising homelessness problem. We are working with partners to support people at risk of becoming homeless. We helped 261 people with funding last year to remain in their own homes or find new accommodation. We have also acquired more properties to reduce the use of costly and unsuitable B&B accommodation for homeless households. Overall, we have reduced the use of B&Bs by

50% from 92 to 46 by March 2024. As a corporate parent, we are particularly mindful of the needs of those leaving care. We provide support through our corporate parenting panel, however, despite the work of the panel, 8 young care leavers experienced homelessness in 2023-24 compared to 5 in the previous year.

The rate of anti-social behaviour incidents per 1,000 population has increased slightly from 10.6 to 13.1. We have worked with young people to address their concerns about knife crime and anti-social behaviour and have extended three public space protection orders to prevent anti-social behaviour. We have also responded to 619 environmental protection incidents, such as littering and fly-tipping, dealing with 84% of these within 3 days. Overall, 95% of people in Monmouthshire who responded to the National Survey for Wales said they were satisfied with the area as a place to live which compares positively with other parts of the nation.

A connected place where people care – Our Rating: 4 (Good)

We want Monmouthshire to be a place where people's contributions are valued, they feel part of a community and are connected to others. Across the UK social services are facing increased demand and more complex cases. Monmouthshire is seeing the same trend and it is taking an increasing proportion of our budget each year. We know that there are many factors that affect our health and well-being. We have committed to working with others across Gwent and the Institute of Health Equity to tackle these by becoming what is known as a Marmot Region.

Early help is vital to prevent children coming into local authority care. We have established a coordinated approach to early intervention in children's social services. We have increased capacity and reduced waiting times for early help services. Our evaluation has shown that 100% of people are reporting a positive outcome from our Building Stronger Families service.

We have produced a new strategy to develop more in-county residential and supported accommodation placements. So far, we are working to deliver the 32 placements we need and have commissioned two new residential homes. This will ensure that children can maintain local connections and much needed stability in their lives.

We are working with Age Cymru and NHS colleagues to ensure timely hospital discharge. However, delayed transfers of care from hospital in March 2024 were at the same level as twelve months earlier. We also want to help vulnerable older people regain their independence. We provided 331 reablement care packages in 2023-24, an increase of 80% on the previous year. In 70% of cases this mitigated or reduced peoples' need for long-term support. When people do need care, it can sometimes be hard to put this in place due to the limited availability of carers. We have addressed this through a number of solutions including support for self-employed 'micro-carers'. This has contributed to a 62% reduction in unmet care need from 804 hours to 306 hours per month. We have also opened a new purpose-built specialist care home for people living with dementia and have trained community volunteers to support those living with dementia in the community to increase their confidence and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

A learning place – Our Rating: 4 (Good)

Monmouthshire should be a place where everybody experiences the best possible start in life and has the opportunity to learn, developing the skills and knowledge they will need to reach their potential.

School attendance has declined since the pandemic. Our Education Welfare Officers have worked with vulnerable learners and we have a specific programme targeted at those with very low attendance levels. Attendance improved for 92% of pupils who participated. Overall primary school attendance improved between the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years in primary schools but declined from 88.4% to 87.7% in secondary schools and remains below pre-pandemic levels.

We are introducing a phased approach to pupil well-being. We have increased the number of schools on the programme from 43% to 74%. We have seen a worsening of behaviours which is challenging for

schools, staff and learners. In response we delivered Trauma Informed Schools training to over 500 staff during the year. We recognise that we have more to do to develop our approach in this area.

We have worked with our regional school improvement service, called the EAS, to provide challenge, monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning. Learners in our secondary schools score higher than elsewhere in Wales, on average 26% of pupils across Monmouthshire achieved 5 or more GCSE at levels A*-A, compared with 20.3% for Wales. We also have fewer pupils leaving school with no qualifications at 0.8%, compared with 1.4% of pupils across Wales. We evaluate schools against those of similar size and linguistic delivery across Wales. On that basis, two secondary schools outperform those similar in every category, and one outperforms in most categories (including literacy, numeracy, science, no qualifications, 5+ A*-A). One of our schools underperforms in most categories compared to similar schools.

We have been working with two of our schools who were placed in statutory categories following Estyn reviews in 22/23. Follow-up reviews were conducted during 23/24; these found that both schools have made significant progress in addressing the recommendations and have been removed from statutory categories. Two of our schools inspected have been selected by Estyn to produce good practice case studies.

Our work has a particular focus on vulnerable learners including those eligible for free school meals. This includes targeted support from education advisors and wider support as part of our community focused schools work. This is aimed at ensuring all pupils can succeed irrespective of their socio-economic background. There remains a gap in attainment equal to 1.5 GCSE grades and we recognise that we have more work to do in this area.

We have restructured our education inclusion service and have worked with all schools with targeted training and regular Q&A sessions. We recognise a need to improve the consistency of ALN provision for those with additional learning needs across the county and have established a new quality assurance system to improve how we identify and manage those with additional learning needs.

We are building a new 3-19 school in Abergavenny. This will be net zero with the capacity for over 1,800 learners, including those with complex neurodevelopmental and learning needs. The school will open its doors from April 2025. We have also developed plans and secured funding to increase our Welsh medium provision.

How effectively are resources being used to deliver our priorities?

We have sound arrangements in place to enable and support service delivery. These include finance, workforce management, digital, asset management, performance and risk management. Nevertheless, the impact of an extended period of financial challenges on service delivery coupled with the rising cost-of-living and high levels of inflation has taken its toll.

We have faced increased demand for services, such as social care and homelessness, while inflation has contributed to rising costs in areas such as home to school transport. Therefore, the council has needed to draw on reserves to balance the budget for the first time in more than a decade. We are now revising our enabling strategies to respond to challenges and opportunities and align them with the Community and Corporate Plan.

How effectively does the council work with stakeholders and partners on agreed outcomes?

Partnership is core to how we work. The council has effective relationships in place with a range of stakeholders that help us achieve our purpose. These range from large scale strategic partnerships like the Cardiff Capital Region and the Gwent Public Services Board to bi-lateral shared services with other councils for services such as youth offending, procurement and revenues and benefits. We have positive working relationships in place with Welsh Government. We recognise that we can and must do more to develop and build on our relationship with community and town councils.

Areas for Development

Through the self-assessment, we have identified how well we are doing and what we can do better. We will look to build on and learn from the things we are doing and seek to improve areas where we can do better. We have developed an action plan that sets out how we will address the areas for development.

Measuring Progress

We use a wide range of performance measures to track our progress against our priorities. These are found throughout the assessment. We also track progress against a range of metrics that track outcomes at a population level. Key measures will be presented regularly to Cabinet and the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee so that we can actively manage performance and adjust delivery where we are falling short of our expectations.

What do you think?

We have included some of the feedback we have received from other organisations and would be delighted to hear your views to help us inform future assessments.

Please e-mail us: improvement@monmouthshire.gov.uk