

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Tuesday, 15th October, 2024 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)
County Councillor Rachel Buckler, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, Alistair Neill, Peter Strong, Ann Webb, Jan Butler, Mary Ann Brocklesby, Paul Griffiths and Martyn Groucutt

Also in attendance County Councillors: Mary Ann Brocklesby, Leader, Paul Griffiths, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Sustainable Economy and Martyn Groucutt, Cabinet Member for Education

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Scott James, Strategic Procurement Manager
Louise Wilce, Employment and Skills Youth Lead
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Hannah Jones, Head Of Economy, Employment And Skills
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and Attainment

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Paul Pavia substituted by County Councillor Jan Butler

Note: Minutes do not serve as a verbatim record of the meeting but provide a summary of the Committee's discussion. For the full discussion, please access the recording of the meeting:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=kJzqz4_7Jq0&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=24

1. Declarations of Interest.

None.

2. Public Open Forum.

None

3. Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy - To review progress of the strategy.

(Note: this item was swapped with Item 6)

Council Leader Mary-Ann Brocklesby and Gemma Ellis introduced the report and answered the members' questions with John Paxton and Scott James.

Key points from Members:

- A member asked about the benefits of the collaborative partnership. The officer responded that the collaboration allows for the transfer of knowledge and expertise, which helps address inconsistencies and standardize processes across the partnership. The Leader added that the collaboration with Ardell provides economies of scale, access to expertise, and helps to address recruitment and retention challenges in the public sector.

- Members asked about value for money from the Procurement partnership. It was explained that collaboration and working together are essential to address budget pressures, leading to more efficient services and better community well-being outcomes.
- It was asked how it is ensured that local contractors are bidding and getting work in the area. It was highlighted that the new Procurement Act allows for below-threshold tenders to be advertised to local suppliers, maintaining competition to ensure value for money.
- Members asked how being socially responsible can be linked with ensuring good value. The officer explained that tenders are evaluated based on value for money, quality, and well-being criteria, ensuring a balanced approach. The Leader emphasised the importance of socially responsible procurement, which includes ethical considerations, local supply chains, and community benefits.
- A member asked for clarity about how the employees are funded. It was explained that the funding model for Ardell includes contributions from each of the four local authorities and levy income from three collaborative frameworks. It was confirmed that the 6 full-time employees are on secure contracts.
- Members sought clarity as to whether the 40 employed are in addition to those who would have been employed anyway. Officers explained that the 40 employees form part of the whole team, funded through a combination of local authority contributions and collaborative frameworks, maintaining expertise within the team.
- A member asked for clarity about the apparent difference in consultancy costs between this report and the budget – **ACTION: officers to provide details of consultancy spend**
- It was asked how officers ensure value for money and manage demand. The officers explained that the Procurement team uses Power BI to track and manage spend, ensuring compliance and identifying contract leakage. They also have a contract forward plan to prepare for upcoming procurements.
- Explanation was sought about the Contract Forward Plan and its progress. The Contract Forward Plan is being developed to provide a forward pipeline of work, helping to prepare the market and resource the procurement team effectively.
- With PowerBI, it was asked if members will be able to see the information by the end of the year. The officer explained that the information is provided on a quarterly basis to senior managers who can disseminate it through their teams.
- A member asked which key performance indicators are being used to measure the strategy's success and how often they are reviewed. Officers explained that KPIs include carbon reduction, Fair Work, and other well-being indicators. These are reviewed regularly, and Welsh Government is developing statutory KPIs for compliance.
- Examples of benefits to Monmouthshire communities beyond King Henry school and Magor Hub were sought. Officers responded that benefits include job creation, environmental improvements, and community well-being initiatives. Examples include the Magor Hub and King Henry School projects, which have provided local employment and educational opportunities.
- Members asked about increasing procurement from those with good environmental practices and how it is ensured that procurement doesn't lead to higher costs. The officer explained that the Council assesses suppliers on environmental performance and social value during the procurement process. They aim to balance cost, quality, and social value to ensure value for money without significantly increasing costs.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers and Leader. Before moving the report, he emphasised the importance of viewing the report from the residents' perspective, and what they might think about the tangible outcomes and achievements from the investments made, efficiency of suppliers and contracts, detail about expenditure, and the accuracy of assessments.

4. Revised NEET Reduction Strategy - To scrutinise the revised strategy prior to Cabinet decision.

Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths introduced the report. Louise Wilce delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Hannah Jones and Councillor Griffiths:

Key points from Members:

- Regarding the use of the word 'aspiration', it was asked if the services are doing well. The officer responded that they are doing well overall, but the area needing improvement is identifying and supporting young people who have not been flagged as at risk of becoming NEET.
- A member asked if there is an opportunity to look at the risk markers before age 7, and if any mental health or trauma support is available. The officer acknowledged the importance of early intervention and mentioned that previously, under ESF funding, there was a year 6-7 transition program. However, due to reduced funding under the UK SPF, the focus shifted to support just ahead of the post-16 transition. She emphasized the reliance on partnerships and stakeholders to provide mental health and well-being support.
- Clarity was sought about the initial source of funding that has been lost. It was clarified that the initial funding came from European Structural Funds (ESF), which supported the programme until 2022.
- Officers were asked to elaborate on the link between being NEET and homelessness. The officer explained that the Welsh Government merged the identification tools for NEET and youth homelessness due to overlapping risk markers such as attendance, exclusions, and looked-after status. This merger helps to ensure collaboration and avoid duplication in support services.
- It was asked if there are NEETs in the county that we don't know about, possibly due to information gaps from schools or because they moved into the county after age 16. The officer noted that the annual destination data tracks young people educated in Monmouthshire, while tier data tracks residents. There can be differences, and efforts are made to identify and track all young people, including those who move into the county.
- For those pupils aged 16 and 18 who decide to go into work directly, it was asked what we know about the job market for them. The officer responded that young people going directly into employment often find low-skilled and low-paid roles in sectors like construction and retail. There is a need to develop more apprenticeship opportunities and upskilling programs to improve their career prospects.
- A member asked what the main factors are to flag up in those who are in danger of becoming NEET, to identify a young person at risk. The officer mentioned that the early identification tool uses indicators such as poor attendance, exclusions, looked-after status, free school meals, school moves, and academic levels. These indicators help to benchmark the risk, but ongoing conversations with stakeholders are crucial to identify and support at-risk young people.
- A member asked if measures are in place for the work to continue once the funding runs out in March '25. The officer responded that the team is waiting for the outcomes of the Autumn budget statement on October 30th, like all other authorities in the UK. The team is exploring other funding sources, including the Welsh government and other avenues, but the end of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) on March 31st will significantly affect the local authority.
- A member asked how we track young people who drop out of their destination and come back. The officer explained that the system relies on stakeholders and partners to flag young people who drop out of their destination. Monthly "keeping in touch" meetings review the data and ensure that any young person who has become NEET is identified and supported.

- Members asked what happens to young people who drop out of university or other destinations beyond the age of 19. It was explained that while the youth engagement progression framework tracks up to age 19, support is available for those beyond this age through Job Centre Plus and adult employment and skills provision. However, it requires the young person to reach out to access this support.
- A member asked about the scenario in which someone goes to university in England and comes back. It was explained that if a young person has dropped from their destination and come back into the county they won't be flagged unless they have made contact with the support agency.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for their work. He emphasised the importance of reports being written in a manner which is accessible and meaningful to residents, particularly the utility of a one-page summary from which residents can grasp the key points while still providing detailed data for those who wish to delve deeper. He also suggested shifting the focus on key issues and strategy towards external challenges and opportunities. The report was moved.

5. WESP (Welsh in Education Strategic Plan) - To scrutinise performance against the plans.

Cabinet Member Martyn Groucott and Sharon Randall-Smith introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will McLean.

Key points from Members:

- A member asked whether the low number of students progressing to AS or A level Welsh is a concern and how the small classes are funded. The officer acknowledged the small number of students progressing to AS and A-level, attributing it partly to difficulties in recruiting Welsh language specialists, but promoting the benefits of bilingual education in the workforce is now more emphasised. Schools use their post-16 funding to support these classes, and the Escal project helps to maintain curriculum breadth by offering remote tutoring.
- More details were sought about how the E-sgol programme works. It was explained that the project involves remote tutoring for most of the time, but students also have regular face-to-face interactions with their peers and teachers. This project helps to maintain A-level provisions that would otherwise be under threat due to small class sizes.
- The Chair asked about the prospect of the number of students progressing to A-level to improve now. The officer emphasised the strong imperative from the government's aspiration to have a million Welsh speakers by 2050 and the number of posts, particularly government ones, for which Welsh is essential or desirable.
- It was asked further if it is expected that the support within the workforce for Welsh speaking will boost the number of A-level students. It was explained that it is challenging to determine whether support within the workforce for Welsh speaking or the number of A-level students comes first. Individual choices and aspirations were emphasised, along with the benefits of learning a second language to cognitive functions and future language acquisition, and it was noted that achieving the goal of a million Welsh speakers will rely on the overall levels of Welsh proficiency within the community and local authority.
- A member asked how the council is assessing and promoting the demand for Welsh medium education across the whole county. The officer explained that the council promotes Welsh medium education through various channels, including information in school booklets, social media, and community events. The Welsh Education Forum (WEF) has a promotion subgroup that meets regularly to strategise and implement promotional activities.
- It was asked how WESP aligns with the government's goal of 1 million speakers by 2050, what the annual targets are for Monmouthshire, and whether we are meeting them. The officer stated that Monmouthshire's target is 105 reception pupils by 2031, and they are currently at

65% of this target. The initial years are challenging, but progress is being made through various promotional efforts and the establishment of new schools and immersion provisions.

- A member asked if there could be a Welsh language comprehensive school in Monmouthshire in the future and, if so, what could be learned from existing comprehensives elsewhere that are achieving fantastic results. The Chief Officer responded that there are ongoing partnership discussions about providing a secondary Welsh medium school for Monmouthshire. Currently, secondary provision is based on partnerships with neighbouring authorities. He expressed concerns about the viability of a single secondary Welsh medium school in Monmouthshire due to the likely small cohort size, suggesting collaboration with other local authorities to ensure a rich curriculum.
- In relation to Outcome 7, a member asked for more detail regarding English medium schools and performance lacking in a number of areas versus targets. The officer explained that previous data capture was not as accurate as the current data, which affected the targets. The new data set will allow for better tracking of progress. There is ongoing work within the local authority and with the EAS to provide training and develop skills further.
- Members asked about the cost-benefit analysis of maintaining Welsh provision versus other services that are being cut. The Chief Officer acknowledged the slight additional cost of Welsh medium education compared to English medium (about 10% more on teaching costs and 15% more on resources). However, he emphasized the importance of providing meaningful choice for parents and meeting policy obligations. The benefits include promoting bilingual education, which has cognitive and career advantages.
- A member asked for clarity about the engagement with other authorities, and whether there is a concern about Torfaen not taking Monmouthshire pupils into their secondary schools. The officer clarified that while the partnership with secondary schools is strong, the challenge lies in aligning the measurement of progression, which varies between schools. Regarding secondary school places, she mentioned that current projections do not indicate an immediate concern, as the growth in Welsh medium education is gradual, giving time to address future capacity needs.
- It was asked if there is a case for continuity in assessment and standards that should be in place across the authorities. The officer noted that the curriculum allows schools to determine their own assessment methods based on their context. While there is a debate about standardizing assessments, the current approach is to work through these processes within individual schools.
- The Chair asked what percentage of pupils in the county are studying any other language, in order to compare with Welsh – **ACTION: officers to provide the percentage of pupils studying other languages, compared with Welsh**

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the informative report. The report was moved.

6. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

Officers will email members about Risk Register ideas.

7. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Action lists:

16th July 2024

8. Cabinet and Council Planner.

9. To confirmation of following minutes:

The minutes were agreed.

Special Meeting - Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee dated 11th July 2024.

Ordinary Meeting - Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee dated 16th July 2024.

10. Next Meeting: 19th November 2024 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **4.50 pm**