

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK
on Tuesday, 22nd July, 2025 at 10.00 am**

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jackie Strong (Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler,
Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth,
Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley,
Louise Brown, Ian Chandler, Angela Sandles and
Peter Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People,
Performance and Partnerships.
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care,
Safeguarding and Health
Deb Hill-Howells, Chief Officer Infrastructure

External Attendees: Friederike Madler, Lynne,
Sheridan, Community Councillor Matt Sidwell
(Mathern Community Council)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Maria Stevens and Ann Webb

1. Apologies for Absence

Apologies were also received from Councillor Stevens, who was being substituted by Councillor Peter Strong. Apologies were received from Councillor Webb for the petitions agenda item, and Penny Jones confirmed she would present the petition on Councillor Webb's behalf.

2. Declarations of Interest

None declared.

3. Public Open Forum

Several people attended the public open forum to speak on different matters.

Lynne Sheridan ~ Strategic Equality Plan 2024-2025

- Lynne emphasised the importance of councils ensuring their policies and practices comply with the Equality Act 2010, especially following a recent Supreme Court judgment clarifying that "sex" refers to biological sex only.
- She noted difficulty in accessing council policies as a member of the public and highlighted the need for greater transparency.
- Lynne stressed that councils, as duty bearers, cannot use ignorance of the law or wait for government guidance as a defence for non-compliance. She suggested

that even compliant policies can be undermined in practice, referencing evidence from tribunals and judicial reviews.

- She referenced a recent tribunal case where an officer was unaware of workplace regulations requiring sex-based facilities, illustrating gaps in staff knowledge.
- Lynne also described a scenario in leisure centres where staff may face challenges if users report concerns about facility use based on sex, questioning whether staff are adequately trained to handle such situations. She urged the council to review and update policies and training as necessary to ensure compliance and effective frontline response.

Freddie Madler ~ Home to School Transport Policy

- Freddie raised concerns about the removal of home-to-school transport for children aged 4 to 11 in Saint Arvans, highlighting significant emotional, physical, and financial impacts on families.
- She stated that the new walking route exceeds 55 minutes each way, is unlit, overgrown, frequently flooded, and includes an unsafe crossing, making it unsuitable and unsafe for young children, especially in winter.
- Freddie also stated that the route exceeds the 45-minute maximum recommended for primary children and has not been independently assessed as required by statutory guidance.
- She argued that the policy shifts the burden onto families, disproportionately affects working households, and creates postcode-based inequality, as some children are excluded despite the bus passing their previous stop.
- Freddie spoke of how long, demanding journeys negatively affect children's readiness to learn, causing tiredness, cold, and anxiety, which undermines educational and well-being goals.
- Freddie suggested the decision contradicts the council's climate and active travel objectives by increasing car use and emissions and urged the council to review and reinstate transport to ensure equity, safety, and policy coherence.

Community Councillor Matt Sidwell ~ Home to School Transport Policy

- Councillor Sidwell mentioned that an appeal (Stage 1) has been lodged regarding the removal of free home-to-school transport for Mathern and Pwlmeyric, and they are awaiting a response.
- He highlighted that while the council may not have a legal obligation under the Climate Change Act, it must demonstrate consideration of climate impacts, questioning how the council will address increased car journeys and associated CO2 emissions compared to bus transport.

- He referenced a previous ruling in 2023 that deemed the route unsafe, particularly at the A48 and Pwllmeyric Hill area, and noted that no changes have been made since, questioning the justification for removing the bus service.

Peter Farley, Chair of St. Arvans Community Council ~ Home to School Transport Policy

- The Chair of Saint Arvan's Community Council expressed that the Community Council shares the concerns of the parents and residents in all respects and has considered the matter in the context of our community as a whole. He conveyed unanimous support for the petition to reinstate home-to-school transport, following meetings with affected parents and a delegation from residents.
- He emphasised concerns about inequity and potential divisiveness resulting from the policy change and noted that it could make the village less attractive to families with young children.
- He requested the committee to consider the community council's views and support the petition during their discussions.

4. Receipt of Petitions on Home to School Transport Policy

St Arvan's Petition

Councillor Penny Jones presented the petition from St Arvans ward on the Home to School Transport Policy, on behalf of Councillor Ann Webb. In reading the wording of the petition, Councillor Jones explained that the petition called for the Council to:

“Reinstate the fully funded home-school-transport for all the primary aged children who attend The Dell School in St Arvan's. The speed and volume of traffic which the children will be exposed to is a risk, the road crossing is not safe, and the footpath is hazardous.

Children attending The Dell School from the age of 4 are expected to walk up to 2 miles each way. The emotional and physical stress of this walk, in all weathers, will negatively impact their mental health, physical health and ability to effectively engage with their learning when in school.

There are major safety concerns from the children and parents around the safety of the road crossing and footpath, they are expected to walk. The crossing is not suitably lit and wide enough. The path is unlit, uneven and extremely narrow in parts with the close proximity to a high number of cars. In the case of an emergency there is a section of the footpath, which is obscured from view, from the road with no easy way to access it, if needed. The children and parents have safety concerns with regards to walking past the racecourse on race day and the days following”.

Mathern Petition

Councillor Lousie Brown presented the petition from Mathern ward on the Home to School Transport Policy. In reading the wording of the petition, Councillor Brown explained that the petition called for the Council to:

“Retain free home to school transport to the Dell Primary School and to the Chepstow Comprehensive School for the pupils from the Mathern Community Council Area (Mathern, Mounton, Pwllmeyric Hill & Haysgate), as the route to school is unsafe and hazardous, as evidenced by the double white lines from Parkwall roundabout to Highbeech Roundabout. There is no safe crossing point for pupils to cross the main A48. The volume and speed of traffic on the A48 are a risk. There is insufficient width to the footpaths to walk safely from Mathern to both schools.

Expecting children from as young as 4 years old to walk up to 2 miles each way daily to The Dell Primary School and for children of 11 years old to walk up to 3 miles each way daily to the Chepstow Comprehensive School in all weathers, carrying school equipment and study material, not allowed to wear outer clothing and storing it to dry during the day at school is not safe, it is emotionally stressful, effects their mental and physical health due to effects of weather and walking in close proximity to a major traffic route, and is a major concern for the parents of said children to ensure they are safe at all times”.

Councillor Brown also highlighted that the petition had received 222 signatures (plus 7 more), which was a significant proportion of the local electorate.

Key points made by Members:

- Councillor Howarth referenced a recent council motion regarding the adoption of statutory distances for home-to-school transport, highlighting that the motion acknowledged the financial hardship and logistical difficulties this would cause for many families. The motion had instructed the cabinet to directly contact all families whose eligibility had changed, inform them of their rights to appeal, commit to assessing whether a safe walking route exists, and expedite all appeals and compliance processes due to the short notice before the school year. It also committed the council to work with schools, parents, and community groups to explore safe, affordable transport alternatives for those affected. He suggested that the committee should align its actions with the agreed motion.
- Councillor Peter Strong suggested there were two matters for consideration, one being the general home-to-school transport policy (statutory distances) and the other being the issue of route safety raised by the petitions. He stated that the policy aligns with what most councils in Wales do and was introduced due to financial constraints and contractor challenges and emphasized that the petitions are about the safety of specific routes, not the general policy, and that the council had previously stated free transport would continue if routes were unsafe. He suggested the most timely and effective route for the petitions would be to have a relevant senior officer review the safety of the routes.

- The Chair (Councillor Jackie Strong), thanked the public speakers for raising important concerns and emphasised the need for timely resolution, so as not to delay decisions for affected families. She expressed her support for the option to refer the matter to a relevant senior officer for inclusion in ongoing work, highlighting the importance of a prompt and practical response.
- Councillor Edwards also thanked petitioners for constructively engaging with the Council and highlighted the importance of addressing perceived injustices in Council decision-making. He apologised that he had been unable to attend a recent walk of the route to school by St Arvan's residents. He expressed concern that options C and D for handling the petitions might delay resolution and emphasised the need for clarity on the process and outcomes if the matter is referred to full Council.
- Councillor Riley stated her concerns on the home to school transport policy and requested clarification on the committee's options, particularly after the topic had already been debated at full Council, in particular, what a relevant working group or joint committee would look like, who would be on it, and what its terms of reference would be. She highlighted Freddie Madler's point about the distance children must walk and expressed her view that the policy breaches the Equality Act and does not support children's best start in life.

Deb Hill-Howells, the responsible Chief Officer provided the following points of explanation to assist the Committee:

- Deb explained that appeals regarding home to school transport, especially in the Pwllmeyric and Saint Arvan's areas, are being expedited, with specific attention to safety concerns such as road crossings. She confirmed that a qualified officer is reviewing route safety assessments, particularly in response to recent motions and parent concerns. She stated that if a route is not considered safe and available, free transport will be provided.
- Deb mentioned collaboration with schools and active travel officers to explore solutions like walking buses but emphasised that these would only be considered if routes are deemed safe.
- She noted that carbon emissions were considered during previous policy changes, and efforts are being made to encourage walking, cycling, or scooting to school where possible, aligning with active travel objectives.
- Deb stated that the Council is committed to ongoing work with families and groups to address concerns and reassess routes as needed, reiterating that policy changes are not being considered, only specific interventions where necessary.
- Deb confirmed that she would hope to conclude the review as soon as possible, hopefully within a month, to provide clarity to parents, recognising the urgency before the new school year.

The Committee agreed the route for the petitions would be option d), to refer them to the relevant officer, Deb Hill-Howells, for inclusion into the ongoing piece of work.

5. County of Sanctuary Strategy

Councillor Sandles introduced the report, highlighting that Monmouthshire is committed to welcoming refugees and becoming an accredited council of sanctuary, while also engaging with local sanctuary organizations and supporting inclusive communities. Sharran Lloyd delivered a presentation before taking Member's questions.

Key Questions from Members:

- How do we prevent the County of Sanctuary award from becoming a gimmick, and what will the Council's role be after receiving the award? Will there be designated staff or budget, and how will performance be measured? Will other groups like charities, businesses, and sports clubs be involved?

Officers responded that the aim is to embed the principles in Council practice and culture, with staff training and awareness. Performance monitoring is not fully developed yet but is under consideration. Other agencies, including schools and voluntary groups, can apply for sanctuary status, and the Council is working with schools and education colleagues on this.

- Does the Council have anyone supporting women who need antenatal and postnatal services but are afraid to come forward due to their immigration status (no recourse to public funds)?

Officers confirmed that the Council is developing a pathway for those with no recourse to public funds, ensuring a human response so no one is left destitute, and staff know how to support such cases.

- What is the Council's actual role in becoming a county of sanctuary, and does it involve much new work given existing legislation and community efforts?

In response, another Member suggested the Council's role is to ensure people seeking sanctuary are treated with dignity and respect, helping them integrate, rather than change government migration policy. This response was supported by officers.

- A member emphasised the importance of promoting good relations between groups to ensure vibrant and cohesive communities, especially given the potential for political tension and negative media attention around refugee housing. They stressed the need for urgent community engagement in Portskewett to address concerns and achieve positive outcomes, considering local housing pressures and the broader context of seeking county of sanctuary status.

Officers responded by acknowledging the concerns about housing suitability for refugees, stating that any property considered for nomination will be actively reviewed, taking into account factors like rurality, transport, and access to services, regardless of

background. They assured that all relevant factors will be considered in the decision-making process for housing allocation.

- Please could "conflict" be added to the list of reasons for improved outcomes for groups who have fled persecution, specifically referencing the importance of including conflict alongside sexual orientation and religious beliefs.
- How many Ukrainian families are still in Monmouthshire?

Officers answered that there are about 50 families living with hosts, and a total of 350 Ukrainians have come to Monmouthshire under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, with some having found work and housing locally. Monmouthshire has more Ukrainian arrivals than any other part of Wales relative to its size, and that the long-term future for these families depends on the situation in Ukraine, but for now, they are contributing to the local community.

They emphasised the importance of engaging with local sanctuary organizations, raising awareness, integrating refugee awareness into staff training, amplifying lived experiences, promoting sanctuary work, supporting inclusive communities, and collaborating with national policy for County of Sanctuary accreditation.

- Is the £600 per month payment for hosting Ukrainian families is still available and have any difficulties been experienced in paying full rent? The report claims no costs are involved, but I have concerns about council accommodation use and the financial basis for the County of Sanctuary.

*Officers responded that the thank you payment for hosting Ukrainian families is still available, paid via the council but funded by the UK government, with no direct cost to Monmouthshire County Council budgets. They clarified that the only direct cost for the County of Sanctuary accreditation is a small administrative fee to the City of Sanctuary group, and that most work is funded through community cohesion budgets, with dedicated support funded by Welsh Government. The partnership and funding for community cohesion and resettlement work are determined by Welsh Government, with joint arrangements in place with Newport City Council. Also, there is often direct funding from the Home Office for this agenda, coordinated through the same structure as the joint Newport and Monmouthshire working arrangement. When the council undertakes this work, UK and Wales governments make funding directly available, and if the council did not do the work, the funds would not flow into Monmouthshire. They offered to pull together key information about funding sources and cost implications and circulate it to committee members. (**Action: Sharran Lloyd**).*

Chairs summary

Members have expressed some financial concerns and have highlighted the need to engage communities through events, which officers have committed to do, however there is also a role for representative councillors and possibly a members seminar would help to provide a fuller understanding of what it involves.

6. Strategic Equality Plan 24/25 AMR

Cabinet Member Councillor Angela Sandles introduced the report, explaining that the Equality Act 2010 requires the council to produce a strategic equality plan and annual progress reports. She advised that the current plan covered 2024–2028 and aligned with the council's corporate and community goals. Together with Pennie Walker, she answered Members' questions.

Key Questions and points raised by Members:

- How is the council is giving every child the best start in life when the home to school transport policy adds barriers to school attendance, especially for pre-school meal children who already have lower attendance rates? I'm concerned that the council is waiting to see the impact on children receiving free school meals, rather than proactively addressing potential barriers.
- How the council can further include young people just above the free school meal eligibility line, who are disadvantaged by the £2 daily charge for breakfast at King Henry School and may not be able to afford it?
- Is the council is liaising with the Women's Institute in Gwent regarding their "knot in my name" campaign against violence towards women and girls?
- Are there are plans to review drop kerbs at bus stops across the county, noting that while improvements have been made in some areas, issues remain elsewhere?
- Are we planning to extend digital literacy training beyond hubs to secondary settlements and the wider community, to reach those with ongoing digital needs?

*Pennie advised that due to the specific nature of the questions asked that relate to responsibilities of various service areas, she would need to seek answers to provide to the committee by email (**Action: Pennie Walker**).*

- The protected characteristics under the Equality Act need updating. The plan should use "sex" (biological sex) instead of "gender" in line with the Supreme Court judgement, especially when referencing the Equality Act.
- The Welsh Government's LGBTQ+ action plan referenced in the report is also not in keeping with legislation, following the Supreme Court judgement. Policies should ensure compliance, especially regarding the legal status of trans and non-binary identities. Policies should ensure compliance, especially regarding the legal status of trans and non-binary identities.

Pennie advised that the our Strategic Equality Plan reflects the position for 2024-2025 which was prior to the Supreme Court Judgement, so the plan was drafted correctly for the time period it reflects.

- Inclusive language" should mean avoiding inappropriate gendered terms (e.g., using "chair" instead of "chairman").

Penny acknowledged this and agreed to review and update the language in the plan (Action: Pennie Walker).

- Sex as a characteristic should be included in "give every child the best start in life," particularly in relation to LGBTQ+ education, as the Equality Act is about sex and gender reassignment, not gender ideology. I have concerns about puberty blockers and safeguarding children.
- Why is sex not listed as a relevant characteristic in Objective 1, highlighting its importance for inclusion, menstruation, and health issues?
- Please can we remove the tick for gender reassignment, as it is not applicable to children.

Penny agreed this was an oversight and would add sex and remove gender reassignment for the next report.

- In terms of what a "plus child" is in the context of LGBTQ+ inclusive education, I have concerns about teaching children they need to change their bodies if they don't fit gender stereotypes.
- Period poverty should reference "young women and girls" as menstruation only affects females, and de-sexing the language is unhelpful.
- Sex is not listed as a relevant characteristic in Objective 5, emphasizing the need for sex-segregated spaces for safety and accessibility, especially for women and minority faith groups.
- I have concerns that inclusive language in training materials can erase women from issues that affect them, impacting understanding and health outcomes, especially for those with learning disabilities or for whom English is a second language.
- What steps are being taken to ensure that external resources used for LGBTQ+ education and relationships/sexuality education in schools are safe and Lawful?

Penny said she would need to consult with the head of inclusion and provide details following the meeting (Action: Pennie Walker).

- How is the council monitoring that equalities training for leaders and managers is lawful and uses correct terminology, noting misuse of "gender" instead of "sex."

Penny responded that they are waiting for EHRC guidance and will review policies and the Strategic Equality Plan accordingly.

- The language in the plan is confusing, so please could "sex" be used rather than "gender" throughout, including in references to the pay gap.

Penny explained that Welsh Government require Councils to report on the gender pay gap, so this is not something we are able to change.

- The plan should mention Christianity in relation to collective worship in schools, as required by law.
- It is important to protect women's spaces (e.g., toilets, changing rooms) and referenced previous council discussions about single-sex toilets in new schools.
- Could the plan address conflicts between protected characteristics, such as marriage or stable relationships?
- Is data on bullying, harassment and discrimination collected by schools broken down by sex, specifically to understand peer-on-peer assaults and the context of violence against women and girls?

*Penny agreed to assess what data is collected and to provide a response (**Action: Pennie Walker**).*

- It's positive to hear that the council has achieved age-friendly employer status. What has been done to encourage the workforce to stay in work longer, including reasonable adjustments for older staff? Please can we have some further detail on this? (**Action: Pennie Walker**).
- Please can the plan reference the Council's ambition to have at least one "changing space" (changing places facility) in every town, and that this be fully considered in relevant Council decisions.

Penny acknowledged this point.

- Will the plan be updated earlier than scheduled, stressing the importance for children's education and safeguarding?

Penny and Councillor Sandles acknowledged the feedback provided by the Committee and reminded Members that the report refers to the current period, and indicated they are awaiting EHRC guidance and will review and update the plan as needed.

7. Adult Services Inspection Report

Jenny Jenkins presented the adult services inspection report, noting it followed up on 2022 findings around people, prevention, well-being, and partnership. Of 23 areas for improvement, 20 have been completed; work continues on risk management, contingency planning, and carers' co-production. Ongoing efforts include quality assurance, training, and revising carers' assessments. Inspectors gave positive feedback on transformation plans, service expansion, technology use, and safeguarding. The service is satisfied with progress but remains committed to further improvement and ongoing engagement with Care Inspectorate Wales.

Together with Cabinet Member Councillor Ian Chandler and Jane Rodgers, Jenny answered Members' questions.

Key Questions from Members:

- Are statutory reviews that are not 'being undertaken in a timely manner', due to staff shortages or other reasons?

Jenny Jenkins advised that the main reason is the volume of work, which impacts the ability to conduct reviews on time. She added that improvements are being made through better recording and additional resources, resulting in above-average performance in review completion. The Welsh average for completed reviews is 60%, while Monmouthshire achieved 70% at the end of the year, indicating substantial improvement.

- The 64% staff recommendation rate for working at Monmouthshire seems a low figure which is concerning.

Jane explained that 64% is not as high as desired, reflecting the challenging environment in adult social care, especially post-COVID and during ongoing changes. She stated that efforts are being made to improve staff engagement and communication.

- In terms of the progress of the domiciliary care change, there are concerns about the transfers from providers and new carers and whether the planned changeover date is still achievable.

Jane advised that in terms of the timescale, the three lot areas are in different positions, with one ready to go and two requiring more attention, but overall, the plan is broadly on track and the main priority is ensuring continuity of care. She encouraged anyone with concerns to contact the council directly.

- Section 2.8 of the report refers to people who are paying privately not being offered assessments, and from my own experience, I know that lacking access to assessment reports when holding power of attorney can make people feel vulnerable. It's important to address this concern as it has also been highlighted by Care Inspectorate Wales.

Jane explained that while many people arrange care without council involvement, if someone comes to the council with care and support needs, they will be offered an assessment and support. Jenny added that the process includes discussing how care is to be provided, but acknowledged the process can be complex.

- Are there many elderly people living alone who "fall through the net", who do not receive help, because no one realizes they need it or they are unsure who to ask?

Jane advised that this is always a concern and efforts to strengthen early help approaches in communities are very important, relying on partnerships with third sector organizations, community groups, and health partners to identify those in need. She emphasized the importance of community networks, neighbours and friends in alerting the council to people in need and mentioned plans to strengthen the council's response at the "front door" with additional posts and training.

- The report states that demand is outstripping supply in domiciliary care and that some people require care to remain independent, but it is not always available, leading to increased burden on carers and frustration for staff. It also mentions delays in processing direct payment requests. How does the assessment process work? How does the council ensure timely progression for those needing direct payments and how does the process link for those already arranging their own care? What is the sequence and timing of assessments for direct payments?

Jane clarified that the situation with domiciliary care has improved, with waiting numbers and hours now significantly reduced compared to previous years, though some areas remain harder to provide for. The brokerage process has been shifted to the commissioning team to reduce frustration for social workers.

In terms of direct payments, social care assessment is required first to determine eligible needs, followed by a technical assessment by the direct payments team to ensure suitability. The process is prioritized based on urgency, and the direct payments team has streamlined their process to minimize delays. Once someone is assessed as eligible and expresses interest in a direct payment, the follow-up assessment and setup are handled quickly, though exact timescales depend on prioritization and demand.

Jane and Jenny both acknowledged that delays and complexity in the system can add stress for carers, especially those supporting people with dementia or Alzheimer's, and emphasized ongoing efforts to improve responsiveness.

- Are issues with data collection and statutory reviews due to outdated systems, and are there plans for investment in more robust data systems?

Some issues are due to how reviews are recorded, and improvements are being made through staff training and better recording practices. Jane explained that a new cloud-based social care case management system is being implemented in partnership with Gwent authorities, which will significantly improve system capability and address data issues over the longer term. She noted the implementation is a long process due to data migration but will support future needs. Whilst a lot of data is collected and used for planning and reporting, there is room for improvement in data capture and recording accuracy, and efforts are ongoing to ensure staff have the right information and support. Sometimes data is not recorded accurately, leading to underreporting of completed work.

- Is the new system (Mosaic) is compatible with health staff systems? How are personal stories captured in the new system?

The health sector is procuring its own systems, but interoperability is a key requirement for all, aiming for integration between services. More clarity on compatibility will be available once health completes procurement. The inspection has highlighted the importance of capturing biographies of people and that Monmouthshire does this well as part of the assessment process. There will be ongoing work to standardize data capture processes across the region, including how assessment documentation is formulated, to

ensure personal stories continue to be included, as this is an intrinsic part of the assessment process.

- The chair advised the Committee that she would suggest a visit to Chepstow Hospital to see the assistive technology rooms, highlighting the value of technology in supporting independent living.

Jane agreed that the development of assistive technology had had a transformational impact and suggested Members may like to visit either or both of the two sites (Chepstow and Monmouth) to see the close partnership between social care and housing.

- Can you advise us on the progress us on growing the number of micro carers in the area?

Jane advised that the number of micro carers has grown to at least 50, the approach being part of a preventative offer, in conjunction with other local authorities and Welsh Government.

- The chair noted that the gaps in carer assessments are being addressed and emphasized the importance of capturing carer needs in assessments.

Jenny explained that there is ongoing work to better integrate carer assessments with those for the cared-for person, aiming to avoid missing carers and to clarify co-produced outcomes, with improvements planned for assessment pathways.

Chair's Conclusion:

The chair thanked officers and the Cabinet Member for attending and providing an interesting and reassuring report, noting that it had clarified some of members' concerns.

8. People Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and Action List

Noted.

9. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted, Councillor Howarth highlighting the need for the planner to be updated to avoid potential calling-in of decisions.

10. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

This was deferred to the next meeting.

Planners noted, raise with SLT about embargoes ICMD.

11. Date of Next Meeting

30th September 2025.

The meeting ended at **1.51 pm**.