

Monmouthshire's Meals on Wheels Service

Report on the current service provision (Phase 1 Report- August 2025)



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Section 1. Introductions and purpose of the report

In June 2025 the service embarked on a first phase review of the Community Meal service and an options appraisal to determine the future of the service (Phase 1). The options on the table were:– keep the service as is, look at alternative models, or reform the current model to make it more sustainable.

The service review consists of:

- a) Review current service delivery and methods (whole system approach)
- b) Determine the demand and the need for the service
- c) Engagement with service users and staff
- d) Value for money examining the potential growth and funding opportunities
- e) Ensuring a good quality and sustainable service model for the future

A Management Board was established to develop an action plan to identify and analyse the opportunities and any potential barriers to developing a delivery model on a financial viability and cost effectiveness.

Representatives of the Management Board include:

Naomi Lovesay, Adults Service Manager

Pauline Batty, Catering Manager

Gail Brain, Business Support Officer

Jonathan Dunham, Business and Performance Manager

Andrew Day, Independent Consultant.

Section 2. Context and Background

The Community Meals Service has provided a subsidised service to vulnerable adults in Monmouthshire County Council over many years, ensuring quality nutritional meals and daily contact with service users during weekdays and weekends for people aged 18+ with eligibility being determined by a social care assessment under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

The service provides wider benefits including social contact and support for vulnerable and isolated service users, who often live alone and could potentially be at risk of having a poor and unbalanced diet. The service can often reduce pressure on families/carers who might not be able to provide meals or support family members/neighbours due to work or other caring commitments. This service has been particularly appreciated by vulnerable service users and families at times of need, including working alongside partners in adult social care and healthcare by supporting frailer adults to remain supported in their own home.

Section 3. Legislative and policy drivers

- There is no legislative requirement to deliver a Community Meals Service. However, the Council needs to ensure that it meets the requirements of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014. The Act and accompanying Part 4 Code of Practice sets out where a local authority has carried out an assessment, which has revealed that the person has care and support needs then the local authority must decide if those needs meet the eligibility criteria and, if they do, it must offer access to services that meet those needs.
- In addition, the report considers the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 wellbeing goal of : A healthier Wales and a society in which people physical and mental well-being is maximised.
- This report is also aligned to the Councils Community and Corporate plan (2022-2028) - “A safe place to Live” and “ A Connected Place Where People Care.”

Section 4. Methodology

As part of the review staff engagement meetings were held with the community meal drivers (14 attended in total across both shifts). Interviews were also held with the Catering Manager, Business support officer, Care Managers, Finance, Transport Manager, and Information Security and Technology Officer. In addition, a service user questionnaire was issued to all active clients to gain their views and share their experiences of the service. Of 236 users, 103 responded (45% response rate). The surveys were completed via telephone calls with the service users.

Section 5. Staffing structure

The current Community Meals Structure is detailed in Table 14 below:

Post title	No of staff budget hours	Comments	Grade/Band
Catering Manager	1 x 18.5 hours		SCP 35
Business Support Officer	1 x 30 hours		Band E
Senior driver	2 x 28 hours	1 vacant post	Band E
Drivers	2 x 28 hours	1 vacant post	Band D
Driver	15 x 16 hours		Band D

*Adults Service Manager and Business Manager are funded from the Adults Management budget.

The meals are currently distributed to service users in their own homes by 20 delivery staff using a fleet of 8 specially adapted vehicles. The existing contractual hours and shift pattern for the drivers is 4 on x 4 off, although there are occasions when additional hours are required to help cover annual leave and sickness. Additional hours and

accrued leave entitlement for all front line staff is currently subject to a wider piece of work being carried out by the Directorate.

Section 6. The Current Service

- The current service has been operating since 2004.
- Currently the Council's community meals service provides a choice of hot (regenerated) and a packed lunch (sandwich or savoury plus a dessert) to service users 7 days a week between 11am and 2.15pm, 365 days of the year across three integrated hubs (north, central and south areas).
- The charge for the hot meal is £6.50 and the method of payment is by cash or direct debit (predominantly payment is by cash).
- The criteria for eligibility for meals on wheels are that the service is intended for people who are unable to cook or provide or obtain a meal for themselves from alternative sources. Without a provision for a meal their health would deteriorate, limiting their ability to remain at home.
- The service allows for meals to be delivered directly to people's homes, where they can then be plated affording time for wellbeing checks and feedback to care managers or next of kin should any concerns be identified.
- Special dietary requirements are also catered for, including pureed meals, meals suitable for diabetic residents, vegetarian and plant-based options. There are allergen controls in place. Kosher / halal meals are all available.
- Referrals are received by email from social workers, hospital discharge team, reablement team and other health professionals.
- As at June 2025 the service has 226 active service users receiving meals.
- The meals are procured from an external supplier, Appetito, and a varied choice of meals are offered.
- In addition the service also offers a tea/sandwich option which is delivered at the same time as lunchtime meals for an additional cost of £5.00 per packed lunch. The sandwiches provided in the packed lunches are supplied by an external local supplier.
- The deliveries are split over 6/7 rounds across the authority on an area location basis with each vehicle travelling between 30 and 50 miles per day from the Raglan depot. The vehicles are currently charged on site with the meals regenerated and cooked initially whilst the vehicle is connected to the electric supply at the depot, the ovens are then switched to diesel regeneration once the drivers leave the depot and commence with their deliveries. The mode of regeneration means that all meals are delivered at the same time and are kept on warm hold for the duration (11am to 2.15pm at 68 degrees).
- Meals are produced to the NACC (National Association of Care Caterers) nutritional standards and food safety is paramount.

- The service is compliant with to Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) principles to ensure food safety throughout the process, from sourcing ingredients to delivery to the end service user.
- Contingency and risk management planning for adverse weather is in place.
- Environmental Health – Food hygiene rating, grade 5 (max) awarded October 2024.

Below is a SWOT analysis of the current service model which also includes feedback from interviews with care managers, drivers, Business support staff and research during collating information for this report.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
• Maintaining independence and service users ability to remain in their own home • Providing healthy and balanced meals is a core strength • The ability to cater to specific dietary requirements e.g. diabetic • Reducing demand on more intensive support • Reducing social isolation • Providing support beyond the meal itself such as welfare and well-being checks • A dedicated, skilled and caring workforce • A positive reputation and an established relationships within the community	• Limited funding and lack of investment over the years • Outdated and inefficient handling equipment and storage facilities • Vehicles require changing to meet service delivery demands • High level of debt • Duplication and paperwork – invoicing process • Collection of cash from service users is high risk and costly to manage.
Opportunities	Threats
• Extend the service to new areas and accessibility • Increase in take up - free up capacity for domiciliary care • Standardisation • Collaboration with other authorities - economies of scale • Technology integration is maximised • For further engagement with services users are part of phase 2 • For reducing the subsidy	• Escalating food prices can strain the budget and may lead to adjustments and/or service reductions • Increasing food and operational costs of running the service • Changes in WG funding or policies can affect financial stability and future service delivery • Wider pressures on public spending leading to a reduction on non-statutory or preventative support • Not adhering to SSWBA or policy

• Explore alternative suppliers, including local firms and our own school meals service	• Complaints
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Section 7. Demographics and service usage

Monmouthshire is a rural county and although it's population has risen to 95,200 (2020) it remains one of the least densely populated counties in Wales. Half of the population live in the main towns of Abergavenny, Usk, Monmouth, Chepstow and Caldicot. There are 19,863 people over 65 years old in Monmouthshire, approx. 22% of the population. This is projected to grow by 56.9% to 31,157 between 2012 and 2033. The proportion of residents aged 65+ is expected to increase to 33.6% by 2043, compared to 25.7% across Wales. People are living longer with increased life expectancy and life expectancy in Monmouthshire is the highest in Wales, 80.5 for males and 84.1 for females.

It is projected that there will be a significant increase in demand for need assessments for this age group based upon the current statistics and projected population figures. In addition, the workforce are reporting complexities of caseloads are increasing. Complexity includes co-morbidity (people with a range of different conditions, people living with chronic ill health or disability, people living with frailty, people living with dementia and people being discharged from hospital after long stays or delays in hospital discharge.

The service users demographics are detailed in table 1 illustrates that the service, in the main, supports the older generation with 90% aged over 65 years old (male and female). A high proportion of these have some assessed care and support needs with service users experiencing mobility issues and frailty, displaying confusion and memory loss.

Table 1- number and age profile of service users who accessed the service each year

Age group	2023	2024	2025
18-35	0	0	0
36-64	33	39	37
65+	348	350	386

Other key findings from the source of data available presently:

- 101 people (44%) receiving community meals are also receiving community homecare (internal and external).
- 57 people (25%) receiving community meals are also receiving equipment, including careline and other OT-recommended items like wheelchairs and grab rails.
- 3 service users (1%) receiving the service are on direct payments.
- 71 (31%) of service users are receiving community meals only.

Table 2 below shows the number of service users who are receiving meals each week. Over 55% of service users are receiving a meal every day of the week and 177 (76%) have remained with the service for over 6 months. Few service users exit the service in the first three months, and most departures are due to better health or increased independence.

No of meals per week	No of service users	Percentage
Receiving 1 meal per week	1	0.50%
Receiving 2 meals per week	22	10%
Receiving 3 meals per week	31	24%
Receiving 4 meals per week	15	30%
Receiving 5 meals per week	16	38%
Receiving 6 meals per week	17	45%
Receiving 7 meals per week	124	55%
Total number of clients	226	100%

Table 3. Daily average of meals (hot and packed lunch) delivered Monday to a Friday across the authority

Type of meal	2023/24	2024/25	2025/26*
Hot	136	128	139
Packed lunch	4	3	7
Total	140	131	146

*projected annual usage for 2025/26 estimated based upon actual meals delivered from April to June 2025

Table 4 – Daily average of meals (hot and packed lunch) delivered Saturday to a Sunday across the authority

Type of meal	2023/24	2024/25	2025 /26*
Hot	40	42	47
Packed lunch	2	1	4
Total	42	43	51

*projected annual usage for 2025/2026 estimated based upon actual meals delivered from April to June 2025

Table 5. – Total number of meals (hot and packed lunch) delivered per annum Monday to a Sunday across the authority

Type of meal	2023/24	2024/25	2025 26 *
Hot	64,476	62,100	68,376
Packed lunch	516	344	1,171
Total	64,992	62,444	69,547

*projected annual usage for 2025/2026 estimated based upon actual meals delivered from April to June 2025

Table 6. Total number of hot and packed lunch meals delivered and the percentage of the overall business in each hub area per annum:

Area	2023/24		2024/25		2025/26	
Llanelly Hill (C)	13,068	20%	12,444	20%	11,772	17%
Raglan (C)	6,036	9%	6,228	10%	6,960	10%
Total for (C)	19,104	29%	18,672	30%	18,732	27%
Monmouth (N)	5,544	9%	7,140	11%	8,256	12%
Grosmont (N)	16,812	26%	12,144	20%	10,872	16%
Total for (N)	22,356	35%	20,508	31%	19,128	28%
Caldicot (S)	14,448	22%	15,332	24.50%	19,615	27%
Chepstow (S)	9,084	14%	9,156	14.50%	12,072	18%
Total for (S)	23,532	36%	24,488	39%	31,687	45%
Grand total for all areas	64,992		62,444		69,547	

Findings

The overall demand for meal on wheels has been fairly static over the last three years with a large number of service users (76%) remaining with the service for over 6 months. There has been a noticeable increase in the number of meals being

provided (hot and cold) over the weekends with a significant uptake in the south hub (Chepstow and Caldicot areas).

Overall the number of meals delivered in each hub has changed significantly:

- Central 33% (reduction of 2%)
- North 22% (reduction of 7%)
- South 45% (increase of 9%)

The current figures shows that the highest demand for meals is in the south hub area (45%) which is also aligned to the demands and pressures in the domiciliary care market. This could be a result of the new strategy for Commissioned Domiciliary Care in Monmouthshire (2024 – 2034) together with an increased number of service users accessing reablement services which is freeing up time for in house and external carers to provide more specialist services.

Due to operational and logistical factors, community meals use different geographical boundaries from other services—for example, Monmouth town is classified in the Central hub for domiciliary care but in the North hub for community meals. This discrepancy skews data analysis for the whole of adult services activity and further investigation is needed to determine the rationale for this decision moving forward.

Section 8. Finance (Information provided by Adult Service Accountant)

A summary of the budget 2025/2026 is set out below in table 7 and the net cost of the service is £341,147

Table 7 <u>Community meal budget 2025/2026</u>	
<u>Expenditure type</u>	<u>£'000</u>
Employees /payroll	497,872
Premises	1,485
Ovens in vehicles	2,495
Equipment	10,118
Supplies	124,127
Services [including vehicle costs]	<u>163,782</u>
Total cost	800,023
<u>Income</u>	458,876
<u>Net cost of service</u>	<u>341,147</u>

The service is highly subsidised by the Council, **Table 8** below shows the subsidisation of Community Meals Service (Gross unit cost).

Table 8	2022/2023 Actual £	2023/2024 Actual £	2024/2025 Actual £	2025/2026 Budget £
Gross cost of service	615,620.23	776,904.92	815,812.72	800,023.00
No. of paid meals	68775	66730	70128	70128
Direct cost of meal	8.95	11.64	11.63	11.41
Charge to service user	4.64	5.10	5.60	6.50
Subsidy per meal	4.31	6.54	6.03	4.91

Table 9. shows the direct budget (cost without central charges) for the subsidisation of Meals on wheels service (for reference only).

	2022/2023 Actual £	2023/2024 Actual £	2024/2025 Actual £	2025/2026 Budget £
Gross cost of service	501,188.35	634,595.31	667,867.16	636,241.00
No. of paid meals	68775	66730	70128	70128
Direct cost of meal	7.29	9.51	9.52	9.07
Charge to service user	4.64	5.10	5.60	6.50
Subsidy per meal	2.64	4.41	3.52	2.57

Table 10 - Other Local Authorities costs for Meal Service 2025/2026

<u>Local Authority</u>	<u>Number of meals delivered per annum</u>	<u>Subsidy /cost to Authority</u>	<u>Charge per meal</u>
MCC.	69,547	£4.91	£6.50
Torfaen CBC	69,160	£1.41 (23/24 rate)	£6.50
Caerphilly CBC	Not known	Unavailable	£6.50
Blaenau CBC	Not known	Unavailable	£5.80

Cardiff CC	102,200	Unavailable	£6.75
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Findings

The service is highly subsidised by the Council, however, this is a similar position across all Councils and although we do not have access to the financial costs to undertake a full comparison with other local councils, national research indicates that Councils in England and Wales subsidy ranges from 30 to 40%. Although the subsidy (cost to the authority) has reduced over the last few years the current subsidy level remains high and represents 43% including corporate central charges.

The current daily charge to service users for a delivered meal is £6.50 and the Council is currently providing a subsidy of £4.91 per meal for the 2025/2026 financial year, compared to a budgeted subsidy, set at the start of the 2023/24 financial year, of £6.54 per meal.

Although the charge to service users increased from £5.60 to £6.50 by approx 14% in this financial year, there has only been a small number of service users leaving the service because of the increase in the cost of the meal. See table below for cost comparisons.

Table 11 below presents a comparison between the unit cost of community meals and those of a domiciliary care agency. The figures are based on 30% of service users (71 service users in total) who receive only meal provision and no additional services from social care.

Service	Unit cost per meal	Total cost per annum for a meal provided 365 days	Total cost per annum based on 71 service users.
Option A - Domiciliary care (30 minute call to cook a frozen meal purchased by the service user from a local supermarket at £5 approx).	£20.00 estimated	£7,300	£518K
Option B – Community meals	£11.41	£4,164.65	£294K
Cost difference between Option A & B	£8.59	£3,126.76	<u>£224K</u>

Table 12 - Debt Management

Period	Outstanding amount	Over 3 months	Between 6 & 12 months	Over 12 months
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31/03/2023	£38,638.80	£1,729.80	£5,068.55	£14,476.70
31/03/2024	£27,239.80	£4,468.10	£9,767.30	£9,767.30
31/07/2025	£23,479.42	£3,227.85	£5,609.55	£10,580.80

Findings

The corporate Finance (Creditors) team oversees debt recovery, including reminders and write-offs, with approvals from the Chief Finance Officer charged to the social service budget. While Table 11 shows debt has decreased over three years, a significant portion (£10,580.00 or 45% as of 31.07.2025) remains tied up in ongoing legal cases and disputes.

As of July 2025, 142 service users are on direct debit, however, 226 monthly invoices must still be issued individually. Processing payments remains time-consuming since many users pay by cheque or cash. In 2024/2025, over 250 payment reminder letters were sent, and officers made 148 separate follow-ups to recover outstanding payments.

Section 9. Operating systems and processes

Systems and Digital

In June 2023, the service acquired a software package from Smartt to optimise the logistics and operational management of menu planning, scheduling, and meal delivery to service users. This system streamlines multiple service elements by enabling the recording and uploading of live information, including vehicle checks, route mapping, service alterations, concerns regarding non-delivery, meal temperatures, and proof of delivery.

Drivers have reported intermittent connectivity issues while on delivery rounds, resulting in reliance on printed hard copies of service user menu choices. This practice poses significant challenges, notably when menu information cannot be accessed via tablets, and introduces GDPR risks related to data protection during deliveries. While office staff provide support by downloading necessary information, this process may lead to delays—particularly at weekends when administrative support is unavailable. Drivers have expressed interest in dedicated classroom training on tablet usage to bolster their confidence and competence in information recording. The matter is under ongoing review with the IT manager, with meetings scheduled with Smartt to address these challenges.

Stock control remains managed through manual record-keeping, which, though effective, is time-intensive for both business support personnel and senior drivers. Constraints related to storage capacity, equipment for meal preparation, cooking, and transport render the daily shift process demanding. Nevertheless, all staff continue to

demonstrate exceptional dedication to ensuring system functionality. Some drivers have noted limited awareness of written procedures and predominantly depend on feedback from colleagues.

Findings

The current software is not being used to its full capabilities or capacity in regard to stock control and forward order planning, including management performance tools on various aspects of the service including delivery statistics, financial summaries, and client information.

Order/storage - Utilise technology for meal orders, delivery tracking and service user communication can improve efficiency and engagement.

Food Supply

The current supplier of the frozen plated meals, Apetito, is currently purchased on a spot purchase basis at the same rates based upon a previous formal agreement. Other Gwent authorities, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, and Torfaen, have a formal contractual agreement with Apetito until 2027. We have begun to work with procurement in developing a tender specification that would meet our needs and what options might be available to establish a preferred supplier in keeping with the ambitions of local strategy.

The service has recognised the necessity to undertake a comprehensive review of menu choices. It has been suggested that menu completion could occur during delivery rounds; however, current working hours do not allow sufficient time for this task unless the quantity of meals per round is reduced—a change that would greatly affect overall service costs.

Findings

In April 2025 all local authority customers were informed 2025 that they were changing their packaging from foil trays to a new, fully recyclable Evolve CPET tray from June 2025 following a trail with customers in the England. Disappointing no Welsh local authorities were invited to take part in these trails and were aware that such trails were taking place or the new business model of the Company. The CPET Trays are a third in size larger, although the portion sizes will very much remain the same compared with the existing foil trays. This will present an impact on the current storage and storage facilities at the Raglan depot moving forward.

Although the Company, Apertito, have stated there will be no imminent price increases to their product range, other local authorities in England are already

anticipating increases in the later part of 2025. Discussions with the procurement lead for MCC are underway and to source potential new suppliers and explore any collaboration opportunities with other Gwent local authorities for the service moving forward.

A procurement process is required.

Menu re-vamped – standardisation of stock and meal choice.

Section 10. Existing Fleet of Vehicles / Workforce

Currently, meals are delivered to service users at their homes by 20 staff utilising a fleet of eight specially adapted vehicles (including four electric vehicles equipped with diesel ovens, two vehicles fitted with both diesel and electric ovens, and two former school catering vans). In October 2024, Environmental Health conducted an inspection and issued a compliance notice under Confidence in Management: "Management to ensure a sufficient number of vehicles to facilitate deliveries." While the report confirmed that operations were safe through the use of hot boxes, this solution was deemed temporary and unsustainable for long-term needs. The Transport Manager has further observed that the vehicles are no longer suitable due to age, and ongoing oven repairs are resulting in significant costs.

The procurement or leasing of replacement vehicles is expected to generate additional financial commitments; consequently, a business case for funding must be submitted. Senior management has currently deferred decisions regarding replacement vehicles pending the outcome of a comprehensive service review and cost analysis aligned with service demand.

Responsibility and budgetary oversight for the Meals on Wheels fleet and maintenance rest with the Corporate Transport Team. Due to issues such as limited range, declining battery performance, and vehicle defects, the Transport Department has temporarily loaned two former school catering vehicles to the Meals on Wheels service.

Over the past ten months, research has been conducted, consulting with the transport manager on procurement and leasing options, as well as exploring innovative cooking solutions such as hydrogen vans with microwave ovens capable of heating food during delivery.

Additionally, following an observational visit to Torfaen CBC to evaluate their operational model (electric vans with plug-in hot boxes), Senior Management approved the conversion of one school catering van for a two week trial to assess its viability and sustainability.

A project initiated in April 2025 aims to optimise delivery routes, explore potential collaboration with other departments (such as Highways and Waste), and examine telematics and route optimisation tools. The current system lacks automated route

optimisation functionality, necessitating manual adjustments by business support or senior drivers, which is inefficient and time-consuming. As the database is managed externally, updates or issue resolution require outside intervention, adding complexity to service operations. Mapping and testing of the social services database are underway with corporate colleagues, with results expected in September.

Section 11. Staff Feedback

Staff bring diverse skills and vast experience to their roles and demonstrate high levels of dedication and motivation in delivering this valuable service. Staff retention remains strong, turnover is low, and absenteeism aligns with other frontline services. Appropriate risk assessments are implemented as necessary to support Occupational Health recommendations, and ongoing monitoring reports are provided by the HR department.

While many staff members find their work fulfilling and value direct interactions with service users, concerns remain regarding inadequate investment in equipment and vehicles, impacting their ability to perform duties safely. Some drivers have reported feelings of pressure and anxiety associated with using unreliable vehicles, as previously noted. Joint visits conducted by business support staff with drivers did not corroborate these findings, but continuous monitoring is in place.

Senior drivers indicated their ability and capacity to manage operational responsibilities, including route planning and stock ordering, viewing these tasks as integral to their positions despite some functional overlap with Business Support. They also expressed concerns about their exclusion from the recent driver recruitment process; although they were informed of the appointment, they believe their direct supervisory responsibility should justify their involvement in such decisions. Additionally, it was observed that Business Support continues to perform effectively, with operational information regularly disseminated between the Manager and Senior drivers.

Regular team meetings are held, with documented records of discussions. However, staff expressed concerns about having their feedback overlooked regarding operational challenges, which resulted in a collective grievance. Senior management has since implemented a resolution and action plan dated 4th April 2025 to address these issues going forward.

Care Managers noted positive aspects of the service and suggested that drivers could assume a support role for service users in addition to their current responsibilities. However, implementing this change would require a comprehensive workforce redesign, and there is currently no definitive evidence regarding potential cost savings or overall benefits.

Section 12. Feedback from service user questionnaires

The Management Board prioritised collecting service user feedback for a thorough evaluation of current and future service planning. Of 236 users, 103 responded by 29th August— a 45% response rate yielding a substantial and rich level of information. Business support staff will continue engaging with users for ongoing planning.

A summary of the key findings from the questionnaires are below (A full PDF report is attached as an Appendix A for reference):

Findings

- 94% confirmed that the meals are nutritious, well balanced and met their dietary requirements
- An average rating of 4.14 out of 5 for meal choice and variety
- The service aided independence, physical and wellbeing (8.77 average out of 10)
- 80% of service users were satisfied with portion sizes with only small percentage stating they were too small.
- 97% of service users stated their meals arrived on time and hot.
- 88% rated their meal as providing value for money
- Staff were consistently described as friendly and punctual
- 74% of service users preferred a hot main meal and only 11% indicated an interest for a tea/sandwich call.
- Overall satisfaction with the service was very high
- Lunchtime calls and hot meals were preferred by the vast majority of service users (92%) with limited desire for evening meals, although there was some interest in a salad or ploughman's lunch (30%).
- All respondents felt heard and respected by the team.

Some of the comments on the questionnaire were:

“All drivers have a natter as well as bringing the meals”

“friendliness and a hot meal”

“Independence and saves me cooking”

“Time for a conversation”

No formal complaints have been received during the last year. Informal issues raised were promptly resolved by staff, preventing escalation. Two written compliments were received, reflecting positive experiences with the delivery team and meal quality.

Section 13. Summary and Conclusion

This report evaluates current service provision and identifies key areas for improvement to guide Phase 2 and support the strategic development of the service.

Despite a national decline in local authorities offering similar services (with only 29% of UK authorities providing Meals on Wheels), evidence demonstrates significant benefits—from improving nutritional intake and supporting recovery, to addressing food insecurity and mitigating the effects of the cost of living crisis. Research highlights its impact on well-being, public health outcomes, and cost savings.

The community meals service consistently delivers approximately 175 hot and cold meals daily, primarily serving older adults, 85% of whom are over the age of 65. Demand for weekend meal deliveries has notably increased, particularly in the southern area of the authority.

Staff interviews reveal that most service users rely on the service due to age-related needs, though some access it because of disability, mental health conditions, injury recovery, or extended hospital stays. Feedback from stakeholders strongly indicates the service is essential for maintaining independence, and without it would have a massive impact on their wellbeing and health. Service user feedback indicates strong appreciation for the service, with 94% rating the meals as nutritious and balanced, 88% noting good value and 76% remaining with the service over 6 months.

The Council heavily subsidises the service, making it more affordable and supporting its viability while easing pressure on social care budgets. Notably, this helps avoid higher costs for domiciliary care, which would be £8.59 more per unit, as shown in table 11, page 12 of the report.

The current model effectively addresses present requirements; however, anticipated population growth and increasing life expectancy underscore the need for ongoing investment. Pursuing grant opportunities and implementing scheduled enhancements identified in the table of recommendations (Section-15) will be vital to maintaining the quality and sustainability of the service.

Section 14. Options for consideration (Phase 2)

Option 1 – To continue with the service as it currently operates with the same subsidy levels (Status Quo). Not recommended.

Benefits	Risks
• Continuation of service will provide an easy accessible service for adults with an assessed care need • Providing healthy and balanced meals is a core strength	• Insufficient funding and investment may hinder the ability to meet rising demand. • Rising demand will strain existing resources, vehicles and equipment, affecting service quality.

• Providing support beyond the meal itself such as welfare and well-being checks • Reducing demand on more intensive support	• Increased demands on staff may impact their morale and well-being if adequate investment is not provided.
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Option 2 – To continue with the service as it currently operates with increased service user charges thus reducing the subsidy per meal from April 2026. (Not Recommended)

Benefits	Risks
• Continuation of service will provide an easy accessible service for adults with an assessed care need • Providing healthy and balanced meals is a core strength • Providing support beyond the meal itself such as welfare and well-being checks • Reducing demand on more intensive support	• Possibility some service users may be unable to afford increased charges, especially those accessing other Council services. • Possible impact on service users health and wellbeing if they exit from the service. • Risk to community meals workforce if service is reduced due to falling demand.

Option 3 (Preferred) – To implement the recommended changes identified in Section 14 below whilst carrying out further work to assess the current operating costs, potential funding opportunities to ensure value for money and sustainability for the service.

Benefits	Risks
• Continuation of service will provide an easy accessible service for adults with an assessed care need. • Providing healthy and balanced meals is a core strength • Providing support beyond the meal itself such as welfare and well-being checks • Provides the project with sufficient time to implement necessary improvements without disrupting service delivery. • Allows time to collaborate with internal and external partners to maximise technology integration and	• Failure to implement the agreed recommendations could adversely affect service delivery and performance in the long term. • Potential funding opportunities and investments may not be realised within designated timeframes.

external funding opportunities and investment.	
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Section 15. TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS (Phase 1)

<u>No</u>	<u>Recommendations</u>
1	Leadership and management – improve communication and strengthen relationships with staff building on the agreed action plan April 2025.
2	Continue developing a performance framework that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data, building on new metrics and measures to better understand present and future service needs.
3	Upon finalising a preferred supplier, update the menu selections, ensuring consideration is given to storage, equipment handling, and site capacity, as well as clear communication with service users.
4	Ensure all training and HR record management files are updated and completed onto the appropriate digital platforms and systematically reviewed quarterly.
5	Ensure all standing operating procedures are circulated and the required training is delivered to staff.
6	Liaise with the Commissioning team to align with the domiciliary strategy and assess how the implementation plan may free up agency capacity and contribute to the growth of the meals on wheels service.
7	Re-establish regular meetings with care management teams to better understand the demands and pressures on the service.
8	Continue to work with the existing software provider Smartt to develop and enhance the functionality of the current technology and to evaluate the findings from the optimisation tools for delivery routing planning.

9	To work with the existing software provider to develop a digital IT solution to manage stock control and inventory, utilising real time data to forecast demand from menu choices, manage stock levels and making informed decisions about ordering and replenishment to minimise excess stock.
10	Review roles and responsibilities between Business Support and Senior drivers to define clear lines of accountability. Further examine staffing rotas, aiming for senior drivers to provide office coverage on weekends and respond to service calls from drivers.
11	Continue to explore grant opportunities to support investment in the service.
12	Finance: Transition all new referrals to direct debit payments from 1st November 2025 and actively pursue outstanding debt with creditors section.
13	Establish regular quarterly meetings with Finance to monitor income, and facilitate proactive budget management and forecasting
14	Finance: Conduct a comprehensive review of fixed and operating costs in comparison with other local authorities, particularly Torfaen CBC, due to similarities in staffing structures, food supplier and volume of meals (200 per day) to establish value for money.
15	Analyse the feedback from the pilot trial of using hot boxes as an alternative method of delivery and compare results with existing system.
16	Continue to progress with the route planning optimisation work, feasibility study on site locations and evaluate findings to support any future investment
17	A feasibility study could be considered in Phase 2 to identify any cost benefits and outcomes of operating the service out from two locations across the authority.
18	Upon completion of the pilot trial evaluation of hot boxes, proceed with the procurement of vehicles that meet current operational needs and are fit for purpose. This will ensure the timely replacement of the existing aging fleet prior to the winter of 2025/2026.
19	Work with Gwent authorities to identify additional opportunities for closer cooperation aimed at enhancing and standardising service provision.
20	To provide quarterly reports to the Senior Management Team on service improvements and progress on the recommendations noted above.