

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk on Tuesday, 23rd September, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, John Crook, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Peter Strong, Ben Callard and Ian Chandler

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance/Section 151
Craig O'Connor, Chief Officer, Place and Community Well-being
Deb Hill-Howells, Chief Officer Infrastructure
Diane Corrister, Head of Childrens Services
Jenny Jenkins, Head of Adult Services
Jess Scarisbrick, Safeguarding and Early Help Service Manager
Dave Loder, Finance Manager - Directorate
Management Accountant
Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors Rachel Buckler and Paul Pavia

1. Apologies for Absence

Paul Pavia sent his apologies and arranged a substitute who themselves was subsequently unable to attend the meeting. Rachel Buckler sent her apologies.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. Revenue Monitoring Update 1 - To scrutinise the revenue position for services falling within the committee's remit

Cabinet Member Ben Callard and Jonathan Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Peter Davies, Matthew Gatehouse, Deb Hill-Howells, Craig O' Connor, Will McLean and Jane Rodgers:

- *Can a simplified version of council spending charts (like pie charts) be included with council tax bills, so residents can better understand where the money goes?*

Officers responded that while bills currently link to detailed information online, they will consider producing a simpler hard copy version for future billing cycles.

- *Have there been any improvements regarding the £90K overspend at Castlegate since the report was compiled?*

Officers explained that while there are still some vacancies affecting income, recent new tenancies (especially in flexible office space) are positive, and active marketing continues. The remaining vacant space is more challenging to let, but overall tenancy levels are close to targets and existing tenants are expanding.

- *Are the staff vacancies structural/planned or due to normal turnover and recruitment delays?*

It was clarified that there are currently 733 vacant posts, but not all have associated budgets due to career development structures. Teams have vacancy factors built into budgets, and all vacancies outside schools require senior sign-off to ensure careful management. The council employs around 4,100 staff (headcount), with fewer full-time equivalents.

- *Have solar panels been installed or considered at Castlegate or Newport Leisure Park?*

Castlegate's roof structure is suitable and such installations are considered during maintenance, but at Newport Leisure Park, tenants are responsible for their own energy costs, so solar panels would not benefit the council directly.

- *Regarding the £109k car parks overspend, are we predicting a further budget cost with the 2 new enforcement officers?*

Officers clarified that the overspend is mainly due to reduced penalty notice income, not pay-and-display, and recruitment is underway to restore enforcement capacity, aiming to resolve the issue. The total number of enforcement officers will be six after recruitment.

- *Has there been any analysis of the Tour Of Britain's value to local businesses?*

The Tour of Britain provides an economic impact report, which will be shared when available, though it might not detail impacts by specific area within Monmouthshire.

- *Can we have an update on Innovation House? Is there the possibility for it to be used by the training department?*

It was clarified that training uses part of the ground floor for courses, reducing costs by avoiding external venue hire, but the building still has other tenants and this is an interim solution.

- *Is Innovation House included in resources reporting and are underspends due to vacancies or other factors?*

The Cabinet Member and officers confirmed that assets like Innovation House are managed corporately within landlord services and reported under the broader resources portfolio.

- *Can tenants at Spytt Park and Newport Leisure Park be encouraged to install solar panels?*

Tenants are responsible for their own buildings and would need to weigh the lease length against installation costs, but the council can support tenants interested in renewables. Previous attempts to install and sell energy to tenants were not financially viable for the council. **Action: Peter Davies to discuss with Nick Keyse and provide a written response back to the committee**

- *Is the council now "right-sized" after previous budget restrictions? What about the impact on staff well-being?*

It was explained that staffing levels are low compared to benchmarks, creating pressures, but the council actively monitors staff well-being and offers support through occupational health, informal groups, and training. The process of right-sizing is ongoing and continually monitored.

- *How does the council determine the appropriate number of staff in social care compared to other areas, and how would this be explained to residents given the significant impact of social care services?*

Staffing levels are based on council-set budgets and service demand, with adjustments made annually through budget pressures and savings. Not all service delivery is by directly employed staff, as some is outsourced, and staffing needs are continually reviewed using service intelligence and demand modelling.

- *Is the council strict enough in enforcing parking penalties, especially for persistent offenders, and whether external debt collection is used?*

A fully resourced enforcement team is being recruited, technology solutions are being explored, and there is a service agreement with another authority for debt recovery.

- *How do we manage supply teaching costs and could the council use in-house or part-time teachers to reduce expenses?*

It was explained that schools often have insurance for supply cover, the council is exploring its own scheme, and advice is given to schools to insure against these costs.

- *Are new comprehensive schools making full use of their facilities for income generation?*

Schools have shared use agreements with leisure centres, and while rental opportunities exist, there are limitations due to supervision and management requirements.

- *Noting the overspend in school transport, the importance of communicating that the council supports pupils without safe routes needs to be stressed.*

This point was acknowledged. The Member suggested reviewing insurance thresholds for supply cover to ensure schools benefit from their policies.

- *Why has the social care budget increased by 22% over two years, which is higher than inflation, and how can this be explained to residents given ongoing savings targets?*

Officers responded that budget lines can change due to service transfers (e.g., housing and homelessness moving into social care), new policy initiatives from Welsh Government with additional funding, and increased demand for high-need care, especially post-pandemic. It was emphasised that the rise is due to a combination of new responsibilities, policy changes, and higher demand, not just inflation.

- *Can you explain the use of the contingency fund to cover the shortfall in National Insurance funding and how further contingencies would be managed?*

The contingency fund is being fully used for this purpose, and future mitigation will rely on financial discipline, maximising grant and income opportunities, and using capital receipts.

- *What are the reasons for rising high-cost care packages, and what is the relationship with the health service?*

Increased complexity and longevity of care needs, demographic changes, and higher thresholds for health-funded care have led to more costly social care packages. There are ongoing discussions with health services about eligibility and funding boundaries.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Members and officers for the report and their responses. The report was moved.

5. Chief Officer for Social Care AMR - To scrutinise the progress and strategic direction for the service area.

Jane Rodgers introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Ian Chandler, Diane Corrister and Jenny Jenkins:

- *74% of care leavers in employment, education, or training, means there are 26% who are not – is this typical or a cause for concern?*

Officers explained that the actual numbers are small, percentages can be skewed, and there are legitimate reasons (such as parenting or health issues) for some not being engaged. They emphasised ongoing support and tracking for all care leavers, with some entering employment or education later.

- *Why is the number of adults using direct payments not increasing, given their perceived benefits?*

While direct payments are encouraged, they are not suitable for everyone due to the responsibilities involved. Some people explore the option but decide against it, and there is expected to be an increase in uptake due to recent changes in domiciliary care commissioning.

- *Where is “staff churn” greatest, is it among professionally qualified staff or other roles?*

Most turnover occurs in direct services (domiciliary care, reablement, residential), while professionally qualified and leadership roles are harder to recruit for but have less “churn”. Each area faces different recruitment and retention challenges.

- *How are people supported in managing direct payments, and how do we mitigate against potential risks such as coercive control or fraud? What about monitoring, payroll, and safeguarding for vulnerable recipients?*

The council retains responsibility for reviewing care and support needs, offers managed bank accounts and payroll services to handle tax and National Insurance, and provides dedicated direct payment advisors. Social workers continue oversight, and mechanisms are in place to minimise the administrative burden and protect recipients.

- *Why is positive feedback from adult social care surveys lower than during or before COVID, and is there any understanding of this trend?*

Officers explained that satisfaction can be influenced by various factors (e.g., waiting times, changes in workers, unmet expectations), and while disappointing, the service focusses on workforce training, communication, and quality assurance to address these issues.

- *Is learning from the recent changes in domiciliary care commissioning in the South being applied to the North and Central areas?*

A full review with partners is pending, but interim lessons include improving communication with providers and residents, and adapting approaches to local provider landscapes. Officers emphasised the importance of engaging providers and supporting operational teams.

- *What is the general learning from the significant number of complaints, and have there been any resulting changes?*

Officers noted that complaints provide detailed insights, with communication being a recurring theme. The service is working to improve communication, especially around financial advice and legal processes, and ensures staff are trained to handle complex interactions.

- *A discrepancy in the reported numbers of looked after children was noted.*

The observation was acknowledged and officers committed to checking and correcting the figures.

- *A member suggested ensuring social worker support is in place before major changes and involving local councillors as advocates for isolated residents.*

The Chief Officer agreed to consider these points.

- *What will be the impact of Monmouthshire's growing older population and declining working-age population on future adult services demand? Should we be concerned about our ability to meet this demand? Does the replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP) make sufficient provision to address demographic imbalance?*

Officers acknowledged the challenge, explaining that service redesign focuses on prevention, early intervention, and reablement to manage increased demand. They noted the importance of housing strategy and attracting younger people and care workers, but emphasised that shifting demographics is a long-term issue. The RLDP aims to create more affordable housing to retain younger residents and care workers, but this is a gradual process.

- *The Chair highlighted discrepancies in reported workforce numbers between infographics and the main report, requesting clarification. He emphasised the importance of workforce grants and expressed concern about the potential risk of future grant cuts. Referencing recent national figures on the cost of looked after children, he noted that Monmouthshire's per-child cost appears lower, and asked for clarification on average costs. He commended improvements in children's services response times and adult social care metrics, such as reduced waiting lists and unfilled care hours, and thanked the team for these achievements.*

Chair's Summary:

The Chair expressed appreciation for the extensive and excellent work carried out daily by social care colleagues across the county, noting that most are working in the community rather than in the council building. He emphasised the high value and gratitude felt by the committee for both frontline staff and officers, acknowledging that this may not always be apparent during scrutiny sessions. He highlighted the usefulness of including case studies and graphical data in the report, making the service more accessible and understandable for councillors and residents. He encouraged wider sharing of the report to help residents understand how council tax funds are spent and

to raise awareness of the positive impact of social care services. He recognised the significant effort involved in producing the report and thanked the officers. The report was moved.

6. Safeguarding Annual Report - To scrutinise the performance of safeguarding arrangements.

Jane Rodgers introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Diane Corrister, Jessica Scarisbrick and Cabinet Member Ian Chandler:

- *Regarding the emergence of harmful sexual behaviour in schools, is the increase due to actual incidents or a greater awareness and reporting? Are influences like online content or post-COVID effects factors? Does the topic warrant further scrutiny?*

Officers responded that there is both increased awareness and a real rise in incidents, with online influences and post-COVID complexities contributing. They explained that improved training and reporting have made the issue more visible, and that multi-agency groups are working to address it in schools.

Action: to ask for a specific update in the Chief Officer's Director's Report

- *Can we have clarification on the "other" and "inappropriate conduct" categories in practitioner concerns, especially considering their significant proportion compared to specific abuse categories?*

It was explained that "other" refers to concerns in a practitioner's personal life (e.g., substance misuse outside work), while "inappropriate conduct" covers behaviours not fitting other categories, such as verbal abuse. Officers agreed to consider further breakdowns.

- *The improvement in sharing one-page profiles with transport staff is to be commended. How many cases has this change reduced from?*

The team acknowledged the improvement in transport cases but did not have the previous case numbers on hand, offering to follow up if needed.

- *Do the amber ratings in the action plan relate to actions not visible in the main report?*

Some amber actions are ongoing or have moved into the next cycle; there is a separately linked action plan document for further details.

- *Should the safeguarding report be explicitly called a "self-evaluation" report, given that it focusses more on strengths and less on weaknesses, and should it include more feedback from service users?*

Officers acknowledged the point about self-evaluation, explaining that the report is benchmarked against regional and national frameworks and external inspection findings, and agreed to clarify this in future reports.

- *There is an apparent link between rising permanent exclusions in schools and knife carrying – is this a genuine correlation or just a passing reference?*

Knife carrying is a national and local issue but is not the sole factor in exclusions. Officers offered to consult education and youth offending colleagues for more detailed data to confirm any correlation – **ACTION**

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and officers for this report and their responses. The report was moved.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Plan.

Councillor Bond reminded officers of her suggestion to add a 'completed' column to the Planner. Officers will follow up again with Democratic Services colleagues – **ACTION**

8. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Work Programme and Action List.

Councillor Bond requested clarification as to why the Economy, Employment and Skills Strategy action plan update is not on the Council and Cabinet Work Planner – **ACTION**

9. To confirm the minutes of the previous meetings:

- 9a. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee – 9th July 2025 (Special Meeting).
- 9b. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee – 15th July 2025 (Ordinary Meeting).

The minutes were confirmed.

10. Date of Next Meeting

Tuesday 18th November 2025 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 1.13 pm.