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Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk on Tuesday, 18th November, 2025 at 10.00 am

| Councillors Present | Officers in Attendance |
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| County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair) | Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer for Resources |
| County Councillors: Jill Bond, Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ben Callard and Ann Webb | 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 Kate Thompson, Corporate Health & Safety Manager Annette Evans, Customer Relations Manager Stacey Jones, Performance/Finance and Resources Manager Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services Manager Dave Loder, Finance Manager - Directorate Management Accountant Tyrone Stokes, Finance Manager Rhys James, Strategic Procurement Lead |

APOLOGIES: Councillors Steven Garratt and Angela Sandles - C. Werrett

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. 2025/26 Revenue Budget - Financial Update - To scrutinise the budgetary position for services falling within the committee's remit

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report with Jonathan Davies and answered the members' questions with Nicola Wellington, Jane Rodgers and Will McLean:

What is the impact of higher-than-expected interest rates on council finances, noting projections that rates may decrease soon, and how significant might any changes be over the next few months?

Any changes in interest rates in the coming months would have minimal effect on the current financial year, as most forecasts already account for expected reductions. The main concern is the cost of borrowing, which is linked to gilt yields rather than directly to the Bank rate. Most of the council's borrowing is at fixed long-term rates, so only a small portion is exposed to short-term rate changes. The approach is balanced to manage risk, not overly cautious or exposed.

What specific interventions are being taken with the most at-risk schools in deficit, and when is the number of schools in deficit expected to decrease?

The council is working with schools to address both in-year and cumulative deficits, prioritizing stabilizing annual budgets before reducing the overall deficit. The largest pressures are in the Abergavenny cluster and the Pupil Referral Service, with recovery plans in place and ongoing collaboration. Funding increases and savings are being pursued, but changes will be gradual to avoid negative educational impacts. Officers added that deficits may worsen before improving due to the academic year structure, but recovery plans are being monitored monthly, and last year's £1 million investment is helping.

How is the council addressing structural deficits versus in-year overspends, and what is considered the minimum safe level of usable reserves for financial resilience?

The council aims to keep emergency reserves at 5% of the net revenue budget, which is the minimum safe level, and is working to rebuild earmarked reserves for medium-term resilience.

Which budget modelling category is highest risk and what mitigation plans exist if risks worsen?

The highest risk in budget modelling is service demand, especially in social care, homelessness, and additional learning needs, which have been more volatile than traditional risks like pay or inflation. The council remains flexible in its modelling to adapt to changing assumptions.

Is the Welsh Government's Pathways of Care Transformation Grant expected to fund additional services or simply cover shortfalls to maintain current service levels, and what expectations do ministers and civil servants have for additionality?

The grant is intended to support system-wide capacity, with an emphasis on hospital discharge, but recognizes that maintaining whole-system capacity is necessary. The grant supports both increased discharge and broader system needs, with quarterly monitoring and reporting to Welsh Government.

What is the plan and timeline for robustly evidencing savings from the social care practice change programme, and what will be done if the full savings cannot be achieved?

Reviews are ongoing and savings are being made, but the specific savings from practice change have not yet been separately identified; they are reflected in the overall adult social care position.

What are the "red line" triggers for the council to intervene directly in a school's financial management, beyond supporting and monitoring recovery plans, and are any schools close to these thresholds?

Intervention would occur if a school lost budgetary control or failed to execute agreed recovery plans, potentially leading to a warning notice and withdrawal of budget delegation. This has happened once before, but currently no schools are at that threshold, though close monitoring is ongoing for the Pupil Referral Service and King Henry VIII School.

What will be the impact of school deficit recovery plans in the classroom, are the issues due to management or unavoidable needs like pupil referral services, and what about increasing behavioural and emotional needs among students i.e. there being a more proactive, preventative support?

The Pupil Referral Service is addressing increased and more complex needs post-pandemic, with three main service areas (PRU, EOTAS, ALN bespoke). Emotional literacy support (ELSA) remains important, but the level of need is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels. Budget recovery may sometimes result in staff reductions, but decisions are made by governing bodies. It is agreed that more preventative work is needed to address root causes before students require intensive support; the broader societal challenge is acknowledged.

Is the passenger transport overspend entirely due to unsafe routes, and can you clarify other areas contributing to the overspend?

The overspend is indeed mainly due to identifying more unsafe routes to school and reinstating passenger transport as committed during the review process.

Regarding street lighting being on budget, what is the role of dimmable technology – has it provided savings, and is it to be rolled out across the county? Why are lights no longer turned off at midnight, given dark skies initiatives?

The lights-off policy was reversed for safety reasons. A written response will need to be provided on dimmable technology – **ACTION: to provide a written response**

Does the National Insurance shortfall exclude schools or is it purely for MCC non-schools?

The shortfall includes schools, with additional costs forecast for the year and a funding gap that will be carried as a pressure moving forward.

Is it possible to have a 'ballpark' figure for the council's dependency on grants?

The council budgets for a level of specific grants, noting the nuance that many grants are directly passed to other agencies, such as acting as an agent for Welsh Government for certain services. – **ACTION: Officers to clarify and provide a 'ballpark' figure for the Council's dependency on grants, including breakdowns of core funding, at-risk funding, and agent-distributed grants.**

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their continuing work and their responses to the members' questions. The report was moved.

4. Medium-term Financial Plan Update - To review the budgetary situation

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report with Jonathan Davies and answered the members' questions with Nicola Wellington, Will McLean, and Jane Rodgers:

How many schools submitted recovery plans by October half term and how many were returned for improvement?

All required recovery plans were submitted by October half term, reviewed internally, and monitored monthly. Plans are not rewritten if targets are missed; schools are asked to adjust future years to meet commitments.

What is the typical time horizon for recovery plans, and do schools with high deficits face structural financial challenges?

Recovery plans are tailored to each school, aiming for robust and sustainable financial discipline without disruptive changes. Support is provided to allow gradual recovery while minimising impact on pupils.

How can council be assured that adult social care practice change savings are having an effect, and how many care packages have been reduced through the review process?

The practice change programme is complex, focused on responding to rising demand and using resources effectively. Savings are reflected in the bottom line, but isolating specific figures is challenging due to dynamic needs and changes in care delivery. Reviews are ongoing, and a more detailed allocation will be available later in the year.

How much does the review process look holistically at each individual's situation?

The approach is indeed holistic, considering well-being outcomes, carer support, community connections, and assistive technology, not just formal care.

What is the projected number of residential placements by year end and next year, given the rise in dementia and complex care?

The council is predicting three new placements per month based on recent trends, but this is unpredictable and may be affected by winter pressures. The rise is linked to an ageing population and increasing complexity of needs.

What proportion of rising legal costs in children's services are avoidable, and what alternative legal support models have been considered?

The council has tried commissioning external legal support, but it increased costs. In-house advocacy is used where possible, and further analysis is planned to identify cost-saving opportunities. Some costs are mandated by the courts and not fully controllable. *What is the split between Welsh Government funding and Council tax for the county, how does this compare to the Welsh average, and could the Local Development Plan (LDP) and affordable housing affect this ratio?*

The average split in Wales is roughly 70% Welsh Government funding and 30% Council tax, but Monmouthshire relies more on Council tax. The ratio is affected by various factors, including discounts, exemptions, and development bandings. The LDP and affordable housing could influence future assumptions, but the area is complex and modelled prudently.

How will the Cabinet Member ensure that savings and transformation plans over the next few years are genuinely realistic and deliverable, given that only about 80% of planned savings were delivered last year and many services are already at statutory minimums? What criteria are used to decide if a transformational saving is robust enough to be included in the budget, and will scrutiny have the opportunity to test these assumptions?

The Cabinet Member acknowledged the challenge, noting that savings targets have been difficult, but the council has achieved a higher rate (around 92%) so far this year. Savings proposals are scrutinised through the budget consultation process, including scrutiny committees, which will continue to have the opportunity to challenge the robustness and deliverability of proposals.

What is the council's strategy for reducing reliance on capital receipts and borrowing, given that capital receipts are forecast to fall sharply, and how will the council maintain investment in essential assets without letting them deteriorate?

The council is tapering off the use of capital receipts to support the revenue budget, aiming for zero by 2028/29. The pool of receipts is diminishing and will only be replenished through the replacement Local Development Plan. Capital investment will be prioritised based on risk and affordability, with technical assessments guiding decisions. Borrowing will be required for investments above core funding, and the council is assessing the long-term impact and prioritisation of needs.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for the report and their responses to the members' questions, with the members welcoming efforts to deliver more customer-focused, efficient services. The report was moved.

5. Annual Health and Safety report - To scrutinise the report on how the Council's health and safety incidents and risks are managed

Kate Thompson introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Matthew Gatehouse:

Is the high rate of workdays lost due to sickness in Monmouthshire County Council (over double the national average) a trend seen in other local authorities, and what more is being done to address this figure?

Comparative data is hard to obtain, but Caerphilly recently reported a similar high figure. The council is continuing to seek Wales-wide data.

Is any particular directorate most affected by high sickness rates e.g. social care?

Social Care is among the directorates most affected and there have been recent meetings with managers and HR to analyse data and develop action plans to reduce sickness absence.

When will the health and safety dashboard be shared, and does the data include residents using council facilities, as well as staff?

The dashboard is in development and should be ready by year-end after consultation. The data includes staff, contractors, and customers using facilities, but only incidents where the work activity or premises contributed are classified as work-related. All incidents are recorded, but only work-related ones are reported in the figures.

Can you explain the use of the term "psychological illness" versus "mental health," and what is being done about mental health, including stress management courses and linking stress to workload and budget cuts?

"Psychological illness" is the HR classification and covers a range of conditions (anxiety, stress, depression, etc.), with more detailed breakdowns available. Connect 5 well-being training has been rolled out, initially in social care, with plans to expand it council-wide. Managers will be expected to conduct stress risk assessments, which will help identify and address work-related stress factors, including workload.

What is being done about the root cause of the increase in violence against teachers by learners, and is the council addressing behaviour and emotional regulation in young people?

The officer's focus is on supporting affected staff and ensuring reliable data. The Wales directorate team handles child-related issues, including risk assessments and specialist support. The officer meets regularly with safeguarding and directorate colleagues to coordinate support for both staff and pupils.

What is an example of a non-work-related incident? Can we emphasise the importance of linking stress management to work planning?

For example, a child tripping over their laces in a playground would not be work-related unless a workplace factor (like a pothole) contributed. Stress risk assessments will help identify work planning issues.

Is "psychological illness" as a category too broad, and should workplace-related stress should be separated from medically diagnosed conditions? How can the council better support individuals and improve reporting to distinguish between these causes?

Every case is treated individually, and new reporting categories now separate workplace stress from personal factors, with initial data showing about 20% of stress is workplace-related, 10% is mixed, and 70% is due to factors outside work – **ACTION: for officers to pick up with the member outside the meeting to explore improved identification and support.**

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the report and their responses. The report was moved.

6. Social Services Complaints Process - To scrutinise the performance of the Council's complaints process, and issues raised by it

Annette Evans introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jane Rodgers:

Is the statutory 25 working day period for Stage 2 complaints reasonable, what drives delays (complexity, capacity, workflow), and why does poor communication remain a recurring theme? What about actions to address inaccurate assessments and procedural failures, and how can learning from complaints lead to measurable change rather than repeated commitments?

The 25-day timescale is very tight due to the need to commission independent investigators, coordinate with complainants and staff, and the complexity of cases—this has been raised with Welsh Government. Communication issues often arise because social workers are not always available to respond quickly, and capacity is a factor. Inaccurate assessments are sometimes a matter of complainant perspective versus professional judgment; Stage 2 complaints are often complex, sometimes adversarial, and while minor inaccuracies do occur, the council aims for accuracy but operates under challenging circumstances.

How confident is the council that children know how to complain and feel safe to do so, what work is done in schools and with youth services to promote the process, and how does the council test that young people understand their rights and can access advocacy?

For children looked after and those in child protection, there is an active offer of advocacy, which is recorded in the system. Issue-based advocacy is available at any point, and social workers are encouraged to build strong relationships so children feel comfortable raising concerns. The council works closely with NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service), which reports on its activity and sits on the corporate parenting

panel. While most complaints come from parents, the council aims to ensure children know how to complain and can access support if needed.

Does the council benchmark its complaints performance against other local authorities and does it learn from other authorities' approaches, for example, in improving communication?

The council participates in an all-Wales Complaints Officer Group, meets quarterly, and shares data and approaches with other authorities and the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. The council provides regular statistics to the Ombudsman, who publishes comparative data online, allowing anyone to see how different authorities perform and the types of complaints they receive. The member's request that some of this benchmarking information be included in future reports for transparency is noted.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for their thorough answers, noting the report gives the public a good overview of the service's challenges. The report was moved.

7. ADDITIONAL BUSINESS: To note and refer any questions arising: Socially Responsible Procurement Strategy update - To scrutinise the steps the Council will take to implement the Socially Responsible Procurement

Questions from members will be sent to Cath Fallon, Rhys James and Councillor Callard for a response – **ACTION**

8. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

Councillor Bond asked about the Panel Performance Assessment. Matthew Gatehouse explained that the Panel Performance Assessment is a statutory requirement under the Local Government and Elections Act 2021, requiring local authorities in Wales to appoint an independent chair and a panel of peers once every five years to review the effectiveness of their arrangements. This supplements the annual self-assessment process. Monmouthshire County Council's first assessment is scheduled for February 2026, and a report will be made available to the committee for information.

9. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Work Plan and Action List

Officers noted that, where possible, meetings will henceforth only feature two substantive items, with Additional Business as an option for extras. Officers drew members' attention to the Education items coming to People on 21st January, to which committee members will be invited. Members are happy to receive the Risk Assessment report every 6 months (perhaps best under Additional Business).

Councillor Bond raised the need to review the grants allocation process, referencing previous issues from the Call-in earlier in the year and noting that there is still SPF (Shared Prosperity Fund) money remaining, as well as upcoming Pride in Place and Impact Fund opportunities. She emphasised the importance of transparency and timely scrutiny – **ACTION: to follow up again with officers**

10. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed.

11. Next Meeting

Wednesday 3rd December 2025 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 12.41 pm.

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