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Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Wednesday, 3rd December, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: John Crook, Meirion Howells, M. Newell, Paul Pavia and Peter Strong

C. Werrett

Also in attendance County Councillors:

Paul Griffiths, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Planning & Economic Development and Catrin Maby, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and the Environment

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Graham Kinsella, Traffic and Road Safety Manager
Sueanne Sandford, Highway Asset Street Works Team Manager
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
James Woodcock, Business Insights Manager
Christopher Mitchell, MCC Group Engineer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Steven Garratt and Jill Bond

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Economy, Employment and Skills Strategy action plan update

Hannah Jones, James Woodcock and Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will McLean:

How can Monmouthshire's economy be described as "working to full capacity" while also suggesting it could be "more vibrant"?

"Full capacity" refers to high employment levels, strong business occupancy (particularly in industrial spaces), and a highly qualified workforce. However, achieving greater vibrancy would require additional people and more industrial space to support further growth.

What is behind the increase in NEETs? Was it predictable, due to more children with complex needs, or was it unexpected?

The rise is multifaceted. It reflects increased complexity of needs, the impact of COVID-19 on secondary education, and challenges in post-16 provision – particularly around Level 2 qualifications and transport in Monmouth. Work is ongoing to broaden post-16 options and improve early identification tools. Recent data shows a reduction in NEET numbers, with final figures still pending.

It was noted that while the unemployment rate is low (2.8%), about 20% of Monmouthshire's working-age population is economically inactive, which is only slightly below the UK average. It is important not to overlook this group, as one in five adults aged 16-64 are not working despite being able to. Should the council consider how to support and engage them?

There are ongoing efforts to support economically inactive cohorts into work, with new programmes like Connect to Work with DWP, and the need for bespoke support. 29.4% of the inactive are students

(higher than the Wales average), 18% are long-term sick (lower than Wales/GB averages), and 25% are retired (almost double the rate elsewhere), indicating that students and retirees make up a significant portion of the inactive group.

Why have business numbers fallen from 4,575 to 4,445, and has the council evaluated the long-term sustainability of business support after the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) ends? Which programmes depend on SPF, and what are the plans for sustaining them after March 2026?

The council is working with internal and regional partners to understand the transition from SPF to the new Local Growth Fund, which is currently under consultation. There is no direct read-across, and some projects may need to be refocused. An impact assessment of SPF-supported work is underway and will be shared with the committee.

What is being done to improve extremely patchy rural broadband, which remains a critical barrier for businesses?

The officers will take this question away and provide a written response, as it is not directly within their remit. – **ACTION**

What is the impact of the 180-day rule on sustaining tourism businesses in Monmouthshire?

A research project is underway to assess the impact of the 180-day rule, which will inform lobbying efforts with Welsh Government, but the question will be referred to tourism colleagues for a fuller written response. – **ACTION**

What interventions could reduce the rise in Universal Credit claimants aged 18-24 (from 441 to 729), and what proportion cite transport barriers?

A pilot with DWP offers a 12-week programme for young Universal Credit claimants, focusing on barriers such as confidence, skills, and health. Employer engagement is part of the support. Transport is frequently cited as a barrier, and cohorts are run in different locations to address this.

How can the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programme in schools be strengthened, and how can employers be encouraged to participate?

The STEM programme is in its early stages, with professional learning for staff, cluster leads for sustainability, and active engagement with employers and private sector partners to make the programme self-sustaining.

What factors have contributed to the recent decline in the number of active enterprises in Monmouthshire, and have any been identified that could help reverse the trend?

It is difficult to attribute the decline to any single factor. Business numbers have fluctuated over time, rising before COVID and increasing again post-pandemic. Further analysis will be carried out to identify any specific causes.

What targeted measures are planned to reduce the significant earning disparity between male and female workers?

Exploratory work is underway, including women-in-business events and discussions with employers about flexible working. The council's own policies also aim to address the gender pay gap.

Have any skill shortages been identified in Monmouthshire, and what is being done to address them, including future improvement plans?

The council has engaged with major local businesses to identify skills gaps, which vary by sector but commonly include technical, software, communication, and digital skills. Work is ongoing to collate this information, and succession planning is a noted issue. The council aims to further develop this assessment over the next year.

Is the higher number of young people not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) in Monmouth linked to public transport issues, and what can be done to help given Monmouth's limited transport options?

Transport barriers, such as limited bus services to Hereford and Newport, place a burden on young people and can lead to disengagement if transport is missed. Expanding post-16 provision within local schools, especially at Level 2 and vocational Level 3, is seen as a way to help retain students and reduce reliance on external further education providers.

How can workplace education (e.g., NVQ up to Level 7) be promoted as an alternative to university?

The officers acknowledged the importance of workplace education and agreed on the need to broaden course options in local schools to reduce transport barriers and support young people's aspirations.

How is the governance and monitoring of the Economy, Employment and Skills (EES) strategy being managed now that delivery is distributed across multiple other strategies, and is there a plan for a single dashboard or scorecard with KPIs, baselines, targets, and RAG status?

There is a comprehensive spreadsheet that currently tracks interdependencies, and the team is open to developing a RAG assessment for future reporting. There is agreement on the importance of reviewing indicators, and this exercise will be undertaken.

What tangible evidence demonstrates the benefits and value delivered to Monmouthshire from its financial contributions to the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR), and has any detailed analysis been done?

Regular reports on CCR activities are provided to full Council, and future reports will include quantifiable information. Examples of CCR impact include investments in compound semiconductors and support for medical technology firms, though more detailed reporting is acknowledged as necessary. – **ACTION: the Cabinet Member to liaise with the Leader about including quantifiable benefits in the quarterly report to council**

Chair's Summary:

The Chair concluded that, despite the low unemployment rate, the council should not be complacent and should continue to explore ways to add value and address the needs of the economically inactive. He emphasised the need for a reality check when comparing Monmouthshire's economic competitiveness, noting that while it ranks second in Wales, it is 79th out of 152 in the UK and the UK itself is 30th out of 38 OECD countries, urging the council to focus on raising its game rather than just outperforming local peers. The Chair highlighted the significant economic impact of tourism (£352 million in 2024) and questioned what is being done to support this sector given current challenges. The development of Placemaking Plans was welcomed by the members as a positive way to engage local residents and address local needs. The Chair expressed concern that the report may not fully reflect the challenges faced by businesses, especially in high streets and hospitality, and suggested this should be considered before the report goes to Cabinet. On the matter of any failed CCR procurement, the Chair suggested that such issues be addressed in future council reports to ensure transparency and confidence. He thanked the officers and Cabinet Member for their responses, and the report was moved.

3. Potholes and Road Conditions

Carl Touhig delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Christopher Mitchell, Sueanne Sandford, Cabinet Member Catrin Maby, and Graham Kinsella:

Why is there no project plan for major roadworks, and could visibility of the various stages help to manage expectations and improve communication with residents and businesses?

Publishing a detailed programme of work can create unrealistic expectations because plans often change due to factors such as ecology checks or storm damage. However, there is a commitment to improve communication by sharing available plans for major works and engaging with communities earlier, while making clear that changes may occur.

Who is responsible for the A40 in Monmouth, particularly when traffic lights fail, and how should such incidents be handled?

Responsibility for the A40 lies with SWTRA, but some traffic lights may fall under MCC's network. Both teams would respond to incidents, and the police should be the first point of contact for immediate safety. Further investigation can be carried out if specific details are provided.

Are there alternatives to temporary pothole repairs that could provide more permanent solutions and save money in the long term?

Temporary repairs are used for immediate safety and are cost-effective, but the team also undertakes patching and permanent repairs when possible. Materials are chosen for quick installation and minimal

disruption, and engineering expertise is applied to incorporate permanent fixes into wider maintenance programmes.

What qualifies as a pothole, and could addressing smaller defects earlier help to prevent bigger issues?

Potholes and defects are categorised based on road hierarchy and defect size. The urgency and response depend on location and severity, with higher priority given to defects on main roads or in wheel tracks.

Is there an annual work plan for clearing drains, given that blocked drains can worsen potholes, especially in winter?

Drainage is handled reactively due to resource constraints, with no scheduled preventive maintenance. Blocked gullies are addressed when reported, and residents can help by clearing leaf litter from gully tops.

Is the budget split equally between roads and pavements, considering the extensive lengths of both?

The budget is not split equally. There is a long list of pavement works, but funding is capped. Pavement condition analysis is ongoing, and active travel funding is used where possible, particularly in targeted areas like Chepstow.

How can issues with unadopted highways and open manholes be resolved, given the difficulty in identifying ownership and ensuring safety?

Specific cases can be investigated if details are provided. The approach involves working with enforcement and legal teams to resolve ownership and address safety concerns. It is important to use the MyMon app or Council services to report issues, as this helps to prioritise and track repairs.

Is the increased weight of electric vehicles (300-500 kg heavier than combustion vehicles) being monitored for its impact on road conditions, and is there any research on this?

The issue is recognised, and monitoring is underway for technical notes and failures, particularly at junctions, as the situation evolves. Relevant findings will be shared as they become available. It is also noted that some roads lack modern foundations, which affects maintenance.

Does pothole monitoring and prioritisation take into account risks to cyclists, especially on rural roads, and should signage or other measures be considered for cyclist safety?

Inspectors are instructed to consider all road users, including cyclists, when assessing defects. Repairs are prioritised on routes heavily used by cyclists or for active travel. While signage is used in some cases, the preference is to fix hazards quickly rather than rely on signs.

How does the Council balance residents' concerns about potholes and degraded roads with limited budgets and prioritisation of social care, and is this balance communicated effectively?

The issue reflects a long-term accumulation due to constrained public budgets and prioritisation of social services and education. Monmouthshire faces particular challenges as a rural county within a regional funding structure, alongside the impact of climate change and the need for significant infrastructure investment. Efforts are ongoing to raise these concerns with regional and national bodies, and cross-party understanding is emphasised.

At what point do recurring potholes in the same location trigger a permanent repair or further investigation?

When potholes are repeatedly reported through the official My Council Services system, the location is flagged for a more permanent fix. If both temporary and permanent repairs fail, further investigation is carried out to identify underlying issues. Reporting through the official system rather than by email ensures this process is followed.

How is public awareness being raised about the Highway Code changes giving pedestrians priority at junctions?

The guidance has changed to give pedestrians priority at junctions, but behaviour change is challenging. Welsh Government is consulting on introducing simple zebra crossings at minor junctions, which could be implemented in the future to reinforce pedestrian priority.

Could there be a review of how frequent problem locations on smaller rural roads—especially those with blocked drains, culverts, and ditches—are managed, given their impact on flooding and access?

Over the past two to three years, teams have improved pre-emptive action before heavy rain by clearing known problem culverts and drainage points. A list of about 100-120 such locations is maintained and can be shared with councillors to help prioritise. Some issues fall under landowner responsibility (riparian ownership), but the Council works with them to resolve problems where possible. – **ACTION: to provide the list**

Chair's Summary:

The Chair and members thanked the officers present and wider team for their sterling work in dealing with the recent flooding. Thank you to the officers and Cabinet Member for the presentation and responses today. – **ACTION: to provide the presentation to members**

4. ADDITIONAL BUSINESS: Planning Annual Performance Report

Any questions to be emailed to officers for a subsequent response.

5. ADDITIONAL BUSINESS: Community & Corporate Plan progress update

Any questions to be emailed to officers for a subsequent response.

6. Next Meeting : 27th January 2026 (Special) at 2pm and 10th February 2026 at 10am

Members were reminded about the forthcoming invitation to People Committee on 21st January for Education items, and that members can view the Cabinet and Council Planner at any time by following the link on the Democratic Services page of the Hub. It was agreed at the last Scrutiny Chairs meeting that the draft budget proposals in the new year will be tabled to Performance & Overview only, but with the invitation to be issued to all members.

The meeting ended at **12.39 pm**

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