

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Wednesday, 21st January, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jackie Strong (Chair)
County Councillor Sue Riley, (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler,
Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth,
Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley,
Martyn Groucutt, Jill Bond, M. Newell, Paul Pavia
and Peter Strong substituting for Maria Stevens

Also in attendance County Councillors: Jill Bond,
Martin Newell, Paul Pavia

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Wendy Barnard, Democratic Services Officer
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and
Attainment
Suzanne Challenger, Lead Education Welfare
Officer
Sonia Morgan, Support Officer - Elect Home
Educated Pupils

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Maria Stevens, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells and Alistair Neill

1. Declarations of Interest.

None.

2. Public Open Forum.

None.

3. Elective Home Education - To scrutinise the performance report (the policy is delayed). Report to follow.

Items 4 and 5 considered at the same time.

Sharon Randall-Smith delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Sonia Morgan and Suzanne Challenger:

Is an annual visit enough for Elective Home Education (EHE) learners?

Annual visits are formal welfare and curriculum checks, but enrichment activities throughout the year provide additional opportunities to see children and families regularly. Newly deregistered learners receive an initial visit, followed by an annual visit about three months later, and ongoing contact is maintained via email or phone.

How long do annual visits last?

Visit duration varies, lasting from one to three hours depending on the family's needs and the information they wish to share.

Is one dedicated officer enough given the increased number of EHE learners, and when will the limit be reached?

The significant increase in EHE numbers is acknowledged. The wider EWS team is currently supporting EHE work, with hopes to increase capacity in the near future.

Do enrichment activities allow for deeper assessment, and is a true picture of problem families obtained with only one hour a year? Would more time be ideal?

Enrichment activities are valuable for building relationships and observing children in different settings, but the primary focus is ensuring that children are safe, happy, and developing necessary skills, rather than formal assessment.

What percentage of families attend the enrichment activities?

Attendance is very high. While no exact percentage was given, the response indicates that enrichment activities are “really well attended by pretty much most families.” The high attendance is attributed to strong relationships with families in Monmouthshire.

Are the enrichment activities optional?

Yes. Enrichment activities are entirely optional. Nothing is compulsory, but attendance remains strong due to the good engagement and rapport with families.

What happens when parents or children will not engage with enrichment activities?

Some families can be “difficult to engage,” but these cases are rare. There is no legal right to demand to see a child solely because they are home-educated. The team still attempts to maintain communication with these families and if there are concerns, we can work with other agencies to access and check on the child and family. If there are serious concerns about the education being provided, we can issue a School Attendance Order (SAO), which would require the child to return to school. SAOs are very rare, though, largely due to the strong work the team does with families.

Are annual visits statutory (legally required)?

No, annual visits are not statutory. There is no legal power to require a child to be seen. Engagement is encouraged through positive relationships rather than legal obligation.

Can home-educated children miss out on daily social interaction and learning to mix with peers, regardless of the quality of home teaching?

Most home-educated learners in Monmouthshire attend various group activities, clubs, and enrichment opportunities, ensuring they have ample chances to socialize and build meaningful friendships. Even those in rural areas generally have good transport and are active in the community.

Can you explain the acronym NSSA?

NSSA stands for “not of statutory school age.”

How is the suitability of home education judged, and are there objective criteria like the national curriculum?

Suitability is judged by ensuring children develop literacy, numeracy, and a range of skills, but there is no set curriculum or objective criteria; many families follow the curriculum voluntarily, especially if aiming for GCSEs, but learning is tailored to each child.

What do “lifestyle or ideological” reasons mean for families opting out of schooling?

"Ideological" reasons generally refer to families believing their children are better educated outside the school system, often due to emotional or mental health needs, or to pursue specialized interests (e.g., sports). The term is more about lifestyle choice than strict ideology.

Does reporting allow for different educational philosophies and distinguish between school-based and home education standards?

The team does not compare home education directly to school standards but ensures that education is suitable and tailored; many home-educated children take GCSEs and some return to mainstream education or go to university.

What is the team's training and experience in elective home education and school education, especially regarding identifying substandard education or safeguarding issues?

The team is experienced, stays updated on different educational philosophies, and is trained in safeguarding to a high level.

Are there numbers on children who have never attended school, or have not done so for more than a year (i.e. long-term home education)?

The number of children who have never attended school is not currently available but can be provided.

– **ACTION**

How many home-educated families are single-child families, and what about potential social isolation?

Data on family composition (e.g., single-child families) is not routinely collected, but most families have siblings. The team checks for social isolation during visits and advises on community engagement if needed.

How does the team address situations where a parent's anxieties may prevent a child from attending school, even if the child wishes to return?

If a child expresses a desire to return to school, the team supports this, prioritizes pupil voice, and has facilitated returns to mainstream education when appropriate.

Are most cases of home education due to anxiety or phobias a last resort after parents become frustrated with the authority?

They are not always a last resort; parents often try various interventions in school first. Many report that their child's well-being improves after moving to home education, as it removes the source of anxiety.

What does the authority do if anxiety or phobias are identified early on, and is the goal to return the child to school?

Schools and the authority offer significant support, including mental health interventions and referrals. If a child is home educated, they can still access support services. The decision to return to school depends on the child's needs and family choice; some do return with support.

Are there still children missing from education who are "under the radar" and not known to the authority?

Yes, despite best efforts, some children remain unaccounted for, but the authority is confident they are aware of the majority and are actively tracking and supporting them.

What percentage of Year 11 home-educated learners sat GCSEs, and how does this compare to what would be expected if they were in school?

About 30% of eligible Year 11 home-educated learners sat GCSEs with the authority. This is lower than the near-universal participation expected in schools.

How does this relate to NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status, and is there tracking of long-term outcomes?

Some learners may be classified as NEET if they do not achieve qualifications, but many pursue further education and take GCSEs later. The authority does not currently track long-term outcomes but recognizes the value in doing so as numbers grow.

Is there a pattern in additional learning needs (ALN) among home-educated children, and is this linked to specific schools?

ALN is present across all schools, not concentrated in any particular one. The definition of ALN in the report may not fully reflect current criteria, as it includes perceived barriers to learning, not just formal ALN status.

What percentage of families attend enrichment activities, and are these activities optional? What happens if parents or children do not engage in these activities? Are any parts of the support compulsory, such as annual visits?

Enrichment activities are very popular and well attended by most families, but participation is optional. There is no legal right for the authority to demand to see the child, but they strive to maintain communication. If there are concerns about a child's education or welfare, the authority can work with other agencies or issue a school attendance order if necessary, though this is rare. Annual visits are offered but not compulsory by law.

The report notes higher prevalence of elective home education (EHE) in secondary schools, especially in years 10 and 11, with drivers such as emotional-based school avoidance, mental health, anxiety, trauma, and ALN. Could this also be a symptom of unmet need in mainstream education? If so, what preventative actions are being taken with secondary schools to reduce push factors into EHE?

It is acknowledged that while some students historically opt out in Years 10 and 11 due to stress, the authority has invested significantly in training for schools on inclusion, EBSA (emotionally based school avoidance), trauma-informed practice, and neurodivergence. These efforts aim to support students and maintain their school placements. However, for some, home education is still chosen for well-being reasons, especially post-pandemic.

Regarding children missing in education (CME), the policy refers to a usual four-week period for children coming off roll, but there is a risk of harm in that period. Is there a risk triage model to determine when immediate escalation is needed, and are there same-day referrals to police or children's services if required?

If safeguarding issues are raised, the team can convene an emergency multi-agency strategy meeting within hours, involving police and children's services. There is a proactive approach to risk, and escalation happens rapidly when needed.

CME requires a multi-agency approach. Are referrals from partner agencies (police, youth justice, housing) happening in a timely manner, and are there barriers to information sharing?

Information sharing is robust, with regular referrals from housing, police (via Operation Encompass), and other agencies. The team has developed a training package for all stakeholders to improve awareness and protocols. Movement of children across borders is tracked with forms and direct confirmation with other authorities to ensure no child is lost in the system.

When sending movement out of area forms to other authorities, is there confirmation that the receiving authority has picked up the referral, or could families be lost in the system?

A case is not closed until we have received confirmation from the receiving authority that they have picked up the referral and will track the child into education.

Reflecting on the historical context of the national curriculum as an entitlement for all children, is there still a concept of a core body of learning everyone should have, given the current focus on individual interests and bespoke learning?

The Welsh curriculum is now fluid and bespoke to the learner, with schools offering contextually based curricula tailored to community and pupil needs. Both school and home education aim to develop broadly similar skills to enable children to thrive and have future options.

There are concerns about looked-after children who may never have attended formal school. How is their learning directed and how they are supported to know what is important for future success, given the risk of "not knowing what you don't know."

Both school and home education systems strive to meet individual needs, and the skills developed should enable all children, including looked-after children, to participate fully in society and have opportunities for success.

What is the philosophical balance between the societal value of attending school and respecting children's and parents' choices for home education?

We acknowledge the right of parents to choose home education or school, and would emphasise that both options are valid and should equip children with the skills needed for life.

What additional data could be included in the report to help identify the root causes of increasing EHE numbers, and is there learning from other Welsh authorities regarding trends and best practices?

Monmouthshire is among the highest in Wales for EHE visits and maintains regular contact with other authorities to share best practices and compare trends.

Are schools doing enough to help young people thrive, especially regarding resilience and social-emotional learning? Is there enough proactive support before issues like bullying or anxiety arise, and is current provision (e.g., ELSA, CAMHS) sufficient?

Many interventions are in place, but some children reach a saturation point where mainstream school is no longer suitable. EHE is then considered a viable option, and while schools do all they can to support attendance and well-being, some needs may exceed available resources.

Are learning portfolios or evidence of ongoing performance maintained for EHE children to help avoid future NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status?

Most families provide comprehensive reports, photos, and evidence of learning, which are uploaded to children's files. However, a small number of families decline to share work, citing Welsh Government policy, and officers have no legal right to demand it.

Do officers have the capacity to follow up on all portfolios and ensure quality?

While most families engage and provide evidence, capacity is stretched, and some families only submit email updates. The team is considering increasing resources to meet growing demand.

What engagement do the Cabinet member and Education Director have with the EHE and CME teams, especially given increasing strain and financial pressures?

Regular monthly meetings occur with Will McLean (Chief Officer, Children and Young People) and Laura Wright (Cabinet Member) to discuss attendance, EHE, CME, and related issues. Both are kept informed about rising EHE numbers and other pressing matters.

Why was there a lack of response from the Education Director regarding EHE numbers at the last Council meeting, and can it be ensured that EHE figures are included in future annual reports to Council?

Annual reporting of EHE figures to Council will be implemented, and we note that the EHE year does not align with academic, financial, or calendar years, which complicates reporting. The team will ensure updated figures and policy changes are brought to Council annually – **RECOMMENDATION**

Are there instances where the recommended meeting between school and parents (when parents decide to home educate) does not happen, and would it be beneficial for a team member to attend these meetings?

While it is recommended for schools to meet with families before deregistration, some parents refuse as they have already made their decision. Sonia Morgan sometimes attends reintegration meetings when children return to school, but it is not standard for her to be involved before deregistration.

How is information about home-educated learners stored, and for how long is it kept?

All data is kept securely under GDPR regulations. Files are closed when a child returns to school or reaches the end of statutory school age, but records are retained within the authority's SharePoint system for at least a decade.

Regarding the CME policy, is the 15-day notification period too long, and what safeguards are in place if a child leaves a school without notice?

While 15 days can be lengthy, pupils remain on the original school roll until accepted elsewhere, and schools are expected to maintain daily contact and safeguarding checks. Schools must keep the child on roll and update the CME officer, who confirms receipt and tracks the child's status.

Are county lines or slavery considered when following up on missing children, and is this part of the remit?

Such concerns are indeed included. If children cross county lines or there are safeguarding concerns (including slavery), children's services are involved immediately, and coordination with relevant authorities continues even if children move to other countries.

What happens if access to a child is denied, and what is the process if a child is missing or not found (referencing CME policy page 32)?

If a child cannot be located, their details are uploaded to a national database (School to School system) accessible by all authorities, and the case remains open until the child is found. If not found, children's services and police are involved. If denied access during a visit, a referral is made to children's services, and joint visits with social workers are attempted, escalating to child protection if necessary.

Why does the CME policy not have an integrated impact assessment shared with the policy? Can we demonstrate that we are sure that all groups are treated equally and we are meeting the corporate plan aims by completing the risk assessment?

Apologies that there is no integrated impact assessment. So we will look at that. The policy is very much grounded in Welsh Government guidance and therefore there would have been the expectation that it would have gone through those processes. But of course we will carry that out and it will be available when it is completed.

Is there any means of assisting EHE (Elective Home Education) families with free school meals or food vouchers, given the high percentage of eligible children?

There is no financial subsidy or transfer of free school meal funds for EHE families; parents take on full financial responsibility for educational costs, including meals, when they deregister their child from mainstream school.

Have there been instances of parents taking children out of private schools to self-educate due to increased fees, and if so, how many?

This does happen, but exact figures could not be provided without checking records. There are also cases of children moving from mainstream to private education.

What is the outlook for funding for EHE after the current funding ends on March 31st?

The team is currently looking at grants for next year and anticipates that funding will continue, but there is no firm answer yet.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for their time and energy, on behalf of the members, noting how useful the reports have been.

Recommendation: that the team ensures updated figures and policy changes are brought to Council annually.

4. Children Missing Education Policy - To scrutinise the policy ahead of adoption. Report to follow.

This item considered with item 4 above.

5. People Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and Action List.

There are changes to the work programme since the agenda was published, with the next meeting including the Disability Confident Pledge and the Corporate Parenting Strategy, which is time-sensitive and will be prioritized. The Gypsy and Travellers Allocation Policy is pending confirmation and may be scheduled before other items if it becomes time-sensitive. Other items, such as the Youth Service and Public Library Strategy, have been moved down the schedule and will be confirmed later.

6. Council and Cabinet Planner.

Noted.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes were agreed, moved by Councillor Groucutt and seconded by Councillor Jones.

8. Next Meeting: Tuesday 10th February 2026.

The meeting ended at **12.29 pm**

This page is intentionally left blank