

## Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 10th March, 2026 at 10.00 am**

### **Councillors Present**

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

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

Clare Werrett

Also in attendance: County Councillor  
Laura Wright, Cabinet Member for Education

### **Officers in Attendance**

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer  
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young  
People  
Ed Pryce, Assistant Director, LA School  
Improvement Service  
Sharon Randall-Smith, Head of Achievement and  
Attainment  
Morwenna Wagstaff, Head of Service , Inclusion  
Nikki Wellington, Finance and Support Services  
Manager

**APOLOGIES:** None.

### **1. Declarations of Interest**

None.

### **2. Public Open Forum**

None.

### **3. Estyn Report - To scrutinise the findings of the latest Estyn report.**

Chief Officer Will McLean introduced the report with Cabinet Member Laura Wright and answered the members' questions:

*How can elected members better understand and respond to school deficits when they are regularly questioned by residents?*

Day-to-day management of school deficits sits with headteachers and governing bodies, but we recognise that members need clearer information in order to respond confidently to public concerns and to consider county-level policy implications. Enhanced reporting on causes of deficits and the effectiveness of interventions would help members fulfil this role and support more informed scrutiny.

*Why is the proportion of pupils identified with Additional Learning Needs higher than the Welsh average, and is this a cause for concern? Is there a risk that pupils are being over-diagnosed with ALN?*

The figure relates specifically to pupils with an Individual Development Plan, which is a tightly defined legal category. Other pupils may experience barriers to learning without meeting this threshold. Being around 2% above the Welsh average is not unusual and likely reflects a combination of factors, including strong parental advocacy. We are confident that assessments are accurate and that pupils are neither under nor over identified, with assurance provided through the work of the Inclusion team.

*What is the current position regarding industrial action and financial recovery at King Henry VIII School?*

There has already been one day of industrial action, with further days planned. While the council is working to prevent further action, the planned strike days are expected to proceed. Work has been

undertaken to provide assurance around compulsory redundancies, and staffing is being adjusted to better match pupil numbers. A recovery period has been agreed that is shorter than that referenced in the Estyn report but still extends over a significant timeframe. The approach aims to support recovery through pupil number growth rather than rapid staffing reductions, with the objective of restoring financial stability without putting pupils' education at risk, while continuing dialogue with unions and school leadership.

*Why do reports to elected members not clearly explain the reasons for individual school overspends or the impact of council intervention, and can this be improved for future scrutiny?*

Future reports can include clearer information on trends in individual school deficits or surpluses, whether recovery plans are on track, and the specific risks faced by schools. The main drivers of overspends are well understood and typically relate to staffing costs, supply cover, and decisions around provision for pupils with Additional Learning Needs. We recognise the need to demonstrate more clearly the impact of intervention, while balancing transparency with the need to avoid placing sensitive information about individual schools into the public domain. More detailed reporting is most feasible at year end.

*How significant is the overall growth in the schools deficit, and is this an isolated or system-wide issue?*

The overall schools deficit has increased rapidly over the year, rising from around £4 million to approximately £7.5-£7.6 million in the latest forecast. This is not confined to a single school but reflects system-wide financial pressures across the school estate.

*Can clearer, written information be provided setting out what is already being done to address the issues identified in the inspection? Can members be given clearer sight of the plans in place to address areas for improvement, including evaluation quality and deficits?*

Variation in evaluative quality stems from differences in how clearly services define intended outcomes at the outset. Officers are actively working on this by developing a directorate-wide plan for 2026-27 that will sit between individual service improvement plans and the Community & Corporate Plan. This plan is intended to clarify priorities and expectations and make improvement activity more explicit and coherent. An improved evaluative approach and clearer articulation of priorities will be visible through the Strategic Director's annual report to Council, expected in June. This report will include both a retrospective assessment of performance and a forward-looking, outcome-focused plan, addressing the request for clearer articulation of "what we are doing".

*How can scrutiny be involved in following improvement work through to completion, rather than only seeing snapshot reports? Is there a way for scrutiny to help track progress over time and support closing the remaining gaps identified in the report?*

The new directorate-wide plan is designed to support more precise evaluation of impact, enabling clearer assessment of whether outcomes were achieved, exceeded, or missed – and why. This structure is intended to make improvement activity easier to track over time.

*The committee has discussed establishing a Task And Finish group of committee members working with officers to improve the shared understanding of complex issues (particularly deficits), and enable members to contribute to practical, informed recommendations to the directorate*

We welcome working with the committee on this. A focused group could be particularly useful in areas such as school deficits, helping members understand what drives expenditure, how different parts of the system interact, and what realistic levers for change exist. – **ACTION: to establish a Task And Finish Group to improve shared understanding of complex issues (particularly deficits), and enable members to contribute to practical, informed recommendations to the directorate**

*Would it be useful for the directorate to report back to Performance & Overview Scrutiny before the Strategic Director's report goes to Council, or would this work be taken forward primarily through the Task And Finish group?*

A combination of both approaches would be appropriate: a report back to the committee setting out plans to address Estyn's recommendations and "however" statements and separate, more detailed work through a Task And Finish group. The Task And Finish group would need clear outputs and outcomes, which should be agreed after the meeting. – **ACTION**

*How is impact measured? How is Estyn's concern about under-evaluation being addressed?*

The local authority is several layers removed from direct classroom activity and therefore does not control the day-to-day teaching and learning experienced by pupils. The authority's role is to create the strategic conditions that enable improvement, rather than delivering outcomes directly. Evaluation of the authority's contribution is therefore framed around how services are commissioned, how partners such as school improvement services are held to account, and the assurance gained from those relationships about standards and progress in schools. The need to be clear about where the authority intervenes, what impact is expected from those interventions, and how success can then be evaluated, is acknowledged.

*When will a clear, outcome-focused performance framework be in place, and what will it include?*

In relation to the performance framework, the officer referred to a broad evaluative and quality-assurance approach that relies on commissioning arrangements, partnership working and oversight of external providers. Performance was described as being understood through the education system as a whole, rather than through a single authority-controlled framework. While this provided context about how assurance is currently gained, there was no confirmation that a clear, outcome-focused performance framework either exists or is in development. No timescales were given, and there was no explanation of how key areas such as attainment trends, exclusions, ALN outcomes, progress measures or intervention impact would be consistently captured, reported and scrutinised.

*What is the targeted plan to improve secondary attendance, especially for disadvantaged learners?*

Further work is needed on secondary school attendance, as it remains too low, particularly for pupils eligible for free school meals. Schools are responsible for day-to-day engagement and encouragement, while the authority operates at the sharp end of the system, providing statutory oversight and, where necessary, enforcement. The authority provides wrap-around support for families, helping to identify and address barriers to attendance. We place strong emphasis on partnership working between schools, education welfare, school improvement partners and educational psychologists.

*What measures are being put in place to support more learners transitioning into Welsh-medium secondary school?*

Support for Welsh-medium progression is rooted in the authority's Welsh Education Strategic Plan (WESP), which has been formally agreed by Council and is described as a cornerstone of policy and strategic direction. Practical measures highlighted focused primarily on strengthening Welsh-medium provision at primary level in order to create a stronger pipeline into secondary education. This includes the development of four Welsh-medium Key Stage 2 cohorts, the establishment of Welsh-medium provision in Caldicot, the seedling school in Monmouth, and the planned expansion of Ysgol Y Fenni to a two-form entry school from September.

*What are the targets and timescales to increase the number of fluent Welsh learners that can realistically be achieved?*

There are forthcoming national expectations, including new legislation that will require 10% of education to be delivered through the medium of Welsh by 2030, and to the authority's contribution to the Welsh Government ambition of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. There are particular linguistic challenges facing Monmouthshire as a border authority; progress is being made but within structural constraints. Future strategic director reports could more explicitly track progress against WESP ambitions.

*How will the extra budget funding for Welsh learning be spent?*

Welsh language development has been identified as a first-year priority, with investment in whole-authority professional learning and involvement from regional partners to assess impact through dip-sampling. Further information on progress against the WESP will be brought back to scrutiny and/or Council.

Will the planned strike action at King Henry VIII school affect learners sitting exams? – **ACTION: to check that the date of exams will not clash with strike action**

**Chair's Summary:**

The Chair confirmed that the report and recommendations were agreed, noting that while scrutiny had rightly focused on the more challenging issues, there was also a great deal of strong and positive work in the report that should be acknowledged and fed back to the wider team. The Chair also confirmed that the committee would proceed with establishing a Task and Finish Group, with the detailed scope and timeframe to be picked up outside the meeting.

#### **4. School Examination Results - To receive a report on the latest school examination results (Key Stage 4).**

Ed Pryce delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will McLean:

*What do the current family rankings mean, and are these positions acceptable?*

The figures do not describe absolute school performance, but show each school's position within its comparator family, which groups schools by contextual factors such as disadvantage. For example, a ranking of 6 out of 10 indicates that a school sits broadly in the middle of its family, rather than underperforming. Chepstow and Monmouth sit within some of the least disadvantaged families in Wales, which is important context when interpreting these positions.

*What explains recent improvements in some schools, and what learning can be shared?*

Analysis of improvement happens through the annual school improvement cycle, led by the local authority and school improvement partners from September onwards. Schools are expected to interrogate their own data and explain the "why" behind changes in performance to governing bodies. Factors such as staffing changes or long-term absence within departments can have a significant impact in a given year.

*Why are some schools experiencing ongoing challenges, and what is being done?*

When performance is broken down by the most able, middle-attaining and least-able learners, most Monmouthshire schools perform above expectation across these groups, even when contextual factors are taken into account. For example, one school is performing slightly below expectation for some learner groups, and this is that school's specific improvement challenge. Understanding the causes of such challenges happens through detailed subject-level analysis within schools and through engagement with governors, rather than being fully captured in the high-level report.

*What learning can be taken from stronger-performing schools and applied elsewhere?*

Structured sharing of practice takes place through school improvement networks, both within Monmouthshire and across the wider regional partnership. Schools and departments with stronger outcomes share approaches, teaching strategies and practice so that other schools and teachers can learn from them. This work is facilitated by the local authority and its school improvement partners and is part of the ongoing improvement cycle rather than a one-off exercise.

*Are there any wider trends or common factors that can be shared?*

A key overarching message from the data is that across Monmouthshire, schools generally perform above expectation for the most able learners, and largely above or close to expectation for middle and lower-attaining learners, regardless of the communities they serve. Where variation exists, it is school-specific rather than systemic, and addressed through targeted improvement work rather than broad authority-wide intervention.

*Why is the variation greatest in the bottom third?*

Variation in outcomes for the lowest-attaining learners is inherently greater because performance at this level is influenced by a wide range of complex and interacting factors. These include curriculum choices, qualification entry patterns, staffing changes within departments, individual pupil circumstances, and how pupils perform in assessments in a given year. Small changes in outcomes for lower-attaining learners can also have a disproportionately large effect on headline measures such as capped scores, for example where pupils move from no qualification to a low-grade pass. Because of this complexity, year-on-year variation in the bottom third is more pronounced and harder to interpret at a high level.

*Is the data too variable to be meaningful for comparison, requiring a different route to identify issues?*

The data is not meaningless, but it is designed to provide a high-level, contextual overview rather than detailed diagnostic insight into individual schools. Welsh Government policy deliberately limits how performance data is used, so that it supports understanding and improvement rather than public accountability or ranking. As a result, this type of report is intended to show broad patterns and relative positions, not to explain the detailed “why” behind performance differences. Drilling down into the causes of variation for individual schools would require far more granular analysis – typically undertaken by schools themselves using extensive national datasets and reported to governing bodies, with challenge provided through school improvement partners. The authority therefore holds a careful line between providing sufficient comparative information for scrutiny and remaining consistent with national expectations about the appropriate use of data.

*For pupils who leave school at the end of Key Stage 4 with no qualifications, do we have robust post-16 tracking arrangements in place, and are we using schools’ understanding of the underlying reasons to ensure those young people are supported into appropriate pathways (for example through programmes such as Inspire)?*

These pupils are recognised as being at high risk of becoming NEET. The authority has an early identification system that begins as early as Year 6, using a set of indicators to flag learners who may be at risk later in their school career. These learners are actively tracked through school and beyond. Post-16, tracking and support are provided through the Inspire project, which has recently secured continued funding, allowing Inspire workers to remain embedded in schools. This work is carried out in partnership with Careers Wales and focuses both on monitoring learners’ destinations after leaving school and on providing continued support where possible once they have finished compulsory education.

*For pupils who are tracked as being at risk but still enter GCSE courses that result in F or G grades, do we know whether those pathways are experienced as positive and appropriate outcomes, or could earlier tracking be used more effectively to guide them into alternative routes that may offer a more meaningful and positive experience?*

Schools are expected to design curricula and qualification pathways that reflect the needs of learners across the full ability range, ensuring that all pupils can access courses that are relevant, appropriate and purposeful. Schools have flexibility within measures such as the capped points score to include alternative qualifications alongside GCSEs, and this flexibility is intended to support pupils for whom traditional GCSE routes may not be the most suitable. Decisions about curriculum design and qualification entry are a key focus of professional discussions between schools and the local authority, particularly in the autumn term following examination results. During these discussions, schools are challenged on whether outcomes align with expectations and whether the curriculum offer is a fair and appropriate reflection of learners’ needs.

*What is being done to ensure best practice is shared and embedded across all secondary schools?*

Improvement work is long-standing and continuous, not triggered only by the current analysis. Each year, beginning in September, early data is reviewed through structured dialogue and challenge with school leaders, led by school improvement partners and local authority officers. This initial analysis identifies strengths, weaknesses and underperforming subjects, which then inform each school’s development priorities. Where weaknesses are identified – for example in science – schools are expected to direct leadership attention and professional learning accordingly, including engagement in subject networks, training, and best-practice sharing with other schools. The approach is explicitly framed as collective improvement, with the aspiration that all schools benefit from shared learning rather than isolated excellence.

*Where some schools are performing significantly below modelled outcomes in key subjects such as science, what targeted action is being taken, and how is progress being monitored?*

There is a variation in science outcomes but highlighted year-on-year movement rather than static underperformance. One school has significantly improved its position relative to family expectations, while another has moved in the opposite direction. These changes are used as the basis for targeted

professional challenge and support. Subject-specific improvement is addressed through leadership focus, professional learning and network engagement, rather than through public identification or comparison of individual schools.

*Is strong performance in some schools masking weaker performance elsewhere?*

When outcomes are examined across the full set of measures, the vast majority of indicators are at or above modelled expectations. Out of twelve performance measures referenced, only one was identified as clearly below expectation, with the remaining measures meeting or exceeding benchmarks. It is therefore important to maintain a balanced view, recognising areas for improvement without overstating systemic weakness.

*Does the variation in outcomes point to inconsistent teaching quality or leadership across schools?*

Variation does not automatically indicate widespread inconsistency in teaching or leadership. Differences are school-specific issues that are identified early, challenged through professional dialogue, and addressed through leadership decisions and support. Accountability is shared between school leaders, governing bodies and school improvement partners, with scrutiny operating at a system-level rather than at the level of individual school practice.

*Why is performance weakest among the lowest-attaining pupils, and what additional or different support is being put in place to prevent these learners from falling further behind and becoming at risk of NEET?*

There is one school where outcomes for lower-attaining pupils sit further below modelled expectations, and this represents a legitimate improvement challenge. However, across the wider system, performance for lower-attaining learners is largely at or close to expectation. The issue is therefore targeted rather than systemic, with intervention focused where the data shows it is most needed.

*Are you content that the processes in place are strong enough, and that we are on the right path?*

We have confidence that the authority is on the right path, while maintaining deliberately high expectations. There is clear year-on-year progress at local authority level, emphasizing improvement over time rather than simple comparison with the Welsh average. Confidence in the processes is grounded in the robust professional challenge and dialogue with headteachers, where outcomes are scrutinized, questioned and reflected upon in depth. We would caution against over-reliance on “modelled expectations”, which are statistical regression lines rather than true indicators of ambition. Instead, expectations should be set at the maximum level each cohort of learners can realistically achieve. GCSE outcomes are the culmination of a long-term, whole-system approach to education, beginning in the early years, and that continued focus on high-quality teaching and learning across the entire system is essential to sustaining and improving performance.

*What factors are driving the decline in CAP 9 scores for FSM pupils, especially given that these scores are now marginally below the Wales FSM average for the first time?*

We would warn against over-interpreting the visual data; the chart is truncated, which makes relatively small changes appear much larger. In practical terms, the change identified represents a difference of around two CAP 9 points, which is equivalent to roughly one-thirtieth of a GCSE grade per learner. While outcomes for FSM pupils in Wales have risen slightly and have dipped marginally in Monmouthshire – which is not the desired direction – the scale of the change is small rather than dramatic.

*What is driving the divergence between FSM and non-FSM outcomes?*

The issue should be placed in a long-term context, noting that narrowing the FSM attainment gap has been a persistent national challenge for over 25 years. Outcomes for FSM learners are influenced by a complex mix of factors, with the most significant being the quality of provision in individual classrooms. Improvements for lower-attaining and disadvantaged learners are having a positive effect across the cohort without disadvantaging higher-attaining pupils. The divergence is attributed to a combination of educational, social and contextual factors.

*How does this emerging pattern sit with the authority's equity and inclusion objectives?*

Tension with the authority's equity ambitions is acknowledged, but FSM learners remain a central focus of school-level and authority-level work. All schools have complex tracking systems that go beyond attainment data, incorporating pastoral support, wellbeing, attendance monitoring and close adult

intervention. Schools provide intensive, practical support to vulnerable learners, particularly around examination attendance, illustrating the extent of effort being made to mitigate disadvantage.

*What targeted interventions or additional support are being put in place specifically to improve outcomes for pupils eligible for free school meals?*

Targeted support is multi-layered and ongoing, rather than a single intervention. A key area of challenge and focus is attendance, which is closely linked to attainment. There is sustained scrutiny of how schools use the Pupil Development Grant, with schools routinely challenged on how funding is deployed to improve outcomes for FSM learners. The authority's approach is one of relentless focus and sustained effort, recognising that while progress is difficult and uneven, closing the gap remains a priority requiring continued attention.

*What should the council say to parents and learners when the only readily available external comparison suggests Wales is under-performing internationally?*

Monmouthshire is a Welsh local authority operating within a devolved Welsh education system, and that direct comparisons with other UK nations or international systems at GCSE level are problematic because qualification structures and grading systems differ. As a result, the most meaningful judgements about performance are made through like-for-like comparisons within the Welsh system, taking account of school context rather than headline international rankings. While acknowledging that PISA provides a national (Wales-wide) picture, it cannot be used to judge individual local authorities or schools. Reassurance to parents and learners is instead drawn from post-16 outcomes, where qualifications are more comparable across England and Wales and where Welsh learners have shown improving performance at A level, including growth in higher grades. This suggests that pupils are leaving GCSEs appropriately prepared for further study. The council's role is to ensure schools deliver the best possible education within the Welsh system, judged against appropriate contextual comparators, while wider international performance trends and reforms remain the responsibility of Welsh Government. – **ACTION: to bring a Key Stage 5 report to the committee in the future**

#### **Chair's Summary:**

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

### **5. School Attendance Report - To scrutinise the latest figures on school attendances.**

Sharon Randall-Smith delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions:

*Is there any concern that some children recorded as home-educated might not be receiving a suitable education?*

There are currently 192 electively home-educated pupils across the authority, and I am confident that these children are receiving a suitable education. Elective home education does not need to replicate school-based provision, provided it enables children to develop appropriate skills and achieve their potential. We have robust monitoring arrangements in place, including a dedicated elective home education officer who maintains regular contact with families, carries out visits where required and provides support. Where concerns arise, which is rare, we have the power to issue a School Attendance Order, although this has not been necessary in the past four years.

*What interventions can be put in place to address the gap in attendance between FSM and non-FSM pupils?*

The FSM/non-FSM attendance gap, particularly in secondary schools, is a priority area of concern. The gap at secondary level is wider than the Wales average, while the primary gap is smaller than the national picture. Gaps can sometimes widen even when attendance improves overall, particularly if non-FSM attendance rises more quickly. Progress is monitored not just through the size of the gap but also through improvements in FSM attendance levels themselves. Addressing the gap is a consistent focus in individual pupil-level discussions with schools, especially secondaries, with attention given to identifying barriers to attendance and putting appropriate support in place.

*Are there any particular concerns that tend to come out of visits to home-schooled pupils, in terms of gaps in education?*

No, and because elective home education does not follow a statutory curriculum, it is not assessed against school-based provision. Instead, officers look for evidence that children are developing core skills, particularly literacy, communication, numeracy, inquiry and exploration, including opportunities to develop scientific understanding through planned activities. The authority provides supportive engagement, including shared learning sessions and opportunities for pupils to come together for creative and practical activities. Visits generally confirm that education is suitable and flexible, with pupils making appropriate progress in key skill areas, and that the breadth of experiences available to home-educated learners is often different from, but not inferior to, those in school settings.

*Are punitive measures for holiday absences still place and how much discretion is given to headteachers?*

The response confirmed that headteachers retain discretion to authorise or refuse term-time holiday absences. The authority's guidance is that holidays should not normally be authorised, except in exceptional circumstances, and work is ongoing with school clusters to ensure a consistent understanding of what counts as "exceptional" across primary and secondary schools. The authority is not currently issuing fixed penalty notices for unauthorised holidays, reflecting the view that punitive measures do not generally improve attendance. However, this position is kept under review, and there may be limited circumstances in future where such measures are reconsidered. The key distinction remains between authorised and unauthorised absence, with formal intervention triggered when unauthorised absence leads to declining attendance.

*The persistent absence threshold has been changed by Welsh Government from 20% to 10%. Does the authority still track absences at a 20% threshold?*

The response confirmed that although Welsh Government has lowered the persistent absence threshold from 20% to 10%, the authority continues to track attendance across multiple thresholds, including 10%, 20%, 30%, 40% and up to 70%. This allows schools and the Education Welfare Service to maintain a detailed understanding of attendance patterns, identify different groups of pupils, and intervene proportionately. While there was an initial spike when the threshold changed, persistent absence has since declined across both primary and secondary schools, and regular monitoring ensures the authority knows where pupils sit and what support is in place for them.

*Do you drill down into attendance data to identify trends within specific year groups, particularly where the overall report focuses on the whole picture?*

Yes, year-group trends are routinely recorded and tracked with schools. These form part of a consultation document that informs discussions with schools and allows trends to be examined at year-group level rather than only at whole-school level.

*Are trends within particular pupil groups or individual schools analysed to identify whether there are emerging or persistent attendance issues?*

Attendance trends can be analysed by year group and by school. In primary schools, attendance tends to be higher and more consistent, though younger year groups are more affected by illness. In secondary schools, Year 7 typically shows the highest absence, with rates tailing off in later years. Some cohorts show consistently high absence throughout their school career, and these are closely monitored by Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), who use their detailed knowledge of schools and historical records to track patterns over time.

*When pupils have been persistently absent, what practical steps are taken to support their return to school, such as phased reintegration or placement in a less intimidating classroom environment where appropriate?*

Support for pupils returning after absence is tailored to individual circumstances. Short absences usually result in a normal return to school, while extended absences involve early contact with families through the FLOWS service. Trauma-informed approaches are used, and reintegration may include phased returns or other bespoke arrangements agreed with schools. The integration of family liaison officers has significantly strengthened this work.

*Is there a breakdown of attendance figures into authorised and unauthorised absences?*



Attendance data includes a clear breakdown of authorised and unauthorised absences, which can be reviewed at school and year-group level as part of monitoring and consultation processes.

*How are absences related to unavoidable medical issues treated within the attendance data, and are these included in overall attendance figures or reported separately?*

Authorised absences, including those related to medical issues, are still recorded as absences within attendance figures, but they are recognised as reasonable and agreed by the school. Unauthorised absences are treated differently, as they may trigger involvement from the service due to concerns about attendance and engagement.

*How are school exclusions (including suspensions and expulsions) reported, are they included within this attendance report, and if not, how can scrutiny access data on exclusion trends across Monmouthshire schools – both in terms of whether figures are rising or falling and the underlying reasons – and should this be considered as a separate item for future scrutiny?*

Exclusions are one of several factors that can explain why pupils are not attending school, alongside issues such as reduced timetables, social, emotional and mental health needs, flexi-schooling arrangements, and other contextual factors. Exclusion data has already been formally reported, with a recent report presented to this committee on 27<sup>th</sup> January, covering both permanent and temporary exclusions. That report provides detailed information for members who wish to examine trends and reasons in more depth. In addition, there is close operational coordination between the Education Welfare Service and colleagues responsible for exclusions, with register-checking information shared to ensure accuracy of figures and clear oversight of when pupils are excluded and when they return to school.

*How are the root causes of non-attendance – such as behavioural issues, social, emotional and mental health needs, trauma and adverse childhood experiences – identified across services that sit in different directorates?*

Non-attendance is recognised as having multiple and complex causes. Services work collectively within the same directorate and closely with inclusion colleagues to ensure children's needs are well understood. While the Education Welfare Service (EWS) cannot always meet specialist needs directly, these are regularly communicated to appropriate services that can provide targeted interventions. Schools also play a central role in identifying barriers and responding to pupils' individual needs.

*Beyond responding to behaviour, what is being done to address underlying causes and prevent issues from escalating?*

The approach combines specialist intervention where required with preventative work in schools. Schools are expected to provide a curriculum and wider provision that develops pupils' resilience and ability to cope with change as they grow older. Many schools are already implementing resilience-focused programmes and using a range of strategies to encourage regular attendance, supported by partner services reviewing and adapting provision where needed.

*How is investment in social, emotional and mental health support being used proactively to build resilience and coping skills in pupils?*

There is a strong emphasis on proactive support alongside reactive interventions. Schools are engaging in programmes designed to build pupil resilience and emotional understanding, while services work together to ensure children receive the appropriate support to attend school as regularly as possible. Additional staffing funded through the budget will further strengthen this work.

*Is there scope to do more early intervention work in primary schools, particularly to support emotional development, trauma and key transitions such as adolescence?*

The response acknowledges that this is a complex area and that earlier intervention is important. Many schools are already engaging in resilience-building programmes, and services continue to work collectively to strengthen early support. However, it is recognised that some pupils may still face medical or other significant barriers that limit attendance despite support.

*Are directorates and scrutiny committees working together as effectively as they could to share information and learning across overlapping areas of responsibility?*

Services are part of the same directorate and work closely together, bringing complementary perspectives and expertise. While there is always more that could be done, collaboration is strong and improving. Additional team capacity funded through the budget will support further joined-up working, with the shared aim of ensuring children receive the best possible support and opportunities to attend school wherever appropriate. Members are reminded that they can check published agendas for all committees for items of interest, but officers will also continue to be proactive in pointing members to potential areas of mutual interest across the committees.

*Given the high levels of non-attendance among pupils – particularly those eligible for free school meals – and the well-established link between persistent absence, poor educational outcomes and later unemployment, what specific actions are being taken to address this issue early, especially in schools where absence rates are highest, in order to prevent young people becoming locked into long-term disadvantage?*

Attendance among pupils eligible for free school meals is a specific and regular focus within consultations with schools. These pupils' attendance is discussed explicitly, alongside the strategies schools are using and the additional support being provided to improve engagement. In some cases, pupils may be temporarily out of school while awaiting support from wider services, and while not all such pupils are FSM-eligible, there is recognised overlap. This work is particularly concentrated in secondary schools and is reviewed through fortnightly meetings, alternating between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, meaning FSM pupils and those at risk of persistent absence are discussed monthly at minimum. Where concerns arise between meetings, these are followed up directly with schools to ensure timely intervention.

**Chair's Summary:**

Thank you for the report and the responses given to the members' questions. The report was moved.

## **6. Council and Cabinet Planner**

Councillor Bond asked whether the Social Partnership and Public Procurement Act should be included as a future scrutiny item – this was agreed in principle, subject to space on an agenda. – **ACTION**

## **7. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Work Planner and Action List**

The Chair requested that members be invited to the meeting of Governance & Audit committee at which the Panel Performance Assessment of the Council of the Council is tabled. – **ACTION**

Robert McGowan noted for members that several items have been added to the work programme since the agenda's publication, including the Chief Executive attending the next meeting to discuss For Purpose On Purpose (FPOP) through the lens of senior-level project management.

Will McLean confirmed that scrutiny of the new Welsh curriculum, as proposed as the last meeting, would be valuable, focusing on how well schools have implemented it and helping Members understand its structures, expectations and the six areas of learning and experience. This overview would then inform wider discussions about the direction of education in Monmouthshire and support future debates around new qualifications as their impact becomes clearer. – **ACTION**

## **8. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes were agreed.

## **9. Next Meeting: 21st April 2026 at 10.00am**

The meeting ended at **1.02 pm**