

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 9th June, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chair)
County Councillors: Rachel Buckler,
Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, M. Newell,
Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Mary Ann Brocklesby
C. Werrett

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief
Officer for Resources
Morwenna Wagstaff, Head of Service , Inclusion
Jacquelyn Elias, Principal ALN Officer
Lucie Doyle, Principal Educational Psychologist
Wellbeing Lead
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People,
Performance and Partnerships.
Jacob Parkinson, Head of Pupil Referral Service
(PRS)
Paul Jefford, (Chief Operating Officer, SRS)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Jill Bond, John Crook and Laura Wright

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Neill was proposed by Councillor Buckler and seconded by Councillor Newell. Councillor Neill was appointed.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Councillor Buckler was proposed by Councillor Pavia and seconded by Councillor Newell. Councillor Buckler was appointed.

3. Apologies for Absence

John Crook and Jill Bond. Cabinet Member Laura Wright.

4. Declarations of Interest

None.

5. Public Open Forum

None.

6. Building the Foundations for Data and AI Enabled Public Services - To scrutinise the business case for foundational investment in data and AI infrastructure necessary to secure programme funding and deliver sustainable service benefits and outcomes

Peter Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Leader Mary-Ann Brocklesby, Paul Jefford and Matt Gatehouse:

Is the council being sufficiently realistic and ambitious in its approach to AI, given that the report proposed a three-year period to 'build the foundations', while many organisations are moving more rapidly. Could an emphasis on caution result in an approach that appears slow or unambitious, particularly if, by the second year, continuing to focus on foundations no longer reflects the pace of change elsewhere?

The programme is intentionally front-loaded, with significant investment and activity taking place early in the three-year period. He explained that trusted external partners would be used initially to accelerate delivery and establish capability, after which the council and the Shared Resource Service would increasingly bring that capability in-house. This approach is designed to balance pace with control, enabling faster progress in later years once the necessary foundations and skills are embedded.

The council cannot afford to take no action but must also avoid fragmented or poorly governed adoption of AI. The purpose of the programme is to establish a strong 'bedrock' that ensures safeguards, governance, and alignment with public service values, rather than simply proceeding quickly. Unregulated adoption of AI can lead to unintended negative consequences, and that the council's approach is intended to ensure human-centred decision-making is maintained.

The approach is not about delaying progress, but about enabling early and tangible benefits within a controlled framework, citing examples such as developing a 'single view' of a child, homelessness, or debt to support early intervention and prevention. The approach seeks to combine pace with responsibility, ensuring improvements in outcomes for residents while maintaining the council's core principles.

What are we doing about prioritising and selecting from the 160 AI use cases?

The initial focus is on a small number of high-priority, shared use cases agreed across the four authorities. The 'AI front door' (customer-facing interactions) and 'single view of a child' are already identified as priority workstreams for year one. In addition, approximately three further use cases per authority will be selected for early implementation, based on collective agreement. A collaborative approach is being used so that one authority can lead on a use case, and others can adopt it, allowing faster scaling and shared benefit despite limited capacity within the Shared Resource Service.

How are we balancing customer-facing improvements with internal organisational benefits?

Both strands are being developed in parallel. The customer-facing element focuses on improving access to services, particularly through online and telephony interactions such as chatbots handling common enquiries (e.g. waste collection queries), which helps free up staff time. The internal element focuses on productivity tools, such as AI supporting document drafting, translation, redaction for information requests, and

internal knowledge access (e.g. HR policy queries). This dual approach is intended to reduce administrative burden internally while improving responsiveness and access externally.

What do we mean by AI bias, and how are we addressing it?

AI bias refers to the risk of inaccurate, misleading, or unfair outputs from AI systems, particularly where they rely on large public data models. This is being mitigated by using controlled and approved systems, including 'closed' models that rely on internally verified council data, such as policies and procedures. Safeguards, testing, and monitoring will be built into the implementation process, and data used by the AI will be drawn from sources that have already been subject to organisational validation and review.

How will we ensure robust evaluation given the scale of investment?

Evaluation is built into the programme as an ongoing and structured process. There will be continuous monitoring and feedback as systems are developed and used, alongside formal review points such as stage gates and governance oversight through the Shared Resource Service board. This includes regular scrutiny, impact assessments, and benefit tracking to ensure that the programme is delivering improved services, building staff capability, and achieving efficiency gains. Evaluation operates both at an operational level (continuous improvement) and at strategic checkpoints (formal governance reviews).

How are we addressing the environmental impact of AI, particularly increased energy use?

The approach is to mitigate environmental impact through technology choices and responsible usage. The move to cloud infrastructure (Amazon Web Services) allows more efficient use of computing resources, including scaling usage up or down and avoiding underutilised hardware. AWS has commitments to reach net zero carbon and invests in renewable energy sources. Additionally, there is recognition within the council of the need for responsible use of AI, supported by policy and governance, to manage demand and reduce unnecessary energy consumption associated with AI tools.

What is the approach to reserve funding, and what does this mean for residents?

The funding is being drawn from the 'invest to redesign' reserve, which is specifically intended for transformation initiatives rather than routine IT spending. A total of £851,000 is proposed as a one-off investment, including around £200,000 to support service capacity where needed. This is set within the context of wider usable reserves of around £20 million. The purpose of this investment is to enable long-term service improvement, efficiency, and better outcomes for residents, rather than ongoing expenditure.

Concerning the energy implications of AI, even simple AI uses can be highly energy intensive; for example, generating a single AI image can require around 2 kilowatt hours of electricity, roughly equivalent to fully charging a smartphone. Organisational systems

may default users into AI tools, which could unintentionally drive demand – should the council consider controls over AI use to manage energy consumption responsibly?

While there are legitimate concerns about energy use, both technology providers and the council have roles in mitigating this impact. Providers such as Amazon are already developing more efficient infrastructure and technologies to reduce the carbon footprint of AI, including improvements in computing hardware and energy use. From the council's perspective, we would emphasise the importance of responsible usage, stating that this will be addressed through an AI policy and governance controls. This may include both guidance to users and technical safeguards (working with the Shared Resource Service) to prevent excessive or inappropriate use of high-energy AI functions.

What assurances are in place to protect confidentiality while creating a 'single view of a child,' and how is the tension with openness and transparency addressed?

Confidentiality is maintained through strict role-based access controls, meaning that staff can only access the data they are authorised to see, in line with current permissions. The system mirrors existing access rights but brings data together into a single interface, reducing the need to access multiple systems. The 'AI foundations' include these guardrails as a core element, ensuring that only appropriate users can view specific information.

The reference to openness and transparency does not mean unrestricted access; rather, it refers to making relevant information more readily available to those who legitimately need it in order to make informed decisions. Transparency operates within the confines of confidentiality, not in conflict with it. The approach ensures that while data is more usable and accessible to practitioners, it is not made broadly available beyond authorised users.

What consideration is being given to the potential for locating data centre infrastructure locally, for example at Sudbrook, given existing water resources, or is this unrealistic?

The current strategy does not involve building local authority-owned data centres, as this has already evolved towards more efficient and cost-effective cloud-based infrastructure. Moving to cloud services allows the council to make more efficient use of shared resources, avoiding underutilised hardware and reducing overall energy consumption compared to maintaining standalone infrastructure. However, the possibility of alternative or local infrastructure has not been entirely dismissed. The point about Sudbrook is recognised as relevant and worth further consideration, particularly in the context of wider regional partnerships such as the Cardiff Capital Region. Existing work on energy and infrastructure opportunities, including at Sudbrook, has been undertaken in the past, and the suggestion will be taken away for further exploration.

The overall approach remains focused on partnership working and collaboration with larger providers and regional initiatives to achieve economic, environmental, and operational efficiencies, rather than developing isolated local data centre capacity.

How will we ensure that this investment delivers a clear return, and how will success be measured and reported over time?

The investment is governed through a staged and controlled process, meaning funding is only released when there is confidence that proposed work will deliver measurable benefits. These benefits include both financial efficiencies and wider service improvements, such as increased productivity, better outcomes for residents, and the ability to manage more complex demand.

Success will be tracked through a defined benefits and value framework, with outcomes monitored during implementation and beyond. There are multiple layers of governance overseeing performance, including internal Council governance groups and the Shared Resource Service boards. This enables regular oversight of progress and impact. Scrutiny also plays an ongoing role, with further reporting expected through mechanisms such as self-assessment and review of enabling strategies, ensuring continued transparency and evaluation.

Do we have the flexibility to adjust or change direction if elements of the programme are not working?

Yes, the programme is deliberately designed to be iterative and adaptable. The use of stage gates and ongoing evaluation allows priorities to be reassessed and refined as the programme progresses. This ensures that if a particular approach is not delivering the expected outcomes, adjustments can be made before further investment is committed.

The overall approach is not a fixed plan but a responsive one, with continuous feedback loops built in so that learning from early implementation informs future phases and use cases.

How are we ensuring that staff are supported, reassured, and kept informed about the impact of AI on their roles?

There is a clear commitment to ongoing communication, engagement, and workforce development. The programme is aligned with the council's 'future focused workforce' approach, which looks at developing the skills and capabilities needed both now and in the longer term. Staff are recognised as central to service delivery, and AI is intended to support and enhance their work rather than replace it.

Regular engagement will take place with staff and trade unions, reflecting obligations under the social partnership duty. Training and development will be provided to help staff adapt to new tools, and workforce planning will consider how roles might evolve over time. Changes are expected to be managed sensitively, including through natural staff turnover, allowing roles to be redesigned gradually where appropriate. The overall aim is to reduce administrative burden and enable staff to focus on higher-value, professional and interpersonal aspects of their work.

What safeguards are in place to prevent AI-generated risk indicators influencing safeguarding decisions inappropriately, particularly in a 'single view of the child'?

AI is used only to analyse and present information, not to make decisions. It performs advanced pattern recognition on existing, trusted data sets and presents this in dashboards for practitioners. The responsibility for interpretation and decision-making

always remains with qualified professionals, who use their judgement to assess the information. A 'human in the loop' is maintained at all stages, ensuring that AI outputs are advisory only and cannot determine safeguarding outcomes on their own.

Has a Data Protection Impact Assessment been completed, and will it be made available to members?

A Data Protection Impact Assessment has been undertaken as part of the work, and it can be shared with members. This is recognised as a key element of assurance given the sensitivity of the data involved. **(ACTION)**

How are we aligning this work with national Welsh frameworks, such as those developed through WLGA and Digital and Social Care Cymru, to avoid fragmented approaches?

The work is being actively aligned with national frameworks and governance structures. There is direct involvement in national data and performance discussions through the WLGA, including participation on relevant boards, and coordination through networks such as Data Cymru (now being integrated into WLGA structures). In addition, the Shared Resource Service maintains links with national structures and other local authorities, ensuring that learning and practice are shared. The approach also aligns with wider collaborative work across Wales and beyond, including developments in 'single view of a child' initiatives in other authorities and sectors. The intention is to contribute to, and draw from, a coordinated national approach rather than operate in isolation.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Leader and officers for their time. This is a very important report and could prove to be seminal when looked back on in future. A few points to note would be that the statement in 3.37 that 'AI cannot and will not replace professional judgement' might require clarification, as it would seem that AI is indeed used in this way. Similarly, in 3.38, the comment that AI is 'not to bypass normal workforce processes' might require clarification.

7. Update on the Pupil Referral Service (PRS) - Discussion on significant changes that have occurred in the service and the risks around increasing demand

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff introduced the report. Jacob Parkinson answered the members' questions with Dr Wagstaff:

Are the alternative qualifications used within the Pupil Referral Service suitable and effective for learners, given that GCSEs are often not appropriate for many pupils?

The current alternative qualifications are considered appropriate and as effective as possible within existing options, and they are selected carefully to be engaging, practical, and suited to the needs of pupils. The service works collaboratively with neighbouring PRUs to identify the most suitable qualifications available and seeks to ensure they are as hands-on and relevant as possible. Pupil voice also informs the selection, with learners given some choice over subjects to help increase engagement.

Examples include BTEC Sport and Health and Social Care, alongside core GCSEs in Maths and English.

However, it is recognised that the current system is not ideal, and the service is operating in an interim position. There is a strong expectation that the forthcoming vocational GCSEs (VCSEs) will improve the offer, as they appear more practical and tailored, with subjects such as construction, mechanics, and animal care. While these are not yet fully implemented, there is cautious optimism that they will better meet learners' needs.

Are the qualifications currently available engaging and meaningful enough for pupils, or is there a need for wider or improved alternatives at a national level?

The qualifications currently being delivered are considered the best available and are chosen specifically to maximise engagement and relevance for the cohort. Staff are confident that they are doing as much as possible within current constraints to provide meaningful educational experiences. At the same time, there is clear recognition that the national offer is evolving and that improvements are needed. The introduction of new vocational GCSEs is seen as a significant development, potentially offering a broader and more appropriate range of pathways for pupils whose needs are not well met by traditional academic routes. While their full effectiveness is not yet proven, the breadth and practical nature of the new qualifications are viewed positively and are expected to better support future cohorts.

How are we addressing the very low attainment outcomes (e.g. limited Level 2 achievement and very low maths and English attainment), particularly for different groups such as medical pupils, ALN pupils, and excluded learners?

The outcomes are recognised as a concern and are broadly in line with similar PRUs, though below mainstream expectations. Work is underway to strengthen both the curriculum and teaching quality, including improving how qualifications are delivered and learning from other PRUs. New in-person provision has been introduced to better engage learners, particularly those previously accessing only online provision. It is expected that these changes will begin to improve outcomes, alongside continued focus on staff development and curriculum design.

How are we addressing very low attendance figures, particularly for medical learners and the overall PRS cohort?

Attendance levels are influenced by the nature of the cohort, particularly medical learners who are often too unwell to attend full-time provision. The current medical model has been limited to part-time engagement, which affects overall figures. However, new face-to-face provision has now been introduced in both the north and south of the county to enable increased attendance and more flexible engagement. There has already been measurable progress, with PRU attendance increasing by around 10% and overall attendance by around 3%. The expectation is that the new provision and improved engagement approaches will continue to raise attendance over time.

How are we improving broader outcomes beyond exam results, and ensuring pupils gain the skills needed to function effectively (for example, functional literacy)?

There is a strong emphasis on improving literacy as a core part of the curriculum. This includes robust assessment on entry, targeted interventions, and staff training to address literacy gaps. Close work is taking place with school improvement services and other PRUs to strengthen teaching in this area. At the same time, outcomes are recognised as needing to be assessed more broadly for this cohort. For many pupils, progress includes re-engagement with education, improved behaviour, social development, and readiness to sit qualifications. These are tracked through individual “pen portraits” showing progress from entry to exit. While exam results remain important, these qualitative improvements are considered essential indicators of success for vulnerable learners.

How do we know that learners are leaving with functional literacy, given wider national concerns about literacy levels?

Functional literacy is being addressed through a structured approach, including diagnostic assessments, targeted teaching, and specialist support. The service recognises that literacy gaps are often linked to disengagement and exclusion, so early identification and intervention are a priority. Progress in literacy is monitored through pupil-level assessment and intervention, and is supported by professional learning for staff. While specific quantified outcomes were not provided, the approach is designed to improve pupils’ functional literacy as part of their overall development.

Why was face-to-face provision for medical learners not implemented earlier, and how long has the current approach been in place?

The previous reliance on online provision developed in response to a very rapid increase in pupil numbers, particularly following COVID. The service expanded from around 25 pupils in 2020 to around 120 by mid-2025, requiring a scalable and immediate response. Online delivery allowed the service to meet demand quickly when in-person capacity was not available. In addition, there was an initial expectation that demand might reduce post-COVID, which did not occur. Over time, it has become clear that demand for medical and anxiety-related provision remains high, leading to the development of new in-person provision.

How useful was the Estyn inspection, given that it took place shortly after the new head took up post, and did it raise issues that the service had not already identified?

The inspection was considered helpful despite taking place very early in the new head’s tenure. It provided constructive feedback on both strengths and areas for improvement at a critical point. Importantly, the findings closely aligned with the service’s own school development plan, indicating that the leadership team already had a clear understanding of the service’s strengths and weaknesses. This alignment reinforced confidence in the direction of improvement, helped validate the internal self-assessment, and supported staff engagement by confirming that the priorities identified internally were the correct ones. Although the timing was challenging, it ultimately proved a useful and strengthening process for the service.

Why are the three groups of young people taught together, and is this driven by convenience or by intended benefits in outcomes?

The three groups – permanently excluded pupils (PRU cohort), medical learners, and ALN bespoke pupils – are recognised as distinct, with different needs and reasons for being in the service. Provision is therefore largely delivered separately, with different centres and approaches tailored to each group. However, there is a conscious effort to identify opportunities where bringing pupils together is beneficial, rather than doing so for convenience. This is being explored carefully on a needs-led basis, particularly where shared activities can support social development, confidence, and engagement. For example, some medical learners may benefit from wider experiences offered within PRU settings, and vice versa.

The overall approach is to maintain consistency in standards, curriculum principles, and expectations across the service, while adapting delivery to suit each cohort. Where groups are brought together, it is done selectively and with clear purpose, aiming to support development rather than simply streamline provision.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for this report. The committee wishes to extend its thanks to everyone involved in the service. The report was moved.

8. Specialist Resource Bases & Additional Learning Provision (including progress with ALN implementation) - To review progress at 12-month stage and include reviewing progress with ALN following the implementation of new legislation

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jacquelyn Elias:

Is the current funding model for Additional Learning Needs sustainable, and is sufficient funding following the child, or is pressure on ALN provision contributing to school deficits?

Funding for Additional Learning Needs is largely delegated directly to schools, with a smaller retained element for exceptional or unforeseen cases. There is a strong system in place to understand needs early – particularly through early years forecasting – and to plan provision accordingly. However, increasing demand and complexity of need are recognised as creating pressure on school budgets, and this is acknowledged as an ongoing challenge. The approach taken is to use robust data and evidence from reviews such as this one to clearly demonstrate need and justify any future requests for additional funding. The emphasis is therefore on evidence-based planning and forecasting, rather than assuming current funding is fully sufficient.

What does an evidence-based approach to literacy in Specialist Resource Bases actually involve – does it focus on one method such as phonics, or a broader approach?

The approach is broader than any single method. The aim is to ensure consistency across all Specialist Resource Bases, using interventions that are supported by evidence and guided by educational psychology expertise. While elements such as phonics or decoding skills may be used, the approach is tailored to individual learners. Each child typically has a personalised programme, delivered at an appropriate pace and focused on small steps and overlearning to ensure progress is secure before

moving on. The intention is not to apply a single uniform method, but to combine evidence-based practices with highly individualised delivery.

What is being done to support meaningful work placements for learners in Specialist Resource Bases, and are there examples of success?

There are already examples of successful work placements for post-16 learners within Specialist Resource Bases, with schools actively identifying suitable opportunities and supporting pupils into them. While these opportunities can be challenging to secure, there is clear evidence that they can be delivered effectively. The work is ongoing and is seen as an important measure of success for ALN provision, particularly where learners transition into employment or supported work placements. The intention is to expand this further through collaboration and continued development of opportunities, recognising the importance of real-world outcomes for learners.

How can we reduce the number of pupils placed out of county, given that 37 remain in external placements and local therapeutic provision appears limited?

There has already been significant progress in reducing out-of-county placements over time, with many more pupils now supported within Monmouthshire. However, it is recognised that further development is needed, particularly in relation to social, emotional, and mental health provision. Work is underway to expand local provision to better meet these needs, including developing new approaches aligned with emerging demand patterns. It is expected that this will reduce the number of external placements over time.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that a small number of highly complex cases – particularly those involving profound or multiple medical needs – might always require specialist provision that cannot realistically be delivered locally. Therefore, while reductions are expected, it is unlikely that out-of-county placements will ever reach zero.

What is the current cost of out-of-county placements, particularly those that could potentially be provided locally?

This will be provided after the meeting. **(ACTION)**

What is holding back the development of local therapeutic provision, particularly in terms of securing health partner (NHS) agreement, and who is responsible for resolving this?

There are recognised challenges in aligning with health partners, particularly due to the complexity and scale of the NHS as an organisation. While there is positive operational collaboration – such as working with a designated education link officer – there is less clarity and consistency at a strategic level. One key issue is the expectation placed on schools to deliver increasingly complex and sometimes invasive medical care, which sits at the boundary between education and health responsibilities. This challenge is not unique to Monmouthshire and is being addressed nationally through a Welsh Government review of healthcare provision for children in educational settings.

The council is actively contributing to this national work and continues to engage with health partners locally. However, resolving the issue requires broader alignment at a national governance level rather than being solely within the council's control.

What is the timescale and plan for implementing new provision for social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, particularly at primary level?

A proposal for SEMH provision has been developed and has already progressed through internal approval processes, including securing funding. The intention is to implement new provision from the next academic year, subject to final stages of the formal decision-making process. The provision will target a small group of primary-aged learners currently out of school and will aim to create a more sustainable and structured offer, aligned with existing Additional Learning provision in the county. Funding will come from a combination of local authority resources and Welsh Government capital grant funding, supporting development over the next academic year.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for the report and the responses to the members' questions. The committee again extends its gratitude to all of the staff involved. The committee suggests that reports such as these would benefit from particular (anonymised) examples of positive impacts/improved outcomes. The report was moved.

9. Supporting Vulnerable Learners - To follow up from June 25 - annual

Dr Morwenna Wagstaff and Dr Lucie Doyle introduced the report. Dr Doyle answered the members' questions:

How can we demonstrate that the trauma-informed programme is actually improving outcomes such as attendance, attainment, and long-term progress, rather than relying on qualitative feedback like confidence and relationships?

The trauma-informed programme has so far focused primarily on preventative work through whole-school professional learning, rather than direct intervention with individual pupils. As a result, it is more difficult at this stage to link the programme directly to quantified pupil outcomes such as attendance or attainment. Evidence to date is therefore based on changes in staff practice and understanding. This includes increased staff confidence, a shift in how behaviours are interpreted (for example, viewing behaviour as communication), and stronger use of trauma-informed language and approaches across schools. Documentation and feedback from schools also show these changes in practice.

The next stage of development is expected to focus more on measuring longer-term impacts, including how this improved staff capacity translates into measurable pupil outcomes. In addition, more targeted elements of the work – such as enhanced trauma-informed practice and specific interventions – are now being introduced, which should make it easier over time to evidence direct impact on learners.

If you had complete flexibility, what two things would you change to improve the service supporting vulnerable learners?

More time would be the key enabler. This would allow greater capacity to work preventatively with schools and also to provide timely support in response to individual

pupil needs. The service is already valued by schools, but increased time would enable deeper engagement both at a system level and at the level of individual cases. Beyond this, strengthening collaboration would be a priority. This includes closer working not only with schools but also with wider services outside education, as well as ensuring that the voices of young people themselves are more strongly embedded in shaping provision. The overall view is that the service is already focusing on the right areas – particularly preventative work and workforce development – but that greater capacity would allow these approaches to be expanded and strengthened further.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for the report and all of the staff's work. The report was moved.

10. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

11. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Work Programme and action List

Officers noted that an answer has been given to the query on the Action List: there are 13 private children's residential homes currently active in the county.

Members should have received an invitation to People Committee on 18th June for the WESP item. Note that a Special meeting has been added on 8th September, to which the Procurement Annual report has also been added. There will be a slightly later start to the pre-meeting on 30th June, and therefore possibly the meeting itself.

12. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed.

13. Next Meeting

30th June 2026 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.52 pm**.