

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Public Services Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr ,Usk, NP15 1GA on Monday, 27th July, 2026 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Armand Watts (Chair)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Steven Garratt, Meirion Howells, Penny Jones, Tony Kear, Sue Riley, Dale Rooke, and John Crook

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Sharran Lloyd, Community and Partner Development Manager
Beth Watkins, Flying Start Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors Malcolm Lane

1. Apologies for Absence

Councillor Malcolm Lane.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Public Open Forum

None.

4. Best Start in Life - Following regional scrutiny, to provide a shared understanding of priorities, consistent challenge and visibility of local impacts within each local authority area

Beth Watkins introduced the report and answered the members' questions:

- *What do you mean by "parents with a disability" in the childcare offer criteria?*

"Parents with a disability" can include parents with a physical disability, a learning disability, or mental health difficulties. Referrals are typically made by professionals who know the family well, such as midwives, health visitors or social workers, so the disability does not have to be a visible one.

- *Do you know how many parents with learning disabilities are supported through the scheme?*

No, I don't have those figures. Children's Services would be the best source for data relating to parents with learning disabilities and the support they receive.

- *Is the service truly universal, or is it mainly focused on Flying Start children?*

The service includes a universal element. While Flying Start remains targeted geographically in certain areas, many programmes and workshops are open to all families across Monmouthshire. The intention is to ensure families can access support regardless of where they live.

- *Can families simply turn up to activities, or do they need to be referred?*

Both routes exist. Referrals are generally used for intensive one-to-one support identified by professionals such as health visitors, midwives, GPs, voluntary organisations, nurseries or schools. However, parents can simply attend many Flying Start activities, workshops, child and family groups, and speech and language groups without a referral.

- *Is the "Team Around the Family" service something people can drop into?*

No. Team Around the Family is a referral-based approach. It provides bespoke support tailored to a family's needs and involves coordinated working between services such as health, social care and voluntary organisations. The support package is developed through conversations with the family about what matters to them.

- *The report refers to "all eligible two-year-olds". What makes a child eligible?*

In this context, eligibility refers to children living in the core Flying Start areas of Monmouthshire, including parts of Abergavenny, Monmouth, Chepstow and Caldicot. The childcare element is currently geographically targeted, although the offer is being expanded.

- *Where are the Welsh-medium childcare settings that provide Flying Start childcare?*

There are two Welsh-medium providers: Y Ffin in Abergavenny and Cylch Meithrin Cil-y-Coed (Cil-y-Coed) in the south of the county. Both provide Flying Start childcare places and have worked with the programme for a number of years.

- *How many people use the service, how many staff are involved, what budgets are available, and are people being turned away because of funding constraints?*

The service is currently well resourced. The Flying Start team consists of around 33–34 staff, including childcare practitioners, early years specialists, parenting and child development workers, and dads' workers. The core Flying Start programme supports approximately 595 children aged 0–4. Funding also supports health visitors, administrative staff, assistant practitioners and a speech and language therapist. Families are not currently being turned away because of budget pressures and Flying Start in Monmouthshire has historically been well funded.

- *Will the changes to childcare funding have any implications for Monmouthshire County Council's budget?*

No. The service is entirely grant funded, so there is no direct impact on the Council's core budget. However, there is uncertainty about how future childcare funding arrangements will work and whether changes could affect the wider support currently delivered through Flying Start.

- *What concerns do you have about the future funding arrangements?*

The main concern is that the expansion of childcare provision could dilute funding available for the parenting, family support and child development work that Flying Start currently delivers. We would emphasise the importance of protecting these services, which have had a significant positive impact on children and families across Monmouthshire.

- *How can councillors ensure that families in areas such as Usk and Llanbadoc do not miss out on support because they are outside the core Flying Start areas?*

Health visiting and midwifery services are available universally across Wales and act as the main referral route into support services. Health visitors can refer any family needing additional help into the Early Years and Parenting Support Panel, which meets weekly and responds quickly. Families can also self-refer, and referrals are accepted from GPs and other health professionals. Because of these referral pathways, very few families miss out on support because of where they live.

- *How do you plan and budget for the future expansion of childcare provision when the funding position remains uncertain?*

Planning is challenging because demand is high and many working parents need help with childcare costs but may not currently qualify. To widen access, the expansion programme has included some social housing areas in every lower super output area (LSOA) of Monmouthshire. Historically, Monmouthshire has received the lowest childcare budget in Wales, but the forthcoming Welsh Government childcare expansion should increase funding and eventually make childcare available universally from nine months of age. The expansion will be phased and will depend on future funding allocations.

- *Why is the childcare expansion being introduced in phases?*

The expansion has to be phased because it depends on both funding and childcare capacity. The intention is that, over time, funded childcare will become available to all eligible children without parents having to demonstrate factors such as employment status or disability. However, this cannot be implemented immediately and requires gradual expansion of provision across Monmouthshire.

- *How much additional Welsh-medium childcare capacity will be needed to meet future demand, and will the existing provision be sufficient?*

There are currently only two Welsh-medium childcare providers in Monmouthshire that offer Flying Start childcare: Y Ffin in Abergavenny and Cylch Meithrin Cil-y-Coed.

Demand at both settings is strong, particularly in Abergavenny. It is difficult to forecast future demand because many parents have not yet decided on their children's educational pathway when they are only two years old. Work is therefore focused on promoting the benefits of bilingualism from the earliest stages, including through antenatal programmes. Recruiting Welsh-speaking childcare staff remains a significant challenge. The four local authority childcare settings are working towards a bilingual Welsh-language standard, and progress is being made in increasing Welsh-language provision.

- *Are you working with the Ti a Fi network to encourage Welsh-language uptake?*

Yes. Close links exist with the Ti a Fi network and Welsh-medium groups. Staff support Welsh-language baby groups and other activities by attending sessions and providing advice on child development where required. This forms part of the wider outreach programme.

- *How many fathers engage with the dads' service each year, and how are outcomes measured?*

The expanded dads' service is relatively new, so comprehensive data is not yet available. One dads' worker had previously covered the whole county, limiting the scale of activity. The service currently includes group work, such as a monthly gym-based group for fathers and children, one-to-one support, and other activities aimed at encouraging fathers' involvement in children's lives. Work is underway to develop evaluation methods, including the use of wellbeing assessment tools to measure impacts on fathers' wellbeing and engagement with their children.

- *Are there links with National Childbirth Trust (NCT) groups?*

No formal links exist with NCT groups. Instead, the service delivers the Solihull "Togetherness" antenatal programme, an evidence-based six-week course. Midwives contribute to part of the programme, while Flying Start practitioners deliver the remainder. Some parents attend both NCT and Flying Start antenatal sessions. NCT provision varies across Monmouthshire, while the local programme aims to provide consistent support across the county.

- *Do antenatal programmes help parents build support networks with each other?*

Yes. The programmes help parents develop relationships with one another and often lead to ongoing engagement with Flying Start services. Reunion sessions are held after babies are born, and many parents continue attending baby groups, baby massage sessions, breastfeeding support groups and other activities. This creates a pathway of support from pregnancy through the early years.

- *How can the long-term impact of Flying Start be measured and demonstrated?*

Measuring the long-term impact of Flying Start is challenging because many factors influence children's outcomes. While positive changes can often be seen in families and communities, it is difficult to attribute those changes solely to Flying Start interventions.

A range of operational data is already collected, including participation in parenting programmes, childcare attendance and service uptake. In addition, Welsh Government is using the Shared Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) system, developed by Swansea University, to evaluate the long-term impact of Flying Start. This work will examine outcomes over time and compare children who accessed different levels of Flying Start support, helping to assess the effectiveness of the programme more robustly.

- *Will the expansion of childcare provision require additional buildings or extensions to existing Flying Start centres, and do we currently have enough capacity?*

Some childcare providers have already used Early Years and Flying Start capital funding to expand their capacity to accommodate more two-year-olds. Capacity varies between settings. Some Flying Start centres, such as Overmonnow, operate from relatively small premises that are already used intensively for childcare, antenatal programmes, parenting support and other family services. The centres have developed into community hubs that families recognise as places where they can access support. The childcare sector also has a degree of flexibility, as providers can adjust staffing levels between age groups depending on demand. At present, it is difficult to predict exactly how much additional capacity will be needed because future take-up rates are unknown.

- *How are existing Flying Start centres balancing childcare provision with their wider family support role?*

The centres are used for much more than childcare. They provide venues for parenting programmes, antenatal support, Acorn Project activities and wider family support services. A key priority is ensuring that the expansion of childcare does not reduce the availability of these broader support services. Protecting the parenting and child-development aspects of Flying Start is considered particularly important as the childcare offer grows.

- *How are you planning for future demand when it is not yet clear how many families will take up the expanded childcare offer?*

Current planning is based on known numbers of eligible children and ongoing monitoring of demand. However, predicting take-up is difficult because families have differing childcare needs. Some parents need full day nursery provision because they work longer hours, while others only require shorter sessions. Better information about future demand should become available once the universal two-year-old offer has been operating for a longer period.

- *What lessons are being learned from the rollout of funded childcare in England, particularly around staffing, capacity and funding challenges?*

The main lesson is that England expanded provision much more quickly. This resulted in situations where families became eligible for funded childcare but providers did not have sufficient places available. The phased approach being taken in Wales is intended to avoid those problems by allowing capacity to grow gradually alongside eligibility. The

current view is that the staged expansion has worked well in Monmouthshire because it enables childcare places and workforce capacity to develop before further widening the offer.

- *Given that the scale of the childcare expansion is uncertain and future demand cannot be predicted accurately, what safeguards will prevent the expansion from weakening support for the most vulnerable children and families?*

The main safeguard is that childcare funding and core Flying Start funding are expected to be kept separate. The intention is that the funding used for parenting support, child development services, family support and other core Flying Start activities will remain protected, while the expanded childcare offer is funded through a separate arrangement. This is intended to ensure that the support built up through Flying Start over the last 20 years is not diluted as childcare provision expands.

- *What evidence is available to demonstrate the effectiveness of Flying Start and support the case for continued investment?*

A range of data is already collected and reported to Welsh Government, including information on take-up of services, childcare attendance and participation in programmes. There are also Welsh Government statistical releases available that allow comparisons over a number of years. Links to these publications can be provided to members to help demonstrate trends and outcomes. While some of the wider benefits are difficult to quantify directly, there is a substantial body of operational data already being collected and reported.

ACTION: Beth Watkins to provide members with links to Welsh Government Flying Start data and statistical releases, following Dale Rooke's request for more evidence and performance data.

- *Do the early intervention and prevention measures provided through Flying Start help prevent family breakdown and reduce the likelihood of children entering foster care or adoption?*

Research is currently underway to explore these longer-term impacts. Focus groups with parents have been conducted through a programme involving CASCADE, and work is taking place to bring together information from children's services, safeguarding services and other datasets to examine outcomes over time. The aim is to understand whether Flying Start contributes to reductions in safeguarding concerns, numbers of children looked after, and other indicators of family stability.

- *How will the long-term effects of Flying Start on children and families be measured?*

The Shared Anonymised Information Linkage (SAIL) programme is expected to play a key role in assessing long-term outcomes. The programme links information from different datasets to examine the longer-term impact of Flying Start on areas such as health, education, employability and academic attainment. This should provide a stronger evidence base for understanding the programme's impact over time.

- *Is there any indication from Welsh Government about future funding arrangements, and does there appear to be ongoing support for the programme?*

No definitive information has been received about future funding arrangements. Discussions are taking place, but there is currently uncertainty about the future shape of the wider Children and Communities Grant, which includes Flying Start funding. The lack of clarity about longer-term funding is a concern, particularly given the importance of maintaining the support services currently available to families.

- *How many children start school still wearing nappies or unable to use a knife and fork?*

Those figures are not held within Flying Start because Flying Start support generally ends before children reach school age. Information about school readiness, continence and related issues would sit elsewhere, primarily within health services and schools. However, there is recognition that delayed toilet training is becoming a significant issue for nurseries and schools.

- *Given that many additional learning needs are not identified until after age four, what support is available for children who are struggling with toilet training?*

Monmouthshire previously piloted a toileting support service using Welsh Government innovation funding, which was later adopted by Aneurin Bevan University Health Board. Flying Start staff can support parents with toilet training and will refer families to GPs where medical issues need to be ruled out. Where specialist intervention is required, families can be referred to the Health Board's continence service. Close links also exist with the Early Years Additional Learning Needs (ALN) Advisory Team, which can identify children requiring further support and refer families back into appropriate services.

- *At what age would you expect most children to be toilet trained?*

Expectations have changed over time. Historically, around 90% of three-year-olds would have been toilet trained, but social changes, including the widespread use of disposable nappies, have altered patterns significantly. A broad estimate would now be that only around 50% of children may be toilet trained by age three. However, this is regarded as a wider societal trend rather than a Monmouthshire-specific issue.

- *Why has toilet training become more difficult than it was in the past?*

Disposable nappies are one factor. Children wearing disposable nappies often do not experience the discomfort associated with being wet, making it harder for them to recognise the sensation that supports toilet training. Wider changes in parenting and lifestyle have also contributed to changing expectations and outcomes.

- *What challenges does delayed toilet training create for nurseries and childcare settings?*

It can place significant pressure on staffing. Staffing ratios change as children get older, meaning fewer adults are available to support larger groups of children. Regularly assisting children who are not toilet trained can require staff to spend considerable time away from other children, creating operational challenges for nurseries and childcare providers.

- *How are parents made aware that they can access these universal early years services?*

Health visitors remain a key route into support services and can make referrals where needed. Childcare settings also play an important role in promoting available support and referring families. In addition, consideration is being given to developing an online "opt-in" system through which parents could register for early years support, request assistance and receive information about available services.

- *Since health visitors have less contact with families than they did before COVID-19, how else can families learn about the support available?*

Childcare settings already help to promote services and refer families as needed. Longer-term ambitions include developing an online registration and support portal, potentially linked to the Family Information Service and Early Years and Childcare Hub, to enable parents to access information and request support directly without relying solely on referrals from professionals.

- *Is the estimate that only around 50% of three-year-olds are toilet trained a trend being seen specifically in Monmouthshire, or is it a wider trend?*

It is a wider trend seen across Wales and Britain rather than being specific to Monmouthshire. However, the trend is evident locally through the volume of requests received from nurseries seeking support with toilet training issues.

- *Is there anything councillors can do to help promote the support available through Flying Start and related early years services?*

Raising awareness of the services available is one of the most valuable things councillors can do. A wide range of support is available for children aged 0-7 through Flying Start and other Children and Communities Grant-funded programmes. Families can be directed to the service through a simple contact with the Flying Start team, after which staff can have a "What Matters" conversation with the family to identify their needs and connect them with the most appropriate support. Importantly, the support offered is tailored to what families say they need, rather than relying solely on professional assumptions.

- *Are the Flying Start areas listed in order of size, and are the different areas significantly different in scale?*

Abergavenny is the largest Flying Start area, reflecting local deprivation data and the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation. There is also a much smaller core Flying Start area

in Llanfoist/Llanelli Hill. The order in which the areas were listed was not intended to indicate size, although Abergavenny is the largest of the core Flying Start areas.

- *How do parents learn about attachment and attunement, and the importance of these concepts to children's development?*

Attachment and attunement are embedded throughout Flying Start services. The antenatal programme focuses on helping parents think about their developing baby as a person in their own right and promotes early emotional attachment before birth. Messages about talking, singing and responding to babies begin during pregnancy and continue through all early years provision. Parenting programmes, baby groups and child development activities are all built around evidence-based approaches that promote attachment, communication, play and positive parent-child relationships.

- *How are parents helped to understand why activities such as talking, reading, playing and interacting with their child are important?*

The programmes are designed to explain child development and help parents understand how their interactions influence their child's development. Flying Start uses evidence-based programmes such as Togetherness (formerly Solihull) and Parents as First Teachers, which link parenting practices, communication, play, speech and language development, and child wellbeing. These messages are reinforced consistently throughout services rather than being delivered as standalone advice.

- *Is specialist support available for parents and babies who may need additional help with bonding and attachment?*

Yes. Funding is provided for a Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist within the Health Board. One current intervention is a "Playing Together" group, which uses music therapy to support mothers and babies. The programme is targeted at parents who may find mainstream baby groups difficult to attend and is designed to strengthen relationships and attachment in a supportive environment.

- *Are parents given information about how stress during pregnancy can affect children's development and long-term outcomes?*

Yes. Antenatal programmes include information about the effects of stress, emotional wellbeing and attachment during pregnancy. The importance of early relationships and emotional development is emphasised throughout the support offered to families.

- *How is understanding of attachment and child development promoted within childcare settings?*

Flying Start has provided training and support across childcare settings in Monmouthshire to increase understanding of attachment and child development. This has helped extend attachment-informed practice beyond Flying Start services into the wider childcare sector.

- *How are staff coping with the uncertainty surrounding future funding arrangements?*

The workforce is described as highly committed and experienced. Staff continue to focus on delivering services despite the uncertainty, while awaiting clarity on future funding arrangements. The team has been established for many years and remains focused on supporting families and children.

- *What role do apprenticeships play within Flying Start, and could this be expanded?*

Apprenticeships are seen as a very positive addition to the service. There are currently four apprentices working within childcare settings. The programme is viewed not only as a route to developing future childcare practitioners, but also as a way of broadening understanding of parenting and child development. There is an ambition to expand the apprenticeship model further and expose apprentices to a wider range of parenting and family support services, rather than limiting their experience to childcare alone.

- *Do you know how many children fail to attend an NHS dentist for a prolonged period and are subsequently removed from the dental list?*

Specific data on this issue is not available within Flying Start. However, whether children are registered with a dentist is something that is routinely discussed with Flying Start families. Where families are not registered, support is provided to help them access dental services. Information about dental registration and attendance would be held by the Health Board and collected through health services rather than Flying Start.

- *What dental health information would be most useful for Flying Start to receive?*

Data on the prevalence of decayed, missing and filled teeth among young children would be particularly valuable. Before COVID-19, more information of this nature was available and helped inform local work. Access to this data would allow Flying Start to target dental health promotion more effectively, particularly in areas where poor dental health is more prevalent. Existing support includes oral health promotion, supervised toothbrushing and fluoride applications in childcare settings.

- *Why does Monmouthshire continue to receive relatively low levels of Welsh Government funding despite increasing evidence of rural poverty and financial hardship?*

Historically, Flying Start funding has been allocated using measures such as the proportion of young children living in income-benefit households. Those measures do not always capture the full picture within areas such as Monmouthshire, where pockets of deprivation can sit alongside much more affluent communities. The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and other datasets can be interpreted in different ways depending on which indicators are examined, making it difficult to demonstrate need through a single measure.

- *Is there evidence that poverty in Monmouthshire is being masked by the county's overall reputation for affluence?*

There are certainly areas where need exists despite Monmouthshire's overall profile. The data shows variation within communities, and deprivation can be present even in areas that appear relatively affluent. When targeting childcare expansion, consideration has been given to factors such as income and educational attainment, but there is no single data source that fully captures all aspects of need.

- *Isn't rural poverty particularly difficult to identify because many people are asset-rich but cash-poor, and often reluctant to seek help or appear in official datasets?*

Rural poverty presents particular challenges. Some families may own significant assets, such as farms, while having very limited disposable income. There can also be reluctance to seek support because of pride or concerns about stigma. Schools often play an important role in identifying families who may be struggling and providing support discreetly.

- *How does rural isolation affect access to childcare and family support services?*

Rural isolation can create significant barriers. Some families may struggle with the cost of transport to reach childcare settings, even when childcare itself is available. In some parts of the county there may not be enough children locally to support a dedicated childcare provision. Childminders can sometimes help by collecting children, but this depends on having funding available to cover those additional transport-related costs. Rural isolation remains an important factor when considering how support services are delivered.

- *Who should be making the case to Welsh Government that Monmouthshire's funding does not properly reflect local deprivation and deep material poverty?*

It is not clear who has primary responsibility for making that case. Funding decisions are heavily data-driven, but there was no definitive answer as to whether this responsibility sits with officers, Cabinet Members, councillors, the Chief Executive, Members of the Senedd, or others.

- *Should the Council be doing more to challenge Welsh Government on how deprivation and poverty are assessed in Monmouthshire?*

Committee members generally agreed that this should be pursued further. The Chair proposed that the matter be referred back to the relevant Cabinet Member, with a request that representations be made to Welsh Government and a response reported back to the committee on how Monmouthshire's position is being advocated, particularly in relation to rural deprivation and deep material poverty.

Chair's Summary:

Thanks were given for the excellent questions and to the officer for attending and answering the members' questions.

ACTION: Request the Cabinet Member to write to Welsh Government and feed back to us.

ACTION: to programme in a follow up for January, inviting the Cabinet Member.

5. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th June 2026

The minutes were confirmed, proposed by Councillor Rooke and seconded by Councillor Jones.

6. Public Services Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and Action List

Actions arising from previous meetings were being progressed, particularly those linked to the committee's forward work programme. An updated version of the action list had been prepared since the agenda was published, reflecting progress on several items.

- Dentistry scrutiny would be postponed to January 2027
- 7th December Meeting ~ Proposal to Invite National Highways and SWTRA
- **Follow-up Action on Funding and Rural Poverty** ~ Arising from the earlier discussion on deprivation and Welsh Government funding: The Chair proposed that the committee formally request that the relevant Cabinet Member pursue the issue with Welsh Government and report back on:
 - How Monmouthshire's case is being made.
 - Whether "deep material poverty" and rural deprivation are being adequately recognised.
 - What representations are being made on funding allocations.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner

Noted.

8. Next Meeting

12th October 2026 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.48 am**.