

Summary

Our Community and Corporate Plan sets our ambition for the council and county of Monmouthshire and the actions we will take to become a zero-carbon county, supporting well-being, health and dignity for everyone at every stage of life. Our absolute priorities are to tackle inequality, to work hard to decarbonise our county and to work with our residents and in partnership with others to meet our objectives.

An annual self-evaluation is one of the ways in which we hold ourselves to account. We track the progress against our priorities, identify lessons and assess where improvements can be made so we can stay on track to achieve our ambitions. Every Council in Wales is required to do the same under the requirements of The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. This report captures the conclusions of our self-assessment covering the period 2022-23

Following the local elections in May 2022, a new administration was elected to lead the council. The Cabinet endorsed a new set of objectives in October with members approving the more detailed Community and Corporate Plan in April 2023, after the annual assessment period. We have structured the report around the six objectives of that plan but as the full plan was not endorsed until the end of the year, the assessment looks primarily at the areas for development identified in the previous self-assessment not the specific actions in the Community and Corporate Plan.



How well do we understand our local context and place?

We have a good understanding of our place informed by a well-being assessment, population needs assessment, feedback from residents and information gathered by elected members. Our data has informed our policy development and priorities including the work on a Replacement Local Development Plan. In some areas of our work, such as inequality and poverty, we've begun to develop more localised data, but we do not yet fully understand the lived experiences of all residents. There has been active participation in decision-making. We have listened and adjusted some of our plans on the evidence presented at pre-decision scrutiny. 33% of residents currently feel able to influence decisions in their local area compared to a Wales average of 30%. We want this figure to be much higher. We recognise there is more to be done to achieve our ambition to work with and alongside residents, enabling them to shape their futures.

How well are we achieving our agreed outcomes?

We've assessed our progress against the six objectives of our Community and Corporate Plan using a six-point scale that rates each one from 1 (unsatisfactory) through to 6 (excellent). Many of the things we've set out to do, such as improving river health and achieving net zero are complex societal challenges and will take time to deliver. As a result, some of the activities we will be reporting on now are the building blocks and milestones on the way to achieving our intended outcomes rather than outcomes themselves

A fair place to live – Our Rating: Level 4 (Good)

Nobody should be left behind in Monmouthshire and we are working to help those who need support to live the life they want. The cost-of-living crisis has made the income inequalities in our county more evident. Many residents are finding it more and more difficult to cope. In response, we've provided a range of support to those affected, including distributing half a million pounds through a discretionary scheme and working with schools and community groups. In partnership with Citizen's Advice and Mind Cymru we ran 15 support sessions to provide advice to help people who are struggling. We are also looking to the long term and have delivered programmes to increase employment and skills which in turn will enable people to increase their income. As mentioned below, last year we supported a 142 people back to work. We also provide a range of training courses to help residents upskill and increase their earning potential. Our MonLife teams provided over 10,000 hours of play activities through school holidays, and we've overseen the roll out of universal free school meals in primary schools to benefit families with young children. We're also committed to increasing the involvement of residents in the decision-making processes, for example we made £60,000 available through participatory budgeting where residents decide directly how to spend money.

A green place to live – Our Rating: Level 3 (Adequate)

We are custodians of our county. We recognise that we are facing a climate and nature emergency and must work to protect and preserve our place for future generations. We now have a clear understanding of the carbon we emit as an organisation and are actively reducing this. Thanks to the efforts of residents, we recycled 69.9% of waste – well ahead of our 64% target for 22-23 and well on the way to longer term target of 72%. Whilst this shows good progress over the past year, we have set ourselves a big challenge and recognise that we have a long way to go to in the fight against climate change. At our current rate of progress, we are unlikely to achieve our ambition of becoming a net zero organisation by 2030. Phosphates levels in rivers remain a major problem, with 88% of the Usk and 67% of the Wye failing the phosphate targets. As a local authority, we are limited in the things we can do to address this. We are working with a range of partners including Dŵr Cymru to improve river health and are integrating nature recovery into our work on decarbonisation. Within the council, we've installed 6.5MW of renewable energy on our buildings and have replaced more of our diesel vehicles with electric ones. A lot of carbon is accounted for by the things we buy from suppliers and we're implementing a socially responsible procurement strategy to reduce this year-on-year, for example by developing more local supply chains, including offering £10,000 grants to community groups and businesses who can help achieve this.

A thriving and ambitious place - Our Rating: Level 4 (Good)

We aim to create the conditions in which businesses and workers can thrive and succeed. One constraint on business is that over 99% of currently available commercial sites are occupied. 19 new employment sites have been given planning permission in the last year to tackle this problem. We also provided advice and support to 55 pre-start and existing businesses. This was below our target. To improve support for local businesses we have secured UK government funding for skills and business development. Looking to a more sustainable future we are producing a Replacement Local Development Plan which will result in more employment sites being identified. In partnership with residents, we worked on the development of town centre masterplans for ensuring that these are vibrant places that continue to draw people in for a wide range of uses. The digital deprivation rate in the county decreased significantly from 5.1% in 2019 to 2.5% in 2022. Our work with partners to increase access to high-speed broadband has played its part in improving connectivity in our county.

A safe place to live – Our Rating: Level 3 (Adequate)

Increasing homelessness is a challenge for our County. High property prices, a shortage of affordable private rented accommodation and the rising cost of living have all contributed to a rising homeless problem. We've introduced a housing first approach which provides long term housing solutions for people who have been unable to sustain accommodation in the past because of their complex and/or multiple needs. We've also developed a Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan to support anyone experiencing homelessness to move into a settled home as quickly as possible. Finding suitable homeless accommodation provision in the county remains a challenge. The use of bed and breakfast accommodation increased marginally from 90 to 92 households in the past year. On average it takes 10.2 months to move a homeless household into settled/permanent accommodation. Our intention is to get this below 6 months by 2027. 35 affordable homes were completed in our last Local Development Plan monitoring period, this was below the target of 96 and was the result of a shortage of development land and phosphate levels in rivers. In total the development of 308 dwellings has been affected by phosphates, of which 149 are affordable dwellings which clearly makes it harder for families to find somewhere to live.

A connected place where people care – Our Rating: Level 3 (Adequate)

We want Monmouthshire will be a place where people's contributions are valued, they feel part of a community and are connected to others. Our social services teams are facing increased demand and more complex cases. This is not unique to Monmouthshire and is taking a larger and larger share of our budgets. We recognise the need to do things differently to support our most vulnerable citizens. We've developed more place-based approaches helping people connect to others in their local community which reduces the need for them to rely solely on formal services. We also launched a micro-carers project to meet demand through small-scale local enterprise. These carers are delivering 161 hours of care each week. We've been able to achieve a reduction in the weekly hours of un-met from nearly 1,200 to 804 per week.

There remains a high level of demand and continued complexity for children requiring support from social services. At the end of 2022/23 there were 211 children being looked after by the local authority. Our teams have focused on working with families to support their strengths, manage risks and achieve good outcomes. Of the children with a care and support plan, 61% are supported to remain at home where safe to do so. We continue to take steps to prevent children coming into care and reduce the numbers of children in care. However, we sometimes need to use specialist placements to deal with complex cases and these are costly and in short supply which puts pressure on our stretched resources. In the past year we've worked with partners to commission specialised provision for young people with complex needs. We've also developed a recruitment and retention strategy for our social care workforce. We continue to face a number of challenges in being able to respond to people's care and support needs as quickly as we would want. 83.5% of adult service users are happy with their care, down from 86.9% in the previous year.

A learning place – Our Rating: Level 4 (Good)

Monmouthshire should be a place where everybody experiences the best possible start in life and has the opportunity to learn, developing the skills and knowledge they will need to reach their potential.

The pandemic affected learners' academic progress, particularly in relation to disadvantaged learners. It also affected the wellbeing of pupils and staff. School leaders are faced with a range of challenges. Some, such as lower school attendance, are linked to the tail of the pandemic while others, such as industrial action are more recent developments. The council has strengthened its team to provide support to learners and schools. We have developed the Whole School Approach to

Emotional and Mental Wellbeing. 43% of schools are currently engaged with this. We have increased the number of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants, with 70 across our schools making a daily impact on the lives of pupils. Attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels, with secondary schools (88.4%) showing much slower improvement than primary (91.8%). We've increased funding for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and broadened our provision with the implementation of the ALN strategy. There remains increased demand for specialist provision places which we provide through specialist bases in our mainstream schools.

We continue to address the attainment gap between pupils eligible for free school meals and other learners. The action plan to address the recommendations from our Estyn inspection is being implemented. Recent Estyn reports indicate that learners eligible for free school meals are making good progress in their learning. The new Curriculum for Wales has been adopted in all primary schools in line with national timescales and is now being rolled out in all secondary schools.

Development of the new King Henry VIII all-through school in Abergavenny is progressing at pace. The school will have the capacity for 1,200 secondary and 420 primary age pupils and 200 places for post-16 education. Welsh medium school provision has continued to expand, including the refurbishment of Ysgol Gymraeg y Ffin to increase the capacity of the school to 210 places.

How effectively are resources being used to deliver our priorities?

We have sound arrangements in place to enable and support service delivery. These include finance, workforce management, digital, asset management, performance and risk management. Nevertheless, the impact of an extended period of austerity on service delivery coupled with the cost-of-living crisis and high levels of inflation has taken its toll.

We have faced increased demand for services, such as social care and homelessness, while inflation has contributed to rising costs in areas such as home to school transport. As a consequence, the council has needed to draw on reserves to balance the budget for the first time in more than a decade. We are now revising our enabling strategies to respond to challenges and opportunities and align them with the Community and Corporate Plan.

How effectively does the council work with stakeholders and partners on agreed outcomes?

Partnership is core to how we work. The council has effective relationships in place with a multiplicity of stakeholders that help us achieve our purpose. These range from large scale strategic partnerships like the Cardiff Capital Region and the Gwent Public Services Board to bi-lateral shared services with other councils for services such as youth offending, procurement and revenues and benefits. We have strengthened how we work with Welsh Government and recognise that we can and must do more to develop and build on our relationship with community and town councils.

Areas for Development

Through the self-assessment, we've identified how well we are doing and what we can do better. This is our starting point. We will look to build on and learn from the things we are doing and seek to improve areas where we can do better. You can see the areas for development that we've identified at the end of each section in the full assessment. They include accelerating delivery of our Decarbonisation Strategy; using new economic analysis to inform the development of an Economy, Employment and Skills Strategy and strengthening our capacity to work with our residents and communities through implementing our Participation Strategy.

Measuring Progress

We use a wide range of performance measures to track our progress against our priorities. These are found throughout the assessment. We did not have targets in place for these measures during 2022-23. This assessment uses the targets set for 2026-27, the end of the current Community and

Corporate Plan period. We also track progress against a range of metrics that track outcomes at a population level. Key measures will be presented regularly to Cabinet and the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee so that we can track progress and adjust delivery where we're falling short of our expectations.

What do you think?

We've included some of the feedback we've received from other organisations and would be delighted to hear your views to help us inform future assessments.

Please e-mail us: improvement@monmouthshire.gov.uk