

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk on Thursday 23rd January 2014 at 10.00am

PRESENT: County Councillor S.G.M. Howarth (Chairman)

County Councillors: A. Easson, R. Edwards, M. Hickman, D. Jones, M. Powell,
V. E. Smith, K. Williams, A.E. Webb and A. Wintle.

ALSO PRESENT:

County Councillor P.A.D. Hobson - Cabinet Member for Community
Development

County Councillor D. Blakebrough

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr R. Cope	-	Passenger Transport Unit Manager
Mr R. Hoggins	-	Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture
Mrs A Howard	-	Sustainable Communities Officer
Mr M. Howcroft	-	Assistant Head of Finance
Ms H. Ilett	-	Scrutiny Manager
Mr N. Leaworthy	-	Operations Manager, Facilities
Ms K. Stinchcombe	-	Biodiversity & Ecology Officer
Mrs E. Tapper	-	Democratic Services Officer

BY INVITATION OF THE CHAIRMAN:

Dr. N. Bradbear - Bees for Development

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Mr D. Maddox	-	Farmer
Mr A.J. Mickie	-	Monmouthshire resident
Mr J. Miles	-	Monmouthshire resident
Mr N. Tatum	-	Abergavenny Town Council

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillor S. White.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

County Councillor A.E. Easson declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 within the capacity of Member of Caldicot Town Council, Minute item 9: On – going scrutiny of the subsidy of Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences

County Councillor M. Hickman declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 within the capacity of Member of Abergavenny Town Council, Minute item 9: On – going scrutiny of the subsidy of Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences

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County Councillor S.G.M. Howarth declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 within the capacity of Chairman of Llanelly Hill Community Council, Minute item: On – going scrutiny of the subsidy of Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences

County Councillor D.W.H. Jones declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 within the capacity of Chairman of Grosmont Community Council, Minute item 9: On – going scrutiny of the subsidy of Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences.

County Councillor M. Powell declared a personal interest pursuant to the Members Code of Conduct, Local Government Act 2000 within the capacity of Member of Abergavenny Town Council, Minute item 9: On – going scrutiny of the subsidy of Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences.

3. CHAIRMAN'S WELCOME AND EXPRESSIONS OF THANKS

The Chairman welcomed elected members, officers, invited guests and members of the public to the meeting.

The Chairman expressed thanks to Members for their support and hard work during the budget scrutiny process and for their attendance at numerous special meetings of the Strong Communities Select Committee.

We were informed that a Special Joint Select Committee meeting to scrutinise the capital and revenue budget proposals would be held on 29th January 2014. Members were encouraged to attend.

4. PUBLIC OPEN FORUM

Members of the public present, requested to speak during items of business on the formal agenda. The Committee accepted the request.

5. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

i. The minutes of the special meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee of 25th November 2013 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman subject to the following amendment:

County Councillor R. G. Harris was in attendance at the meeting.

ii. The minutes of the meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held on 28th November 2013 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman. During confirmation of the minutes we resolved to receive an update in July 2014 regarding the cost and progress of the Abergavenny Community Trust Park Street School Project.

iii. The minutes of the special meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee of 5th December 2013 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the following highlighted addition to Minute Item 4: Draft Whole Authority Strategic Risk Assessment 2013 – 16, page 30;

“We noted that whilst the Authority’s LDP approved the construction of 800 properties

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(affordable homes, self - tenure etc.) 3000 remained on the housing waiting list.”

During confirmation of the minutes the Committee resolved to request an update report in July 2014 regarding the work and impact of the employment of Local Area Coordinators, Minute Item 5: Draft Outcome Agreement 2013 – 16.

6. PROPOSED POLLINATOR POLICY

We received the proposed Pollinator Policy for scrutiny from the Sustainable Communities Officer.

The policy had been developed in consultation with a wide variety of stakeholders including Heddlu Gwent Police, Friends of the Earth and Aneurin Bevan Health Board, “Bee” Friendly Monmouthshire and local communities. Officers had also visited Bristol City Council to observe their practices and had consulted with Powys County Council and Lanarkshire County Council.

We heard that the proposed policy sought to promote the creation of pollinator friendly habitats on land owned by the Authority through changes to planting and grass cutting regimes, in response to a declining pollinator population and Welsh Government ‘s Action Plan For Pollinators of July 2013. We noted that the policy would positively impact the local environment and generate revenue savings of £34 000.

We reviewed the key features of the proposed pollinator policy and in so doing the following issues were raised:

- **Grass cutting along County Highways**

We were informed of the proposal to reduce cutting regimes along A and B class highways routes to annually, subject to health and safety assessments. No change was proposed to C and R class highways networks.

We welcomed Mr D. Maddox, Devauden Community Council, to the meeting. Mr Maddox presented a petition to the Chairman, endorsed by 160 signatories, objecting to the proposal to reduce verge cutting to once per year along B Roads. The petition was supported by a letter from the National Farmers Union.

Mr Maddox outlined the nature of the objection, as follows:

- There was a tendency for B roads to be extremely narrow. Cow parsley is particularly problematic and should verges receive only one cut in the Autumn the excessive growth could hinder the visibility for drivers and horse riders, compromising road safety.
- Concern was expressed that drainage would be compromised as grids may become blocked with overgrown vegetation preventing storm water entering them and causing damage to road surfaces.
- Agricultural vehicles are larger, wider and higher than standard vehicles and require greater space to pass along roads.
- Farmers would continue to maintain and cut verges along B roads where the Local Authority failed to do so.
- Mr Maddox felt that it was ludicrous that, in Wales, verge cutting could not commence until 1st September, where as in England verge cutting was permitted a

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month earlier.

- The removal of 1m of hedge, leaving 3 – 4m remaining, would provide sufficient room for pollinators.
- Clearings should be made for farm gateways.

Members and other attendees were invited to respond to the objections outlined by Mr Maddox.

Dr Bradbear, Bees For Development, advised that if verge cutting commenced on 1st August, the verge would not flower the following year reducing the habitat for pollinators. We heard that the RSPB advocate cutting to commence in February and in terms of the Welsh Pollinator Action Plan, Monmouthshire County Council were well ahead. Dr Bradbear stated that the proposed pollinator took account of health and safety issues.

In response to a Member question regarding the impact of disease on pollinators, Dr Bradbear advised that this was a minor issue in comparison to lack of food and habitat. Honey bee and bumble bee disease resulted from the need to import pollinators and it was hoped that the proposed pollinator policy would reduce the need for importation.

The Local Member for Dewstow expressed concern that the Pollinator policy was motivated by revenue savings. This was strenuously denied.

We were advised that the revenue saving of £34 000 related to highways with the expenditure normally targeted for summer and winter planting being substituted for wild flower planting.

The Committee felt that a moderate, sensible approach needed to be adopted by the Authority in terms of ensuring road safety and providing habitats for pollinators and birds:

- Road safety was of paramount importance. The use of B roads was considered to be almost as great as the use of A roads. The B4293 and B4245 were cited as examples of this.
The Cabinet Member for Community Development assured the Committee that every B road would be risk assessed individually.
- Members felt that the Authority should not prevent farmers cutting verges and hedges for reasons of local safety but cuttings should be disposed of appropriately to prevent drains becoming blocked.
- Members supported re - planting public open spaces to encourage pollinators.
An increase in the number of green spaces to encourage pollinators and to reduce the risk of flooding would be welcomed. It was suggested that the planning policy be revised to address the issue of households concreting and paving driveways.
- Cow parsley should be cut bi - annually as this grows rapidly and obstructs roads.

The Committee recommended that two cuts should be retained on some B roads. Each town and community council should identify areas where verge cutting could be safely reduced. Similarly Community Councils may wish to identify areas of overgrown land which could be reclaimed to encourage pollinators.

We requested that the Operations Manager, Facilities, provide Members with a copy of the proposed changes to verge cutting and maintenance. The Operations Manager also agreed to provide a written description of the cutting plans with photographic

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evidence to all Town and Community Councils.

The Cabinet Member for Community Development advised the Committee that it would be necessary to present the proposed pollinator policy to Cabinet as planned in order to avoid delays to the cutting season. We received assurance that the policy would be reviewed in light of comments made so that areas of particular concern, requiring bi – annual cuts could be highlighted.

7i. REVENUE BUDGET FORECAST STATEMENT 2013/14 MONTH 6

The Assistant Head of Finance reported an improving revenue budget position since month 3 of the financial year. We welcomed notice of an under spend of £895 000 attributable to the Strong Communities Select Committee.

£2, 610, 000 of savings were attributed to the service during the 2013 – 14 budget process. The Assistant Head of Finance expressed confidence that £2.4 million of the savings would be achieved in 2013/14. Some savings were considered unachievable such as the proposed changes to the pest control service. The remainder would be achieved in 2014/15.

We noted a significant change to the Job Evaluation budget position at month 6. We heard that Single Status expenses had been settled in full with Directorates resulting in an under spend of £781 000. As a short term measure, it was recommended that the under spend be transferred to reserves to settle the actual 2013 – 14 outturn position.

The Committee reviewed the Revenue Budget Forecast Statement and in so doing the following issues were raised:

- An Outsourced Facilities Management contract had introduced a budget pressure of £80 000. The Assistant Head of Finance advised that this referred to school cleaning contracts where outsourced cleaning had proved more costly than in – house. It was not known if the contract could be reversed and further information was requested.
- We were advised that net employee catering costs of £35 000 related to the delivery of school meals to ensure Appetite for Life Compliance. The Assistant Head of Finance was not aware of grant funding from Welsh Government.
- Concern was expressed regarding, the net shortfall in parking income and waste pressures of £173 000. We were advised that the waste grant from Welsh Government would not be received until after the budget setting process given that payment of the grant was subject to receipt of a full year’s activity data. We noted that only £70 000 of the income pressure of £108 000 identified related to this grant.
- Concern was expressed regarding the £10 000 shortfall in the budgeted benefit associated with Public Conveniences.
In response to a Member question regarding the sale of the public conveniences at Raglan Members felt that any asset belonging to Council should be sold at public auction unless there was a sale threshold. The Assistant Head of Finance agreed to clarify the position.
- Concern was expressed regarding an over spend of £24 000 attributable to the Green Car Scheme. Although staff take – up had increased to 56, this remained insufficient to meet the budgeted saving target of £66 000. Members requested

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additional information regarding the Green Car Scheme.

- We heard that the Council Vehicle Usage Scheme was forecast to overspend by £61 500. We were informed that the construction of a holding car park to store the employees' vehicles who had opted out of the scheme had been delayed due to the identification of newts on the site.
- Underspends due to vacant posts were being utilised to compensate for budget overspends and pressures. If any vacant posts were to be filled, authorisation would be required from the Chief Executive.
- We heard that an under spend of £52 000 within Elections was due to the delay in implementation of the Individual Registration Process until July 2014 and the existence of a vacant post.
- Members queried the rationale behind the decision not to fill the Democratic Services Manager post particularly in view of the need to respond to the all Wales criticism of scrutiny. The Scrutiny Manager informed the Committee that an inspection by Wales Audit Office had concluded that scrutiny arrangements within Monmouthshire were good. Newport City Council has greater capacity for scrutiny yet Newport's Corporate Assessment which addressed scrutiny was less positive. We were advised that a restructure of Elections, Democratic Services and Scrutiny arrangements was pending.
- With regard to additional handling costs totalling £9 000 for payments made by credit or debit cards within Revenues, Systems and Exchequer, Members suggested passing the 30 pence charge on to the customer. The Assistant Head of Finance stated that the Authority did not wish to deter customers paying by these means but provided assurance that in the next 12 months consideration would be afforded to the issue.

The Assistant Head of Finance informed Members that he would be seeking to strike a balance between timeliness and depth of information and would trial a traffic light system to focus scrutiny activity of budget monitoring information.

We resolved to note the report.

7ii. CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2013/14 MONTH 8 FORECAST OUTTURN STATEMENT

We received the month 8 forecast outturn capital expenditure position for 2013/14 from the Assistant Head of Finance.

A net under spend of £205 000, within the remit of Strong Communities Select Committee was forecast resulting mainly from an under spend of £219 000 on the County Hall demolition and remodelling which came in under budget.

The saving specific to the Authority equated to £95 000. Members requested that this figure should be more clearly identified.

Concern was expressed that the former County Hall site was not forecast as a capital receipt for 2013/14 to 2016/17.

The Head of Operations assured the Committee that any further costs relating to the County Hall site would be subject to scrutiny and that the sale of the site was not currently anticipated within the MTFP window.

We heard that Heddlu Gwent Police's position remained unclear in terms of a decision

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to vacate the site. The Council decision to sell the site in conjunction with Torfaen and Heddli Gwent Police would require review if it was agreed to sell the site without Heddli Gwent Police, in order to relieve budgetary pressures and prior to any amalgamation with Newport City Council.

We heard that the Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture was in consultation with Torfaen County Borough Council regarding the issue.

The Committee expressed concern at the delayed sale of five assets, totalling £990 000, from 2012/13 into 2013/14.

We received assurance that Officers were committed to progress the sale of assets. In response, the Chairman requested that an anticipated completion date be assigned to S106 schemes and capital asset sales to enable Members to monitor progress more effectively.

With regard to the Abergavenny Library Scheme, the Deputy Chief Officer Regeneration and Culture advised that a meeting was due to be held as part of the Whole Place Plan, the outcome of which would be reported to Members.

The Deputy Chief Officer Regeneration and Culture agreed to provide the Committee with a list of sites owned and/or operated by the Authority within Abergavenny.

Member requested clarification regarding the completion of the Shire Hall project; this would be investigated and Members informed accordingly.

The Chairman expressed thanks to the Assistant Head of Finance and we resolved that the report be noted.

The Committee resolved to adjourn for a comfort break at 12:30pm.

The Committee reconvened at 12:40pm for consideration of the following items of business.

8. PROVISION OF PUBLIC CONVENIENCES – SUBSIDY TO TOWN AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS

We received a report from Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture as part of the on - going scrutiny of the subsidy available to Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences.

The report recommended that an annual grant of £1200 originally made available to Town and Community Councils in 2010, be extended for a further three years. We heard that the grant would be available to existing Town and Community Councils and could be applied to any further arrangements entered into between the County Council and any Town or Community Council for the provision of a public convenience currently managed by the County Council.

We welcomed the report as it marked a closer working relationship with Town and Community Councils but it was felt inappropriate to increase the grant within the current financial climate. Members requested the inclusion of a cut – off date for grant applications.

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During scrutiny of the report the following issues were raised:

- Members commented that there had been limited improvement in the standards of cleanliness. The toilets in Abergavenny Bus Station were considered to be sub - standard as were the facilities in Bank Street, Chepstow.
- The cost of providing public conveniences was increasing. The Authority recognised that £1200 did not cover the annual cost of operating public conveniences. We heard that Caldicot Town Council reported current maintenance costs of £14 000.
- The Authority emphasised the importance of operating various arrangements with different Town and Community Councils as it was recognised that flexibility would encourage buy – in.

Chepstow: We were advised that Chepstow Town Council was responsible for the management and cleaning of the facilities in Bank Street/Welsh Street and the Tourist Information Centre. The Authority had retained ownership of the Bank Street and TIC facilities but pays Chepstow Town Council to clean them on behalf of the Authority. Operationally, the Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture considered this to be a sound arrangement.

We noted that it had been agreed to close the public convenience in Riverside, Chepstow.

Monmouth: We were informed that the Authority had retained the Monnow Bridge facility but had decided to close the facility in Agincourt Street. In response, Monmouth Town Council adopted the facility in Agincourt Street and employs the Authority to clean both facilities.

Members discussed provision within their own wards and the following requests for information were received; request to confirm whether the toilets within Abergavenny Market Hall remain open, request to provide the operational costs of the Brewery Yard public conveniences and to confirm the value achieved from the sale of Mathern public convenience.

The Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture agreed to source the information.

Mr N Tatum challenged the Equality Impact Assessment stating that age and pregnancy would impact any decision regarding public conveniences.

The Deputy Chief Officer, Regeneration and Culture welcomed and accepted the comment. The Chief Officer stated that the impact of age was difficult to evidence and clarification would be required regarding pregnancy and maternity being protected characteristics.

Members queried the need to publish Equality Impact Assessments in full. We suggested inclusion of a written notification informing that an EQIA had been completed and was available by request.

We resolved to support the recommendation to continue the subsidy available to Town and Community Councils to provide public conveniences.

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9. REPLACEMENT OF BUS SERVICE 65

We received a report from the Passenger Transport Unit Manager seeking approval to replace the existing service 65 Chepstow to Monmouth with a Section 22 transport bus service, for scrutiny.

We heard that the current contract was due to expire on 29th March 2014 and was being operated using a non DDA compliant vehicle, which post 1st January 2015 would be unacceptable.

Following a tender exercise the lowest tender received to include a DDA compliant vehicle was £103 443, an increase of £60 943 per annum for five years. This cost was considered unsustainable.

The Passenger Transport Unit Manager stated that the service was well used by residents travelling between Chepstow and Monmouth and by pupils travelling to and from Chepstow Comprehensive School.

The Committee recognised that the removal of the 65 service would leave many areas without a transport link and a separate school transport contract would need to be procured.

We welcomed notice that surveys were being conducted on passenger journeys at various times throughout the day and a new timetable was being developed based upon current and historical passenger data. No changes to the route were envisaged. The Passenger Transport Manager stated that there was room for flexibility such as using a lesser capacity vehicle at off peak times.

We heard that changes to post 16 transport and the use of a DDA compliant vehicle could positively impact the number of passengers using the 65 bus service. We welcomed notice that even if the current revenue levels were maintained a small budget saving could be achieved by the proposals.

We agreed to support the replacement of the existing service 65 Chepstow to Monmouth with a Section 22 community transport bus service operated by the Passenger Transport Unit. This was subject to assurance that consultation would be undertaken with local members regarding the revised timetable. The Passenger Transport Manager agreed to consult and apologised for not doing so at an earlier juncture.

10. PRE – DECISION SCRUTINY OF THE AUTHORITY

We resolved to defer the Authority's Street Naming and Numbering Policy to the next meeting of the Strong Communities Select Committee.

11. STRONG COMMUNITIES SELECT COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2013 – 14 AND THE CABINET FORWARD WORK PLANNER

We received and resolved to note the Strong Communities Select Committee Work Programme and the Cabinet Forward Work Planner.

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12. TIME AND DATE OF NEXT MEETING

We confirmed the time and date of the next meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee as Thursday 6th March 2014 at 10am.

The meeting ended at 13:50

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