

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held
at on Thursday, 26th September, 2019 at 10.00 am**

Councillors Present

County Councillor L.Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Dovey, A. Easson,
L. Guppy, R. Harris, V. Smith and J.Pratt

Also in attendance County Councillor J. Pratt,
Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and
Neighbourhood Services

Officers in Attendance

Mark Howcroft, Assistant Head of Finance
Hazel Clatworthy, Sustainability Policy Officer
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and
Governance
Dave Loder, Finance Manager
Sally Thomas, HR Manager
Mark Cleaver, Environmental Officer
Rob O'Dwyer, Head of Business Transformation
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services

APOLOGIES: County Councillor J.Treharne

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Open Public Forum

No members of the public addressed the Committee as part of the public open forum.

3. Budget Monitoring Report: Month 2 (Quarterly Scrutiny)

- The Assistant Head of Finance is exploring new ways of reporting to give members a greater level of understanding whilst trying to simplify reports and will be meeting with chairs of select committees as part of this work
- There is presently a £2.4M deficit overall. There is an overall £750,000 overspend within this portfolio and some savings that haven't been found
- The capital programme is coming in on budget but there will be a need to slip forward some of the expenditure on the Crick Road scheme
- The report highlights the draw on reserves in 2019-20. Currently reserve levels are at 3.19% of the net budget expenditure which falls below appropriate levels of 4% - 6% but the one off VAT ruling should help replenish these.

Members Challenge

- In response to input from the assistant head of finance the committee discussed the accessibility of financial reporting to non-accountants and made a request for further training and summaries. It was agreed that these options would be explored in a meeting with chairs of selects.
- Members challenged the financial performance of commercial investments and the impact on council finances. Members heard that the financing costs of Castlegate are secured but there are rental vacancies, with occupancy at around

65%, which mean the authority is not meeting income targets. Information on commercial investment will be received by the investment and audit committees

- The committee questioned whether it was right to terminate the tenure of the musical theatre group on the site. Members were reminded that the units need to be considered as a considered as commercial investment rather than operational assets associated with delivering our purpose
- Members queried the potential to further increase income from renewable energy. Members heard that feed-in tariffs have been reduced so solar is not as attractive as previously although technology is now cheaper. There is a lack of capacity in the national infrastructure to take more power and the council may need to become an energy company to overcome this or tie solar farms in with new housing developments.
- Members challenged whether we were being over-ambitious with the future Monmouthshire savings targets. Members heard that this budget is being used as a holding account until the savings are allocated to individual budgets.
- Members sought to understand the commercial advantages available from our ability as a public body to generate income. Members heard that the Public Works Loan Board gives provide us with access to preferential interest rates. However we always look to our own resources (internal borrowing) before looking to external.

Outcomes

- Members sought increased clarity with the reports with the addition of an executive summary and the Assistant head of Finance will meet with Chairs of Selects to take this forward
- Members challenged the savings targets and commercial performance of the authority and received responses to a broad range of questions

4. People Services: Annual update on sickness absence and attendance management

- Social Care and Health along with Operations departments have the highest levels of absence
- The top three reason for absence were mental health, infections and hospitalisation with mental health accounting for 22% of absences
- The mental health data is broken down within the report to separates the headline figure into work related and personal issues of anxiety and stress.

Members Challenge

- Members raised concerns about staff receiving abusive calls and heard about the practices that are in place to support staff.
- Members challenged the level of response to phone calls and e-mails in some parts of the organisation. The Head of Service was tasked with preparing a report on this for the committee. Issues were also raised with ICT systems for members and members were reminded that this would be a matter for the Democratic Services Committee

- Members sought more information on the financial cost of sickness absence and the People Services Manager offered to provide this information to members.

Outcomes

- The People Services Manager will provide the financial cost for the figure of sickness absence and comparative data for other councils
- The Head of Policy and Governance will make available a report on customer contact arrangements

5. Climate Change: Scrutiny of the Draft Response ahead of approval

- A draft response to the climate emergency was presented to members following workshops with officers and members of the community which had identified more than 100 potential actions
- Members were asked to provide views on the ten draft objectives and engage in policy development in the prioritisation and shaping of potential actions to address these.
- The Cabinet member with responsibility for climate change stressed that the local authority cannot do this alone, it will have to require collaboration to save our planet for future generations.
- Ongoing work will involve the members of our community who have fantastic knowledge on this subject, involve our schools and young people

Member Challenge

- Members felt there should be a greater focus on working with businesses. The committee were advised that there had been involvement of local renewable energy companies but not yet the wider business community, members heard that this would also be addressed through corporate procurement.
- Members challenged the way that statistics were presented in the strategy and officers were tasked with making these more accessible.
- There was a discussion about the links between vehicle emissions, air quality and health impacts and how this agenda could be used to identify small changes that would make a positive difference. There was also a suggestion to lobby Welsh Government to change its decision not to invest in the M4.
- Members considered the draft action plan and contributed a broad range of ideas to shape it and help the council reduce its carbon footprint through a mixture of simpler actions and more ambitious and innovative long term proposals. Members stressed that the council must lead and try to influence as well as what we can do directly.

Outcomes

- Members undertook policy development helping to prioritise the activity that would form part of the action plan accompanying the strategy
- It was agreed that the draft strategy be circulated to all community and town councils for debate and comment.

- Ensure that members of other select committees are aware of opportunities to participate in the working group.

6. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting held on 11th July 2019

The minutes were agreed as true and accurate record.

7. Strong Communities forward work programme

No specific items from the meeting have been added to work programme. Items circulated following questions at today's challenge may inform the work programme when considered by members.

8. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

The Cabinet and Council Forward Work Programme was noted.

9. Date and time of next meeting: 15th October 2019 at 3.00pm (Special Meeting) and 7th November 2019 at 10.00am (Ordinary Meeting)

The meeting ended at 12.15 pm