

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of County Council held
at Council Chamber - Council Chamber on Thursday, 11th March, 2021 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)

County Councillors: P. Clarke, D. Batrouni, J.Becker,
D. Blakebrough, L.Brown, A.Davies, L.Dymock, A. Easson,
R. Edwards, D. Evans, M.Feakins, P.A. Fox, R.J.W. Greenland,
M.Groucutt, L. Guppy, R. Harris, J. Higginson, G. Howard,
S. Howarth, R.John, D. Jones, L.Jones, P. Jones, S. Jones,
P. Jordan, M.Lane, P. Murphy, P.Pavia, M. Powell, J.Pratt, R.Roden,
B. Strong, F. Taylor, T.Thomas, J.Treharne, J.Watkins, A. Watts,
A. Webb and K. Williams

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Matt Phillips	Head of Law/ Monitoring Officer
Paul Matthews	Chief Executive
Peter Davies	Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Will McLean	Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Nicola Perry	Senior Democracy Officer
Frances O'Brien	Chief Officer, Enterprise
Julie Boothroyd	Chief Officer Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Jonathan Davies	Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Scott James	Strategic Procurement Manager
Sally Thomas	HR Manager

APOLOGIES:

County Councillors S.B. Jones

1. Declarations of interest

None.

2. Public Questions

None.

3. Chairman's announcement and receipts of petitions

On opening the meeting, the Chairman conducted a period of silence as a mark of respect of the passing of County Councillor David Dovey.

Members paid tribute to Councillor Dovey. Council passed on their sincere condolences.

The Chairman acknowledged receipt of a petition from Councillor Alan Davies regarding flooding at Castle Lea.

The Chairman commended the work undertaken by staff and officers of the Council over the term of the pandemic.

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4. Reports for Council:

5. COUNCIL TAX RESOLUTION and REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS FOR 2021/22

The Cabinet Member for Resources presented the Council Tax Resolution and Revenue and Capital Budgets for 2021/22.

The Council is bound by Statute to specific timescales for Council Tax setting and is also required to make certain defined resolutions. The recommendations that form a major part of this report are designed to comply with those Statutory Provisions.

The recommended resolutions also draw together the Council Tax implications of precepts proposed by the Office of Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent and Town and Community Councils, thereby enabling the County Council to establish its headline Council Tax levels at the various property bands within each Town or Community area.

Seconded by County Councillor R. Greenland.

The Leader of the Opposition expressed disappointment with the increase in Council Tax, and increase in fees and charges, which would have the greatest impact on households with lowest incomes, given the additional Welsh Government support.

Frustrations were expressed over the cost of employing agency workers.

Concerns were raised over the upkeep and maintenance of Caldicot Castle Park. It was a great concern that car parking chargers are to be introduced. The Cabinet member responded that car park charges would not be increased this year, and much of what had been spoken of was Covid related expenditure.

The Leader thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their work in preparing the budget. He expressed that there had been no alternative budget suggestions submitted to Council. He highlighted the difference in funding per capita across neighbouring authorities, adding that if MCC was funded fairly, Council Tax could be reduced.

A question was raised regarding Council Tax collections, and it was anticipated that collection rate would remain the same. Council Tax write offs in 2019 amounted to £168,240, in the current year to date it amounts to £36,313

A suggestion was made that no increase to Council Tax should be made, given the current climate.

It was confirmed that no money had been lost over the investment at Newport Leisure Park, due to the WG Covid Hardship Fund.

A question around investment in affordable housing was raised.

Upon being put to a vote Council resolved to accept the recommendations as set out in the report.

6. 2021/22 TREASURY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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The Cabinet Member for Resources presented the report for approval of the Treasury Management Strategy including Minimum Revenue Provision policy for the 2021/22 financial year. The report summarises and highlights the key areas relating to the strategy, alongside those areas of key implications and risks resulting from it.

Seconded by County Councillor Maureen Powell.

The Chair of Audit Committee was in attendance and addressed Council to confirm the report had been discussed at Audit Committee on 25th February 2021.

In response to a concern regarding the borrow strategy, the Cabinet Member confirmed that officers will look at long term rates and fix when it is appropriate to do so. Officers are constantly assessing borrowing requirements.

Upon being put to the vote Council resolve to accept the recommendations:

That Council approves the Treasury Management Strategy 2021/22 including the:

- 1. 2021/22 Treasury Management policy statement**
- 2. 2021/22 Minimum Revenue Provision Policy Statement**
- 3. 2021/22 Investment & Borrowing Strategies**

To approve the Prudential Indicators supplied in Appendix 5 and that will be used in the performance monitoring of the treasury function during 2021/22.

That Council agrees that Audit Committee should continue to review the Council's treasury activities on behalf of the Council by receiving & scrutinising the mid-year report and year end report and also scrutinising the Treasury Policy & Strategy before passing to Council for approval.

7. CAPITAL STRATEGY 2021/22 AND APPROVAL OF GRANT FUNDED ADDITIONS TO THE 2020/21 CAPITAL BUDGET

The Cabinet Member for Resources presented the report for Council to approve the 2021/22 Capital strategy for approval and for approval of the addition of grant funded budgets to the 2020/21 capital programme.

Seconded by County Councillor Giles Howard.

Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to accept the recommendations:

To review and approve the 2021/22 Capital Strategy (Appendix 1)

To approve the additions of the capital budgets financed entirely from external grants and contributions identified in Appendix 2 to the 2020/21 capital budget

8. APPOINTMENT TO WYE NAVIGATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Cabinet Member for Governance and Law presented the report to appoint a representative to serve on the Wye Navigation Advisory Committee.

In doing so he thanked Councillor Ann Webb for her time on the Committee.

Councillor Batrouni nominated Councillor Anthony Easson, seconded by Councillor Groucutt.

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Councillor Jordan nominated Councillor Jane Pratt, seconded by Councillor Powell.

Upon being put to the vote Councillor Jane Pratt was appointed.

9. CONSTITUTION

The Cabinet Member for Governance and Law presented the report for Council to consider the revised and updated MCC Constitution.

Seconded by County Councillor Jamie Treharne.

Councillor Howard thanked Officers for the removal of the proposal that planning applications referred to full Committee by ward members would first be considered by the delegated panel.

Councillor Brown thanked officers for amendments to the Constitution and retaining the right of County Councillors to refer matters to Planning Committee.

Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to approve the recommendation:

Full Council approve the reviewed and updated Constitution.

10. Notices of Motion:

11. Submitted by County Councillor D. Batrouni

This Council applauds the Welsh Labour Government for its support, particularly financially, to the Council, its residents, and our local businesses during the Covid-19 pandemic. In total, the Welsh Government has provided the Council and Monmouthshire businesses over £45m. It is also very pleasing that the Welsh Government have increased the Council's budget settlement by 3.9%, which is above the Welsh average. The council originally budgeted for a 0% increase, so this means the Council will roughly receive an extra £3.7m.

Seconded by Councillor Tudor Thomas. In doing so he highlighted that Welsh Government have provided rapid support financially and in terms of leadership and added that he would like to see MCC working more closely with Welsh Government. We heard that many Abergavenny businesses have welcomed and been grateful for the support provided by WG via MCC during this difficult period of trading.

Councillor D. Evans left the meeting at 14:50pm

The Leader stated that he would not be supporting the motion. He expressed frustration that the funding situation was allowed to continue which is putting excessive strain on authorities like MCC through a lack of action in altering a formula which could be reviewed to provide fairness going forward. He added that UK Government had made £6.6 billion available to WG, to administer on their behalf.

Councillor Armand Watts declared a non-prejudicial interest as a business owner in receipt of support.

Councillor Laura Jones MS concurred with comments around distribution of support and funds from WG. She added that it is well recognised within the Senedd how well MCC are doing and being used as an example of good practice.

Upon being put to the vote the notion was defeated.

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12. Submitted by County Councillor J. Watkins

Council notes that:

- a) At just £67.25 a week, Carer's Allowance is the lowest benefit of its kind.*
- b) In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government increased the Universal Credit standard allowance and the Working Tax Credit basic element by £20 a week above the planned uprating in April 2020, but it has not increased Carer's Allowance.*
- c) Many unpaid carers are facing extreme financial hardship. A recent survey by Carers UK found that more than a third of those on Carer's Allowance are struggling to make ends meet. Many have been struggling for months, often relying on foodbanks to feed themselves and the people they care for. The Carers UK survey found that "43% of carers felt that a rise in Carer's Allowance would help them, given the financial pressures they are facing."*

Council resolves that:

- a) We must stand up for carers, do more to support them, and build a more caring society as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic.*

Council directs the Leader of the Council to:

- a) Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, urging them to raise Carer's Allowance by £20 a week immediately, in line with the increase in Universal Credit.*
- b) Council resolves to put out a general communication to unpaid carers, third sector organisations and community councils to encourage carers to claim Carers Allowance*

Seconded by Councillor Anthony Easson.

Councillor Armand Watts proposed an amendment to the motion, to include Part C as below:

Council directs the Leader of the Council to:

- a) Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, urging them to raise Carer's Allowance by £20 a week immediately, in line with the increase in Universal Credit.*
- b) Council resolves to put out a general communication to unpaid carers, third sector organisations and community councils to encourage carers to claim Carers Allowance*
- c) That the £128 earnings threshold is removed.***

The amended was seconded by Councillor Frances Taylor.

Suggestion was made that a reasonable figure for the earnings threshold should be set out in the amended motion.

Councillor Kevin Williams declared a personal non-prejudicial interest

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Upon being put to the vote the amended motion was carried and became the substantive motion.

Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health proposed that part b of the motion was unnecessary and should be removed: *b) Council resolves to put out a general communication to unpaid carers, third sector organisations and community councils to encourage carers to claim Carers Allowance.*

She explained that forms of communication currently include a Monmouthshire Carers newsletter with updated information on everything beneficial to carers and their families, Social Media, video calls, virtual coffee mornings and meetings, Gwent carers hub and local support groups.

Upon being put to the vote the amendment to the substantive motion was carried.

The new substantive motion:

Council directs the Leader of the Council to:

a) Write to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, urging them to raise Carer's Allowance by £20 a week immediately, in line with the increase in Universal Credit.

b) That the £128 earnings threshold is removed.

Upon being put to the vote the substantive motion was carried.

13. Submitted by County Councillor F. Taylor

That in fulfilling its role to support sustainable communities, this council safeguards all public amenity space in the interests of future generations and in support of mitigating and addressing the declared climate emergency.

Seconded by Councillor Simon Howarth.

The Cabinet Member for Resources stated that Council is fully committed to ensuring it takes decisions in accordance with the principles of the Well-Being and Future Generations Act and undertake actions that seek to make a positive contribution to the decarbonisation agenda. He added that the proposed motion fails to take account of the safeguards that are already in place and could lead to unintended consequences that would serve to undermine the actions that the motion seeks to prevent.

There were concerns that the reference to public community space did not have enough clarity in terms of the motion.

It was hoped that should Council not accept the motion ways could be sought to work to safeguard community spaces and to stop them being sold and developed upon.

Upon being put to the vote the motion was defeated.

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14. Submitted by County Councillor R. John, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and MonLife

This council:

- a) *Notes the significant improvement in the Covid-19 incidence rates both in Monmouthshire and across Wales since Alert Level Four restrictions began on 20th December.*
- b) *Welcomes the success and speed of the vaccination programme across the UK*
- c) *Calls on the Welsh Government to publish a detailed roadmap to ending Covid-19 restrictions in Wales*

Seconded by Councillor Bob Greenland.

Councillor Roger Harris proposed an amendment to the motion:

This council:

- a) *Notes the significant improvement in the Covid-19 incidence rates both in Monmouthshire and across Wales since Alert Level Four restrictions began on 20th December.*
- b) *Welcomes the success and speed of the vaccination programme across the UK, **particularly in Wales***
- c) ***Congratulates the Welsh Government on publishing a detailed roadmap to ending Covid-19 restrictions in Wales***

Seconded by Councillor Dimitri Batrouni

The Cabinet Member for Community and Social Justice did not support the motion and explained how she considered the roadmap to be no longer applicable.

In support of the motion the Leader of the Opposition stated that Wales was the leading UK nation in the roll out of the vaccination programme, particularly distribution of second vaccines. He added that the roadmap produced in February 2021 was adaptable to the changes of the virus.

Councillor John welcomed the part b of the amendment but did not support part c of the amendment.

Upon being put to the vote the amended motion was defeated.

Debate returned to the original motion

The Cabinet Member for Social Justice focussed her comments on wellbeing, in particular children and young people. She stressed the importance of opening organised activities, and pleaded that Welsh Government look to prioritise the removal of outdoor sporting facilities from their list of closed premises. Also, that WG look to allow organised group activities for under 18s and allow individuals to travel by car to exercise.

Upon being put the vote the motion was carried.

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15. **Members Questions:**

16. **From County Councillor T. Thomas to County Councillor R. John, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and MonLife**

Could the Cabinet Member inform council how confident he is that all pupils in Monmouthshire schools have laptops or iPads to ensure good access to 'blended learning' including free school meal pupils and pupils coming from homes that have lower incomes?

Councillor John thanked Councillor Thomas for the question and responded:

We have been working with WG on an initiative to refresh schools digital network infrastructure and invest in replacement devices to enhance digital learning. This multi-million project was brought forward during the pandemic in an effort to ensure that remote learning facilities were enabled for all schools.

Our digital programme officers worked extensively with the SRS, and with schools, to ensure that digitally excluded learners received all the help and support they required during the pandemic. They gathered information from households on their ability to connect to the internet and provided mobile broadband units where they were needed. They provided laptops to learners who needed an internet enabled device to access Hwb. We have provided several thousand new devices across our schools to support blended learning requirements to ensure children, particularly those eligible for free school meals, are included. We have also worked with teaching staff to ensure they have access to technical support where needed.

We are confident that all households and learners who have engaged with their schools have received the tools they need for blended learning. Our schools have also worked hard with their families to identify gaps in provision and ensure every child and young person has the opportunity to engage in distance learning.

17. **Reports for Council:**

18. **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP TEAM ADJUSTMENTS**

The Chief Executive presented the report to propose some minor changes to the structure and portfolio balance of the Strategic Leadership Team recognising key external contextual changes that will shape the next stage of the Council's development.

Seconded by Councillor P. Jordan.

Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to accept the recommendations:

To re-designate the current Chief Officer Resources as Chief Officer Resources / Deputy Chief Executive and the current Head of Law / Monitoring Officer as Chief Officer People and Governance. In accordance with Art 4.02(g) of the December 2017 Constitution this requires Council's endorsement.

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**19. PUBLICATION OF PAY POLICY STATEMENT AS REQUIRED BY THE LOCALISM
ACT**

The Cabinet Member for Resources presented the report for council to approve the publication of Monmouthshire County Council's Pay Policy, in compliance with the Localism Act.

Seconded by County Councillor M. Feakins

Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to accept the recommendation:

That Council approves the Pay Policy for the year 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022.

20. To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 14th January 2021

The minutes of the meeting held on 14th January 2021 were approved as an accurate record.

The meeting ended at 7.10 pm