

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Thursday, 4th March, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor L.Dymock (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Batrouni, V. Smith,
R. Edwards, M.Groucutt, M. Powell

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

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Alan Burkitt, Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh
Language
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing,
Highways and Flood
Paul Keeble, Group Engineer (Highways and Flood
Management)
Steve Lane, County Highways Operations Manager
Sueanne Sandford, Project Engineer - Strategy

APOLOGIES: County Councillors A. Easson, J.Treharne and A. Webb

1. Declarations of Interest.

Councillor Batrouni declared an interest as the Senior Analyst on European Legislation for the Ministry of Justice, and the Citizen's Rights organisation attached to it.

2. Open Public Forum.

No members of the public were present.

3. Scrutiny of the Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) Annual Report 2019-20.

Alan Burkitt presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

This strategy is linked to 8 others – should they all be condensed and more focussed? Is this plan the overarching one, or is it the Social Justice Strategy? In what way do the two plans 'dovetail'?

Under the Equality Act 2010, we have a responsibility to produce this strategy. A lot of good work is taking place on this agenda, but it is indeed difficult for the work to 'dovetail'; 'overlapping' would be a better description. They could possibly gel more, yes. But we talk together as groups, so there is positive interaction, and the work is discrete. We could work more on linking together, and we should bear that in mind. Perhaps the work isn't structured quite as neatly as it could be, but that reflects how keen we are to do so much work.

The work on Poverty and Inequality seems to happen after finances have been thought through. To what extent does this Strategic Equality Plan, or the Social Justice Strategy, influence the budget-setting process in the beginning?

The assessment document looks at protected characteristics, ensuring that when we make decisions, people with those characteristics aren't disadvantaged. We tend to produce these documents when a report is going to Cabinet or Council, rather than using them to shape the process early on. It shouldn't be that way, as the assessment is then tailored to the decision i.e. at the end of the process, when it is less effective. In terms of the SEP, it's not the plan itself, it's the safeguards within the Equality Act. The EQIA should be the process by which we seek not to disadvantage people. As an organisation, we need to start looking at that document at an earlier stage.

Page 19 refers to the European Union Settlement Scheme. It's become clear that children in care and elderly EU citizens are over-reliant on local authorities to apply for them. How many EU national children are in our care and how many elderly EU nationals are in our care homes?

I don't know. It's a very good question but I don't work closely enough in that level of detail. Shaz Miah (Community Cohesion Officer) might have answers, or would be the person to carry out the necessary work.

Potential overlap is actually important, as most things do overlap and almost nothing can be separated into different compartments.

Yes, it is difficult to separate matters. A lot of good work is happening, with a high level of commitment, and the different groups engage with each other in order to cross over but not double up. The most important thing is for us not to miss anything.

We need to think more about how we present reports – the use of coloured prints is difficult for some people to cope with.

Yes, this is something the Accessibility survey is going to look at. The RNIB says that Arial font, size 12 should be used, and to ensure there are contrasting colours. We will mention this in the upcoming meeting with the website designers.

The Access For All forum initially had a good take-off – what is its current state?

Yes, the late Jenny Barnes' CAIR (Contact, Action, Inform, Represent) was the driving force – this morphed into Access For All because we wanted to get greater engagement. The forum hasn't met for a while but is due to meet shortly, chaired by Tony Crowhurst. There was a well-attended meeting in Torfaen recently. Many members retired from CAIR after Jenny died but there is still a very active disability group in Abergavenny. It is important to have such external scrutiny and input of what we are doing. Online meetings will be beneficial and should encourage attendance.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Batrouni questioned whether 8 objectives are the most efficient way of working, and how do they fit around the Social Justice strategy, and if plans overlap, whether work is duplicated. He also has concerns around finance, feeling that it might have been an

afterthought, and stated that the budget doesn't reflect our strategic plan. He questioned at what point the Equality and Social Justice plan affects the budget from the start. He also asked a question about the European Settlement Status, and wanted to know how many EU Nationals suffering from cognitive problems are in care homes – the Chair will email Shaz Miah with this question following the meeting.

Councillors Powell and Edwards stated that sometimes overlapping in work can't be avoided. Councillor Smith highlighted some typos in the report and noted that the coloured prints in reports can be difficult for some users. She also requested an update on the status of Access for All. On that point, Councillor Pratt informed members that she attended the meeting chaired by Torfaen yesterday, with Officer Burkitt. She stated that it is very valuable and she would like to engage more, to hear the issues faced by the disabled community. She is keen to build strong communication, and wishes to give it her full support.

4. Update on issues the Highways Maintenance Department has faced during the Covid-19 pandemic and the forward direction for this service (report to follow).

Carl Touhig presented the report and answered the members' questions with Steve Lane and Mark Hand.

Challenge:

The reverse of budget cuts in this area is welcome. Is the problem of people parking on greens and loosening the soil and mud a general one, and how can we stop it?

Yes, parking on verges was a problem in Magor, with mud then pushed across the top of the drains. It is a general problem across the county. Also, larger vehicles use the lanes, pushing mud into the drains – so the problem is both urban and rural. We will speak to Parking Enforcement to see if we can stop parking on the verges, though it is also a matter for police. Parking is becoming increasingly difficult for residents, as the roads weren't designed with so many cars in mind. We need to do more work on education and raising awareness of the problems caused by incorrect parking.

When we cut grass, it goes everywhere – will we now collect it?

Last year, we started 'Cut and Collect' in some areas, to take the goodness out of the grass and support wildflower growth. Historically, we have done 'Cut and Fly' i.e. cutting the grass and leaving it in situ – we recognise that the grass then blows around. The idea with 'C&C' would be that the sweeper would work closely with the gully-sucker and some of our other maintenance issues. So whether we're cutting hedges back or cutting grass, the sweeper could be in the same area to clear it up. We would hope to collect sooner than a week later.

It is good to hear that the drains in Whitehall Lane are being addressed – both sides have been blocked for years, undermining the road surface.

We try to be proactive and focus our work, ensuring that we are keeping the road safe. Any material left on the road can end up in the gully. The drains are designed to have a sump so, technically, each drain has a sump at the bottom. The heavy material falls into that sump, and the water goes out of the pipes. The problem is that if we don't empty the sumps quickly and

often enough then the heavy debris gets into the pipes and into the outflows. Highways doesn't put any mud or clippings on the road – that is third parties. The responsibility is on the third party leaving the debris to clear it, though we can help and support by programming our work. Enforcement is a long way off, unfortunately. With this project, after 4 years, we will have a network with which we can target our maintenance i.e. empty the gully at Whitehall Lane more regularly than one in, say, a town centre.

The workforce doesn't seem to be there to address all of these problems – do we take on apprenticeships?

Last year, we took on five new workers with engineering backgrounds, who are all inputting to the work being discussed. It is a financial tightrope: we have to support those staff members by bringing in income from outside e.g. for every pound spent to fill a pothole, we have to bring in a pound of income to pay for that tarmac. 18 months ago, we took on 2 cadets who are going through a 2-year training regime. They are very capable and enthusiastic; we hope to bring them on into the team.

Many problems are on the trunk roads, which are the responsibility of Welsh Government. Do we have any powers to push them to get something done?

We work closely with SWTRA, managing some of the maintenance contracts for them in this area. We will raise these concerns with their officers when we next speak to them. There has been a lot of flooding on the Llanellen bridge and other roads that they maintain, so we know it's an issue, and we hope to do something on those main routes. As we do the maintenance for SWTRA, we have some input to the priority list though, equally, they are struggling as much as we are in financial terms, and they are trying to cover the whole network in Wales, which includes even bigger priority roads. They are looking at a similar programme now of monitoring all of their assets for the same code – perhaps we could trial something between the both of us.

The report attempts to undo the damage done by austerity, returning to the previous position. It says that position is inadequate given climate change etc. Are we planning for the future, and drains that in the longer term are fit for purpose?

It is partly due to a lack of funding and trying to work to the new code of practice and a risk-based assessment. We know that we have had dis-investment in Highways operations and we have had to make savings. At some point, we do need to re-invest in service delivery. I'm not sure we're inadequate in what we deliver but there is now the challenge with increased rainfalls adding to the problems, and making things more difficult for us to keep the network free flowing. The reactive/proactive scheme works very well, but with 3 or 4 storms back-to-back, it is very hard to get on top of this work with the two vehicles that we have. We are asking for additional investment, therefore.

Regarding future planning of drains and flooding, the requirement for all new developments to incorporate sustainable urban drainage schemes (SUDS) is in place. As things come through, you will see some of those things being implemented. It will require something of a culture change because a lot of that is about surface water being dealt with on site, rather than draining off into drains. So gullies, roadside drains and lagoon features will start to appear on development sites. During adverse weather, they will be full of water, which might alarm some

residents, but they will be doing exactly what they are designed to. Those regulations apply to lots of schemes: town centre regeneration, highways, etc. So we are planning for drainage that will work in the longer term.

Is the current drainage system, which can't deal with increasingly bad weather, therefore being written off?

The system is designed to deal with 1-in-10 year floods. We have seen 5 such floods in the last 18 months. Providing we keep on top of the drainage system's maintenance, the system will manage reasonable amounts of rain. I'm not sure that the rivers will cope with the increased rain during larger events – if that's the case, it is unlikely that a culvert or road drain will do so. I'm not sure about dredging the rivers either. What we want to do is to ensure that the systems are working to their optimum, all the time. That should keep the rainwater off the roads in normal events, and when there is a strong rain event, at least we will know that the system is taking everything it can at that point, before possibly overflowing.

If investigations of flood events reveal a problem with a gully or pipe being ineffective, then that would be picked up in the study and recommendations for those improvements to be made. That hasn't been the case so far. One investigation looking at an outfall system is due to be published in a few weeks' time, but the problems up until now have mainly been about the volume of rainfall, and ground being saturated. We do have areas of our settlements and road networks that lie in flood plains, and part of a flood plain's purpose is to flood, so we would have to ensure that any works put in don't prevent the flood plain from operating.

Infrastructure is the most important service, and we have let it go for years. It is correct to prioritise the priority routes but there is the rest of the infrastructure to consider.

The additional machine would be for priority routes, freeing up the other 2 machines for the other routes. The town centres generally do the town centres and more urban areas; the larger machine would do the main roads. We have suggested withdrawing one of the small town sweepers in the south of the county. One of the rationales for this is that we are seeing a reduction in litter complaints, though that litter could in fact be going down the drains. So we need to look at that again, in light of this report.

Will you work with town and community councils to identify where problems are?

We are more than happy to attend Town and Community councils to discuss matters. We know where the 25,000 drains are across the county; plotting them with the machinery allows us to pinpoint everything, and which works need to be done in the future. The code of practice is about scheduling works for the future on a risk-based assessment. By plotting the drains, we can overlap them with flooding detail, and other information.

Can we use mulching machines?

We bought 2 additional mulchers in the grounds maintenance section to mulch the grass back in, along with 2 additional collection mowers to take out grass and encourage wild flower growth.

When we look at potholes, do we double task i.e. the report comes in, then someone goes out to assess it, before dealing with it?

We try to keep on top of all the potholes and drains but it is a difficult challenge with our resources. Currently, unless there has been an accident, we react by sending a team to deal with the issue and are able to repair the pothole. If the team is concerned about the overall condition of the road, they report that back and we go out to make that more general assessment. So we react first, then step back and consider what else we can do. If the work will be too expensive or take too long, we speak to Strategy for them to programme and identify the need in greater detail.

We currently have a lot of advertisements for road closures in the local paper – are these always necessary, and what do they cost?

We have to advertise traffic regulation orders, such as road closures, in the press, bilingually. Welsh Government has waived that if we have to do emergency actions, but overall we are required to do those notices. We will have to check on the exact cost to us of placing the adverts.

Litter is a big problem. What is the answer to it?

We have a big education programme now running for litter that came through this committee around 18 months ago. We have joined with the campaign being run by Keep Wales Tidy to tackle vergeside litter – this is now recognised across the UK as being one of the main problems. Hopefully some additional legislation can come in for us to fine drivers who litter. It is a big problem for drains, as it doesn't take a lot of litter to cause a blockage. The additional sweeper will make a difference, though it shouldn't have to be the case that it is used to deal with litter.

There are many upset residents in Undy, regarding the closure of Elms Lane. Do road closure permits always have to be for 18 months?

The Highways team would be better placed to answer this.

What is the fuel for the proposed new vehicles?

We have trialled electric on the larger vehicles but they haven't been quite at the standard required. We are also continuing work into hydrogen. It is likely that the next fleet we have will be diesel-powered but for smaller vehicles like vans, we are bringing in a lot of electric. We are about to procure Welsh Government funding for electric refuse vehicles – they seem to be on the market more than sweepers and gully-suckers. We have looked at electric vehicles for the Jetter: at the moment, everything is focussed on cityscapes, where a Jetter can empty a lot of gullies in a small radius from the depot. We greatly exceed the current limit of these machines of 17 miles for 7 hours.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Batrouni agreed with the report. He questioned whether parking on greens, and the resultant loosening of mud, contributes to blocked drains, and how we could stop it. He has received a number of complaints that we do not collect grass cuttings in spring and summer.

Councillor Edwards also raised concerns about long grass in drains and recommended that grass be cut more often. She also highlighted that improved programming of hedge cutting and

road-sweeping scheduling would be a huge benefit, especially in the countryside. She highlighted issues in Whitehall Lane and questioned whether we recruit apprentices to the team; Carl Touhig confirmed that there are 5 new starters with engineering backgrounds. The Councillor noted that it would be good to encourage women into this area. She raised concerns about out-of-county people littering the countryside with excessive signage.

Councillor Powell asked if we have any power to encourage Welsh Government to carry out maintenance on trunk roads. Councillor Groucott suggested that the previous systems were inadequate and asked if we are planning adequate ones for the future.

Councillor Smith, with regard to Recommendation 2.4 (identifying drainage), suggested that we work with town and community councils, including contacting local councils directly with a map, asking for problem drains to be located. She also questioned why we don't use mulching machines and asked, regarding potholes, whether we double-task with inspections and executing the work. She raised a point about better communication with landowners regarding hedge removals, and questioned the cost of notices in the papers informing the public about road closures; officers will come back to the committee with precise costs. She also asked about the fuel for the new vehicles, and suggested that a note be put in the report explaining why, so the public knows we are still considering the climate.

5. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes for 28th January 2021 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

6. Strong Communities Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

Public Toilet Strategy will be considered at the next meeting in April.

7. Cabinet & Council Forward Work Programme.

8. Next Meeting: Thursday 29th April 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.43 am**