

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Adults Select Committee Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 25th May, 2021 at 10.30 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)
County Councillor L. Brown (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: M. Groucutt, R. Harris,
M. Powell, S. Woodhouse and M. Lane

Mr. T. Crowhurst

Also in attendance: County Councillor V Smith

APOLOGIES: County Councillor R. Edwards and C. Bowie

Officers in Attendance

Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Jane Oates, Housing Options Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

1. To note the appointment of County Councillor S. Howarth as Chair

Councillor Howarth was proposed by Councillor Woodhouse and seconded by Councillor Brown.

2. To appoint a Vice Chair

Councillor Brown was proposed by Councillor Woodhouse and seconded by Councillor Powell.

3. Declarations of interest

Tony Crowhurst declared a non-prejudicial interest as a citizen panel member for Monmouthshire Housing.

4. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

5. Homelessness Transition Plan: Progress report on what are we doing to address homelessness

Ian Bakewell presented the report and answered the members' questions, with additional comments from Cath Fallon and Jane Oates.

Challenge:

The Housing Support provision includes numerous officers, each covering a large aspect of the problem. Housing is just one part of a huge social issue. There have been examples in this authority of working at a multi-agency level to think outside the box. I propose that this authority commissions an academic study to determine the best way to break into this intergenerational cycle.

Yes, we agree entirely about the cycle. These comments are timely: when we put forward the Housing action plan, it was part of our social justice strategy update in March. As part of that, we were looking at Phase 3 of our community support network, which we pivoted and developed as part of our response to the pandemic. The community support network is now taking us towards Phase 3, where our Community and Partnership Development team, that previously was working in our communities (volunteering etc.), are now working very closely with our Adult Social Care colleagues, particularly in the 'Changing Places, Changing Lives' work. This week, we started talking about looking at more proof of concept and research work, and working with the Welsh School of Social Care i.e. the multi-agency approach that has been suggested. We are considering how to break the cycle, take forward the work that we have as part of our Tackling Poverty And Inequality action plan, and how we align that with the flexible funding that supports our Children And Communities grant and Housing Support grant, and how we can work better with external colleagues and internally.

As a council, we don't seem to be supporting this team adequately, and are letting them down, as a result. Do we have a date for when the buying up of housing will start? Can MCC provide housing in its own right, rather than relying on developers or private landlords?

The suggestion to buy properties is being given serious consideration. There is interest from senior management, who have asked me to progress that to a proposal, which should be in the next few weeks. I would welcome the authority becoming a stockholder, but that is a decision for council as a whole. We are well-supported by our partners: housing associations have brought properties forward, Monmouthshire Housing in particular has acquired properties for the team, Melin has agreed to hand over accommodation to us directly. We still have the challenge of unique circumstances; one of the issues is affordability, which Welsh Government recognises, and about which we have regular discussions.

The end of the report mentions problems with the Covid Hardship Fund. What extra finance would be needed, were that fund to cease? How could that funding be obtained in the long-term?

That is supporting our B&B expenditure, management costs that are incurred (e.g. losing income from keeping bedrooms empty), the concierge service covering several properties, and incidentals like taxis and provision of meals. If Welsh Government were to withdraw that funding, we would have to make some difficult decisions in relation to those costs. Please be assured that we are lobbying Welsh Government on that – we met with them yesterday, so they do know the implications.

One-bed accommodation is hard to obtain in Monmouthshire. Could Welsh Government allow for better incentives for private landlords to purchase properties for rent in the homeless sector, if they took away the Stamp Duty costs, Capital Gains Tax, etc.?

We want to support landlords when it comes to potential disincentives. We will help to cover damage, for example. One of our options is a leasing option, which provides guaranteed income. We are always looking at how we can offer landlords better value for money. We offer an alternative, supporting landlords with the hassle of being a landlord. In terms of bespoke packages, we are trying to ask publicly for any landlord to come and speak to us: if something is of interest or concern, we are open to working with them in that regard. Having a dedicated member of staff, who can hopefully bring some private sector experience, will be an important step forward for us.

There is concern about young people in B&B accommodation perhaps not being near a town, and therefore feeling isolated e.g. at Raglan.

Raglan is an important resource for us, but we recognise its location. It's probably characteristic of our challenge. We want the homes we offer to be in the person's community.

What about Mental Health Housing Support workers from the Health authority? Could it be linked in with RSL providers and providing support in the private rented sector as well?

We can offer some reassurances that the Health Service is involved at the moment, off the back of the GDAS service and Substance Misuse Support that we've started benefitting from – that's been really important. The conversations have started: we are in regular contact with the community mental health team. There are still more conversations to be had. The property alone is not the answer to many people's support

needs; we need to bring in other agencies to provide wraparound support. The most interesting recent conversation was about Health establishing a team of 8 people to target rough sleepers. That project concentrated on Newport and is currently being reviewed. Our desire is to see that project have a wider remit than just rough sleeping.

Should the Covid Hardship Fund not be re-labelled as part of the Welsh Government policy to get people into permanent accommodation?

That pot of money is an emergency one, and the government probably didn't expect it to continue for so long. They have put additional funding into our Housing Support Grant and Social Housing grant programmes but it is understood that there are resource issues at a local authority level – they do understand our predicament.

Concerning the Process Map, we need to recognise the mental health effect on those around someone waiting to be rehoused, not just the person themselves – as in the recent case of an elderly woman who was sofa surfing. There is also the effect on someone who worries that the process will fail, and they will go back to, for example, living in a car – as in a particular recent case.

We are aware of that recent case, which is complicated, and with a long history – we can update members outside the meeting with recent progress, if needed. Mental health issues aren't just for applicants but the family as well. We do our best to support everyone. In the particular case of the elderly woman, we supported her with self-contained accommodation very close to her family. She should now be well placed to bid for permanent accommodation.

What proportion of large houses that are unused could be used for shared housing? Is that possible?

Twice a year we contact empty property owners to ascertain what is happening with the properties. It is a soft proactive approach whereby we encourage property owners to adopt any of the available options. It is probably quite a challenge. Empty property owners often don't like us contacting them. We have around 15 properties with shared facilities, housing approximately 70 people. We have been doing this for only 3 years; when we started doing so we were offering an additional housing option that many local authorities weren't. We were able to accommodate rough sleepers using it and single people who wouldn't have previously been considered to be in priority need. But it does have disadvantages from the point of view of shared living: we know it's not ideal, but as a team we think that it will be needed in the short to medium term. One complication is that Welsh Government were working towards a self-contained policy, which is the

appropriate direction, but we don't want to stop the shared option for the time being, as there would then be a gap in provision. But because of Welsh Government's view, they will not fund shared housing, so we must do so via our own mechanisms.

You mentioned that there are no boundaries – has this had a big effect on the numbers you are looking after, and the accommodation you seek?

Yes, this is the core of the matter. We've gone from March last year, when someone presenting who wasn't in priority need would have been provided with advice and assistance rather than accommodation, as per our legal duty, but now, for anyone coming through we have to provide accommodation. It has put us on the course to reviewing homeless legislation, which has been on the cards for several years. If everything is relaxed in terms of homelessness, the resource implications are significant. It has flushed out hidden homelessness and hidden issues, which is a good thing – without doubt, we have got a better understanding of the needs and issues in Monmouthshire.

There is no such thing as 'priority need', which we don't expect will change. The Homeless Action Group is also looking at intentionality and local connection, and possible doing away with that in the future as well, which will bring another challenge to us. The other issue we have is that we are under the obligation that nobody is to be outside, so even though we have a fair number of people who struggle in temporary accommodation in antisocial behaviour, substance abuse etc., if they break down that accommodation we have to place them somewhere else. We are therefore in a circle currently of moving people round so that no one is rough sleeping. We have 3 people whom we are unable to accommodate due to the risks they present to others.

With regard to locality, are many more people coming into Monmouthshire?

We could probably count the number on two hands. We've been lucky that the information about people having a choice as to where they can present as homeless isn't out there at the moment, but if that is promoted. It could pose a future challenge to our capacity. Currently, for those who present with no local connection, we take the homeless application and allocate them to the local authority that they are from but if they choose not to go, we have no grounds to make them. It's a great experience that Welsh Government has introduced us to, but the legislation isn't there yet to back us up, in terms of what we can do if people refuse to move on.

The team should be up to full complement in August – are we going to meet that?

Yes, hopefully, depending on the level and quality of applications. There is a shortage now in Wales of homeless workers, particularly around housing support.

Will there be training or apprentice work to learn about the specifics required?

We haven't taken on apprentices as part of this proposal. Training is a key issue for the team. In the last year, they have been exposed to very challenging scenarios, and things are happening at pace, so it is incumbent on us as an authority to ensure that we support the staff as fully as possible. We have pulled back from training recently due to finances but we are looking now at a new programme of training to support our staff. This week we have done training with Mind about how to have conversations with people in need.

Landlord eviction legislation ends in September – what risk will that pose?

Our understanding is that we are beginning to get early signs of some individual landlords who might look to acquire possession. It's probably less about tenant issues than it is them wanting their properties back. We did an exercise a few months ago in which we started contacting letting agencies to identify low-level issues that they might have with their tenants, and ask if we could assist in any way. We got very little back. Any demand at the moment is demand we can do without.

Chair's Summary:

The committee gives great thanks to the team for all of its hard work and dedication. We have considered numerous aspects of Homelessness in Monmouthshire. Additionally, Councillor Brown noted that we shouldn't allow of the loopholes that private developers exploit in order to not provide the amount of affordable housing for which a site's capacity allows. Councillor Powell lamented that planning at Raglan, in which the proportion of low-cost housing was high, was overturned by Welsh Government. Councillor Harris observed that the team works on resources that have been limited for a long time, with Covid only exacerbating those shortages. The Chair wondered if use could be made of the well-placed large blocks at Nevill Hall and, if so, whether the Health Board might help.

The committee agreed to the report's recommendations.

Councillor Groucott made the following further recommendation, which was agreed by members, unanimously: to commission an academic study to determine the best way in which to break the cycle of deprivation and poverty. In addition, he proposed that in

order to meet the statutory duty of homelessness being short-term and non-repeating, Monmouthshire County Council should build its own housing.

6. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme

7. Cabinet, Council and ICMD Forward Planner

8. Confirmation of Minutes

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

9. To confirm the date of the next meeting as 22nd June 2021

Councillor Powell would rather the meetings return to a 10.00 start. Councillor Woodhouse noted that it is 10.00 in the diary, though Hazel Ilett observed that this must be an error as the committee previously agreed a 10.30 start. Councillor Brown and Tony Crowhurst noted that traffic and travel times might need consideration for when meetings resume in the chamber.

The Chair moved that the times change to a 09.30 pre-meeting and 10.00 start for the main meeting.

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm.