

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Joint Select Committee held at Remote Microsoft Teams Meeting on Tuesday, 21st July, 2020
at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor P. Pavia (Chairman)
County Councillor L. Dymock (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: J.Becker, A.Davies, D. Dovey,
A. Easson, D. Evans, R. Harris, R.Roden, B. Strong,
J.Treharne and A. Webb

Also in attendance:

County Councillor R.J.W. Greenland , Cabinet
Member

Officers in Attendance

Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways
and Flood

Roger Hoggins, Head of Service - Strategic Projects
(Fixed Term)

James Woodcock, Business Insights Manager

Paul Keeble, Group Engineer (Highways and Flood
Management)

Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services

Matthew Lewis (Countryside), Interim Performance,
Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for
MonLife

APOLOGIES: None

1. Election of Chair.

It was agreed that Councillor Pavia would chair this meeting.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair.

It was agreed that Councillor Dymock would be vice-chair.

3. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Reopening of Town Centres (report to follow).

Officer Mark Hand presented a report, "Re-opening Monmouthshire's High Streets", explaining the measures which have been taken to ensure that it is safe for shoppers and visitors to return to town centres. Each of the main towns was considered in turn, explaining the measures and reflecting on the lessons learned, changes made, successes, ongoing challenges, and next steps to be taken.

Councillor Greenland added that even before the current crisis, town centres were facing a gradual decline due to internet shopping and malls. We have been working towards changing the fortunes of our town centres for some considerable time. What needs to be done, first and foremost, is to make shopping safe for residents, which means social distancing. All of the measures which have been put in place are temporary, and would only become permanent

following consultation. We hope that the measures will begin to show the way towards our town centres becoming successful.

Challenge:

Mark Hand, Roger Hoggins, Paul Keeble, Carl Touhig and Councillor Greenland responded to the questions.

Regarding café culture, can we dictate what sort of barriers will be used, in order to ensure that they do not present difficulties for the partially sighted?

An application process was set up for pavement café licences, prior to which press releases were issued inviting businesses to apply for a licence. We wanted to take a favourable approach to helping businesses, in particular where they could utilise roads which are now closed. The licence is £10, as it has to have a cost against it, legally. The application is checked by our Highways colleagues, before being passed to a technician who assesses the site to ensure it will be safe. A copy of the application also goes to our licensing and environmental health teams. The new legislation has reduced the time and other requirements in order to support the businesses with these licences. Control ultimately comes down to Highways. Part of their assessment would include whether the barriers present a restriction. The sort being used tend to be the same as 'crowd control' barriers, we are encouraging businesses to put a covering on them but we haven't really looked at it from a DDA-compliant approach, other than to maintain the prescribed 2-metre distance for pedestrians. It's something we can look at, and make it part of the recommendation in approving the licence when the officers make their assessment.

We aren't aware of transparent screens having been proposed, but we will keep an eye out for any. There is a distinction to be made between 'crowd' barriers and those used by businesses to demarcate their table areas. We created banners to go on highway barriers to increase their visibility, and on which advertising can be placed. Further information as to the type of screening which is a concern provided by Tony Crowhurst via Councillor Dymock will be very welcome and included in considerations henceforth.

Could the plans for Caldicot be outlined, and what are the timescales involved for implementation?

Significant changes weren't proposed, as the town centre is already pedestrianised. Primarily, the changes concern barriers to prevent vehicle access into the pedestrianised areas, as well as cycle facilities. Traffic is cut off by the cross scheme at one end, and at the other we are putting in removable bollards, and planters. Social distancing signs have also gone in. The West end scheme will follow. Traffic movement and pedestrian safety on the curb line are the key considerations. The bollards which can be dropped aren't in place yet – they have to be fixed in. Highways Operations are arranging this. The planters are in place, as is social distancing.

How much consultation has taken place with Caldicot businesses, and what has the feedback been?

There was a meeting between County Council, Town Council, the Mayor, Aaron from the Town team and business representatives, in which the detail of the changes was discussed. This was

predominantly around how to manage unauthorised traffic movement in the town centre. There hasn't been a Chamber of Commerce, feedback has come through the Town team. If any particular businesses would like to discuss the measures, we will be happy to speak to them. As things stand, the focus is mostly on vehicles coming into the centre, and encouraging cyclists to dismount.

Usk's residents are virtually unanimous in not wanting the one-way system, due to open on 29th July, including 19 out of 20 businesses which were consulted. Could an alternative placement of the traffic lights in Bridge Street (compared to the initial attempt) be considered in place of the one-way system?

Usk has been the most challenging town. Traffic lights were attempted first, as that was the Town Council's preference. Unfortunately, traffic chaos ensued and it was felt that traffic lights were not going to work. They were therefore removed. The Town Council were met with again to consider an alternative, with one suggestion being to place them on the western extreme of the bridge, but that isn't possible as the lights would be too far apart from each other, according to the regulations and the technicalities of how they operate. The Town Council proposed shrinking the area slightly; we walked the route with them, but when we reported back to the senior leadership team it was felt that the configuration would not be sufficiently different from the initial scheme.

In terms of the one-way system date, there are gas works proposed for the end of Maryport Street so we need to ensure we don't conflict with those. We have booked in review meetings for all of these projects (Abergavenny, Monmouth and Chepstow last week), with the others booked in for week commencing 27th; I have emailed this morning about the review date for Usk being later, now that the date has been pushed back to accommodate the gas works. We understand the concerns of the Town Council and Civic Society, and which the community is voicing to us, regarding the one-way system. The concern we keep returning to is that of the choke points along Bridge Street for the 24 businesses. Another option which was proposed was a pedestrian one-way system, but our experience is that these never really work – a current example being in Ross-On-Wye.

Before the current crisis there were dangers in Bridge Street. Cllr Greenland himself witnessed an elderly woman being hit in the head by the wingmirror of a passing lorry. Now that this crisis is upon us, there is the need to have social distancing in place on pavements which are mostly 1.5m – this therefore cannot be done without pedestrians stepping into the road. Last week in Bridge Street there was a near miss when a pedestrian stepped into the road to avoid other people and was nearly hit by an oncoming vehicle. We know that the one-way system worked previously as a temporary measure with the gas works, and we should reiterate that this is a temporary measure now. It's certainly not the case that we're trying to push through a town plan 'through the back door.'

The challenge in this case is drawing the line between listening to feedback, and caving at the first sign of objection. It is certainly a sustained objection in Usk but we are tied by the need to keep the residents safe. If there were another option we would take it. We also have seen on social media a post from someone saying that they are afraid to come back into Usk to shop, though they would like to, and that their friends and neighbours feel the same.

We have received messages from the public that the measures in Chepstow have made shopping there a much nicer experience. Could we have a general overview of the provision for Chepstow?

The closure is for the whole of the High Street, from the town arch (where we are proposing to install retractable bollards. Around the junction in the Moore Street/Well Street area we are going to install temporary curbing. There will be a pedestrian control point there, bringing the diagonal crossing forward from where it currently lies. The other point of closure is Station Road, which is where traffic will access High Street for deliveries (between 4pm and 10am) and disabled drivers. The direction for the one-way system is to go up High Street and at the top of the town turn around and go down Bank Street, then back on to Station Road. The original plan has been amended to accommodate parking for blue badge holders.

Through the town, a 'keep left' system has been adopted for pedestrians, particularly at the Arch. We hope to put in zebra crossings at Station Road, connecting St. Mary's Street, Beaufort Square and High Street; traffic calming measures will be needed at the approach to the crossings. A 20mph zone is being introduced for the whole town, which we understand was requested and is very welcome. Additional planters have been put in, and we are looking to provide cycle stands.

Can we be updated on refining the signage in Chepstow?

The current signage is temporary, following on from the emergency road closure. That will be replaced shortly with permanent signage. St. Mary's Street is on a different 'time zone' than High Street, and with the new powers that we have to make traffic orders simpler we are looking to bring those together so that there is a consistent arrangement for both streets.

When are the long-awaited bollards in St Mary's Street going to be installed?

We are very keen on the Town Council to help us with their volunteers who have been trained to operate the bollards. Hopefully they can also be installed in High Street at the same time. There is a meeting this afternoon with an engineer about bollards, after which they will be ordered and installed as quickly as possible (hopefully in a week or so). A protocol for how they will be managed needs to be agreed with the Town Council, though.

Is there a reason why the previous work done on making better use of Upper Nelson Street hasn't been included in these plans?

We considered putting extra disabled parking in Upper Nelson Street, but otherwise it hasn't been included in these plans. We would welcome the opportunity to work with Town Council and Planning colleagues in putting measures there to enhance the area. Green infrastructure would be good there and we might be able to take that through the Air Quality steering group.

Parking on Moore Street is a concern, particularly with cars blocking the movement of coaches. Can this be addressed? Can we remove the parking on the left-hand side?

The only parking on Moore Street is for Blue Badge holders, so we will need to ask the Enforcement team to check that other motorists aren't using the parking. The Police haven't been taking any enforcement action for some time, and County Council has recently taken on on-street parking enforcement – so that's something that we can possibly improve. It would be

difficult to remove the Blue Badge spaces altogether, due to the topography of Chepstow, as mentioned earlier.

Is there a way to provide Blue Badge parking in the area where the buses and taxis park, in order to keep the passengers away from the pavement?

The taxi ranks are popular and are used well in tandem with the long-haul coaches that operate there. Some towns are able to make spaces Blue Badge by day and Taxi by night. In this location, however, the taxis are used throughout the day. We can look at this suggestion but it would be part of a larger review. Paul Keeble can meet with Councillor Dovey to discuss the idea in more detail.

The Pro-mobility group in Abergavenny has asked if there are any plans in print for the bus station?

We plan to widen the area where the coaches park, providing a more substantial loading bay and waiting area for people. This will help with disability considerations as well. The station will therefore be utilised in a different way during Covid, then longer term it will be easier for incoming coach passengers to disembark in that area.

Are there further plans to make Lower Castle Street pedestrian-friendly, specifically the introduction of barriers?

This is a difficult area. The street provides access to the rest of town, and there is currently increased traffic while Cross Street is closed. Cones are there currently to slow traffic down but as it is a very small road with residential properties, and now with increased pedestrian traffic, it is hard to envisage how barriers could be installed – they would effectively block up that end of town completely. We can of course look at it further though. It has certainly always been a problematic area for residents.

What needs to be done in Monmouth for it be considered a success, like Abergavenny and Magor?

The challenge in Monmouth has been two-fold, as there are also the Agincourt Square works. Welsh Water has been doing works on Wye Bridge Street as well. The business feedback in Monmouth has been more varied than in Abergavenny, for example, making it more complicated. Monmouth has given us the opportunity to do early work on the one-way system, and get the engagement more in advance than in other towns, but it is an added complication having two phases of the Agincourt works and two phases of the re-opening works. Another issue that is harder in Monmouth is how much on-street parking has been lost in Monnow Street: we focussed efforts on the disabled parking, but the shopkeepers are telling us clearly how important free spaces are for their customers. Compared to Abergavenny and Magor, with existing pedestrianisation and one-way system, respectively, Chepstow and Monmouth are more difficult, as it will take some time for the shift to being less car-dominated to occur. We have increased on-street free parking in the Cornwall House car park from 30 mins to 1 hour. It has been called to our attention that the path linking it to Monnow Street is too narrow for social distancing; a resident has suggested a pedestrian one-way system but there isn't an obvious return on the loop.

There is an element of confusion among shoppers and businesses in Monmouth. Are there other methods for informing them of the measures, beyond leaflets?

We, and our colleagues in the Communications team, are looking into the suggestion of using local radio stations. As we are still finalising some of the plans we haven't decided fully what we will be telling the public. In addition to the leaflet drop, which ideally would have come sooner, several Councillors will be operating booths for direct communication with the public. It has been hard to get the messaging out with such a mixture of opinions from businesses and the Town Council. The leaflets will be both digital and paper.

Are there plans to issue these instructions about parking provisions to the residents of Monnow Street (particularly Nailor's Lane), and if so, in what format and what is the timeline?

Admittedly, Nailor's Lane residents were overlooked in this initial trial. Roger Hoggins will speak to Councillor Treharne after this meeting, and happily contact any resident who has a concern.

£438K has been secured to do this work; what additional resources will be required? What about resources for enforcing the measures?

Available funding includes Welsh Government funding which was just announced – Colin Phillips is leading on that project. One of the challenges around that is balancing what we are trialling with permanent schemes. Of course, the Active Travel Re-opening fund of £438k is very helpful. Then there is the wider Covid-19 budget code, against which we are able to put some of the measures, albeit with no guarantee of what, or how much, Welsh Government will reimburse. We have been told that they will look to reimburse some things which were 'forced' on us, but they wouldn't do so in cases of policy changes which were our own choice. In addition to the money, the biggest challenge has been staff resource. Colleagues have been furloughed for a short time but are now back, while many colleagues have been redeployed to support business grants, community meals, etc. Most of the grants now allow us to charge an element of officer time, and there are other changes which will be helpful; for example, issuing press notices for traffic orders has run into the tens of thousands of pounds, but new legislation will allow us to announce those changes just on social media. Officer time should also be covered.

Linked to this is the long-term Active Travel work, which Paul Sullivan and Sue Hughes from MonLife are leading. Consultation on that work begins in August. We've just had the funding announcement of £1.8m for the current schemes, which is far higher than we've had in the past. It is our objective to knit these projects together, to make best use of the money. As many of the current measures are temporary (i.e. removable barriers), if they were to become permanent it would require a lot of further, more detailed, work (widening pavements, for example) and therefore an additional financial implication.

To clarify: the Covid-19 budget code is across the authority, not just for Highways?

Yes, there will be an overall reimbursement from Welsh Government of a particular amount; we will then need to decide, as an organisation, where it goes. Our measures will therefore be in competition with bids from Social Care, Education, etc. We know we won't get it all, so it will be a case of prioritisation.

Do we have short to medium term project timescales? What do the review gateways look like for the next 4-6 months, or to the end of the calendar year?

Successful temporary measures might become permanent, but it's currently under discussion what "successful" will mean. We don't have effective footfall data from before the pandemic, it's being gathered now, but it makes measurement difficult. We can see that car parking is beginning to increase as an indicator of people returning to the town centres. Business survival will perhaps be the best metric for success but even then, we won't know for sure the degree to which it will have been due to our measures. Determining their success will probably be on a case-by-case basis. The introduction of 20mph zones has been very well received, so that is a straightforward case; however, the Welsh Government ruling of a 20mph default for urban centres might not happen now until 2023. Because the process began at such speed, we haven't really developed that long-term project plan, in terms of review points, and when it ends. There are meetings with each town booked in the coming weeks, as mentioned earlier, and we will look to meet again in September.

Reacting to what was an emergency situation necessitated short-term measures. But, looking forward, until the effective rollout of a vaccine many of these restrictions/improvements are likely to remain in place. There will be a full consultation with town councils, businesses and any other stakeholders when the time comes to decide whether to make any of the measures permanent. The initial feedback in most towns has been that they like the greater space, and having fewer cars. Perhaps we can use this dreadful situation to glimpse a brighter future for our towns.

Returning to disability access, and some things being overlooked, was there a failure of methodology? Or, was the Equality Impact Assessment not robust enough?

The Wellbeing and Future Generations assessments were done as part of the emerging project and were concluded and published at a time of decision-making. They are also published on our website in the section about reopening our towns – so they are there for review. Advice from Legal is that what we've done is entirely proportionate, given the speed in which we've had to work, and the measures we've had to use. Part of the issue raised was in terms of the use of data, and the evidence used. As an organisation, we have all of the Blue Badge data available to us. One key learning point which has gone back to the Policy team is the suggestion that we use the information captured in the consistency data sheet, which is behind the template for these assessments: this sheet shows, in the case of disability, how many Blue Badge holders we have, projected changes to demography, etc. This will trigger us when writing the reports to think about the data a bit more. However, complaints about the data have gone to levels of details which we can't realistically know – at least in the scope of this project. Nevertheless, any mistakes made when undergoing this process for the first time will of course be rectified going forward.

Some residents are still nervous about coming back to the high street. What additional actions can be taken to allay their fears? Will we issue another survey?

Yes, we need to keep in touch with our residents about what we've done and what they think about the future. The survey we are discussing went out via social media and came back within a week with over 1400 responses. Unsurprisingly, there were not a lot of responses from the

upper age ranges (we will need to consider how to reach more people with a second survey, rather than restricting it to social media), and this is clearly the group which is most reluctant to return to our shops. We have a big job to do to convince them that the steps we have taken will make things safer for them under the current circumstances. As we work through the marketing we will undoubtedly try to impress on the public the importance of open-air towns: not just how much more pleasant they are now, but also underline that we have created safe places to shop. Councillor Greenland noted that he would like to reach, ultimately, a place where we can have mobile exhibitions in town centres, and other features which take them beyond being just destinations for shopping, starting with bars and cafés making greater use of the highways.

Chair's summary:

The Councillors expressed their thanks for the work that has been done to prepare and implement measures, especially in such a short time. We have covered the main towns, highlighting that each is unique, with unique challenges. We have made a good start in overcoming these. There is more work to be done with some of the proposals, though. Councillor Strong made a strong plea that the one-way system in Usk be re-considered. He proposed that the traffic lights in Usk are tried on the shorter distance first: if they are, and fail, then the Council will be in a stronger position to insist on the one-way system. Councillor Harris noted that it needs to be remembered that the high streets in Monmouthshire are hundreds of years old, and therefore a response that will please everyone is not possible.

It is important that proposals put forward are evidence-based and evidence-led, and that we show ourselves to be flexible when evidence-led feedback is received. We have done that, with Chepstow being a clear example. We have considered disability access, which is very important. We looked at costs and funding; moving forward, it will be interesting to see what happens with bids for future proposals, particularly as new funding models from Welsh Government come online. Timescales, and communication and engagement were also considered. These are very important.

Recommendations

In terms of communication and engagement, there is a duty on all members to feed back various views from residents and businesses from whatever platforms we can access. Those councillors which have been involved in the initial discussions in their communities will continue to be engaged and feed back. It would be really useful to have a project outline, with review points, to at least the end of the year. The Chair understands that such an outline will be tentative and subject to large change, but it would be very useful for members to use as a benchmark, and then revisit the matter in early autumn (though not necessarily in this arena).

The meeting ended at **Time Not Specified**