

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Adults Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 21st September, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

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

Officers in Attendance

Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing,
Highways and Flood
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Sally Meyrick, Strategy & Policy Affordable Housing
Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: Councillors R. Edwards, C. Bowie and T. Crowhurst

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No public submissions were received.

3. Gypsy and Travellers Needs Assessment - To consider the way forward following a review of needs

Ian Bakewell presented the report and answered the members' questions with Mark Hand.

Challenge:

How important is it that we meet every one of the criteria set out by Welsh Government? How does determining a site work in relation to, for example, available school places?

I don't think the process would consider school quotas, but access to schools is a criterion. At this stage we haven't considered where schools are at capacity, but it would make sense for the matter to enter the debate.

Will the government therefore be flexible on the criteria, especially as there's a cost implication for transport to school?

Access to schools is not set out definitively in the legislation – the obligation is more about the actual provision. We are expected to consider certain criteria, and we would aim to get as close to meeting all of those as possible. It would probably be difficult to meet every criterion definitively.

How would you rank those criteria i.e. schooling being one of the most important aspects?

We've not really done so, and it would be hard to do so, but it is certainly a consideration. Again, we won't 'tick every box' with the sites. The criteria aren't weighed against each other, it will be a carefully balanced decision as we progress. As we are considering families who are already in the county, their children should already be in the schooling system, though that isn't to say that successful sites will necessarily be in those areas – so there could be the implication of a different catchment. Home-to-school transport policies would then apply, as for any other residents.

Appendix 2 mentions guidance; there's a lot concerning public sites, but not much for private sites. There isn't a section on licensing either.

Welsh Government have produced the public site criteria, which they would expect us to meet, if we go down that road. We expect that we will need to, but the need can be met by private arrangement. Including licensing as part of the working group's conversation is appropriate – it hasn't factored into the discussions previously.

Will Appendix 2 be submitted to Welsh Government?

We wouldn't be compelled to submit it per se, but it would be appropriate to be available as background information to explain how we came to our decision.

The revised criteria mention phosphates and drainage but, quite often, these sites are in rural locations, so this presumably wouldn't be relevant?

Yes, sites often aren't on mains drainage, but have private treatment plants. The phosphates requirement on planning decisions is that for anything in sensitive areas (i.e. the northern two-thirds of the county, due to the Usk and Wye rivers), we have to go through a screening process with the habitat regulations, looking at betterment or neutrality in phosphates. It could be that a private treatment plant addresses that, and there is no phosphate impact – that is the position we will need to get to for a site to progress. There isn't the same phosphates issue with mains drainage in the south of the county.

Chair's Summary:

The recommendations were agreed by the committee. It would be helpful if licensing were also included in officer group and looking at the criteria. It was suggested that a comment about the importance of schooling be added, in considering the criteria. The workshop will be led by the Select committee, but open to all members.

4. Affordable Housing - To scrutinise the Local Authority Prospectus, which summarises the demand for affordable housing within Monmouthshire prior to submission to Welsh Government

Sally Meyrick presented the report and answered the members' questions with Ian Bakewell and Mark Hand.

Challenge:

Regarding the priorities highlighted in the strategic housing development: first, to seek to respond to increased levels of homelessness – what is that rate?

It is hard to answer definitively because the overall number of households that we are dealing with hasn't changed significantly from previous years. What has changed is the type of household – because Welsh Government's requirements have changed (ending rough sleeping and youth homelessness), we are dealing with more single people, often with significant support needs. Because of the change in profile, we are having difficulty moving those people on. As a

result, we have significant numbers of people in temporary accommodation – an increase from pre-pandemic. the team is focused on ramping up our preventative work and trying to increase our permanent accommodation.

The other priority to progress ambitions to set up an in-house development company – could that be elaborated on, given that it is a subject that has been discussed for several years now?

Debra Hill-Howells is leading on this, and would be best placed to provide an update, but she is on leave this week. Our latest understanding is that there is still an appetite for the development company but there is consideration as to what the land supply pipeline looks like, which is a factor of the replacement local development plan, and therefore still a work in progress. We will arrange for an email update to be sent to the committee.

What is the effect of the high house prices on the population, specifically young people, and how can this be addressed?

From the perspective of housing need, the house prices compound the situation in Monmouthshire. We are trying to work up solutions to meet these needs but face the same problems: land is expensive, properties are expensive to buy, and rents are high too. The need for affordable housing is a key part of the local development plan, and those demographic changes are considerations of planning colleagues in relation to the review of the development plan.

Affordable housing is one of the huge challenges for this county, and for our young people to remain in the county, if they wish to do so. It is a huge driving force behind the RLDP. There is the discussion about what happens if we build more homes and more people from outside the county move in, to which there are two answers: first, our natural population is declining, so people moving in is vital. In terms of how we ensure that housing is there for local people – meeting its intended purpose – affordable housing is very clearly and carefully governed so that people from the waiting list are given the housing (according to criteria concerning a local connection). Second, we continue to review for deposit plan stage any other policy tools or legal mechanisms to look at how we help, for example, care workers that we desperately need but who aren't on high wages. We also look at housing mix policies so that not everything is 4-bed detached houses, and other legal mechanisms raised by Councillor Jordan under the Housing Act that might allocate some of the housing for local people.

147 households are in temporary accommodation – is this an increase? Does it include children who have been made homeless and have returned to their parent's home?

We have several households referred to as 'homeless at home', which aren't included in that figure.

There is nothing in the report about how we can achieve 468 affordable units per year, or what a sensible minimum number to recommend to Cabinet would be. Why is there nothing about the council having its own development company?

468 is not necessarily a target for delivery but represents the need. It is arrived at by considering the current housing waiting list data, the committed supply of affordable housing, projections about incoming need, and population projections. Some of those people will be able to satisfy their own housing needs so 468 is not necessarily a target. It's difficult to put an exact figure on the target e.g., last year, 146 units of affordable housing were delivered over the financial year, this year, 80 have been projected. RLDP takes targets for delivering affordable housing into consideration, so that will be looked at. Regarding the development company, we

have 3 RSLs currently operating in Monmouthshire, with others potentially set to do so, which are proactive about finding land and looking for opportunities to develop new housing and convert existing properties.

The preferred strategy on which we consulted recently would have provided 2,450 affordable homes; 731 of those are already in the pipeline. 230 would come from 'windfall' sites, or small sites, and 1,489 from new allocations (table 7, p85). As a matter of clarity, when the Planning and Housing teams talk about affordable housing, we do so in the strict sense of what Welsh Government guidance says – other areas, particularly in England, use other definitions. Welsh Government's 20,000 affordable housing target includes Help To Buy, but we don't count that. We talk about social rent, intermediate rent, and low-cost home ownership properties, with the clear criteria as mentioned.

We have a Social Housing Grant of £7.5m. Can we guarantee that we will use all of that, and ask for more if we do?

We've had a big increase in the budget: last year it was £2.9m and this year it is £7.5m. Yes, ideally, we would be able to spend it all and be able to spend more. There is an overall budget for Wales; if any local authorities have an underspend, then there could be slippage from other LAs. But there are issues that make it hard to deliver in certain parts of the county e.g. phosphates, high land values, viability of developments, etc. As things stand, around £5m has been allocated. We communicate regularly with the RSLs and are always looking for opportunities to put the money to good use. We can't guarantee we will spend it all, but we will try our best.

Do the RSLs apply for the £7.5m as a grant or how much does the Council directly spend on properties? What about dual flushes in flats above shops for addressing the phosphate problem?

Properties accessing the social housing grant need to meet the property standards. These are set by Welsh Government, which has just released new ones, the Welsh Development Quality Requirements 2021. So, there are high standards concerning the size and standard of properties to be eligible for social housing grant. Spaces above shops are very unlikely to meet the standards in DQR. This is another factor we must consider when looking to bring forward affordable housing using the SHG. We would still look to acquire those properties and use them for affordable housing, as do the RSLs, but they wouldn't necessarily be eligible for grant funding.

We are working through a range of solutions to the phosphate problem, which is holding up applications, particularly some affordable housing schemes. Dual flushes affect how much water is used by the toilet cistern, so wouldn't be a solution. In the phosphate catchment area i.e. the northern two-thirds of the county, it is far harder to deal with things like refurbishment of existing properties and change of use, as there isn't the available land for installing package treatment plants. It is quite a challenge. We are seeking guidance from Welsh Government and NRW on this matter regarding affordable housing, in particular.

It is very frustrating that, often, we find places to build houses, but the people living there complain, and the site is turned down by Welsh Government e.g. Raglan and Pandy.

This is a key consideration in the RLDP. There are community concerns about new developments, of which we must be mindful, but building houses is one of our core objectives.

Pandy is a prime example, as it is caught up with two policy issues. We haven't fully concluded the flooding issues that Planning was considering, and it also has the phosphates challenge.

Regarding homelessness, where have grants been spent previously and where will they be spent in the future?

We can provide the committee with an overview of what we have done in recent years and what we are currently doing, with the different funding streams, etc. Schemes that have had funding and been recently completed or are due for completion this year include a scheme of 8 flats in Chepstow (Melin), a couple of schemes in Chepstow that Pobl are involved in, converting some supported accommodation for young people. Also, there are two rural schemes, one in Devauden and one in Llanishen, a couple of units in Sudbrook, and some schemes that have received Innovative Housing funding – these are also in Chepstow, done by MHA.

Regarding the Local Authority Prospectus, one of the issues with meeting this housing need is in the local connection criteria. Can the prospectus include something about the need for local criteria in rural and urban settings?

We only have a contribution towards affordable housing on the very small sites. There is a rural allocations policy: when we develop affordable housing in rural communities, people apply for them on the housing register, but priority will be given to people who can provide evidence of a local connection. The overall housing register recognises local connection, but it needs to be recognised that there are limitations in terms of what we can do – we are governed by housing legislation etc. In terms of homelessness, under the current legislation local connection is a criterion for assessing applications; WG has asked us to suspend that, and we expect them to legislate for the local connection to go. but we find that the vast majority of people coming through on the homeless side are Monmouthshire people.

Presumably, the local connection is more of a concern in the rural areas where prices are higher. Are we making representations to Welsh Government about this change?

It is an ongoing conversation. We anticipate that for the change in legislation they will engage with local authorities. The government recognises that Monmouthshire is unique, with unique difficulties, and are doing everything they can to support us.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the team for its hard work in a difficult situation. The recommendations were agreed.

5. Revenue and Capital Monitoring 2021/22 Forecast Outturn Statement Month 2 - Scrutiny of the budgetary position for services falling within the Committee's remit at Month 2

Tyrone Stokes presented the report and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Davies.

Challenge:

Overall, there's a shortfall but a lot should be covered by Covid money – is it more like £2.5m?

Yes. the Covid-related element is about two-thirds of our predicted overspend which should be met by Welsh Government funding. In terms of social care in general, the main overspend pertains to children's services, as already delivered to CYP Select. The major pressure we have in Adults services is meeting the demand, and the difficulty of the external marketplace, in terms of domiciliary care. That means we have had to bolster our in-house provision and employ more

carers, above budget. There are particular pressures in the south of the county with hospital discharge. We are preparing for the next forecast; unfortunately, the overspend is only increasing.

Concerning the homelessness budget, a significant overspend is forecast (£1.04m), mainly due to expensive B&Bs and hostels. We are eligible to claim all that cost from the Welsh Government Hardship Fund. The government has produced new guidelines for claiming for the last 6 months of the year that are more stringent, so we need to work through that detail. This is also relevant to Adult Care, for which the Hardship Fund is going to taper off by the end of the year. We will liaise with budget holders and look to mitigate our additional costs as far as possible.

Presumably, the advantage of employing more in-house means less reliance on the market?

It is a double-edged sword. When we employ more in-house, there is that element of control but it costs more to employ. For example, for the local authority there is the 23% employer's contribution to the pension scheme, which the external market doesn't need to pay.

Is it not easier to recruit carers because some of the retail occupations were losing staff?

As the pandemic and restrictions are easing, it has become attractive for people to go into other areas such as hospitality, particularly as there might be a better hourly rate. Retention is perhaps more difficult than the initial recruitment.

Where have the savings of £874k been made and how can we ensure that they don't affect service users?

The major saving has been from us moving away from the pandemic, in conjunction with more place-based care and market intelligence. Covid has sometimes brought opportunities but also created more challenges. The Hardship Fund props up the external marketplace a lot e.g. Care Homes with voids that they wouldn't necessarily have had. Now we need to look at how we rebuild the market and gain more confidence in the market. We need to be proactive in a different way, which has given us the opportunity to offer £548k of savings back to the authority.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to officers for the comprehensive report. The recommendations were agreed.

6. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme

Homelessness will be considered in more detail at the next meeting. In the pre-meeting, Tony Crowhurst proposed a discussion over disability related to transport, with a suggestion of inviting the Cabinet Member – this could be included on 9th November. The Gypsy & Travellers workshop will take place in October.

7. Cabinet and Council Forward Plan

8. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Groucott and seconded by Councillor Powell.

9. Next Meeting

Tuesday 9th November 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.50 am.**