

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at on Thursday, 17th June, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: P. Clarke, A. Easson,
C.Edwards, L. Guppy, V. Smith, J.Treharne

Also in attendance County Councillor: 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
Hazel Clatworthy, Sustainability Policy Officer
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and
Governance

APOLOGIES: None

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

2. To appoint a Vice Chair

Councillor Treharne nominated Councillor Webb, seconded by Councillor Edwards.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Open Public Forum

No members of the public were present.

5. Climate Change

Matthew Gatehouse and Hazel Clatworthy presented the report and answered the members' questions, along with Cabinet Member Jane Pratt.

Challenge:

The pie charts refer to progress on actions made in 2021. Is it correct that there are no projects yet to start?

A few actions in June hadn't started. For example, a couple of schools-related projects that hadn't started, due to lockdown. One of the first actions in the plan is about ensuring that new builds are zero carbon; at that point, no new builds were happening, but discussions are now taking place about the new building at King Henry VIII school, so that has moved to 'green' – we are ensuring that sustainability and net zero are included in the specifications for that. Those are a couple of examples of projects that hadn't started but are now underway.

There is no progress on fitting bike carriers to buses – what is on the table to progress that and make the buses compatible?

Contractors operate many of the buses that run in the county, so we have less influence over what can be done with those. With the buses that we do run, where the bike racks would need to go is where the engine compartment is, so it's not feasible given the type of buses that we have. As and when we look at renewing buses, this matter will be picked up and explored then, to see if we can use buses for which bike racks are compatible.

Some residents are complaining about the mowing of green spaces – who decides that larger areas are to remain uncut?

It would be helpful to receive details by email of the particular areas of concern, so that they can be passed on to Nigel Leaworthy (Commercial and Operations Manager) and his team, who do the mowing. The council is mowing playing fields and pitches. In other areas they have let the wildflowers grow, but still mowing paths around or through those areas so that residents can walk unaffected by wet, cut grass etc. In some of the residential areas, sometimes it's not the council that is responsible i.e. it might be the responsibility of a housing association. Similarly, schools are in charge of their own grounds and how they are managed; sometimes, they might ask the council team to mow their area in a way that is not necessarily in accordance with the council's policy. Thus, it would be useful to know in which precise locations residents have concerns. It is tricky to get the balance right, as we have also had many compliments from residents about the wildflowers and the increase of bee numbers.

Regarding open spaces and mowing, is it worth putting out an update to residents about how effective the measures have been, and to reassure them that the situation is monitored?

Yes, we will speak to colleagues about this. Press releases went out earlier in the year, and we have done a lot in terms of signage explaining 'No Mow May' and the rationale behind it, but we will indeed follow this up.

Regarding the Action Plan, are there major areas of concern in any of the amber areas?

Not all of these matters have progressed as quickly as we would have liked, or as we might need in order to reach net zero by 2030. One example is the commitment to move the council's pension fund away from carbon-intensive industries, following a motion from Councillor Groucott. Since then, the fund has begun to divest significantly from fossil fuel companies and put a larger proportion of investments into a zero carbon tracker, so that we are investing more positively in companies that are proactively looking to reduce carbon from their activities e.g. green energy firms. A significant amount of progress has been taken, in the region of tens of millions of pounds of investments. This sort of action can't take place overnight, however.

Other activities have progressed more slowly than we'd hoped e.g. the installation of Photovoltaic canopies and EV charging at car parks such as County Hall. Pre-pandemic, we were looking to expand the car park at County Hall, as more staff had been consolidated at that site. As part of that proposal, there were plans to install PV canopies in the expanded area. Now, with more people working from home, work on that expansion has paused, as there might not be the need for the extra space in light of altered travel patterns resulting from the pandemic.

At the end of No Mow Way, where is the council in relation to catching up with grass cutting?

Mowing is resuming for those areas left uncut during May, prioritising the verges at junctions and sports pitches. There is a lot to catch up with, of course, so people might need to be

patient. Also, the new cut and collect machine that we are using is very valuable because it collects even the longer mowings. If cut grass is left, it makes the field more fertile, which is bad for the wildflowers as they thrive in soil that is more infertile. Picking up the cuttings is therefore very important, but this machine is slightly slower than the usual ones that leave the cuttings behind – so progress is a little slower, as a result.

Is the Council doing anything to mark Clean Air Day today?

One of the actions in the plan that we have been carrying out is an anti-idling campaign. We have worked with schools and had a competition for them to design posters that we can turn into metal signs that will go around the schools, encouraging parents to switch off their engines. As well as being bad for air quality and the environment, there are significant effects on people's health from idling, especially that of young children. This is another example of an amber action that was put on hold because we wanted publicity when the schools were open (as well as in other locations.) There is an air quality management zone in Chepstow and Usk. A group made up of officers from Monmouthshire and Gloucestershire, and some citizens, meets regularly in Chepstow to discuss proposals there. We work closely with the Transition town groups, working on ways to reduce air pollution. In hindsight, a strong publicity drive would have been a good idea, but various communications about it have gone out today on social media linking Clean Air Day with the anti-idling campaign.

No Mow May was fabulous. We only have grass in the verges in our country lanes and minor B-roads – can we include wildflowers? It would help the public to embrace the reduced cutting.

We don't own all of the land. There have been times, such as during the Eisteddfod, when we have encouraged people to buy and plant wildflower seeds. We do what we can on our own land, and we would certainly agree that more wildflowers in the county would be very welcome, especially given the environmental benefit they would bring.

A long time ago, Councillor Guppy requested a cycle path between Rogiet and Undy, as it is a dangerous road. But nothing has happened – it is long overdue.

We have invested a great deal in Active Travel routes over the last 12 months, overseen by officers Paul Sullivan and Susan Hume, both of whom attend the Climate working group, chaired by Councillor Pratt. We have had recent success in leveraging external funds for the development of cycle routes. We currently have a live Active Travel consultation, and would urge members and the public to look at the routes on the council's website, give feedback, and continue to engage with our officers about what works and what else is needed.

We are losing our investment in wind turbines, and losing out as an authority, therefore.

We aren't aware of the detail about this, at that time, so can't give a specific response. One of the objectives in the climate strategy and action plan relates to energy. We operate a solar farm that has significant benefits, commercially and in producing renewable energy. There are some challenges when it comes to expanding our renewables, linked to the capacity of the national grid. We are dependent on the power distribution company in our area, Western Power, to have the capacity to enable us to connect more renewable sources into the grid. At present, for example, there is insufficient capacity available to us to reconnect things like solar farms on to the grid. We would need to check the detail regarding wind turbines, but it is the sort of thing that colleagues like Debra Hill-Howells and Ian Hoccom are grappling with. National grid capacity issues are not unique to Monmouthshire. We will get a detailed response regarding wind turbines from colleagues, to present at this committee's next meeting.

Regarding Active Travel and the footpath between Rogiet and Undy, someone needs to get hold of it – words need to be turned into actions.

We applied for funding for this and were rejected by Welsh Government. It has been highlighted in the Burns Report, which the government is taking very seriously. We are lobbying at every avenue to get this done but we do need the finances to do it. We hope to be successful in doing that. We certainly agree that there is a dire need for this footpath.

Is there an update on hydrogen cars?

We've been talking for a long time about piloting the Riversimple hydrogen cars, with 20 due to be beta-tested around the county. The timescale has been a little frustrating, as we hoped to have had them by now. We will soon take delivery of the first though, which will be piloted by our Registrars' service. They are quite small vehicles so wouldn't be suitable for some council services. Riversimple want the cars to work perfectly for us, rather than give us cars with lots of problems. They have therefore made further refinements during lockdown. In terms of larger vehicles, some UK authorities like Aberdeen have been piloting hydrogen refuse trucks. Our officers are keeping up-to-date with the latest technologies and possibilities around that. Currently, the only refuelling station is in Abergavenny, but it is only suitable for Riversimple's Rasa cars, for which it was designed. We would therefore need different refuelling stations for larger vehicles. Therefore, at this time, we are keeping a watching brief on this. If, in the future, we were to have another solar farm, perhaps it could be used to create hydrogen. Big ideas like this are also being considered.

Has work actually started on the EV charging strategy? It was due to start in April.

The work was due to start. Funding is in place to bring in someone to work on the development of the strategy. As mentioned above, learning from other authorities is important. One of the connections that we've established is with Oxfordshire council, which is leading the way in this area. A big challenge that we have with EV charging is providing for people who don't have off-road parking. Oxfordshire has received funding from Innovate UK that has enabled them to set up an EV team. They have piloted different approaches for on street charging, such as pop-up chargers and gullies for people to run cables safely underneath the pavement from their house. Because they are ahead, conversations with Oxfordshire are giving our officers pause for thought about our first steps and what needs to happen on the strategy, but also taking us far ahead in our understanding of the issue. Another avenue we're exploring is the possibility of working across the Cardiff Capital Region on this matter. Across the CCR, there is a £10m Challenge Fund to help local authorities address challenges that we can't resolve with current technologies. One of the themes of the fund is accelerating decarbonisation. We are speaking with the fund manager there, who has also been connected into the conversations with Oxfordshire, on the sorts of things we can do and how we could potentially pitch some of these challenges to incentivise private sector companies to come up with some of the solutions that we need.

With Digital Solutions, there is a reference to car sharing schemes – are we considering other avenues?

This work started because of a challenge fund. It's been paused because of the pandemic: the firm that has developed a potential digital solution for improving access to rural transport (which, in turn, helps to remove carbon because people are travelling in different ways) has had to pause testing. The proposed solution is divided into three parts: a planner (to plan journeys

more effectively, taking into account mobility issues etc.), something that enables people to book and access a demand-responsive scheme (allowing people to book at shorter notice, and a more efficient scheme around grassroots), and 'tag along' – a secure lift-sharing scheme.

How often does the cross party working group meet and are minutes available?

Minutes are taken but are not routinely published. They can be made available to the committee though, of course. The group meets quarterly, and has done so since the first meeting in January 2020.

Community meals vehicles are electric but not mentioned in the report?

These have been electric since 2017, so they have been factored in but we probably haven't updated the committee. 4 or 5 of the Chefmobile vehicles are electric; not all are because of problems with range. As battery range improves, as with all of our fleet, we will look to move the vehicles over to electric.

Is there any suggestion of repeating member training?

Yes, we aim to repeat the carbon literacy training. The Carbon Literacy Project has accredited training, a day's worth, spread out across a week. It gives a background to the science behind climate change, and helps with understanding the effect that we have on climate change, as individuals and members through their work in the council. We are now a Bronze level carbon literate organisation. Becoming Silver accredited would involve 15% of the workforce doing the training. We are therefore looking to see if a handful of officers can receive the training and then roll it out through our in-house training provision, and roll it out to the wider community. The 4 community reps who attended the climate emergency working group were very positive about it.

Chair's Summary:

Cabinet Member Jane Pratt first gave the following summation:

Thank you to the chair and the committee for the invitation to attend, and the robust questions. The in-depth scrutiny of the paper is greatly appreciated. When I took over this portfolio two years ago, there wasn't really a budget. What Hazel Clatworthy, Matthew Gatehouse and other officers have achieved in two years is incredible, especially as Hazel works part-time. We've been successful in getting government money and bids for circular economy funding: £626k in January, with which we have made rapid progress. We will access every possible grant to forward this agenda. Every department in the council is committed to deliver our target of achieving net zero by 2030. We would like to have achieved more but in many cases are waiting for technology to catch up. A particular example is the lack of an electric waste truck that can properly service our rural county. I am encouraged that we now have a super ministry in Welsh government, headed by Julie James. As indicated in this week's government publication, there will soon be a huge shift in waste and recycling. As a council, we are going to raise our ambition and keep pushing, but to do so we will probably need to take on some external help. Thanks are due to our working group and community champions.

We've had an interesting debate this morning and we thank officers for an informative discussion on what is a cross cutting issue. I'm going to summarise some of the points raised this morning as we draw this item to a conclusion.

- We understand there are a variety of reasons slowing the progress around electric vehicles.

- We are encouraged to hear about the library of things, which is a really useful community initiative.
- In terms of street lighting, we are pleased to hear that the rollout of LED's is almost complete.
- We've heard that remote working has reduced business mileage and has contributed to carbon reduction.
- The expansion of green spaces through wild flower planting is encouraging and has transformed some areas.
- The committee raised issues such as the need for bike racks on buses, acknowledging there are difficulties at the moment in accommodating them.
- Members also highlighted the need to maintain grass areas to ensure safety and access, whilst recognising the benefits brought about by initiatives such as 'No Mow May'. Officers informed that areas that weren't mowed in May will be scheduled as a priority, the teams focussing on verges at junctions and sports fields as the first priority. Members support the 'no mow May' initiative and asked officers to consider how to increase wildflowers along Monmouthshire's B roads, acknowledging that not all of the land is within our gift to change. Members asked officers to provide more information to the public on these initiatives.
- Members feel strongly that cycle paths need to be prioritised, noting the changes in travel patterns due to more homeworking and more people wanting to walk or cycle safely, the example given being between Rogiet and Undy. Officers advised that the Active Travel Consultation is currently underway and they encouraged elected members and the public to engage on this and provide feedback on the routes proposed. Members heard that the bid for funding to Welsh Government has been rejected, but that the Burns report has highlighted this and the Council is lobbying at every opportunity. **Action:** The Committee agreed a formal recommendation to the Cabinet Member to pursue this and to report back to the committee.
- We discussed renewable energy, a member highlighting that neighbouring authorities are harnessing the power of wind turbines. The officers explained that some of the challenge the council is facing is the ability to connect our solar farms and other renewable energy sources to the National Grid. **Action:** The officer agreed to provide a response to the committee outside of the meeting on the barriers to renewable energy.
- Members raised hydrogen fuels and the extent to which we are pursuing this and officers explained the difficulty is the fuelling infrastructure but reassured we are still exploring bigger opportunities around solar and hydrogen.
- We queried progress on the Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy and we were reassured that funding is in place to harness expertise from Oxfordshire County Council who are piloting different approaches for charging on street and are leading the way on this and that learning from them will help us progress our own strategy on this, which is an issue across the Cardiff Capital Region.
- In terms of our Digital Solutions to improve access to rural transport, we had paused this work during the pandemic but this is restarting.
- We also discussed the progress of electric vehicles for delivering school meals and community meals, officers advising us that they are working on expanding this as far as the technology allows.

- The Carbon Literacy training has been helpful for those who attended and we are now a 'bronze level' accredited council and we are looking to further roll out training to the wider workforce and the community.

So, in conclusion, we are looking to refresh our strategy but the action plan is constantly evolving to ensure we are exploring the latest initiatives. We have discussed this fully this morning and we are making a formal recommendation to the Cabinet Member Councillor Dymock in terms of Cycle initiatives. The actions highlighted will be addressed and followed up by our scrutiny team.

6. Welsh Language

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

Challenge:

For perspective, how many calls are made in other languages during the same period as the 74 Welsh calls?

About 75,000 English calls. On calling the council line there is the option to continue in English or Welsh. Expectation levels are likely low, so many Welsh speakers will probably choose the English line. Figures have slowly increased over the years, and that is likely to continue.

Are the stated Welsh language skills among the staff based on self-evaluation or someone else's determination?

I have spoken to all of the 'fluent' Welsh speakers, and I know the people in the 'higher' levels. I organise the classes for the 'lower' levels; the further someone goes through the course then they go up the levels. With self-assessment, people tend to under-assess their skills, so I try to chat with them and gauge their level. It's not an exact science, of course, especially as there are different levels of fluency.

Is there a particular service area that's of concern? CYP looks like a problem area, for example?

Yes, I would agree that there is a shortage of skills in CYP. Frontline is where we have the particular challenge. We have now appointed people in the contact centre who are Welsh speakers, which has worked really well. There has been something of a hiatus due to Covid, but once we are back working in offices as before, we don't have many staff who could speak to someone who comes through the door. This is a problem: if we were challenged, we would have difficulty in offsetting that challenge.

What support could the Welsh language group in Monmouthshire give to town and community councils, especially in providing translations?

I've had very fruitful conversations with town and community councils in Monmouth, Usk, Chepstow, Caldicot and Abergavenny. We are trying to be realistic in terms of resources. The website is probably the biggest public service that is provided. From a conversation with Councillor Tudor Thomas we started on the Abergavenny one, and from there, conversations have taken place with other town and community clerks. We have offered to do translations for their sites. They are still under the old Welsh language act, and aren't subject to the same requirements that we are, so don't need to translate as much.

It would be good to see more in the report, for example, by including the Welsh speaking teaching staff. Can we also highlight the changes in our schools i.e. the new schools, and things like the Welsh youth club in Caldicot?

Yes, these are interesting points. The 2011 census gave the Welsh-speaking population as 9.9%, approximately 8,500 people; that has no doubt increased in the most recent census. It is therefore a sizeable minority. Concerning data for schools, our focus for this particular report was our resource for providing council services – we therefore can't include schools staff as a resource.

Chair's Summary:

We'd like to thank Alan Burkitt for bringing us the report on our compliance on adhering to Welsh language legislation over the period 2020-2021.

The Officer highlighted several key issues, which are that:

- Training online has been successful and courses such as Say Something in Welsh have been useful
- Our Welsh speaker telephone line is working effectively and whilst we don't have a huge volume of calls, those who use the line are very pleased to have this service
- Recruiting Welsh speaker appointments is the key area where we are struggling. We advertise every role as 'Welsh speaker desirable' but we have only recruited 2 individuals and we are not currently recruiting Welsh Language as 'essential requirements'

A members asked for clarification on the number of Welsh calls (which are 74) in relation to the number of English speaking calls ~ which are 75 000.

Another member asked whether Town and Community Councils are supported to show commitment to Welsh Language. The officer advised that he has offered to assist through translation of their websites, but suggested they are not subject to the same requirements as a county council.

A member suggested there are more Welsh speakers in our staff than are reported due to staff within schools not having been counted. The officer explained that whilst we could count these staff in our report, but given that they are ring-fenced to their roles, they are not able to support our council services. The suggestion by the member was that we could better promote the Welsh language if we held events with all Welsh-speaking staff.

Action: That the officer takes a report to full council on promoting Welsh language across Monmouthshire.

Councillor Guppy suggested that a full report go to council celebrating our achievements and highlighting progress since Eisteddfod.

7. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

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

8. Strong Communities forward work programme

Councillor Easson suggested, following Councillor Guppy, including B4245 (the road between Rogiet and Undy) and grass cutting. He noted that there hasn't been recent scrutiny of crime and disorder; previously there was extensive work on speed management as part of it. He also proposed looking at CCTV provision – it would be useful to understand whether sufficient time can be given to Monmouthshire's towns when the central hub is in Blaenavon, and an officer has to travel there to get any footage that is needed. The Chair agreed to invite the officer responsible, Andy Mason, to the committee.

Councillor Treharne proposed that the Police & Crime Commissioner attend to discuss the numbers of police officers in the community. The Chair suggested starting with CCTV, as it's not clear with which Select committee this matter lies.

Councillor Smith suggested a review of highways infrastructure – it is the highest profile issue but the budget has reduced each year. The Chair noted that a particular aspect would need to be considered. The Councillor has asked for a breakdown of the department i.e. a directory.

The Committee will put in a request for this as a Recommendation.

9. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

10. Date and time of next meeting: 29th July 2021

The meeting ended at **12.25 pm**