

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 30th June, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Lisa Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillor Jane Lucas (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, Ben Callard, Ian Chandler, Tomos Davies, Su McConnel and Jackie Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Roger Hoggins, Head of Service - Strategic Projects (Fixed Term)
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Sadie Beer, Town Centre Engagement Project Officer
Daniel Fordham, Project Manager

APOLOGIES: There were no apologies for absence.

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Lisa Dymock.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Nominations were received for Councillor McConnell and Councillor Lucas (and Councillor Brown – declined).

Councillor Lucas was appointed as Vice-Chair, following a vote.

3. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Dymock declared an interest in the Castle Meadows petition, as the former Cabinet member for MonLife, and having met with Friends of Castle Meadows.

4. Public Open Forum

No public submissions were received.

5. Discussion on the Committee's Forward Work Programme

Items proposed by the committee were the Chepstow High Street closure, the Council's plans for flood prevention and protection, the way in which active travel arrangements are made, how the new school in Abergavenny is to be used as a community hub and that information communicated, the revised Local Development Plan, the regeneration of high streets, Monnow Street in Monmouth (with part of the levelling up bid coming),

Active Travel, the Council's approach to placemaking, how to leverage the considerable civic capital of the county for the benefit of the wider county and population, looking at some of the issues falling under the working groups, supporting retrofitting and insulation for houses, and affordable housing.

Mark Hand responded that the RLDP indeed sits well in this committee, and that there is lots of work coming up on it. This year the Council has to create a new Flooding strategy, which will be an ideal piece for the committee to scrutinise; the Update paper on Section 19 (flooding investigation reports) might be of interest. High streets are going through various processes e.g. Transforming Chepstow Masterplan – work will be forthcoming. There is lots of Active Travel work between Highways and MonLife. Regarding Active Travel and Castle Meadows, the committee will need to ensure there's no overlap with Planning. On a question about local issues in Chepstow and Abergavenny.

Councillor Chandler asked if local issues will also be covered by area committees. Mark Hand did not have the details, and will come back to the Councillor about it.

6. Pre-decision Scrutiny of the Wye Valley Villages Future Plan

Roger Hoggins presented the report and answered the members' questions with Mark Hand.

Challenge:

Could we have a further explanation of funding and costs?

The Wye Valley study was seen as opportunity to bring community councils together. It was looked on as a testbed, in a sense, and had the added benefit of having a physical boundary as it is located in the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – they then had input and helped significantly with the funding. All work and consultation came to £49k, but other reports might not need to be as extensive and therefore as costly. The community councils involved have raised their precepts to raise funding to contribute towards new signage.

Other villages might be interested, so what are the pros and cons of this approach?

By bringing the community councils together, they acted together, which helped them to work towards a common goal. One of the weaknesses of this approach is if one of the community councils says they no longer agree or wish to take part. There's no talk of it currently, but it is a risk. Signage was a good example of positive collaborative work, albeit on a relatively small matter: there are now signs everywhere informing the public that they are in the AONB, each with backgrounds related to the individual villages, thus helping to create an identity for the AONB and the villages within it. We've been able to act collectively in bringing forward the villages for the speed management issues; similarly, with the village halls, we will be able to work across the Wye Valley area. Whether other community councils wish to operate collectively is something that could be explored but in this case, being in the AONB brought them together more easily and logically. It seems to bring more confidence to the community councils to be more proactive in their areas. We are trying to create a culture in which community and town

councils are proactive in working with the County Council, rather than operating as individuals.

Active Travel funding tends to focus on town centres, rather than villages – there doesn't seem to be consideration about Active Travel linking villages with towns?

The term 'Active Travel' should have been stated as pedestrians and cyclists. Joining villages to towns is a good point. It probably needs to be raised elsewhere at some point but yes, currently, funding is geared principally towards town centres.

How long did it take to do the work?

The process started in October 2019 in Tintern when we put together an agenda and sought support from community councils. We went to Catbrook to write the terms of reference, then worked around local villages in various meetings. The process stalled somewhat with the pandemic. Some stakeholder engagement happened over Teams and the broader public consultation was online. The report was finally submitted to the steering group in March 2022.

How much does this work link in to the RLDP, and what effect would it have on that?

It doesn't sit with the RLDP. The drivers behind this are placemaking and the shared identity in the AONB, shaping tourism, what works well for communities, and highway safety. The only relevant issue with the RLDP is the need for affordable housing in those communities, and how it is delivered. A link between this and the next report, and the question about Active Travel, concerns the extent of funding and resource to support these ambitions – ambition is much greater than resources, and the ways to deliver some of the objectives are not yet known. There is a Members Seminar on 8th July on Active Travel, which will be a good opportunity to ask questions and seek clarity on that matter.

Promoting shared working spaces is key to allowing people to work where they live but in many villages there is a lack of good broadband or phone signal – was that considered in the report?

Connectivity is mentioned in the report but I'm not sure what the latest is on improving it in villages, though there are certainly projects underway to do so – we can seek an update.

Does this report represent good value for money? Would you use Arup again?

In terms of value for money, we went through a tender process but it's hard to answer categorically. Possibly we would do the same again, we had done a lot of work with Arup in recent years, but there's no specific allegiance there. This process included the development of the online consultation event, putting together virtual rooms etc. – perhaps in the future, given our recent experience, we might do more of this in-house.

Where is the sense of prioritisation, where funding is available? Is there buy-in from neighbouring authorities? The sustainable travel measures aren't addressing the behavioural aspect – what else can we do to win support and change behaviours?

A pragmatic approach will be needed: priorities will probably be decided by which funding becomes available. Having a plan puts the area in a better place should opportunities to bid for funding present themselves. Wye Valley AONB has been a lucrative partner because they have been able to raise funds. A lot will rely on the delivery group to work with the projects and officers to look at what funding might become available, what could the County Council and/or Community Councils generate, and what might come through the WV AONB. To keep life in the report, things will need to keep moving, press releases about successes and future goals will be need to be issued about what is being delivered and next steps/ambitions e.g. speed limits coming in, gateway features such as signage, though, yes, this might not be sufficient to change behaviour completely, but it should have some effect.

In terms of buy-in, Gloucestershire and Forest of Dean are aware of this report. The WV AONB will take the report to its committee for adoption as well, which will give us an in-road to those other authorities.

How might we manage expectations in the communities?

One way would be by keeping the public aware through the media and press releases about what is happening and what comes next – headlines about visible things that people are going to see changing.

Can we continue virtual rooms etc. in order to update residents and keep them informed?

That process was used for the Chepstow Transport study, receiving 6000 hits and 330 responses, and gives demographic information too (if the public chooses to provide it), which was mixed. The same was used for the WV AONB consultation event, registering around 2500 hits – though hits doesn't mean responses. For the first, 330 responses from 6000 hits might not sound like very many but that number of responses to any other consultation would be very good. But there is a piece of work to be done to mix the online with more traditional consultation methods. Online worked very well as an alternative during the pandemic.

It's a concern that the Chepstow Transport Hub consultation period is only 4 weeks, considering that community councils only meet monthly.

Ideally, the consultation period would have been 6 weeks but in this case a compromise was needed.

In terms of trying to reach all possible public members, the Arup study was a virtual room but the whole document couldn't be seen – the full consultation document as a pdf and a word document for a non-virtual response should be on the website. Could those changes be made on this study or in the future?

Regarding the Transport Hub consultation, the press release contained the telephone number for people to contact if they wanted a hard copy, and it should have been on the front page of our website – we will check that. We posted out a lot of hard copy documents for the Chepstow Transport Stage 2, so we didn't have that criticism. The

text is on the website for requesting hard copies of the Chepstow Transport Hub document. Looking forward, online – with virtual rooms – appeals to some people, possibly bringing in some who otherwise might not get involved. But hard copies and face-to-face should still be part of it, so it will be a mix. We have seen what can be achieved with the technology because of Covid, but it shouldn't be the be-all and end-all.

Why is Whitebrook missing from the report, and what about Llanishen? Areas seen from within the AONB should be counted as part of it e.g. Llanishen, Llansoy and the valley down from Devauden.

There was a debate about which villages to include in the study – Whitebrook was missed out but it is a live document and might well be revisited to include other villages and areas. The extent of the study was the boundary of the AONB; Llansoy was outside this but Llanishen is in as part of Trellech United.

The re-opening of railway tracks e.g. the tunnel from Tintern to Chepstow: there is a long tunnel from Whitebrook to Redbrook in which there are areas where the surface could be improved, to increase the number of people using it.

Railway tracks and improving cycle tracks could be a useful vehicle for this group to take forwards, as extending the existing tracks is already being discussed. If this group takes that on or acts as a lobbying group for it is something that can be worked out as we move forward – it isn't part of the plan currently, but can be included as it is updated.

How can we bring farmers on board? Is there more information about phosphates etc. and how to involve farmers?

Rivers and contamination fall outside this group as things stand. Regarding farmers, the idea was to look for pilots to try new methods that might work e.g. land use change, reduction in fertiliser. It's a matter of finding those opportunities and testing them. It's a case of working with individual farmers and the NFU or FUW.

How will the older generation in these areas – a large demographic – learn about the consultation, if they don't like using the internet?

The consultation was advertised in the press, that a hard copy was available, but it's a fair point about consulting more extensively in the future, as discussed already – there's certainly work to be done there.

What about the awareness of loneliness and well-being for those people to be able to interact with others, ensuring that they are using their village hall hubs?

The use of village halls as hubs, whether for co-working or community use, and exploiting them more than they are currently, is something for which Wye Valley has hopefully generated funding – a bid for grant funding has been made – at which point there is an officer available to work with the village halls to see what their future might look like.

The report is very welcome but raises a lot of extra questions about the ageing demographics of the communities, their quality of life, and travel between the villages. How will these points be addressed?

We aren't able to answer some of those points here. This is feedback that could go to Cabinet: the committee could ask for the role of the group and extent of the report to be extended, in order to address these points. This could then go back to the Community Councils for them to sign on to – in this way the group could be used to address these concerns of rurality, even though that wasn't the original remit.

In the AONB, the elephant in the room is its heavily polluted river. Will it have an effect on tourism and other aspects covered by this report? The Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Environment is in contact with neighbouring authorities already – should this go to Cabinet with an extra request that it's knitted in, where possible, with the other work in Cabinet regarding the rivers?

Yes, we are aware of conversations taking place with Cabinet Members about the effect of the contamination of rivers, which is a widespread issue beyond just the remit of the group being considered.

Chair's Summary:

The Committee endorsed the Wye Valley Villages Future Plan and was content that it be taken to Cabinet, but with the recommendation that the plan is aligned to other workstreams being undertaken on phosphates and river pollution i.e. that both groups work together to align their work. The committee also agreed they would like to table the report on Rivers and Ocean that is due to be considered by Council on the 22nd September to the Place Scrutiny Committee on the 15th September, to conduct pre-decision scrutiny.

7. Pre-decision Scrutiny of the Regeneration Funding and Delivery Plan 2022-2025 (prior to going to Cabinet on 27th July 2022)

Mark Hand and Daniel Fordham presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Why is Chepstow not mentioned in the first recommendation, when it's listed in Appendix B?

The first recommendation doesn't include Chepstow as it was agreed last year, with the work already underway and its completion assumed. The second recommendation concerns pausing on a decision about strategic projects until we know a decision on funding in the Autumn. The third recommendation is to endorse the list at Appendix B, which includes those projects in Chepstow.

What does 'Chepstow Shopfront enveloping' mean? Are there grants for improving shopfronts or things like repairing the clock on the Herbert Lewis building? What has happened with the planning application for that building?

Welsh Government recently published its revised framework for the Transforming Towns Placemaking Grant for the next three years. A broad range of projects are covered, including grants for commercial properties and potential private refurbishment of them, grants for relatively small public realm schemes, potential for funding green infrastructure projects, town centre-focussed connectivity projects, and others. Our projects in this list are equally broad, reflecting this.

Regarding enveloping, over the last 2-3 years we have delivered funding for a programme of shop fronts in Caldicot; there are 3 or 4 completed projects to improve commercial buildings, with 2-3 more potential grants lined up for this year. This proposal is to roll out that grants approach to rundown commercial buildings in town centres to Abergavenny, Monmouth and Chepstow. Generating take-up is challenging so the amounts being sought are relatively low. There aren't specific projects relating to empty properties currently listed in the Placemaking grants proposals, though it is on our radar to perhaps tackle through other mechanisms. Last year we brought empty properties back into 'meanwhile' use – that would be an option again, or there are options here for longer use. For example, in Caldicot, there is a project to bring back into use a long-term empty property in the 7-43 Newport Road building, as part of the Levelling Up fund proposals.

Are we looking to go out to new members about properties that they are concerned about?

Not specifically. There are annual surveys on vacant retail units and the Chambers of Commerce provide us with regular information. We held a series of quarterly meetings with Chamber and Town Council reps during Covid which we would like to resurrect: this is a space where members can tell us about things that are happening and issues in their towns.

Chair's Summary:

The recommendations were agreed.

8. Petitions Received - to recommend actions to the Cabinet

The petitions were presented. Following a discussion, it was agreed that the committee will refer the petitions to the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer but request written feedback to the Place Scrutiny Committee on the actions that will be taken to address the issues raised in the petitions and how the community and petitioners will be updated on those actions.

9. To confirm the following minutes:

Economy and Development Select Committee - 3rd February 2022

Economy & Development was tabled but none of today's members were present. Proposed as an accurate record by Councillor Davies, seconded by Councillor Lucas.

Strong Communities Select Committee - 10th March 2022

Strong Communities was proposed by Councillor Dymock, seconded by Councillor Lucas.

10. Next Meeting

Thursday 15th September 2022.

The time of the next meeting will change to 12.30, with a 12:00 pre-meeting.

The meeting ended at 12.07 pm.