

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 28th February, 2023 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Sue Riley (Chairman)
County Councillor John Crook, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Rachel Buckler,
Christopher Edwards, Jayne McKenna,
Maureen Powell, Maria Stevens and
Jackie Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Rebecca Creswell, Homeless Project Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillor David Jones

5. Declarations of Interest

None.

6. Public Open Forum

No submissions were received.

7. Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan

The Housing Team presented their 5-year plan to prevent homelessness, increase accommodation and provide focussed support to people. Officers gave a presentation which provided detailed explanation of how the team plan to deliver the plan.

Challenge:

In your presentation, there seemed to be reference to an increase in the number of homeless males. Is this trend related to a particular age group?

Housing Team: We are seeing generally younger single men who aren't necessarily working, but there are mixed reasons why people enter the system. The legalisation changed during pandemic requiring us to house everybody, so this is the reason for the increase in single males now being accommodated, alongside everyone else under public health responsibilities.

I notice that you referred to a client centred approach, but I can't see any consultation having taken place with service users, which should be the central part of any plan. Please

can you explain how we anticipate service users' views will influence the plan and whether any of this data will be included prior to Cabinet adopting the plan?

Housing Team: The reason client views weren't part of the drafting was due to some staff sickness. We have done previous client surveys on the application process and accommodation needs, so we did have some views to base the plan on. We may not have enough to factor in ahead of Cabinet but it's very much a live document. We are currently undertaking a review of service users, so we will be using that information and we actually have found benefits of doing it this way as we are asking better questions of service users and therefore the input they will have will be more useful going forward.

I didn't see a great emphasis on empty homes in the report. I take on board that solving homelessness is a bigger issue than simply housing stock, but what are we doing to encourage bringing empty homes back into housing stock? Are there grants to encourage them, given that the average house price is £352k in Monmouthshire?

Housing Team: This is a point well made. There is empty homes activity undertaken bi-annually where we contact owners of empty properties, but we are also as part of our staffing restructure moving empty homes into the Monmouthshire Lettings Team and we are looking to bring in another Senior Accommodation Officer which will give it additional resource. We have loans that people can apply for up to £25k if they sign up to a long lease and there is a new recently established national empty homes scheme administered by Rhondda Cynon Taff Council on behalf of Welsh Government, with a £25k grant available. Recently established and we have received 2 applications already. You may also be aware that the Council is considering the empty homes tax premium. There are a lot of empty properties, but the vast majority are in good condition and are not a problem in the community and are delayed due to probate and other legitimate reasons.

Cabinet Member for Housing: The administration is putting in more resource and attention to empty homes through the proposed increased council tax on second homes, using the powers that the Council has to compulsory purchase properties if all else fails.

Have the figures changed significantly since the report was drafted and are trends changing? Just in the last few months, we have seen such a changing dynamic with increased energy prices, the cost of living and food prices due to global events, so have these figures been stress-tested and do they take into account changing trends over the last 12 months?

There are some unknowns with the current position over the longer term. The number of people coming through our door hasn't significantly changed since before the pandemic, but the main change is the number of people who are needing accommodation, so we are bracing ourselves for the impact of the cost of living, such as rent arrears, mortgage areas due to increased inflation. That said, we are better resourced as a team than previously and will have a First Contact Officer who will receive applications coming through, freeing up the Housing Options Officers to do the higher value prevention work and also we have a Homelessness Prevention Officers whose role it is to get out and about and help people look for accommodation, so we are as well-placed as we could be. The figures for the first months of 2023 to today are 154 presentations, with 141 presenting in the same period in 2022 and 148 pre-covid during the same timeframe, so there is a slight increase, but it is fairly stable. It's more that the demographic of the people coming through and the urgency of the homelessness need that has changed, with more families presenting due to landlords selling up and moving back into their properties and larger families coming through the system with 5 or 6 children, which a newer dynamic, and also single males. In terms of whether we have stress tested the figures, we have a Welsh Government tool that enables us to enter our demand, the resources we have available and this helps us anticipate projections and this helps us plan more effectively.

There are naturally cost implications to the council as part of the Council's new responsibilities around preventing homelessness and you have touched on recently recruited staff. Please can you expand on that, so residents understand the implications for Council tax. In addition, as the figures provided in the plan are retrospective, it would be helpful to understand the current position.

I can circulate a staff structure highlighting the new posts following the meeting together with what is funded directly and also via Welsh Government. **(Action: Ian Bakewell).**

Are caravans considered housing stock and are subject to Council tax?

We are not allowed to use caravans for housing homeless people as the area size isn't considered big enough by Welsh Government. Shared accommodation such as night shelters is also not permissible.

How many empty houses are there in Monmouthshire, given that not all of these will be available for housing people, as homes may be empty for various reasons.

I believe the figure is around 400 but I can confirm this following the meeting (**Action: Ian Bakewell**). Whether it makes a difference bringing empty properties back into use for housing homeless people is interesting because in the case of most empty properties, the owners move back in, so the impact is probably limited.

To enable private housing to be brought back into use to meet the letting requirements of Welsh Government, there may be enormous cost involved for older housing stock. What help is available for improving houses to meet the necessary requirements?

We have packages now to help people if there are instances of disrepair in properties, but our Monmouthshire Lettings Service is the key support for landlords and we offer a range of support to both prospective tenants and landlords under this service and are always keen to seek more private landlords to join the service with dedicated staff.

Have there been negative attitudes from the public to homeless people being housed, given the high numbers of people waiting on the housing list for social housing?

This is highly relevant, as social housing needs are high, with several thousands of people on the waiting list for social housing, so it is difficult. We are very mindful that our own housing stock doesn't impact on the community so we are very careful about how we place people and how we manage any situations that may occur and we do sometimes have these problems. The housing of single males is not a case of prioritising single males over other groups of people, but prior to the pandemic, they weren't included in the duty to house, so that's the key change. Negativity from the public tends to occur with the use of direct lets, where an empty property has not been listed on the Homesearch, so we have included a section on the website to explain the use of direct lets.

How does prevention work? How do you approach the underlying reasons why people become homeless?

We have a Housing Support Service that works with people who are struggling within their tenancies, whether they are in rent arrears, are in private rented housing or are in mortgage arrears. We also commission third sector organisations to work with people, such as POBL, MIND, LLMAE, to try to prevent people becoming homeless. As a Council, we have a statutory duty to prevent homelessness within 56 days, but we work with people who are several months in advance of them anticipating becoming homeless. We can assist in various ways through numerous packages, such as maybe negotiating rent changes with landlords, financial packages for people who may be able to move into the private rented sector by providing a rent guarantee, assisting via bonds, or

providing extended rent in advance. For younger people, if the best option is for the young person to remain at home, we provide a family mediation service and ongoing support. So we have quite a proactive and innovative prevention team with excellent negotiation skills which helps negotiate with landlords to help people remain in a property until they can access social housing and Welsh Government help has assisted us greatly in doing that.

I notice there's no Caldicot housing stock on page 19 in the report, but they may have been covered as Severnside? I'd like to know a bit more about Housing of Multiple Occupation (HMO's) in Caldicot and Monmouthshire as a whole.

There is stock in Caldicot but it must be covered under Severnside, so we'll alter that.

(Action: Ian Bakewell). HMO's are an important part of our provision with approximately 90 units, so if we didn't have those, it would be a major loss of provision, but we accept there are more management challenges with HMO's, but we have had HMO's for about 7 years and are fairly experienced at managing them. We buy into Welsh Government's ideal portfolio of self-contained accommodation, rather than HMO's, but in the short to medium term, we need to continue with them. Some of the HMO'S we took on in the early days we would like to change/improve and do things differently but at the moment, the reliance on B&B means we are not able to do this.

Cabinet Member for Housing: We need to be mindful of national government welfare benefits via the Department for Work and Pensions, because these have not increased in line with the housing market, so even for the most modest house, the amount that can be claimed from the Department for Work and Pensions is much lower than is required for Welsh Government's ideal housing option.

I have several points to mention as opposed to questions, but in the Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA), one of the cohorts mentioned in the report are ex-armed forces, so please can that be included in the IIA **(Action: Ian Bakewell)**. The Monmouthshire Lettings Service needs to be visible, but please can this be done in a sensitive way to avoid any stigmatisation.

I welcome the expansion of your team. Are they patch based or across Monmouthshire?

It's a bit of a mixture, the majority being in the accommodation sector, so some staff spend time in the B&B's where we didn't have a presence previously. As we have people coming through on a daily basis, we have two members of staff who provide an accommodation duty role, an increase from one, because it's a very difficult and intense role. The Housing Options Officer Team previously had around 30 cases each but now

have around 150 following the new duty and cases are quite time consuming as people are not moving on from the temporary accommodation, so we are bringing in a Senior Options Officer to support them.

Have you had feedback from the people who have moved on?

We do hold some events and we'd like to do more of this if we have the time as it's something we did before the pandemic when we had lower numbers. But when new staff are in place, it will be part of everyone's role.

Are the hubs instrumental in picking up homelessness from a preventative point of view and do you work closely with them?

We remodelled the team's delivery a few years prior to the pandemic, so contact for homelessness has become largely over the phone, but they are assisted in the hubs too and passed on to the Housing Team. So it can act as a point of contact, but the First Contact Officer role should free up the Housing Options Officers to go out and about more and meet people face to face, not just by the telephone.

We seem to be providing high quality properties, but could we progress quicker with maybe a lower standard that still meets requirements?

What we need to do is agree a standard of homelessness accommodation and it's something we haven't been able to do as yet, but it is important we agree an appropriate standard for Monmouthshire for consistency. We need to think about mobility standards, durability but also something someone can class as a home.

Given the demography of the people presenting, what are the implications for Monmouthshire residents of not supporting people?

Well you would be setting people up to fail and we wouldn't be meeting our responsibilities and the expectations of Welsh Government. The legislation underpins what we need to do and the older legislative requirements led us to question decisions around the service we were providing, so it has come on leaps and bounds since the pandemic. We previously met our duty but we didn't offer people second, third and fourth chances and it is completely different and we feel is a much more enhanced service to avoid rough sleeping and evictions.

Is 'intentionally homeless' still a consideration?

We do have people in accommodation who would be still classed as being intentionally homeless and that may affect their banding or position within Homesearch, but we still have to view them as a priority, recognising their needs are complex.

Are there any local authorities who are considered as best practice?

Scotland was referred to in the report as Welsh Government applied the Scottish approach to rapid rehousing. Whilst rapid rehousing came in first in Scotland, with some of our practices that have been in place over recent years, I feel they lag a little behind. We have similar staffing structures and officers liaise with each other regularly.

How do we compare with other Gwent Councils in terms of key indicators?

We have a lot of similarities with the issues others are facing. Others are struggling with the use of B&B accommodation, also, phosphate issues are a common. I feel we are more disadvantaged when it comes to the private rented sector, as rents in the county are very high. It's very difficult to make provision we provide subtle with our communities and towns being so small.

Are Ukrainians included within the figures?

Ukrainians can present as homeless and are included in the figures and we currently have 11 households presenting as homeless.

Are there any plans to establish hostels, or plans to use empty pubs, halls etc?

There are no plans to create any hostels. The focus is on supported housing schemes and we do see HMO's as being part of the landscape, but we don't class them as hostels and we try to acquire smaller ones. If there are buildings out there that can be repurposed, nothing is off the table in terms of repurposing them and we have regular discussions with the estates team.

Chairs Summary:

We've undertaken thorough scrutiny today and there's clearly support from the Committee for the scheme. We would like to request you return in 9 months' time, and perhaps you may be able to discuss the homeless accommodation standards with us at that time.

8. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

The work programme and amendments were noted.

9. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

The planner was noted.

10. To confirm the minutes of the following meetings:

The minutes of the meetings held on the following dates were approved as an accurate record:

- 15th November 2022
- 3rd January 2023 – Special Meeting

- 26th January 2023 – Special Meeting

11. Next Meeting: 18th April 2023

The date and time of the next meeting was noted.

The meeting ended at **12.01 pm**