

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Tuesday, 16th April, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor John Crook (Chairman)

County Councillors: Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Maria Stevens, Jackie Strong and Ann Webb (substituting for Christopher Edwards).

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Sally Meyrick, Strategy & Policy Affordable Housing Officer
Clare Hamer, Strategy & Sustainable Living Manager
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Helen Horton, Senior Accommodation Development Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Fay Bromfield, Christopher Edwards and Simon Howarth

1. Declarations of Interest.

None.

2. Public Open Forum.

None.

3. Empty Homes Update - Scrutiny of the Council's progress on bringing empty properties back into use.

Ian Bakewell introduced the report about the background, progress, challenges and achievements of the project and the future plans, answering members' questions with Clare Hamer and Helen Norton.

Key points from members:

- Members asked what the empty homes project was and were advised it's an initiative by the Council to reduce the number of recorded empty homes in Monmouthshire, through more contact and engagement with the owners, and offering them grants and loans to bring their properties back into use.
- Members queried how many empty homes there were at the start and end of the year, officers advising that there were 541 empty homes at the start of the year and 366 at the end of the year.
- The challenges and opportunities of the project were questioned and Members heard that these are the variety of reasons and circumstances behind the empty homes, the availability of grants and loans to support the owners, and the potential for the homes to be used for social housing or private sector.

- Members asked about the next steps and future plans of the project and the officers advised that these involve continuing the supportive and helpful approach, but also considering more formal enforcement actions for some problematic properties, in collaboration with other departments.
- The criteria and conditions for the empty homes grant were discussed, the committee hearing that the empty homes grant is a grant of up to £25,000 for owners of properties that have been empty for more than 12 months and unfurnished. Owners must live in the property for five years after the completion of the works.
- The promotion of empty homes loans and grants was discussed, officers explaining that loans and grants are promoted mainly through social media, website, and literature that can be sent to town and community councils. Members requested this information to distribute within their own communities. **ACTION: Officers to provide us with the relevant information on empty homes loans and grants.**
- The Committee discussed the challenges of identifying and engaging with trusts and estates that have empty properties, particularly if they aren't registered individually for Council tax and therefore may not be on the list that Council tax provides.
- The teams' enforcement powers for problematic empty properties were questioned, Members hearing that they can include compulsory purchase orders, enforced sales, empty dwelling management orders, and improvement notices, accepting that the scope and feasibility of using these powers need to be discussed with other departments and legal services.
- A Member asked about the possibility of addressing under occupation in rented accommodation, officers explaining that this wasn't part of the empty homes work, but that housing associations would periodically review their stock and encourage tenants to downsize if appropriate.
- Another Member asked about the outcomes and effectiveness of the empty homes project and how many properties have been brought back into use. Officers responded, explaining that they didn't track the properties that have been privately rented, but that they had seen an increase in the uptake of loans and grants and a reduction in the number of empty homes.
- A Member queried a potential situation where a property may be empty, but furnished, however, officers advised that this wouldn't be classed as empty, but that they could still investigate if there was evidence of long-term vacancy and potential for grant application.

Action Items:

- Empty homes loans and grants: Officers to contact town and community councils and make them aware of the availability of the loans and grants.
- Enforcement powers: Discuss with building control, environmental health, planning and legal services the scope and feasibility of using enforcement powers for problematic empty properties.

- Trusts and estates: Officers explore how to identify and engage with trusts and estates that have empty properties that are not registered individually for Council tax.

Chair's Summary:

The report has been scrutinised by the People Scrutiny Committee who have asked questions around the nature of the empty homes project, how it works, how many empty homes we had at the start of the year and year end, the challenges and opportunities of the project, the future plans and next stages. Members also asked about the criteria and conditions for empty homes grants and requested as an action that the officer contacts town and community councils and make them aware of the availability of the loans and grants. The Committee discussed how empty homes loans and grants are promoted and talked about enforcement powers, asking officers to progress discussions with building control, environmental health, planning and legal services the scope and feasibility of using enforcement powers for problematic empty properties. Finally, Members discussed trusts and estates and how the Council can explore how to identify and engage with trusts and estates that have empty properties that are not registered individually for Council tax. The Committee was supportive of option 1 being continued and would like to be kept updated on progress in due course.

4. Local Housing Market Assessment - Scrutiny of the local housing market position.

Sally Meyrick introduced the report on LHMA refresh 2022-2037, delivering a presentation, before answering Members' questions. She explained that the LHMA provides an estimation of affordable housing need by area and tenure, using Welsh Government guidance and tool. The report is estimating a need for 499 additional affordable homes per year for the first five years, and 90 per year for the remaining 10 years, mainly as social rented accommodation. It estimated a need for 126 market homes per year, 86 as private rent and 41 as owner occupier. The LHMA also identified a range of specialist and supported housing needs for various groups, such as homeless people, older people, people with mental health needs, and children and young people. She advised that the LHMA provided an overview of the housing market in Monmouthshire, which has high property prices and low affordability levels compared to the Welsh average. Members heard that the LHMA is an important evidence base for informing housing strategies, local development plans, social housing grant allocation, and negotiations with developers.

Key points from members:

- Members asked why Usk and Raglan are included in the Chepstow housing market area? Officers explained that the housing market areas are based on statistical travel to work areas from the census data, and that is the guidance from Welsh Government.
- Members asked how the cost-of-living crisis has affected the number of homeowners in Monmouthshire and whether it has affected the affordability and availability of housing for different income groups. The Committee heard

that there are more people needing rented accommodation than home ownership and that the team used to provide more support to people to access home ownership, but that has decreased significantly.

- Members queried the definition and tenure of affordable housing and were advised that affordable housing is housing where there are secure mechanisms to ensure that it is accessible to those who can't afford market housing, and that there are different tenures of affordable housing, such as social rent, intermediate rent, and low-cost home ownership.
- The Committee highlighted the inclusion of Usk and Raglan in the Chepstow housing market area, may potentially disadvantage those wards, due to the different needs and affiliations of those areas.
- Members questioned the methodology and data sources of the LHMA, officers explaining that they needed to follow Welsh Government guidance and that it involved using various sets of data such as the housing waiting list, homelessness presentations, household projections, and private rent figures.
- Members discussed the need for specific and supported housing for various groups, such as homeless people, older people, people with mental health needs, and children and young people, and they were advised that the LHMA had taken this into consideration, as it is based on existing plans and strategies as well as the housing register data.

Chair's Summary:

The report has been scrutinised by the People Scrutiny Committee, members discussing the LHMA methodology, the definition and tenures of affordable housing, the income thresholds and affordability levels, the housing market areas, the census data, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the number of homeowners in Monmouthshire. Members queried the data sources, highlighting that the inclusion of Usk and Raglan in the Chepstow housing market area, may be disadvantaging those wards due to the different needs and affiliations of those areas. Members supported the need for specific and supported housing for various groups, such as homeless people, older people, people with mental health needs, and children and young people. The Committee felt that as the county has an ageing population, officers should consider exploring other methods such as the housing register to give a more accurate picture. The Committee asked that officers challenge Welsh Government on the applicability of the statistical travel to work areas census data for determining the housing market areas in Monmouthshire. The recommendations were agreed.

5. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

The forward work programme was agreed, with the addition of a request from officers to consider care leavers report.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

The planner was noted.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting held on 5th March 2024.

The minutes were confirmed.

8. Next Meeting: Tuesday 11th June 2024 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.30 am**