

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 30th January, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)
County Councillor Laura Wright, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Alistair Neill, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Meirion Howells, Rachel Buckler, Catherine Fookes, Laura Wright, Mary Ann Brocklesby, Fay Bromfield, Ben Callard, Ian Chandler, Simon Howarth and Sue Riley

Also in attendance County Councillors: Mary Ann Brocklesby, Leader, Fay Bromfield substituting for Ann Webb, Ben Callard, Cabinet Member for Resources, Ian Chandler, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Accessible Health Services, Simon Howarth and Sue Riley

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Ian Saunders, Chief Officer Customer, Culture and Wellbeing.
Hannah Carter, Performance Analyst
James Williams, Chief Officer Law & Governance
Stacey Jones, Senior Accountant
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Ann Webb, and Cabinet Member Martyn Groucott.

1. Declarations of Interest

The Chair declared a non-prejudicial interest as chair of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee for the Education Achievement Service.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Scrutiny of the Budget Proposals

Cabinet Member Ben Callard delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Peter Davies, Cabinet Member Ian Chandler, Jane Rodgers, Tyrone Stokes, Frances O'Brien, Will Mclean, Ian Saunders, Jonathan Davies and Matthew Gatehouse.

Key Questions from Members:

- What are the connotations of using £2.8m of capital receipts to cover revenue costs?
- How have the lower than average Welsh Government settlement and the uncertain nature of grants been factored into the proposals?
- Business rate relief reduction is very important for town centres: will we have less footfall and reduced income if there are fewer businesses? How is that addressed in the budget?
- Does £2.8m of capital receipts being used mean there will be a shortfall in the capital budget, and we have less expenditure for which that capital would otherwise be used or will it increase our borrowing?
- Regarding the shortfall from the Welsh average settlement, a difference of 0.8% equates to around £600k?
- For clarity, anything coming out of an award to England would flow naturally into a split across all authorities, and wouldn't require lobbying?
- Is the plan to reduce borrowing costs by £1.8m compatible with taking out capital receipts?
- Savings being asked of the Social Care Directorate are a concern – how they are expected to do more with less?
- Will there be costs associated with making transitional changes?
- There are concerns about the assumption that the cap on non-residential care in the community will be lifted. What is the potential impact if the £570k savings are not realised?
- What will be the impact of the social services workforce grant and realignment of vacancies on the frontline workforce?
- Social Care: how does our meeting statutory requirements marry with there being 853 hours of unmet need? What effect will these savings have on those hours of unmet need?
- For complete clarity, there is no assessed need not met for any individual, it's sometimes delayed 853 hours, and therefore we're meeting our statutory obligations?
- What reassurance can be given about savings when the most recent indication showed an increase in the forecast overspend from the previous month?
- Under 5.8, waste collections remain the same but given that there are fortnightly black bag collections, have we examined the case for fortnightly collections for the other bags?
- Slide 3 of the presentation, is the difference between the figures for the cost pressures a rounding error?
- Regarding the reduction in Gwent Music funding, have the implications been considered given the strong correlation between learning music and learning in other subjects?
- Could Gwent music be helped in other ways, such as a reduction in hiring rooms in schools?
- Museums and Tintern Station one-day closure – will that lead to confusion to visitors? Will it be monitored in some way?
- Opening on bank holidays – what about school holidays e.g. the Easter and summer holiday?
- Do reduced hours at Tintern and leisure centres take us to a position that will reduce footfall following the confusion, then next year we will see reduced revenue leading to reducing the hours further? Where do we go looking out further than one year?
- Regarding Gwent Music, do we have information from other councils about the impact on the take-up of music? How much will lesson costs go up?
- How many pupils do we estimate will be able to benefit from the hardship fund, and how will they apply?

- Are there any figures on how many users access leisure centres in the last hour/half hour?
- What is being done to closely track the cost of consultants and professional fees? How closely monitored are they? Is there potential for savings?
- Is there a possibility of using alternative approaches e.g. Monlife is using internal resource to project manage some of their schemes, saving money and developing people?
- Are we fully considering the resource that we have left? There are concerns about the stress and pressure on those remaining staff taking on more responsibility and wider roles.
- Cutting the budget in real terms last year, this year and next year – where does that take us after three years? Is a more substantial rethink needed of how we deliver our services in the future? Does it not require a Transformation Plan for the next three years?
- It would be good to see when and how we will learn about the effects of these cuts e.g. what will the reduced social care support mean for families who have someone who needs social care? What will be the impact beyond just the numbers?
- Last year, £3.5m was taken from reserves, with a further £2.6m this year and now there's no further scope to take from reserves. If that money is used up what fund will be drawn on to make the significant changes that are needed? Would a Change Programme Board be needed to drive all of this?

Chair's Summary:

We all understand that this is a very difficult period and that a lot of work is going into this. The committee thanks everyone, not just here but behind the scenes, for doing their best in this situation. The questions we've asked are to try to see if there is a better or different way of doing things and to understand what the consequences are.

The recommendations were approved and the report moved.

4. Community & Corporate Plan Q2 Update

Leader Mary Ann Brocklesby introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Will Mclean and Matthew Gatehouse.

Key Questions from Members:

- Are more pupils from deprived families being encouraged to take up universal free school meals? Is the council subsidising families with better incomes?
- How do we prioritise the needs of those children not in school? What support is being provided to children who have dropped out of formal education due to anxiety and mental ill health? Do we have a comprehensive suite of datasets for those pupils before dropping out of formal education setting?
- For clarity, the report identifies the latest position of secondary schools is 1 in 10 pupils not attending? For FSM pupils it's 1 in 5?
- The committee would like to remind pupils, parents and guardians that the best place for children is at school.
- Other than food schemes and community fridges what else is being done to tackle inequalities in our communities? Are you expecting the budget proposals to exacerbate inequalities?
- Are we signposting residents to services or resources to help them back into work?
- What is being done to help homeless people to live independently e.g. return to education or employment?

- Is it correct that children from age 5-11 are being given the same sized portions at lunch, are not allowed seconds if they are still hungry, but at the end of lunch leftovers are thrown away?
- There are concerns about the impact of placemaking plans on small businesses in Monmouth, particularly in relation to active travel routes, parking costs, and lower footfall. How does the council plan to address these issues? – **ACTION (written response about plans to address concerns in Monmouth)**
- Isolation in rural areas, and the stress and poverty faced by rural dwellers, particularly in relation to increased costs and poor incomes, is a big concern. Can we see something in the Community & Corporate Plan to help to reach these people?
- How does MCC compare to other authorities across Wales in terms of reporting outcomes and budget impacts?
- Some pupils are not choosing to have school meals – does that mean they aren't having anything? Do we know what they're having, and should we enlist supervisors?
- When will the completed VAWDASV strategy be shared with members, and how?
- With reference to active travel funds for quick and effective changes, how easy is it to get small projects done such as pavement repairs and dropped curbs?
- How far are we able to influence Aneurin Bevan Health Board on partnership issues?
- Is any work being done with schools to make them more sustainable, e.g. installing solar panels, future-proofing them on their energy costs?
- Regarding the Benthgy cafes, is there a risk of volunteer burnout? Will recruitment of secondary economy project officers come through the shared prosperity fund, how is that progressing, and how long will they be in post for?
- On page 20, why is there no target for 23/24 for the number of affordable homes granted planning permission in year? – **ACTION (provide written response with details)**
- Given that the proposed council tax increases are 3 times the forecast inflation rate for 24/25, can we afford this plan?
- Do you think residents, service users and businesses would agree with us scoring our assessments? Could we not hand over scoring to them?

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Leader and officers for this report. A lot of work goes into the daily activities of the Council and the committee celebrates improvements where they have been made, and congratulates the employees who have achieved them. The report was moved.

5. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Forward Work Programme and Action List

Councillor Strong requested that a date be sought for scrutinising the recruitment and retention of Social Care workers – **ACTION**

Members will be emailed with proposed changes to meeting dates in March and June.

6. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

7. To confirm the minutes of the meetings held on:

- 22nd November 2023
- 15th January 2024 (Special)

The minutes were confirmed, proposed by Councillor Strong and seconded by Councillor Howells.

8. Next Meeting: 20th February 2024

The meeting ended at **12.53 pm**