

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Thursday, 6th February, 2025 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jane Lucas (Chair)
County Councillors: Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, Tomos Davies, Lisa Dymock, Jackie Strong, Laura Wright, Tudor Thomas, John Crook

Also in attendance County Councillors:

Sara Burch and Ben Callard

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Acting Chief Executive
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Craig O'Connor, Chief Officer, Place
Deb Hill-Howells, Head of Decarbonisation, Transport and Support Services
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager
Stacey Jones, Senior Accountant
Dave Loder, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: None

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

Two members of the public spoke on the matter of the petition. They suggested the implementation of a visible crossing, in black or white, to ensure it is noticeable from both the pavement and the road. They highlighted issues with the current crossing near the Caldicot building, including cars not stopping and the bus stop creating a blind spot, and mentioned that the grey zebra crossing is not well distinguished, especially for out-of-towners, and that the road appears to be at the same level as the pavement, leading to confusion. They suggested the need for a brighter zebra crossing and double yellow lines to improve safety.

3. Petition: 'Design over Health and Safety?' petition, relating to the safety of the zebra crossing on Sandy Lane adjacent to The Cross public house, Caldicot - To agree whether to refer to the Executive or full Council for action.

Councillor Jackie Strong introduced the petition, highlighting the safety concerns of the Zebra crossing on Sandy Lane, emphasising the poor visibility of the crossing and the disregard for the no-parking zone. She noted that the damaged beacon has been repaired and described the issues with vehicles parking in non-parking areas and the need for better enforcement. She suggested that the design of the crossing could potentially cause accidents and called for urgent action to address these issues. She

proposed that the council should review and publish the results of any safety reviews and carry out an urgent review of the crossing, and report back to the scrutiny committee with more information.

Cabinet Member Sara Burch acknowledged the concerns raised and apologised for the delay in addressing them, noting that the issues have been raised over time. She mentioned that a review of the original road safety audits from 2020 and 2023 is underway, with a plan to update the audit and consider technical feasibility of suggested changes, and informed that a group of officers walked the route to observe the issues firsthand. A task and finish group has been convened to address the suggestions made by residents and councillors. She is committed to bringing back a detailed action plan and implementing necessary safety measures as a matter of urgency, and emphasised the importance of involving residents in the design of future schemes to ensure their needs are met.

The committee's decision was to refer to the Cabinet Member to respond on progress = **ACTION**

4. Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals - To scrutinise the 2025/26 Draft Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals.

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report, delivered the presentation, and answered the members' questions with Deb Hill-Howells, Jonathan Davies and Cabinet Member Sara Burch.

- *Considering the council is implementing service savings, could some be put towards keeping Together Works in Caldicot open?* The Cabinet Member acknowledged the value of Together Works and its funding through the Shared Prosperity Fund, which is outside the council's direct control. He explained that despite the service savings, the council still faces a budget gap of £3 million, making it difficult to allocate additional funds to Together Works. The council is, however, exploring grant funding options to support Together Works.
- *The proposals regarding Old Tintern Station are very disappointing – many residents will be concerned about the prospect of it being sold.* The Cabinet Member clarified that there is no current proposal to close Old Tintern Station. He emphasised the intention to explore different stewardship options, including the possibility of the site being more successful under private sector management. He stressed the importance of balancing the roles of the local authority and the private sector in operating tourist attractions in Monmouthshire.
- *The Solar Farm's £50k losses are a concern. Can the grid outage be explained?* The Cabinet Member explained that grid outages occur when the National Grid has a glut of energy and needs to balance inputs and outputs to maintain frequency. This can result in the solar farm being turned off, leading to losses.
- *What is the proportion of roads categorised as black and red? How many are considered for maintenance? Is there the same category for pavements?* Funding for the resurfacing of the Wye Bridge is allocated, and the date for the

work will be confirmed soon. – **ACTION – to provide details of black and red roads**

- *Are any funds allocated for the repair of the Wye Bridge and Staunton Road? No funding is allocated for Staunton Road in this year's or next year's budget; it relies on a resilient roads bid to Welsh Government, with the outcome expected by the end of March.*
- *Is any of the public right of way investment allocated to the collapsed part of the Wye Valley Walk in Wyesham or the improvement of the section in Redbrook? If not, what areas are planned to be targeted with that funding? The situation regarding the public right of way is complex, involving land ownership and responsibility issues. A written response with more detailed information will be provided – **ACTION***
- *What are the reasoning and timeline for the car parking review? The car parking review will take a broad look at car parking in the county, including payment systems. The money raised from car parking is ring-fenced for highways, but the income does not cover the total maintenance costs.*
- *Can you confirm that £110k savings will not necessitate closure or reduction of any libraries? Will we receive a review of any knock-on effects of reduced opening hours on other services? The Cabinet member clarified that there are no proposals to move or downsize any hubs. The adjustment of hours is to respond to demand and ensure equitable service.*
- *What are the current opening hours of community hubs and what is proposed to be the opening hours following this change? How can you ensure consistency and availability throughout the county? Current opening hours vary by hub, ranging from 35 hours in Abergavenny to 43 hours in Caldicot. Proposed changes include potentially having a day closed in each of the four main hubs, but not on the same day for all hubs.*
- *Community hubs act as information and advice places but also warm spaces. The aim is to ensure that a hub is open somewhere in the county at all times, providing staff on hand to answer phones and assist residents. Changes to hub hours do not necessarily affect library hours, as some hubs are linked to libraries and some are not. There are 24 warm hubs across the county, funded by Welsh Government, and the council will continue to provide these valuable services. Adjusting hub hours is a measure taken due to financial constraints, and if the financial situation allowed, this would be one of the proposals the Council would prefer not to implement.*
- *Could you specifically provide the current opening hours and proposed changes to community hubs? – **ACTION – to provide a written response***
- *Can you explain what the interim position is regarding the removal of the post of Head of Public Protection, and what is the long-term forecast? Interim arrangements are currently in place, covering the responsibilities of the head of*

public protection through acting up arrangements. The council recognises the importance of the head of public protection role and is committed to conducting a thorough review over the coming months to determine the appropriate long-term arrangements. The interim arrangements are working well and sufficiently at the moment, but the council acknowledges the need to get the long-term solution right. – **ACTION – to provide a written response**

- *The Welsh Government is not expected to fully cover the budget gap of £2.68m. How do you expect any shortfall to be covered?* The Cabinet Member emphasised that the budget-setting process is fluid, with many moving parts between the draught proposals and the final budget, including changes to service demand and grant awards. It is hoped that the funding gap would be somewhat bridged by Welsh Government, but not entirely. The CM highlighted the importance of supporting the growth of Monmouthshire to increase income from Welsh Government, mentioning the Replacement Local Development Plan as a key factor. He acknowledged that there is still insufficient funding in public services and emphasised the ongoing advocacy for better financial support for Monmouthshire.
- *How will the proposed savings relating to homelessness be achieved given the ongoing demand for accommodation?* Councillor Burch explained that the Welsh Government's "everybody in" approach post-pandemic has led to high costs for bed and breakfast accommodations, including 24/7 security in some cases. The current number of people in bed and breakfast accommodations is around 34, with many others in temporary accommodation, which is generally cheaper and offers better living conditions. The refurbishment of Severn View will provide temporary accommodation with wrap-around support, including collaboration with local churches and the third sector, to help individuals to transition to permanent affordable housing. The preventative work by the housing options team and the increase in affordable housing are helping to reduce the number of people in bed and breakfast accommodations and the associated costs.
- *Concerning the proposal to cut £40k regarding youth clubs services, what will a more sustainable operating model look like in practice to those who benefit from these services in our rural communities?* The current rural youth service operates in the south of Monmouthshire but not in the north. The proposal is to remove the rural provision and reinvest funds into youth services in the towns, aligning the provision with that in the north. This means youth service provision will be centred in Caldicot and Chepstow in the south, similar to the existing provision in Abergavenny and Monmouth in the north.
- *Can it be confirmed that there will be no changes to the frequency of road sweeping operations?* Yes, no changes are proposed as part of this budget.
- *Will the aspiration to generate £150k of new income from leisure services translate into a spike in fees to access those services?* The proposal to generate £150k in new income from leisure services does not involve increasing fees for accessing these services. Instead, it focuses on increasing the usage of leisure services to drive higher income. The recent investments in leisure services and

the growing memberships at leisure centres underscore their value as community assets.

- *What is the source of the £366k savings in the social care budget?* These savings primarily come from increased non-residential fees, based on financial assessments in line with the Social Services and Well-being Act of 2014. The rates are being increased, but they are means-tested with a maximum weekly cap of £100. The service is facing pressures from rising National Insurance, real living wage, and inflation. Despite low headline inflation, certain areas are still experiencing significant cost increases. The fee increase reflects these anticipated cost pressures, but support is available for those who need it through means-tested financial assessments.
- *If there's a cap of £100 per week what range of increases can actually be utilised?* The hourly rate of care charge will go up from £20 to £24 for non-residential care.
- Where are the youth services that are mentioned as being in the south? – **ACTION – to provide a written response**
- *The 7.8% increase in council tax is a concern. Is it correct that it means a Band D property will pay a further £400 p/a?* The proposed increase for a Band D property is £131.56 per year, not £400, and is necessary to sustain service delivery.
- *What is the explanation for cutting cybersecurity insurance?* The decision to cut cybersecurity insurance is based on its poor value for money. The council's cybersecurity measures are robust and the insurance only covers the cost of cleaning up after a breach, not preventing it. The council's cybersecurity protocols are robust, and the risk of loss and damages was deemed manageable without the insurance. Furthermore, the market for cybersecurity insurance is immature, and the council's internal security measures have significantly improved. The council holds a budget for self-insurance and an insurance and risk management reserve to cover potential financial risks.
- *Are we doing as much as we can with roads, or are we looking to do any more on Highways?* There is a significant backlog in road and infrastructure maintenance, at around £80 million; the additional £2.3 million investment, therefore, while helpful, is insufficient to address the entire backlog. The council is aware of the poor state of the roads and is doing what it can within the financial constraints, and has also received additional funding from Welsh Government to support borrowing for highway improvements. Specific roads and lanes will be considered based on their priority and risk assessment.
- *Is it correct that leisure centre times are not changing?* Yes, this is correct.
- *Is there a possibility of realigning the market from the bottom car park at Blestium Street to Agincourt Square? This change could potentially release car parking spaces and increase revenue.*

- *Regarding Hubs, can we have a counter on both doors? Can you confirm that the library in the Hub in Monmouth is not being reduced, and how the potential move to Shire Hall would take place?* The need for accurate data collection on hub usage is acknowledged and there is an ongoing piece of work to ensure consistent measurement across all hubs. He reiterated the importance of making evidence-based decisions regarding the opening hours of the hubs and ensuring that any changes do not create additional demand on other services. The idea about a counter will be passed on to Cabinet Member Sandles.
- *Is it correct that the old library room, under the lottery bid, would be used to archive and display items from the museum, such as books, papers, and maps?* The proposals for Shire Hall are quite exciting and have been developed in partnership with the people of Monmouth and the Heritage Lottery. The aim is to make Shire Hall a modern museum and a hub for heritage and culture, which could increase footfall. As part of this development, it was considered whether collocating the library service in the same building would provide a better experience for all users, such as allowing visitors to access both the museum and library on a Sunday. Although there has been a strong response to this idea, there is no firm proposal yet. The current proposals for Shire Hall are still evolving, and the bid will further develop these ideas. The museum collections include many documents, a local history library, and the Nelson collection. The current proposals include a reading room, education spaces, and areas for research and educational groups.
- *The lack of immediate parking for residents near Shire Hall is a concern. Additionally, the food bank and other hub services, such as support for women in crisis, benefit from the current location, and people can discreetly access various services under the guise of visiting the library, which provides them with privacy.* It is important that we understand who uses the hubs and for what purposes. You stress the decisions regarding the opening hours of the hubs need to be evidence-based to ensure that any reduction does not place additional demand on other services, such as the homelessness service. There are pros and cons regarding the proposals around Shire Hall: some people believe that moving the library back to the centre of town would be beneficial, but this week, there has been strong feedback highlighting the cons of the proposal.
- *Have you conducted a review to rationalise the wider groups that we support e.g. Cardiff Capital Region, to understand how contributions to such partnerships are made and how maximum value can be leveraged from this partnership work?* The different partnerships, such as the Cardiff Capital Region, are funded centrally, and the local authorities, including MCC, take an active role in them. There is a larger piece of work happening in England that may affect the Western Gateway, particularly with the consolidation of some authorities. However, in Wales, the way of working with and funding the Cardiff Capital Region is not affected by the current budget, as it is funded centrally and does not come across the Cabinet Member's desk.

- *Is there a risk of being in breach of Welsh Language standards in using AI for translation?* The use of AI in Welsh language translation is intended to strengthen the council's capabilities. Quality verification will be in place to ensure accuracy, and if the Welsh Language Commissioner wishes to review the proposals, they would be welcome to do so. In fact, they should welcome this development, as the use of technology like this can be key to delivering good value for residents.
- *Do we have particular grants for potholes?* The Welsh Government's draft settlement includes additional investment for highways and structures, allowing the council to allocate an additional £1.4 million for these works. He emphasized the importance of a structured approach to addressing potholes and related infrastructure issues.
- *Will there be a review next year to assess the financial and social impacts of the potential changes in hub hours, particularly on other MCC departments such as homelessness and social care, and to ensure that vulnerable adults are not unduly affected by the closures?* The intention is to design changes in the opening hours of the hubs to have minimal impact, especially in locations where services are most needed. The situation will be continuously monitored, and it is acknowledged that if more funds were available, these changes might not be necessary. The hubs are considered the 'front door' of the community, and there is a strong commitment to ensuring they provide good value and effective service for residents.
- *Can you clarify the grassroots fee structure – is the annual payment £10 or £12.50?* The mention of four instalments of £12.50 was an error in the document. The correct proposal is a £10 annual fee for grassroots membership.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Cabinet Members and officers, and to Councillor Strong for organising the members of public attending. We have discussed a number of aspects of the budget today, including the impact of car park reviews, noting that money from car parks goes to the highways department; social care savings and price increases; the Regional Partnership Board; Old Tintern Station, expressing concerns shared by others; the realignment of opening hours for youth clubs and centres, particularly in rural communities, and the savings from these changes; road sweeping, leisure centre prices, partnerships, and Welsh language compliance; questions about the hubs, residents' travel expectations, public transport protection, and funding shortfalls from the Welsh government; Severn View House and homelessness cost reductions. Finally, we also asked about highways, council tax increases, and issues related to the hubs and Shire Hall.

5. Place Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List.

Officers reminded members to provide questions for NRW regarding the Nedern, ahead of the next meeting. A Special meeting on 5th June to scrutinise the Replacement Local Development Plan was agreed – **ACTION**

Members requested an item to look at the rates charged for markets and stallholders, and at markets more generally – **ACTION**. Councillor Brown reiterated the intention to scrutinise the Shire Hall Lottery bid.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes were confirmed.

8. Next Meeting

Thursday 27th March 2025 at 2.00pm.

The meeting ended at **4.29 pm**.