

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held
at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk. NP15 1GA on Thursday, 5th September, 2019
at 2.00 pm**

Councillors Present

County Councillor P.Pavia (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Blakebrough, D. Dovey,
R.Roden, R.J.W. Greenland, and

Also in attendance County Councillor(s):
M. Powell, R.John L.Brown, and P. Murphy

Officers in Attendance

Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Enterprise
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and
Governance

Mark Howcroft, Assistant Head of Finance
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing,
Highways and Flood

Philip Thomas, Development Services Manager

Rachel Lewis, Planning Policy Manager

Richard Jones, Performance Manager

Dave Loder, Finance Manager

Craig O'Connor, Development Management Area
Team Manager

APOLOGIES: County Councillors A.Davies and M.Feakins

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

- The Committee was addressed by Mr Andrew Johnson, a resident of Raglan. Mr Johnson described the journey residents had been on to develop a proposal to develop community facilities on the site of the former school.
- Members heard that the project dates back to 2014. Following a letter to the Chief Executive a working group was convened including community members, local ward member Cllr Penny Jones, the community council and MCC's then Deputy CEO.
- This resulted in a business plan with agreement from the local authority to undertake a two year community asset transfer (CAT) subject to Raglan Village Hall Association (RVHA) making continual progress towards the delivery of the project.
- Up to £50,000 was approved by the Big Lottery Fund and in 2017 the CAT was extended for a further 2 years and full planning permission received.
- At the end of 2017 the project lost its lottery funding, at the same time a plan was submitted to build 111 houses which was approved by Planning Committee that would generate c£300,000 in section 106 funding for community projects
- In July 2019, 5 years after the project began, an e-mail informed RVHA saying that MCC are unable to consider a further extension as the Education Department have now identified an alternative use for the former Junior School.
- A formal complaint was made to the Council's Chief Executive who indicated that RVHA has been given sufficient time to progress their plans and the council would now be moving on with its own project. 212 signature petition stating that they expect all partners to do everything in their power to deliver this project which supports many of the council's own project

- Mr Johnson set out 5 asks of the committee: To support an application to Cabinet for an extension to the CAT; to take up the complaint made by the chair of the RVHA and make their own independent assessment of the way in which the executive have acted and/or refer this for immediate scrutiny; to recommend that the executive cease potentially wasting further resources and money being spent on the feasibility study of this site for their own project; to drive the executive as a priority to actually deliver the 45 homes to deliver affordable housing in the county and a section 106 receipt.

Outcome

The committee listened to Mr Johnson's contribution and agreed to receive additional information from him via e-mail. The chair will look at this issue and enable the committee to agree whether it is a matter they wish to take up as part of their work programme

3. To hold Cabinet Members to account on performance and alignment of service delivery to the corporate plan.

- The report contains an overview of performance against the activities in the Corporate Plan. It focuses on the objectives, actions and progress of areas relevant to this committee.
- Each objective has been allocated a progress rating with performance indicators presented in an appendix to the report showing performance benchmarked against other authorities in Wales.

Members Challenge

- There was a challenge about the lack of qualitative data in the progress update. It was explained that officers always seek to back up progress with both quantitative and qualitative evidence but there are not always corresponding national or local performance indicators for every project.
- A question was raised about whether the counties relatively older population resulted in a higher number of empty homes due to the length of probate or homes being owned by people who are now in care. It was confirmed that we have about 700 empty homes in the county and probate means they can sometimes take time to sell although no specific analysis had been completed.
- Members queried what action was being taken locally to overcome the problems caused by the relative slow progress with SuperFast Cymru and to provide an update on innovative procurement to deliver digital solutions to rural transport. Members heard that Monmouthshire is now part of a task force and a digital infrastructure plan was approved by Cabinet the previous day that would enable officers to explore the ability to move at speed with other options when they become available. It was confirmed that a recent announcement confirmed that two firms have been awarded contracts to work in Monmouthshire for the next 12 months while there are also a number of Internet of Things projects being explored.
- Members examined the figures for those Not in Education, Employment or Training and queried how school leavers were made aware of opportunities through I2Achieve and Inspire2Work. It was confirmed that we have officers working closely with the schools and Careers Wales
- Members challenged whether the high skilled jobs being created at IQE were being filled by people in local communities. The Cabinet Member responded to say figures were available and had increased further since the figure included in the report and spoke of

the importance of getting the message to young people about the careers in the compound semi-conductor foundry.

- Members raised concerns that the CCRCD director does not have the necessary resources to deliver the programme beyond the next gateway review. The Cabinet member responded that while there were a lot of opportunities that still needed to be finalised he was confident that many opportunities in the pipeline would be realised.
- Concern about whether the curriculum was preparing young people for careers in ICT. It was suggested that this was a matter for the Chief Officer for Education rather than this committee

Outcomes

- Members received the report and used it as the basis to ask a number of questions of senior officers and the executive to seek assurance around progress against the authority's objectives

4. Quarterly Scrutiny of the Revenue and Capital Monitoring 2019/20 Outturn Statement.

- The Deputy Head of Finance confirmed his plans to meet with the 4 chairs of selects to discuss how we simplify financial reporting.
- Members' would like more training on the budget and would welcome simpler higher level reports. Members heard that simpler reports can make it harder to hold Cabinet to account if they are seeing different levels of detail.
- The authority has a £2.4 million deficit which has already been reported to Cabinet, 88% of savings have been achieved. The biggest are of overspends relevant to the committee being in tourism, leisure and culture as a result of the decision not to outsource the service as it will no longer benefit from charity status; car parks and passenger transport are also overspending
- Members heard that if the authority were to adopt the Ealing Ruling on VAT it would play a significant part in eliminating the deficit
- There is £1.139 million of slippage in the capital budget relevant to the committee relating to the Crick Road scheme
- The anticipated draw on reserves will leave these at 3.19% which is below the appropriate guideline of between 4% and 6% and SLT are working on bringing this back

Members Challenge

- Members challenged the amount of savings that are undeliverable and queried whether these are stress-tested as part of the budget build. Members heard a number of lenses are used including a standardised approach to capturing activity and the extent to which they meet policy aspirations, but that there remains a lot of legwork to deliver those once they are agreed. Savings achievement at 88% is on-par or better that where we usually are at this point of the financial year.
- Members queried why the authority is overspending on car parks. Members hears that this was predominantly a reduction in income. Civil enforcement should encourage people to use paid spaces. There is also a reduction in use of town centre car parks as shopping habits move online
- A question was asked whether Monmouthshire is creeping towards bankruptcy and how do our reserves compare with others? Officers responded that our reserves are lower than many others, this is not problematic and councils are encouraged not to sit on reserves, 4-6% is entirely reasonable. However, members were reminded that MCC has the lowest funding per head of any council in Wales and members have so far avoided

making cuts to front-line services. Members heard that council borrowing isn't influenced by reserve levels as we get in from the Public Works Loan Board.

- Members queried what the basis was a mild winter prediction for operations costs. It was suggested that climate change means we are more likely to get warmer, wetter winters, at this point colder winters are treated as ad-hoc rather than being built into annual considerations.
- Members queried when will the exercise on Monlife be completed? It was reported that this was being taken to council shortly and the business plan will need to be reflected in the council's financial ledgers.

Outcomes

- Select chairs will meet with the deputy head of finance to establish how reporting can be improved and members welcomed the opportunity for a seminar to grow understanding of the budget.

5. Current Local Development Plan Annual Monitoring Report - Scrutiny of annual performance.

- Many of the targets have been achieved and there are fewer red ratings than in the previous period as a result of increased completions with 443 dwelling completions with 131, or 30% of these being affordable and 4 LDP allocated housing sites gaining planning permission
- Over 40 hectares of employment land available, 22 tourist holiday lets approved and vacancy rates in all shopping areas apart from Chepstow and Usk outperforming the Great Britain average.
- Three underperforming policy areas were highlighted: There are only 4.0 years of land supply available; the allocated strategic site at Vinegar Hill is yet to get planning permission and a decrease of permitted development on Brownfield Sites reflecting limited scope for Brownfield Development in the County

Members Challenge

- Members queried what lessons have been learnt that will be taken into the new LDP and heard that there are regular meetings to learn what works and what hasn't including meeting people who put forward certain sites and meeting certain groups such as farmers to talk about their challenges such as diversification. Officers are also learning from other authorities.
- Members queried whether the new LDP mention exploring a new settlement as part of a long term vision rather than only growing from expanding existing settlements. It was confirmed that this has been considered but Welsh Government have indicated that this should be via Strategic Development Plan and they will challenge if we proceed with a new settlement in the LDP and therefore we may have to wait for the regional strategic development plan.
- There was a question in response to the calculation of the 5 year land supply. Members heard about the process and the Head of Planning, Housing and Place Shaping agreed to compile some all Wales figures to circulate to members.
- Members queried how much housing has been developed from looking outside the LDP. Members heard that more than 360 permissions were granted but no completions yet. This doesn't include the 111 properties at Raglan that were called in by Welsh Government. However these have generally not been universally popular with local residents.
- Members queried figures for vacancy rates in town centres gathered from surveys of central shopping areas and it was heard that this covered all A1 retail units, which could

include restaurants. Members heard that more people are using town centres for leisure and food opportunities.

- Members challenged how the development of sites could be sped up. Members heard that this could include things to make sites more attractive to small developers and in some instances developers paying for an enhanced services as part of a planning performance agreements. It was also recognised that the council's own sites have been slow to come forward but ultimately planners must be outcome focused.
- The Committee queried when the consultation report on the replacement LDP would be coming forward. Members heard that the results should be brought forward in November.
- The Cabinet member stated that the use of town centres is changing as a result of high business rates and he has written to the Minister about high charges for town centre businesses compared to low rates for out of town businesses, Monmouthshire has resisted out of town developments but we have seen a rise in shops within garden centres which pay much lower business rates while architects have commented positively to the impact of the supermarket to Abergavenny town centre.

Outcomes

- Members have scrutinised and understood lessons learnt from the last LDP to apply to the next plan
- There has been scrutiny of the town centre vacancy rates and the impact of business rates which members recognised needs to change
- Members scrutinised and made comments and recommend that the plan is endorsed and submitted to Welsh Government.

6. Planning Annual Performance Report - Scrutiny of annual performance.

- There are five actions highlighted in the report including a systems review of whole planning system, there was a rise in enforcement complaints after it was made easier for people to report enforcement complaint online; a lot of work with the digital team to improve website and ensure fewer clicks to get to important information; There were concerns that the service wasn't good enough against enforcement target of Welsh Government and now carry out investigations more quickly; The team is good at dealing with major planning applications and does so in an average of 66 days, much quicker than Welsh average.
- Of 11 Performance Indicators 6 are ranked as good, one as fair and four as needing improvement
- Monmouthshire received the largest number of listed building applications in Wales and enforcement did decline.
- Members also heard that the authority performs well at getting endorsements at committee with good working relationships between members and officers.

Members Challenge

- A concern was raised about pre-application advice and the assessment of application coming from the same member of staff. Members heard that a high rate of approvals is evidence that the pre-application advice is working as it reduces the number of people making applications which are unlikely to succeed.
- Further detail was sought on the operation of delegated decisions. Members heard that of over 1000 applications 95% of applications were delegated with the remainder going to committee. The role of planning committee is to deal with the more complex and difficult cases. Monmouthshire's panel looking at delegated decision is not common in all areas and gives an added level of engagement and scrutiny.

- Members challenged officers to think about the use of technology such as drones for some applications. Members heard that Building Control were using these although there were some privacy issues that needed to be considered. However, services such as Google Earth can be helpful to complement existing approaches but officers do not advocate using this to replace site visits.

Outcomes

- Members challenged and commented on the report prior to its submission to Welsh Government

7. To confirm and sign the following minutes:

These were duly approved.

8. Economy and Development Select Committee dated 10th April 2019.

9. Special Meeting - Economy and Development Select Committee dated 17th July 2019.

10. List of actions arising from the Economy and Development Select Committee meeting dated 10th April 2019.

No issues of concern with the actions.

11. Economy and Development Select Committee Forward Work Programme (to follow).

The chair agreed to meet with scrutiny colleagues and the Head of Service to see if some of the LDP workshops could be combined. Concerns were also raised about timing of LDP workshops. The chair suggested that the next few remain as scheduled but that those beyond December would be looked at again.

The issue of scrutiny of the GovTech Catalyst work on rural transport was raised and it was suggested that it sat between committee and Strong Communities and that the chairs could meet to confirm this.

The scrutiny of the Investment Committee was highlighted as an issue that still needed to be confirmed, it was suggested that this sit with Audit Committee. The chair indicated that he would meet with the Chief Officer Resources to discuss this.

12. Council and Cabinet Forward Work Programme.

No issue were raised.

13. Next Meeting.

The next meeting would be held on Thursday 10th October 2019 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 5.30 pm

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