

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Remote Microsoft Teams Meeting on Thursday, 12th November, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor L.Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillors: D. Batrouni, L. Guppy, J.Treharne and S. Woodhouse

Officers in Attendance

David Jones, Head of Public Protection
Linda O'Gorman, Principal Licensing Officer
Huw Owen, Principal Environment Health Officer (Public Health)
Jennifer Walton, Registration Service Manager
Gareth Walters, Trading Standards & Animal Health Team Leader
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors A. Easson and A. Webb

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

There were no members of the public present.

3. Scrutiny of the Public Protection Performance Report 2019/20 & Covid-19 response in 2020.

Officers David Jones, Huw Owen, and Gareth Walters presented the report and answered the Members' questions.

Challenge:

Are food hygiene training courses back on now?

No, not yet. We can check when it's likely to resume.

Could we hear about the impact on innovation because of the budget cuts? There's an overall drop in performance – is that due to the budget cuts, and is there a corresponding drop in staff numbers?

The budget has remained static in the last few years, in recognition of the hard work that is done. Many of the staff are also responding to the pandemic, so there will be a detriment to this year's performance, as a result. At a recent national meeting, ways in which this service can be bolstered through Welsh Government were explored and discussed; hopefully, that will ready for next April. There are no guarantees, however, but we are certainly discussing the budget and what we can deliver.

We are pleased that, as per Fig. 1, the proactive visits haven't dropped. We tend to record our statistics and performance in two ways: responses in three working days, and cases closed within three months. The latter is especially important as it is a measure of how quickly and efficiently our officers deal with

complaints. The numbers for these have gone up, so the performance of officers in dealing with complaints has improved. We are a very reactive service. The summer period is our particularly busy time in terms of complaints received, but conflicts with the time when our officers want to go on holiday – we are therefore a bit stretched during these months, limiting the amount of proactive work that we can do.

For animal welfare, we have always been consistent in responding in the 90th percentiles, but last year was particularly difficult, with a variety of staff sicknesses. We lost an important member of staff the previous year, and had difficulty replacing them. Before austerity, we had five animal health officers, but now we have 2.4 FTEs. Due to having the strategic lead for Trading Standards Wales and Animal Welfare, we have some additional funding into Animal Health across Wales. Officer Walters is able to coordinate that, and the money has enabled the team to bring an experienced officer in that might have not have been attracted otherwise. Two new officers joined at the end of last year, but Covid has had a significant impact on their development and bringing them up to speed. We constantly communicate to Welsh Government the difficulties faced by animal health and welfare teams across all local authorities. Recently, even the RSPCA has had to draw back on the inspectorate side of things.

There has been a surge of people getting pets during Covid, so the demand on the team is likely to increase. Should we include this matter in future meetings?

Yes, we can have a conversation initially outside the meeting, and consider what needs to be done going forward. We are currently leading on a three-year project for Welsh Government concerning dog breeding, looking at the whole picture in Wales and, hopefully, introducing a new model. Alongside that, yes, there are issues around people buying pets. Only 8% of the market of puppies in Wales is from licenced breeders, which shows the significance of the matter.

Regarding the increase of figures relating to damp/mould and fire, what can we do/are we doing to get private landlords and housing associations to properly address this problem in homes?

In Monmouthshire, for a number of years we have set out dealing with excess cold and fire as a priority. Officers prioritise these matters when inspecting properties, and are keen to ensure their resolution. Fire Safety issues could be the non-interconnectedness of smoke detectors i.e. while many landlords have smoke detectors in the property, these might not be interconnected between ground and first floors. This would constitute a hazard, and we would require that work be done. Excess cold is a hazard with which we are particularly concerned. We are all aware of fuel poverty. We try to address inadequate provision of heating vigorously with the landlords. Damp/mould is interesting. The majority of cases where tenants complain about this, it is condensation-related. In many cases, this is down to the lifestyle habits of the tenants, rather than the landlord not providing adequate heating and ventilation to deal with condensation. Modern houses tend to be hermetically sealed, so if windows are not opened and fans aren't used, issues can arise that aren't the landlord's fault. For five or six years, landlords in Wales have had to be registered with Rent Smart Wales and have a licenced agent. This has improved landlords' knowledge about their responsibilities, and assisted us in our enforcement.

Could the details on the graphs in 5.2.1 be elaborated?

Category 1 hazards are considered to be more serious than Category 2, which are the same problems but to a lesser degree, and which still need addressing. Category 1 hazards are those in which the

council has a duty to resolve them, whereas Category 2 are those in which we have a power to require the landlords to deal with them, if we see fit.

Chair's Summary 4a:

Councillor Batrouni praised the rigour of this report, especially its inclusion of comparative information. He noted the drop in performance and wanted to know if that was a direct result of cuts, especially regarding noise inspections and animal welfare. The officers confirmed that cuts do have an impact, but noted the two ways in which cases are categorised, and that the number of cases closed in three months have gone up. Proactive work is limited by staff holidays during the busy summer period. We heard that Trading Standards lost a long-term member of staff, who was difficult to replace, and that the number of officers is now down to 2.4. We were updated about funding. Councillor Batrouni noted the increase in purchases of pets during the pandemic, and we have agreed to set up a meeting to look into that. Cllr Guppy praised the team and their excellent work. She would like to see the food hygiene go online, and noted some housing issues, particularly mould cases. We heard that this is a priority for officers, and with the help of Rent Smart Wales, landlords' understanding of these matters has improved.

b)

Officers David Jones, Huw Owen, Linda O'Gorman and Gareth Walters presented the additional reports and answered the Members' questions.

Challenge:

Are there recommendations about taxi drivers, in view of children in car seats?

Taxis have to follow passenger seat guidelines: seatbelts, when to have booster seats, etc. The onus is on the passengers to put those in, rather than it being expected that the taxi company will provide them. We give the taxis guidance to check the seats. We can provide a copy of the requirements to members after the meeting.

What will happen with Christmas and New Year's festivities?

Yes, the run up to Christmas is a concern, with pubs re-opening post-Fire Break. In terms of the TTP evidence that we're now gathering, it is not so much licensed premises, it's a high level of compliance in our pubs and clubs. Liaising with the Police, they'll do a focussed, targeting of residential estates – the TTP issues tend to involve social interactions. Gwent Police now has some additional resourcing that will help with this. They will still go to licensed premises as they always do.

What is the state of officers' morale? What support is in place for them?

The Commercial team dealing with TTP is passionate and dedicated, working long into the night at times. They are bearing up very well, helped in large part by the connection between officers – a family spirit. It is more a case of peer support, though everyone is aware of potential support through HR. Environmental Health has very experienced officers. Sometimes they are asked why they are working so late, should they not go home, etc. They are reminded to not try to do everything, but do what they can. It has been particularly difficult for the many officers who have young children, needing to balance the extra work (and variety of work) with home schooling. Licensing is a small team, in which there has also been a bout of long-term sickness. But the officers are hardworking and quick to adapt. We've had some funding through the Covid Relief Fund, which has enabled one officer who was job-sharing to

become full-time until March. This has eased things a bit. Trading Standards equally has very hard working officers, facing the same challenges, with the same dedication. They are aware of the support structure, should they need it.

If there is another firebreak, who is responsible for enforcing premises not breaking the rules?

The regulations are quite complex. We have powers relating to any licensed premises through the Health Protection Control Of Coronavirus Regulations 2020, split with Gwent Police. For pubs and clubs, we have powers with FPNs, notices, etc. We look at these regularly, and give advice relating to social distancing etc. We are not a 24/7 service, so the Police usually react initially to complaints about a particular premises after hours, as the call will come through to them. They will then liaise back with us in terms of licensing conditions. Environmental Health and Licensing tend to deal with things. For the people issue, there will be a particular focus on clamping down on social interactions, which is Gwent Police's purview – we have no powers relating to domestic property.

Are levels of compliance/non-compliance recorded? Are we able to see the figures?

We provided the information for Adults Select in September – we do a three-weekly update for Welsh Government. We can circulate that report and all of the figures separately. 4 improvement notices and 2 fixed penalties have been served for pubs. Our pubs and restaurants have been highly compliant. We try to work by advice rather than enforcement, though we do have that arm. Assisting with the organisation of specific events, and the interpretation of legislation, has been very time-consuming. The numbers are therefore a crude summation of the work that has taken place.

When premises have extended into outside spaces, who is responsible for social distancing in them?

It is the responsibility of the business. We were proactive in informing them when outside chairs and tables were first set up. The law relating to open drinks containers was relaxed to allow for more free movement between premises and their outdoor spaces. There is also the Highways element, in terms of the pavement licence. We request that venues demarcate their area clearly, in instances of a shared outdoor space. Depending on the particular case though, it is possible for an outside matter to develop into a street one, and therefore become the Police's concern. But the relevant venue would still have a duty to guide its patrons safely home when they leave, and not to mingle with others on the street.

Chair's Summary 4b:

Councillor Guppy expressed concerns about Christmas and New Year festivities, and the requisite additional resources. Officers confirmed that Gwent Police has additional resources, and will focus more on residential premises than licensed ones, though they will visit the latter with our officers. Councillor Guppy was also concerned about child seats in taxis – it was confirmed that the drivers should follow normal guidance, but the responsibility rests with the parent to bring a car seat. Councillor Treharne praised the report and officers, and expressed concern for the officers' morale. We heard that the teams' passion is very clear. Officers have worked long hours but they have supported each other, and there is further support available if needed. Councillor Batrouni asked whose responsibility it is to enforce the rules in the event of a future firebreak; officers advised that regulation dictates a split between Gwent Police and the council. The Councillor also asked about recording this data: there is a three-weekly report that has now been shared with members during this meeting. Councillor Treharne asked whose responsibility it is to ensure that social distancing be maintained in outside spaces of premises: this is the responsibility of the business.

4. Scrutiny of the Registration Service Performance Report 2019/20 and Covid-19 response in 2020.

Officer Jennifer Walton presented the report.

Challenge:

When will birth registrations take place again in libraries?

In March, we stopped library registrations and brought everything back into the Usk office. This has mainly been because it's easier for us to control the environment when we are in one building, and gives us greater resilience in case of staff sickness. We have been out for some exceptions, e.g. to Nevill Hall, but there isn't an immediate plan to go back to outstations. If there were a difficulty and we needed to go to an outstation, we would of course do that. We would like to get further through the pandemic before returning to a regular pattern of attending all of the outstations.

Do we anticipate an influx of work for your team going forward, given the number of weddings that have been postponed?

We have a very high number of bookings for next year. They have been made in such a way that we can manage them with the team we have. We are cautious because lots of people are starting to make alternative plans, so it's difficult to see what the bigger picture will be next summer. If, in the New Year, restrictions start to lift, many of the ceremonies will go ahead, but if there is still a limit of 15 people at the reception, many will not want to go ahead with bookings.

Chair's Summary:

We discussed the possibility of moving registrations back to libraries, to be more flexible for residents. The normal procedure has not resumed, as a means to protect staff and cover sicknesses, but the team has visited Nevill Hall in special circumstances. If there is greater freedom from the pandemic, the team will look to resume normal services.

5. To confirm the following minutes:

6. Strong Communities Select Committee dated 17th September 2020.

The minutes were confirmed as a true record.

7. Special Meeting - Strong Communities Select Committee dated 28th September 2020.

The minutes were confirmed as a true record.

8. Strong Communities Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

The next meeting on 17th December will look at the Strategic Equality Action Plan and Public Toilets works. There will be a special meeting mid-January to consider the Poverty Action Plan.

9. Cabinet & Council Forward Work Programme.

10. Next Meeting: Thursday 17th December 2020 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **Time Not Specified**