

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk with Remote Attendance on Thursday, 10th June, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor P. Jordan (Chairman)
County Councillor R.Roden, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: J.Becker, A.Davies, B. Strong
and V. Smith

Also in attendance County Councillor S. Jones,
Cabinet Member for Economy:

Officers in Attendance

Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Enterprise
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
James Woodcock, Business Insights Manager
Hannah Jones, Youth and Community Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors D. Evans and M.Feakins

1. To note the appointment of County Councillor P. Jordan as Chair.

The appointment of CC P. Jordan as Chair was noted.

2. To appoint a Vice-Chair.

Councillor Richard Roden was proposed by Councillor Davies and seconded by Councillor Jordan.

3. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Public Open Forum.

No members of the public were present.

5. To consider the Future Economies Ambition Statement and to link the regional picture with local direction (report to follow).

Cath Fallon and Hannah Jones presented the report, with additional contributions from Cabinet Member Sara Jones, and answered the members' questions with Frances O'Brien and James Woodcock.

Challenge:

How are we encouraging businesses to come into the county from outside, when we don't have any sites ready yet? Sites that were previously earmarked for B1/B2 have now been given consent for residential use – is there not therefore a reduction in available sites? Will businesses therefore be attracted to places in SE Wales like Newport, leading to workers living in Monmouthshire but working out of county?

There's a call at the moment from our Planning colleagues for candidate sites to come forward. There have been issues with take-up in the past, which is why some industry has gone to housing. But, recently, some sites that were locked for a while are starting to reopen. A number of us, including the Chief Exec, have been in discussions with businesses looking to come into Monmouthshire on those sites, which is very encouraging.

In dealing with enquiries as they come in, we do tailored searches with our local agents to ensure that we provide the right property to the right business. We are in a situation, however, with our indigenous businesses (particularly in the north of the county) that are becoming site-constrained. We are doing a lot of work with them at the moment on an individual basis to see how they might expand locally – putting them in touch with Planning – or looking at potential other sites. This is on a day-to-day basis. It's a bespoke local offer, and we find businesses value and benefit from that service. Inward investment enquiries can come either directly from a business or, more often, via Welsh Government. We seek to understand the needs of that business in terms of premises and any other queries they have as they consider a potential relocation. Identifying premises is a key part of that but also understanding potential future skills or staff needs, and any assistance that we or partner organisations can provide. Finance is also an area that generates a number of queries, in terms of grant funding or investment available, particularly from the public sector. We support enquirers in all of those areas, and link them with other organisations that can provide that assistance. The enquiries that we receive from Welsh Government are often shared with a number of authorities; an organisation can look at a number of options as they seek to relocate. Sometimes we're able to get feedback on the decision that an organisation has made when selecting their location. Unfortunately, though, it's sometimes not possible to understand the reasons behind a business' final decision in their choice of location.

In terms of inward investment, and how that works across the region, the CCR plays a key role for us in trying to support and coordinate inward investment opportunities and conversations. They also interlink with Welsh Government in terms of their foreign inward investment teams and working to identify where a business is looking to land within Wales, and identifying potential sites. If an inward investor is coming into the region, they will contact us if they are looking for specific sites or locations that they think might be suitable, based on that company's requirements. It can be quite challenging for us at a local level to influence what happens on a national and global scale. Trying to ensure that we work with those relevant departments within Welsh Government is key for us, in terms of building those relationships so that they understand what opportunities we have in Monmouthshire, and staying on their radar. We are meeting with WG colleagues in the regional economic team towards the end of July, at which time we will go through with them our ambitions and plans regarding the economy and how that interlinks with what we and they can be doing.

Regarding Aim 3 and apprenticeships, we only have 16 apprentices in MCC, 1 marketing graduate, no interns and some additional employees in Kickstart, but only for a limited period. Could that be explained?

We continually work with managers across directorates to look at new opportunities. There are more graduates than was just quoted. The Kickstart placements are short term but we are working with managers on succession planning. The calibre of apprentices and Kickstart candidates currently coming through the authority is exceptional. There are 2 graduates in our

team who are on that pathway. It is the start of a journey in that there is an appetite for more apprentices and to look into graduates more, whether it's joining with the Cardiff Capital Region graduate scheme or looking at opportunities that are more external. We would like to come back with updated figures and details of forward planning.

Do we create strategic sites or do we wait for candidate sites to come in? Do we try to persuade people coming forward with candidate sites to utilise them for other purposes than they initially envisaged?

We and our Planning colleagues have held breakfast meetings in which we have encouraged owners of strategic sites to come forward, and to explain to them where we want to get to, in terms of our economic growth and ambition plan. They have sat down with Planning and looked at sites that they own. This was done pre-Covid; it is key, and we are looking to do it again as soon as possible. We will place another call for candidate sites after full council considers the preferred strategy on 24th June. We encourage anyone who has connections or networks of landowners or people who might be interested in bringing forward a candidate site, please tell them to do so – businesses are often unaware that they need to come forward through that process. The window of opportunity to bring forward sites will open on 5th July, running into early August.

Regarding inward and outward mobility from the county and pollution, perhaps the focus could be on a wider approach to employability?

Yes, we have noticed that people have learned to enjoy their environment more while they've been at home, and have started to shop more locally. Thus, while the city centres have been hit hard, we are starting to see that vibrancy come to our market towns – though there are some concerns in a few of them that we need to address. It is of huge benefit that we are now working more closely with Planning colleagues. We are on the same page and have the same ambition.

We are surrounded by a talented pool of graduates coming out of the city universities – perhaps we could emphasise that to employers looking for sites and workers in the county?

We hope that our Prospectus will go some way towards selling our offer, in terms of the quality of graduates that we have in the county.

We are neglecting the Climate aspect of the plan, and need to make more of the net zero aspirations. The people that we want in county – the 30% working from home – that is important to them.

In terms of the authority's progress against the climate emergency action plan, a report is coming to full council this month, or in July, and we are looking to also reset and review that action plan and strategy; we can then bring it to members for review later this year. It's a valid point that all the strategies and documents need to align to the climate emergency and the ambition. We will take that away as an action from today's meeting.

Co-working spaces is very welcome; people are attracted by the aesthetic and feel, not just the opportunity to interact with others – so we need to be careful about incorporating that.

Yes, we understand it's about the 'vibe' and things like the coffee available – our initial research has confirmed this. It will be built in as we move forward e.g. in our bids for the 'levelling up' fund. We need to ensure it's a nicer environment for people than being at home, otherwise they won't come.

Regarding the app, any functioning wellbeing system is based on listening, rather than telling. An app therefore needs to be 50% asking what young people need.

We are currently consulting with our young people, adults, and stakeholders, around our services and what we offer. We are keen to implement this point about asking users to tell us what they want.

We have discussed the ambitions before and are fully behind them, but we need to see more details. There doesn't seem to be a reporting method back to this committee concerning delivery.

Yes, we need to demonstrate that we are moving forward with our ambitions. We've completed our service plans, which are part of the wider performance framework. We will happily update this committee with our progress on it in a future meeting, perhaps towards the end of the year.

Are the educational establishments and businesses talking to each other to determine what skills and qualifications the businesses require, and whether the colleges and universities actually provide what the businesses want?

Yes, they are talking to each other. It doesn't happen on a local authority level but is tasked by the Regional Skills board and the Cardiff Capital Region. There are sector areas that have cluster group meetings, e.g. Advanced Material and Manufacturing. Within those cluster meetings there's intelligence gathering from those employers regarding their skills challenges in those areas. We were on a call this week looking at hiring more manufacturing apprentices. How they influence post-16 training: Welsh Government provides higher education with less funding, rather than further education, but those conversations do take place. There is particular buy-in from the employers in those sector areas and the FE and HE colleges. They all link with Industry Wales and it's part of the Cardiff Capital Region drive going forward. Higher apprenticeships have always been there, but there is a definite need for further advancement and offering those opportunities across the ten local authorities.

It must be frustrating when neighbouring counties have premises already up and running for businesses to move into immediately, when we don't seem to have very many at all?

The fact that vacant stock is limited is perhaps testament to the attractiveness of Monmouthshire as a location, along with the growth of businesses. We are working closely with landowners to bring forward new sites and premises and utilise land that has been allocated and is available within the local development plan.

Is there the possibility of us working with counties across the border, to produce more opportunities for Monmouthshire?

Frances O'Brien is a member and stakeholder of the Western Gateway, which extends into Bristol, Bath and across south Gloucestershire. The Western Gateway has appointed Deloitte to undertake an economic review, which is currently underway, in which they are identifying where there could be strategic opportunities for partners across the Western Gateway, to work together to improve economic outputs. We haven't played a significant role in the Western Gateway conversation to date, but we (together with the Leader and Chief Executive) are fully engaged in doing so as they undertake this review.

Chair's Summary:

Officers agreed to take forward the points made about the app, and to change the wording 'Pledge to strive to be carbon neutral' to 'Pledge to be...'. They will give updates to the committee at future meetings, particularly regarding progress with attracting businesses, and sites being ready for doing so. It was agreed that all the strategies and documents need to align to the climate emergency and the ambition in facing it: officers will take that away as an action

from today's meeting. Cabinet Member Sara Jones thanked members for their questions and confirmed the importance of reporting to the committee. At a future meeting, the committee would like to see detail on the process of working with landowners to bring forward new sites, and updates about it.

In addition to the questions, members made the following points. Councillor Davies noted that one of the committee's concerns is preparation: the priority needs to be to put ourselves in pole position so that we are ready for companies when they express an interest in locating here. Councillor Becker felt that the report doesn't explain much about the approach to Tourism, and there is a disconnection between our aspirations and what is being done on the ground in Climate, Tourism and FutureTech e.g. 5G aspirations. The Chair noted that if we don't have sites ready, our dormitory status will continue: the figures show how many people have to go out of county to work but back into county to live, which is not the desired arrangement.

6. Economy and Development Select Committee Forward Work Plan.

The next meeting will consider Town Centre Regeneration and bids, and whether rearrangement of the town centres due to the pandemic should remain.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

8. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

9. Next meeting: Thursday 15th July 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.05 am**

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