

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 7th September, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: J.Becker, A.Davies,
G. Howard, B. Strong

Also in attendance County Councillors:
L.Dymock, M. Powell, V. Smith and
S. Woodhouse

Officers in Attendance

Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing,
Highways and Flood
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Dave Baxter, Borough Theatre Manager
Dave Loder, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: County Councillors D. Evans and M.Feakins

4. Declarations of Interest.

Councillor Davies declared a personal interest as a resident of Church Road, Caldicot.
Councillor Woodhouse declared a personal interest as a member of an amateur society that hires Borough Theatre.

5. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

6. Scrutiny of the Borough Theatre Refurbishment Proposal.

Borough theatre Manager Dave Baxter presented the report and answered the members' questions with Cath Fallon and Mark Hand.

Challenge:

By how much did the costs go up? Is the hike due to materials?

Some elements were value added i.e. while something needed to be done, we recognised that it would be beneficial to do other things at the same time. A Quantity Surveyor costed everything to where we thought it should be, after which we went out to market for the principal contractor. the contractor selected was the best and lowest bid. So, it was a competitive process, and in line with other projects e.g. an arts centre in West Wales that did a capital project, for which the costs doubled. It should be considered as an investment, because as well as being a resource for the local community, it is a driver for culture and opportunities for education, social cohesion, etc.

Has it been a case of profiteering?

Looking at the wider picture, and from discussions with the external architects, it doesn't seem to have been. This situation isn't unusual, and the contractor has agreed to hold the price to September, beyond when they had to.

A substantial financial input is required from the council. Are you confident that this won't require more and more finance in the coming years?

Yes, we are confident, and see it as a resource for all of Monmouthshire. It's a case of being careful with cultural resources. Looking at the postcode map of attendance for a recent show held in the castle, the audience had attended from the south of the county to the heads of the valleys. The management and direction of the theatre should be seen as a strategic asset. It's very important for Abergavenny but it needs to be beneficial for the whole county. There are three elements of a successful arts centre: the facilities themselves (equipment and venue), the staff and their skills development (in the case of Borough, skilled staff and volunteers), and the relationship with the audience and link to the community. It is a challenge and is a question of how we can benefit the whole area: for us, it is a case of having those resources.

It is unfortunate that costs have escalated but it is vitally important that this refurbishment goes ahead. The theatre has been in use for 100 years, and it brings a lot of business into the town.

The importance of the theatre to Abergavenny's identity links to discussions about the placemaking charter – consideration of a town's unique identity and culture is a key part of that placemaking approach. The matter also links with consideration of the future of our towns and high streets: as the member mentioned, an evening at the theatre with a meal beforehand and/or a drink afterwards could be a significant part of Abergavenny's economy and cultural appeal.

£279k is yet to be determined. Is the forthcoming meeting with Abergavenny Town Council to discuss that shortfall?

Yes, the conversation on 15th September is to discuss the extension to the refurbishment programme and any potential support that the town council might be able to give to address that shortfall.

If the town council doesn't come up with a solution to the shortfall, where do we go next?

We are looking at an option for loan funding through the public works board, but we do hope the town council is able to join us.

The idea of being able to remove the seats so that it could be used as one big room for different events is an interesting one. There is concern about losing the orchestra pit, though.

We have set up a task and finish group with our users to look at different configurations for the orchestra, and we will include those in discussions with the design team over the next month or so. Thanks to Cabinet Member Dymock for the support she has given, particularly in moving forward our relationship with our stakeholder and user groups. We are keen to perpetuate that, and to work closely with them. Many thanks to the staff and team throughout this time as well.

Chair's Summary:

Several members have spoken passionately in favour of the theatre's refurbishment, citing its historical and current importance to the town and wider area. In addition, Councillor Dymock, Cabinet Member for Community Wellbeing and Social Justice, made the following comments:

The members' comments are greatly appreciated. Numerous members of the public have stopped me in the street asking about the theatre's reopening. It is vital that we do so given how special it is for the town, but also for those visiting Monmouthshire. It is an amazing building and

has a fantastic manager in Dave Baxter and excellent staff. Thanks to councillors Sheila Woodhouse and Tudor Thomas, who have been very supportive. We've organised tours for user groups to share what was uncovered in the investigation works and explain the reasons for the costs rising. We also did a Q&A with the user groups. Hopefully full council will get behind this project.

7. Scrutiny of the proposed Regeneration Projects and Placemaking Grants Submission.

Mark Hand presented the report and appendices and answered the members' questions with Dave Loder.

Challenge:

The bid to Welsh Government for £554k – does it have any say about the indicative submission and the way that it will be allocated?

The funding is secure. It is a 1/10th equal share of the amount that has been allocated to SE Wales Cardiff Capital Region. It is administered by RCT, which is a process we've used before. There are a couple of stages: first, we get member approval of what we're suggesting. There's also approval by Welsh Government that they're happy that the projects will deliver on the outcomes required and meet the T&Cs of the grants. Then there's overview by colleagues on a regional basis – as RCT are administering, they are responsible for the T&Cs. For future funding, Welsh Government will expect it to fit in with wider strategies e.g. another part of the grant funding for which we've bid is for money to develop, in partnership with Chepstow Town Council, an overarching strategy for the town, linking in with their Place Plan. We've also submitted Monmouth for the same thing in case there is spare money. If the funding exists next year, we will submit a bid for Abergavenny. We already have those overarching strategies in place for Caldicot and Usk. But we do need those documents in place to ensure that the bids are informed in the future and fit in with wider agreed strategies. But, yes, there is a stage gate where Welsh Government checks that the right money is being spent on the right things. We have an ongoing dialogue and positive relationship with the officers concerned.

How will taking £250k of the available funding out for Borough Theatre affect the projects outlined in the indicative proposals?

Borough Theatre is listed in Appendix 2. The suggested £250k allocation is already there. It doesn't affect any of the other proposals. We suggest that Church Road, Caldicot, goes in the 2022-3 draft submission. We are on the cusp of securing Active Travel funding for that route, which would be this financial year: so we would use the Active Travel funding this financial year, and the MCC match funding that's required, and the Transforming Towns money for next year, would carry the project forward. In short, both Church Road and Borough Theatre projects could happen, along with the other projects listed in the table.

We have a 10% share of the placemaking grant. Is the £75k bid for Chepstow out of that grant?

No, there are three separate Transforming Towns pots. The first is the placemaking grant (£791k), listed in appendix 2. There's also a revenue fund, which is where we put the £75k for Chepstow's overarching strategy. The third pot is the business fund, where we've also put some bids. Other items for Chepstow (other than the £75k for the revenue fund) are listed against the placemaking grant and business fund.

What's been done in the interim in Chepstow has been late in the day and is already falling apart – why don't we get the funding to fix that?

If Cabinet approves that the interim measures will stay in place for longer, then some things like tactile paving will have to be reconsidered as permanent measures, and be re-done accordingly. As a short-term measure, the contractor has been asked to come back and address the immediate issues. We will pick up with colleagues the maintenance of the memorial steps. We weren't aware of the problem with the planters, but we can review their quality and repair or replace them. If Cabinet decides not to extend the measures, then we would not take those actions. We need a safety audit on the zebra crossing; work is progressing, and the member will be updated. The funding being discussed would give us scope to look at the measures and see if there are ones that can work better.

Will we therefore have to wait for this funding to come through for problems in Chepstow to be addressed?

No, we need to await Cabinet's decision as to whether we extend the trial measures – once we have that certainty, we can make the necessary improvements. Replacement of the tarmac isn't dependent on anything in this paper; it has now been costed, and we are now considering the sequence of works, which will require a conversation with the member separate from this meeting.

The list in Appendix 2 seems like a bit of a fait accompli. What other projects were put forward that didn't make this list?

We've gone through a lot of work to identify suggested projects and determine what is deliverable. They came, primarily, from the review of the Reopening Towns meetings with county councillors, town/community councils and business resilience or chamber of commerce reps. A previous report to this committee went through those suggestions and findings. Also, we hold a multi-disciplinary officer workshop in which colleagues put forward lots of different ideas. This year, in particular, it's very much driven by what can be delivered in the financial year. For next year, if other ideas come up, they can be factored in.

Are we planning to sign up to the Placemaking Wales charter, and do you see that being tied into existing strategies?

Yes, a Cabinet report for 15th September should be published in the next few days in which we recommend signing up to the charter. It informs all of this, as placemaking is the wider thinking about how we deal with physical regeneration. But that is already embedded in national planning policy and much of what we do.

If towns don't want to continue with the temporary arrangements, could there be a split arrangement, whereby some continue with the amended regulations and others go back to the previous situation?

Yes, it could be that Cabinet wants to proceed but thinks we need to consult in communities, for example. The decision to retain the temporary measure in some towns but remove them from others is possible, either at the outset or over the 18-month period, as the need arises.

RE: Appendix 1, have there been any applications for grants for conversion from retail to residential?

Not yet, but the grant criteria and opportunities aren't in the public sphere yet. Once there is agreement from Cabinet, we will publicise things like the enveloping scheme to seek take-up. The Housing team is conducting separate work to assess what opportunities are out there for

residential uses in the town centre. If that's a funding stream that we put forward, then we will promote it actively. For the Year 1 bid, funds would need to be made available by 31st March 2022, but it's something that we can include in the 2022-23 bid. This is part of our rationale for putting in a two-year programme, as some things have a long lead-in time.

Once approved by Cabinet, will we advertise to the general business community that these grants will become available?

Yes, we will do targeted awareness and marketing. If there is an enveloping scheme in a particular town, we will make sure that it's publicised in that area e.g. Caldicot shop front improvements.

In the indicative submission for Borough Theatre refurbishment of £250k, their report mentions £175k?

Of the £250k in the table for this report, 30% is match funding: so, it is a £175k grant and £75k match funding split. They are combined in the Borough Theatre report.

8. Employment and Skills - To scrutinise progress of the employment, skills and apprenticeship programmes.

This item has been deferred to a special meeting on 16th September.

9. Economy and Development Select Committee Forward Work Plan.

10. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

11. To confirm the following minutes:

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Strong and seconded by Councillor Davies.

12. Economy and Development Select Committee dated 15th July 2021.

13. Special Meeting - Economy and Development Select Committee dated 26th July 2021.

14. Next Meeting: Thursday 21st October 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.02 am**

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