

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Wednesday, 6th October, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: P. Clarke, A. Easson,
C.Edwards, L. Guppy, R. Harris, V. Smith and
J.Treharne

Officers in Attendance

Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Enterprise
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Emma Davies, Performance Officer
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and Governance
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Richard Jones, Performance Manager
Eve Parkinson, Head of Adult Services
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services

APOLOGIES: None

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Linda Guppy declared a personal but not prejudicial interest in respect of her work for the Aneurin Bevan Health Board and her involvement with the Flying Start Programme. The remaining members agreed to record any declarations of interest as and when appropriate in discussing the reports.

2. Public Open Forum.

There had been a representation made shortly before the start of the meeting, but unfortunately not in sufficient time to be tabled today. The Scrutiny Manager agreed to progress this outside of the meeting.

3. Covid Pandemic Review

Emma Davies, the Policy and Performance Officer presented the report that had been circulated as part of the published agenda. Emma explained that the purpose of the report was to scrutinise a review of the learning from the covid pandemic and to consider the implications for the council's future direction. She advised the committee that relevant service lead officers were present to answer questions members may have about different services and their challenges.

Emma discussed the report's content in detail, referring to the 'plans on a page' that had directed the council's activity to supporting those most in need, the key objective being to 'preserve life'. She highlighted the significant adjustments to education and the provision of distance learning, the efforts to ensure business were supported through grants, the establishment of the Track, Trace and Protect Team within Public Protection and the council's coordination of the volunteering activity and community support for residents. She also discussed how the council had adapted during the pandemic and how some of these new ways of providing services will be continued, examples being the scheduling of bookable visits to Household Waste and Recycling Centres, the 'Request and Collect' library services and remote electronic meetings for the council's governance and political decision-making process. The pandemic had drawn sharp focus on the need for Active Travel methods, such as walking and cycling and the council was responding to this.

Emma drew members attention to ongoing challenges such as the shortage of 'Heavy Goods Vehicle' (HVG) drivers, staff shortages in the social care sector and the increase in price of construction supplies. The Cabinet would be considering an updated version of the plan on a page in December which would take account of the current position.

Emma concluded by inviting the committee to consider the council's progress over the 18 months against the strategic aims outlined in the various plans and ask questions of chief officers.

Member Challenge:

The chair thanked Emma for her presentation of the report and offered thanks to all staff for their work during challenging and unprecedented times. She invited questions from the committee:

- The Council supports volunteers through the Community Leadership Programme, but how can we maintain the enthusiasm that we have witnessed, outside of the pandemic?

Judith Langdon ~ The response was on a scale that we had never seen before and we really want to capitalise on this and sustain it. We've been considering how best to support it, for example, our Wellbeing Links Team works with the most vulnerable people in society, where cases are not straightforward, but the energy and excitement that people felt in doing something for their communities needs to be capitalised on as a significant resource. We have established Community Support Networks to put in place the structure to allow people to come together with ideas. We're also doing community development work, so for example, there may be an initiative such as community fridges which could work well elsewhere, so we sow the seed in other areas to see if there is interest. To answer your question, harnessing the enthusiasm of volunteers is a key focus for us to as the potential is enormous.

- How do senior officers present feel staff have dealt with the challenges faced? The Chief Executive provided very immense support to staff but I'm wondering whether we are in a better position to respond to future challenges faced?

Peter Davies ~ This is a very pertinent question. Most public bodies have had to respond to a huge strain on their services and councils particularly We responded immediately to the pandemic by establishing new services like Track Trace and Protect. I think we had a strong culture with solid values and a robust workforce at the start of the pandemic and that helps when you have to respond to an emergency situation. Our workforce reacted very responsively, staff volunteering to work in different services. Service delivery was not normal and no single service was left unaffected. Officer workers transitioned into home working, which wasn't a difficult transition for us as we already had flexible working arrangements in place, but operational services would have faced the most challenge. We have a duty of care to staff and

that has been at the forefront of our organisation, to ensure people felt supported during an incredibly challenging period. We must acknowledge that we are not yet post-pandemic and we continue to face immense challenge, both covid and Brexit related, with shortages in social care sector staffing, immense pressure on NHS services, particularly Ambulance services and we expect a tough few months through the winter period. I think to answer the question, goodwill amongst our staff has always been in abundance, but we know we cannot exhaust this.

Frances O'Brien ~ I was phenomenally impressed with how everyone stepped up to respond to the pandemic and this was evidenced in our continuations to provide all of our core services, when some other councils couldn't. Staff redeployed into different roles to ensure vital services such as the community meals service and waste services could continue and I want to everyone for this, as sometimes the message can be lost in the height of an emergency situation. Normally, emergencies are experienced over shorter periods, but this has been relentless and we will continue to see the effects on our colleagues.

Will Mclean ~ For schools' staff, it was very difficult period in which staff responded by changing the way we have provided education for decades, through implementing innovative distance learning approaches. There was the immediacy of having to establish childcare hubs for keyworker children which were open over the weekend between 8am and 6pm, so beyond normal hours and in providing that, we had to work with school meal suppliers to ensure children had free school meals, so there was incredible commitment from the sect which led us to achieve this and everyone responded really well, led by headteacher and the whole school system seemed to come together, a real team effort. We still have the challenges of covid cases and children needing to isolate. Staff are being very flexible at the moment to respond to any changes that may occur.

- Are there any areas where we are really struggling, areas members may not be aware of?

Frances O'Brien ~ I would like to highlight that the increased demand for services has been phenomenal as we progressed through the pandemic. We saw an initial drop at the start of the pandemic, but we have seen a significant upturn in demand for services, a few examples being the number of Freedom of Information Requests we are receiving, complaints which are becoming stage 2 complaints and this has been putting significant additional pressure on services, in terms of responding to the incoming correspondence. I'd like to invite Mark to explain what's happening in the planning and highways arena.

Mark Hand ~ We have seen a significant increase in customer contact as we've progressed through the pandemic. Our workforce is quite young, so the challenges of home schooling and remote working had affects on the team. The construction industry wasn't deeply affected after the initial blip in the first lockdown, so planning services and development control services haven't been greatly affected in terms of their volume, but they had to change working practices by having virtual site visits and we've now recruited to some additional posts. In terms of highways, the reopening town centres was a piece of work that was significant and in addition to the day job, particularly when some staff were being redeployed. We are now working toward our plans for the future, but I'd like to offer a public thanks to our teams and to members for their ongoing support and patience.

- In your discussions you invariably have with colleagues in other authorities, is there any learning that you feel we can take on board?

Peter Davies ~ Taking us back to the start of the pandemic, we worked very closely with partners and stakeholder on civil contingencies and emergency planning. The ongoing and very effective communication of our Chief Executive and our role on the Gwent Strategic

Emergency Coordinating Group enabled us to capture some of the lessons in real time. There's also continued discussion with the Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Government and other networks so there's lots of information sharing and Frances and Will have highlighted some examples of our learning. There isn't a desire to rush to a new normal in our council, we're evolving our approach as we progress, taking on board views from staff, particularly in terms of the future use of our office space, but we have very open lines off comms with other councils. In the first question we referred to volunteering and the good social capital we witnessed at the outset of the pandemic and there is clear value in maintaining these networks and capitalising on the lessons we have learnt, so we don't just move back to doing things how we did previously but continue to adapt.

Will Mclean ~ We were working closely with directors of education across Wales and Welsh Government and as the five former Gwent councils because we needed to understand what was possible within the parameters of legislation, such as childcare hubs but also look at how to manage other things like lunchtimes, so it has been a collaborative effort There's such a high level of integration between teachers across different authorities so we've been able to look at common approaches but also build in local flexibility.

Carl Touhig ~ When we went into the first lockdown, the only service that we didn't provide for 6 weeks was the garden waste collection service. The HWRC's were closed nationally so we worked with Welsh Government to get those opened as soon as possible implementing the booking system, which was clunky at first, but has vastly improved, evidenced by over 160 000 visits since it was implemented. All of the grounds maintenance services and South Wales Trunk Road Agency (SWTRA) staff pulled together to deliver the waste services and this was greatly appreciated by the public. As we are coming out of the pandemic, the pressure for services is increasingly enormously. Staycations inevitably create more rubbish and we have noticed that the public are experiencing more issues within their local environment, whether that is the frequency of grass cutting, issues with street lights, potholes, waste inquiries, so there is increasing pressure on service provision.

Mark Hand ~ In terms of things that have worked well internally, I'm not sure if members are aware of this, but on a weekly basis, our communications team held a virtual meeting called the Cwtch, which provided staff with an update on covid from either the Chief Executive or another member of the senior leadership team and this offered support and guidance and answered staff's questions. We were an agile working organisation already, so that really helped us. The effectiveness of the Microsoft Teams software and the speed of the rollout enabled us to keep working and an example is how virtual preapplication meetings have been held, preventing travelling by stakeholders and consultants and we will continue with this where possible. Our colleagues in Property Services also enabled staff to work in a safe office environment via a bookable desk system and the opportunity for staff to come into the office and see other people from time to time was very welcome, as was the speed with which this was implemented.

Cath Fallon ~ In response to your question about how we have collaborated, we have referred to our interaction with our communities and how we were able to unleash our social capital in an unprecedented way to work with friends and neighbours to support our most vulnerable people, but we have also developed strong relationships with colleagues in different council services, health and social care being an example. We worked together to triage people to make sure we were giving the right service to the right person. The council also delivered over 6500 grants worth £40 million to Monmouthshire businesses and I want to thank the Business Resilience Forum for their help in identifying business because without their help, we wouldn't have been able to support as many businesses as we did. We had no team in place to do this, we had to establish one quickly and redeploy staff to work in it. We also have worked in close partnership with our Communications Team which was very effective in their shop Local campaigns and their work with our tourism service to encourage people to visit Monmouthshire but do so safely.

Eve Parkinson ~ We've made significant strides through meetings with the independent sector such as the domiciliary care and the nursing care sector, to share guidance and discuss matters such as Personal Protective Equipment and staff shortages. The meetings have been well attended, but it has highlighted that we need a consolidated partnership, because we cannot look at social care and the health board separately, it needs to be considered holistically. Peter alluded to the pressures and I feel staff have worked phenomenally well, but we didn't acknowledge fully the effect of the lockdowns on our residents and the winter months will continue to present those challenges.

- Thanks need to be given to the Chief Executive for his leadership during the pandemic because the challenges and pressures have been relentless. I feel the executive should have been invited to hear first hand of these challenges. I think we need an update report to capture ongoing challenges and to capture things that have worked for the better such as 'no Mow May' and what we will be taking forward as a consequence. For example, walking and cycling became an activity that many people spent more time doing through the pandemic, so are we now going to improve our walking and cycling networks through the Active Travel Plans? Another example, we hear that lots of staff are working from home, so will we still be expanding the carpark? I have several other questions, as follows:

- What have we done to praise staff and what are we doing to support staff who are exhausted? Have shielding staff returned? Some staff will have retired during this time or changed roles so are we filling these vacancies?

Eve Parkinson ~ In terms of thanking staff and raising staff morale, we have done lots of informal things on a local perspective ranging from afternoon teas, walking meetings and more formally, we have sent every social care colleague a personalised card in the post to thank them for all their work, recognising that not all staff have access to emails. We also had our own digital Cwtch coordinated at different times of the day to enable everyone the opportunity to join. In terms of vacancies in the sector, it's very challenging, and we are recruiting continuously, currently working on a deficit of 1200 care hours a week, with the independent sector facing similar challenges. In terms of PPE, we initially faced a number of challenges but I don't think we've had significant issues more recently.

Will Mclean ~ We all saw quite quickly that staff needed some support. Expectations from staff were very high and the normal time to plan was simply not there. To think you could implement remote learning in just a few weeks would usually take about 2 years to introduce, not a matter of weeks. The headteachers were able to access a former headteacher for guidance and support, a professional who could offer them support, over and above the usual routes. We met frequently with trade unions to discuss the many concerns during the pandemic. We had some extremely clinically vulnerable staff and we had to work closely with schools and our Human Resources Teams to support them. We've talked about culture and values today but the 'public service' value was very evident in our council.

Cath Fallon ~ The enterprise directorate has similarly thanked all of its staff and not forgotten those who don't access email, sending Christmas cards and as soon as permitted, we arranged team walks and informal opportunities for people to meet outdoors safely, recognising that home working can be socially isolating.

Carl Touhig ~ I personally addressed and sent cards to over 300 staff and I try to thank my staff as often as possible how grateful I am, but 18 months of pressure is building and when we miss a waste collection, please be patient. If the narrative could be changed to celebrating what we are doing rather than comparing us to our pre-pandemic service level, that would be very helpful.

- What will we be doing to support homelessness going forward?

Ian Bakewell ~ We have a real shortage of accommodation for the homeless. We are leaving no stone unturned as we have over 160 households waiting for permanent accommodation, some of whom will be in bed and breakfast accommodation. If we can get our prevention services right, it will stop the need for homelessness, so we are really focussing on this now and we have invested in more staff working on homeless prevention than pre-pandemic.

In terms of actions, we are working with housing association partners to maximise existing stock and we are looking at how we can use social housing differently, so asking the housing associations to offer more shared housing and more targeted groups such as 1 bed accommodation. Housing associations are buying more stock and we are trying to bring empty properties back into use as homes, not as simply accommodation.

We have long standing practice of engaging private landlords through the Monmouthshire Lettings Service to entice them into the sector and we now have a dedicated Monmouthshire Lettings Officer. Linked to private sector, we are making a concerted effort to survey retail businesses to gauge opportunities above retail and housing associations are keen to take on these, but we need to acknowledge these properties can present obstacles in terms of fire regulations, access, construction standards, space requirements. We will be presenting the Empty Homes Strategy to Adults Select Committee in November. We are also starting to have new conversations about the council purchasing properties and whether it would be feasible to start a development company to build properties, but these are not easy areas to take forward, yet we are giving them serious consideration.

Finally, we are also talking to voluntary agencies such as a church organisation who is willing to purchase a property for us to access, so although these are relatively small initiatives, we hope together, they can make some inroad into the problem of a lack of accommodation.

- The report is very comprehensive. My question relates to how we transition virtually overnight into an emergency responder. For example, in March 2020, we experienced severe flooding. How did we translate to being an active emergency responder and how smooth was that? I would like

Mark Hand ~ It's a good question. We entered the pandemic having just come out of another emergency situation. The pandemic didn't directly or significantly affect the flooding work, which continues, but it did compound it. We were able to access some bed and breakfast accommodation and we were able to deliver the sandbags but we had to do some things slightly differently. I just want to reassure members that work is ongoing ~ we have to update the Local Flood Risk Management Plan and we need to complete and publish the Section 19 Local Flood Reports and we are arranging some meetings particularly for Magor and Caldicot where there were some significant flooding issues. A new National Flood Plan Policy has been issued, which we are working through in conjunction with climate plans and our new Local Development Plan. We have some scrutiny workshops on highway matters and we'd like to schedule one on flooding.

- My question related to the ongoing challenges highlighted in paragraph 3.8 of the report ~ challenges such as HGV driver shortages. How many vacant posts do we have and has any research been done on why we can't attract and retain them?

Carl Touhig ~ We have a small shortage across front line services, but we are recruiting 6 drivers in waste services. The reasons are many; Covid, Brexit, supply chain issues and the fact that it is difficult for the public sector to compete with the private sector, given the recent hike in salaries by supermarkets and Amazon. We are seeing difficulties with staff shortages across

the board, not just in respect of HGV drivers. When the public see a missed waste collection, that's when the issues are under the spotlight.

- Has the Afghanistan crisis put additional pressure on our homelessness situation and how many Afghans have we housed?

We have made a commitment to support housing Afghans, but I don't think it has caused an extra pressure on our homelessness situation. I'm aware that 3 properties were put forward by housing associations, but I don't believe these have been taken up at this point. Those properties would have most likely not have been allocated for homelessness. We have put out an appeal to ask private landlords and property owners to help house Afghans and the response was very positive, so that provides us with another avenue of people we can engage with on provision for homelessness.

Chair's Conclusion:

The report provided by Emma was very comprehensive which allowed us to question so many areas. It has been highly beneficial to have the relevant Chief Officers and service leads here today to answer our questioning has covered a wide range of services. I hope this session has been as useful to officers in terms of standing back and reflecting on the learning as it has been to the scrutiny committee. We must recognise the tremendous efforts that have been made by all staff, but also to capture the learning that we can take forward.

We've considered the response and the lessons learnt and we acknowledge the challenges were significant. Today we have held officers to account but we also offer our thanks to all officers and we want to offer you our ongoing support. You have kept us informed every step of this journey and we truly thank you for that as we have been able to better support our residents. We would like the Cabinet to also consider this report and our record of this meeting to have the benefit of the insight that has been given to this committee this morning.

4. Budget Monitoring - Month 2

There are many links between this report and some of the discussions held so far. I apologise that you are receiving this report that presents the position in Month 2 in May, considered by Cabinet in late July but due to officer shortages and the summer break of meetings, it has not been possible to bring this to you any earlier but hopefully I can provide you with an updated position, particularly in respect of the Welsh Government Hardship Fund. I'd also like to apologise for an error in terms of the appendix on page 33 of the agenda which provides the full council position rather than the areas in your remit, but we will focus on these.

The overall forecast deficit on the revenue account is presented on page 23 of the agenda and reports a £9.02m deficit, but I feel it's important to explain this and explain which relate to our core service delivery and which relate to effects of the covid pandemic. The distinction is important because we have accounted from them in the hope of recouping some of the costs and lost income from the Welsh Government Hardship Fund. At the point this report was written, we weren't aware what monies we might receive, but we have now learnt that Welsh Government is continuing the fund through to March 2022, but there will be a tapering off of funding which need to be factored in.

The core focus for the finance team is detailed on Page 26 of the pack, highlighting the core service delivery deficit £2.5 million, which mainly comprises pressures associated with children's services demand and similarly in adult services, largely due to the need to recruit additional staff to meet increased demand. Fleet maintenance pressures are affecting the Passenger Transport Service budget and there are increased costs associated with complex additional learning

needs cases. Also there are costs associated with Landlord Services, due to the need to meet income targets. It's important to note that pressures are supported by the collection of income tax and capital expenditure, through capital receipts. It's not a sustainable way forward and we will need to consider this in the medium term financial plan.

In terms of services that fall under the remit of this committee, the forecast overspend is 2.6m but some of this is covid related and can be recouped and offset by Welsh Government funding. We do have some non-covid related overspends which need to be carefully managed by budget recovery plans. The officer talked members through each of the overspends in turn which were displayed on the screen.

The officer also presented the capital position, highlighting that the assumed break-even budget at month 2 is susceptible to change due to price increases across many areas and a fuller position will be presented at month 6. The chair thanked the two finance officers for their presentation of the report and invited questions from the committee.

Member Challenge

- A lot of the figures seem to be not achieved due to covid. In terms of car parks for example, I thought these were cost neutral, so how would the loss of use due to covid affect that budget?

With some services, we are budgeted to meet certain targets, so for example, school meals being served differently means take up of these will have affected the bottom line and present as a cost pressure. Car parking costs are used to offset other costs such as road safety and highway costs, so this did affect the budget and present as a pressure. We do need to have a certain level of pay and display parking to hit that income target.

- My question is about waste service provision. Now that social distancing is no longer required, I assume the additional vans required for waste collections services are no longer required.

Yes, you are correct, this cost will be recouped from the Welsh Government and should not affect the future position.

- Are the Civil Parking Enforcement staff back in their normal roles?

Yes, they are, some were shielding, and some were sick, but enforcement should resume now with a full complement of staff and we can report on this at month 6.

- Are we due to receive a grant for car parks or is it amalgamated in the hardship funding? We have a deficit in the car park budget due to income lost but it will be covered by the hardship fund.

The Deputy Chief Executive thanked the finance team for their hard work in trying to balance budgets during unprecedented times. He explained there has been significant reliance on the covid hardship fund and we have been suitably funded by that and without it, the position would have been untenable. We have a few significant risks, firstly in terms of the hardship fund as the money will taper during the last 6 months of funding, so for the current financial year, we are content we can continue to recover income but there is no expectation this fund will continue next year which does present us with risks. We will need to bear in mind that some of these issues won't just fall away. Leisure centres and the need for social distancing affects income generation and similarly with carpark revenues, so we need to understand what is covered, homelessness being a key example. We are significantly underfunded through the settlement

so post May 2022, there are clear risks to manage and mitigate. There are still core service overspends in adult services and additional learning needs, which bear heavily on the council's finances, so there are a host of issues to grapple with, whilst trying to set a budget for next year.

Chair's Conclusion:

The chair offered her thanks to officers for the comprehensive report and the additional context provided to assist members in understanding the latest budgetary position.

5. Burials and Cremations Member Report

Councillor Smith advised the committee that she had prepared a report on a subject that was very personal to her and was a matter she felt strongly about, in terms of the support available to people to plan such important services for loved one at the most difficult time of their lives when they are grieving. She asked whether the committee would be interested in tabling her report to a future select committee meeting, to which we could invite the relevant officers. The committee agreed that they would welcome the report being tabled to the next available meeting, in accordance with officer availability. The chair thanked Councillor Smith for her hard work in compiling this report and confirmed the committee would welcome a full discussion on the report.

6. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

7. Action list

8. Strong Communities forward work programme

The committee agreed to table the report produced by Councillor Smith on Burials and Cremations to a future meeting. The committee also agreed to schedule a workshop on flooding.

9. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

No additional items were raised.

10. Date and time of next meeting: Thursday 18th November 2021

The meeting ended at **12.26 pm**

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