

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 12th January, 2023 at 12.30 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Lisa Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillors: Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, Ben Callard, Ian Chandler, Su McConnel, Jackie Strong, Rachel Buckler and John Crook

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Maria Stevens, Jane Lucas and Tomos Davies

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

No submissions were received.

3. Local Toilet Strategy

David Jones presented the report and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Sara Burch.

Challenge:

There is no reference to Stoma-friendly accessible toilets – can that be included in the action plan e.g. signage on doors?

We aren't sure in the moment what adjustments need to be made but we are committed to ensuring all of our toilets are accessible to all, so will look into this matter. Other departments will be aware (e.g. Landlords Services); the requisite information from the Councillor would be welcome. As part of the action plan, we will provide proper signage.

The listings of available toilets is out of date e.g. the Baker Street Library in Abergavenny and the museum in Priory Street, Monmouth, both of which have closed. And there is no mention of the opening times of toilets – this would be very useful.

There is a link at the end of the strategy that should give this information, but we take the point that the list needs to be updated. The link isn't working though, which we will address.

There is no assessment of where there are baby changing facilities and whether they are in both female and male toilets – this is not addressed in the Integrated Impact Assessment.

These facilities are mapped in the source which the link accesses, mentioned above, but it will be reviewed with Data Map Wales this year, to give a clearer picture of what the facilities are, as

well as where. Baby changing for both sexes should be available as it's a Welsh Government requirement, but we will double-check.

Changing Spaces provision will be 'considered' – this is too weak a word, given our ambition and obligation to improve our facilities. Can something stronger be written?

Yes, this could be strengthened.

The survey says that 67% consider disabled provision to be inadequate. What will be done to address that – there is nothing in the strategy?

Access to disabled toilets can be a difficult area because getting to British Standards might cause the closure of some, as the dimensions might not be compliant. Landlords Services could advise better on that, but yes, the survey did show two-thirds felt they are inadequate. We mentioned Changing Spaces but any other disabled person could access those.

Any disaggregation in the survey between men and women or other groups about their satisfaction with the facilities would be very useful.

Welsh Government guidance was followed at the time as to what was in the survey, but we could potentially revisit user satisfaction, taking this point on board.

There is mention of considering making some toilets gender-neutral but this is not addressed in the IIA when considering impacts on minorities e.g. those seeking gender reassignment, etc.

Furthermore, there is a concern that if all toilets were made gender neutral there are concerns relating to lone females in locations like car parks – if considered, a full public consultation would be needed. Also, there are resource implications in providing 3 separate entrances.

Yes, this can be included for consideration, going forward.

It would be good to explore where there are gaps e.g. there is no public toilet in Skenfrith, where there are many visitors in the summer. How are we addressing such instances?

Due to the cost involved there probably won't be any new toilet blocks installed – recurring costs e.g. drainage, electric, as well as the initial build. We can actively engage with any private facilities in the area to ensure that the public has some toilet access. The quantity in the county is good overall i.e. there are 18 blocks and another 20 with facilities, but yes we need to ensure that they are in the right places. But a lot of feedback is very good e.g. regarding the disabled provision at Abergavenny Bus Station, and how surveys tend to skew towards negative feedback needs to be considered. But it is a valid idea to revisit the survey. Though we don't currently have the funds to build new blocks we will need to look at tourism hotspots in the county.

Are the opening times shrinking on the toilets we have? Closing early is an issue if the reason is a concern about drug-taking, as we don't close parks or other facilities for that reason.

The opening hours of our current provision aren't affected by advice from Gwent Police over anti-social behaviour, and they are flexible e.g. they will be extended during events such as Abergavenny Food Festival.

I disagree that there are toilets within walking distance of White Horse Lane. Would Council consider an agreement with Abergavenny Town Council to see if responsibility could be shared, or discuss whether there's a mechanism whereby they could be reopened?

It is unusual for the population size of Abergavenny for there to be as many toilets: Brewery Yard, Castle Street, the bus station, Wetherspoons, Morrisons, etc. When the matter was previously discussed with ATC, they were 'not opposed' to MCC closing White Horse Lane toilets. The negative comments as to its condition in the survey and the high figure that would

be required for repairs/refurbishment further explain its closure. It is also the toilets which Police identified as a particular location for anti-social behaviour. But the matter could be revisited by members.

The Severn Tunnel Junction point in the report is crucial. Keeping toilets free is very important. The baby changing point is also very important. When toilets do close, they can become a greater target for vandalism, so this needs to be addressed – will they be knocked down, e.g. the closure on the A40?

These are good points which we will bear in mind. Regarding the A40, as it is a trunk road responsibility falls to Welsh Government but we can refer that back to them and request an update.

Why is the estimated repair cost for Whitehorse Lane so high, at £93k?

The figures were arrived at by Landlords Services, having visited all of the toilets. This figure is indeed comparatively high – we are informed that there are problems with the roof and drains, but we can ask for further details.

Chair's Summary:

Overall, the committee is positive about the good range of toilet provision that we offer in Monmouthshire. Councillor Bryn raised a very important point about being Stoma-friendly, and good signage. Clarification is needed over baby-changing facilities in both men's and women's toilets. Councillor Chandler asked if the Changing Spaces wording could be stronger, and what is the Council doing to address the lack of disability provision across the county. During the recent call-in meeting, residents expressed concern over the suitability and difficulty of public toilets for changing disabled adults, so that needs to be considered. It would be helpful to know if men or women are completing the User Satisfaction Survey, and their ages. The idea of gender-neutral toilets should be explored and included in the Impact Assessment, but public consultation is suggested considering safety concerns for female users. Better signage is needed. Can we explore the areas in which there is a high number of visitors, but no toilets e.g. Skenfrith? Councillor Callard suggested exploring a shared responsibility with Abergavenny Town Council for White Horse Lane toilets, rather than closing them, as there are no other toilets nearby. Councillor John supports the toilets at Severn Tunnel Junction, and notes that keeping toilets free of charge is vitally important.

Dave Jones: the MCC hyperlink to opening times in the report needs to be fixed – **ACTION**

Dave Jones to contact Welsh Government about the toilets on the A40, as they are a target for vandalism – **ACTION**

Dave Jones will seek further information from Landlords Services about costs, particularly related to the high repair figure for Whitehorse Lane toilets – **ACTION**

4. Rural Broadband

Cath Fallon presented the report and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths.

Challenge:

A number of households still feel that they aren't getting broadband any time soon. It would be very helpful if members could know the places in each ward where broadband isn't set up, so that they can work proactively with officers.

In 3.20, there is a link to when and where we are building, which would give members the information on where Openreach full fibre is going. It is rarely that straightforward, however, so we have weekly meetings with Broadway for specific projects and can ask them to provide us with their rollout plans. So, if communities aren't being served as desired then we can get the update and start to create relationships with the engineers working in that area. Members can therefore check using the link or email the officer, who can then put members in touch with the provider.

Is there the same way to see the Broadway data as there is to see Openreach? Do they have a link?

We will provide members with the information for the Community Liaison point person for Broadway Partners, as such dialogue is more fruitful and direct than exploring website data.

There is a concern about how robust the plans are e.g. there is a resident who doesn't have full fibre because BT ran out just before her house. BT won't commit to addressing the problem so the resident can't get support for additional connection means and has been in that position for years. Will the figures for the county as a whole mean that some residents will still be in limbo in this way?

For this particular property, please contact the officers with the specific information and we will enquire with BT directly.

Rural residents are the key concern. How can we ensure, specifically, that the most deprived areas – in terms of connectivity – are the ones that get priority for new connections, especially as the same areas tend to suffer from black spots in mobile coverage?

We agree about focussing on digitally deprived/more rural areas. Because of that, we have been a testbed for a 5G project that has just concluded, looking at Raglan Castle and school and a farming environment. We are therefore at the forefront when there is an opportunity to be a testbed for alternative technologies, working very closely with Welsh Government. We are also aware that it is not always possible to get fibre to the cabinet in rural areas, due to the landscape – this is why we work with Broadway, as they use alternative technologies such as wireless, in which there is a connection to the cabinet but then beamed from mast to mast, or 'White Space', in which they use the old analogue TV signals for delivery, among others. We can't know where the difficulties are on a property-by-property basis, which is why we need to work together with members to solve these issues.

The report on the investment in Broadway came to Governance & Audit Committee, at which we were told that priorities have shifted, and our partnership vehicle with them is now unlikely to feature as a major part of their plans going forward?

We will pick this up and reply to the Councillor outside the meeting.

There are problems with BT charging individual premises for infrastructure – with a particular recent case as an example.

In this particular instance there was no problem with the connection to the property but there was a problem on site, to which we are seeking solutions, which resulted in excess charges.

Ogi provides fibre to premises but it is dependent on them being the internet provider, so there is a lack of competition with other providers. Is there a way to overcome BT Openreach's monopoly?

Where Openreach runs the ducting it has to be open to any broadband provider because much of it is publicly funded. Where there is significant private investment into companies like Ogi or

Broadway it is their ducting, and those private companies own the network. It is a very complex area.

Chair's Summary:

Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths thanked the officers for creating a record of significant improvement in the county over the years, and thanked the members for their questions and bringing to attention where there are gaps and areas for improvement.

Cath Fallon will provide members with the information for the Community Liaison point person for Broadway Partners – **ACTION**

Ian Chandler will provide Cath Fallon with specific information about the resident he spoke of, and their problem, and she will investigate the matter – **ACTION**

Cath Fallon will pick up Councillor Chandler's query about investment in Broadway Partners and reply outside the meeting – **ACTION**

5. Garden Waste Collection Service

Cabinet Member Catrin Maby and Carl Touhig presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Will there be alternative payment methods so there isn't a one-off fee? Is assistance possible for low-income families? Some councils don't charge for this service – is that true, and if so, how do they do that?

We don't what income will be until we start the scheme. We hope to set it at £50 based on what the consultation and survey came back with – if the survey is right then we are just going to make the £720k needed to run the scheme. If there is a change in that and we overachieve then we can look at other versions. If we achieve 17k bins this year in an overachieving budget we wouldn't want to put the bins up the following year for those customers, we would try to balance the books. We shouldn't overachieve anyway (we are not allowed to) and we don't want to charge residents more than we need to run a service. When we rolled out the bins there was concern that we would lose a lot of customers but they in fact increased by 2000 people.

It would be difficult with the Civica system that we have to do monthly or quarterly payments but it's something we could look at for the year after if we are overachieving. And, the year after, if we do overachieve we could possibly look at reductions for people on low incomes. the difficulty is that this year we won't know the customer base and we recognise that an increase to £50 from £28 is substantial.

Did introduction of a low-fee bin reduce flytipping?

We didn't see any negative effects in terms of flytipping. Changes in Waste services are always accompanied by the threat of flytipping that very rarely comes to the fore. People who flytip, generally, don't use our CA sites or council services anyway, and are therefore rarely affected by the changes that we make.

Should we more actively encourage home gardeners to compost? If there were a surplus in the budget could we provide people with the necessary equipment?

We will certainly take this on board. We provide cost-price bins through our reuse shops and water butts but this could be a way of assisting further and making them below cost price. These are the kinds of ideas that we like to look at through the scrutiny process in the coming year.

Can the figures be further explained e.g. £6 per customer, additional customers, possible costs up to £850k, etc.?

The £6 subsidy is from all households: every household is paying £6 through their council tax towards 14,000 customers using the garden waste scheme (40,000 households at £6 = £240k). Additional customers is one of the options we looked at if we do nothing i.e. if we put the service out again at £28 this year, it is likely that we will see an additional 2,000 customers based on what we have seen over the last two years. Those extra customers will put an extra £200k cost on the service because we will need an extra vehicle, but they will only bring in £56k of extra income based on £28 per bin. The main point is to say that, currently, we have expenses of £720k and an income of £480k. To meet the expenses with 14,500 customers, based on their responses, we need to charge £50. If they all come on board it will achieve £725k. Back-office costs and management fees haven't been included. If all 17,000 bins stay out in the service area, we could potentially achieve £850k but this is very unlikely given that 14% said they don't want to see cost increases and would prefer to cease the service. But, hopefully, with a strong customer base we will land somewhere between £720k and £850k, reducing the council subsidy which can be put back into other services.

If there is a reduction in the number of people taking up the service then surely you won't need as many staff and vehicles, thus reducing the costs? Is the 78% increase an over-estimate? If it's not clear what the customer base will be could there be two payments of £25, with the second geared according to the actual number of customers and vehicles, so people aren't paying more than is necessary?

Based on the 14% who said they didn't want the service if there were a cost increase, pushes us back to the £50 fee, which comes out at £725k. The risk of two separate payments is that everyone signs up for the first one but if many drop out of paying the second then the remaining customers will have to pay a second payment that is greater than £25 to make the service viable. If the 14% lived in areas that are difficult to reach then we probably could lose a vehicle, but in reality, they will be spread across the county, so we will still need the additional vehicle – we would need to lose 25% of customers in order to then lose a vehicle.

Could there be a scheme for home composting bins in an active way and letting people know how to do it in a simple way?

We promoted compost bins heavily 7-8 years ago. 10% of the county has home compost bins and is an area that we would like to look at more – potentially, if there is an overspend, we could also look at water butts, which would be very helpful. We will certainly try to promote the compost bins with videos etc. that are more appropriate to how people now prefer to receive information.

There are several concerns that should be considered: Why should someone in a one-bedroom flat and no garden, or someone who composts at home, subsidise someone with a big garden who chooses to opt into the service? How wise is recommending that we should peg future increases to RPI when we don't know if the cost of the service will go up with RPI? The timing of this report is also a concern – things should go to scrutiny before the final report is published.

We apologise for the route that this has taken, which was due to the timings of Scrutiny and Cabinet around Christmas, and getting the consultation document to where it needed to be. We will ensure that Cabinet knows what was discussed today – they will be added into the Cabinet report.

Do we also generate an income from the waste once it is composted, as fertiliser, and have those figures been considered?

The garden waste is treated at a farm in Abergavenny, where it is spread on the land. We purchase some of the material back and sell it through the reuse shops. Sending it to a plant that offered to give us some money back involved an extra £250k in costs but with the risk that we wouldn't achieve that income, so we think we have the best deal for our residents. The cost of treatment can't be included in the charges – it sits outside this. The only charge that we can make is for collection, so it doesn't form part of the £50, though if a profit were made from selling the compost, we would look to reinvest it into services, including garden waste.

Regarding the Integrated Impact Assessment and Protected Characteristics, the service is important for those who are unable to go to a recycling centre due to their age, but the mitigation for that is for them to go to a waste facility and collect a home composting bin?

Yes, that's an oversight, but we do have recycling wardens so for those that particularly struggle we could no doubt offer support by dropping the bin to them.

Chair's Summary:

Increasing the cost this much is hard to swallow – can we explore winter collections? Can we look at neighbouring councils, where the average cost of green waste is £12 – how are they doing that and where are we going wrong? Newport and Torfaen operate the service for free, whereas Monmouthshire will be 4 times the average price in Wales. The number of returning customers in April is therefore a concern.

Alternative payment methods were discussed e.g. direct debit, splitting the payment. It was asked whether wheelie bins reduce flytipping, but people paying for them tend not to want to flytip in the first place. Home composting should be encouraged; further education for residents should be explored, along with the use of water butts – depending on the figures next year, we could look at offering these. Cabinet Member Catrin Maby noted that in the coming year she would like information to be shared on home composting, particularly for town gardens. Clarity was sought about costings. It was asked if we generate an income once the garden waste is composted. It was noted that the scheme is meant to make things easier for older residents or those with a disability, but it is expected that they come to the waste transfer stations to collect home compost bins – this should be addressed in the Impact Assessment.

Carl Touhig will provide supplementary information for the Cabinet report about how the costs were arrived at i.e. a further breakdown, and to include detail of the time constraints and an explanation as to why it's come to scrutiny now – **ACTION**

6. Place Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

The meeting on 2nd February is at 2pm. Wednesday 29th March am is agreed for the Special meeting. 10am is agreed for the time of the meeting on 13th April.

7. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

Note that this is a live document: Democratic Services update this weekly.

8. To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 10th November 2022

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

9. To note the date of the next meeting as 3rd March 2023 and Special Meeting on 2nd February 2023 (Budget)

The next meeting is in fact 2nd March but will move to 1st March.

The meeting ended at **2.36 pm**.