

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Thursday, 28th September, 2023 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Lisa Dymock (Chairman)

County Councillors: Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, Tomos Davies, Jane Lucas, Jackie Strong, Tudor Thomas, Laura Wright, John Crook, Simon Howarth and Frances Taylor

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning

APOLOGIES: Councillors Maria Stevens and Paul Griffiths

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from Members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPJ0TiBx5c&list=PLLMqn4nAaFJAaDA9m3C2P8ZdJsca-bkSU&index=81

1. Declarations of Interest

Emma Bryn declared a non-prejudicial interest (has previously completed a form.)

2. Public Open Forum

A number of residents spoke, raising the following concerns:

- Suggesting that new housing being weighted heavily to Severnside conflicts with the aspiration to retain Monmouthshire's green spaces, especially given the Gwent levels
- Arguing that Magor will be seen as part of an urban corridor between Newport and Chepstow, threatening its rural status, and noting the existing shortage of green spaces for residents
- Suggesting that there be a more even spread of houses between Monmouth and Abergavenny
- Questioning whether it is sustainable for Severnside to have 21% of the county's population, with 1 out of 3 new homes set to be built there
- Stressing the deficit of open space in Magor and Undy, and that it has been overdeveloped for years, with untreated water already being allowed to flow into the SSSI and some homes already being victims of flooding

- Suggesting that being 'protection-led' rather than 'development-led' would be more in keeping with an environmentally focussed RLDP
- Noting the shortage of amenity areas around Langley Close, with a 2008 report already highlighting a deficiency of 14.4 acres of outdoor provision at that time
- Stressing the importance of retaining farmland and supporting communities e.g. the family who would be evicted from farming at Langley Close, and questioning putting development before the health of a community
- Highlighting that a previous council report stated that no development would take place on open land near or close to a motorway, yet this plan proposes to do so
- Stressing the importance of preserving the Gwent Levels and its unique landscape, expressing concern for wildlife, and arguing that the council's own Green Strategy is being ignored, particularly relating to the Green Infrastructure potential at Magor and Undy
- Noting that this plan contravenes Future Wales Policy 9, relating to biodiversity
- Arguing that previous Rockfield farm and Vinegar Hill developments were predicated on the relief road and Magor-Undy bypass going ahead, but were allowed to proceed and expand, and suggesting that there has not been enough collaboration with Newport Council over the impact of their developments given the joint implications for thousands more vehicles needing to access the M4 at Junction 23A
- Suggesting that there is not sufficient evidence to state that higher levels of growth will not affect the road network, and that building thousands of homes without the necessary infrastructure being in place first is not responsible
- Asking for Air and Noise Pollution Assessments for Magor and Undy, given that there is already an air quality problem from the M4 and B4245 traffic jams
- Reiterating infrastructure concerns, particularly regarding insufficient healthcare, shopping and leisure provisions in Caldicot, with residents from the new developments likely to travel elsewhere, and highlighting again the strain on the road network and lack of decent public transport
- Expressing concerns about flooding being exacerbated by further runoff from more developments, and the impact on air quality and biodiversity
- Proposing that social housing be built where it is needed, rather than concentrated in one place
- Expressing opposition to Monmouth being allocated a 230% housing increase, particularly compared to other sites only increasing in single digits, and concern for the implications for Monmouth in terms of poor public transport services, oversubscribed doctors and schools, and the challenge of having more sewage to treat given the existing phosphates issue in the Wye

3. Replacement Local Development Plan Preferred Strategy - To scrutinise the RLDP Preferred Strategy, including any proposed changes arising from the public consultation

Mark Hand introduced the report, Craig O'Connor delivered a presentation, and they answered the members' questions.

Key points raised by the Committee Members and other Councillors:

- Clarifying that there will be an easy-to-read version of the report for residents with dyslexia
- Asking if there are plans to allocate land for self-builds and whether consideration could be given to opening up MCC farmland and offering plots for rent
- Asking how Monmouth qualifies as a sustainable development considering its lack of public transport links
- Asking how further housing in Monmouth can be justified given the impact this will have on the A40 trunk road, which is already at capacity, and with residents having no option other than private car trips
- Challenging the notion that the bus services in Monmouth can be used to access work in Newport, Hereford or Gloucester as services are neither frequent nor reliable
- Asking if it is known how robust the phosphate removal will be in the improvements set to be made to the Waste Water treatment works, and whether the drainage networks will be able to cope with the additional capacity
- Asking how the Mounton Road site was selected over Bayfield, given the 72% best and most versatile agricultural land is there – should we not be developing around this natural resource that is in short supply
- Asking what the plans are to react to the increased traffic as a result of building an extra 270 houses in Monmouth, and where the extra children will go to school given that Osbaston primary is already at full capacity – asking whether new infrastructure will need to be built
- Noting that landscape in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty needs to be duly considered
- Seeking confirmation that there are no more brownfield sites that can be built on
- Reiterating the concern over the reliability and frequency of bus services
- Questioning whether we should go to the level of 5,400 new homes given the issues of climate and phosphates

- Asking whether the mitigation of phosphates by treatment works will be sufficient to take on more growth
- Noting the need to have jobs to match housing
- Asking whether minibuses could be provided for transportation to Overmonnow and Wyesham schools to alleviate the likely congestion caused by parents driving to school on rainy days
- Questioning whether the plan can be supported without a bypass for Chepstow and active travel measures, particularly as these were the concerns when the committee scrutinised the Forest of Dean's plan
- Highlighting infrastructure concerns: Welsh Government recommends considering adjoining local authorities; in Chepstow's case, this should include the houses being built in the Forest of Dean area and the traffic that would come into Chepstow from there
- Strongly challenging the consideration of Severnside, Caldicot and Chepstow as separate areas, especially given the traffic impacts amongst them
- Challenging the Mounton Road site being considered as an area for development given its proximity to Highbeech roundabout and that the council passed a motion to support studies for improvements to that roundabout – the development of Mounton Road surely prohibits any possible improvements being made
- Asserting that neither Bayfield nor Mounton Road can work without infrastructure improvements, which won't come from developers
- Noting that Planning application DC/2013/00571 for Bayfield was rejected largely on the basis of traffic jams in Chepstow, and therefore questioning why this same consideration should not be given to the Mounton Road site
- Suggesting that the site's importance in serving as a welcome to the county in terms of tourism will be diminished by further building
- Suggesting that the sites won't be viable without significant funding from the Welsh government, with millions needing to be spent on improving the Highbeech roundabout and M48 links
- For 'relationship to adjoining authorities' proposing that the council looks at English authorities as well – it would be shortsighted in only looking at the impact of Newport, for example
- Observing that as developers have to have a 50% profit level, if more profit goes into affordable housing there will be less for education and road improvements etc. that are needed to mitigate development

- Suggesting that the delivery of 50% affordable housing allocations won't happen without substantial money from Welsh Government, and without it the plan isn't sound
- Expressing concerns about phosphates and sewage capacity, especially given the age of many of the pipes
- Expressing disappointment and surprise that the Welsh Government letter does not include infrastructure and transport in its key areas
- Asking what modelling has been conducted about traffic volume and emissions on the A465 down to the Hardwick roundabout at Abergavenny, as there will likely be a bottleneck resulting from the development there
- Seeking reassurance as to why development on such a scale is proposed for the parcel of land by the A465 Hardwick roundabout
- Suggesting that Caldicot East can't be looked at in isolation from Severnside
- Stressing the lack of green space in Magor and Undy, and the need for caution in taking any more there
- Clarifying that the 100 MOD houses from the potential Caldicot East side won't affect the number needing to be allocated for affordable housing
- Expressing concerns about traffic on the A48 and B4245
- Needing to remember school places as well as infrastructure – seeking reassurance that the necessary developments will occur as part of this plan, alongside the housing developments
- Reiterating infrastructure concerns for Magor and Undy (especially doctors' surgeries), and the importance of preserving the open spaces there e.g. the area north of Rockfield, and not building any more developments
- Asking why the MOD situation needs to change given that there is lots of area for building properties inside the barracks at Caerwent
- Requesting that before any further decisions are made about development in the Blenheim area and at Rockfield a meeting could be held with all the councillors concerned
- Suggesting that while 50% social housing might be difficult it is important that the RLDP be aspirational
- Welcoming having a basis for getting people on housing ladder, noting that with the importance of growth and the problem of an ageing county, a mix of ages is needed

- Stressing the need to hold farmers to account considering the development of huge poultry farms in Monmouthshire and Powys and the phosphates problem in the Usk and Wye
- Questioning that development in Magor and Undy has opened up land for the public, and asking where it is
- In reference to 3% of the county as a whole being developed, asking what proportion of Magor and Undy and Severnside are developed
- Suggesting that there seem to be too many compromises and a lack of balance in the plan
- Asking about consistency e.g. in the last plan Caldicot wasn't considered sustainable, and clarifying what has therefore changed
- Reiterating the deficit in public transport infrastructure overall (though acknowledging improvements in Caldicot and Chepstow services), noting that bus services are less frequent now than in the last planning period and that trains are more expensive than in other parts of Wales
- Asking what is being done to make communities integrated and accessible e.g. there is still no route between Magor and Undy and Rogiet, after many years of discussion
- Reiterating concerns about the narrow focus of the affordable housing strategy, and expressing doubts about delivery
- Asking how the RLDP will lead to improvements in the quality of life of the elderly in Monmouthshire
- Expressing scepticism about the promotion of sustainable communities as, for example, there have been no takers for the economic part of the land in Magor and Undy, which was allocated in 2014, and expressing concern that this land will also be allocated for residential development
- Asking what is being done to protect the integrity of the Gwent Levels
- Noting that amenity spaces in Magor and Undy are in short supply and asking if they can now be expanded as there won't be an M4 bypass, and stressing the importance of this land in mitigating flooding and its impact on the levels
- Suggesting that the plan isn't consistent with the Climate and Nature Emergency declared by the council, and that focussing on net-zero homes is not aspirational enough

- Asking for confirmation as to whether the Glan Yr Afon site is moving forward, and proposing that the other 4 sites around Usk not be included (the officer corrected that candidate sites are not being considered as part of this report, however)
- Stressing that the understandable need for affordable housing shouldn't be at the detriment of existing residents, nor further saturate gridlocked areas
- Expressing grave concerns about flooding, with the Chair in possession of evidence that the David Broome Event Centre area has flooded, and welcoming a walkaround with officers on the site, should the Crick Road development go ahead
- Questioning the transport links in Caldicot and noting the reduced bus services in the area, observing that it has been impossible for some residents to get buses from Portskewett due to a road being closed
- Noting in particular that with development there will be an increased need for people to get to work, citing the need for a station at Portskewett which has been discussed with the Public Transport Manager, especially as most jobs for residents will likely be outside the area
- Expressing concern about attracting businesses and employment opportunities
- Asking for confirmation that Gypsy & Traveller sites have been taken into consideration (the officer noted that these are part of the Deposit Plan and are therefore not covered by this report)
- Regarding amenity space, noting that Portskewett is similar to Magor and Undy and therefore if Crick Road goes ahead, those residents will be in the same position
- Observing that the A48 junction for Crick Road is a pinch point. In the case of a 7.5-ton vehicle, another vehicle can't get past – this is a concern, especially with another 850 houses, as the traffic will come on to B4245 where there are already high volumes, with Magor and Chepstow already being bottlenecks
- Expressing concern about school places given that ARW school is already oversubscribed, and reiterating concerns about the area becoming gridlocked
- Noting that with a lack of burial sites in the area, consideration needs to be given to where people will be buried
- Noting that Caldicot town centre needs improvements, and that if 850 houses come in, the people will travel to Newport, Bristol and Cardiff
- Suggesting that the previous LDP failed as it didn't deliver on affordable housing, and that the council should still explore having its own development company to deliver housing

- Noting the importance of exception sites for delivering affordable housing, and the possibility of urging companies to look at these before giving away brownfield sites
- Asking about the status of the council's toolkit that was previously used in dealing with matters of affordable housing
- Highlighting that there needs to be the right balance of affordable housing or developers won't build, and that some growth is needed in the county
- Noting that the MOD staff in Crickhowell take a lot of rented properties from private landlords, so caution needs to be exercised with the MOD
- Suggesting that 50% affordable housing is not currently achievable

Chair's Summary:

The committee has discussed the report at length, with members' concerns focussing on the following aspects:

- Concerns around infrastructure and the potential impacts on existing residents, and from new residents coming into the area – transport, and education and health capacity
- There are some serious concerns around the saturation of smaller areas: 850 houses are proposed for the south of the county and 607 houses proposed for the north. Considering we are such a large county it is suggested that those be spread out more evenly
- Members would like to see a strategy that is not so car dependent. They want the road network to be improved but not be relied upon so heavily. As these proposals stand, residents will have to rely on car transport
- Concerns about the MOD and what it means for local residents
- The suggestion that we be more creative: to look at exception plans which will work with Affordable Housing organizations
- Members felt we need to protect agricultural land
- Members want to explore whether there are any more brownfield sites across the county – are we sure that we've exhausted those possibilities
- A member asked what modelling had been undertaken to look at traffic volumes increasing around certain areas

- Concerns about the lack of active travel in the south of the county
- Doubts that the proposals align with the council's declaration of a Climate and Nature Emergency
- Strenuous concerns about the impact of the proposals on the Highbeech roundabout at Chepstow and a resultant increase in congestion and traffic problems in that area

Due to these concerns, the committee did not endorse the recommendation.

4. Place Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

The members' attention was drawn to the possibility of School Meals Procurement coming to the committee in December or March, the EV Charging Strategy having been added to 11th January, and the Workshop on 10th October still going ahead.

5. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed, proposed by Councillor Strong and seconded by Councillor Bryn.

7. Next Meeting

Thursday 9th November 2023 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **1.54 pm**.

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