

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Monday, 15th January, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ann Webb, John Crook substituting for County Councillor Laura Wright

Also in attendance: County Councillor Ben Callard, Cabinet Member for Resources

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Paul Matthews, Chief Executive
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Ian Saunders, Chief Officer Customer, Culture and Wellbeing.

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Laura Wright substituted by County Councillor John Crook

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Month 6 Budget Monitoring

Cabinet Member Ben Callard, Peter Davies and Jonathan Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Tyrone Stokes, Will Mclean and Jane Rodgers.

Key questions from members:

- How is the overspend in Adults Services now going? How are Care costs being mitigated?
- What can be done about the very high ALN transport costs?
- Can you clarify what effect capital slippage will have on increased costs?
- Can you explain in more detail the situation with school meals?
- If reserves are utilised until there is no more flexibility, how are we going to be able to rework services so that they are on a surer footing?

- We have used reserves to rework services to put them on a sustainable footing but the Month 6 overspend forecast worsened against Month 5. So, is the approach therefore unsustainable?
- What is meant by 'there remains a severe risk to the financial sustainability of the council in the near term'?
- Regarding Social Care, can we further understand the issues around demand and complexity, and how it can be managed, especially given the older demographic?
- What messages are we putting out to delivery partners, particularly GPs, in this period of high demand on the Health and Social care system and can more be done to manage risk closer to home and keep frail older adults in the community, whether in residential care or at home?
- The report shows Business Growth and Enterprise savings and Highways and Flooding savings, but the public might ask that those be areas that are prioritised given that it is a very challenging time for businesses, and there are problems with roads – what would the answer to them be?
- Are we able to claw back the past cost of continuing healthcare?

Chair's Summary:

The recommendations were approved and the report moved.

4. Asset Management Strategy

Cabinet Member Rachel Garrick and Peter Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Nicholas Keyse.

Key questions from members:

- What are the particular areas for concern that the council needs to concentrate on?
- There is a very large, empty car park at Severn Tunnel Junction, predicated on improvements and developments. If those are severely delayed or don't happen, what financial risk would the council be exposed to? – **ACTION (written response from officers)**
- How are we scoping the reutilisation of our building assets to assist us in developing more authority provision for social care, particularly Children's Services?
- How well-resourced and capable is the department to acquire assets if independent providers exit the market?
- P21, under the objective to utilise community assets to optimise social value, the strategy says, 'Work to ensure equalities and accessibility are fully considered in development of service area asset plan' – is the word 'considered' not too weak? Should this particular behaviour be further up in the list?
- Can we see Changing Places provision in every town?
- Have we got any horticulture farms in the 24 farm holdings? Do applicants score higher if they are pushing forward more sustainable and environmentally friendly farming ideas?
- We aren't getting a 2% return on Newport Leisure Park – how do we propose getting there?
- There are concerns about risk from the reduction in capital maintenance programmes and a potential inconsistency in our approach. With the recent situation at Innovation House as an example, are we only looking at plastering going forward, due to budgetary restraints?
- With vacant properties, is the agent fully aware of what we want for the future? We need to have an approach where we can be easily approachable for incoming tenants.

- Is it appropriate that Fig. 15 is included in this report?
- Is there a list of all registered assets that is accessible to residents?
- There are two Fig 1.s in the report – the numbers should be rearranged – and initials used throughout the report need to be explained – **ACTION (Councillor Bond to send list of suggested corrections to officers)**
- Newport Leisure Park is stated as on the border – is it not wholly in Newport, and this therefore needs to be changed?
- Are you subject to recruitment freezes currently, and are there skills gaps in relation to recruitment for areas that you have concerns about?
- Is the Cabinet Member happy with departmental capacity at this time?
- The report is strong on what we've done but there isn't much information on what the strategy will be for the assets going forward?
- Would the Council be in a better position divesting into a joint venture with a retail expert and using liquidated capital for other purposes?
- Would it be more useful for residents to have the developments grouped around our individual market towns?
- The strategy for Community Asset Transfers still seems unclear?
- Is deciding strategy on a case-by-case basis by definition not a strategy?

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and officers. The recommendations and report are moved.

5. Asset Investment Policy

Cabinet Member Rachel Garrick and Peter Davies introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Jonathan Davies, Nicholas Keyse.

Key questions from members:

- There could be concerns that there's enough relevant expertise in dealing with commercial and retail investments – can we have more clarity on that, and the decision-making process that the report mentions?
- £30.7m of the £50m borrowed fund has been spent on the investments, what's the situation with the remaining £19.3m?
- Can you explain the 'sinking' fund?
- Who is responsible for the control of these investments and portfolio? Can we have more information on how it will be done?
- Can you confirm the meaning of the phrase 'seems to infer' on p151?
- P150-2, the return on Castle Gate is less than 2%; the criteria mention community benefit – can room be made for the Caldicot Musical Theatre Society?
- How much is in the Sinking fund, and how much room is there in it?
- To clarify, the occupancy rate was 85.6% as of November?
- 2.2, to clarify the geographical scope of the policy, would this give us the flexibility to look at authorities within the Western Gateway?
- Are retail parks an example of areas in which we might consider disinvesting, in part, in order to have a joint ownership with a group in order to free up capital that could be put to more specific community or business support?

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for their continued excellent work. It is good to see in 5.2 the improvement in the performance of the investment portfolio and that the two large retail investments are projected to generate a net surplus after borrowing costs in 24/25. The recommendations were endorsed and the report moved.

6. **Next Meeting: 30th January 2024**

The meeting ended at **12.30 pm**