

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the Special Economy and Development Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk on Thursday 4th December 2014 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor S. Jones (Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Dovey, D.L. Edwards, R.J.C. Hayward, J. Higginson, J.L. Prosser, A. Watts, S. White and A. Wintle.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

County Councillors P. Murphy and R.J.W. Greenland.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Mrs. J. Robson	-	Head of Finance
Ms. S. Hayward	-	Organisational Development Lead
Mr. M. Howcroft	-	Assistant Head of Finance
Mr. I. Saunders	-	Head of Leisure, Tourism & Heritage
Ms. D. Hill-Howells	-	Head of Community Led Delivery
Mr. R. Jones	-	Improvement Support Officer
Mr. B. Winstanley	-	Acting Estates Manager
Mr. R. Simpkins	-	Business Development Manager
Ms. N. Edwards	-	Food & Tourism Strategic Manager
Ms. R. Rogers	-	Curator, Abergavenny Museum and Castle
Mrs K. Beirne	-	Chief Officer, Enterprise
Miss H. Ilett	-	Scrutiny Manager
Mrs N. Perry	-	Democratic Services Officer

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

County Councillor R.J. Higginson declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest, pursuant to the members' code of conduct as a Governor for Durand Primary School and as a member of Caldicot Town Council.

County Councillors D. Dovey, A. Watts, D. Evans, D. Edwards, and J. Prosser declared personal and non-prejudicial interests, pursuant to the members' code of conduct as Town Council members.

County Councillor S. White declared a personal and non-prejudicial interest, pursuant to the members' code of conduct due to being the owner of the farm related to item 3.

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We received a report, for scrutiny and comment, from the Head of Finance which outlined the proposed capital budget for 2015/16 and the indicative capital budgets for the three years 2016/17 to 2018/19.

Members were advised to scrutinise the draft capital budget proposals, the issues were highlighted in the attached appendices of the report.

We were informed that the report linked heavily with the Risk Assessment, to be presented at Item 6.

During discussion members were invited to ask questions and the following points were noted:

- A Member expressed concern at the proposal to consider the use of receptacles rather than bags for waste management. We were informed by the Cabinet Member that the position with recycling and waste management service was due to a move by Welsh Government to prefer kerbside recycling. The current position with Welsh Government was that provided we could demonstrate the service provided was effective we would continue in the same manner. The proposal of not providing the grey bags would save £80,000. The waste management proposals would be further scrutinised by Strong Communities Select.
- A Member questioned if there was enough money available for the increase in demands for the Disabled Facilities Grant. We were informed that that level of funding had been fixed due to the priority being given to 21st Century Schools.
- A Member sought assurance on the exploration of the alternative uses of surplus assets, before the assets were approved for sale. We were informed that officers looked at internal uses for the building in the first instance, and to confirm if it would be retained to generate income, before being disposed of as a capital asset. Town Teams and local representatives were consulted under the Right To Bid system.
- A concern was expressed if the figure relating to Llanfoist Bridge was realistic. It was explained that the figures were indications made by the Highways Officers as a likely liability.
- A Member expressed concern that we should not be funding the Wye and Valley Usk Walks.
- With regards to the ACM and Abergavenny regeneration, we were informed by the Head of Community Led Delivery that the court had ruled that compensation costs relating to High House Farm would be in the region of £1,000, not the estimated £6,000,000 as stated in the report. The overspend of £82,000 would relate to the cost of defending legal claims on the cattle market site.

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- It was noted that appendix 1b was omitted from the report.*
- A Member queried the figures relating to Monmouth Comprehensive School. We were advised that questions regarding the schools should be directed to Children and Young People Select, as the officers were not present to answer questions. The Chairman requested that the Committee received further information to enable the Committee to discuss.
- A Member required further detail on the bungalow at King Henry VIII School. The bungalow was being used by Social Services as a contact centre, as the school had declared it surplus to requirements.

Members thanked the officers for the readable and informative report.

4. BUDGET PROPOSALS 2015/16 TO 2018/19

We welcomed a report from the Head of Finance to provide detailed proposals on the budget savings required to meet the gap between available resources and need to spend in 2015/16.

Members were recommended to scrutinise the budget savings proposals and consider what alternative proposals could be submitted by 14th January 2015. The Committee were asked to note Cabinet's intentions to continue to work on the areas required to balance the Medium Term Financial Plan.

Members were made aware that the reduction in funding for next year was 4.3%.

The budget process had been brought forward in order to give officers more time, when the budget had been agreed, to ensure savings would be implemented for a full year.

During discussion following the report, we noted the following points:

- We were informed that in terms of putting our business case to Welsh Government, we were one of 22 authorities who collectively put their pressures through to Welsh Government. Cases had been put forward in the past but we had not seen direct consequences from those.
- Ideas that came in from members of the public were continually looked at and implemented where possible.
- The funding was based on a complex formula and, as all authorities had the same issues, the funding cuts were all relative.
- The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that we send a response to the settlement to Welsh Government every year, but to no avail.
- A Member raised a concern that in Chepstow there was a serious issue of the catchment area not providing the number of pupils to take forward to a 21st Century School. The Cabinet Member stated that there was a considerable amount of work being done in regards to catchment areas. Chepstow School

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had been successful in increasing numbers. There remained a problem in Chepstow School with regards to budget. Further information would be provided through Children and Young People Select.

- A Member requested clarification on the settlement figure in relation to population figures. The Head of Finance explained that Welsh Government had announced in June the reduction of settlement to be 4.5%. The size of the settlement needed to be shared between all the authorities and was calculated by a formula, taking into several indicators. The share would be relative.
- The Committee were informed that previously Audit Committee had looked into, in detail, school deficits and governors would be called in to provide explanations.
- A Member made a point that additional housing increased the income from Council Tax, which would be a benefit to Monmouthshire.
- The Tourism Manager explained that the TIC in Abergavenny was a prime example of something intended to be replicated through other towns.
- A Member sought assurance that the Community Hub being proposed for Abergavenny would not be decided until February 2015. In response the Head of Community Delivery explained that we needed to bear in mind that the mandate would be going to decision in January so would therefore be an earlier decision than February. However no decision would be made on the staffing component of the Hubs and library service until the budget mandate had been agreed or not.
- A Member queried if extra staff would be beneficial in the Council Tax department, to ensure all debts were collected. We were informed by the Cabinet Member that we collected 99.9% of all Council Tax payments with the current level of staff. The Head of Finance confirmed that one extra person was now in place in the recovery section concentrating on higher end debts.
- A Cabinet Member informed the Committee that Monmouthshire had the lowest ratio of staff to population in the whole of Wales. The settlement was unfair but unfortunately we could not change it.

5. SERVICE AREA BUDGET MANDATES

We received a report detailing the service area budget mandates for scrutiny from the Head of Leisure, Tourism and Heritage. We were informed that most of the savings would be delivered from Leisure Centre led services. We heard the proposals before the Committee were invited to ask questions.

During discussion the following points were noted:

i) Development of Leisure & Outdoor Education Services

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- A Member questioned if the quality of cleanliness would suffer if staff cuts were made. Reassurances were given that checks were made regularly to maintain a high level of cleanliness.
- It was suggested that the income generated could be more ambitious. The success achieved to date could be pushed further.
- A Member requested further information regarding the successes achieved from the fitness suite and pool in Monmouth. It was confirmed that the success resulted from providing quality facilities in the first instance. The 3G pitch in Caldicot was also expected to be highly popular and provide excellent services.
- The Chair noted that the Committee were pleased with the work and progress in this area, and welcome further updates to enable further discussion on leisure services.

The Committee resolved to support the mandate

ii) Museums, Castles, TICs and Tourism

- A Member raised concern regarding the development of volunteers as a form of cheap employment, and that this could be detrimental to the quality being provided. Several Members felt that this was not the case, that many volunteers had a wealth of knowledge which would be invaluable to the service. It was confirmed by the Tourism Manager that all ambassadors would undergo a series of training days.
- The Chief Officer for Enterprise confirmed that there was a need to look at the demographic coming forward for ambassador training, and there was a wide spread of people coming forward. We heard that it was important to discover how best to employ the resources to provide the best outcome.
- We were informed that there was a challenge in how best to manage volunteers. This was being looked into through Enterprise. It was intended to create an internal post to coordinate the volunteer programme.
- It was noted that there was a risk in the increasing reliance on volunteers.
- A Member queried if it would be possible to liaise with Wye Valley / Gloucestershire in order to save the TICs.
- The information kiosks were provided with information by local businesses, who were encouraged to keep this information up to date.
- The Cabinet Member reiterated that over the next few years there were huge savings to be made. This directorate alone needed to make a 20% cut. If Members did not find the suggestions in the mandates acceptable it would be difficult to determine where the cuts would be made. It was felt that TICs were not sustainable alone, and that Hub would be the best way forward for the long term.
- A Member queried if there was appropriate marketing and advertising of the wedding facilities available throughout the County.

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- It was felt that the castle in Abergavenny provided excellent exhibitions and congratulations were given to the Curator. It was expressed that the windows were in desperate need of refurbishment.
- The Chair agreed that the figures generated from weddings in the County seemed low and with the right marketing could generate a higher income. It was suggested that Officers could work with marketing students through universities.
- One Member expressed that even though he agreed with the content of the mandate it was felt that too many items were being combined into one mandate.
- The Chief Officer explained that the mandate could benefit from better context. It was recognised that there were a clash of items but that it was a transition mandate. A clear proposition providing separation would be expected by the same time next year.
- It was noted that museums were a valuable asset, but that it may not necessarily mean that the Local Government was best placed to run them.

The Chair noted that the key items the Committee would like addressed in order to support the mandate were:

- The structure of the mandate.
- The risk of over reliance on volunteers.
- The importance of being innovative and ambitious in the tourism industry.

The Committee agreed to support the mandate.

iii) ICT Savings

- The disaster recovery service ensured if something critical occurred there would be no disruption to service.
- In terms of the review, there was a positive result. The levels of savings would result in no reduction in service.
- A Member suggested that it would be helpful for Members to receive an invitation to attend SRS in Blaenavon, in order to establish a further understanding of the system.
- There was a possibility to market the software to other Local Authorities.
- Developing our own software would avoid the cost of license fees.
- The Cabinet Member stressed that the development of the bespoke software for Social Services had been very successful.
- A Member raised a concern that by bringing the IT system in-house there should be sufficient back up in place.
- The Organisational Development Lead Officer informed the committee that CMC² developers were commissioned to maintain the system for a small fee.
- Clarification was required on the membership of the Digital Board.

Following a vote, Members resolved to support the mandate.

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We received the Strategic Risk Assessment to provide Members with an overview of the current and future strategic risks facing the authority.

Members were required to identify whether the risks identified within the report were the most significant issues the Authority faced over the following three years.

The risk assessment ensured that

- Strategic risks were identified and monitored by the Authority
- Risk controls were appropriate and proportionate
- Senior managers and Elected Members systematically reviewed the strategic risks faced by the Authority.

During discussion Members agreed that the report should provide more detail. It was noted that during the next meeting of the Committee the risk log would be more detailed. It was requested that the Asset Management would be looked into further. Another area of concern was 21st Century Schools and whether Chepstow Comprehensive would be moving in the same direction.

The Scrutiny Manager advised that the Committee needed to be satisfied that Cabinet and Officers had taken the necessary measures to mitigate risk, and that an obvious area for further scrutiny would be SRS.

It was noted that the Risk Log was a living document and could be updated at any time.

The Committee accepted the report, but agreed it would provide more detail in January, specifically on Asset Management, and ICT.

The meeting ended at 1.30pm.