

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Adults Select Committee held
at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Tuesday, 26th April, 2016 at 10.00 am**

PRESENT: County Councillor P. Farley (Chairman)
County Councillor R. Harris (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: R. Chapman, R. Edwards, P. Jordan, A. Wintle
and D Hudson

Also in attendance County Councillor(s): V. Smith

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Claire Marchant	Chief Officer Social Care, Health & Housing
Nicola Perry	Democratic Services Officer
Ian Bakewell	Housing & Regeneration Manager
Alan Burkitt	Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language
Karen Durrant	Private Sector Housing Manager
Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Nicola Needle	Changing Lives Lead
Owen Wilce	Programme Lead - A County That Serves

APOLOGIES:

Councillors M. Hickman and P. Jones

1. Declarations of interest

County Councillor declared a personal, non-prejudicial under the Members Code of Conduct as a Board Member of Monmouthshire Housing.

2. Public open forum

There were no members of the public present.

3. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the Adults Select meeting held on 1st March were agreed and signed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

The minutes of the Adults Select meeting held on 8th March were agreed and signed as an accurate record by the Chairman.

In doing so it was noted that there were repeated typographical errors in the spelling of Mrs Hudson's name. This has since been resolved through the Modern.Gov system. It was also requested that care be taken not to confuse co-opted members with County Councillors.

4. Community Connections Befriending Scheme ~ Discussion on how the "Community Connections Befriending Scheme" is assisting people to avoid social isolation

We welcomed Miranda Thomson, Manager, Community Connections Befriending Scheme, who was in attendance to provide Adults Select Committee information on the service.

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Community Connections Befriending Scheme is a lottery funded project to address social isolation and loneliness for older people across Monmouthshire. It is a Bridges Community Centre project, an independent local charitable organisation based in Monmouth. The scheme recruits volunteers and matches them up with people who are isolated, also supporting them to get out into the community.

The scheme had been running for and a half years and were coming to the end of the lottery grant, and were applying for further funding.

Members viewed a short film presentation and were invited to comment.

Member Scrutiny:

The Changing Practice, Changing Lives Lead added the outcomes of working with the Community Connections scheme had been so positive it was being recommended to roll-out to remaining Hubs so that the whole County would benefit from the positive approach.

An officer commented that for us as a Council, the benefits of the collaboration had provided The County that Serves team with an element of confidence in terms of the way we enable and support volunteers.

County Councillor P. Farley declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest as trustee of Chepstow Senior Citizens Welfare Trust.

Members commented that the scheme highlighted that there are many very vulnerable people in the County, and questioned if volunteers were aware of the background and needs of the vulnerable adults. In response we heard that in terms of preparation volunteers received an induction, DBS check if working one to one with a vulnerable adult, needed to provide references, and received training. The training had been approved by MCC officers. The training and support would also be adopted by the upcoming car scheme. Volunteers who drive as part of befriending would have to provide copies of their documents and would be given a template letter for insurers. Occupational Therapists were on hand to provide advice with regards to getting in and out of vehicles, and how best to support people.

A Member suggested that where there was on to one care, two people may be beneficial to provide extra support.

A Member questioned what the outcome would be if the funding application was unsuccessful. In response we heard that the scheme would not be able to continue in the same way, as the funding would employ staff and without project coordinators it would not be possible to meet and support the volunteers. The scheme was looking at how to support existing social groups should the funding not be granted, and if other agencies could adopt the one to one relationships. It was hoped to receive funding through the Independent Care Fund. It was noted that the application was for £250,000 funding, to cover a two year project, and would employ four members of staff.

A Member asked if there were other similar organisations across Wales and England, which we may be in contact with. We heard that there was contact with other organisations, and there were 22 similar schemes across Wales, mainly under large national charities. There was definitely an increased interest in befriending.

It was noted that loneliness and isolation had a huge impact on health and was considered the equivalent to smoking and obesity.

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Members noted concerns that with the encouragement of independent living, the more the befriending service would be beneficial. In the long term the scheme would assist to alleviate special mental health issues.

The Chief Officer of Social Care and Health added that the Authority sees befriending as part of a whole approach around community coordination moving into something place based. There may be a slight difference in different communities depending on resource, the capacity around volunteering, and a case of being creative around resources. Also need to look at specific grant funding to maximise the resource into the County, and opportunities channelled by the health board. Proposals were in place and would be advised in a month if successful. The other critical partner was around primary care and taking advantages of partnerships with GPs and others within the neighbourhood care network.

It was questioned that should the application for funding be unsuccessful, how much we would miss out on not having the continuation of the service. In response we heard the importance of befriending, and how it plays a big role in keeping people well and happy. It was difficult to provide a cost benefit analysis.

We heard there was a telephone befriending service on an informal basis.

The Chair expressed that there were some serious gaps to consider. Across Monmouthshire as a whole there were elements not mentioned. It was noted the Older Persons Champion, County Councillor G Burrows had been unable to attend today, but there was also supposed to be an Older Persons Coordinator, which seemed to be a vacant position. There is a patchwork around key organisations which were part of the infrastructure, such as Action 50+, strong in some places but not across the county. As a County Council we need to do a lot better at a strategic level

The Chair expressed that he would recommended that the County Council adopts a stronger approach across the County for a number of reasons, one being to ensure that no part of the County is left behind. It was important to recognise the issues surrounding funding, and a question was raised if the County Council should consider making a more focused investment. With lots of strengths in different areas, this should be translated into a strategic model.

Officers explained that they were using the Social Care and Wellbeing Act as a driving force in well-being in its broadest sense, and looking into how to get behind the aspirations of the Act.

The Chair thanked Miranda Thomson and officers for the stimulating discussion and acknowledged the excellent work.

5. Review the Common Allocation Policy (Housing)

Context:

We received a report from the Private Sector Housing Manager in order for Members to consider the proposed amendment to the common allocation policy between the Council and Monmouthshire, Melin and Charter Housing Associations.

Key Issues:

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Although no longer owning any housing stock, the Council still retains a statutory responsibility for the strategic identification of housing need and leading on all local actions to effectively respond to this need. In this regard, the [Monmouthshire] Housing Register is still a legal responsibility of the Council.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member commented that agricultural work was more often done with machinery, and it was more the case that dairy farmers who would need housing closer to the farm, which may be the reason for less need to re-house agricultural workers today.

It was questioned if, in view of the fact, as the policy had been approved by the relevant local housing associations was any further input necessary. The Chair advised that we were in receipt of the report for advisory purposes.

It was noted that the Committee were at a disadvantage as they had not received the appendices with agenda despatch. The Committee agreed where further information was necessary the Chair would be addressed.

In response to a question raised we heard in terms of Syrian refugees MCC had been asked to identify a property for a family due to arrive in June or July. MCC have agreed to house 20 families over 20 years.

A Member questioned how the high rent in the private sector could be addressed. Officers explained that in the proposed changes to the allocation policy, where people were working but struggling it would be possible to claim discretionary housing payment, and move to band 3, medium housing need. The Housing and Regeneration Manager added that part of the responsibility of the new Private Sector Housing team would be to get to a position to identify private housing for waiting list applicants as well as homeless applicants.

We heard that there would be a drop-in session on 10th May 2016 where landlords would be invited to attend in order to meet the team and receive information regarding licensing requirements.

In response to a question regarding private rented properties we heard that it was difficult to say if there had been an increase or decrease but market rents seemed to continually increase, which proved a challenge for the team. There was a continual battle to identify properties, and there was not enough to support our duties.

Officers explained that private rented landlords were encouraged to use our services rather than local agents by offering a wide range of complimentary services, such as individual experienced staff, a number of funding pots and housing support. Officers were keen to develop new services as necessary.

With the introduction of licensing there may be an opportunity for MCC to deliver courses, but this had not been discussed as yet. This was currently provided through Rent Smart Wales as well as other providers.

A Member expressed that Cabinet should ensure that all Members are aware of the policy changes and suggested that a seminar would be useful.

A Member highlighted that there had previously been a working group looking to identify empty homes in the County, and questioned if there was any further development in this area. Officers explained that the empty homes work continues, but there were staffing capacity issues.

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Officers worked closely with the Council Tax colleagues to identify such properties, which would be contacted via mailshot twice a year. In terms of incentive for empty property owners MCC could provide a loan facility, but this was not proving popular.

Recommendations:

The report recommended that Adults Select Committee consider the proposals outlined in the report to adjust the policy and make recommendations to the Council's Cabinet as appropriate

Committee Conclusion:

The Chair concluded that Adults Select Committee were minded to recommend the policy to Cabinet but recommend that Cabinet hold a Member Seminar to disseminate knowledge.

6. To consider the Guidance for Scrutiny produced by the Older Person's Commissioner in relation to:

Context:

We received a report from the Scrutiny Manager in order to consider the guidance for Scrutiny produced by the Older Person's Commissioner in relation to Scrutinising Changes to Community Services and Scrutinising Equalities and Human Rights Impact Assessments.

Key Issues:

The Older Person's Commissioner has written to local authorities to present the work that has been undertaken to produce guidance for Councils on how to scrutinise Changes to Community Services and 'Equalities and Human Rights Impact Assessments'.

The Commissioner recognises that challenging financial times will present difficult decisions for Councils as to how to provide quality locally accessible services to communities and has produced guidance for local government scrutineers to assist them in their consideration of key decisions and policy affecting older people. The guidance advocates the need for careful consideration of the implications of decisions in order to protect society's most vulnerable people.

The guidance provides a useful outline for scrutineers in terms of how to apply the principles of the 'Equalities and Human Rights Impact Assessments' to decisions and policy affecting older people, given the increasing ageing population.

Scrutiny Members may wish to consider how they can embed such principles into their scrutiny approach; possibly through developing a questioning strategy to be applied to scrutiny of relevant subjects, or through considering the robustness of 'Equalities and Human Rights

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Impact Assessments' together with the validity of evidence provided in such assessments to support decision-making.

Member Scrutiny:

The Chair highlighted the opportunity not only to respond but the potential to kick-start and encourage, and suggested that Members should reflect on whether the questions posed make sense, and if the assessments made were fit for purpose.

Whilst the guidance may assume that all authorities have an Older Persons Strategy Coordinator, this is not necessarily the case. Members expressed concern that without a dedicated post, there may be a reduced opportunity to ensure proper thought is given as to how policy and decisions affect older people. The Chair advised that the scrutiny process therefore needed to ensure that it championed the rights of older people in scrutinising decisions and policy.

The Scrutiny Manager explained that a future meeting of Strong Communities and Adults Select would address partnership discussions. It was suggested that a future meeting be diarised to consider the role of the different partnerships and how they are coordinated.

The general conclusion was that assessments needed to be more robust and better scrutinised. In terms of assessments, the Policy officer for Equality suggested that when considering decisions, scrutineers may wish to consider who the decision affects and the evidence that supports whether there are positive or negative implications for older people. Members could consider at which stage different groups and services users had been consulted. There could also be more detailed questions regarding the aims of the proposal. This would help to achieve more informed scrutiny. The Scrutiny Manager would look to create a template and bring to a future meeting.

The Scrutiny Manager suggested that the Committee may in certain instances, wish to consider retrospective scrutiny to ascertain whether the anticipated implications on certain groups had actually occurred and how these could be minimised. The Policy Officer for Equality advised that having dealt with EQIAs, the assessments had been unsuccessful as a result of a lack of information. Whilst officers had tended to fill the forms in at the last minute, they were being encouraged to think about the questions at the start of the process and that as a result, assessments were improving. The lack of data upon which to predict implications remained an issue and was not improving as quickly as it should.

A question was raised as to how the EQIAs were applied to non-statutory obligations, in particular, if services were transferred to Town and Community Councils. The Equality Policy Officer agreed that statutory and non-statutory services should still follow the same EQIA process and that the implications should be discussed as part of the EQIA process prior to the decision to transfer services.

The Chair queried instances whereby a decision has been taken to offer a service to a Town or Community Council which then rejects the service transfer, the process for the EQIA ~ It was agreed this should be discussed with Head of Legal.

Recommendations:

The report recommended that the Committee:

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- i. Draw formal conclusions to be included in a Council response to the Older Person's Commissioner;
- ii. Consider how it can embed the principles outlined in each guidance paper into scrutiny practice; whether through the scrutiny of the 'Equalities Impact Assessments', or through lines of questioning and/or other scrutiny activity.

Committee Conclusion:

The Chair concluded that any scrutiny of decisions and policy needed a context and that the EQIA templates assisted in providing that context. The Chair reminded Members of several key points raised in the discussion for which Members have agreed a way forward:

- Retrospective scrutiny of key decisions could take place if the Committee had concern regarding implications for certain groups at the point of the decision being made/policy being adopted
- There is a need for a single Consultation list for Monmouthshire and that the Communications Team would be requested to advise on this
- There is a need to clarify with Legal Services the process for EQIA's when transferring services to other organisations
- The older Persons Commissioner would be invited to attend a meeting of the committee and provide training on addressing inequalities
- That the Policy and Partnerships Team would be invited to the committee to discuss partnerships ion Adult Services and the network of support for older people.

The Chair thanked all for a useful and productive discussion on an important area of work for the committee.

7. Adults Select Work Programming and Action List

We received the future work programme for Adults Select Committee. In doing so the following points were noted:

- Special meeting to be held on Tuesday 17th May 2016 at 10.00am to discuss Monmouthshire Carer Strategy. County Councillor R. Edwards provided apologies in advance.
- Joint meeting to be led by Children and Young People Select to be held on Thursday 19th May 2016 at 10.00am to for partnership scrutiny. County Councillor R. Edwards provided apologies in advance.

The meeting ended at 1.05 pm