

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Thursday, 26th October, 2017 at 2.00 pm

PRESENT: County Councillor P.Pavia (Chairman)

County Councillors: J.Becker, A.Davies, D. Dovey, M.Feakins and B. Strong

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Cath Fallon	Head of Economy and Enterprise
Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Paula Harris	Democratic Services Officer
Rachel Rogers	Monmouthshire Museums Manager
Ian Saunders	Head of Tourism, Leisure and Culture

1. Apologies

County Councillors D. Blakebrough and R. Roden.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Pre-decision scrutiny of the Abergavenny Castle Outdoor Project

Context:

To seek comments and consideration regarding the attached Abergavenny Castle Feasibility Study

Key Issues:

In 2015 Amion Consulting carried out a review of the Museum Service which acknowledged Monmouthshire as a county steeped in culture with significant tourist appeal. Findings from the review were used to inform the Five Year Forward Plan which was approved by Cabinet in December 2016.

Further to the approval of the Forward Plan it was agreed that individual business cases from the plan would be brought forward for scrutiny as appropriate. One of the proposed business cases included reference to the currently underused open spaces of Abergavenny Castle and consideration of a permanent outdoor structure in which an annual programme of events could be developed in order to generate additional income to improve the economic sustainability of the service and to increase partnership working with local communities and businesses.

Sarah Browne Architect was appointed in July 2017 to prepare designs for the Outdoor Events Pavilion. The intention is to submit a planning application in late October/early

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November alongside a Heritage Impact Assessment, a Noise Impact Assessment and an Archaeological Report.

3.4 The Abergavenny Castle site is leased from the Nevill Estate, an agreement which has been in place since the nineteenth century. The current lease expires in August 2020 so should the proposal be approved, then it will be necessary to renegotiate terms prior to commitments being made. The Nevill Estate have been made fully aware of the proposals as detailed and are fully supportive of the current partnership moving forward.

Member Scrutiny

It was pointed out that financial generation projections are missing from the report and a Member asked if there were plans for the project to generate an income. In answer we were told that due to the information being commercially sensitive, it has been omitted at this stage, however by the end of year 5 it was projected that a small profit would be made.

A Member queried the request for a 32K loan from the authority, with the particular service currently standing at 300K in deficit. The Member commented that due to the current financial climate he would expect new initiatives to have income generation potential to reduce deficits.

Reservations were raised by a Member who felt unable to back the scheme as it was felt it had not been thought out correctly and although it was a nice project, there are more worthwhile projects in the County that would make more impact.

It was asked if how many events would not take place without the structure in place and we were told that events would still take place but without the shelter, bad weather could limit the amount of people willing to attend.

A Member spoke of the intangible quality of Monmouthshire's surroundings and felt that this project would add value to the local community rather than tourism.

The lack of a repayment schedule for the 32K loan was questioned and a Member had doubts that it would be repaid as a loan. The capital costs for the Authority to carry this would be approximately 2k per year just on interest payments, so over a ten year period the service would be looking at 5K plus to repay to loan back to the Authority.

The size of the structure, in comparison to currently used transferable marquees and inflatable structures was questioned and we were told it would seat formally 150 people.

Comments were made regarding the perceived lack of clarity with the terminology used within the report and it was felt that the request for 32K was a loan and as a loan we as Authority should expect interest.

The Officers were applauded for the amount of work and research contained within the report, but it was felt that investment in a block of toilets would add more value rather than the current offer of portaloos at the site.

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The expiry of the lease on the land in 2020 raised concerns with the Committee as placing a capital asset on land not owned by the Council was felt to be an issue which need to be ironed out.

It was asked if Abergavenny Town Council had been approached for the 32K.

A Member spoke of the site being used as a wedding venue and the revenue this would raise.

In terms of the added extra for the outside space it was asked what shelter the canopy would provide, in answer we were told that the canopy would provide shelter for the audience rather than the performers.

It was asked how confident Officers were that they would obtain funding via the grants applied for to date.

The Chair raised the point that in regard to the survey work where nine percent of those surveyed felt it was not appropriate to hold events in the grounds of the castle and asked for information on this. We were answered that those people felt that the access should be exclusive when an event was taking place.

It was felt that as a first step, this is positive, but certainly not a complete business case, with more information required.

With regard to the construction of the structure it was hoped that local businesses and trades people would be used.

In delivering high quality staffing it was asked if volunteers and ambassadors would be integral to the running of the venue.

Committee's Conclusion:

The Committee applauded Officers for the amount of work and research which had gone into the report, however In times of fiscal restraint it was felt to be essential that as an Authority we maximise our money and obtain tangible returns.

There is a strong case in terms of community improvement and as an asset it would be a strong community enhancement as well as potentially providing long term gains.

Comfort was sought on the lease before any decision could be made and the question of what contributions could be made by Abergavenny Town Council.

It was felt at this time the Committee cannot indorse The Abergavenny Castle Events Feasibility Study at this time as further information is required on;

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- The lease
- Loan structure
- Building construction costs

The Committee look forward to receiving further information in January 2018.

The meeting ended at 3.22 pm