

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at on Thursday, 23rd January, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor L. Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: P. Clarke, D. Dovey,
A. Easson, L. Guppy, R. Harris, V. Smith,
B. Strong and P. Murphy

Also in attendance County Councillors: P.
Murphy, Cabinet Member for Resources and B.
Strong (substituting for County Councillor J.
Treharne)
Peter Sutherland, Llanbadoc Community Council

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Chief Officer, Resources
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Matthew Phillips, Head of Law/ Monitoring Officer
Andrew Blake, Wye Valley AONB Officer
Matthew Lewis (Countryside), Interim Performance,
Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for
MonLife
Dave Loder, Finance Manager
Ruth Rourke, Principal Officer - Countryside Access

APOLOGIES: County Councillor J. Treharne

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Open Public Forum

Peter Sutherland spoke on behalf of Llanbadoc Community Council to raise 3 issues:

- The Public Consultation on the final draft of the Usk Regeneration Plan ~ on behalf of Llanbadoc Community Council, he acknowledged the resources, initiative and support from both officers and members, citing the project as an example of effective joint working.
- Issues related to Monkswood ~ Parking outside St Matthews Church and Speeding Signage ~ a proposed site meeting between the community council and council officers had not taken place following a request in December and he requested this be chased.
- Proposed closure of recycling centre ~ requested it be recorded that the community council has strong objections for three reasons: a potential increase in flytipping, a greater carbon footprint implication and a negative impact for the older population in having to undertake an extra round mile trip of 12 miles to visit the nearest alternative facility. The community council would like the council to consider joint working with Torfaen who have an 88% recycling rate.

The Cabinet Member responded to advise that the closure of Usk Household Waste and Recycling Centre would be fully discussed at the cluster meeting the following Tuesday. The Chair agreed to chase officers on the site meeting at Monkswood that had not taken place. The

committee suggested that the Central Monmouthshire Area Committee may be the appropriate forum to raise future area related issues.

3. Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The Rights of Way Improvement Plan

The committee was asked to undertake pre- decision scrutiny of the Countryside Access Improvement Plan (Rights of Way Improvement Plan) following the completion of public consultation and prior to consideration by cabinet. Officers explained that the ROWIP is a statutory plan under the Countryside Rights of Way Act and that in essence, it is a Countryside Access Plan. The plan is being consulted upon, appendix 3 illustrating the proposed amendments as a result of the consultation. Officers confirmed that the Local Access Forum were content with the plan and that the next step would be to prepare the first version of what is required under the legislation, which would be published alongside the approved plan.

Challenge:

- The report is detailed and very inclusive. The concern is that the countryside team is thinly stretched and now has extra responsibilities, so how will you manage this? You mentioned financial implications within your report, so how will you mitigate this?

We have to prioritise what we spend money on day to day as our capital budget is limited. Our ideal budget would be 10 times the current budget. Our approach is to demonstrate benefits from countryside access, not just to treat this as a statutory requirement and this approach does help us to access funding through different avenues, working closely with the Gwent Levels. The Central Monmouthshire Area Committee has raised that individual group grants are focussed often around Wye Valley or coasts with a tourism development focus. We have reviewed all of our procedures and we have prioritisation schemes in place. We cannot do everything and the document is weighted heavily on value of partnerships and volunteering aspects, so trying to find funding through other means to find funding to do more good work in the future is our priority. We are extremely fortunate in Monmouthshire to have excellent community backing. We can see some good examples coming forward, related to signposting and we hope to be in a strong position to be involved in the different schemes. We are extremely lucky to have a large number of volunteers who work with the tourism ambassadors and we are continually looking at new ways to enable volunteers to do more for us.

Outcome and chairs conclusion

Pre-decision scrutiny of the plan has been welcomed by this committee. We are very supportive of the volunteering that the service benefits greatly from, however, we have some concern relating to the resources of the team. We consider the plan is fit for purpose and we support you in taking it forward to Cabinet for endorsement on 19th February.

4. Wye Valley AONB Management Plan

Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Management Plan 2020-2025

The committee were invited to inform the review of the Wye Valley Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Management Plan 2020-2025 and identify any issues they feel should be considered further. The manager of the AONB explained that the council has a collective responsibility with Herefordshire, Gloucestershire and the Forest of Dean to prepare a management plan for the Wye Valley AONB. Whilst this is developed by the Joint Advisory Committee, the input of the relevant councils is sought, as the plan essentially belongs to those

councils. It was explained that this is the core document for the ANOB and acts as a joint plan for all 4 local authorities and is sent to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and to Westminster. Members were advised that whilst we have had a number of plans, we felt a light touch review was proportionate at this stage with so many uncertainties nationally. A full review would be undertaken for the next plan in 2025. The committee heard that a 12-week public consultation had been undertaken with 20 responses being received. The Well-being of Future Generations evaluation had highlighted a number of considerations to be included within the plan, which will be considered by the Joint Advisory Committee in July prior to being taken to each of the councils for formal adoption.

Challenge:

- Please could you explain the financial set up?
It is complicated, but there is a formula based on a geographical basis. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Welsh Government provide grant funding and for each £1 we spend, we receive £8 in funding, which is outstanding value for money.

Chair's Conclusion:

The committee fully supports this excellent document and are happy that you progress to the next stage, which is agreement by the Joint Advisory Committee.

5. Budget Monitoring Report - Month 7

Scrutiny of the Month 7 Budget Monitoring Report and the draft Capital and Revenue proposals for 2020-21 within the context of the four-year Medium Term Financial Plan

The has discussed in its pre-meeting that it would like to attend the Economy and Development Select Committee on 30th January as there were issues of interest and relevance to this committee on the agenda of that meeting. Members asked whether it would be possible to convene a joint meeting of the committees which would enable Strong Communities Select Committee members to have an equal contribution and voting rights on the subject matter. It was confirmed by our Monitoring Officer that this could be scheduled. Members were asked to diarise the meeting.

The committee agreed to discuss the Month 7 Budget Monitoring report in conjunction with the draft Capital and Revenue proposals for 2020-21 and the budget monitoring report provided the wider context for the challenges being faced in the current year and moving forward.

Members heard that at month 7, the council is facing significant challenges, with the level of service overspends being very significant and extraordinary compared to recent years. Officers explained that in previous years, we have had an exemplary track record of managing overspends so that at the point of budget outturn, we are usually breaking even or returning a small surplus and that continues to be our attempt.

Paragraph 3.2 provides a table which shows a net council surplus of £4 million. In terms of context, these are driven from 3 areas:

- Children's services and looked after children pressures
- Pressures in adult social care
- Support for children with additional learning needs

In terms of matters concerning the operations directorate, which we will consider more fully at next week's Economy and Development Select Committee, pressures are being contained around car parking, passenger transport and planning income. And these are placing significant strain on the revenue budget.

We haven't got significant levels of reserves, so we have had to put recovery plans in place and react and respond to the situation we are in. Recovery plans are to curb all non-essential expenditure and where possible, to look to generate further savings whilst arresting the current position.

If you refer to 3.10 of report, this shows position we are currently in and details our plan of action. We are forecasting a deficit of £3.987m and we were fortunate we were able to make the teachers' pay awards in the current year, £310k being provided by Welsh Government WG. The £1.9m VAT recovery due to the Ealing ruling around leisure services income also will assist the position. Consultants were appointed to work with us on securing this recovery and we have a strong case pending. The final aspect to brief the committee upon is the work we have been doing with Welsh Government which offers us the flexibility to use capital receipts to funds costs associated with service reform. This has been helpful to us. Previously, permission was needed but now in line with Welsh Government guidance, the council can make that decision. Furthermore, we have been interrogating our spend to identify costs associated with service reform and over £2m reform costs could actually be addressed through the use of capital receipts.

Winter pressures could still be risk areas in terms of the budget and also the volatile service areas that are pressure points, notably children's services, however, we are looking at where we stand with that long before the outturn budgetary position. This has hopefully provided useful context in terms of the revenue account.

In terms of the capital position, there is a small level of underspend in relation to 21st Century Schools. Capital receipts are shown in the report and these have been impacted by the decision to make flexible use of capital receipts. That will have an impact for this year and next year, but we have to balance the revenue account pressures with the capital. In terms of month 7, the report provides the detail on overspends and underspends specific to the committees remit together with directors' commentary.

We've mentioned the capitalisation directive already and we have transferred £500k expenditure across to the capital budget. In terms of savings, if you refer to paragraph 3.11, you will see that of the £6.446 million built into this year's budget, we've found 86%. The rest of those savings are either delayed or unachievable and greater detail on this is provided in the report, with the detail for this committee's portfolio provided in the appendix.

Challenge:

- Can you explain the issues in relation to solar farming and sale of electricity to the national grid? *Just to clarify that the overspend detailed within the report on the solar farm was in relation to monitoring systems and we had a shortfall of income as a result, but this has now been rectified and shouldn't pose that problem into 2021. In terms of your questions, the issue with solar farm is grid restraints and it is not easily overcome. This is an issue for the national grid and providers to resolve and Cardiff Capital Region City Deal are attempting to resolve this through their conversations at a national level.*

6. Scrutiny of the 2020/21 draft budget proposals

Draft Capital and Revenue Proposals for 2020-21

Officers explained that having talked extensively about the pressure points at month 7 which have been at the forefront of the budget challenge, paragraph 3.4 of the report shows pressures of £9.7 million, which is unprecedented. They explained that it had been very difficult bring forward a set of coherent proposals to consult upon and that all the feedback would need to be taken into account for Cabinet to consider on 19th February prior to Council on the 5th march. Officers drew attention to paragraph 3.7 which presented the draft proposals and asked members for their views. Assumptions had been made that funding from Welsh Government would fund teachers' pay award and also that pensions would be fully funded. They reiterated that the ability to use capital receipts to assist the revenue budget will be helpful. Fees and charges had also been explored and the proposal for a 2% saving could potentially be made to Individual Schools Budget as a last resort. Officers explained that council tax had been modelled at a prudent level.

Challenge:

- You have referred in paragraph 3.5 to the pressures and in paragraph 3.18, you broke it down further. Where have these pressures come from over the last 12 months. Were they always there, or has there been a spike?
Children's services has seen an unprecedented rise in the number of looked after children cases and we are unsure why, but there are a number of potential reasons. We have become more successful in preventative activity and there is also more focus on the judiciary side in terms of views taken by courts on the need for corporate parental responsibility. This has brought significant cost but is a very necessary endeavour. In terms of children with additional learning needs, more assessment has led to more support being identified as needed at the acute end, in terms of out of county placements. In terms of adult's social care, the situation has only become more acute in recent months. Adults with disabilities are living longer and their parents are aging and are unable to look after them and this is a national dynamic.
- Is there a need for concern about the costs associated with new school curriculum? Has this been identified in your discussions with schools, particularly in respect of the 2% saving on Individual Schools Budgets?
We have held meetings with head teachers and consultation events and discussions with the schools' budget forum and feedback is coming through. We understand that schools have pressures and that is the rationale for the loan mechanism that enables schools up to 10 years to apply their budget recovery plans to bring their budgets out of a deficit position. There is no appetite for us to impose a 2% reduction on schools, but the financial pressures upon the council are so significant that we have to consider it. If we obtain any additional funding, we will look to reduce it or remove it.
- Are other councils in the same position as us?
Some councils are disadvantaged by the funding formula. We feel Monmouthshire is particularly disadvantaged and we are having discussions nationally about what we feel is the funding flaw. If this was addressed, five local authorities would benefit and it wouldn't cost Welsh Government much, but would offer us an extra £1 million.

Chairs conclusion:

The committee has discussed reasons for the significant pressures in social services, acknowledging this is outside of our remit but we have done so in order to understand the context for the budget proposals being presented to us. We have scrutinised the proposals within our remit, but have no specific recommendations. We support the request made by Monmouthshire to Welsh Government for a funding floor and the need for an independent review, noting that a seminar will be held in the spring. The committee has not discussed the

operations proposals which were presented late to us, but we have agreed to attend the Economy and Development Select Committee to undertake joint scrutiny of these.

7. Action list

8. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

9. Strong Communities forward work programme

The committee's work programme was noted.

10. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

The programme was noted and no requests were made for reports to be brought to the committee.

11. Date and time of next meeting

The meeting ended at **Time Not Specified**