

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Adults Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 16th March, 2021 at 10.30 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Howarth, (Chairman)
County Councillor L.Brown, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: S. Howarth, L.Brown, M.Groucutt, R. Harris, M.Lane, P.Pavia, M. Powell, S. Woodhouse, T. Crowhurst and P. Jones

Also in attendance County Councillors: P. Jones , Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health

Officers in Attendance

Eve Parkinson, Head of Adult Services
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Cheryl Haskell, Community Hubs North & Libraries Strategic Lead Manager
Richard Drinkwater, Community Hub Manager
Gillian Dicken, Principal Environmental Health Officer (Commercial)
Louise Driscoll, Specialist Environmental Health Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillor R. Edwards

1. Declarations of interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No members of the public were present.

3. Community Learning and Libraries - Discussion on how services evolved to ensure that adults in Monmouthshire continue to have access to books, learning and social connections while staying at home.

Before the item, a minute's silence was observed for Councillor David Dovey.

Richard Drinkwater and Cheryl Haskell presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

What is the precise shortfall in expenditure and staff employed? What could be done to make the service even better, if there were more money?

The budgets were cut as part of a service reduction 4 years ago, in which the book budget was cut 50%. This is reflective of most of the local authorities in Wales. We try to circulate as much material as we can: previously, we might have bought several copies of a book per library but now we buy one or two copies and circulate them. We have become thrifter, therefore, but also more creative, and the customer doesn't miss out. If there is a specific request for a book, in most cases, we can obtain the book for them and then shelve it for other customers. With more

money, we would do so many things, so it is hard to be specific. We have invested more money each year into digital, reflecting the changing trends that we see.

In terms of staffing, the report marks us down because we are community hubs, not purely libraries, and Welsh Government doesn't count the council hours that our colleagues work – we can only count a portion of their time towards the library hours. That won't change as long as we are a community hub. Again, this is reflective of other local authorities. Abergavenny is a little different because the service is offered across two floors; therefore, the flow is different from what it would be in the other community hubs. But our colleagues all work through the services – we don't separate them into council and library.

Has the initial advice to keep books quarantined for 72 hours been updated?

The guidance remains that books should be quarantined for 72 hours. Books are issued via Requested and Collect. Customers return them to the hub or the One Stop shop in Abergavenny, where they are put in a box and taken out of circulation for 72 hours. Welsh Government is not advising anything different. It hasn't caused us any difficulty throughout the pandemic, and customers have been very understanding.

Could the charging structure be explained further, specifically regarding Digital?

It would be more constructive to send the figures out to members after the meeting.

Those who are more housebound, and are receiving book deliveries, are presumably less able to complete the census?

Currently, Abergavenny, Usk and Chepstow are Census Support centres. On an appointment basis, we are able to support users over the phone to fill in their census paper. Matthew Gatehouse has asked the company if we can do some support face-to-face, as this is what some people prefer; our hubs are set up very safely for this to happen. We hope to have an answer to that later today. The number for people to call is the usual contact centre number. We have two Welsh speakers, if the customer would prefer to speak in Welsh.

One of the key issues for disabled people is digital exclusion. How has this been overcome in the libraries, including relating to the pre-pandemic use of hubs for training?

Digital exclusion has been on our radar for a long time. Monmouthshire has suffered from being – until this academic year – one of the poorest funded areas in Wales, regarding provision of community education. This year, due to a new funding structure within Welsh Government, our funding for community education for our direct delivery has skyrocketed from just over £2k to over £55,000k, allowing us to bid for further funding, partly to address digital exclusion in the county. Previously, due to the level of funding we had, we were excluded from applying for more. We were awarded £15k this year. Part of the grant application process, we have worked with colleagues in Newport to map where digital exclusion exists in Monmouthshire. It has highlighted areas like the Magor-Caldicot corridor, and some outlying areas of Abergavenny. We used that intelligence to prioritise where/how to spend the £15k. We suffer from poor connectivity in Monmouthshire, so we largely invested the grant in My-Fi devices, which are – essentially – standalone broadband emitters.

A key thing is also digital competency – we need to tutor people to use the devices, which has created its own set of problems. Through some work with Coleg Gwent, we have set up digital mentors in each of the counties in the five counties partnership, who set up socially distanced teaching aids and walkthrough guides. We recognise that this doesn't necessarily replace what someone would get from attending a class in person – they can engage over a digital platform

but it's not quite the same as being in a room with other people. We see it as a small step towards digital enablement and arresting social isolation.

The lift to the first floor in the Abergavenny hub is a problem for many disabled people because of fire risks.

We are not aware that there will be any alterations made in Abergavenny. The point about accessibility is certainly noted. The space that we now have, and the facilities we can offer, far exceed what we offered in the previous location in Baker Street. It might not be perfect but it is a great improvement: there is more room to manoeuvre, better toilet facilities, etc. There was a question a little while ago about scooter access in the lift – we worked with someone who uses a scooter, who came to try it for us. They thought that everything was well set up, and we have acquired our own scooter for the first floor for anyone who needs it. We are open to further suggestions but we don't envisage making any further additions at this time.

How well are the other hubs adapted to disabled access, particularly in Chepstow?

In 2020, just prior to lockdown, the ground floor disabled toilets in Chepstow hub were completely refurbished. We are happy that all facilities there are open access to all. We also have disabled facilities on the first floor and a DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant lift.

£15k doesn't seem like a lot to get people online – what is that money able to pay for?

We use scale of markets for our purchasing. We also looked at a lower monetary value per unit for devices. Working initially with Welsh Government, we sourced 30 devices but there were supply chain issues, so we went to market and obtained 32 Netbooks (of which 20 are now out in the community) and the 18 My-Fi devices. We also purchased and refreshed 11 iPads for our digital classes in the hubs, and bought 4 Facebook Portal devices. These look like tablets but have a fish eye lens and run with Zoom, which we use for digital delivery to communities. We have been able to lend these out to our tutors for delivery of, for example, parent and child cookery classes. The tutor puts the portal on the kitchen worktop; those dialling in from home have a very clear picture of the preparation and cooking via the fish eye lens, and can participate in the session almost as if they were there in person. This has allowed us to transcend geographical problems. Covid has encouraged us to accelerate some of our wishes using digital means.

Cheryl and Fiona Ashley in the Library Service successfully bid for £15k from Welsh Government for all digital tech to go out to our communities. Also, we are currently working with Miranda Thomason from GAVO, who is heading up a partnership – they have successfully bid for £30k, with which we are creating a digital loaning library. Between us, we therefore have quite good resources going into digital equipment – we are going out now to purchase that equipment.

Chair's Summary:

The members commended the team for its work, and the quality of services in the hubs.

Tony Crowhurst noted that the designs for the new Abergavenny Hub were perhaps made before the Equality Impact Assessment was done – this should therefore be a lesson to the council for future planning.

Councillor Brown suggested that isolated constituents be targeted on a proactive basis when it comes to the census, to ensure that they are fully engaged.

Cheryl Haskell will send figures relating to the charging structure to the members after the meeting.

4. Verbal update regarding the current position for Adults Services in respect of Covid-19 pressures.

Eve Parkinson spoke to the members.

PPE first started delivering in April 2020. We deliver approximately 360,000 pieces of PPE every two weeks – we provide to our own services and the independent sector. At the start of this month, Lateral Flow Tests were included in that delivery; we have given people 3 months' supply. Residential settings have been a very challenging area. We have worked very closely with providers, holding regular meetings to go through guidance and offer support. We have also provided support on an individual basis, when needed, included how to claim via the Hardship fund.

We have worked very closely with colleagues in Environmental Health, the Health Board and Public Health Wales, supporting homes with outbreaks. December and January were the worst months for this – in some cases, staff providing support didn't go home for several weeks. The introduction of LFTs means there is a lot of additional work for the homes to do. We are now supporting homes with how they will implement the recent announcement that visits can resume.

Provision of domiciliary care has been a challenge, at times. We have had staff shortages, due to isolating and shielding, etc. The independent sector has tended to have a period of time in which they aren't able to meet their demand; we have had to support them, but on a few rare occasions, we haven't had the capacity to do so, and have brought in outside agencies. Overall, our staff across the sector have been 'all hands on deck.'

Reablement work has carried on throughout the pandemic. Some of it has been virtual. The effect of lockdown has been significant: people talk of becoming 'deconditioned', whereby they have become more frail and dependent. So we have seen a rise in some of the referrals. Social work has also carried on, with some visits in person and some virtually.

Safeguarding: there has been an increase in referrals in some areas, around people being very stressed, domestic violence, mental health, alcohol misuse, pressures in provision of care, etc. Vaccinations have been very challenging at times: we were responsible for submitting the names of frontline staff across in-house and independent sectors, amounting to thousands of names. Vaccination take-up has been very good. All of our homes have had their first dose, with the second booked in.

We have had Chromebooks from Welsh Government, which were given to young carers so that they can work remotely and link with each other. Some have found actually remote working better. Day services have carried on, but differently, doing things on more of an individual basis. When not in Level 4, we have continued home visits as needed, while wearing all of the appropriate PPE.

Respite has been quite challenging, particularly around the ability to go in somewhere on a short-term basis. Many people have been provided respite in their home on a 24-hour basis. We've used a flat in Lavender Gardens as a respite base for a few people. Emergency respite has been challenging – not necessarily about the availability, but about the fact that if people are going into respite, they have to have had a swab within 48 hours, which has not always been easy to access. Also, if someone goes into a residential setting for respite, they have to be

isolated for 14 days, which can have a big impact on that person, especially if they don't fully understand why.

Chair's Summary:

There were no questions. Councillor Penny Jones and the committee gave its appreciation to the team for going above and beyond in their hard work, especially given the considerable challenges they faced.

5. Track, Trace and Protect - Verbal update on the current situation and service provision.

Gill Dicken and Louise Driscoll spoke to the members and answered their questions.

The team last updated the committee in July. In September, we started to pick up on cases. The environmental health team was doing the tracking and tracing in that period, and there was the advisors' team under Richard Drinkwater. We started to pick up Track & Trace for Caerphilly and north Wales. In October, all of the Track & Trace team came under Public Health and Environmental Protection. We added structure to the advisors and developed the team. In November, the team was in a good place. The numbers were increasing. By December, we hit very high numbers but we were taking on people from around the council – redeployment, from MonLife, volunteers etc., – and we handpicked people with environmental health or medical backgrounds, giving us the ability to respond to cases and clusters very quickly. When the firebreak started, we were confident that we could keep the lid on clusters. By February, numbers were coming down, so we were able to begin scaling the team down. We now wait to see what happens in the next few weeks with schools due to go back, LFT testing going on, and lockdown measures gradually easing. We know now that we can flex the team up and down when needed.

We are now down to 15 tracers, working 8 til 8, 7 days a week. Numbers are declining, so lockdown has very much worked in Monmouthshire, alongside the vaccines. Since we started tracing in June, we have had 4,174 cases in Monmouthshire; out of those, we have responded to 99.7% within a 48-hour period across Gwent (with Monmouthshire stats at the top of the leaderboard). It is a success story in Wales. From those 4,174 cases, we generated over 6,000 contacts. We also work closely, and have daily meetings, with our other partners in Gwent. We have very good communication to enable us to react to any workplaces that might see a cluster of cases. We review that data daily, and report weekly to PHW and Welsh Government on our cases and any spikes. The team has a good link with workplaces, which was established prior to Covid.

Also, we have done a lot of work with schools, which are now rolling out the LFT testing, which gives a result in a few minutes. All staff have been issued with these kits. We have regular meetings with our headteachers, who have been superb in working with us. We have had low numbers, compared with the rest of Gwent, because headteachers have done a brilliant job in getting bubbles to isolate. Whereas, previously, we would isolate the whole year group, now we go back and track and trace to limit as much as possible the amount of staff and children affected. We work very closely with Will McLean and his team. Some of our tracers are ex-teachers, so they understand the culture of the schools. We have been working with care homes and the commissioning team as well.

We have done studies on those who are isolating, working with the Partnerships team, and supporting residents in isolation. Back tracing has been a new introduction. Monmouthshire is alone on this in Gwent. We have done it from the beginning, always going back further than 48 hours, encouraging premises and workplaces to have everyone who had visited contact us, and advise them to get tested. There has been good compliance. Now, all of Wales is doing 14-day backward tracing. They don't have to isolate if they are out of the 48-hours infectious period but are all advised to get tested – so, hopefully, we can find those asymptomatic people out in the community. And, Welsh Government has now released guidance on anyone who has been a direct contact in their infectious period to be tested twice within the first 8 days. We had 200+ cases per week in January and now are down to 25 in the last 7 days. We expect some increase with restrictions being lifted but are being proactive in our approach with businesses, schools, etc.

Challenge:

When someone has to self-isolate, do we check that they are doing so?

For a positive case, the tracer call is backed up with a letter or SMS message. Then the people in that household are classed as a close contact, and contacted daily for 10 days. They can opt for SMS but we prefer to call and have an actual conversation. We track that they are isolating but also if they are well, and whether they should go for a test. This has changed in the last week: we now say to isolate and also get a test. It's different in England as it is run by a private company; they don't contact all of their positive cases, but send e-forms. We tried e-forms for a week at Christmas time and they didn't work.

Although we are further ahead of the European countries with immunisations, what has been said about preparing for a third wave, and would the nature of it be different?

Welsh Government has said there will be funding for Track & Trace until September. We will therefore retain a core team of tracers. It has always been the environmental health officers that have started it. We are best placed to do it because we have the local connections, and understand the area. That's why we feel it has worked very well. Welsh Government is predicting a third wave for around May, so the contracts and TTP will continue. Public Health Wales is predicting a third wave but not at the same scale as before. In Track & Trace, we are now monitoring the positive cases who have had the vaccine – this will probably be the basis of the next study. We have weekly updates from PHW and are involved in any decisions that occur.

How useful has the NHS app been?

The app isn't linked to TTP. The app tells the user to isolate but it is a guide –someone officially only needs to isolate if they are contacted by TTP. We didn't have any input to the app or its implementation. A tracing interview by phone can take up to two hours and is not related to the app at all.

How reliable are the kits – are they giving out slightly different results?

If someone receives a positive from the kit then they are advised to go and get an official test. We've been using the kits in our schools and early years, and have had only 1 case from the LFT tests. If someone has symptoms, we recommend that they don't use the kit but go to a testing centre.

Chair's Summary:

Many thanks from the committee to the team for their hard work. Councillor Groucott noted that Wales has dealt with T&T via local authorities, which has been much more successful than in England.

6. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

Councillor Pavia would like to look at the Plan On A Page, the Council's forward focus for the remainder of this administration. A workshop on the Gypsy and Traveller's Needs Assessment needs to be arranged. Councillor Brown proposed a daytime slot for this.

7. Council and Cabinet Forward Work Plan.

8. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes from 26th January 2021 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record. Proposed by Councillor Woodhouse and seconded by Councillor Brown.

9. Next Meeting: Tuesday 27th April 2021 at 10.30am.

Councillor Powell questioned whether a 10.00am start would give members more time between meetings, if they have another in the afternoon. 10.30am was agreed at the end of 2020 to assist some members with the school run, etc.; the committee agreed to continue with this time for now.

The meeting ended at **12.01 pm**