

# Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Monday, 19th October, 2020 at 10.00 am

## Councillors Present

County Councillor A.Davies, (Vice Chairman chaired the meeting)

County Councillors: A.Davies, D. Dovey, D. Evans, R.Roden and B. Strong

## Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer  
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager  
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood  
Rachel Lewis, Planning Policy Manager  
Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning  
Philip Thomas, Development Services Manager

**APOLOGIES:** County Councillors J.Becker, M.Feakins and P.Pavia

### 1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

### 2. Public Open Forum

No members of the public were present.

### 3. Current LDP Annual Monitoring Report

Officers Rachel Lewis and Craig O'Connor presented the report. Craig O'Connor and Mark Hand answered the Members' questions.

#### **Challenge:**

*The report states that ample land remains available for potential waste management sites – are any of these near Usk?*

In terms of what the LDP needs to deliver, there is enough space of adequate size. We have enough waste management sites to meet our requirements, so we wouldn't need to allocate more. This will be reviewed as part of the replacement LDP, to make sure we have enough sites and we are sustainable in meeting our requirements. We don't have to hand the information about possible sites for the future, specifically.

*In October 2019 and February 2020 Monmouthshire experienced deluges. Was there an adverse impact on the housing completion rate during that period?*

We aren't aware of specific data on that, but undoubtedly there would have been an impact. The Kingswood site in Monmouth is almost complete now, but there would have been some effect; whether it was significant though, given the limited timespan of those flooding events, is unlikely. It would probably require a specific piece of work with the developers to determine.

*Is there current data for businesses that have had to close due to the pandemic?*

It is too soon for us to have this data at this stage. The initial impacts have probably been limited, as a lot of grant funding has been available, in addition to the furlough scheme. We will likely see the real impacts in the coming months, when companies will either be unable to apply for grants, or the furlough scheme ends. Interestingly, we've seen some benefits in some of our settlements – Magor, in particular, has been in the press – in that more people working from home has meant more people shopping locally. This is to be expected. Magor now has 0 vacancies, therefore, with 5 new businesses opening in a relatively short period. Councillor Strong has noted there are fewer vacancies in Usk. Other towns aren't looking as healthy: Monmouth is a concern at the moment. We are working with the businesses and the grants and incentives available. It's certainly something that we will need to consider in the new LDP. Encouraging people to shop locally if they are working from home will be important, and ensuring that those high streets are fit for purpose and inviting.

*What can we do, as an authority, to encourage the right sort of development in town centres? Do we have a vision of what a sustainable town centre would look like?*

The Policy framework currently concentrates retail uses on the central shopping area, with a primary and secondary area. We could look at simplifying that. In the next plan, we will look at reducing the retail core and freeing up uses on the periphery. However, we don't have evidence that planning policies themselves are a problem. When people come into towns, we support them (with one recent example in Monmouth aside.) Historically, our focus was on a high proportion of retail uses in the core, being stricter on cafes – that is what is now fundamentally changing. With people now going out to have leisure time, cafes and restaurants will become more prevalent. We are discussing, and seeking agreement on, the extent to which we could perhaps have those policies connected more into the LDP, with the details in supplementary guidance. That way, we could be quicker to change them as circumstances change. As we don't know the long-term impacts of Covid, the more flexibility we have in changing those policies, the better.

Some of the answer also concerns the physical environment. There have been considerable challenges and opportunities with reopening to deal with Covid. It is difficult to get the perfect balance between pedestrian areas (e.g. wider footpaths, the planters that have been very well received), and having less space for cars – the balance between customers wanting to park directly outside the shops, but not have a car-dominated environment. Abergavenny has worked very well in that sense, but there's a very long history in getting it to that position. Monmouth has had a few issues, but there are very good possibilities for Monnow Street.

*Are there short-term plans to increase the number of affordable housing in the county?*

It is worth noting that the house builders tend to deliver 40-45 homes per outlet. Therefore, having more planning permission is driving the increase of delivery. To achieve the 450 per annum target we need 10 sales outlets up and running at any one

time. For the new LDP, it will be a matter of having a range of sites. Many councils will discuss developers land-banking, sites not coming forward for viability reasons – we don't have those reasons or problems. On the whole, as soon as permissions are approved, and developers have the legalities in place, work begins. This can be seen in the latest site in Undy which is developing at pace.

*Could we have an update on the Church Road, Caldicot development, which is not part of the LDP process?*

Church Road was an unallocated site that we supported, outside the LDP. This was a policy developed by the council to try to support the provision of affordable housing across the county. We set up a number of ground rules to bring these sites forward and attempt to address some of the issues. 130 houses were allowed for the Church Road site, of which 45 units were affordable. Work has started there. The site was allowed, along with another in Monmouthshire, to meet the deficit in this requirement to build homes for people who are in need, and on the waiting list – there were 2,021 people on the list, and that number has possibly gone up. We will look to address this as one of the key issues in the replacement LDP, as part of the target of 110,000 new homes in Wales by 2040, of which 48% should be affordable. Unfortunately, Welsh Government has given a clear indication through its decision over a site in Raglan that the Welsh system is going to be plan-led, and sites need to be allocated within the plan to be supported. Therefore, it's unlikely that we would be able to support unallocated sites going forward, even though we felt it was a proactive way to address some of the issues and deliver some affordable housing.

**Chair's Summary:**

The new LDP needs to be as ambitious as possible. It takes a considerable amount of time, and it's unfortunate that at the moment we can't look at other sites. I hope that we do everything we can to produce that affordable housing, and housing in general. We need to have a clear vision of which businesses we hope to attract, and the sites that we have available. The committee agrees for the recommendations to be taken forward.

**4. Annual Performance Report for the Planning Service**

Officer Philip Thomas presented the report and responded to the Members' questions, with additional comments from Craig O'Connor.

**Challenge:**

*Will the problematic sites of Priory Gatehouse and the White House in Usk be near the top of the Risk Register?*

We are keeping a close eye on these two buildings. The difficulty is finding a partner who can work with us to provide an economic value and beneficial use for the scheme afterwards – this is certainly the difficulty with the gatehouse. We appreciate the condition that it is in, and the need for restoration and remediation. We have served

notices on the White House, and will provide an update on the progress with both cases following this meeting.

*22A in Monnow Street, Monmouth is a similar case. Could it also be at the forefront of any list?*

Yes, we will check the progress on that site and provide an update as soon as possible. *We have done very well in appeals to Welsh Government, but for those that we lost on appeal, do we analyse the reasons and learn lessons from them?*

Yes, we should be. We report all appeals to the Planning committee, and we raise them at Planning liaison meetings, to talk through with the case officers, or at development management team meetings. If Members would like details of the two appeals that we lost over the year, then we can provide those, and perform an analysis. We could do a special review of the last 12 months at the end of one of the Planning committees, looking at lessons learned. As officers, we have a committee debrief at the end of each month, and look at the appeals – we could do something like this as an annual review. We will put this to the chair of the committee. Troy House is one of the buildings at risk, in this case the Inspector didn't agree with our proposals for it. We need to look at all of the at-risk buildings together, and set out a strategy. It is very important to protect our characteristic buildings and retain our heritage assets.

#### **Chair's Summary:**

Mark Hand and the committee expressed their thanks and congratulations for the hard work performed by the team. We need to look closely at the possibilities for our county – we have a lot going for us, and we need to make the most of those things. The committee agrees for the recommendations to be taken forward.

### **5. Economy and Development Forward Work Programme**

Councillor Pavia is keen to pursue the matter of Procurement. LDP workshops will take place; Officers O'Connor and Lewis are working on a timetable now. Officer Hand asked for opinions on holding them at 5pm on Mondays. Councillors Roden and Strong said that this time is difficult given concurrent town meetings. Councillor Evans asked why they couldn't happen earlier in the day. Officer Hand suggested 5pm on a different day. Councillor Roden suggested putting the question to the Members, and going with the majority decision – this was agreed.

### **6. Council and Cabinet Work Plan**

#### **7. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24<sup>th</sup> September were agreed and signed as an accurate record.

#### **8. To confirm the date and time of the next meeting**

It was agreed that the next meeting will take place on 5<sup>th</sup> November, with a special Joint meeting with Strong Communities on 2<sup>nd</sup> November.

The meeting ended at **11.12 am**