

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Joint Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Thursday, 10th December, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)
County Councillor P.Pavia (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: L.Brown, A.Davies, D. Dovey, L.Dymock, R. Edwards, D. Evans, M.Groucutt, R. Harris, M. Powell, B. Strong and S. Woodhouse,

Also in attendance County Councillors R.J.W. Greenland, J.Pratt, V. Smith, J.Treharne and M.Lane

T. Crowhurst, Access for All
Peter Boden, Edge Consultants

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Stephen Griffiths, Strategy & Policy Officer
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Rachel Lewis, Planning Policy Manager
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning

APOLOGIES: County Councillors R.Roden and A. Webb

1. Election of Chair.

Simon Howarth was appointed as Chair.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair.

Paul Pavia was appointed as Vice-Chair.

3. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Pre-decision scrutiny of the Gypsy, Traveller and Showperson's Accommodation Assessment 2021 - 2033.

Stephen Griffiths presented the report, with additional comments from Mark Hand. It was noted that the report omitted the mention the involvement of Opinion Research Services Ltd., a social research organisation that assisted with the preparation of the report.

Challenge:

In 3.1.2, where it mentions the current need for 8 pitches – are they included in the 13?

Yes, the 13 pitches includes those 8. In 3.1.1 there is a summary of what the 13 pitches comprise.

One of the sites is described as 'overcrowded'?

There is confusion about what 'overcrowded' means. It's talking about adults on a pitch who should have their own caravan, rather than being in a wider family caravan. It doesn't mean that there are literally too many people in the caravan.

Can the definitions of static caravans and pitches be clarified?

Welsh Government guidance defines a pitch. The easiest way to think of a pitch is as a house plot, with garden space, parking space, etc. There tends to be a static home that provides living room-style accommodation. Normally there is a separate block for utility and for toilets. The younger children tend to be in the main static caravan with the parents, and older children in another. So it is like a house with different bedrooms. The guidance suggests that as a minimum one static caravan, perhaps two touring caravans, space to park two vehicles, and a garden area. But they do vary, as houses do. We have to look at the family's needs and the site.

It would be helpful for a multidisciplinary team that worked on the private site policy because there could then be a plan that ticks the boxes for both Planning and Licensing. Assistance through Planning Aid would also be very helpful. Would it not be better to work this way?

Joint working is a really good idea and we will pick that up. We can work with the applicants jointly with Environmental Health but they are separate regulatory systems – so we can't refuse planning applications because they don't comply with Environmental Licenses, and vice versa. So in that sense, we could never have a planning policy that requires it to comply with other legislation – that wouldn't be legally permissible. But in terms of working practices – getting everything aligned before that stage – that is something we will look to do.

How likely is it that the demand will change, especially for those who travel from site to site? How often do they usually stay long term?

The draft GTAA is valid until 2026, so it will be revisited then and if anyone has moved out of the county that will be reflected. We won't know until then.

Is legislation the same as in England? It is changing in England – will that affect Wales?

Yes, it has now changed in England to say that anyone who has stopped travelling is no longer a traveller. It is going through the Court of Appeals process. There is no indication that the legislation will change in Wales in that direction. The only thing that might happen is whether as a border county, people will move across from England – we would need to see if we have a duty to accommodate them, and go through that process then.

Chair's Summary:

Members supported the Recommendations. A multi-disciplinary approach was added as a Recommendation. Mark Hand reiterated that Planning can look at that but it would be guidance rather than policy. Councillor Brown added that it would be helpful if there were easy to read private site and policy guidance for the applicants.

5. Pre-decision scrutiny of the Local Housing Market Assessment, prior to submission to Welsh Government.

Mark Hand presented the report and answered the Members' questions, with additional contributions from Ian Bakewell and Cabinet Member Bob Greenland.

Challenge:

People with disabilities are disproportionately represented among those seeking social housing. Welsh Government has said the mix between social and mass market housing should be 45%/55%, Stats Wales say 47%/53%, but in the last 5 years Monmouthshire has achieved 18%/82%. The report says we need to build 467 affordable houses each year, which would mean also building 2128 mass-market houses, following the 18-82 ratio. How is that achievable and what is the impetus for increasing the ratio of social housing?

2000+ homes per year is not deliverable, and Welsh Government's ratio is not used anywhere in Wales as an LDP target. The NDF, now called Future Wales 2040, talks about a need for 47% of homes built to be affordable, for the first 5 years of its life. It also talks about that growth being directed largely to Newport and the valleys. Those sites are less viable than in Monmouthshire. It will be impossible for those areas without heavy public subsidy. The minister promotes inclusion of affordable housing-led sites in local development plans. The hard fact is that the level of affordable housing we're talking about is well below what the LHMA says.

The Housing Allocation policy and its discord with the current report: the former says that if someone has savings exceeding £16k they will be put into Band 4, which effectively means they will never get social housing. But this report says that a deposit of at least £30k is needed, and an income of £48.5k, to be able to afford an entry level property. Those two facts are at odds with each other. Did the two departments work together on this?

Yes, we are working very closely together, and both policies are written by the same department. Adults Select Committee received the policy change a few months ago. There was a need to review the financial resources section. The policy is worked on the basis of targeting those with the greatest need. There's a section in the policy that relates to having sufficient financial resources and therefore, arguably, there's a lower need for social housing. We made a number of changes in that section. We increased the amount of savings to £16k and the income threshold to £45k, and we increased the banding around that. In the new policy, someone would be in Band 4, rather than Band 5. We also built in the caveat that we wouldn't count benefit income or a lump sum from, for example, leaving the Armed Forces. The figures we came to were based on average Monmouthshire property prices. Another important consideration is that we aren't always talking about purchasing property but also accessing rental properties. The new policy has only been in place relatively recently – we can review it as we move forward.

The report mentions needing 467 affordable houses per annum but it doesn't mention the number in the LDP – the previous number was 960 affordable houses.

The Local Housing Market Assessment doesn't specify the level of affordable housing needed in the LDP – they are two separate documents – but it does form part of the evidence base. The LHMA shows that we need 467 affordable homes p.a. over the next 5 years to tackle the need that is identified. A chunk of that comes from the planning process, some comes from things like Monmouthshire Letting service, and the annual churn of affordable homes, with people moving out. But, the 467 is part of the information that we use for the LDP.

There are some single people looking for social housing. It has been normal practice that properties are bought based on a joint income, which would cut down the ratios significantly.

Yes, we talk about the income to house price ratio assuming that it's a single salary purchase but even if one assumes that there are two people and both are earning, the house prices are still in excess of 3 times the joint average income. So we still have that challenge. People on decent joint incomes would still struggle to get a mortgage for £300k starting, and to get the

deposit without an equity. There is the added challenge of private sector rents being quite high, so living day-to-day and building up the deposit is difficult.

There is nothing in the report about bedroom numbers. There is a one-bedroom demand at the moment concerning young homeless people. There is possible a two-bedroom demand for elderly people looking to downsize, a three-bedroom demand for young couples potentially starting families. Is there any coordination between the different needs and the types of dwelling?

There is a lot of information in the LHMA (p14-18) which looks at bedroom size requirements and demands, and identifies some other challenges. In the housing market, a starter home would typically be a flat or terraced house, but the average price of our flats is higher than the average price of all property types in Blaenau Gwent, and the average price of a terraced property in Monmouthshire is higher than the average for all property types in Torfaen and Newport. So just getting on that ladder in Monmouthshire is more difficult than in neighbouring authorities. This is a concern to all of us. The bedroom size issue is important for thinking about what we build going forward. With current developments, we can pin down exactly what the affordable portion needs to be per area: number of one-bedroom flats, two-bedroom houses, etc.

What will the result of this be in relation to the LDP?

We propose including in the LDP a policy around housing mix for the market sector. At the moment, we control the affordable housing element. As a rule, developers will build what they can sell: in Monmouthshire, anything will sell, so they naturally move towards the 4-bedroom detached properties because there is a higher profit margin. We're working towards the argument that we need intervention into that, to get some smaller market homes built – otherwise there will be a gap between people who qualify for affordable housing and people who can't get on the ladder.

There is a lack of resources for officers. Young people in care are becoming homeless – this must be addressed urgently. We simply aren't building enough social or affordable housing. This joint committee should ask Cabinet to start the process of building our own housing – the private sector has failed miserably.

We would like to build our own houses but can only do so once we have a new LDP to increase our delivery of social housing (for the rest of this LDP, all of our houses are coming on stream and will be built.) The next LDP is therefore the time to bring on the development company. The development company is about setting up for the future when the land supply is there, and projects for it to move on. The report going to Cabinet suggests that a way of starting is with a potential scheme in Caldicot. Members will be able to see the report and proposal. The challenge we're finding, and in our discussions with registered social landlords, is that they would build more if more land were available. So it comes down to the LDP, what we put in it, and how we balance that level of growth with sustainability and infrastructure.

In the forthcoming LDP, we must nail down the promises from developers that agree numbers of affordable houses but then change their mind later in the process. The exception sites showed that the developers can do it. If we build our own homes, it will be important to put aside rent money, after expenses, with which to provide maintenance.

We need to ensure that these developments are viable. We have to make it balanced and to ensure that the communities are balanced as a result. We have to recognise that as a result of

the social housing projects of the 60s, we now have some very big solely ex-council estates in sometimes fairly remote locations, and some social issues around them. We're looking now to have more of a balance and get the mix right. We also have to bear in mind the infrastructure needs in the county.

Regarding the development company, the recommendations going to Cabinet next week are: 1. that Cabinet agrees to the proposals to commence a project to undertake the construction of low-cost homes on the site adjacent to Caldicot Comprehensive School, and 2. that Cabinet agrees to the continuation of the planning for the development company so that it can be implemented when opportunities or land supply pipeline are secured, and the requirement for a development company is both justified and required by law.

Why are we failing on exception sites?

There are two aspects. There's a policy that allows for rural exception sites – so we could build 100% affordable housing on the edge of villages, and potentially grant-fund aspects of those. They are rare coming forwards, largely due to viability. That's not unique to Monmouthshire. We tried to address that to an extent with this LDP, by having 60-40 sites (60% affordable housing). That has been a mixed success, and a mix of issues around those that haven't worked. For example, on the smaller sites it only takes a small amount of infrastructure to go wrong for them not to be viable. Several others have stalled because the landowners have their eyes on residential values that aren't justified, and are being greedy. The point of those sites is to bring forward housing that wouldn't happen otherwise. We will look to send out a strong message in the new LDP because any of those sites that haven't happened will be de-allocated – they won't go back into the plan unless there are exceptional circumstances. They will go back to agricultural land value. Councillor Harris referred to the fact that we briefly had a policy to look at sites outside the LDP based on the 5-year housing land supply. They were achieving 35% affordable housing but that policy has ended. There was a very clear message from the Raglan application that Welsh Government supported a plan-led approach and have since changed national policy so we don't have a 5-year housing land supply measured in the same way as before. There is a logic to this but it gives us a worrying gap between delivering and finishing the current plan, and the new plan sites coming forward in 2023.

Chair's Summary:

There is general support from the committee to move forward with this report, and for the creation of a development company at the appropriate time, tying in with the LDP. A fuller summary of the meeting will be provided for the Chair(s) to take to Cabinet next week.

Tony Crowhurst noted that the mass market doesn't think about disabled people enough when houses and estates are designed, and observed that disabled people also can't have private rents, as landlords won't make the necessary adaptations to their properties. Councillor Brown proposed that a comment be included in relation to the implications of a single person purchasing, rather than a couple.

6. To consider the Local Development Plan Growth and Spatial Options (appendix 3 to follow).

Following a brief introduction from Mark Hand, Craig O'Connor and Rachel Lewis presented the report and delivered the presentation.

Challenge:

Regarding Growth Option 5, stating 'opportunities for carbon neutral development' isn't strong enough in light of the climate emergency – this option should go no further until carbon reduction can be addressed more clearly.

Climate Change needs to be balanced against the housing crisis. Through the LDP, we will be able to build the most sustainable homes ever: sustainable drainage, renewable energy, energy efficiency, etc. In Monmouthshire, we have a huge amount of land that we can build on. We will address Climate Change via our Green Infrastructure policies and introducing renewable energy on homes. If we are to address all of these things then it is with a balanced approach. Welsh Government has a target of 30% of people working from home by 2025-30, which will reduce commuting; the pandemic has shown that this can be done. Looking at our town centres, perhaps we will see hubs whereby people can live and work more locally. So we are looking to address the transport point as well.

Reducing outward commuting and increasing local job opportunities need to be central to plans, along with an increased focus on local (non-meat) food production.

Yes, livestock versus crops is a good point but we wouldn't have remit of that within the LDP. Agriculture is broadly outside the planning system. But we would have the remit with regards to allotments and community planting – those would be relevant to the plan.

There is concern about the increased pressure on the natural environment. A Green Wedge policy has previously been suggested.

We will do a Green Wedge review and working with colleagues throughout the region to get a methodology together, going alongside the LDP. It is important to note that the Growth and Spatial options are a starting point, with other policies to follow. All of these elements will be looked at, and protecting the landscape is a key part of that.

There is concern about infrastructure. Realistically, a bypass for Chepstow will take at least 10 years, for example.

Yes, Members and officers are concerned about existing infrastructure but this growth will mean financial contributions that will allow some of those services to be sustained in the long term as well. This plan is a starting point, and there will be an infrastructure plan alongside it that will consider how we sustain that level of growth, along with a Local Transport Plan, to ensure we have the right infrastructure to support this level of growth.

If houses are distributed evenly then won't areas like Raglan, for example, add to the Climate Change problem by residents commuting from there to Bristol or Cardiff?

Affordable housing is needed across the county. The LHMA has indicated that we need this level of housing across the area, and this is key to meeting our objectives.

Spatial Option 1 is more in line with the National Development Framework that argues for town centres first, in terms of development.

This plan will need to comply with the NDF and address those issues. I can't see why Option 5 wouldn't comply with it, in terms of its aspiration to deliver affordable housing and ensure we have placemaking and sustainable communities.

We have a lot of land but not all of it is suitable for houses or food production. Agriculture requires a lot of land that can't necessarily be turned over for building.

We aren't looking to build everywhere. We have some of the best agricultural land in Wales, with special landscapes attracting tourists. We have to balance growth with meeting our

demographic needs, affordable housing needs, infrastructure challenges, and climate emergency. The county is 88,000 hectares. 2018 statistics show that the urban built proportion is 3%, so we would only look to go up to less than 3.5%. It doesn't mean the infrastructure challenges aren't there. We have to pick the best spots. We are proposing proportionate growth. Currently, the larger the settlement, the more amenities and transport infrastructure it has – those areas would have the greater proportion of growth. But the larger villages need affordable housing too.

What about the demographic issue, given that young people go to cities as that's where the jobs are – how will building more houses help with that?

The older population will grow and we need to make sure we have that balance. There was discussion in the workshop of school rolls falling in some places, and the benefits of inward migration for families. If a lot of that migration can be supported in the right locations, and a lot of those people can work from home or locally, then we won't have those commuting challenges. There are lots of different objectives to align and different pressures on us.

In the last LDP a new settlement/ward was suggested – it could give us what we need.

A new settlement would potentially be a long-term option for the county but Welsh Government has ruled out a new settlement for the LDP so it isn't an option right now. It could come as part of the Strategic Development Plan for SE Wales but wouldn't be until at least 2026 – so probably for the next LDP after this one.

Air quality and climate change doesn't seem to feature enough. Chepstow has worse air quality than Bristol. This needs to be borne in mind for housing development. Adding extra charging points on sites won't assist with air quality because EVs are currently too expensive for most people and it will increase traffic congestion anyway.

Infrastructure, air quality and the climate emergency are detailed in the lengthy report that sits behind this one. They have been given lengthy consideration. There are aspects that can address growth and some of these issues. EV charging points will make a difference: by 2030 or 2040 there won't be any new petrol or diesel cars – they will be phased out, and as the technology develops, EVs will become cheaper. Young people are looking more now for a quality of life, so not necessarily moving to the cities.

We have two crises: affordable housing and climate emergency. They are not compatible. Last week, the Burns report said that the M4 relief road will not go ahead but did emphasise the need for further public transport and commuter access, which is very important for the climate emergency. Houses can't be separated from jobs. We need to provide new jobs in the locality but we now see that a lot more people will work from home than we might have envisaged a few years ago. Infrastructure is so important but we don't have the ability to provide that first, before the housing. We have to do what we can. If we do nothing, and have a low growth of housing without a demographic change, there will be a huge financial burden on the council. Our requirement for social services will go up, and the number of people to spread that cost will go down. Option 5 and the Spatial Option of 2 are the right thing. Members comments are taken on board, but these are the right options to take forward to Cabinet for the county as a whole.

Plans for Lydney and the larger area are considerable, involving people coming across to Monmouthshire – there will be an implication for housing and infrastructure.

We are working closely with colleagues across the border. The Forest of Dean is doing a new Local Development Framework. Officers O'Brien and Hand recently attended a meeting about

the plans for Bristol and its surroundings. We have fed into that. We are also working on transport and infrastructure with them, including via the strategic transport group.

There are unique pressures due to the tolls going. The thousands of houses being built between Lydney and Chepstow add to that. A large campaign group, 'Transition Chepstow', has been set up. I am concerned that Cabinet isn't considering the pressures on our areas fully.

The recommendation is to scrutinise the report and provide comments to Cabinet next week. We recommend Growth Option 5 and Spatial Option 2 but that is a preference at this stage. We will go through the consultation responses (consultation runs 4th January – 1st February), and ask Cabinet to review them. It is unusual for us to state a preference this early but the documents are already public.

Chair's Summary:

The committee broadly supports the recommendations, but Councillor Brown stated that the concerns about air quality and infrastructure need to be taken into account. She also proposed including green wedges as part of the recommendations, in order for areas to keep their identity, rather than having all of the urban areas (80% are in the south of the county) merge into one. Councillor Groucott reiterated that if climate change is not properly considered then he couldn't support the options.

Additionally, Councillor Smith suggested that infrastructure plans include consideration of the route to the new hospital, and observed that a recent report showed the large extent to which the wear from tyres contributes to pollution from vehicles. Councillor Harris noted the problem of 'NIMBYism' in the county, citing the example of the 10 houses proposed for the national park being turned down and needing to be built elsewhere – but the next location might not work out either, for the same reason.

7. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

8. Economy and Development Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

Councillor Pavia proposed that Procurement be added to this list, which was agreed by the Members.

The meeting ended at **12.55 pm**