

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Adults Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 9th November, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: R. Edwards, M. Groucutt,
M. Powell, M. Lane and V. Smith

Mr. T. Crowhurst

Officers in Attendance

Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Stephen Griffiths, Strategy & Policy Officer
Huw Owen, Principal Environment Health Officer
(Public Health)
Amy Longford, Development Management Area
Team Manager
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillors R. Harris and S. Woodhouse

1. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No public submissions were received.

3. Empty Homes Strategy - To scrutinise the strategy for addressing empty homes

Ian Bakewell presented the report and answered the members' questions with Amy Langford and Stephen Griffiths.

Challenge:

We have a continuing problem with housing. One of the buildings highlighted is the former nunnery on Old Hereford Road. It has a history of being used as a residential property and has fantastic potential. We, as a council, should take it on and not let it go to private developers.

This building is listed. It has an historic core and more modern element. It had planning permission for conversion to flats, then new builds were constructed to the rear. It could be a fantastic opportunity for a large number of flats. We want to facilitate the use of these historic buildings. If it gives the opportunity for housing that wouldn't be brought forward in other ways, then we need to try to grasp it. It is worth reminding members though that the problem of phosphates remains very large in the north of the county when it comes to delivering housing, but colleagues are working very hard to find solutions.

How many properties are on the at-risk register that could be utilised, rather than building on fresh ground?

We don't have the exact figures to hand. We have around 20 listed buildings at risk that are more rural properties. As part of our service improvement plan, we are going to set up a 'buildings at risk' strategy and action plan. We will identify specific actions within specific timeframes, essentially looking at formal notices. We need to take firm action where we can, but also engage with the owners and encourage them as best as possible.

Does the 15-year rolling loan from Welsh Government in relation to empty properties in the town centres include 'for sale' properties?

We haven't gone into the details of the funding yet, but we see it as an opportunity, albeit with it being a loan and not a grant. One of our challenges is that there's no dedicated funding stream for these levels of enforcement or general work. Regarding properties for sale, we are confident that this loan facility wouldn't support buying properties *per se*, but should support compulsory purchase and enforced sale. With the approach that we're taking there are a number of other potential opportunities e.g. social housing grant that we make available to housing associations for the development of affordable housing. If there were scope to link a housing association with an empty property, it might present an opportunity. Also, new this year is that the council can access the social housing grant, which we will factor into our considerations. There are funding streams through town centre regeneration, for example, though this again probably wouldn't go towards buying a property. In terms of buying properties, we are looking at whether MCC buys accommodation, rather than always relying on housing association partners. Housing Benefit regulations don't allow us to buy a property and then place a homeless applicant in there, with us managing the property – so if we do buy something, we must bring in a managing agent or partner. We found some flats in the south that we are considering now.

Generally, what are the reasons for properties being left empty?

Probate is one reason why empty properties become available but, usually, probate is then over, and they are inherited properties – there are a lot of inherited properties on the list. Properties stay empty for various reasons, including being kept as an asset, due to house prices.

Is Usk classified as a 'town' in the remit of Monmouthshire?

Usk has been factored into our approach. We have approached the owner of one property in the high street which is starting to look in poor condition. Usk might not fall within the criteria of the loan, but we would need to check.

Regarding town centre regeneration and conversion of commercial properties into residential, there is the law surrounding conservation to be considered. Who will change this law?

We are keen to consider commercial to residential opportunities. With such pressure on housing stock, we shouldn't exclude any opportunities. But there are planning criteria to meet, and we would have to come up with a very good business case for conversion. We have an upcoming viewing in the Magor area that might present a homeless opportunity. The housing associations are discussing this matter, too.

From a Planning perspective, the change in uses in our town centres is a pertinent point. In the current LDP we have defined town centres which is about trying to protect commercial properties on the ground floor – we have always been supportive of residential conversions on the upper floors – but people are using town centres very differently. So, in the revised LDP we will reconsider those boundaries concerning town centres and possibly write policies that are more supportive of mixed uses. In terms of conservation and listed buildings, there is a perception that nothing can be done with a listed building or conservation area, but that is no longer true. Policy is now more supportive of bringing historic properties back into use.

Officer and Cabinet member training was mentioned. Which members are these, and have they had the training yet?

The training has been done. There was an officer session during the summer, and half the Cabinet attended. It was not training *per se*, but more about raising awareness that there are a surprising number of pieces of legislation that enable us to take action. Welsh Government has appointed a specialist, Andrew Lavender, who is available to us to answer any queries and provide advice and guidance, which will be very useful.

There will be strict criteria for the 15-year loan. If we don't go down the route of town centre regeneration, will we be unable to apply for the loans?

If we don't follow the criteria, we will be unable to access the loan – Welsh Government is strict on this point. Training was an example of one of the criteria.

Who is on the working group for empty homes? Should we not have one of our members on it?

The working group has been in place for around 2 years. The Action Plan is helpful for the group. Members of this team are on the group, as well as members from Legal – they are important, as they would support us with any potential enforcement action. We are certainly happy to discuss member involvement in the group.

What are the stages for taking a property forward, if it meets the criteria? Will there be match funding? What are the caveats for the loans?

The approach is very much 'carrot and stick.' We start with being supportive and helpful to owners but if they don't engage or respond, then it is now appropriate that we take the process through more formal steps. But we don't want to move towards escalated steps, which will

include other funding streams. This is about bringing in as many funding streams as we can, if it is appropriate to do so.

The loan is geared towards town centre and empty properties – is any funding available for empty properties outside the town centre?

There isn't a specific 'empty property' pot for outside town centres. This is a deliberate and targeted step by Welsh Government to bring town centre properties back into use. Where we identify a property that fall outside those areas, we need to look at other opportunities e.g., social housing grant, and whether the council will have the appetite for buying properties, or whether housing associations will buy anyway. We are working with them on a property using a recycled social housing grant, as an example of not just relying on this loan. Were we to enter into serious enforcement steps on any property, we would probably need Cabinet approval for certain aspects.

Is the loan to the council or the company that has the portfolio?

The loan discussed in the report would be a loan to the council. But we do have another pot that we can make available to property owners. We have participated in a 'home improvement' loan scheme over the last 8-9 years. Originally, it was designed solely for empty properties but has now expanded out to cover home improvement loans for owner occupiers. We have around £1m available to us that has to be paid back to Welsh Government by 2030. So, there are loans for property owners to bring back empty properties anywhere in the county. For the homeowner it is an interest-free fixed fee but for the developer it would depend on what they borrow – they can borrow up to £35k per unit (so if a property can be converted into 2 units, then they can borrow £70k.)

Chair's summary:

The recommendations were agreed.

4. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme

The Gypsy and Travellers workshop is likely to happen in the early new year.

5. Cabinet and Council Forward Plan

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

7. Next Meeting: Tuesday 14th December 2021 at 10.00am

It was agreed not to hold the December meeting as it is additional and isn't needed, and to push back the January date for Budget scrutiny as the reports won't be available for 11th January.

The meeting ended at 11.09 am.