

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Economy and Development Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk with Remote Attendance on Thursday, 21st October, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor P. Jordan, (Chairman)
County Councillor R.Roden, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: J.Becker, A.Davies, D. Evans and B. Strong

Also in attendance County Councillors:
P. Murphy, Cabinet Member for Resources,
R. Edwards, R. Harris, S. Jones, M. Powell and
V. Smith

Officers in Attendance

Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Enterprise
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Craig O'Connor, Head of Planning
Philip Thomas, Development Services Manager
Rachel Lewis, Planning Policy Manager
Hannah Jones, Youth and Community Officer
Gareth James, AGI Coordinator

APOLOGIES: County Councillors M.Feakins, G. Howard and F. Taylor

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

3. Employment and Skills - To scrutinise progress of the employment, skills and apprenticeship programmes.

Hannah Jones, Gareth James, Stephen Cooper and William Austin presented the report. Hannah Jones answered the members' questions with Stephen Cooper and Cath Fallon.

Challenge:

What is the difference in the numbers of apprentices mentioned?

Where 168 are mentioned, this is existing staff who are looking to upskill: anyone who is undertaking a Level 2-4 qualification or NVQ is considered an apprentice as well.

The elephant in the room is funding. For the projects outlined, £2.2m is coming from the European Social Fund, of which £1.1m is for the Infuse scheme. For the other schemes, where do you expect to achieve funds to cover that shortfall?

We are working with the other CCR authorities to develop a co-designed collaborative model for future employment and skills – this will give us more flexibility and value-based cost-effectiveness. There are workshops this week to look at the model. But finances are a concern – there is a big financial implication for the authority, which we want to minimise. We are looking

at local and regional solutions, and will work up more detailed proposals to take to Cabinet. We haven't heard about the community renewal fund, which is unfortunate.

Adding the schemes together comes to roughly £1m. Will that come from Welsh Government? How much will MCC contribute?

Annually, we receive approximately £327k of grant funding for the Inspire2Achieve, Inspire2Work, and Skills@Work projects. We fund the other £187k delivery costs from our core budget, taking up the majority of our total £199k core funding.

If no European Social Fund money comes in, you will look for a significant increase from MCC to keep these schemes going?

We are looking to successive programmes but unfortunately are still waiting for details from UK and Welsh Government.

In Item 3.2, 'Next Steps' mentions Torfaen leading on an employability paper for the 10 CCR authorities. How do we make our voice heard, as a rural council and something of an outlier, compared to the others?

Newport is our lead authority on the current schemes. When developing the model for Monmouthshire, our voices were heard. We have been meeting for 18 months as 10 authorities, developing the model, and looking at local intelligence. Going forward, we think we are in a stronger position to reduce risk. There are bigger contractors coming into the local authority, working pan-UK and pan-Wales – we want to be in that space. We have a 10-authority approach to employability and skills, with the local delivery plan sitting behind it, that is flexible and adaptable to the needs of our county.

Regarding Key Stage 2 Inspire To Achieve and supported children, can the low Chepstow numbers be explained?

We have a data system in which we...attendance, behaviour, and wellbeing at Key Stage 2. One of the criteria identifies young people who need the most support, then the worker will have a professional discussion with the primary school. Everything has been taken into consideration to support the young people at Chepstow stepping up from primary into secondary, but we can double-check the figures.

Can we have more information on the HGV shortage work?

We met with Torfaen at a jobs fair yesterday – they funded a few of their clients through the process. But it is very expensive e.g. approximately £1700 per client, for a test, competency-related exam, and to pay for the licence. We are looking, with ELOs from various councils around us, to see if we can go to Welsh Government to seek further funding. Then, if clients come forward who are already with Melin or MHA, perhaps we can spread the cost. We are in the planning stage; we have identified the need, hopefully our plan will be successful.

The funding issue is critical in expanding these services. There's an appropriate role for Welsh Government in ensuring that these schemes continue.

Regarding successor funding, the team is working regionally – and the Chief Officer at a national level – to identify alternative funding streams once European funding ends. This is a UK-wide issue. We will update the committee as we progress. Although Infuse sits as part of this portfolio, there is no direct match funding from the authority that goes into it. We support the programme through 'match funding in kind' i.e. officer time to support it. So, while it constitutes a large chunk of the programme it runs somewhat outside the delivery of what our employment and skills team does.

3.2.2 discusses an employability paper. Is there an idea of timescale for the final version going to Cabinet?

We're looking for a date in December to go to Cabinet, so are working up the paper now. It has been agreed by the CCR strategic board. We will take it to the departmental management team, senior leadership team, then Cabinet.

Regarding the Evolutive model in 6.3, we need to match skills to what businesses actually require. Can we be updated on what is happening, and on introducing this system?

We met with neighbouring local authorities to look at the system and understand how it works. We then met with SRS to look at a different plan, to see if there is a better system. We have worked up a paper to go to Enterprise DMT, following sign-off from SRS. Then we will go back to the Evolutive company to start setting it up, hopefully this side of Christmas, for it to then go live January-March. We have face-to-face and e-mail contact with our businesses, but this will give us the skills intelligence to look at trends and the bigger landscape for Monmouthshire. Feedback from other authorities is that it has been a valuable tool for them. We would like to update the committee on its progress around April.

These schemes are so useful for young people to gain experience of a different environment and work.

We have submitted a proposal for a Kickstart placement to support Evolutive as part of a team as well – there should be lots of young people with valuable I.T. experience who will jump at that opportunity.

Chair's Summary:

This is an excellent project, but more money is needed to ensure its continuation beyond the end of the financial year; clearly, that cannot just come from MCC but will need substantial input from Welsh Government.

4. To scrutinise the annual monitoring report for the current adopted Local Development Plan (LDP) prior to submitting to Welsh Government.

Rachel Lewis and Craig O'Connor presented the report. Craig O'Connor answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Are we not, to a large extent, at the behest of developers as to whether these targets will be reached? Is this not a moveable feast, regarding the figures changing from week to week?

As a council, we don't hold all the levers within the construction industry. What we can do is have a proactive LDP that allocates enough land, and there is enough opportunity, for developers to come forward – both residential and economic. What the existing LDP has shown is that 6 of the 7 strategic sites have planning consent, so we have created that opportunity, as a council. And there is currently a planning application for the 7th, Vinegar Hill. Over this planning period we have issued 4,378 planning permissions, against a 4,500 target – so we are doing really well.

River Wye quality and phosphates are a great concern. It is a huge problem to resolve – is that really possible in the timeframe of the next LDP?

Yes, the phosphates issue is a significant one. It is a national problem; we sit on a pan-Wales board with NRW, Welsh Government and Welsh Water to try to find ways in which

developments can progress while water quality is improved. There needs to be a detailed funding programme for the drainage system to allow phosphate-stripping in our most sustainable settlements. But we also need to look at natural solutions with multiple benefits. It is a massive challenge, but we are working very hard on it. Drainage infrastructure needs to be improved in Abergavenny and Monmouth, in particular.

Are you working with the English authorities as well, regarding the Wye?

Yes, we also sit on a board relating to the Wye, with cross-border discussions taking place.

How realistic is the housing development trajectory on p41 of the AMR in light of the phosphates problem?

The trajectory is embraced by existing planning permissions as well, so some of those sites already have planning consent. The phosphates issue is set at a point in time from the beginning of this year. Therefore, if a development has planning consent prior to that, it can continue – the phosphates problem is affecting developments that haven't been given consent. We are confident that the trajectory can continue, based on applications that have already been granted, and those that lie outside the area concerned, such as Vinegar Hill.

Are Phosphates a north of the county or north of the M4 problem?

Phosphates affect the river catchment areas, so the matter doesn't affect all of Monmouthshire, and doesn't follow the M4's route. There is a map under the Water Quality section of the website that shows the areas. Severnside and Chepstow, for example, are not in that phosphate area.

Do we know what percentage the water board has of phosphate-stripping facilities?

We have very limited stripping capability in the county. The only drainage system which does is in Raglan. We are in discussions with Welsh Water about improving the infrastructure in Abergavenny and Monmouth to allow growth.

Regarding the housing trajectory, there is a shortfall of 1500 houses from the initial target, equivalent to 300 houses per annum over the ten-year period. The target for the RLDP is 507 per annum, or higher. How realistic is this, in light of the challenges that we face?

Yes, there is a shortfall of 1,500 dwellings but, as mentioned, 6 of the 7 sites have been allocated and are coming forward. Over the next 5 years, considering what is coming on board, we are confident that the trajectory will continue. We see that when land is allocated, we are able to deliver the homes.

The 11-unit development in Shirenewton has outline planning permission but not detailed planning permission. With an AMR, is that considered, as it could be a while before it progresses?

We measure from the time that an application's outline planning consent is granted – that is when the principle of development is established.

How does the predominance of poultry farming in Powys figure in solutions to the phosphates problem?

It is a multi-disciplinary problem, covering developments and agricultural practices, which is why we are working together on a pan-Wales basis. Mitigating run-off will be a factor, but all we can do at this stage is keep working to find solutions.

There is also concern about raw sewage being emptied into rivers rather than going through the sewage system. Can this be addressed?

We can't comment on that specifically, but it would come under the umbrella of finding solutions, working with NRW and Welsh Water.

Why is the Crick Road site not proceeding? Is there a water sewage infrastructure problem at this site?

Crick Road is progressing, it has planning consent for a care home for residential development. Some of the delays have been contractual. There are several conditions that we are still working through but development on site should start soon. There is no problem with drainage or sewage at the site.

Chair's Summary:

The committee recommends that the report be submitted to Welsh Government. Cabinet Member Phil Murphy clarified that the Crick Road care home will start by the first two weeks of December.

5. Planning Annual Performance Report - Scrutiny of the annual performance report prior to submission to Welsh Government.

Philip Thomas presented the report and answered the members' questions with Craig O'Connor.

Challenge:

Paragraph 6.1 on p5 mentions 8 weeks (56 days) to determine applications, but paragraph 6.7 on p8 says that the average time to determine applications has increased to 92 days. What is the discrepancy?

The end-to-end time for all applications is 92 days. Once an application gets to 8 weeks, we agree an extension with the developer.

Regarding enforcement, there are 297 complaints but only 14 actions. Is something else taking place? Is there a possibility of educating the complainants? How much work is entailed?

There is a lot of work, but the amount varies from complaint to complaint, as does the scale. All are investigated. Some are closed quickly while others take many months, often due to someone not realising that their action required permission. We have done training previously with community councils so that they understand the limits of what we can do, and when it's appropriate to complain. Training will need to be updated for the new cohort of councillors following next year's elections.

Regarding actions for 2021-22, we have two buildings at risk in Usk: The Priory gatehouse and old stable block, and old council building beside the King's Head. Can these, especially the gatehouse, be addressed urgently?

Yes, we will keep a close eye on these.

What is the timescale for the digital tree project?

We are currently looking at how to move forward with this piece of work. A lot of information needs to be digitised and put on the system. We hope to commence in the new year but how long it takes is still up for discussion.

Chair's Summary:

The committee recommends that the report be submitted to Welsh Government.

6. Economy and Development Select Committee Forward Work Plan.

Note the Special meeting on 8th November on the topic of the Replacement Local Development Plan.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

8. To confirm the following minutes:

9. Economy and Development Select Committee dated 7th September 2021.

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

10. Special meeting of the Economy and Development Select Committee dated 16th September 2021.

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

11. Next Meeting: Thursday 9th December 2021 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **12.06 pm**