

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 29th July, 2021 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: A. Easson, C. Edwards, V. Smith and J. Treharne,

Officers in Attendance

Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Enterprise
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Emma Davies, Performance Officer
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Stacey Jones, Senior Accountant

APOLOGIES: County Councillor P. Clarke

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Open Public Forum

A submission was received from one of the community councils regarding joint working between Monmouthshire County Council and National Resources Wales, and water pumps, but unfortunately too late for it to be sent to officers for their response today – there needs to be 3 clear working days between the submission and the meeting. Officers will read the submission and provide the appropriate response outside this meeting. Members will be included in the response.

3. Performance Reporting

Emma Davies presented the report and answered the members' questions with Carl Touhig and Frances O'Brien.

Challenge:

We have a Progress Evaluation of 3, which is 'adequate' – what is the top rating possible?

Ratings range from 1-6, with 6 being 'excellent', where all performance measures have achieved the targets set, and all actions have been delivered. Reaching 6 is possible, and therefore a potential aim.

How are we faring with recycling?

Last year we achieved 68.4% recycling, which is 4.4% ahead of the target. The re-use shops in Llanfoist and Five Lanes are now open and doing very well. Re-use is growing in the county and is making an improvement in keeping materials separate when people use the sites.

Newport City Council have received a national award for their recycling centres – were we in the running for this?

We didn't put ourselves forward for any awards this year due to the resources in the team, and trying to keep the services running. We focussed on getting shops open and applying for bids. We also started the Library Of Things and Repair Cafes this year, so didn't have the capacity to also apply for awards.

On p12, the report mentions the percentage of roads in poor condition, which is always a concern for the public. How are the percentages qualified/measured?

This is one of our national performance indicators, so there is a range of areas included that are stipulated to us.

How are we measuring the council's reduction in carbon emissions?

There are no officers from MonLife in this meeting so we will request that the Green Infrastructure team provides a response to members after the meeting.

The My Monmouthshire app is brilliant. Can we follow up on the reports we put on there, if work hasn't been done?

We are currently seeing an unprecedented demand coming through all channels: call centre, My Monmouthshire, letters, etc. The volume of enquiries has been phenomenal. We are going to undertake a review of that with the Digital Programme Office as we are finding that people are coming to us through lots of different mechanisms, and we are struggling to respond to all of them or close them down. The mechanism for providing closure and feedback in My Monmouthshire needs to be improved. We will pick a few key areas relevant to the Strong Communities portfolio such as Highways and Waste to see if we can start to improve that communication and customer engagement.

There is a reference to new working arrangements – do we have any feedback on that?

Chief Officer for People & Governance, Matt Phillips, is overseeing this project, which we are still working through. Staff engagement sessions are ongoing to feed into that process. In the forthcoming period, we will test out different places and spaces, and how we can work in a different way. We are thinking about how we can have collaborative working spaces, project-working spaces. Our workers fall into different categories: 'on the go' workers who aren't fixed in one location, fixed workers who are place-based, and 'anywhere' workers. These all need to feature in how we operate in the future. The work is ongoing but not yet concluded.

Regarding communication with community and town councils, is there a specific officer dedicated to dealing with concerns?

It might be useful if a committee member were part of those conversations – it would be valuable to have that input as we review and refresh how customer engagement works.

Do our staff sickness figures include Covid-related issues – isolation days etc.?

Sickness recorded for Covid-19 has only been for associated illness, so not due to shielding or non-symptomatic absences e.g. self-isolating.

If shielding isn't included in the sickness figures, how do we relate that to work performance?

We don't know at this time what the HR mechanism has been for recording shielding information but can check and feed back to the member after the meeting. Coronavirus strategy is being considered in September, so this matter can be discussed in that context too.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Webb volunteered to be the member representative to community and town councils.

This report has been brought to the committee in order for us to consider the Council's progress in meeting its five priority goals as set out in our Corporate Plan. We recognise that the pandemic has led to some delays on projects and some work having been paused temporarily, as the Council focussed its attention on delivering key services in challenging times. We developed a Coronavirus Strategy that was adopted by the cabinet and has ensured that activities have been focussed and coordinated. This committee will consider a detailed analysis of the Council's response to the pandemic and the lessons learnt that will shape our future service delivery at our next meeting on 30th September. Thank you to Emma for preparing this report. Unless there are any specific recommendations members wish to make, I am content that the committee is satisfied with the performance of the services that fall within our remit.

4. Budget Monitoring

Jonathan Davies presented the report and answered the members' questions with Stacey Jones, Frances O'Brien, and Mark Hand.

Challenge:

Besides Audit Manager (shared with Newport), are there other areas that we share with other councils?

Yes, there are several examples of shared service arrangements throughout the authority. The most recent example is the decision to amalgamate with Cardiff Council's procurement service. If there is a benefit to be had then we explore the possibility. When we collaborate with other councils or bodies we are able to capitalise that cost, allowing us to meet the costs from capital resources, rather than burdening the revenue account. We're looking to do this for procurement for the current financial year: £208k pressure that would have been in the revenue budget is being capitalised.

Does the collaboration with Cardiff on procurement include shared salaries?

That included a transfer of the service and secondment of officers to Cardiff. We would then pay a fee for that service, effectively. So, in effect, we pay the salary but through a fee arrangement rather than directly.

Passenger transport unit and civil parking enforcement: has the new scheme of civil parking started, and will the pressures be resolved in the coming years?

The PTU service has a number of pressures. We've seen increased maintenance costs, additional staffing costs, increased pupil numbers requiring transport, etc. The modelling of those numbers is very complex in terms of applications coming in for home to school transport each year. We often get late applications and it is difficult for us to predict where pupils will go. We're looking at putting a recovery plan in place for PTU for next year; last year we received a substantial amount of Welsh Government funding that helped mitigate some of the issues in the services, but they still exist. We're looking at the current staffing structure and doing a comparison between internal and external operations to see if there is any leeway there for reducing costs. But they mainly relate to fluctuations in numbers – when we receive the new numbers in September, the direction we need to take will be clearer, and there will be another review.

Civil parking enforcement has been in place for just under two years but between staff vacancies, sickness and the pandemic, we have probably only had about three months of full activity. There's currently a shortfall in income against the target; we have started a review to ascertain whether the target is realistic in the first place. We weren't enforcing during the flood events and staff were redeployed during the pandemic, so we're only now getting the service bedded in. This will be an area for the committee to watch as we move along, and we can report back in the coming year.

Have our private contracts been affected?

Yes, we've reduced our private hire because of Covid. We are now starting to get back into the private hire market and getting jobs in on that end. Hopefully, as the year goes on, income will steadily progress. We need to ensure that we have the staffing structure to deliver our core services, i.e. children to school, and the first point of call will be picking up swimming lessons once they start again. We will watch the market very closely and develop our service to match the needs and produce income from private hire as it does offset our overall costs.

Could there be further training in reading accounts, and perhaps members could suggest ways of phrasing things, etc.?

Officers will consider this and get back to the committee.

Chair's Summary:

We thank the officers for a detailed report on the revenue and capital outturn position and we are grateful for the concise explanation of the key budgetary issues in the service areas that fall within our remit. We recognise that reports need to be detailed, however, local government finance is complex and we would like some further training on analysis of the finance reports in due course. Our role is to satisfy ourselves that effective budget monitoring is taking place and as a committee, we feel fairly

confident that this is the case. We recognise that the 2 winter storms had significant implications for the financial position together with the already challenging service area positions, notably children's services, Passenger Transport Unit and Waste and Recycling, the increased pay award and the late settlement from Welsh Government further compounding a challenging situation. We particularly thank officers for providing us with an overview of the financial implications of the Covid pandemic, which will help us in our scrutiny of the pandemic learning that we will undertake in September. Thank you officers for your time this morning and your hard work in collating these reports.

5. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record.

6. Action list

7. Strong Communities forward work programme

Training on budget monitoring is requested. Councillor Webb requested that a subgroup covering the communications with town and community councils be added to the work programme. Councillor Smith's Burials and Cremations report will hopefully be covered in September, along with Coronavirus strategy. Depending on the response from officers to the Public Open Forum submission, flooding could possibly be covered in November. It is proposed that an update on County Lines be added to the work programme, perhaps in conjunction with a review of CCTV. January will include a significant piece on dog controls.

8. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

9. Date and time of next meeting

Thursday 30th September 2021.

The meeting ended at **10.50 am**