

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

**Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee
County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 18th November, 2021 at 10.00 am**

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillors: C.Edwards, R. Harris,
V. Smith, J.Treharne, M. Powell and P. Jordan

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Alan Burkitt, Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh
Language
David Jones, Head of Public Protection

APOLOGIES: Councillor A. Easson

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum

No public submissions were received.

3. Public Protection 2020/21 Performance Report & Division's response to the Coronavirus pandemic

David Jones and Gareth Walters presented the reports and answered the members' questions with Gillian Dicken.

Challenge:

Regarding pandemic response, would you do anything differently next year from last year?

We are reflecting on our actions via Aneurin Bevan: the 6 Track and Trace teams are asking themselves about lessons learned, etc. We responded very well, the governance was set up very quickly and has gone well. We have fed back that announcements on a Friday afternoon aren't particularly helpful to the front line as, often, the providers (e.g. schools) are on the backfoot trying to interpret the announcement before the end of the week. Another lesson learned is that it would be useful to co-produce some of the guidance with the frontline officers e.g. the Standard Operating Procedures, of which there have been a huge amount. There will be regional and national reports on lessons learned and what we would have done differently.

How many businesses or individuals did you prosecute in the last 12 months, and what was the outcome?

We took an approach that encouraged business users, rather than focussing on enforcement. Licencing did around 8 improvement notices e.g. for pub customers who were flouting the rules – we went with the designated Premises Supervisor and dealt with those complaints, then followed up with a visit to check that things have improved. In Monmouthshire, compliance has generally been very good. Gwent Police are happy to attend town centres on Saturday nights and address certain pubs, based on our advice. They will be out in force on Black Friday. Due to our focus on working with businesses rather than just on enforcement there have only been a handful of prosecutions.

Were there any prosecutions relating to hand sanitisers that weren't up to standard?

Fortunately, no-one was manufacturing it in our area, other than a few breweries that diversified. We supported them with advice, to produce it correctly. Everything that wasn't up to standard was collected and destroyed. The information and intelligence was then passed back to the home authority from which it had originated, for them to take action. We will provide members with the number of prosecutions that have resulted. For other PPE, it is again a business advice approach, working closely with HSE, who were taking the proactive approach to doing stop-checks. Monmouthshire businesses have listened to the advice and followed it. We have had 22 Improvement notices: 9 in Hospitality, 6 in Food Retail, 1 in non-Food Retail and 6 in close personal contact services, mainly barbers and hairdressers.

What effect will Covid passports have on the team's performance?

We've been keen to encourage businesses to comply with passports. Again, compliance has generally been very good. There haven't been issues with non-compliance relating to the PPE requirements. Passports will be very helpful for any upcoming events e.g. the Christmas meet at Chepstow Racecourse, with 8000+ people. The Police won't do any enforcement on passports, so the onus goes back on the businesses, now including theatres and cinemas. If we do receive any reports on non-compliance, we will act on them accordingly.

Who's going to look after Street Licensing in the future?

This is still being discussed. With the example of Cross Street in Abergavenny, grants were issued, and we have been working with Highways colleagues. We will have to get back to the committee with specifics on this matter.

Can we return to putting emphasis on tackling the problem of flytipping, in the future?

We have had two successful prosecutions recently, which should send a strong message. We will certainly endeavour to return this subject to priority status. But it is difficult to catch the offenders, given the time and location of the offences, generally.

Track and Trace has been an excellent service. Did you organise all of it, or was it the health authority?

It is predominantly provided by MCC. We have contracted staff who work within our terms and conditions. We work with all community transmissions, which make up over 90%, while the health board deals with in-patients. We currently deal with around 80 cases per day. We have to work with schools to try to minimise the spread there. We will feed back that the service has been excellent.

Is the increase in pest control complaints related to serving food outside, or increased takeaways?

It is probably more to do with people being at home. Most of our complaints aren't relating to businesses but are from members of the public. It is probably as simple as people working from home and seeing, say, a rat go through their garden, that they wouldn't have seen if they were in the office. This compensates for the drop in numbers relating to food businesses: food waste reduced because December-March there was a complete lockdown, with no food businesses open. It tallies with the rise in noise complaints: these also went up as people spent so much more time at home.

Regarding air quality sensors in the four schools, the report mentions 'data collected and the scope for this to be an important education tool' – is that being taken forward?

We are keen to engage with schools on this, as it concerns live data. We targeted Monmouth and Chepstow as they have major trunk roads nearby. We see it as an educational tool – if someone is asthmatic, it would be useful to know if pollution is particularly bad on a given day, for example. It hasn't happened yet because the schools have been so occupied with their Covid response.

What is the number or percentage of businesses that have been able to restart?

It's around 10% of the 101 new businesses that opened in 2020/21. We are pushing for a licence process for food businesses, so someone can set up a food business following a redundancy, for example. It can be an onerous task for a food business to start from scratch, requiring a lot of advice from us. The number of businesses that have opened have increased since the report, so we now stand at over 170. We won't know the full number that have closed until we have made visits.

Will there be a problem with dogs being abandoned when people go back to work fully?

This is certainly a concern and has been raised to Welsh Government by charities. We have the Stray Dog contract which could result in an increased number of stray dogs. From our perspective on the wider part of the project, Operation Scout recently raided a premise involved

with organised crime in Carmarthen, which resulted in 240 dogs being taken. This raises the question of where they can be kept, and is something for us to consider, and that we have raised with Welsh Government. With the project, we are trying to make these links i.e. with the government task force, and put forward a model for Wales in which no puppy can be sold without some form of registration or licence. It might not be a commercial licence, but they would still need to register. Creating a central system for collating microchip data would also be very important.

Does MCC provide training for Food Hygiene certificates?

Our team does provide food hygiene training but with providing inspections and working through the backlog currently it hasn't been a priority. We therefore won't do it for a long time to come. There is another body within MCC that provides the training, and we hope to link with them.

Chair's Summary:

The pandemic has placed a lot of significant additional pressure on the Public Protection Service, which was already stretched pre-pandemic, so this report has enabled us to draw an interesting comparison of their activity pre-pandemic and during the pandemic.

The Public Protection Service is wide-ranging, covering Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Animal Health and Licensing. We have heard how lockdowns led to a rise in environmental health complaints, ranging from noise and disturbance, flytipping and bonfires to dog fouling, due to more people being in their homes and also greater public visibility when these incidents occurred.

The teams have also had to deal with the normal day job, undertaking proactive visits to establishments to protect the public from poor hygiene as well as support businesses during the pandemic. We heard that there are particular resource issues in animal health due to a shortage of staff and additional work, such as the Dog Breeding programme, which is a partnership piece of work that Monmouthshire is leading upon.

Our scrutiny today has led us conclude that the Public Protection Service has performed incredibly well over the pandemic, particularly the Environmental Health Team which needed to establish a '24 hours a day, 7 days a week Track, Trace and Protect Team', as well as deliver all their other responsibilities. We fully acknowledge that delivering this additional service has been very onerous.

We fully support you in raising these resource issues with the cabinet. We'd like to extend our thanks to you and all of your team for your important role, which you have carried out very effectively during unprecedented times. Thank you for presenting your report to us today.

Councillor Treharne requested that the licensing aspect of this report be taken to the Licensing committee.

4. Strategic Equality Plan

Alan Burkitt presented the report and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Regarding disability, can we provide employment for people who are coming up to retirement, or have retired?

The question is whether there is a limit on who we would look to employ, within the protected characteristics: age, for example, shouldn't make a difference to whether someone is employed. An older person will bring a wealth of experience but needs to be balanced against bringing through younger employees. The current situation of working from home has potentially changed matters, as, for example, someone with a physical disability who might have had difficulties in the office can now work from home with fewer limitations. With a recent case of a young person with autism whose employer didn't know how to work with his needs, we have worked to get him into a placement and mentor him. So, there is a lot of work in this area that goes on in the background.

The term 'gender pay gap' is confusing because of the difference between jobs and the difference between those who do the same job. Is it a Welsh Government term?

Yes, the gap doesn't necessarily concern a difference between those doing the same job, but comparable jobs – levels of comparable responsibility. For example, as a society we currently have the question of how to hire more carers (who tend to be female) – do we need to properly assess the properties and skills needed to be a one-to-one carer, and reconsider what they are paid, given what they contribute and provide? It's hard to give specifics but it essentially concerns the problem that, historically, a female-dominated career hasn't been paid the same as a male-dominated career with equivalent skills. There shouldn't be a gender stereotype now with jobs, which also needs to change. The gender pay gap is something that we need to report on as part of the Equality Act.

The gender pay gap comes down to wording. There used to be a problem of women being paid less for the exact same job. On the other hand, there are now some men who stay at home because their partner is able to earn more, so things are changing.

Yes, there is still a long way to go, but we are working on it.

On p11, objectives 3, there is a reference to the Box Clever Digital platform. Has testing resumed?

At the time of this report being written it was delayed by the pandemic. There isn't any further information yet, but I can check and update members.

What effect will the socio-economic duty have on these reports?

It's now a part of our Integrated Impact Assessment process (it came in last March). When officers carry out an Impact Assessment, they have to consider the socio-economic duty i.e. if something in the report might have a financial impact, they have to consider and discuss it. To date, it is more likely to have come up as part of the Budget process, or if we're looking to revise a pricing strategy, for example. Not every report that goes to Cabinet, Council or Individual Cabinet Member decisions affects every area. There hasn't been a particular example in the Integrated Impact Assessment process so far.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Officer Burkitt for this report. The committee accepted the recommendations.

5. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The meeting had to close prematurely because of technical difficulties. This agenda item will therefore be covered at the next meeting.

6. Strong Communities forward work programme

The meeting had to close prematurely because of technical difficulties. This agenda item will therefore be covered at the next meeting.

7. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

The meeting had to close prematurely because of technical difficulties. This agenda item will therefore be covered at the next meeting.

8. Date and time of next meeting

25th January 2022.

The meeting ended at 11.03 am.