

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Wednesday, 10th April, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Lisa Dymock (Chairman)

County Councillors: Emma Bryn, Tomos Davies, Jane Lucas, Maria Stevens, Jackie Strong, Tudor Thomas, Laura Wright, Alistair Neill, Mary Ann Brocklesby and Catrin Maby

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Ian Saunders, Chief Officer Customer, Culture and Wellbeing.
Hazel Clatworthy, Sustainability Policy Officer
Deb Hill-Howells, Head of Decarbonisation, Transport and Support Services
Colette Bosley, Green Infrastructure Manager
Marianne Elliott, Sustainable Food Projects Manager
Matthew Lewis (Countryside), Interim Performance, Evaluation and Programme Development Lead for MonLife
Kate Stinchcombe, Biodiversity & Ecology Officer
Ian Hoccom, Decarbonisation Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillor Louise Brown

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

A contribution was received from a member of the public which can be accessed via the live stream. Cabinet Member Catrin Maby wished to follow up on the issues raised outside the meeting.

3. Climate and Nature Emergency Strategy 2024 - To scrutinise progress of the strategy prior to Cabinet decision.

Cabinet Member Catrin Maby introduced the report, delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Colette Bosley, Matthew Lewis and Hazel Clatworthy.

Key questions from Members:

- Do we keep a record of the trees removed, hedgerows lost, and trees fallen per year, and do we record Tree Protection Orders that have failed? Are there plans to have a hedgerow strategy?
- When is the dark skies policy likely to happen and what we are doing to protect the dark skies in the meantime?
- Would it be best to separate 'climate emergency' and 'nature recovery', and describe 'nature recovery' as an emergency, because applying the term 'emergency' to everything doesn't necessarily lead to the best planning and approach. It can confuse people and we need to take people with us and use our influence and distilled knowledge to inform people.
- The concern around electric vehicles is whether we are clear about the true nature of carbon emissions and the use of rare minerals in the production of the batteries for EV's leads to an entirely separate, but extremely important, set of questions, which is concerning if we pin our actions towards net zero solely on the use of electric vehicles.
- There is also the concern that Wales is being described as one of most nature-depleted countries on earth – tied to the UK being described as such in the 2023 State of Nature Report. The language used is somewhat apocalyptic and there is a danger in describing everything as disastrous and catastrophic, in terms of whether we will actually take people with us in terms of addressing the issue. We need to encourage and support residents and businesses and that's the bit that needs to be much stronger in this strategy because whilst this isn't about giving financial support, it is about doing everything possible to support residents and businesses to move in this direction and we know the scale of what 100,000 residents can achieve, as opposed to a council, so surely putting our efforts into that may well be much more productive than some of the other things. England also has a greater amount of urban concentration than Scotland and Wales, so could they offset some of the effects of urban sprawl?
- It's vital that we understand what we can do, what we have control over and are clear about that, for example bats and dark skies, the fact we have a Site of Special Scientific Interest bordering Monmouth, so we must ask ourselves whether we are really paying enough attention to it and what plans we have for it in future. We also have examples of dates and times when some of our buildings have lights on, wasting electric, when not needed and contributing to lighter skies, such as Monmouth Comprehensive School car park and building lights being left on and Raglan depot too, so these need to be addresses. **ACTION: Councillor Lucas to send details through to Councillor Maby and Ian Hocom.**
- The importance of flora and fauna, bees and other insect numbers, amongst a backdrop of declining numbers, and disease such as Ash dieback amongst trees, exacerbated by climate change, but there are signs of recovery and regeneration, so it's important to reflect the positives in this report too.
- There is concern about the impact of new housing development and the importance of compliance with habitat regulations.
- There are also concerns around the River Severn and the Caldicot sea wall, in terms of mitigation and adaptation for flood risk ~ have we lost sight of that?

- Pleased to see that tackling plastic waste features are prominently in the climate and nature emergency strategy, given that in the previous budget cycle back in 2023-2024, there was a budgetary concession in respect of some £253,000k, if recalled correctly, to support the council's enforcement efforts in respect of tackling the scourge of littering and fly tipping across the county. How has this additional resource has been deployed and how will it be deployed in in future? How will our enforcement powers and resources interact more broadly with supporting the climate and nature strategy? I endorse the ambition stated to support plastic free towns across the county though the aspiration, like many other aspirations in the strategy, will be contingent on having the support of the volunteers, so what more does the cabinet member think we can be doing as a Council to further unlock the potential and incentivize the immense civic capital that we have at our disposal to drive further meaningful progress, specifically in tackling litter, but also in supporting the wider aspirations of the climate and nature emergency strategy presented to us?
- The enthusiasm of the subject can lead to exaggerated terms in communicating it, such as Wales being described as one of most depleted countries, whilst nowhere does the state of nature report mention this – it refers to the UK. The key findings for Wales only look at a 7-year period, but it needs to be seen in context with the position for other countries which are starting at lower level, so it would be beneficial to emphasise the positives already achieved.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Members for the questions and feedback. The report has been scrutinised in detail and the Cabinet Member and colleagues can consider the points raised. We discussed how Members wanted to understand how we're capturing the data of trees and hedgerows being felled and replanted and look at the replanting scheme and what we are doing in relation to preserving our dark skies and urban wildlife. There is a feeling we should not describe everything as an emergency – it doesn't provide the best planning approach. We need to encourage people to come with us and we don't want to overwhelm them with terms like 'emergency'. There is some concern we use Electric Vehicles as an answer to all, but it is not the only answer or resolution to the climate change emergency.

A very valid point was made with regards to Council building lights left on e.g. car park lights in schools and Raglan depot – this goes against our dark skies ambition and is also a wasteful use of electricity. We need to consider and reference the positives such as the ash dieback problem being managed by the Council, and obviously the natural regeneration will see a positive from this. Points were made about Caldicot Seawall and the River Nedern and its importance to residents in the Severnside area with regards to flooding and water quality. We were pleased to see plastic waste featured prominently and want to know how resource will be deployed within the strategy to tackle this.

4. Nature Recovery - To scrutinise progress of the strategy prior to Cabinet decision.

Colette Bosley delivered a presentation and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Catrin Maby.

Key questions from Members:

- I was interested to review the forward plan objectives. Monmouthshire isn't just like any other part of the country, it's an area of outstanding beauty and one of the UK's finest rural counties, with key market towns benefitting from 360-degree transport links, so the recognition of this as a starting point in the objectives section of the report would be helpful. It may well be that a better set of objectives would embed biodiversity, because whilst it is a term frequently used, explaining what it means in real terms could provide as a starting point for us to reference that Monmouthshire is already one of the most outstanding and beautiful parts of the country. We want to ensure that residents and school children in every part of the county develop their engagement with nature and a greater emphasis put on embedding biodiversity in real terms could be better referenced to recognize what an extraordinary part of the country we are in and it would help to provide that 'distinctiveness' that you have referred to as being difficult to achieve.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to officers and Cabinet Member for presenting the report which clearly has the Committee's support. The feedback provided is for the officers and Cabinet Member to consider, namely, that Monmouthshire is one of the most outstanding rural counties is not recognised in the objectives, and that a way to embed biodiversity might be to develop residents and schoolchildren's engagement with nature.

5. Local Food Strategy - To scrutinise progress of the strategy prior to Cabinet decision.

Leader Mary Ann Brocklesby introduced the report, Marianne Elliott delivered a presentation, and they answered the members' questions with Deb Hill-Howells and Craig O'Connor.

Key questions from Members:

- Caldicot food bank need is growing, I am interested in the concept of community food and how to upskill residents and bring people together to perhaps use council lands as allotments – acknowledging the very successful community allotment in Caldicot.
- I am interested in the new Severn View care home which has a community allotment, the ethos being to bring the community in to facilitate and to provide a social element, emphasising that food is not just about nutrition. How can we support local residents to access council land and facilities? Where and how can this happen?
- In terms of the 'Cook along club', the local primary school had its first session this afternoon and there was a significant interest from parents.
- In reference to Free School Meals (FSM), the school meal budget and lunch food being wasted is a key concern – is there feedback as to why there's waste? Is it children's choices or nutrition?
- In relation to the uptake of FSM registration, could the number be compromised by residents or carers having to register online? Not everyone engages with social media, so could this be better facilitated via word of mouth? Parents have

asked how to register if they don't have the 'Scoop system' – could there be more options for relaying the message to parents?

- If pupils are registered for FSMs, is there an opportunity for grant fundings for uniforms?
- Is there a way to improve supply chains locally so that schools and care homes can be supplied with meat – 70% of sheep sold through Raglan market are sent to England to be processed as there is no local processing plant?
- There is a difference between what residents would see as words and actual actions.... “Monmouthshire stands out for” and “local can be seen as Monmouthshire, Gwent....”. I don't feel that Llandudno for example, is 'local'. We need to be more specific and in real terms, local should mean local and be defined as such. We need to separate out Monmouthshire from the rest of Wales.
- In terms of Climate Change and Nature Recovery, I recognise the importance of taking residents and businesses with us and this strategy clearly depends on their support, but the contract recently awarded to a milk supplier hundreds of miles away cuts directly across statements of ethical and local produce.
- I am pleased to see the new hydrogen electric vehicle is now serving meals on wheels to residents.
- Osbaston School: they are feeding back all of the good things that they do about food sourcing, which is brilliant to see – there are very good things and conversations happening but we recognise we have a long way to go.
- Can it be confirmed whether this local food strategy would have materially impacted the original decision to award the school milk contract to a business in Pembrokeshire?
- In terms of support for SMEs, microbusinesses and SMEs are the lifeblood of the county's food industry and these often struggle to scale up and are affected by high business rates. Welsh Government has cut rates to 40%, but can the Leader commit to write to the minister and implore him to reconsider?
- It's positive to hear about work with local growers. With 80% of land being grassland, it's inefficient compared to crop-growing – how much success have we had to transition to increase food production on land we own and therefore have control over?
- Sourcing local food is so important and is what residents and Councillors want. There are a number of county farms and smallholdings in Portskewett, who want to ensure they can continue, which is better for environment and shows the passion in rural communities. In terms of the disposal of MCC land for development, how will this be balanced with the demand for housing?

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Councillor Brocklesby and the officers for presenting this strategy. Members wanted to understand what we are doing to support and teach our communities and projects of upskilling residents to eat nutritious meals and how we can support and facilitate local residents to get access to Council land to grow their own produce. There is concern about the uptake of free school meals and what the Council is doing to ensure that people are aware of what is available to them. It was asked if there is any way we can improve supply chains locally to our nursing homes, schools, etc. in relation to processing that produce. There is a very real concern from recent

events that have caused members to discuss the procurement of food and milk. Council and residents will of course support a local food strategy, but we'd like a strategy to be more specific to Monmouthshire and maybe neighbouring borders. Local produce is key when considering climate change and we need our local food strategy to align.

There was praise from members for the hydrogen vehicles that are serving Meals on Wheels to our residents. There was a question asking if the local food strategy played any part in the recent procurement selection of Totally Welsh and we're looking for some support to lobby Welsh Government with regards to the business rate relief for RSMES in the county. There was a valid question as to how the Council will encourage sustainable farming going forward and the importance of aligning all our policies, whether that's the local food strategy, the climate change strategy, the RLDP tackling, the qualities, the list is endless.

6. Place Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List.

As discussed at the last meeting of Place committee, a number of items on the work programme have had to be deferred to later in the year. As no reports will be ready to be scrutinised at the next meeting on 23rd May, this will need to be cancelled. Petitions received will go to the July meeting.

7. Council and Cabinet Work Planner.

Noted.

8. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes were agreed, proposed by Councillor Thomas and seconded by Councillor Lucas.

9. Next Meeting: Thursday 23rd May 2024 at 10.00am.

This meeting will be cancelled. The next meeting will therefore be 11th July 2024.

The meeting ended at 1.05 pm.