

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Monday, 17th July, 2023 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Rachel Buckler, Catherine Fookes, and Tony Kear (substituting for Ann Webb)

Also in attendance County Councillors: Rachel Garrick, Cabinet Member for Resources and Angela Sandles, Cabinet Member for Equalities and Engagement

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Frances O'Brien, Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People, Performance and Partnerships.
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Nia Roberts, Welsh Language Officer
Stacey Jones, Senior Accountant
Dave Loder, Finance Manager
Tyrone Stokes, Accountant
Nikki Wellington, Finance Manager

APOLOGIES: County Councillors Ann Webb, Laura Wright and Meirion Howells

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSPdiDTFE4A&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=9

1. Declarations of Interest.

Councillor Strong declared a non-prejudicial interest as Chair of the Friends of Caldicot Library.

2. Public Open Forum.

None.

3. Welsh Language Annual Monitoring Report 2022-23 - To scrutinise the Council's performance in complying with Welsh Language Standards.

Councillor Sandles introduced the report. Nia Roberts and Matthew Gatehouse answered the members' questions.

Key points raised by the Committee Members

- Whether the numbers of learners moving on from entry level are a concern
- If members could be reminded of the training they received in June 2022, and whether the courses available to staff are available to members, or if there is further training to refresh councillors keen to catch up on learning Welsh
- Whether for complaints that do not fall within the Council's duties there is nonetheless a responsibility to ensure that they are dealt with by the relevant parties
- Clarifying the costs and budget involved for courses, the timeframe and costs that would be involved in hosting the Eisteddfod, and the process for simultaneous translations
- What the implications would have been of working within a specific budget, as a business would
- If the reasons for the increase in learning this year are known, how learners can be encouraged to continue through the later stages, and asking how many of the senior leadership team are registered for courses
- Understanding the effect that an increase in the take-up of courses would have on the budget, what proportion of funding the Council receives (given that it is a statutory duty from Welsh Government), and the level of engagement with Welsh government to ensure that we can do our statutory duty as it is written
- The usefulness of the Welsh Language skills survey, and whether there was a bias in respondents
- Whether adverts stipulating Welsh as 'Essential' has had a detrimental effect on the numbers applying for jobs, in particular, Bristol area residents and members of the Armed Forces
- The extent of participation in Schmae Day and the scope for widening its reach
- If there has been a 'lessons learned' exercise about how the Welsh Commissioner's enforcement action should have been handled, and whether a lack of sufficient staff at the time was a factor
- Noting that with the sharp decline in the number of pupils taking French and German at GCSEs, there are concerns in the language capabilities with which pupils are graduating, and whether this concern is being addressed at a school level

Actions:

- Councillor Bond to send through the list of typos and corrections, to be amended in the report – Jill Bond, Nia Roberts
- To provide information on the budget required and the impact of hosting the Eisteddfod in 2016 – Matt Gatehouse
- To provide the numbers of the Strategic Leadership team who have registered for a Welsh language course – Nia Roberts
- To provide a written response about lessons learned following the Commissioner's enforcement actions – Matt Gatehouse

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the officers for the report. The Recommendations were moved.

4. 2023/24 Revenue Budget Progress Early Update - To scrutinise the budgetary position for services falling within the Committee's remit.

Councillor Garrick introduced the report. Jonathan Davies, Frances O'Brien, Tyrone Stokes, Jane Rodgers, Will Mclean, Peter Davies and Matthew Gatehouse answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

Key points raised by the Committee Members

- Asking why it hasn't been possible to reduce the use of B&Bs for Homelessness
- Whether the anticipated savings in Green Waste collection have materialised, and asking why the additional staff taken on for its collection were needed
- Understanding our position and level of risk regarding the agency workforce, especially social work staff
- Whether we are collaborating with neighbouring authorities on providing placements, rather than looking to expensive agency provision
- Under Waste, if the £400k relating to staff is an additional or unbudgeted cost, and whether it is a high amount for staff covering bank holidays
- Whether the budget for Fleet maintenance was set incorrectly, given that it is insufficient to cover the whole fleet
- Understanding the reason for delays in implementing cost savings
- Regarding 'significant increased responsibilities have transferred to councils', whether there is a number for that, and asking what the pressure is on our budget
- Understanding the implication that the Free School Meals initiative has on the budget, and whether Welsh Government has produced an allocated sum. In addition, asking whether the nutritional value of these meals is being overseen and standardised across the county
- Asking for specific examples relating to 'financial headwinds', which is an imprecise term
- Whether vacancies are being loaded on to staff, leading to delays, and noting concern for staff mental health, if so, and asking whether there is a route for staff to signal if they believe they're working too many extra duties to cover vacancies
- Asking why the Counselling Development Fund has been reduced
- If Cabinet thinks that Councillors should do more remote activity given the additional expenses owing to increased physical meetings
- Whether there is the flexibility to implement new operational activity if the Council decides to change policy in-year
- Asking how there can be dependability on the budget forecasts when the delivery of the planned savings is not being seen, and the extent to which the Council can keep drawing on reserves before making fundamental changes to the delivery of services

Action:

- To clarify the amount and percentage for the reduction in the budget on library books – Jonathan Davies

Chair's Summary:

We are grateful for the officers' work and recognise the difficult situation that councils are facing. We are concerned about the continued use of reserves and the questions that residents might reasonably ask as to whether the Council will make the sorts of changes required to deliver reduced costs – this is something on which the committee will need to keep its focus.

The Recommendations were moved.

5. Next Meeting: Wednesday 20th September 2023 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **Time Not Specified**