

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 6th February, 2024 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor John Crook (Chairman)
County Councillor Jackie Strong (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Fay Bromfield,
Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth,
Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley,
Maria Stevens

Also in attendance County Councillors:
Louise Brown, Ian Chandler, Cabinet Member for
Social Care, Safeguarding and Accessible Health
Services, 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
Matthew Gatehouse, Chief Officer People,
Performance and Partnerships.
Jane Rodgers, Chief Officer for Social Care,
Safeguarding and Health

APOLOGIES: None

Note: Minutes do not serve as a verbatim record of the meeting. They provide a summary of the Committee's discussion. For the full debate, please access the recording of the meeting:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHBeTHa0Is&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJCbj_Cu0DbhGQkCrLYK7xM

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Development of Residential Provision: Accommodation and Delivery Model for Care

Cabinet Member Ian Chandler and Jane Rodgers introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Peter Davies and Nicholas Keyse.

Key points raised by members:

- The level of demand and the basis for the 6 bespoke children's placements, Members questioning whether there is historical low demand and whether the number will be sufficient long-term. Questions also asked as to why it will be 3 separate dwellings, rather than have the placements under one roof.
- The report mentions securing grants from Welsh government in relation to the acquisition of suitable properties – Members asked how confident the council is in meeting objectives in this area and how far along the discussions are, so that the council doesn't have to utilise more of the Children's Services budget.

- The number of young people from Monmouthshire being looked after by other local authorities and vice versa and whether the provision would lead to some of the young people being moved back into Monmouthshire.
- With joint projects like Myst with Torfaen, given the boundaries are so close between local authorities, whether there are any plans to buy properties with other authorities, as a partnership.
- Whether individual business cases for large spending on assets that the Cabinet wishes to repurpose will be brought back to scrutiny (the report notes post-decision scrutiny).
- The comparison with other authorities and any learning from them.
- Whilst children's placement numbers are low, would the provision lead to an increase.
- The suitability of properties in terms of urban/rural and how accommodation spaces would be built around the 16–25-year-olds category.
- Whether consultation with young people in residential provision or ex-care leavers has informed the proposals.
- Whether vacancies in a property would be rented to neighbouring authorities.
- Whether there will be discussions with local ward members on any asset reprovision.
- A member suggested the policy needed to state that fostering would be the initial option, as it's better for children to be with a family.
- How much consideration has been given to the revenue implications and whether there would be independent inspectors.

Chair's Summary:

Thanks were given to the Cabinet Member and officers for attending. Discussions focussed on the sufficiency and suitability of bespoke placements, how adequate and flexible they would be, the likelihood of securing Welsh Government grants and the exchange of placements with other local authorities. Members asked questions around the possibility of joint projects for neighbouring authorities and asked about the learning from other councils. Questions were asked around the issue of sibling room sharing, the impact of bringing young people back to their communities, and property type and location. The Committee also asked how consultation had been held with young people and there were questions about the types and numbers of placements needed, the revenue implications and the acquisition of repurposing properties. Discussions also took place on the borrowing headroom and the governance and transparency around the purchase of assets. The committee endorsed the proposal and raised the opportunity for post-decision scrutiny.

4. Scrutiny of the Strategic Equality Plan

Cabinet Member Angela Sandles and Matthew Gatehouse introduced the report and answered the members' questions.

Key points raised by members:

- Whether it was premature to endorse the Council sets its budget and the implications for the budget.
- Members asked about the risks and challenges that the Council may face in delivering the strategy.
- It's vitally important to recognise that all residents face difficulties of some sort and that there should be recognition of this, particularly in relation to the rural problems and associated hardship.
- Acknowledgement that protected characteristics can often overlap and the need to refer to the effect of raising the state pension age in terms of employment.

- In relation to the protected characteristic of sex, perhaps there could be the inclusion that we are working with partners to reduce sexual violence and that it's not an issue solely for women and the importance of engagement with boys and young men.
- The strategy may benefit from including how women undergoing the menopause are supported at work.
- There is a need for consistency within the strategy in terms of the protected characteristics.
- There can be tensions between protected characteristics, with the ideal of equality can be being lost on occasions, members questioning whether this had had sufficient consideration.
- In terms of the LGBTQ+ section of the document, there may be a need to include under the curriculum, that teaching in this area needs to be critical and pluralistic according to case law ~ it is important to note that there is now case law that gender critical views are recognised as a philosophical conviction protected in law.

Chair's Summary:

The report was scrutinised in depth, discussion focussing on rural poverty and the implications for our future economy, particularly for farmers. Members recognised that the document is a live document and that there will be opportunities to consider progress and revise the document to reflect the nature of Monmouthshire and gather more evidence. Members acknowledged there will be a need to align the document with the budget. The committee agreed that plan was well drafted and offered a clear vision, but there were some points for officers and cabinet to reflect on, in particular the protected characteristic of sex. There were some comments around particularly sexual violence and how we work with boys and young men on issues related to personal safety. Sexual harassment reports in schools were discussed and members felt it was important to maintain single sex spaces. Members raised the need to consider how women going through the menopause are supported and the raising of state pension age and the implications of that were also highlighted. Members recognised the conflicts and tensions between different groups and the idea of equality for all and suggested there may be a need to check some of the terminology and the consistency within the document, particularly regarding the protected characteristics. In addition, a member raised a concern about the objective of providing an LGBTQ plus inclusive education and how it aligns with the teaching approach, suggesting teaching should be a critical objective and should be pluralistic, with religion and culture needs taken into account. Members agreed the summary reflected the view of the committee and offered its support to the plan, with feedback being offered to the Cabinet Member.

5. Next Meeting: 5th March 2024

The meeting ended at **12.16 pm**