

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Thursday, 11th July, 2024 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill (Chairman)
County Councillors: Rachel Buckler, John Crook, Meirion Howells, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ben Callard, Jane Lucas, Angela Sandles and Laura Wright

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Richard Jones, Performance and Data Insight Manager
Jonathan Davies, Head of Finance
Nia Roberts, Welsh Language Officer
Pennie Walker, Equality & Welsh Language Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillors Jill Bond and Catherine Fookes

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) Financial Strategy - To provide formal feedback ahead of Council on 18th July 2024

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Peter Davies and Jonathan Davies.

- The difference between the medium-term financial strategy and the medium-term financial plan was queried. The explanation given was that the strategy sets out the long-term financial vision, context and framework for the Council, while the plan is a more detailed and updated document that informs the annual budget setting process.
- There was a suggestion from one Member that the report was felt to have political undertones arising from some of the language and terminology used and whether that was helpful for a Council document. It was confirmed by the Cabinet Member that this was a political document, and that the examples given by the member of a possible political inference were factually correct statements, for example, the reference to reductions in funding to local government over the last 14 years.
- A question was asked about what the main challenges and risks are for the Council's finances in the next five years. These were summarised and included the uncertainty of the Welsh Government funding, the impact of COVID-19 and Brexit, the rising demand and cost of social care and homelessness services, the

need to invest in digital and data capabilities, and the delivery of savings and transformation programmes. The Chair asked why the report did not mention the principal cause of financial challenges for the Council being that Monmouthshire County Council receives the lowest financial settlement from Welsh Government.

- A member asked how the Council would address the projected budget shortfall of £34.7 million over the medium term. The Cabinet Member and officers responded that the Council would develop a programme of change and improvement that will focus on four key areas: demand management, service redesign, income generation, and efficiency and productivity. The programme will be informed by the financial strategy and the medium-term financial plan and would involve consultation and engagement with stakeholders. The Chair asked how residents may have confidence that this future programme would deliver savings equivalent to £34.7 when over the last two financial years the Council has significantly overspent on its core social care services.
- The strategy highlights the need for 'radical change' to the council's operating model and its services, (which will be detailed in the forthcoming plans), but it would be helpful to us to explain at least in broad terms what this might entail, given that the strategy sets out the dependency on 'radical change' to manage the financial challenge of the £34.7 million shortfall. The Cabinet Member advised that this 'radical change' related to the programme of change already discussed and the improvements required. Further questions were asked as to how reducing costs on this scale, and moving to more online services would realistically 'improve' services. The Cabinet Member agreed that this may require greater clarification.
- A member asked whether and how the demand scenarios in the financial strategy are based on the latest data and forecasts.
- Another member asked whether we have drawn any comparison with other Councils and whether we were in a different position to the rest of the country.
- A member asked what the assumptions are behind the Council tax modelling in the financial strategy.
- The procurement partnership with Cardiff 'Atebion' was raised, the question being whether the 3 years of work through the partnership had enabled the Council to improve its financial modelling and planning. The member suggested that if the key element was to ensure financial data was mature and comprehensive, were we satisfied that we were capturing the right data to give us early insights and did the Cabinet Member feel the data generated was sufficiently robust to make the best budget assumptions and more informed decisions.
- A member questioned the financial scenarios outlined in Figure 5 on page 20, asking why given the narrative and context in the report, Scenario 1 would be felt to be more likely than Scenario 2.

- A member asked what greater use of Artificial Intelligence and data analytics as set out in the strategy, would actually mean in strategic terms for the authority.
- The Chair highlighted that it is important to be clear about what is being proposed and the solutions, to ensure residents can understand the plan and support its delivery, given the scale of financial challenge.
- The Chair referred to the Wales Local Government Funding Analysis study conducted by Cardiff University in Q3 2023, that forecast a £744m budgetary shortfall across Wales by 2027-2028. Based on this Monmouthshire's projected shortfall appeared to be significantly higher than the average for local authorities in Wales. He highlighted his concerns around the fiscal situation and for departments without protected budgets which he suggested could result in decreased central funding. Officers confirmed that the most recent Wales Fiscal Analysis report had taken into account of a range of scenarios and that led to a base case assumption for local government funding in Wales over the next three years, noting that this informed the Council's modelling assumption around core funding.
- The Chair also commented that given that five years ago when we would have been conducting our financial modelling, we wouldn't have anticipated a pandemic, the Ukraine invasion and the resultant energy shock and high inflation, there is the need to consider to what extent we have scope for flexibility in our financial planning for unexpected major impacts. He suggested that in relation to this, the financial strategy's depletion of our cash and capital receipts reserves is a concern, particularly in terms of dealing with the social care challenges.
- A member commented on this being the first strategy of its kind and that the plan being reviewed 6 monthly was encouraging and a member asked whether the scrutiny process would be part of the consultation with councillors on the financial plan.
- There was also a suggestion that figures 2 and 3 could be made a little easier to read within the document.

The Cabinet Member and officers present responded to all of the questions raised, which can be viewed on the live stream and via the meeting transcript. The Committee drew its conclusions as below.

Chair's Summary:

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their time and their responses to questions from the Committee arising from the discussion of the Financial Strategy. He acknowledged that this is an extremely challenging period in which to look ahead, it's an unenviable task and he also thanked them for their efforts in drafting the report which clearly sets out the reasons for the financial challenges the Council is facing, and seeks to explain the financial strategy in an engaging way to residents. He emphasised that the questions raised at the Performance and Overview Committee were important as they raised significant concerns and issues with the aim of strengthening the strategy

and report. The report was moved and the following points by way of summary would be tabled as the Committee's feedback on the report:

- The Committee recognises that these are challenging times for any Local Authority and appreciate the efforts that have gone into drafting the report. Discussion took place on the main challenges and risks for the Council's finances over the next five years and it was felt important to clearly explain to the public the Council's proposed approach.
- Given the unpredictability of forecasting five years ahead, there is a need for flexibility in our financial planning and the position of the Council's reserves remained a concern for some members.
- The Committee felt it imperative to capture robust data to give us early insights in order to make the best budget assumptions and informed decisions.

3. Digital and Data Strategy - Pre-decision Scrutiny ahead of Cabinet on 17th July 2024

Cabinet Member Ben Callard introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Peter Davies, James Vale and Richard Jones.

- A Member queried how the digital strategy aligns with the financial strategy and other enabling strategies. The explanation was given that the digital strategy supports the financial strategy by enabling more efficient and effective use of resources, data, and technology, and by creating new opportunities for income generation and service transformation. There was reference to it also aligning with other enabling strategies by providing the tools, skills, and culture to deliver better outcomes for the organization and the community.
- Questions were asked around how the digital strategy addresses the digital divide and ensures digital inclusion for all residents and staff. A further question asked was what difficulties were foreseen in encouraging the workforce to embrace new technologies and data-driven processes. Training and developing user-friendly and accessible digital solutions were seen as key to achieving this.
- Discussion took place on how the digital strategy will measure and evaluate its impact and success, as well as use data to inform service planning and delivery.
- Members asked how the strategy supports collaboration and service integration with other local authorities and partners, particularly in terms of the extent to which we are working collaboratively with other Local Authorities, to ensure we have a common digital infrastructure should we consider integrated services in the future.
- Questions were also asked about how the digital strategy fosters a data culture and data literacy among staff, partners, and residents.
- Another question asked was in what ways the strategy will ensure a user-centred approach in mind, taking into account the needs and expectations of residents.

- A member suggested there was a need to be careful in making assumptions about whether older people can and do use digital platforms and social media.
- A member also raised the question of whether isolation due to increased use of technology had been captured in the Integrated Impact Assessment.
- Reference was made to the presentation of the Financial Strategy in the previous agenda item that had discussed the increased use of artificial intelligence and data analytics, a member asking whether the Council would be investing in those skillsets and whether it has the financial capacity to do so, and whether there would be scope for additional borrowing if required.
- Another member highlighted that residents are not finding the My Mon app user-friendly. Also, if the app retains resident's protected data, do we use this data to contact them about consultations on service change, as residents often ask how they are supposed to know about upcoming consultations, unless they proactively seek this information. It seems like a lost opportunity to consult with residents.
- A query was made around how to ensure that the data officers use is up to date.

All questions were responded to by the Cabinet Member and officers and the Committee moved the report and its recommendations, drawing the following conclusions.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to officers and the Cabinet Member for bringing the Digital Strategy to the Committee who were supportive of its direction and would like to highlight the following points:

- It's clear from the report that this isn't simply about the Council collecting data, but also about making it easier for residents to access our services. We anticipate that if digital access methods become easier, demand for these may increase, so this needs to be modelled to ensure we have factored increased demand and that there is sufficient resource in the community hubs to deliver this.
- As councillors, we have a role to play in bridging the gap between the Council and residents and that may involve explanation and assistance, but customer engagement has been referred to in our discussions and that's encouraging.
- Members have also expressed that they would benefit from further training on digital platforms, having been in their roles for some time, so we will pass on the request for further member training on digital platforms to the Democratic Services Committee (Action: Scrutiny Team).

4. Welsh Language Standards Annual Monitoring Report 2023/24 - To scrutinise the Council's performance

Cabinet Member Angela Sandles and Pennie Walker introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Nia Roberts.

- Members asked what the main achievements of the Council were in promoting the Welsh language during 2023-2024, and heard that receiving Employer of the Year award, an enhanced programme of Welsh language courses to staff and members, and increased number of Welsh speakers in the contact centre, and the use of bilingual e-mail addresses and Welsh tips in the staff newsletter were key achievements that could demonstrate the Council's commitment.
- Discussion took place on the main challenges and risks for the Council in complying with the Welsh language standards, these including the delay in procurement of the new telephony system, the need to review the translation process, the need to monitor the staff's Welsh language skills and training, and the need to respond to any complaints from the public or the Welsh language commissioner.
- Members asked how the Council plans to improve its Welsh language provision and performance in the future, officers providing a list of suggestions that will form part of a future action plan.
- Queries included how many staff members had registered for a Welsh language course during 2023-2024 and whether it was an increased number in comparison to previous years, due to the additional flexibility and options to learn Welsh.
- Questions were asked around courses, the hours required, the various levels of proficiency, the take-up and completion rates, the number of staff progressing between the entry level and intermediate to advanced level ability, and how staff are engaged and incentivised to take up the courses. It was suggested that some case studies may better illustrate the added value to a person's role.
- The Chair questioned whether in view of 83% of Monmouthshire residents not speaking Welsh, whether the same standards applied to the Council as an authority where 75% of residents speak fluently, and this was confirmed to be the case.
- In terms of public announcements, should we ensure our policy included the need for a Welsh announcement for specific occasions.
- Staff recruitment was discussed, members highlighting that given there is a need to increase Welsh speakers in the contact centre, there may be a need to recruit from other areas of Wales and consider postholders who would primarily be home-based. A question was asked as to whether the 'Welsh speaker' requirement may be a deterrent to English applicants and it was agreed that this should be discussed with People Services, to ascertain whether there is any data on that **(Action: Nia Roberts and Pennie Walker)**.

- A member asked whether in terms of social care, being a front-line service, the Council has capacity to provide care in the Welsh language, if requested.
- Another member queried whether the Council will be seeking to provide simultaneous translation for Council meetings.
- The issue of bi-lingual signage was raised, a member highlighting how difficult it can be for people reading road signs whilst driving, particularly if a person has dyslexia and suggested future road signage could incorporate a horizontal line between the English and Welsh texts to assist drivers. **(Action: Nia Roberts and Pennie Walker to follow up and consider in relation to the Council's Strategic Equality Plan).**

All questions were answered by officers and Cabinet Members and the Committee was satisfied with the report, drawing the following conclusion.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member for attending and answering member's questions and thanks to the officers for this report, noting you are both new in post. The Committee is satisfied with progress and the report has been moved, with some actions to be addressed following the meeting.

5. Next Meeting

16th July 2024 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at 4.43 pm.