

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Place Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Thursday, 29th January, 2026 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor Jane Lucas (Chair)
County Councillors: Louise Brown, Emma Bryn, Tomos Davies, Lisa Dymock, Martyn Groucutt, Tudor Thomas, John Crook and Peter Strong

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Craig O'Connor, Chief Officer, Place and Community Well-being
Tracey Thomas, Development/Heritage/Attractions Manager
Kate Stinchcombe, Nature Recovery and Land Use Manager
Colette Bosley, Green Infrastructure Manager
Rachael Rogers, Museums and Arts Manager

APOLOGIES: Councillor Jackie Strong

1. Apologies fro Absence

Jackie Strong, Peter Strong as substitute.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Place Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List

ACTION: to request a list of all surplus council assets, relating to Councillor Brown's request, to share with the committee.

4. Cabinet and Council Work Planner

ACTION: send link to members as a reminder.

5. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of 6th November were agreed.

6. Public Open Forum

None.

7. Cultural Strategy - To conduct pre-decision scrutiny ahead of the decision at Cabinet

Tracey Thomas and Rachael Rogers delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions with Craig O'Connor:

How will the Cultural Forum ensure fair representation of all areas and interest groups, avoiding overrepresentation or bias?

The forum will have clear criteria and role profiles, aiming for representation from all key areas and underrepresented groups, including children and young people. Subgroups and ongoing community workshops will help maintain broad engagement.

Why does the heritage timeline focus more on touristy areas, with little mention of Severnside towns and villages?

Feedback is welcomed, and the timeline will be updated to better reflect Severnside and other overlooked areas. Additional information from councillors is invited for inclusion.

Can the strategy include dementia-friendly events, not just in care homes but also in the wider community?

The strategy aims for inclusivity, with staff trained in dementia-friendly practices. Efforts will be made to ensure all events are accessible and inclusive for people with dementia and other needs.

How will the strategy create skilled employment and avoid reliance on low-skilled, seasonal tourism jobs?

The focus is on developing skilled roles in film, technology, theatre, and photography, engaging young people and leveraging Monmouthshire's appeal as a film location to create higher-skilled opportunities.

Does the Cultural Strategy currently reflect local, villagelevel and grassroots cultural activity?

The strategy is broader in scope and does not yet reflect all the rich grassroots activity. The Council does understand what happens locally, and the strategy will evolve to include it more clearly. Progress to date may not be fully visible in the draft.

Is the Council already supporting grassroots culture in practical ways?

Yes, the Council already runs regular networking events across towns and smaller communities and provides space for artists to display and sell their work (e.g., artwork, jewellery, ceramics). These activities have expanded significantly in the past 12 months, though the progress is not yet wellreflected in the written strategy.

Can all the heritage buildings mentioned by Members be included in the strategy?

Some of the buildings referenced are not owned or controlled by the Council. To address this, the Council will need to build relationships with external owners and groups to understand how they can collectively support tourism and strengthen Monmouthshire's cultural identity.

How does the Cultural Strategy relate to the Destination Management Plan (DMP) and other strategies?

They serve different purposes but are designed to complement each other. The DMP focuses on the visitor economy, tourism infrastructure, and sustainable growth. The Cultural Strategy focuses on people – how residents and visitors engage with arts, culture, and creativity. Both documents “speak to each other” and form part of a coordinated organisational approach.

How do built environment issues (heritage assets, venues, buildings at risk) fit into this?

These areas are primarily covered by other Council documents, such as Placemaking Plans and the Buildings at Risk register. The Cultural Strategy does not duplicate these but instead sits alongside them as part of a holistic approach to “place.” Each document covers different aspects but collectively ensures protection, enhancement, and coordinated development.

Is the Cultural Strategy intended to stand alone?

No, the Cultural Strategy is not a standalone document. It works together with the DMP, Placemaking Plans, heritage-focused policies, and the wider strategic framework. Together, they collectively address cultural experience, economic growth, tourism, and built heritage across Monmouthshire.

Will the final strategy include direct links to events and places listed, making it easier for readers to learn more?

The team will consider adding links, being mindful that links can break over time, but agree it would be useful.

Does the strategy offer strong enough support for volunteers and community-led events, and could there be stronger action points for supporting volunteer groups?

The importance of volunteers is recognized, and the team will look at strengthening actions around volunteering and ensuring this is better reflected in the strategy.

Would it be possible to include incidental Welsh, such as using “Croeso” in the welcomes, to reflect local identity?

The document will be translated, and the team will revisit the use of incidental Welsh to better reflect identity.

Concurring with increasing the use of incidental Welsh in the strategy, Monmouthshire’s Welsh identity needs to be highlighted, including the presence of Welsh-medium schools and the impact of the 2016 Eisteddfod.

The team agreed, confirming the strategy will be available as a dual Welsh-English document and will strengthen references to Welsh language, schools, and the Eisteddfod, acknowledging its significance for the county.

Chair’s Summary:

Thank you to the officers for the report and their responses today.

8. Biodiversity and Resilience - To scrutinise the Section 6 Report to Welsh Government on Biodiversity and resilience of ecosystems

Colette Bosley and Kate Stinchcombe delivered a presentation, introduced the report and answered the members' questions:

There are concerns about two planning applications in Portskewett where soil import paperwork and water quality discharge sampling did not meet Natural Resources Wales (NRW) requirements – how might they be resolved, especially when the site is adjacent to the Severn Estuary?

The officers acknowledged awareness of the issues and explained that biodiversity officers are involved in the planning process, flagging such concerns. They offered to follow up separately with the Member regarding the specific applications, recognizing the seriousness of inheriting unresolved environmental issues.

Who is the biodiversity officer responsible for planning matters?

The Council does have biodiversity officers who respond specifically to development management planning cases. However, resources are currently stretched: the team has only 1.5 FTE, and one biodiversity post was lost just before Christmas. Recruitment for a replacement officer is expected imminently, with the remaining 0.5 FTE to follow in the coming weeks. In the meantime, several ecologists across the authority are covering planning consultations.

How are biodiversity issues monitored when an old planning approval is activated years later through minimal site works?

Officers try to address such issues within legal duties. For larger or long duration sites, planning conditions can require ongoing ecological monitoring during the interim period. This ensures new wildlife interest that appears between approval and development is identified and considered before work progresses.

What happens if a site becomes overgrown and biodiversity increases before later clearance?

Where monitoring conditions are in place, any new species or habitats that appear during the intervening years must be considered before further development. Officers acknowledge this is a real issue – particularly on smaller sites – because it may not always be proportionate to require continuous surveying, creating a risk that ecological changes go unrecorded.

How does the Council ensure biodiversity impacts are properly assessed and mitigated when clearing sites that have changed since the original approval?

For larger schemes with anticipated long delays, planning conditions requiring regular ecological surveys can ensure new biodiversity value is identified. Enforcement and biodiversity teams work together where necessary to prevent unacceptable site clearance if ecological interests have emerged.

How is compliance with Green Infrastructure (GI) plans monitored, especially when required planting hasn't been delivered?

GI management plans – sometimes extending up to 20year maintenance periods – are secured through planning obligations. Officers aim to ensure longterm delivery, but limited biodiversity resources make monitoring challenging. Where nondelivery or breaches occur, the enforcement team works jointly with biodiversity officers to pursue compliance.

What happens when a new planning application is submitted on land where required GI planting should already exist but hasn't been implemented?

This becomes a matter for planning enforcement, supported by biodiversity officers. A new principal enforcement officer is joining the team, improving capacity to act where applicants fail to carry out previously required landscaping or biodiversity measures.

How are planning enforcement, biodiversity duties, and longterm management plans connected?

Officers emphasised that enforcement and biodiversity work collaboratively, especially where management plans have not been followed. Enforcement capacity has recently been strengthened, allowing better coordination between ecological requirements and statutory planning control.

What monitoring systems are in place to ensure biodiversity and GI management plans are followed?

Net biodiversity benefit is usually secured on plans at the application stage. GI and biodiversity management obligations (often longterm) exist, but resourcing makes monitoring difficult. Large sites may be required to carry out interim ecological monitoring to detect new wildlife. A strengthened enforcement team provides additional support to secure compliance.

Can relevant experts (e.g., those involved with Nedern Brook) be invited to speak to the Severnside Area Forum?

Yes, this would be welcome, and the officers would be happy to extend invitations to the appropriate people for further discussion.

Was the term "pushback" dismissive of community feedback on the Nature Isn't Neat programme?

The officer apologises, clarifying this was not intended to be dismissive. The term was meant only to reflect differing viewpoints, all of which are valid.

How does the Council balance community expectations with ecological aims under Nature Isn't Neat?

Officers acknowledge this is a difficult balance. While some concerns arise, many areas receive even stronger positive support for meadow-style management. The team works with communities to resolve issues where they occur.

How well do grounds teams understand local sites and seasonal variation?

Very well. Grounds staff have sites mapped across the county and adjust management as the growing season evolves, mowing some areas more often depending on use and ecological need.

Why is grass-cutting practice inconsistent across the county (e.g., small heaps vs large piles)?

Variation is due to practical constraints. In some areas arisings can be taken away but in others this is not possible, so material must remain on site. This creates unavoidable differences.

What is being done to improve grassland management standards and consistency?

Operatives will receive refresher training this spring on Nature Isn't Neat principles. Common issues (including grass disposal) will be discussed to improve practice.

Will councillors be further supported in explaining Nature Isn't Neat to residents?

Yes. After the May election, another member seminar will be held before summer, timed to coincide with when most complaints arise.

How will the Council improve public understanding and acceptance of long-grass/meadow management?

A summer public campaign will highlight the benefits for pollinators, water storage, and carbon storage. A public perception survey will also be issued via Let's Talk Monmouthshire to measure current attitudes.

Is the Council listening to community concerns about vegetation, mowing, and site appearance?

Yes. Officers fully recognise community concerns and intend to listen carefully, understand issues, and work collaboratively to ensure communities feel well-looked-after.

How important is educating the public about Nature Isn't Neat, given diverse views on grass-cutting?

Yes. Officers agree that education is essential. Public attitudes vary widely, and clearer communication helps residents understand why reduced mowing is more environmentally friendly than frequent cuts using diesel machinery. Officers welcome support for the approach and confirm that it forms an important part of their ecological and land-management strategy.

Is regenerative farming being prioritised, given the scale and nature of agriculture in Monmouthshire?

Yes. The Council is actively working with sustainable food colleagues, biodiversity officers, Wye Valley National Landscape teams, Farming & Protected Landscapes programmes, Living Levels partnerships, and regenerative farming clusters. Engagement, education, and collaborative projects are already underway and expanding.

How is the Council working with farmers to encourage more sustainable land management?

Through farming clusters, landscape partnerships, regenerative farming pilots, and joint working with catchment partnerships such as ASK. Officers aim to encourage tree-planting, hedgerows, habitat restoration, and more sustainable agricultural practices despite limited staffing resources.

Can the Council influence issues related to large poultry units, manure, and water pollution?

Only indirectly. Officers note these are largely matters for Natural Resources Wales (NRW), but MCC is engaging with regenerative farming schemes and wider landscape partnerships that encourage better environmental practices.

Why doesn't Monmouthshire have more large, free-access country parks like urban authorities? Is the Council doing anything to expand access to green and natural spaces despite limited land ownership?

Because Monmouthshire is rural and much of the land is not Council-owned. Acquiring or designating new large parks is difficult. However, the Council works to secure maximum green infrastructure and public green space within development sites through the planning system. Officers try to secure as much green space as possible through planning applications and green infrastructure requirements. Although creating new country parks is challenging, they use innovative planning approaches to increase access where feasible.

Could sites like the old Hereford Road cemetery in Abergavenny, with its rich biodiversity, be used for scientific studies by schoolchildren as part of the Welsh curriculum?

Officers confirmed that the cemetery has been used for pollinator training with local schools and described broader efforts to engage schools through practitioner groups and grant-funded projects, including pollinator sessions and swift box initiatives.

There are indeed ongoing challenges in changing public attitudes toward "Nature isn't Neat," with one constituent's complaints about untidy vegetation being a good example.

Response: Officers reiterated the importance of education and communication, referencing previous and planned initiatives to address public perception.

The Mill Common Project is a tremendous asset, and the Member would like to highlight the hard work and total involvement of the team and community in tree

planting and historical engagement. It is important to communicate these achievements so that people are aware of the positive work being done.

Officers thanked the Member for his comments.

How does the council plan to reach disengaged or unaware residents regarding biodiversity initiatives, what indicators will be used to measure increased understanding and participation, and can councillors receive training to better address residents' concerns?

There are plans for operative and member training, a public campaign, and measurable engagement mechanisms (e.g., surveys). Officers acknowledge the challenge of reaching disengaged groups and welcome feedback on effective approaches.

Is there an update on the pilot Tree Warden Scheme project and its progress?

Officers explained the scheme began as a pilot at Mill Common, with initial training delivered, and expressed hope to expand it across the county. They described it as a national standard for volunteer training.

What are the cost implications of hiring a new ecologist and would this save money by reducing the need for external consultants, especially for ash dieback work?

Officers confirmed the new role is expected to save money by handling work in-house that would otherwise require consultants, and will help address ongoing ecological issues more efficiently.

What is the new machinery for Nedern Brook? Residents and councillors would appreciate demonstrations and involvement.

The machinery is a flail that collects arisings, and there are plans to work with NRW and promote the initiative to the community.

Could wide, winding walkways through long grass areas be created, with staged grass lengths and information boards, to improve accessibility and public experience?

Officers agreed, noting that walkways and interpretation boards are already included in larger sites, and that design accommodates accessibility where possible.

"Nature Isn't Neat" is to be supported but there are resident complaints about weeds on roads and pavements, and a need for better maintenance to prevent infrastructure damage.

Officers acknowledge the concern; it is a common issue, and will be addressed in upcoming campaigns and through collaboration with operatives, councillors, and the public.

Is there work ongoing with farmers to dig trenches and create ponds to help prevent downstream flooding?

The council's flooding team has applied for funding for natural flood management projects, including working with individual landowners and larger catchment-scale initiatives to store water and develop payment schemes for ecosystem services.

Is there a delay in the RLDP (Replacement Local Development Plan) due to phosphate issues, and when is the Planning Inspectorate likely to review it?

The council is providing additional phosphate information to the planning authority, there are no current objections from statutory bodies, and the timetable for hearings depends on the planning authority's scheduling, with updates to be shared when available.

Can officers comment on a recent document indicating that phosphate stripping in Monmouth may not be as effective as previously thought?

The latest data shows water quality in the lower Wye in Monmouthshire is improving and not failing, but officers would welcome the specific article or information being shared for further review.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the officers for the report and for attending today.

9. Next Meeting

Thursday 19th March 2026 at 2.00pm.

The meeting ended at 4.23 pm.