

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK on Tuesday, 4th March, 2025 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Laura Wright (Chair)
County Councillor Jackie Strong (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler,
Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth,
Penny Jones, Maureen Powell and Peter Strong
substituting for Maria Stevens

Also in attendance County Councillors: Paul
Griffiths, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a
Sustainable Economy and Mary Ann Brocklesby,
Leader, Jill Bond and Tony Easson

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Maria Stevens

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Peter Davies, Acting Chief Executive
Will McLean, Chief Officer for Children and Young
People
Hannah Jones, Head Of Economy, Employment
And Skills

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting at [Agenda for People Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday, 4th March, 2025, 10.00 am - Modern Council](#)

1. Declarations of Interest

Councillor Jackie Strong and Councillor Tony Easson declared a personal but non-prejudicial interests, in that they facilitate a group on Fridays in Caldicot, but advised they have no relationship or friendship with anyone from Together Works. Councillor Jill Bond declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest as a long-time friend and supporter of Together Works. Councillor Jan Butler declared a personal but non-prejudicial interest, in that she is a member of a community centre at Goytre which had received some Shared Prosperity Funding.

2. Call In of the decision of Cabinet of 19th February 2025 regarding UK Shared Prosperity Fund 2025/26

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. She asked the Scrutiny Manager to briefly explain the call-in process that would be followed at the meeting, in accordance with the Council's Constitution. The Scrutiny Manager advised that the meeting had been scheduled to debate a decision that had been made but had not taken effect concerning UK Shared Prosperity Fund Allocation 2025-2026.

It was advised that on 19th February 2025, the Cabinet considered a report that informed them of UK Governments one-year extension to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and sought approval for the granting of investment from UKSPF for 2025/26 to projects listed in Appendix one of the Cabinet report.

The Cabinet decision report provides full context of the key issues relating to the decision taken on 19th February 2025, outlined in section 3 together with an options appraisal provided under section 5, accessed via [Agenda for Cabinet on Wednesday, 19th February, 2025, 4.30 pm - Modern Council](#) .

For context, the decision that had been resolved by Cabinet on 19th February 2025 was to accept the following recommendations:

That Cabinet:

- a. Approves the recommendations of the Monmouthshire People & Place partnership in relation to the investment of funds from the local authority's allocation for 2025/26.
- b. Approves the draft local investment plan (appendix one) and projects contained within.
- c. Authorises the commencement of activity as outlined in the draft local investment plan from 1st April 2025, ahead of the regional lead local authority (Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC) receiving an updated Memorandum of Understanding from UK Government.

The Chair asked the members who had called in the decision to present their reasons for calling in the decision, as follows:

- Insufficient scrutiny, transparency and accountability as to how projects are identified and evaluated and the process and criteria against which decisions are made. No apparent assessment of the realisation of benefits, as defined in each initial project proposal and where projects are within their lifecycle.
- Little visible assessment of the impact and consideration of mitigation for projects being ceased in the Integrated Impact Assessment, or elsewhere.

The Call-in Members outlined their reasons for calling the decision in (as above) and made the following additional points:

Councillor Bond:

- Emphasised the importance of council processes ensuring correct, robust, and transparent decisions for public fund allocation through scrutiny.
- Highlighted the "Together Works" project as an example of a valuable community project in Caldicot.

Councillor Easson:

- Councillor Easson expressed that he felt that there should have been earlier scrutiny of the issue rather than it being addressed through a call-in.

- Councillor Easson mentioned his concern about not being able to discuss background information not in the public domain that he felt was relevant to the decision.

Councillor Howarth:

- Councillor Howarth felt there was a lack of transparency about the Shared Prosperity Fund application process and insufficient scrutiny overall.
- He emphasised the need for long-term viability and business cases for projects funded by grants, highlighting the issue of sustainability when grant funding ends.
- Councillor Howarth called for better communication and involvement of members in decision-making processes, especially for significant funding decisions.

Response by the Cabinet Member:

The Chair asked the Cabinet Member Councillor Paul Griffiths to respond. The Cabinet Member responded by:

- Acknowledging the scrutiny committee's role in considering the decision-making process for the Shared Prosperity Fund and emphasising the need for scrutiny, transparency, and accountability.
- Explaining that the fund was established in 2022 as the UK government's successor to the EU structural funds, with the intention to centralise control and limit the role of devolved administrations and local authorities.
- Highlighting the haste in decision-making due to the transition from EU funds to the Shared Prosperity Fund, which led to limited engagement with communities and a focus on rolling forward previous programs.
- Detailing the process of submitting business cases for funding, the significant cut in funding (46%) announced in December 2022, and the subsequent need for rapid decision-making by the partnership board.
- Suggesting there is a lack of a clear mechanism for accountability to the council, as the partnership board is accountable to local government officers in RCT and UK government civil servants.
- Advising that he felt that the current governance arrangements are over-centralised, bureaucratic, and lack effective local scrutiny and accountability and suggesting that the scrutiny committee may want to consider new and better arrangements for future funding, engaging with Welsh government to create more transparent and accountable processes.

Key points raised by the Committee Members and visiting Members:

Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths, Chief Officer Will McLean and Hannah Jones answered the members' questions:

- A member asked for reassurance on whether the existing projects still require funding and if the money could be spent better elsewhere within the allotted prosperity

funding headings. He expressed concern about the distribution of funding across Monmouthshire and whether it is being allocated to the most appropriate areas. He enquired about the work carried out to assess the impact and necessity of the currently funded projects since the funding stream commenced. He questioned the role of Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) as the lead partner for the delivery of the overall scheme and how much influence RCT has over the allocation of funds to certain types of projects.

The Cabinet Member explained that Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) performs an administrative role, checking that the required information is provided and forwarding it to the UK government without making political judgments on the allocations. He acknowledged that the process was constrained by time, limiting the ability to scan widely for new projects. However, he expressed confidence that the best possible job was done within these constraints. The Chief Officer reiterated that RCT's role is to hold the piece for the 10 local authorities and interface with the UK central government, ensuring that business cases are constructed and verified positively. He emphasised that the time frame for decisions was severely restricted

due to the one-year extension, but he shared confidence that the right decisions were taken through the cabinet process.

- A member summarised the context of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, noting the changes in funding sources due to the withdrawal of the European fund and the involvement of the Welsh and Westminster governments. She expressed uncertainty about the mix of funding shared between the 10 local authorities and the role of Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) as the lead authority. She questioned why there had been no scrutiny since the cabinet decision in June and why none of the scrutiny committee chairs had brought it to their committees. She highlighted concerns about the lack of scrutiny and transparency in the process, emphasising the importance of these projects for the quality-of-life services provided to Monmouthshire residents. She criticised the cabinet for acting unilaterally without proper scrutiny and questioned the lack of forethought in the process.

The Chair clarified that the cabinet decision was not taken in June; rather, the item was added to the cabinet's forward work planner in June and that the actual decision was made in February. The Cabinet Member then explained that the allocation to individual authorities is done by a group of civil servants in Whitehall, not by RCT. He expressed concern about the formula used for allocation, which gives Monmouthshire about 50% less funding than other local authorities in Wales. He emphasised the need for better scrutiny and transparency in future arrangements, especially when the responsibility reverts to the Welsh government.

The officer provided specific figures for the allocation for 2025-2026: £2,399,940 in total, with £1,730,400 in revenue and £665,000 in capital. She explained that each individual authority across the UK has its allocation, and in Wales, the southeast region is made up of 10 authorities with RCT as the lead.

- A member expressed disturbance about the centralisation of the process and sought clarification on whether the mix of funding from Whitehall and Welsh Government had changed. She asked if there was a similar formula for the Welsh element of the funding and whether Monmouthshire was at the bottom of the pile for this fund as well.

The Chief Officer clarified that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UK SPF) is entirely funded by the UK government, with no investment from the Welsh government. He mentioned that

in the next round of succession funding post-Brexit, it is likely that the Welsh government will have a greater role in its administration and spending decisions. He emphasised that the current funding comes directly from Westminster to the local authorities, without any Welsh government involvement.

- A member questioned whether the scrutiny process itself was being scrutinised, noting that large ticket items of public spending should be discussed at scrutiny. She highlighted the issue of transparency and consultation and asked if large sums of public money were being spent in haste by an autocratic decision process, possibly by one Cabinet Member, and enquired about how to change this.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged that the process is not as it should be, citing issues with haste and lack of transparency. He explained that decision-making is done by a board, not by an individual cabinet member, and that the local accountability of the board is poor due to the arrangements set by the UK government. He emphasised the need for urgent debate in Wales to improve these arrangements. The Chief Officer clarified that the work has not been done by a single elected member but through a proper board process involving a wide range of public service organisations. He highlighted that the decision was taken to a full cabinet meeting to ensure transparency.

The Chair reiterated that it is the collective responsibility of members to suggest things for the forward work programme. A suggestion for more frequent scrutiny meetings could be considered in due course.

- A member asked how it was decided that RCT should be the lead authority in the area.

The officer explained that the decision for Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) to be the lead authority was likely made through a call out across authorities, probably at the chief executive level, and it was agreed that RCT would take the lead.

- A member emphasised the need to consider the impact of the Cabinet's decision on employees, as some projects might either fold or progress. She highlighted the importance of accountability and the need for local authorities to have an expanded role in scrutinising projects meaningfully. She also stressed the necessity of taking into account the employees affected by these decisions.

- A member emphasised that call-ins should address whether the Cabinet acted in the best interests of Monmouthshire's citizens. He observed that no concerns were raised by opposition group leaders during the 2022 discussions on the Shared Prosperity Fund or the February 2025 cabinet meeting. He suggested that much of the current discussion is not relevant to the call-in, as it attempts to scrutinise entities beyond the committee's control, such as the Regional Partnership Board and Westminster. He also expressed a desire to see the Together Works project continue sustainably and suggested moving the discussion to other scrutiny committees for a more appropriate examination.

- A member enquired whether the projects funded last year were aware that the funds could possibly stop at the end of March and if they had exit plans in place for such a scenario. She emphasised the importance of considering the impact on MCC employees who would be in limbo if the committee decided to send the decision back to the cabinet or to full council. She urged the committee to reflect carefully on their decision, considering the potential effects on employees' job security.

The officer confirmed that all projects funded last year were fully aware of the funding time frames and were encouraged to have exit plans in place due to the time-limited nature of the funding.

- A member expressed appreciation for the explanation provided by the Cabinet Member regarding the process and the challenges faced due to the tight timelines. He expressed his dissatisfaction with the current process, highlighting the significant amount of money involved and the need for fairness in the allocation of funds within communities in Wales. He questioned the applications and business cases for the projects, suggesting that some of them might not meet the necessary criteria and that better projects might have been overlooked. He emphasised the importance of transparency and the justification for the call-in, stating that it was necessary to ensure proper scrutiny and to address any potential issues with the allocation process.
- The Chair noted that the call-in grounds referred to “no apparent assessment of the realisation of benefits as defined in the initial project proposal and where projects are within their life cycle” and asked for a comment.

The Cabinet Member confirmed that the projects were asked to submit business cases in December, which included information on the impact of different levels of funding. The People and Place Partnership considers the impact in terms of the delivery of the current projects, their financial profile and their performance, but he acknowledged that the Cabinet Paper could have more fully reflected that consideration.

- Members questioned if the committee should go into a closed session to discuss exempt information. Following a brief break to consider the options, the Chair and Acting Chief Executive advised against moving into a closed session, stating that it would not be appropriate given the nature of the call-in, which focuses on transparency and scrutiny. He also mentioned that it would stray outside the scope of the call-in itself.
- A member asked if six members of the partnership board are MCC employees and if they had complete or incorrect information about all projects. She questioned why Monmouthshire residents' money was being sent out of the county to Hartpury when there are farmer training facilities in Usk. She enquired about the use of integrated impact assessments, specifically if they assess the impact of ceasing projects and their life cycle benefits.

The Cabinet Member explained that the process allows for organisations outside Monmouthshire to bid for providing services within the county. The important criterion is that the service benefits Monmouthshire residents, regardless of the provider's location. The officer clarified that the People and Place Partnership Board has three MCC representatives, not six. Other attendees at the board meetings support with minutes and papers but do not participate in decision-making. She explained that the integrated impact assessment (IIA) was written around the projects being taken forward in the draft local investment plan. The partnership board regularly reviews the impact of current projects on communities, businesses, and people in Monmouthshire. She acknowledged the questioning around the impact on projects that are not continuing and mentioned that the IIA has been amended since the decision on Together Works. The updated IIA and local investment plan reflect the significant funding cuts and focus on the projects that have secured funding.

- A member emphasised that the IIA should assess the impact of both continuing and ceased projects. She suggested that even a line in the IIA acknowledging the impact on ceased projects and mentioning any mitigation measures would be helpful.

- A member questioned the process of awarding funds to an establishment in England (Hartpury College) and whether a local Monmouthshire provider would have had a chance to apply given the short application timeframe. He expressed concerns about the fairness and transparency of the process and sought clarification on whether local providers were given a fair opportunity to bid for the funds.

The Cabinet Member explained that the last time organizations were invited to bid for providing services was in 2022, and Hartpury College was the only organisation that offered to provide business support to farming businesses in Monmouthshire. The decision to continue funding Hartpury College was based on the positive evaluation of their service. He acknowledged that if there had been more time for an open bidding process, other providers might have had the opportunity to bid. He emphasized the importance of ensuring that future processes allow sufficient time for open bidding and consideration of all potential providers.

Chair's Conclusion:

The Chair noted the consensus among the committee members, acknowledging that while there were concerns about the process of the Shared Prosperity Fund, the process itself is not within the local authority's control. Further examination of the process could be achieved through joint scrutiny of the People and the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committees.

The Chair advised the Committee that they had three options available to them, which were:

1. To accept the decision
2. To refer the decision to the Cabinet Member for reconsideration (with reasons)
3. To refer the decision to full Council

The Committee asked for a recorded vote on the above options. Following the recorded vote, the Committee unanimously agreed to accept the Cabinet Member's decision.

6. To confirm the date of the next meeting as 2nd April 2025.

The meeting ended at **12.05 pm**