

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of County Council held
at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Thursday, 19th January, 2017 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: County Councillor J. Higginson (Chairman)
County Councillor P. Jordan (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Batrouni, J. Prosser, D. Blakebrough, M. Powell, V. Smith, G. Burrows, R. Chapman, P. Clarke, J. Crook, D. Dovey, G. Down, A. Easson, D. Edwards, R. Edwards, P. Farley, P.A. Fox, J. George, R.J.W. Greenland, L. Guppy, E. Hackett Pain, R. Harris, B. Hayward, M. Hickman, P.A.D. Hobson, G. Howard, S. Howarth, P. Jones, S. Jones, S.B. Jones, P. Murphy, B. Strong, F. Taylor, A. Watts, P. Watts, A. Webb, K. Williams and A. Wintle

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Paul Matthews	Chief Executive
Alan Burkitt	Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language
Peter Davies	Chief Officer, Resources
Will McLean	Head of Democracy, Engagement and Improvement
Joy Robson	Head of Finance/Section 151 Officer
Robert Tranter	Head of Legal Services & Monitoring Officer
Nicola Perry	Senior Democracy Officer
Richard Davies	

APOLOGIES:

Councillors D. Evans, D. Jones, J. Marshall and S. White

2. Chairman's report and receipt of petitions

Upon opening the meeting the Chairman congratulated the Leader of the Council, Councillor P. Fox on being awarded an OBE. The Group Leaders were keen to offer their congratulations also. Councillor S. Howarth added that all citizens of Monmouthshire who had received an award were to be congratulated.

Council received the Chairman's report.

There were no petitions.

3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made by Members.

4. Public Open Forum

There matters for the public open forum.

5. To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2016

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The minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2016 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Councillor Howarth requested information on the progress of the petition presented to Council 1st December 2016. The Chief Executive agreed to follow this up.

6. To note the action list of the meeting held on 1st December 2016

Council noted the action list of the meeting held on 1st December 2016.

In doing so Councillor Taylor expressed disappointment that Members had not been kept fully informed regarding the issue surrounding zero hour contracts presented to Audit Committee.

The Chairman, in his capacity as Vice- Chair of Audit Committee, advised that further information had been provided to Audit Committee and was expected to be discussed at the next Audit meeting. A follow up report would be presented to Council in due course.

7. To receive the minutes of Audit Committee:

7.1. Audit Committee 17th November 2016

We noted the Audit Committee minutes of the meeting held on 17th November 2016.

7.2. Audit Committee 15th December 2016

We noted the minutes of the Audit Committee meeting held on 15th December 2016.

In doing so Councillor Taylor requested that the advice surrounding the terminology regarding zero hour contracts is forwarded to all Members in order to explain the statement that MCC does not use zero hour contracts.

In response, Councillor Murphy added that a full an extensive response had been supplied, which would also be supplied to Audit Committee.

Councillor Taylor insisted that reassurance was required, as the response had not answered the fundamental question of what the Audit Committee would look at to assure this Council that the use of casual contracts is appropriate.

8. Notices of Motion

8.1. Motion from County Councillor R.J.W. Greenland

The Announcement from HM Government that tolls for the Severn Bridges will be halved in 2018 is welcomed by this Council. Furthermore we support the removal of all tolls for both bridges with future maintenance costs being met from the general UK roads maintenance budget.

In 2015, tourism was worth £187 million to the economy of Monmouthshire, day visits generated £53 million. This is expected to increase when tolls are reduced or removed given anecdotal evidence that the tolls discourage tourist coach traffic and day tripper and survey evidence that

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22% of south west England's residents said they would expect to make more trips to Wales in the next twelve months if the Severn Tolls were removed.

As day visitors have the potential to support the flourishing independent retail sector in south Monmouthshire, this presents further opportunities for the regeneration of our High Streets, a key strand in our economic development activities. Through our regular contacts with trade and business organisations in the County we will continue to work in partnership to develop sustainable growth in the County.

On the regional front, we will continue to play our part in the development of the Cardiff Capital Region. Economic regeneration is set to take centre stage in Monmouthshire's future, bringing new opportunities for raising prosperity throughout the region particularly in new technology companies of the future.

At the same time we acknowledge that reducing tolls could bring dis-benefits into Monmouthshire. We will continue to monitor all potential issues and act accordingly to ensure the best outcomes for the residents of Monmouthshire.

This Council therefore re-affirms our intention to continue to promote Monmouthshire as the place to build businesses within southern Wales and the west of England whilst also promoting southern Monmouthshire as a quality shopping destination. This promotional activity will be escalated in the coming months as the reducing costs of tolls moves closer.

The motion was duly seconded..

Councillor Batrouni broadly agreed with motion and noted the reduction in tolls would be good news for commuters, local businesses and tourism. Clarity was sought surrounding the aspect of the motion that the Council supports the removal of the tolls as the consultation had not advocated the removal of tolls in 2018. Councillor Greenland responded that the correct way would be to remove the barrier of tolls completely to ensure free trade between the West of England and Wales, but he understood the view of the Secretary of State.

Councillor Batrouni added an amendment to the motion, adding a sentence to the second to last paragraph, to read;

- *At the same time we acknowledge that reducing tolls could bring dis-benefits into Monmouthshire. We will continue to monitor all potential issues and act accordingly to ensure the best outcomes for the residents of Monmouthshire. **In particular, we will closely watch house prices in South East Monmouthshire and consider the of affordable homes in the area, so local people, especially young people, are not priced out of the housing market.***

The amendment was seconded and this became the substantive motion. Debate ensued.

Councillor Howarth addressed the issue of affordable housing and requested clarity as to whether the LDP would be revisited. In response Councillor Greenland advised that across all authorities there is a question of viability for various housing schemes. There is too large a proportion of affordable housing suggested for some housing sites which may see some schemes becoming unviable. There are proposals that we look at the LDP and the issues being faced.

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Councillor S. Jones, as the Chair of Economy and Development Select Committee advised that a special meeting has been arranged for scrutiny of affordable housing on 14th February 2017. Also the Committee would be looking into the review of the LDP.

A few Members expressed concern that the motion could be construed as a statement rather than a motion. The Chair explained that the motion had been accepted as an agenda item.

Councillor Hobson explained that affordable housing is essential and entry level for a first time buyer in Chepstow is currently £160,000. With the introduction of the toll reduction this figure would increase. LDP would need to be re-visited in the next year of the new Council term.

Some Independent Members were keen to express that the motion was a political reaction and did not take into consideration the full consequences. It was suggested that proper modelling on how the tolls could be used should be undertaken. The suggestion of an innovative integrated transport fund was put to Council.

Concerns were expressed that the motion referred to an increase in day visitors, but at the same time TICs were closing.

The Leader thanked the Labour Group for their amendment, and confirmed support of that. He added that the bridge tolls had too long been an economical barrier, and the reduction would unlock opportunities and benefits to commercial users and small businesses. He agreed that the issue of housing would need to be addressed.

Councillor Farley requested reassurance for people in Chepstow in particular, where the treatment of the TIC would sit in light of the motion, and asked for a suitable resourced outcome. Councillor Greenland responded that he has requested a meeting be set up with all interested parties in Chepstow to discuss a way forward.

Council held a recorded vote:

For	33
Against	2
Abstentions	3

Therefore the substantive motion was carried.

9. Report of the Head of Democracy, Engagement and Improvement

9.1. Welsh Language Strategy 2017-2022

Council were presented with the Welsh Language Strategy for 2017 – 2022, which has been produced in line with the requirements of the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and specifically Standards 145 and 146.

During debate we noted the following comments:

Councillor Blakebrough questioned if the increase over 20 years from 2.3% to 9.9% was considered a significant increase of Welsh speakers. Councillor Hobson responded that the last census saw numbers decrease, whereas Monmouthshire had increased. It was expected that the 2021 census would see a greater increase which was reflected in the report

In terms of funding, point 5.1 of the report stated that there were no additional financial or HR implications arising out of the strategy. The Welsh Language Officer explained that it was not expected to see costs other than those set out in the strategy. There had been a budget of

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£13,000 prior to the standards, which had increased to £58,000, with a potential current overspend.

In response to questions surrounding HR implications of the strategy and sought clarity regarding Welsh language requirements for key posts. The Welsh Language Officer explained that increasing the number of Welsh speakers working in the Council was part of workforce planning. An upcoming meeting with DMTs would be looking at staffing structures. In terms of job descriptions, where a Welsh speaker was essential to the role, this would be part of the essential criteria on the description, as with any other post. In terms of staff learning Welsh, there is a small pot of money held for training frontline staff in receptions/hubs etc.

Members expressed frustrations concerning Welsh language taking precedent over English, specifically on telephone calls and road signage. It was thought to be a case of the minority dictating to the majority.

Councillor Hayward referred to the foreword of the report, and the statement that in 25 years the number of Welsh speakers had increased to 8780 and in a large proportion of that 25 years there has been compulsory Welsh education in schools. It was therefore considered a failure of the initiative, and further money spent on the initiative would be wasted. In response the Cabinet Member explained that treating the language as an academic exercise with no opportunity to use outside that environment it would be easily forgotten. To tie in with the policy the aim was to become dynamic and use outside the school environment.

Councillor Hobson confirmed that concerns regarding road signage would be fed back to the Commissioner and Minister in due course.

The Chief Officer provided clarification regarding concerns around the target percentages.

Upon being put to the vote, Council resolved to agree the recommendation in the report:

- That Council agree this 5 Year Strategy as required by Standard 145 set out in the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011.

10. Report of the Head of Finance

10.1. Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2017/18

Council received the Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2017/18 report. The purpose of this report was to:

- Present arrangements for the implementation of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and to approve it for 2017/18.
- Affirm that, in the absence of any revisions or amendments, annual uprating amendments will be carried out each year without a requirement to adopt the whole Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

During debate the following points were noted:

Councillor Batrouni expressed that thanks to the Welsh Labour Government everyone would be receiving 100% of their Council Tax reduction. In response to a question we heard that 5850 residents currently receive council tax reduction. Information on the outcome of the survey of rough sleepers was requested.

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Councillor A. Watts questioned the amount of Council Tax debt, and was interested to hear the level of debt per Council Tax band. Mr Davies advised that he would look to provide this information. The Cabinet Member advised that this report did not refer to debt levels as it was about Council Tax payers getting a rebate on their charge.

Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to agree the recommendations in the report:

- To note the making of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Prescribed Requirements (Wales) Regulations ("the Prescribed Requirements Regulations") 2013 by the Welsh Government on 26 November 2013.
- To adopt the provisions within the Regulations above ("the Prescribed Requirements Regulations") and any 'annual uprating regulations' in respect of its Scheme for the financial year 2017/18 including the discretionary elements previously approved as the Council's local scheme from 1st April 2017.

11. Report of the Monitoring Officer

11.1. Standards Committee - Appointment of Independent Members

Council received a report advising that the Appointments Panel for Independent Members of the Standards Committee had met and is recommending appointments to be made by the Council. A serving independent member of the Standards Committee has expressed a wish to serve a second term, as permitted by the regulations.

Council resolved to agree the recommendations in the report:

- To appoint Richard McGonigle and Richard Stow as recommended by the Appointments Panel to fill the vacancies of independent members on the Standards Committee for a period of six years.
- To reappoint Trevor Auld for a further 4 years as an independent member on the Standards Committee.

The meeting ended at 3.50 pm