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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held
at on Thursday, 28th September, 2017 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor J.Pratt (Chairman)

County Councillors: A.Davies, L.Jones, R.Roden, L. Guppy, V. Smith
and A. Easson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Paula Harris	Democratic Services Officer
Tracey Harry	Head of People and Information Governance
Roger Hoggins	Head of Operations
Owen Wilce	Programme Lead - A County That Serves
Liz Williams	Senior Management Accountant
Sally Thomas	HR Lead

1. Apologies for absence

County Councillor A. Webb.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Open Public Forum

There were no members of the public wishing to address the committee.

4. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were accepted and signed by the Chair.

In regard to the Road Safety Task and Finish Group County Councillor V. Smith raised concerns that it appeared that no progress had been made.

In response we were told by the Head of Operations that work had been taking place with partner agencies to facilitate a Public Meeting and that this would take place early 2018.

5. Revenue & Capital Monitoring 2017/18 Outturn Statement

Context:

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The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information on the revenue and capital outturn positions based on activity data at month 2.

This report will also be considered by Select Committees as part of their responsibility to,

- assess whether effective budget monitoring is taking place,
- monitor the extent to which budgets are spent in accordance with agreed budget and policy framework,
- challenge the reasonableness of projected over or underspends, and
- monitor the achievement of predicted efficiency gains or progress in relation to savings proposals.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member queried the figures in 3.16 in relation to groceries and was confirmed as correct.

A Member commented that the financial situation appeared to be getting worse and there are efficiency opportunities we need to grasp as the lack of funding will result in a deteriorating service.

It was asked that Elected Members are provided with a list of statutory duties that the Council have to perform so that as a Council we can address what we have to do.

In respect to street lighting, the 85K overspend due to energy rising cost was questioned.

A Member stressed the need to look at the efficiency of our operations and our priorities must be the services for our residents.

Committee's Conclusion:

The Committee raised concerns after noting the low level of reserves which will severely reduce the flexibility the Council has in meeting the financial challenges of reducing settlements and the consequent need to redesign services.

It was also commented that Members note the significant forecast reduction in the overall school balance and support the continuing work with schools to ensure the Council's fairer funding scheme requirements are met.

As a Council we have a large number of challenges ahead of us and the budget setting will be extremely difficult. We need to explore further how we can obtain

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more funding in the future by pursuing every opportunity available to us.

6. People Services Annual Report

Context:

The Committee received the People Services Annual report 2017.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member commented that the intended audience of the report was not clear and asked who was the report was aimed at; staff, Elected Members, volunteers or the community.

In respect of Mental Health a Member asked about People Services have done to date and what future plans were in place to support staff. It was felt that the changes needed to be expedited as mental health needed to be made a priority.

The Committee unanimously felt that the term 'physiological illness' should not be used and would rather see the term 'mental health/wellbeing' in its place.

In regard to the EVOLVE programme, it was asked who this is aimed at as this was not made clear in the report.

A Member questioned staff turnover with the organisation losing 300 staff in 2016, but employing 370. It was asked how many were made redundant as opposed to finishing training to allow them to work elsewhere.

It was asked of agile working was a success and queried if staff felt pressured to work extra hours.

Members stressed the need for a leaver's interview to understand the reason staff leave MCC.

A Member commented although People Services Officers had spoken of data collection and analysis, it was not visible in the report. In respect to interventions taking place, clarity was sought on the type invention and the subsequent results of intervention.

A Member raised the point that a member of staff who may be struggling with their mental health can only obtain help via their line manager which may not always be appropriate if the manager is the source of stress. People Services advised that staff can go to HR direct with a cost code. The Member pointed out that in requesting a cost code the line manager would become aware and the help sought would no longer be anonymous.

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Upon being told of an external counselling service the Chair asked if staff were aware of this service.

It was asked how much was staff absence was costing the authority.

A Member of the Committee advised that they had given the report to members of their ward for feedback. The feedback was not positive with comments including;

- A lot of information presented in one way
- Heavy going
- A lot of clever language
- no one is going to read it
- Initially good, then went off
- how much does it cost to produce this report?
- How many man hours went into it?
- How much does this report cost me as a tax payer?

It was asked if return to work interviews carried out in every instance of sickness and when advised no by officers, the Member stressed that this needed to be followed up as the impact of a member of staff being off ill was great, not only on the individual, but on the team.

The Chair also raised concerns regarding managers not recording sickness correctly as it goes not create a true reflection of issues within a department.

A Member was greatly concerned that People Services could only advise the committee that a manager should know how to treat and manage their staff and to be able recognise patterns of behaviour as outlined. It was asked how we are ensuring that every manager are aware of staff movements, behaviour and health. It was felt that 'hoping' was not 'ensuring' and the Member asked for reassurance that all managers would receive training so that there was continuity across the authority.

A Member commented that they felt that regular steps and regular checks are essential for managers to ensure every manager, not just being reactive when something goes wrong. This needs to be updated and in certain cases a manager with good practice could mentor a less able manager. In answer the Head of People Services said that they did not have the capacity to do that as there are only six HR officers.

In response, Members said that they appreciate the capacity of staff and managers and had no wish to increase workloads, but this is fundamental to what is being discussed and maybe there is a software package that could support managers.

In regard to College Gwent health MOTs, it was asked if a mental wellbeing assessment was part of the scheme and what percentage of staff were taking up the opportunity and how where staff were encouraged.

Members noted the low response to the staff survey and questioned what officers were doing to encourage participation.

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Concerns were raised regarding the level of sickness, especially the cost to the Council. The fact that so few staff responded to the staff survey is a red flag and that perhaps staff did not answer it as they felt their opinions would not be valued.

Committee's Conclusion:

Although the report was an interesting read, the Committee would have liked to have seen less use of abbreviations and language that is difficult to understand.

The Committee felt the report required more detail on sickness levels and a breakdown by department.

The mental health courses were applauded but it was felt that they were not accessible for all staff.

There were also concerns regarding staff being to access the services of Wellbeing Solutions Wales, as many neighbouring Council have invested in a company called Carefirst, which allows staff to access counselling independently without approval from a line manager.

It was felt there is still a large amount of work to be done. As the budget is being reduced and more pressure is being put on staff, it was felt essential that staff are retained and valued and that we look at solutions to the problems we have.

7. Review of Commercial Obstructions in the Highway policy

Context:

To provide members with an update on the implementation of the policy 'Management of Commercial Obstructions in The Highway' and to consider whether any amendments to the policy be recommended to Cabinet.

Key Issues:

Following an extensive review by Strong Communities Select Committee in July 2016 Cabinet adopted a new policy for the management of Commercial Obstructions in the Highway. This generic title embraces policies regarding fly posting, placing benches, displaying banners etc. within the public highway and in particular approved the implementation of a new policy to manage items placed in the highway such as A boards, displays, tables and chairs.

In relation to A boards, displays, tables and chairs etc, the policy adopted a strategy of meeting with individual businesses, agreeing what might be placed in the public highway (effectively on footways and public spaces) and issuing a permit to each

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individual business (that is approved by the highway authority) to place an item/s on the public highway for the benefit of the business.

The implementation of the policy commenced early in this year but the revaluation of business rates by government created significant concern and disquiet within the business community.

Members became aware of the additional financial hardship arising from the new NNDR regime and that this coincided with the continued roll out of the obstructions in the highway policy.

To allow members the opportunity to review the overall impact upon the business community the roll out of the policy was paused. It has remained in abeyance awaiting this report which offers members the opportunity to review the policy and make any recommendations to Cabinet regarding amendments to the policy.

In reviewing the existing policy members may consider the following points of particular relevance:

The previous policy (i.e. that prior to the policy adopted in July of last year) adopted a blanket approach to the management of items in the highway. Policing of the policy was ad hoc and often in response to complaints. The new policy sought to work with individual businesses to approve displays where a safe route for pedestrians could be maintained.

Although representation at the time suggested to the contrary businesses have no right to place any item in the public highway without the permission of the highway authority. Without such authority the council is at risk for allowing unauthorized objects to be placed in the highway and the individual business may at least be uninsured for any third party claims and at worst subject to prosecution by the highway authority for placing items in the highway without approval.

The concept of the policy (i.e. permitting individual businesses) is consistent with those adopted in various other local authorities in the region (appendix 1, part 2, page 7 of the Cabinet report of 6th July 2016), although the charges vary between authorities. Not all local authorities presently use a permit system for managing obstructions in the highway.

A local businessman Damian Cole, Managing Director of Get Connected, Abergavenny attended the meeting to speak on this item and made the points;

- He owns a coffee shop in St John's square which has 6 benches outside
- The MCC adopted LDP from 2014-21 states that a key objective is to sustain and enhance the County's main towns

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- As opposed to the proposed charges for A boards and outside seating the Council would do better to work with local businesses to attract more footfall rather than charge for sitting outside
- Another local business which has a small interior relies on the outdoor seating for customers
- Customers with bikes and dogs would be deterred
- A large number of local businesses would be affected

Member Scrutiny:

The scheme is better in that it looks at individual businesses but small local businesses are under extreme pressure. Although other Councils have implemented the charges, in most cases they are not rural Counties such as Monmouthshire, who are desperate to get people into the towns.

Members felt that the charges were too high and although they agreed that having a policy in place was essential, the financial pressure of the charges on local businesses would be too great.

A Member commented that there must be a system in place so that we can inspect and regulate items placed on the highway.

It was felt there are safety issues with items on the highway, especially partially sighted and people with prams. It was felt that if the A boards could be anchored so that they remained in one place, this would be useful to the partially sighted.

A Member felt that by having items on the highway that businesses were increasing the size of their business, increasing revenue and as such the charges were reasonable.

It was commented that with business rates increasing this new charge would be untenable for small local businesses.

A Member commented that reducing traffic movement in Abergavenny would be an option introducing shared access.

Members felt that if space allowed for a larger footprint, the business should be allowed to use that space.

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Committee's Conclusion:

Members did not want the current permit scheme removed as maintaining and controlling items placed on the highway was essential to provide a safe route.

Upon taking a vote, the majority of the Committee asked that the recommendation of no charge was taken to Cabinet.

8. Volunteering Policy

Context:

The purpose of this report is to provide a Volunteering Policy, which is applicable to all service/business areas including schools.

Key Issues:

Monmouthshire County Council recognises the important and valuable contribution made by volunteers who give freely of their time to enhance the services provided by the paid workforce, with the ultimate aim of improving services for residents.

This policy describes the role of volunteers in service delivery and sets out the terms governing their engagement and ongoing relationship with the Council. The Council acknowledges the significant role that volunteers play in both supporting service delivery and promoting community wellbeing. It offers a wide variety of volunteering opportunities across numerous services for people with particular skills experience or interests.

This policy applies to all volunteers engaged in supporting the delivery of council services. This includes services delivered by agents of the Council, including contractors and schools.

This policy does not apply to volunteers who are active within communities and not managed by council services, work experience, apprenticeships and student placements or council employees volunteering for other groups and organisations.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member asked for reassurance regarding the safety of the volunteers and the safe recruiting policy.

The policy was applauded for being so comprehensive and for addressing different types of volunteers.

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Members appreciated the clarity on insurance.

The Policy was praised for being well set out and the FAQ's was particularly useful, the issue now is ensuring that it is applied fairly and evenly.

Clarity was sought on the purpose of the level one Safeguarding qualification and we were told it is an awareness raising qualification, available to all.

Work experience placements were questioned and we were advised that work experience placements are not covered by this policy, this would be the responsibility of the education establishment.

Members thanked Owen Wilce for his work and made particular reference to the volunteer's café in the MCC tent at Usk Show which received positive feedback via the Members.

Committee's Conclusion:

The Policy was thought to be robust and thorough and hoped that it would cover every eventuality.

The Committee supported the Volunteering Policy and recommended that it be accepted and circulated to all service/business areas and commended to governing bodies for adoption as soon as possible.

9. Strong Communities forward work programme

Members were advised that the report on Anaerobic Digestion would come to Committee on the 16th November.

Budget Setting may require a Special meeting.

10. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

The Committee were advised that they would receive an updated planner each Friday with additions/deletions.

County Councillor A. Davies asked that actions were reported back to the Committee.

County Councillor V. Smith asked to look at burials and funeral costs.

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It was requested that the Highways management plan is sent to all committee members.

11. **Date and time of next meeting - 16th November 2017 10am (pre-meeting 9.30am)**

The meeting ended at 1.10 pm