

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr USK - County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk on Monday, 24th February, 2020 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor L.Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillor (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Batrouni, D. Dovey,
A. Easson, V. Smith and J.Treharne

Also in attendance County Councillors: R. Harris

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Alan Burkitt, Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Gareth Sage, SWTRA /Street Lighting Manager
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and Governance

APOLOGIES: Councillors P. Clarke and A. Webb

1. Declarations of Interest.

2. Performance Monitoring of the Previous Strategic Equality Plan 2018-19.

The committee was presented with an annual report detailing the council's performance in embedding equalities legislation into practice. The Equality Act 2010 was introduced in April 2011 and within the specific duties of the act is the requirement to publish an annual report that aligns with a Strategic Equality Plan and to detail its equality objectives through a comprehensive action Plan. The committee's role is to ensure that policy and practice delivers these legislative requirements. The officer presented the report and highlighted how the council has tried to deliver on their responsibilities, offering examples. The chair invited questions from members.

Challenge:

- Can you please check your reference to FEDEP as I believe this has been disbanded? *I can check this, but at the point of drafting this report, I believe FEDEP was still in place.*
- We have an anti-poverty plan which is still in progress 2 years later and that concerns me. The reports of last year and the year before seem to suggest the same, so I'm conscious that progress needs to be made. I feel the report needs some updating and an example of this is that there is hardly any mention of racism in the report and yet I'm aware of incidences in schools. Have you looked at data round this? It's not taught in schools and I know of 6 incidences. I believe that 45% of schools say they would like training around this, so I would like to see this reflected in the report. *In terms of racism, this is discussed more in the Strategic Equality Plan (SEP) 3, but I agree with you as I am aware of incidences. This new SEP 3 is looking to address that and there is a task group established to focus on this. We're looking at how we can disseminate best practice and I'm not sure why schools are not reporting incidences.*

We have a forthcoming meeting called 'show racism the red card' and I would be really pleased if you could attend, so I will send you the details. We are aware that some of the information is out of date, but this is the monitoring report for 2018-19, so it doesn't reflect new evidence that we have received. We feel that it would be more helpful if this report was brought to members earlier in the year to give the committee a fuller picture of the evidence.

- In response, I would appreciate earlier oversight of this report. It also depends upon the purpose of you bringing the report to us. If we are simply signing it off, it doesn't really matter when we consider it, but if it is to be used as a critical document to hone and improve our practice, it does need to be brought earlier.
The purpose of the report is the latter of your suggestions and you are right, we need to gather the evidence to shape our actions.

- You have produced 2 reports, but are you operating as a lone ranger? Do people report their progress to you or do you actively have to go to them? My concern is around resources.
I do have to engage with my colleagues to receive the information, as this is effectively the council's response and my role is to coordinate what activities are being undertaken and report on progress, but I always receive the information.

Chairs Conclusion:

I think officers have taken our comments on board and will make any necessary amendments to the report in terms of our suggestions around checking on FEDEP and I'm asking for consideration of the future timing of the scrutiny of the monitoring report, in line with our discussions on role and purpose. We would like to invite the Children and Young People's Select Committee to do an engagement piece jointly with us on racism.

3. Pre-Decision Scrutiny of the New Strategic Equality Plan 2020 (Strategic Equality Plan to follow).

The Council is required to present their Strategic Equality Objectives within a Strategic Equality Plan (SEP). This plan is the Council's third such SEP and replaces the version 2016 – 2020 on the 1st April 2020. The plan was brought to the committee for pre-decision scrutiny prior to adoption. The officer briefly presented the plan, given that the context had been discussed during the previous item when the committee scrutinised the performance of the previous year in delivering on the council's legislative responsibilities. The chair invited questions.

- In terms of the Well-being of Future Generations assessments having be undertaken on all decisions, I could only find one out of thirteen for the budget decisions. Similarly, in terms of the Cumulative Impact Assessments you refer to, I haven't seen these and I would be interested to know how they were they calculated and what policies were included in the drafting of them.
The WFG assessments should be undertaken for all decisions and to my knowledge, I thought they had been. I have seen the Cumulative Impact Assessments so I can locate those and send them to you.

- There is no mention of homelessness in this report, which seems like an omission to me, because whilst I cannot provide evidence, I have been made aware of instances of homeless people from Monmouthshire presenting as homeless in Newport because there are more services there.
I will need to check with our Housing Manager on this as we tend to only include issues where evidence suggests there is an issue, but I will certainly follow this up after the committee and before finalising my report.
- I cannot see any mention of the Income Equality Grant in this report and yet there was cross party agreement for this last year, so it feels like not enough progress is being made and I'm not sure if that is a lack of political will.
I will also check on this.
- The gender pay gap is mentioned, but I'm not sure it is adequately captured through the objective in the report and I'm unsure as to whether it accurately reflects the disparity in the county and the real situation.
This is something I can take back and discuss with colleagues in finalising the report.
- The language used feels overly strategic and as a result, it just feels very 'tick boxy', and yet under closer scrutiny, it lacks the detail I would expect.
That is helpful and is something I can address for future documents.
- The definition of poverty is a real issue in my view, because I want to understand the benchmark by which assessments can be made and particularly when there is no agreed definition of poverty? I am unsure how we can say we have embedded something that we cannot even define?
I recognise what you are saying here and the ability to define poverty is something we have struggled with and perhaps I need to review the statement regarding 'embedding'.
- I feel there should be more analysis on improvement and I would have liked to have seen a section on what worked well in the last plan, what didn't and so forth. I feel this plan needs to be bolder, if we are serious about tackling poverty on a cross-party basis.
This is something I can take back and think about for the next plan and I will pass your views to the cabinet member ahead of finalising the plan.

Chair's Conclusion:

I feel we have given this sufficient scrutiny and have raised issues for consideration prior to the final draft of the plan being taken to council. We will ensure that the comments and views of members will be reflected to the cabinet member and relevant officers after the meeting to enable them to refine the report prior to consideration by Council.

4. Update on Street Lighting (report to follow).

The committee had requested an update on street lighting policy. A report was presented which gave an update on the service and its pressures and reaffirmed that there were no proposed changes to the current street lighting policy.

Members heard that in 2014, a decision was taken to achieve cost savings and wider

environmental benefits in carbon reduction, light pollution and biodiversity through switching off streetlights in residential areas in the main towns. A further roll out in 2017 included smaller towns and villages. The council had used a loan to upgrade the control system to the Harvard system, which provided options for switching times, dimming and part-night operation. Savings were primarily achieved through reduced energy usage from reduced operating hours and improvements in technology, together with the switch from traditional halogen bulbs to LED bulbs. The committee were informed that unlike many authorities, the council decided that none would be completely turned off and as such, the council's policy for residential lighting is to only switch off between midnight and 5:30 and to implement dimming at other times. Improvements to technology has meant that the latest LED bulbs can be dimmed across a much wider range and these are being used in all replacements. For new lanterns, the council now dims residential areas to 20% instead of switching lights off.

Officers explained that the cost of replacing all the RC units with the pre-programmed units is unbudgeted and in the region of £210,000. As the older RC units fail they will be replaced with the new technology. Members were advised that whilst there were many concerns regarding safety and increased crime levels when the policy was consulted on, there is no evidence to prove that levels of crime have increased since the policy was introduced. The team work closely with the Police and where the Police have specific concerns for safety, the switch-off period has been reduced and the new LEDs that are 20% dimmed will resolve the issue of the perception of crime.

In terms of resources, the committee heard that the costs savings from reduced energy usage are being used to repay the SALIX loan over the next 16 years but this leaves very little for reinvestment in the ageing infrastructure. The team are 3 people with responsibility for street lighting overall, so there is a resource issue.

Challenge:

- You mentioned that Harvard has gone bust, where does that leave us?
Another company has taken over but not all of our lighting is on the Harvard system, some are on different systems.
- If technology is changing all the time, are we improving with the times? Is there merit in upgrading the infrastructure?
We have a mixed batch out there. The market is continually evolving so we upgrade when it's defunct with the best technology. To change all the lighting would be a huge cost so we are changing as we need to. Our budgets are decreasing but there is no cashable saving coming back as that's paying off the loan. We manage traffic lighting and safety signs not just street lighting columns and we have to maintain and upgrade these. Some are run on aluminium cable and replacing all of that is very expensive, so it's about investing in the infrastructure.
- Initially there were concerns for safety. Where there are concerns, can we do anything?
We haven't had lots of complaints with crime or safety issues. Where identified, we can put lights back on but we've taken a pragmatic approach to the policy.
- When do we anticipate all the old lighting will have been replaced?

All will be replaced by the summer. The first phase went in 5-6 years ago, so they are not as efficient.

- Will there be any monetary benefit?
No, it's invested back in to LED. This is essentially a budget diversion exercise as opposed to budget saving. It's not just about the money, there are environmental considerations here too.
- I'm concerned that you are saying that it can take 10 years for adoption of the highway so that the lighting is old technology ~ it is ridiculous that it would take so long to go through that process.
The reason is often that it costs the developer money and therefore they aren't particularly pushing for progress.

Chair's Conclusion:

We have welcomed the opportunity to have an update on this issues since it was raised by Councillor Easson. The report was very clear in presenting the resource issues that we need to be aware of and confirming to us that the existing policy is not subject to change. I would like to raise the matter of adoption of highways with the Head of Planning. If any members have any further questions on this, I recommend you liaise with officers directly.

The meeting ended at **Time Not Specified**

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