

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Remote Microsoft Teams Meeting on Thursday, 17th September, 2020 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

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

County Councillors: D. Batrouni, A. Easson,
R. Harris, V. Smith, J.Treharne and S. Jones

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Officers in Attendance

Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise
Alan Burkitt, Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language
Judith Langdon, Communities and Partnership Development Lead
Owen Wilce, Community and Partnership Development Lead
Ryan Coleman, Community Focused Schools Business Manager
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer

APOLOGIES: None

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Open Public Forum.

No members of the public were present.

3. Presentation regarding the Social Justice Strategy Review - Consultation exercise.

Officer Cath Fallon gave a presentation on the Social Justice Strategy, following a brief introduction from Councillor Sara Jones. The strategy was published two years ago as a live document which can be adapted, taking account of external factors, and ensuring it is always relevant and applicable to the most vulnerable in our society. The strategy was refreshed last summer following consultation with members, and we were due to do the same this year but the process has been extended due to the pandemic. The challenges we will undoubtedly face as a result will need to be reflected in the latest iteration.

The Social Justice Strategy is about people, place and prosperity, the aim being to put social justice at the heart of what we do, with the strategy being a broad programme of work to turn the vision into reality. We want to make a difference in the lives of local people, while working in partnership with them. We have committed to enabling connected and caring communities to support people to live independently, but also delivering on social justice, better prosperity, and reducing inequality. We want to enable better local services through supporting volunteers and social action.

This aligns with the PSB priorities to reduce inequalities between, and within, communities, as well as supporting and protecting vulnerable people, and considering our impact on the environment. Further, it aligns with the PSB objectives to provide children and young people with the best possible start in life, and responding to demographic challenges and changes. It

also allows us to develop opportunities for communities and businesses to be part of an economically thriving and well-connected county.

The Community And Partnership Development team drives the Social Justice Strategy, working as a bridge between community needs and aspirations. We have concluded that area working and community development works well. Some of our area clusters have more engagement and are better attended than others, but we are working in an environment in which there are other opportunities to engage.

There have been some positive developments because of the team's partnership work, in our youth support services network and community cohesion approaches, which have been essential, especially during the pandemic, in terms of how we engage with our BAME residents. The Community Focussed Schools Programme, working directly with schools, volunteers and parents to capture and mobilise our social capital, has also been positive.

Prior to Covid-19, we felt that we needed to promote the plan more widely, both internally and externally, but with a stronger focus on community development. 'Be Community' ensures we are providing the best possible support and advice to our volunteers. We are also maximising Flexible Funding to ensure that we can help when we see a real need in the community. We have found that as we have committed as an authority, town and community councils will follow. We felt it was important to look at our Partnerships and PSB, asking if our Partnership structure is too complicated, with areas of overlap or duplication, and ensuring that the community is an equal partner.

Once the pandemic hit, our work changed dramatically, with the focus shifting to volunteers and community groups shopping for residents, picking up prescriptions, etc. This was coordinated through the Volunteer Action Group Virtual Network. A Volunteer Safe Recruitment Team was set up to ensure we were undertaking the right checks on volunteers. The Need Team ensured that the right support was put in the right place – we realised quickly that we needed to work very closely with Social Services to triage every enquiry we had. Through the Monmouthshire Digital Community Exchange we connected digitally to maximise those opportunities, while also bringing our Third Sector partners into the relationship, ensuring we had the most volunteer and specialist support possible. This has involved 76 colleagues from 15 different teams and 3 external organisations. 765 contacts were made, with 227 volunteers addressing 537 requests for help.

The PSB is now looking towards adopting a place-based approach to partnership working, with a focus on prevention and early intervention. The PSB provides governance and direction to the teams, ensuring the report is multi-agency, not duplicating efforts and is as coordinated as possible. Emphasis on working successfully via the Virtual Network is important in advance of a potential second lockdown. Next steps: we feel it is a neighbourhood networks approach and maintaining cross-directorate working and the momentum we currently have. Targeted, evidence based and data driven delivery is very important – we are at the point now where we can identify specific households in specific areas, then provide the right kind of support. We also need to make sure that teams have a permission structure and the support that they need, too. In terms of policy coherence, we need to consider how our revised social justice strategy looks in light of the changes. Clearly, we need to keep social justice at the heart of everything we do. We are looking now at reducing disadvantages, and intergenerational justice. Within the overarching strategy, we have targeted action plans for tackling poverty and inequality, which have been in development for a while – we are working on a document that should be ready for consultation soon. We also have a Food Development Action Plan, as food insecurity is a big issue. We are looking at how this links with our local supply chains, and from an economic wellbeing perspective. Mental health/wellbeing and social isolation also play into this. We are working with our Housing colleagues to address homelessness. The policies will be integrated with the Equalities Plan and Colleague Community Volunteering Framework.

There was a motion earlier in the year from Councillor Batrouni regarding the need for a specific theme in the Tackling Poverty & Inequality Action Plan. We have refocussed the role of Judith Langdon and Ryan Coleman, who are looking now at the theme of achieving equitable prosperity and preventing our citizens from experiencing poverty. However, we recognise that

despite our efforts there will be points in people's lives in which they experience financial hardship. When this does occur we will come together to provide support to make the experience as brief, infrequent and manageable as possible. We will help people to emerge from that experience with greater levels of resilience.

There is a huge amount of data behind this, which Officers Langdon and Coleman have been working on. The priorities are Employability skills and employment support, In-work poverty, Mental Health and emotional support, equitable support for isolated poverty, and crisis prevention. Our activities are focussed on support for individuals, families and households to build self-resilience; creating prosperous and supportive neighbourhoods to enable communities to build local resilience; working towards a connected county where people and communities can thrive and inequality is reduced; inequality; and using our leverage to influence the structural causes of poverty and disadvantage, working collectively to improve opportunities for prosperity for all.

We are in consultation now with our PSB partners to implement place based working structures, and revising our Social Justice Strategy to include preparation of individual Action Plans. We will present that revised strategy to the next Social Justice Advisory Group and to Cabinet for approval.

Challenge:

Officer Judith Langdon answered the members' questions.

The strategy talks about tackling inequality – what type of 'inequality' does this refer to?

'Inequality' has the potential to cover a wide number of areas. At the moment it is shorthand for 'Income Inequality'. We are fortunate to have an increased amount of data on that, which makes it easier to show the extent of the inequality in a visual way. That is therefore our primary focus, though perhaps more important is the lived experience as a consequence of that inequality. We will therefore look at aspects such as how income inequality is manifested in educational disadvantage, food insecurity, etc.

In 'tackling poverty', whom are we defining as poor?

This is a complex issue. There are standard measures used in terms of low income, either below 50% or 60% of median income, but this doesn't necessarily equate to the same thing as 'poverty'. The reason why there isn't a single nationally agreed definition is that it is possible (as shown, for example, by the work of the Joseph Rowntree Organisation) to be below 60% but as a single household with relatively low outgoings, which then doesn't necessarily equate to poverty. Equally, there can be people who are closer towards the threshold but whose lived experiences will be closer to what we recognise as poverty. We have discussed this as a partnership group; hopefully, when the action plan comes forward supporting the strategy, we will expand on a shared understanding of what we mean by 'poverty'.

Is there a specific budget for the two new officers, and how does it work?

There isn't a specific, dedicated budget for this area of work but there is a considerable amount of resource that sits behind work that addresses poverty and inequality. In particular, as Cath Fallon mentioned, we are going to look at the recommissioning of the Housing & Communities Grant over the next 6 months or so, which has a significant resource behind it. It is largely a matter of how we intelligently use and apply our resources as an authority to make the best possible impact.

When will the committee see the KPIs, so that we can hold the Cabinet member and officers to account?

This is a high level presentation. There is an enormous amount of data sitting behind it. When the full action plan comes forward as part of the strategy, it will be clearly seen that there is a lot of KPI data in it.

The new trend, as shown in two recent reports by IFS and the Social Justice Commission, is that income inequality is reducing but wealth inequality is increasing hugely. Will you consider this problem?

Yes, this is a very important point which we recognise and will certainly consider in our work.

Housing is key: child poverty doubles when housing costs are considered, for example. Is this area being given the necessary attention?

Housing is essential for a good quality of life. The priority is high level set of immediate areas for action. There is a huge amount of existing work that continues. The Housing & Communities Grant highlights that housing underpins a huge amount of this work; therefore, the absence of the word 'housing' in the list of priorities should not be interpreted as indicating a lack of attention to housing. This should be evident in the full action plan.

Why is there no mention of social mobility? Concerning education, are we considering implementing individual action plans much earlier than GCSE age, with the hope of an improvement in our figures later on, as those children grow up?

One of the two officers that have been brought in to work on poverty and inequality has worked until this point on the community-focussed schools programme, an area in which we have been ahead of the game. We have looked at how we can harness all of the assets of a local community to help support the education and life chances of the least advantaged in our schools. The programme has been running for around 18 months, and because of its importance, the officer has been brought into this poverty work. He is integrating the programme's work into this wider work on poverty and inequality. There are a developed set of KPIs around education, FSM attainment gaps, etc. that feature explicitly in the overarching strategy.

Chair's Summary:

The work by officers during the pandemic has been excellent in supporting the communities across Monmouthshire. Councillor Batrouni raised a number of points: he wishes to know the details of the partners with which we are working, and asked for the definition of inequality on which we are operating. We discussed the complex matter of how we define being 'poor', social mobility, and the budget for the two officers. We would like to see KPIs in place so that officers and Cabinet members can be held to account. Cath Fallon confirmed that officers will take these points forward when the individual action plans that sit behind the overarching social justice strategy come through.

4. Welsh Language Monitoring Report 2019/20 - Scrutiny of Performance.

Officer Alan Burkitt presented a verbal report on the Welsh Language in Monmouthshire. This is a legal requirement by the Welsh language Wales measure 2011, consisting of giving an overview of performance to the Welsh language Commissioner; we then receive a reply with the commissioner's own assessment. The translation service is very busy; for that, many of the 176 Welsh language standards with which we have to comply consists of providing information, documentation, etc. Our service is excellent, run by Becky Davies, who allocates and records. Around 18 months ago, we calculated that we translate 1.6 million words per annum, which is considerably more than before the Welsh language standards were introduced. The take-up from staff is excellent – I very rarely see a document that has gone out without a Welsh translation. The website is fully bilingual.

Workforce planning is a requirement looking at what resources are available within departments, essentially an audit of who in those departments has Welsh language skills, from fluent down to learners. Something that Monmouthshire has done lately is that all vacancies are now 'Welsh Language – Desirable' – considering that we have 10,000 Welsh-speaking residents in Monmouthshire, there isn't a job in which Welsh language skills are not desirable. The key issue is that frontline staff numbers, i.e. jobs advertised as 'Welsh Language – Essential', are low. This brings challenges. It is already hard to appoint to certain roles in Monmouthshire, particularly in Social Care, and we do not have a large turnover of staff. It is therefore difficult to build that critical resource. We have 34 fluent non-school based Welsh speaking staff out of approximately 2,000. There was a Quality Assurance Report meeting this week in which the commissioner identified that the number of frontline staff in some local authorities is poor. There are 34 fluent speakers in the council now, compared to 28 when I started. In 36 vacancies last year, only 1 was designated as 'Welsh Language – Essential'.

We have received no official complaints, which is obviously positive. We have only ever had 1 complaint, against which we successfully challenged. There are some complaints, however – I often receive emails pointing me towards various issues, which we address immediately. As well as recruitment, a big issue is that we aren't proactive with the services we offer. If someone requests something, we then try to provide it, rather than offering things through the medium of Welsh in the first instance. The commissioner, as part of his report, conducts a 'mystery shopper' activity in which receptionists etc. are addressed in Welsh and if there isn't an effective response, it is concluded that the organisation is lacking in its skills. This is something we need to look at seriously for a future review. The good news is that I think everything else in place here, including the enthusiasm and support of officers. Fortunately, the attitude in Monmouthshire is that if something needs to be done, it will be done properly; this is excellent, but we need to be more proactive.

Challenge:

Regarding recruitment, why is 'Do not require Welsh' written on some job adverts?

This option has always been on there. I reviewed these matters with HR, as there are a lot which say Welsh skills aren't required. We agree that, in Wales, everyone has an ability in the language, no matter how small, and we have therefore moved away from writing this. There is now more focus on 'Desirable'. Those with Welsh skills tend to be appointed not for that reason, with their proficiency in the language being discovered later.

How do we compare to other local authorities on the England/Wales border?

Powys has a substantial Welsh-speaking area, from Ystradgynlais to Machynlleth, but with fewer speakers the closer it gets to the border. There is still Welsh-medium education there, though. There are far more speakers in Caerphilly, while there are not many in Newport, and we probably have more speakers than Blaenau Gwent. We are probably on a par with Torfaen, and therefore low overall. We are missing something when it comes to getting the children coming out of Welsh-medium education: we should be telling them that if they have Welsh language skills, we want them here in Monmouthshire. It is an essential skill in cases such as, for instance, dementia patients who are struggling to communicate in English because they have reverted to Welsh. It is something of a chicken-and-egg scenario in terms of us offering Welsh and people asking for it.

The report mentions 10,000 Welsh speakers in Monmouthshire, approximately 10% of the population, while Welsh Government has the aspiration for 30% Welsh speakers by 2050. Is this goal achievable for Monmouthshire?

Welsh Government wants 1 million Welsh speakers by 2050, which is approximately one-third of the population. The census is the most accurate figure for speakers, but we haven't had a

census since 2011, based on 2010 statistics. At that time, it was 8500 speakers, 9.9% of Monmouthshire. That was one of only two places that had seen an increase since the previous census of 2001. It is a massive challenge for the county. The upcoming primary school will certainly help. The number of people learning through Adult Education Centres and Coleg Gwent is excellent. We offer our staff a comprehensive training package as well, with a take-up last year of around 70. This year it has been less because of Covid-19. We need to continue as we are, with an emphasis on promoting the language, and trying to get more Welsh speaking staff into our authority. Then, more people will use it and value it. Holding the Eisteddfod again will hopefully have helped. The demographic is not just about learners, as a lot of people move into this area from elsewhere in Wales, bringing their Welsh language skills with them, accounting for a lot of our numbers. Also, there are English people who have learned Welsh.

When the commissioner looks at Monmouthshire, do they take into account that we have a lot of Bristolians living here, which will affect the number of Welsh speakers in the county considerably?

This is a very good point. We have met with Aled Edwards, the new commissioner, who is from a border county himself, and therefore familiar with the challenges. Standards want everyone to reach the same level at the same time, which I have always felt isn't plausible. Due to the point from which we are starting, we might never reach the level of other counties such as Ceredigion. I think the new commissioner appreciates that Monmouthshire, and the other SE Wales authorities, do a really good job with limited resources. I think he would need to factor Bristol in, but if those children are given a good Welsh language education then they have the same chance as anybody of speaking the language. I think the commissioner has a good grip on the demographic issues in Wales, and knows that we in Monmouthshire are doing our best. Where he might, and should, push us is on the Welsh language 'essential' i.e. increasing the number of speakers in our workforce: whether we give the thousands of children who have gone through Welsh language education the chance to come and work for our authority. This would be a valid criticism, along with how proactive we are in the services we offer.

Llanover used to be home to a number of Welsh speakers, do we know if it still is, and to what extent?

No, I know that Lady Llanover was a patron of the Welsh language but I don't think there are many speakers there now. There used to be a Welsh school there. Our biggest numbers are around the Welsh schools: Abergavenny and the Caldicot area.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Eason raised the important matter of the Eisteddfod in promoting the Welsh language. Councillor Batrouni raised a valid point about the commissioner accounting for Monmouthshire's location, and our influx of people from Bristol. He also noted Officer Burkitt's fantastic work in promoting the Welsh language in Monmouthshire.

5. Burials - Member investigation - verbal feedback.

Councillor Val Smith presented a verbal report (full written form to be emailed to members later). The report highlighted numerous points, in order to raise the question of whether Monmouthshire County Council could provide a total bereavement service for residents. Councils are well placed to make a strong business case; Kettering Borough Council and Wigan Council serve as successful examples. Funerals are often a 'crisis' purchase for families, and funeral 'poverty' is increasing: people are unable to meet the costs involved, borrowing (including payday loans) and taking on debt to do so. The Cardiff Bereavement Service is another example of a successful programme helping communities to deal with this difficult time.

The report also considered the lack of standards for conduct or training in becoming a funeral director, and the increasing problem of space for burials, along with innovative companies such as 'Recompose' in the USA, which are changing the process of dealing with bodies. The report also drew attention to the disparity between councils of the cost of funerals and burials, and the sharp increase of prices overall in the last decade. An additional problem is that of death notifications, with families needing to notify numerous agencies on the death of a loved one; the government's 'Tell Us Once' initiative is making excellent progress on this front. As a council, we need to look at whether we can do a better job in making funeral organisation as easy and stress-free as possible, and see this as a useful initiative.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to Councillor Smith for this report. This subject is of course important to everyone, as we will all face these concerns in our lives, perhaps on many occasions. The variety of available options is surprising – composting, etc. Donation to science is another important option. The variation in costs is also surprising. Councillor Easson wished to make the following point about Dewstow Cemetery in Caldicot, which has been very successful: it was a Finalist for Best Kept Cemetery 2016 at the Good Funeral Awards, and has a Green Flag. The cost of opening a plot is half the price of anywhere else in Monmouthshire. The local authority in Caldicot has managed the cemetery since 1962 and is nearly full. Negotiations have taken place to buy a plot of land above the cemetery for extra burials in the coming years. It is therefore a strong example of good practice.

6. To confirm the following minutes:

7. Strong Communities Select Committee dated 12th March 2020.

The minutes of the meeting held on the 12th March 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record.

8. Joint Meeting - Economy and Development Select and Strong Communities Select Committees dated 21st July 2020 (to follow).

The minutes of the meeting held on the 21st July 2020 were confirmed as an accurate record.

9. Strong Communities Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

The Work Programme has been updated since the agenda was dispatched. One addition is the Members' Seminar next week on Waste & Recycling, followed on 28th September by a Special Scrutiny Committee on changes to Waste & Recycling prior to a Cabinet decision on 7th October. The way in which we can receive public submissions, given that we are not meeting in the chamber, is currently being discussed. There is also a special Joint meeting on 19th October regarding Budget Recovery plans. All Scrutiny members will be invited. There will be the need to organise a special joint meeting with Economy & Development Select in late October to look at the car parking review.

The meeting on 12th November will consider public protection and the Covid response, and the registration and Covid response. The final meeting of the year on 17th December will look at Strategic Equality plans and public toilets, scrutinising the process on implementing a strategy, before updating Welsh Government.

10. Cabinet & Council Forward Work Programme.

11. **Next Meeting: Thursday 12th November 2020.**

The meeting ended at **11.26 am**