

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Tuesday, 12th January, 2021 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

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

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

Also in attendance County Councillors: S. Jones
(Cabinet Member for Social Justice and
Community Development) and S. Woodhouse

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Judith Langdon, Communities and Partnership
Development Lead
Ryan Coleman, Community Focussed Schools
Business Manager
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise

APOLOGIES: County Councillor L. Guppy

1. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

2. Open Public Forum

No members of the public were present.

3. Revised Social Justice Strategy

Judith Langdon, Cath Fallon, Deserie Mansfield and Ian Bakewell delivered the presentation and reports, and answered the members' questions, with additional comments from Cabinet Member Sara Jones.

Challenge:

The report doesn't indicate the deprivation seen on the ground. How can we, as an authority, make known where the deprivation is?

Yes, this mirrors what we officers see, which is a dispersed nature of deprivation. We are working to map the deprivation at postcode level, which shows it peppered across the county. Because it is so dispersed, it has the effect of not moving the dial, as the concentrations aren't great enough. Nevertheless, if someone is experiencing poverty, low income, and the associated effects, the experience is the same regardless of where they live. But it is difficult to show that picture. There are action groups associated with each of the priorities as part of the Tackling Poverty Plan; an early task for the Inequality group will be to build a more sophisticated and compelling data piece that considers what it would look like if all the isolated dots were grouped into a hypothetical ward, and how it would compare to other areas. Along with quantitative research and putting the voices of those experiencing deprivation at the centre of this, there are some areas that have developed a variety of commissions to bring people's lived

experience to the fore. That will be an early and important project to shine a light on the dispersed deprivation; it might also help us with an evidence base for, for example, lobbying for an Inequality Grant from Welsh Government.

We are now in a situation where housing inflation is becoming a problem for renters. Ex-Social Housing has been sold back to private developers who are then raising prices beyond what those in the area can afford.

The change in Homeless circumstance has flushed out and highlighted many hidden situations that we would have dealt with for a very long period. We are now dealing directly with a significant number of people who fall into the category of deprivation, and who have nothing behind them. That gives us a significant cohort of people who are tangible and who we can work with, and to whom we can target much-needed resources. The accommodation issue is correct, we are facing it all the time: trying to secure people private rented accommodation but can't because of the level of rent.

In terms of food poverty, we have a system of data analysis funded by Welsh Government. It is a fledgling project – we are building the platform now – which will add mapping of food producers and businesses, and we will be able to add data down to ward level. We can overlay the food poverty access scenario. Access to fresh, nutritional food within our county is one of the biggest issues; this includes through schools and land use. We are overlaying food poverty data with some of the data that shows the potential blackspots mentioned earlier, and looking at other data to show, at a granular level, how many free school meals are offered and where the intervention should be. We can give Councillors further information after the meeting.

Is there a specific Social Justice budget that can be used at the team's discretion, or a plan for one?

There is no specific heading for 'Social Justice Budget'; however, we work very well cross-Directorate. The Community Support team has its own budget (Judith Langdon sits within that team) and we have access to various other budgets e.g. a lot of the work that Deserie Mansfield is doing is funded through the Rural Development Programme and Welsh Government. The work Ian Bakewell is doing is picked up with the Housing Support Grant and Homeless Prevention. We're working together very closely to map where the funding sits to ensure we bring it all together – which it does, quite well. Regarding innovation, we can pick up many of our new projects through various funding streams; for example, the data project that was just mentioned was a funding opportunity through Welsh Government.

'Tackling the effects' of poverty suggests we are doing so after the fact – are we focussing on causes as well?

The whole plan continues to be a work in progress. It is not yet set in stone, and issues such as these are what we hope to tease out as part of the consultation process. It can become quite difficult to distinguish between causes and effects – it can become a vicious circle. For example, highlighting lower educational attainment as an 'effect' of low-income poverty that, in turn, becomes a cause of low income in certain families. Having said that, the reason for the wording about tackling the effects of inequality is to try to bring in a note of realism, and look at what is achievable i.e. what we, as an authority, have our hands on and can influence. What we can do at 'ground level' is make a significant impact on the way that inequality plays out in people's lives. That is the rationale for leaning towards tackling the effects – but it is not to say that we aren't interested in addressing the causes as well.

What is the benefit of the social justice advisory group– can they change anything? Is it a sounding board?

Sounding boards are very important for this piece of work because it is so vast. The advisory group helps with ideas around policy formation and exchange of ideas. It is extremely helpful to be able to run ideas past members at an early stage – all of these ideas went to the advisory group at the end of last year. The quality of the group is possibly subjective but it is very useful, and an important part of the governance structure.

The measure of inequality is fiendishly difficult. We can talk about income gaps between communities on MSOAs, e.g. in Chepstow, there is a £20k difference in annual income between the wealthiest and poorest parts. Can we develop that data to show how big the gap is, in order to then try and close it?

There are many measures that illuminate the reality of inequality; each taken in isolation tends to be unsatisfactory and doesn't convey the whole picture. Therefore, it is a case of bringing together a sophisticated suite of measures that can collectively paint the picture. Some of it will be at county level, some at MSOA. We are very excited about the postcode level data, as it will start to show the real picture of inequality in the county, wherein there are very small concentrations in relatively affluent areas. By combining all of these things, there is scope to do something very interesting that should move us forward in our understanding of inequality.

What is the vision for long-term housing?

We share the frustration with the shortfall in accommodation. It is incumbent on us to look at all opportunities, however small, to make a difference, as there isn't a single solution. The council's intentions around building are really exciting, and we hope that that will have an effect on the situation. Making available land that supports viable development is a continual challenge for Monmouthshire. The council has a potential role within that. Assistance from Welsh Government with Homelessness has started, through different programmes. It may well be short term, which is frustrating. One other area that we would love to develop – particularly around affordable housing – is the potential partnership with health, and whether there is scope to bring more to the table from that side of things. We have to simply keep working hard on the various strands.

There's no mention of county farms in the Food Poverty plan. Do we see a role for them to play?

We own county farms but they are under contract to resident farmers. Our vision for Monmouthshire is that we are an exemplar in our food production and access to land. The direction of the council in the past has been to look at the value of the land and the contractual perspective – how long residents hold the contracts, how we might extend them, etc. We have gone outside the county farms, and we're looking at linking landowners with potential growers, rather than using our county farms which are tied into that contractual agreement. We are working with Community Farm Land Trust at the moment, and we have a project in place that is building resources for farm entrepreneurs. People tend to come to us saying that they would like to grow, that we have lots of land in Monmouthshire, but we can't use or give it. That's why we're using that link with landowners in particular.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Easson asked questions about knowing where the deprivation is across the county, and has concerns about our location causing housing inflation. Councillor Batrouni raised the

following points: whether there is a social justice budget; tackling the causes and effects of inequality, and why that language was chosen; the purpose of the social advisory group; the measure of inequality in income gaps; the long-term vision for housing; and why there is no mention of county farms in the Food Poverty action plan.

The meeting ended at **3.18 pm**