

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Adults Select Committee held at Remote Microsoft Teams Meeting on Tuesday, 20th October, 2020 at 10.30 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)

County Councillors: S. Howarth, L.Brown, R. Edwards, M.Groucutt, R. Harris, P.Pavia, M. Powell and S. Woodhouse

Also in attendance: County Councillors R.J.W. Greenland and S. Jones

T. Crowhurst

C. Bowie:

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Louise Corbett, Strategy & Policy Officer - Affordable Housing
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager
Stephen Griffiths, Strategy & Policy Officer
Jane Oates, Housing Options Officer
Lyn Webber, Flexible Funding Strategic Manager

APOLOGIES: None

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No members of the public were present.

3. Homesearch Allocations Review and Policy amendments - To review the allocations Policy.

Officers Louise Corbett presented the report and answered the Members' questions, with additional responses from Ian Bakewell and Cabinet Member Bob Greenland.

Challenge:

There's no mention of prisoners – are they long-term or short-term, do we think of accommodation for them?

Being in prison doesn't give someone a local connection. Once they are out, they are asked to go back to the area in which they lived previously. Therefore, it isn't something that needs to be stated specifically in the policy, as they wouldn't meet the criteria.

With a mobile app, whom do applicants go to if they don't have the right technology or signal?

That is a valid point. We are aware that there are older or vulnerable people on the waiting list who perhaps aren't able to self-serve or do everything digitally. Therefore, nothing has changed in relation to the team being available. We still have the phone number and officers to facilitate. None of that has ended but the digital side has made us more efficient. The public can still get Homesearch support from the Hubs and the Options Team.

It is good to have flexibility, as Covid will create more challenges.

The key aim of the review was to build flexibility into the policy, and that it was robust and would respond to challenges. We feel that with the proposed amendments we are covered well in these regards.

Has an Equality Impact Assessment been carried out on the whole policy? What about older people who will not be given a mortgage, as they might not have the years in which to pay it back?

One was done, and it should be attached to the reports pack online. When it came to looking at capital assets and figures, such as £45,000 per annum for someone to have sufficient means to secure their own accommodation, we looked at a Monmouthshire average for property and rental prices, rather than area-by-area. This is because part of the aim is to simplify the process – we didn't want to be drawn into the differences by individual town. The data led us to propose a sum that is reasonable for someone to be expected to solve their own housing issue, especially as purchasing might not be the right avenue, but the private renters' sector could be. However, the difficulty of purchasing a property outright for older people, given the time required to pay off a mortgage, is noted.

What are the implications of the point scoring system?

It is a needs-based system. If someone were fit and healthy, and had capital assets, we would say that they have sufficient financial resources, and they would be placed in the lowest band (5). But if someone has a welfare need or a medical issue, the flexibility built into the policy now allows a little discretion whereby those cases can be considered, taking into account the person's capital assets, with the medical issue giving them a higher banding. Other considerations included in the process would be their age, where they are living, etc.

Do the proposals link with those for Future Wales, the national plan for 2040? This says there should be 45% social housing, but in recent years we have only built 18-19%.

Councillor Greenland: We are in the middle of the process of formulating a new Local Development Plan now, which is the means by which new housing is delivered. Unfortunately, our plans have been much delayed by the pandemic. The problem we always have in Monmouthshire is that developers want to build large, 4-bedroom houses. We have to build in policies in the future that give us much more control over what is built. We have a problem in meeting the Welsh Government's 45-55 split, because it is impossible to get a commercial developer to deliver that level of social housing. The level we have built is indeed disappointing – we had ideas of getting to 30% social housing. When a developer looks at a site, they will then negotiate with a local authority, and say they can't build a certain amount. The site then either stays vacant or we negotiate whatever we can in terms of social housing. That's no longer going to be the case because we have worked with Melin and Monmouthshire Housing, and I'm sure that in the future we will be able to achieve the level of affordable housing needed, particularly concerning land owned by Monmouthshire County Council.

Unfortunately, in considering the LDP and which sites to take forward, preference cannot be given to sites owned by the County Council. Sites have to be considered purely on their individual merits. The situation is therefore a difficult one, and not helped by the fact that in the National Development Framework, Welsh Government believes that housing should be near the Metro and up in the valleys. Nevertheless, in formulating the new LDP Planning officers will certainly look at how we can deliver the level of social housing that we know is needed.

Has consideration also been given to Care leavers?

Care leavers are awarded High Priority need, and always have been. We have really good links with Social Services, and we are trying to do even more work with them now. As soon as a young person is ready to leave foster care, support is given in terms of their housing, and their having a priority status in order to move on quickly through the system to permanent housing.

Should the policy include medical need, either physical or mental?

Medical need is addressed. We look at people's mental and physical conditions. There is a medical questionnaire to fill out if a person declares a medical condition, and we ask for doctor's information. In cases of a physical disability, an Occupation Therapist will look at the case and make recommendations in terms of housing and the level of need.

It's not clear how the banding process reflects mental and physical needs.

It will depend on the level of their need. When someone applies, they will be asked if they have a physical disability or issue, and we will ask for information from doctors or anyone supporting them in that regard. Based on the combined information, an assessment is made as to whether the person is high, medium or low need, as medical need will only be taken into consideration if their current living conditions are unsuitable or making that medical need worse. If where they currently live is suitable for their medical need then they will receive a low banding, but if they need to be rehoused on medical grounds, then whether they are low, medium or high will depend on the severity of their condition. But that is determined on a case-by-case basis.

Is there a right to appeal on decisions?

Yes, any element of the decision process is open to review, so the person would simply need to contact the team.

Could the point about prisoners be clarified, regarding residents of Monmouthshire who have been incarcerated outside the county?

If a Monmouthshire resident were in prison outside the county it wouldn't entitle them to any housing status in the local authority where they were imprisoned – they would be referred back to Monmouthshire. We have local connection criteria, with 5 years of residence being the standard that we look at, but there is discretion e.g. if someone applied after a long time in prison, we would look at their address history prior to going in.

What should someone do in the situation of the person at the bottom of the list?

It is very difficult when developing a policy and procedure to get every circumstance correct. There is flexibility in the policy to give discretion as and when it is needed. We have responded to the query regarding the individual, and the policy will support them. As the policy moves along we can look at particular cases, and make changes where we can. The team would welcome liaising with Tony Crowhurst about any aspect of the policy, on an ongoing basis as a Critical Friend.

Chair's Summary:

The officers have agreed to check the banding process in relation to mental and physical needs and provide clarification in the final policy as needed, and check if the point relating to family members living in the community for 5 years needs to be clarified on p13 of the Appendix.

Councillor Harris suggested that perhaps we should be stronger in dealing with developers when they refuse to include the level of social housing that we require, but noted that the developers have a strong hand, and therefore backing should be sought from Welsh Government. Councillor Edwards observed, regarding the revision of the LDP and consideration

of elderly residents, that the county doesn't build enough bungalows and housing of a size that can accommodate a wheelchair, or a second bedroom for a carer, should one need to stay with the resident.

Tony Crowhurst queried the point about disabled people applying for private rental accommodation, noting that this has been a problem for many years. He described the case of an individual who has been sofa surfing for 18 months who has had an assessment done that supports her disability claim, yet remains at the bottom of the list. She lives in Caldicot but the closest place that could be found that suits her needs is in the Forest of Dean, 45 minutes from her circle of support. He questioned the concept of making an average across Monmouthshire, given its variety, rather than focussing on individual circumstances, and asked where in the document the Points system is explained. Councillor Greenland stated that he will take up Mr Crowhurst's comments with officers.

The policy has been very helpful for Councillors to explain to residents the reasons behind applicants being given the properties they have. We aren't going to please everyone but we are making good progress, and hopefully we can get as close as possible. The committee is happy for the recommendations to go to Cabinet.

4. Homeless Briefing Report and Emerging Proposals for Future Delivery of Homelessness.

Officer Ian Bakewell delivered the report. Cabinet Member Bob Greenland added the following comments:

The amount of work performed by the team is enormous and their commitment to homelessness is unwavering. Officer Bakewell has given Councillor Jones and me regular updates, which we have passed on to Cabinet, and he has attended informal Cabinet meetings. The situation has been worsened by the pandemic. Early on, Minister Julie James gave money, for which we are very grateful, for taking people off the streets. As infection rates grew in the spring, people who had been sofa surfing presented as homeless overnight, as they could no longer stay where they were. We anticipate big problems this autumn and winter. There are no easy answers, as the Council currently has huge draws on its limited resources. We do recognise as a priority the issues faced by this area of council work, in particular. We will do everything we can to achieve what is needed.

Officer Bakewell answered the Members' questions, with additional comments from Lyn Webber:

Challenge:

What is the approximate cost for a pod?

They cannot be bought outright – there's a rental charge of around £120-150 a month. They are delivered on the back of a lorry, and are fairly easy to install. We have always balked at their use, and we don't really have anywhere suitable for them. Their use would be a last resort, as an interim measure to empty Monmouth market hall and provide accommodation until something suitable was found.

Is there anything that can be done to persuade banks and building societies to be more lenient for those hit by the pandemic now, so that they don't become homeless?

This is an area in which we need to invest. If people come through with those circumstances, then we need to do everything we can to support them; part of that would be to engage with

banks and building societies, and support the people with their potential debts. There are a few schemes to note coming out of Welsh Government, though they will be loans with a 1% interest rate. Another dimension of that is the Council's housing support arrangements: they will work very closely with people in those circumstances as well.

Because of the new guidance that has come from Welsh Government, at the start of the pandemic the teams realigned services to support those in temporary accommodation. We have had support from Monmouthshire Housing and worked to ensure that those in temporary accommodation are supported where appropriate. Realigning the services has been stressful given the existing caseloads, but the teams have done very well. We hope to make that situation a permanent one. It is difficult because we have to comply with the terms and conditions of the Housing Support grant, in which there is a requirement on us to do preventative work, supporting domestic violence and abuse victims, older people, etc. It is a fine balancing act.

What support do you get from the Gwent Drug and Alcohol Service? Or from the Health Board? Have grants from the Police and Crime Commissioner been explored?

At the beginning of Covid, our arrangements with GDAS were probably not as they should be. We have been working closely with them around their existing provision, but that doesn't have capacity for the number of people that we now know need support. But we have secured funding from Welsh Government until April for a dedicated GDAS worker who will focus on our B&Bs and temporary accommodation. Other authorities are having similar problems. The conversation has started about a Gwent project – the need for it is well understood.

Because of the change in Welsh Government policy, do they not want night shelters or is it that they are no longer needed?

We want to end night shelters, as they aren't appropriate accommodation. Welsh Government is certainly against them now, though they are also against pods. They have said again today that they will not support any night shelters, as they cannot be COVID safe. However, if the situation were to ever demand the use of pods they would consider them. The policy change seems to be here to stay, with Welsh Government moving away from intentional homelessness – anyone needing accommodation will have to be provided with some. Everyone supports this but the resources need to be there.

Last winter, some local churches provided emergency accommodation – are there any agencies at this time that can offer assistance?

As a council, we cannot actively use churches, though they are able to provide accommodation independently. The Covid risk assessments that churches need to follow would not allow that going into this winter. There might need to be relaxations in the rules going forward.

How does washing clothes etc. work with pods?

There is an example in Newport in which I believe one pod is set up as a separate utility pod.

Is GDAS able to undertake tests for Hep C, for example?

GDAS is able to undertake Blood Borne Viruses (BBV) tests that would cover HepC. They are also undertaking Harm Reduction Work with clients where needed. We haven't been informed that these tests are not able to be completed during the COVID period. ABUHB sits on the Area Planning Board and their respective Commissioning Board.

Are BBV nurses able to support GDAS in their commissioned work on the frontline or have they/are they being drawn elsewhere because of COVID pressures?

MCC's GDAS Phase 2 Assertive Outreach Worker started 3 weeks ago and BBV testing is one of the first services she has offered service users.

Chair's Summary:

Councillor Edwards wondered if static caravans might be better and more cost-effective than B&Bs or pods. She expressed concern that more homes will be repossessed due to redundancies, and noted that there is a subtle distinction between homelessness and rough sleeping – some of the latter might not want to go into permanent accommodation but would welcome the help in winter.

The Members expressed their appreciation for the team's continuing hard work. The Committee agreed the recommendations.

5. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting (to follow).

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 29th September 2020 were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, with the following amendment:

Under Item 5, Councillor Brown proposed that when housing is planned, density of the living arrangements needs to be strongly considered on a public health basis (to prevent the spreading of pandemics and expressed concern about the density proposed in urban areas for future housing in the draft NDF).

6. Adults Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

The Gypsy & Travellers Assessment should be included in the December meeting. The Homelessness report from today's meeting will also go to Children and Young People Select committee. Budget Recovery scrutiny will take place after Christmas. We will seek an update from the Health Board regarding substance misuse, as well as a report on support for sufferers of dementia, and their carers.

7. Council and Cabinet Forward Work Planner.

8. Next Meeting: Tuesday 15th December 2020 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at **12.25 pm**