

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of Joint Select Committee held
at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Wednesday, 16th
December, 2015 at 10.00 am**

PRESENT: County Councillors: D. Dovey, D. Evans, P. Farley, S. Howarth, P. Jones, S. Jones, M. Powell, V. Smith, K. Williams, A. Wintle, P.A.D. Hobson, G. Burrows, P. Clarke, P.A. Fox, R.J.W. Greenland, E. Hacket Pain, S.B. Jones, P. Murphy, J. Prosser and B. Strong

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Kellie Beirne	Chief Officer, Enterprise
Cath Fallon	Head of Economy and Enterprise
Tracey Harry	Head of Democracy and Regulatory Services
Roger Hoggins	Head of Operations
Sarah McGuinness	Chief Officer, Children & Young People
Will McLean	Head of Policy & Engagement
Joy Robson	Head of Finance/Section 151 Officer
Robert Tranter	Head of Legal Services & Temporary Monitoring Officer
Nikki Wellington	Finance Manager
Nicola Perry	Democratic Services Officer
Deb Hill-Howells	Head of Community Led Delivery
Rob O'Dwyer	Head of Property Services and Facilities Management
Ian Saunders	Head of Tourism, Leisure and Culture
Sharon Randall-Smith	Head of Achievement and Attainment

APOLOGIES:

Councillors A. Easson, D. Edwards, R. Edwards, R. Harris, M. Hickman, D Husdon, C Robertshaw (Parent Governor Representative), A. Webb and S. White

1. Election of Chair

We elected County Councillor S.G. M. Howarth as Chairman.

2. Declarations of interest

We received declarations of interest from the following Members:

County Councillor P. Farley declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest as a Chepstow Town Councillor.

County Councillor P. Jones declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest as a member of the Raglan Village Hall Association.

County Councillor D. Dovey declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest.

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Any further declarations would be made under the relevant item.

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3. Final Scrutiny of the Budget Mandates for 2016-2017

The Chairman welcomed Members and Officers to the Joint Special Meeting of the 4 Select Committees, convened to engage with Scrutiny Members on the final budget mandates that would be presented to Cabinet on 6th January 2016.

We were advised by the Chairman that individual Select Committees had previously scrutinised budget mandates relevant to their remit and that the purpose of the meeting today was:

- To update Members on the budget position and the updated settlement.
- To provide an overview of budget mandated that had been revised since the initial scrutiny.

We were advised that the Committee would be scrutinising, in particular, the following mandates:

B5, B11, B12, B14, B15, B20 and B21.

The Chairman invited the Leader to introduce the Cabinet's budget and to outline their priorities for delivering services in the difficult financial climate.

The Leader expressed thanks to Officers for work done to date, and Members who had met with members of the public during consultations, particularly noting County Councillor V. Smith who had attended every function.

To provide context we were informed that the Authority had consulted on a budget with a £6.7 million gap, and there were difficult mandates in place to aim to cover that gap. It was expected that there would be a gap of £1.7 – £3 million with additional pressures being identified.

We heard that the expected settlement from Welsh Government would be a 1.4% cut, but there were thought that there may be a 3.1% cut. It was agreed that conversations were needed regarding the discrimination against rural authorities.

Members were advised to take time to read the Continuance Agreement, which outlines how we see us going forward to 2017.

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Resources to update Members on the budget process undertaken this year to engage with the public in producing the budget mandates.

Members received a presentation from both the Cabinet Member and the Head of Finance, to outline the steps taken.

Members were taken through the revised mandates, and were invited to ask questions following each mandate. We were advised that Cabinet Members were present to answer questions on policy and the proposed budget, while officers were present to answer any detailed questions on the mandates.

Mandate B5 Community Asset Transfer - The savings have increased as income generation targets as we plan to enter into a competitive process to identify suitable partners that may wish to work with us

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to optimise use of our prime assets for community large scale events and other income generation activities.

Concerns were raised that more work had been carried out regarding Melville Theatre rather than Chepstow Drill Hall. We were advised that the Drill Hall would not be neglected. The Cabinet Member expressed that he was keen to ensure that officers would take deep interest to facilitate the transfer. Officers confirmed that a formal process had not been embarked upon regarding either building. Members would look forward to formal consultations.

A Member raised a question regarding the Melville Theatre and referred to a point made by the Leader that facilities would not be closing. Assurance was requested from the Cabinet Member that the course of action being taken in this area would lead to that effect. The Cabinet Member explained that due to the change in the financial situation we were struggling with discretionary services, but we were taking the hard option of avoiding cutting and closing, and exhausting every available option to find the right fit for Monmouthshire.

There remained a concern that the discussion could create a misleading impression and the Drill Hall was not liable to be closed. It was felt that the nature of the activities there, and the commitment around it, could make it an ideal candidate. The Cabinet Member expressed that the Drill Hall was in a class of its own which had created a community asset with community involvement, and should be used as an example of a community asset.

Clarification was sought that the mandate was to increase the income expectation in terms of the revisions made, and delaying the savings until the 2017/2018 period. The Chief Officer for Enterprise explained that there was no delay but were looking to up the number of delivery for 2016/2017. The title of the mandate had been changed to reflect asset optimisation.

It was questioned if we were creating a kind of 'reference bible' to provide a list of processes for organisations. In response we heard that there the following were in place:

- Community Asset Transfer Policy, included within the Asset Management Plan.
- A formal application process which detailed the hurdles that people may need to go through.
- A GAVO appointed officer who oversees and helps community groups take the journey through the Community Asset Transfer Policy.

It was suggested that we could create FAQs to assist these processes.

The Chairman advised that Members were content with the mandate and expressed good wishes to Officers and Communities for the future.

Mandate B11 Leadership Team Structure Review - *An increase in original budget savings by further aligning organisational efficiency and maintaining focus on preserving frontline delivery.*

Members had received a presentation from Public Health the day previously and one of the topics discussed was the health of the workplace. The point was raised that the unintended consequence of the restructure could be added pressures to staff. In response the Leader explained that we are an efficient Council which already had the lowest proportion of staff ratio to 10,000 population. The Leader was extremely mindful to the pressures in the organisation. There was a need to accelerate work around collaboration to alleviate the pressures.

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The Cabinet Member for Resources added that the issue was being monitored closely on the Health and Safety Working Group.

The Chief Officer for Enterprise noted that in terms of stress in the workplace some of the rationale behind making the amendments was with staff wellbeing and pressures in mind, and it was important to make modifications.

Members questioned where the original £225,000 savings in the mandate had been derived from, and requested further information on the reorganisation.

The Leader confirmed that as elected members we held trust in Chief Officers to make judgements around staffing management, noting that Members could set policy and direction.

The Committee resolved to accept the mandate, noting that further information would have been appreciated. A written explanation from the Chief Executive would be appreciated also.

Mandate B20 Phase 3 of Additional Learning Needs Review - Savings for 2016 will be in line with statutory consultation timescales. The savings have been realigned in line with updated timescales. In addition there are further savings identified to meet the MTFP and these include updating pricing policy for external providers and a delegated funding formula review based on current residential provision.

Where necessary, Members declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest.

Members noted that the mandate referred only to Mounton House in the context of funding but it reads as though we are actually running it down with a view to closing. Further information on the future of Mounton House was requested, as it was felt we should be improving the facility.

The Cabinet Member for Education explained that the review would be undertaken whether or not the budget takes place. Phase 1 had been completed and we were now looking at Deri View and other such facilities in the County in phase 2. How we could utilise Mounton House to its full potential would be undertaken in phase 3. There was an element of ALN which was decreasing but increasing in other ways. Fundamental work had started but as the work progressed Members would receive further information. It was explained that the needs of children at Deri View had changed over the last 10 years. Our philosophy as an Authority is to provide mainstream support, and most young people with mild to moderate needs were catered to in mainstream, which explained why the facility at Deri View was under-utilised.

It was thought that the mandate documentation could be misleading and could appear to be more conclusive.

The Chief Officer for Children and Young People confirmed that the mandate was a response to a decline in residential numbers, and a decline in demand from other authorities.

Members expressed that the need for the phase 3 review was urgent and requested a timeline. The Cabinet Member explained that where changes were being taken into consideration, there was statutory adherence to protocol, and it was being looked into as quickly as possible.

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A Member noted that the engagement survey results stated that 58% were against the mandate and a twitter poll survey said 70% were against the mandate. The Member questioned the Cabinet Member and the Chief Officer what the reaction to these results had been. In response the Chief Officer explained that as a reaction to the results the consultation time had been lengthened regarding Deri View, and we were committed to absorbing all responses received. The Cabinet Member confirmed that consultation was a protocol and meetings had been held with staff, governors and parents on 12 occasions and it had been made clear that all views were vital to the process. All the information was essential to making a decision regarding the proposals.

The Leader commented that the questions in the surveys had not been detailed enough, and maybe not that helpful. It had been interesting to hear views of parents, and we were mindful of the assets we have. It was important to be prudent of the resources we have and was hoped that Phase 3 review would be all inclusive.

It was noted that Mounton House was not bottom of the list for review but Phase 3 would be considering ALN provision across the County. The Leader continued to explain that if Mounton House had been an excellent facility in the past and if continued to deliver the type of provision need going forward, that would be part of the assessment. The Leader stated that there was no intention that this was to be considered a way to run down Mounton House.

The Chairman noted that should the numbers not attend the facility it was difficult to sustain the facility, and therefore did not make good reading for the future.

The Cabinet Member explained that Deri View had 7 children in a 24 place unit, due to the unit not being fit for purpose. It was important to look at whether the provision was fit for purpose and with the review we would be able to say we were providing the best education for all children across the County.

Following a request for clarification, the Finance Manager explained that the original proposal for Deri View had been £200,000, because of the extended consultation it had now been reduced to £50,000.

Members agreed to accept the mandate but noted there were concerns over the future at Mounton House.

Mandate B23 Discretionary Fees and Income - *This mandate has now been incorporated into the fees and charges report that will be presented to Cabinet in January with other budget proposals.*

The Head of Finance explained that the idea of the mandate had been to increase discretionary fees and charges by 10%. More time was needed to analyse the potential impact might be, and to look more closely at benchmarking with other local authorities. The mandate was currently on hold and an additional £25,000 had been found which would be incorporated into the fees and charges report.

The Cabinet Member for Resources added that when the original mandate had come out there had been a schedule of charges which had recorded the 2.5% to increase prices by. An additional column had highlighted what the additional income would be if there was an increase of 10%. It was never the intention to increase all prices by 10%.

Members agreed to accept the mandate.

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Following a short break we were advised that the following mandates would be discussed:

B12, B14, B15 and B21.

Mandate B12 Second Phase Review of Subsidies to 3rd Sector - *Continuing to work with 3rd sectors affected groups to understand any potential impact.*

The Head of Policy and Engagement highlighted concerns raised by the Access for All group, informing Members that there were increasing tensions regarding the aspirations to work with the 3rd Sector. Officers had spoken to all the affected groups and appreciated that the receipt of less money would never be received positively. However, all groups had valued early conversations and that we were looking to reduce rather than stop funding.

We heard that the list of groups and amount of funding was included on the mandate.

Members questioned if this was now a closed list, and suggested that there may be other groups which should be included. In response we were informed that the list was now closed but any suggestions of other organisations could be addressed with partners in the future.

The Leader informed Members that he had recently addressed the GAVO AGM and had explained the situation Monmouthshire was in, as had the Police and Health Services. There had been an acceptance of the situation and when asked no questions came from the floor regarding the proposals. Confidence had been taken that all were in a similar place.

A Member felt there were concerns for future years and highlighted the importance of remaining sustainable.

A Member raised concerns that the mandate seemed slightly imbalanced, particularly noting the CAB. The Cabinet Member explained that there had been an agreement that had lasted 3 years where funding reduced by 10% each year. CAB fully recognised that MCC had given as much as possible and were happy to embrace other sources of funding.

The Chairman summed up that the Committee accepted the mandate but noted that the grants would be welcomed by other organisations. It was hoped that these sectors could bridge the gap through other sources of funding.

Mandate B14 Grounds Funding Review – *Continue to work with community groups to ensure services are delivered.*

The Head of Operations explained that the mandate was made up of several parts: planting of wildflowers, using voluntary green fingers more extensively, and verge maintenance.

The mandate would work with Mandate B21 to work with Town and Community Councils.

It was noted that at Strong Communities Select Committee there had been concerns surrounding the second cut being withdrawn on the R routes regarding foliage falling on roads and cyclists having to

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move into the centre of the roads. It was noted that wildflowers would be brought back to Select Committee as would the voluntary green fingers.

Members agreed to accept the mandate.

Mandate B15 Highways Maintenance Review – *On target for full year savings in line with mandate proposal.*

Feedback from Select and consultations had been brought forward as the mandate in line with the Continuance Agreement.

Members questioned if where there were resources in place to address urgent situations. The Head of Operations advised that part of the exercise would be to look at all available resources, in terms of revenue and capital. Officers would work with Members to create priorities, and how money would be spent in the future. There may be a case of doing extensive patching work rather than full resurfacing work that had been done in the past.

A Member raised concerns regarding the provision for land slippage. The Head of Operations explained that previously the Capital Budget had been reprioritised in those circumstances. It may be a case of coming back to Members to discuss additional funding in those types of emergencies. In terms of physical resources there would always be enough people to make the road safe, ie closing the road. The level of flexibility would be reduced with the reduced budget but would be managed by officers.

There were concerns from Members if we were reducing too much and whether it was wise to be doing so at this time.

A Member raised concerns regarding the reduction of employees with the amount of people who may claim damage to cars due to pot holes. The Leaders explained that officers had to align with the Continuance Agreement, and therefore prioritise be keeping most used roads at the same standard as they are currently. It was not a case that less used roads would be closed, but that most used roads would be prioritised. It was recognised that there was less money and would therefore be a drop in standards.

A Member expressed that she felt unable to support the reduction in infrastructure, as it was considered a false economy and savings should be found elsewhere. It was felt that there should be a review of the service.

It was noted that the issue of climate change should be brought by WLGA to Central Government.

The Chairman summarised that not all Members agreed with the mandate but the mandate would go forward and future discussions would be welcomed.

Mandate B21 Town and Community Councils – *Continue to consult with Town and Community Councils*

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The Head of Operations explained that officers had been working with Town and Community Councils individually to discuss the initiative. Schedules of services at risk had been provided.

Where appropriate Members declared personal, non-prejudicial interests as members of Town Councillors.

A Member, wished to express that the ongoing dialogue was welcomed and the efforts of officers were appreciated.

The Leader wished to thank Town Councils and Community Councils who had committed and entered into dialogue. It was felt that a cluster of discussions needed to be encouraged and a maturity of debate needed to manifest.

A Member suggested that it would be helpful if it was explained what services would be unable to continue, if Town and Community Councils were not to provide the help required. It was confirmed that the information was available.

A Member expressed that he was unable to support due to the complexity of the issue. It was questioned where the Town and Community Councils would otherwise get the funding, suggesting there would be an increase in Council Tax. The Leader highlighted that the Town and Community Councils were accountable for some services and they needed to make decisions themselves as to whether services would continue.

A Member expressed that clusters were a good way to move forward, and it had worked well in the Severnside area.

It was noted that the mandate had also been in place last year but had not been achieved. The Cabinet Member felt confident that it could be achieved this year with the uptake of Town and Community Councils.

The Leader expressed that the expectation was a saving of £400,000, and the reality was that where this was not made service areas would be trimmed. The collaborative approach in communities was considered the best way to devolve responsibility and provide opportunity. It was important as an Authority to help facilitate the mature discussions needed.

We heard from the Head of Operations that both Town and Community Councils were contributing to or taking on services. There was an awareness of the issue, and Raglan had been very pro-active in moving this forward.

It was noted that Chepstow had made strides forward in taking responsibility for services. It was felt that it would be helpful if an indication whether efforts made were in line with what MCC were expecting.

Members expressed there was a need for better communication.

In summary, the Chairman noted that overall the mandate would be accepted, but Members were looking for continuity with Town and Community Councils where all were on a level playing field.

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The meeting ended at 1.05 pm