

MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held
at Council Chamber, County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Monday, 11th January,
2016 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor S.G.M. Howarth (Chairman)

County Councillors: D.L.S. Dovey, A. Easson and S White.

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

M. Hand	- Head of Planning
I. Bakewell	- Housing & Regeneration Manager
S. Griffiths	- Strategy & Policy Officer
N. Leaworthy	- Commercial & Operations Manager
A. Howard	- Community Development Officer
R. Hoggins	- Head of Operations
R. Lewis	- Principal Planning Policy Officer
J. Coppick	- Planning Policy Manager
H. Ilett	- Scrutiny Manager
P. Harris	- Democratic Services Officer

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

County Councillor D. Evans
T. Hendry – South East Wales Racial Equality Council
S. Jones

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from David Hill, Councillor M. Hickman, S. Jones, V. Smith and K. Williams.

2. Declarations of Interest

None received.

3. Gypsy and Traveller Assessment

Context:

The Strong Communities Select Committee convened the Select Committee to consider the draft findings of the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment for Monmouthshire, which is a statutory requirement of the Council. The Council's Housing & Communities service led the Assessment, with the independent guidance of the South East Wales Regional Equalities Council, which is due to be submitted to Welsh Government by 26th February 2016. Committee Members met members of the Gypsy and Traveller community at the beginning of January in order to better understand the circumstances and needs of the community to inform the debate at the Committee.

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Key Issues:

- Under Part 3 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, all local authorities must undertake a Gypsy & Traveller Accommodation Assessment and to make provision where assessments identify an unmet need for mobile home pitches (See Appendix 2).
- The assessments were undertaken with reference to Welsh Government guidance document, 'Undertaking Gypsy & Traveller Accommodation Assessments' published in May 2015 (See Appendix 3).
- All Local Authorities have until the 26th February 2016 to submit their assessments to the Welsh Government for scrutiny.
- The purpose of the assessment is to inform the Council's LDP Annual Monitoring Report and the LDP Review Process to meet both current and future needs for Gypsy and Traveller sites.

The following provides a brief summary of the Assessment process, and its Findings. For a more detailed information please refer to the Assessment report.

Process:

- A Steering Group comprising of important key stakeholders and members of the Gypsy and Traveller community was formed to oversee the assessment process and its findings. The group had a number of responsibilities including:
 - Helping to identify households living within the community to contact and survey using the standard questionnaire contained in the Guidance.
 - To help scrutinise and provide feedback on the results:
 - To sign off the report to be submitted to Welsh Government.
- Household survey interviews were conducted between June and November 2015 by officers from Housing & Communities Service, with the assistance of the Regional Equalities Council's Gypsy & Traveller Liaison Officer. The Assessment's core findings, conclusions and recommendations are based on the answers to the questionnaire.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member sought clarification on an item in the report, in which it states that unauthorised sites may be tolerated while site are in development, and asked would the Authority tolerate this indefinitely. The Head of Planning answered that advice had been taken from Welsh Government guidance and that during the period that a planning application is under review, the Authority may tolerate an unauthorised site for a short period of time, until planning application is determined. If refused, enforcement action would take place.

A Member commented on the new definition of need and asked if it better reflects the needs of the Traveller Community. We were advised that the needs of Travellers have not been satisfactorily accessed in the past. The definition of need is one area of guidance which is not prescriptive. We are currently in a position that the information collected was not anonymous, allowing us to provide bespoke help.

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Committee's Conclusion:

The Chair advised Members that the Special Select Committee had been convened to consider the draft findings of the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment for Monmouthshire, which will be submitted to Cabinet for approval and to Welsh Government. Members concluded that the assessment being undertaken in-house by officers was mutually beneficial to both the community and the Council as a positive relationship was developing which had enabled everyone to have a clearer understanding of Gypsy and Traveller Needs. It was also agreed that the officers should continue to work with Gypsy and Traveller households in Monmouthshire on the next stage of the process.

4. Pollinator Policy

Context:

To provide the Strong Communities Select Committee with a performance overview of the pollinator policy 22 months post implementation. In particular the perceived implications of the highway verge maintenance policy amendment (Budget Mandate proposal number B4) in relation to MCC's commitment to support WG Pollinator Action Plan.

Key Issues:

1. The pollinator policy was adopted in 2014 and fully supports the Welsh Governments' Action Plan for Pollinators and the Natural Environment and Rural Communities act 2006. The Action Plan recommended new management systems in terms of planting regimes and resulted in reducing the first cut on A & B routes to safety cuts only and reducing the number of unnecessary cuts to large verged areas and elected public open spaces. The change in the management system resulted in a benefit saving of £43,555, whilst actively making the county more desirable to visit, live and work in.
2. Consultation with Town and Community Councils (T&CC's) was a requirement of the policy and as such, there are now regular and much improved discussions with T&CC's on how to replicate the flowering displays within their areas. Support for the policy has been given by numerous T&CC's, with one council requesting an extension to the safety cuts and reduced cuts in more rural areas.
3. On April 16th 2014 the Select Committee were presented with a report of petitions received, a petition with 163 signatures – opposed to the verge safety cuts on A&B roads and a 2nd petition with 766 electronic signatures, 74 emails and 6 individual letters fully supporting the whole policy. This support has since grown with many residents and groups actively asking for reduced cuts to hedges and verges.
4. The Wales Environment Bill will place an enhanced biodiversity duties on Local Authorities when it receives royal ascent in the spring. This means that rather than just having regard for biodiversity, we will need to maintain and enhance biodiversity in exercising our functions, which dovetails the Council's commitment outlined in the Single Integrated plan to promote, protect and enhance Monmouthshire under the theme "Our County Thrives".

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5. Within the first 6 months of implementing the policy, the Council received over 80 emails and 25 telephone calls in praise and support of the displays. Individual T&CC's and various environmental groups also took time to congratulate us on the work.

6. In the wider arena, the Council received applause from DEFRA, BBC's Country File, Spring Watch and Horticultural Weekly. Advice was sought from neighbouring Councils including Chard, Somerset and Crickhowell Town Council in addition Council officers have given presentations to a large proportion of Welsh LA's on the subject.

7. Since the implementation of the policy, officers received only one concern on issues of visibility/ safety from 1 Community Council and one resident and these concerns were addressed immediately.

8. Currently, highway verges are cut twice, with field hedges and verges receiving a safety cut in the summer, if there isn't a verge, for example within a large proportion of our narrower R and C routes, the hedge is cut to a metre high. It is worth noting that all field hedges are the responsibility of the land owner and are in their ownership as identified within section 154 of the Highways Act.

9. Mandate proposal Number B14 discussed the introduction of a change to the number of cuts when the new contract is issued, reducing them to one cut per year, with the exception of scheduled Urbanised areas of which will continue to receive two cuts. This will fully support the Pollinator policy and the groups/individuals wishes, which form the majority when commenting on the policy. It is proposed that local Community Councils will have the opportunity to fund additional cuts as required within their individual boundaries. The priority as always will be safety and confidence in this statement can be assured through the immediacy of grounds maintenance response to concerns by highly mobile compact tractor and flail units this quick reaction will fully support the reduced cuts, in addition the section

Member Scrutiny:

A Member asked if they would be able to request a verge area to be cut if it was felt to be dangerous. We were advised that after receiving a request, local accessors would be sent out to inspect and if the area was considered to be a health and safety issue, a small tractor would be sent out to cut back the area.

A Member observed that the flowers are viewed locally as a failure, with another Member adding that the beds now looked to contain a brown mess. We were advised that the flowers had been left to seed and ongoing a new perennial mix had been sourced.

Concerns for the ongoing management of the beds were raised and we were advised the maintenance regime would entail the bed being prepared during March, seeded in April and then left throughout the year (with selective weeding) and cut down during the Winter period.

Mandate B14 was discussed with the number of cuts in urbanised area being questioned. We were answered that Urbanised areas would be townships; verges that fall within the 30mph zones, Usk, Monmouth, Raglan, Abergavenny, Chepstow and Caldicot. We were told that concerns had been raised about the amount of verge mowing carried out in the countryside with several complaints being received. One of the complaints asked why do we do cut private hedges. The R and C routes that we cut, very few of them have grassed verges and the

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mandate proposes that we only carry out 1 cut during June/July period and then leave it to private owners to do it.

Officers were asked if pressures had been put upon the Council to ensure that entrances to towns were kept tidy and did urbanised areas take priority over rural communities. In answer we were told no, the intention is to carry out the double urban cut. A Member stressed that communities should all be treated the same.

We were told that Community Councils would be given the opportunity to pay this authority for an enhanced cut. A Member commented that this would mean smaller, rural communities would spend more money than their urban counterparts.

A Member commented on the strength of working on cluster basis.

A Member asked if changes had been made to Mandate 14 in respect to urbanised cuts. We were advised that the proposal to reduce from 2 cuts to 1 cut had been picked up after working closely with town and community councils mandate rather than B14. Concerns were raised that the mandate, which had been scrutinised had been changed.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Committee have scrutinised the subject over the course of 18 months and have received significant public input into their meetings on various aspects of the policy. The Chair reminded Members that the Committee had scrutinised the Grounds Maintenance Budget in December and that whilst they had agreed with some aspects of the mandate, they had not agreed with the proposal within that mandate for reduced verge maintenance. The Chair advised Members that he believed the wording of the pollinator policy has changed since the Committee last scrutinised the policy and that this only raised further concerns, particularly in relation to the number of verge maintenance cuts the various parts of the county will receive. The Committee received the policy update - monitoring of the policy will be factored into the Committee's future Work Programme.

5. Date and time of next meeting

Strong Communities Select Committee

- Thursday 28th January 2016

The meeting ended at 12.32 pm