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**MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**Minutes of the meeting of County Council**  
**County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 16th December, 2021 at 2.00 pm**

**PRESENT:** County Councillor M. Feakins (Chairman)  
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Batrouni, J. Becker, L. Brown, A. Davies, L. Dymock, A. Easson, C. Edwards, P.A. Fox, R.J.W. Greenland, M. Groucutt, R. Harris, J. Higginson, G. Howard, S. Howarth, R. John, D. Jones, L. Jones, P. Jones, S. Jones, P. Jordan, M. Lane, P. Murphy, P. Pavia, M. Powell, J. Pratt, R. Roden, V. Smith, B. Strong, T. Thomas, J. Treharne, J. Watkins, A. Watts, K. Williams and S. Woodhouse

**OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:**

Paul Matthews	Chief Executive
Peter Davies	Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Will McLean	Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Frances O'Brien	Chief Officer, Enterprise
Matt Phillips	Chief Officer People and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Richard Williams	Democratic Services Officer

**APOLOGIES:**

County Councillors P. Clarke, D. Blakebrough, R. Edwards, D. Evans, L. Guppy, S.B. Jones and F. Taylor

**1. Declarations of Interest**

None received.

**2. Public Questions**

None received.

**3. Chairman's announcement and receipt of petitions**

Council received the Chairman's report and noted that no petitions had been received.

Council also paid respect to the recent passing of former County Councillor Andrew James.

**4. Cabinet Statement on the impact of COVID-19 on schools in Monmouthshire**

Council received a Cabinet Statement on the impact of Covid-19 on schools in Monmouthshire.

In doing so, the following points were noted:

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- The Cabinet Member thanked learners, their families, and all school staff during this difficult period.
- Across Monmouthshire's schools there have been 1769 positive Covid-19 cases between 3<sup>rd</sup> September and 12<sup>th</sup> December 2021. This represents 16% of the school age population.
- There have been 805 cases in our secondary schools and 964 cases in our primary schools. Most affected were learners aged between 8 and 11 which accounted for 42% of all our cases.
- There was a slow start regarding cases in Monmouthshire before cases spiked around half-term. At that time there was a clear shift in cases moving from the secondary school sector to our primary schools. That has been significantly higher in the latter part of the term. This shift could be attributable to the introduction of vaccines to those aged between 12 and 15 from 4<sup>th</sup> October 2021 but we do not have clear data to underpin that.
- Covid-19 has not only impacted our learners but there has been an impact on school staff. Schools have reported the highest levels of staff cases and related absences of Covid-19 across Monmouthshire County Council. It has had a direct impact on teaching delivery this term and the changes around household isolation requirements has exacerbated the situation where staff were waiting for PCR tests and results.
- The impact of Covid-19 on Monmouthshire's schools has been more significant in the Autumn term compared to any previous term throughout the pandemic. At the same time, there has been a shortage of supply staff to fill the gaps in staffing capacity, placing additional pressure on our school staffing teams. Despite this, nearly all our schools have remained open throughout the term with only two instances of primary schools having to close a class for a very limited period of time.
- Currently, due to extreme staff shortages, one of our secondary schools has moved to remote learning for post 16 learners for the last week of term to allow face to face delivery for students in years 7 to 11.
- Since the start of the pandemic there has been a focus on the well-being of learners and staff across our schools. This term has not seen any change in this approach. Schools have been able to use some of the new grant streams to support enhanced and developing well-being provision with their schools. Achieving a sustainable balance between well-being and structured learning will be a challenge in the short, medium and longer term.
- The pandemic has impacted on the progress of our learners. This term officers and the Education Achievement Service (EAS) have increased their interaction with schools to understand where learners are and to identify specific areas of support that schools may need to enhance their provision and offer.

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- A series of professional discussions have taken place with 18 of our schools during the term which is the highest proportion across the region. The purpose of the meetings is to gain a deeper understanding of our schools and what is being planned to address their issues, to identify what support is needed with a view to moving forward.
- Feedback from headteacher discussions have been positive, especially looking at the new processes that will be implemented in the new year.
- Over the course of the year, we will meet with all schools, with 13 visits scheduled for the spring term and new year, with the remainder being held in the first half of the Summer term.
- New processes to support schools in need of higher levels of support have been established and implemented during the Autumn term. Currently, there are no Monmouthshire schools receiving the highest levels of support.
- The plans for next Summer's examination series remain as a return to formal examinations. There are alternative plans in place should they not be able to proceed. These decisions are with other parties beyond this Authority.
- All schools have continued their work preparing the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs (ALN) and Educational Tribunal Wales Act from January 2022 which has been supported by the team in Monmouthshire and the wider Regional ALN Implementation Team. Officers continue to work with Welsh Government to ensure an appropriately phased implementation of these changes. School governors are advised to make themselves aware of the new arrangements.
- Schools have continued to develop their thinking and approaches to the new Curriculum for Wales. This is a significant change to the current curriculum delivery with each school designing and creating its own curriculum responding to its own local context. The September 2022 introduction should be considered as the beginning of a process.
- The EAS is providing tailored professional learning to support our schools.
- The EAS has rationalised the professional learning offer to schools in recognition of the challenges the schools are facing this term but there remains a wide range of professional learning opportunities and most can be accessed on demand to ensure greater equity for all.
- Estyn has announced that inspections will recommence in the Spring term and schools identified for inspection will be notified at the start of the Spring Term with the current three-week notification period being maintained. It is anticipated that Estyn will visit some Monmouthshire schools on the list for inspection as some of our schools have not been visited for several years.

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- Welsh Government has identified that the first two days of the spring term will be designated as additional planning days. This will allow for data and intelligence to be obtained about the Omicron variant and contingency plans to be put in place for the return of children. Welsh Government will be meeting more frequently over the coming months and there could potentially be further updates during the Christmas Holiday period.
- Should there be a need to return to remote learning the blended learning provision has been developed and refined in our schools over the previous 20 months which will allow our students to continue to learn in the least disruptive way possible.

Having received the Cabinet Member's statement, the following points were noted:

- The First Minister has asked schools as part of their contingency planning in the first two days of the new term to ensure that examination years are prioritised for on-site provision and should they need to restrict in-person learning at any time that those plans are in place. In terms of revisiting those plans they have been asked to consider what arrangements might be needed in place for vulnerable learners and children of critical workers during any periods of disruption.
- Qualifications Wales is looking at rolling back some of the grade inflation. It is anticipated that we will have a better understanding of where we will be regarding Summer examinations by the end of January / early February 2022. Qualifications Wales is working on the premise that examinations will go ahead as normal this current academic year but will be guided by Public Health Wales, going forward.
- In terms of the EAS and its assessment of examinations grades, it was noted that we are working closely with our school improvement partners and our secondary schools to ensure that those steps to prepare our learners, as well as we can, are in place.
- The Cabinet Member informed Council that we have been working closely with Caldicot School to provide support to the student and to the student's family, as well as to the student's peers and staff who have been affected by the events that took place at the school earlier in the week. However, no further update could be provided as ongoing work was being undertaken by a range of agencies in respect of this matter.
- The ventilation of Monmouthshire's schools is critically important during the next school term due to the rapid spread of the Omicron variant. Welsh Government has announced that there will be several risk mitigations that will have to be brought in as part of that higher-level status. This will result in regular testing for students and staff, the wearing of face coverings in both classrooms and communal areas and staggered days. There will be in the region of 400 Carbon Dioxide monitors placed in our schools which will be important, particularly during the Winter months. Feedback from schools have indicated that these monitors

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are proving to be very effective as a mechanism of managing air flow in classrooms.

- In terms of Chepstow School funds have been invested, particularly over the previous months, renovating certain aged aspects of the school. The delivery of the new Chepstow School remains the same with the opening scheduled for 2024.
- In response to the query regarding the progress of children that have obtained Special Status within the Authority, the Chief Officer for Children and Young People informed Council that they would liaise with colleagues working on this matter and report back.
- The Gwent Incident Management Team raised the status of the region just before the October half-term to high. However, unlike other authorities in the region, Monmouthshire was not experiencing the same high levels of transmissibility at that time within the Authority and didn't have to make that provision. There are mechanisms in place to move to a blended learning offer in the new year should this be required.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his statement.

### **5. Notices of Motion:**

#### **5.1. Submitted by County Councillor Tudor Thomas**

*The Council accepts that current provision is unfit for purpose and that this Council totally upgrades and modernises the Abergavenny Bus Station as part of its commitment to 'Active Travel' and carbon reduction.*

- *Access for people with mobility issues is installed.*
- *The bus shelters are replaced with shelters that protect travellers from the elements.*
- *Suitable devices to prevent cars and other vehicles from accessing the 'No Entry' lanes - currently signs are ignored and vehicles pose a threat to safety of travellers. Public Document Pack.*
- *Bus timetables are erected at a height at which wheelchair users can read and larger font sizes are used.*

Seconded by County Councillor M. Groucutt.

The Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Neighbourhood Services thanked County Councillor Thomas for submitting the motion and subsequently updated Council on works already planned in this financial year.

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It was noted that:

- Works intended for Abergavenny bus station before 31st March 2022, weather permitting, have already been planned in this financial year following a successful bid to improve bus facilities from Welsh Government.
- At Abergavenny bus station, the stand 1 platform is to be increased in size to allow a larger new shelter to be installed. Information boards and tactile paving will also be installed.
- Stand 2 will be removed entirely to allow flow of traffic through the bus station.
- All dropped kerbs to platforms will have tactile paving and will be clearly marked between the platforms.
- With regard to the bus shelter itself, Covid-19 guidelines did not allow for the front of the shelter to be covered. As soon as this guidance is lifted the bus shelter will be provided with better coverage.
- The island at the end of stand 5 is to be removed to provide better access to the stand whilst keeping the taxi parking and pavement.
- Bays 2 and 3 of the coach parking are to be hatched out with no parking to ensure access for buses is maintained.
- Signage is to be provided at the no entry point and the bus station entrance is to be clearly marked with allowed vehicles.
- Signage to be provided at the rear of the coach parking bays to state parking conditions.
- There will be dedicated motorcycle parking bays outside the café area and lining will be reinstated to mark bays and no entry areas.
- This work is planned to be carried out and completed with funds received to be used in this financial year which addresses the points made by County Councillor Thomas. However, there is an additional proposal to carry out a study of the whole bus station area to look at the longer term ambition of providing a new transport hub in this area that will be sustainable for the future.
- The Cabinet Member considered that the motion could not be supported because all the points identified in the motion relate works planned for this financial year. Welsh Government funding has been received to improve Abergavenny bus station.
- The Cabinet Member has regular meetings with the Pro-Mobility Group.

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- Once this year's work has been completed the Authority will proceed with plans to create a sustainable transport hub at Abergavenny bus station by applying for funding to carry out a study.

Having received the motion and the response by the Cabinet Member, the following points were noted:

- Some Members considered that the motion was unnecessary as the works had already been scheduled to take place within this financial year with funding provided by Welsh Government.
- Other Members considered that the motion had been put forward in good faith and that Council should consider supporting it.

County Councillor Thomas summed up by stating that Abergavenny bus station had been in need of refurbishment for several years and therefore continued to stand by the motion.

Upon being put to the vote the motion was not carried.

#### **6. Members' Questions:**

##### **6.1. From County Councillor Tudor Thomas to County Councillor Penny Jones, Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health**

*Can the Cabinet Member for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health reassure the Council that there are sufficiently robust procedures in place to safeguard all children in the Authority?*

*This is in light of the case of Arthur Labinjo Hughes in Solihull who tragically lost his life at the hands of his step-mother and biological father.*

The Cabinet Member thanked County Councillor Thomas and informed Council that much work has been undertaken across the Council over several years to ensure that safeguarding is embedded in the whole culture of Monmouthshire County Council. This was endorsed by the recent whole authority safeguarding report which was endorsed by the County Council. This is supported by a number of training programmes both for Members and Social Services.

There is good liaison between schools, Children and Young People and Children's Services which is supported by the lead officer for Safeguarding in Education and all head teachers at schools within Monmouthshire.

Referral rates have remained high throughout the Covid-19 pandemic which indicates that people are still reporting their concerns. All referrals into Children's Services are screened and then decisions are made within 24 hours with initial discussions about safeguarding being held via the multi-agency process.

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Social workers undertaking home assessments to investigate concerns are fully trained, supervised and most importantly supported. Families are able to access Early Help Services if they have concerns within the community with good liaison taking place between Early Help Services and Children's Services.

Part of the Regional Safeguarding arrangements are considered at a local level. Social Services will take the opportunity to identify any additional learning and further development of services arrangements or practices as seen fit in light of the recent tragic events as outlined in County Councillor Thomas' question.

The Cabinet Member congratulated and welcomed the new Head of Children's Services. Her knowledge and expertise, particularly in Children's Services, will be a positive outcome for Monmouthshire County Council.

#### **6.2. From County Councillor Maureen Powell to County Councillor Jane Pratt, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Neighbourhood Services**

*Can the Cabinet Member confirm if the A465 from Gilwern to Brymawr is now fully open and can she reassure members that there is ongoing engagement between MCC, Costain and the Welsh Government, to rectify issues caused by the works, in the surrounding infrastructure?*

The Cabinet Member thanked County Councillor Powell and informed Council that the A465 is now open with no more planned road closures. Officers have been working closely with Costain and Welsh Government to address the issues caused by increased traffic.

The Cabinet Member is liaising with Welsh Government regarding compensation claims to local businesses that have been affected by the works over the past seven years.

#### **6.3. From County Councillor Laura Jones to County Councillor Jane Pratt, Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Neighbourhood Services**

*Would the Cabinet Member please provide an update on the rollout of 20mph zones in Monmouthshire, including in Wyesham?*

The Cabinet Member thanked County Councillor Laura Jones and informed Council that the Welsh Government's pilot projects in Abergavenny and Severnside are being prioritised with consultation for the traffic order scheduled to commence on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2021 which will run for 28 days. The consultation period has been extended to account for the Christmas break. Provided there are no objections raised that cannot be resolved, the 20 mph zones will be implemented in February 2022.

The other 20mph zones agreed for this financial year are in Devauden, Mathern, Monmouth, Wyesham, Mynydd Bach and two areas of Chepstow. The 21 day consultation period for these traffic orders will commence in early February 2022. Provided there are no objections raised that cannot be resolved, the 20mph zones will be implemented in March 2022.

It is also proposed to make the Raglan and Tintern trial 20mph zones permanent.

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### **7. Confirmation of Minutes**

Council approved the minutes of the meeting held on 4<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

### **8. Next Meeting:**

Thursday 27th January 2022 at 2.00pm.

**The meeting ended at 3.03 pm.**

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