

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Thursday, 10th February, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: A. Easson, C. Edwards,
R. Harris, V. Smith, J. Treharne and M. Powell

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Alan Burkitt, Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

3. Welsh Language

Alan Burkitt presented the report, ran through the consultation responses, and answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

There is a large number of Welsh speakers in the south of the county but north of the county is not as strong. However, Ysgol Y Fenni is doing well and Ysgol Y Ffin is struggling with numbers. Do we have any ideas as to why that's the case?

Yes, it is remarkable how many speakers are in the Caldicot area – mostly due to people having moved from elsewhere in Wales to work in the steel industry. But Abergavenny also has a lot of speakers, and several Welsh language societies. There is more of a network around the school there than is the case for Ysgol Y Ffin. Being a Welsh speaker doesn't necessarily translate into numbers of people going to Welsh language events. A parent in Caldicot is less likely to put their child on a bus to go to Ysgol Gyfun Gwent Isgoed in Newport when they can go the local English language comprehensive. It could be that this affects Chepstow more: if a child goes from Chepstow to Ysgol Y Ffin they will then have to go to Gwent Isgoed for their secondary provision, which is a considerable distance. So, it is very difficult. The existing Welsh secondary provision outside the county is excellent but the geographical considerations are potentially prohibitive – when parents plan their children's education they think about the whole journey,

and the lack of secondary provision in the county therefore has a strong bearing on their decision as to which primary school to send their children to.

If a child goes from Ysgol Y Ffin to Gwent Isgoed in Newport, they slip out of Monmouthshire's responsibility. How can we integrate how the schools work across borders?

If we had our own provision in the county we would perhaps look after them better, as we would know where they are, and we would simply continue our existing care and responsibility, but this is perhaps more of a question for CYP.

It is important that we have a secondary school somewhere in Monmouthshire, as the existing distances are difficult for parents, and there will be numbers of children learning in primary school, for whom it then lapses. Hopefully there will be a good Welsh provision in the new school in Abergavenny.

Yes, if someone wants their child to learn Welsh in Monmouthshire then they have to make a particular effort. The same can be said for religious education, e.g. to attend a Catholic school, pupils can only go to St. Albans in Torfaen. Again, this would be better addressed in CYP.

With public engagement going forward, what would be required for someone to attend a committee, ask a question in Welsh, and have simultaneous translation?

The person would have to give notice – the rule is five working days – so that a simultaneous translator can be arranged. The council chamber is now fully equipped for simultaneous translation, so any member of the public who wishes to attend and deliver their comment/question in Welsh can do so.

Chair's Summary:

We have discussed the various means of learning Welsh this morning, which are excellent, and we need to continue as an authority to encourage people to learn, to support them financially and to allow them the opportunity to speak Welsh when possible. Regarding recruitment, we need to encourage Welsh-speaking candidates to apply, though it's more difficult as a border authority. We have heard poignant examples of Monmouthshire residents with dementia who can no longer speak English, highlighting the need for more Welsh-speaking staff in the authority.

We have touched on Welsh medium education: members felt strongly that there is a need for a Welsh-medium comprehensive in the county, as we are losing children to English medium, due to a lack of provision in the county and geographical challenges. Regarding the overlap here with CYP, there are interesting comments in the minutes from the meeting of CYP Select on 14th October 2021, in which the Welsh Education Strategic Plan was scrutinised.

We have discussed the possibility of Welsh-medium education being delivered in conjunction with neighbouring authorities, and the new immersion unit that helps children to get up to speed quickly. This is the first of its kind in the area, and something of which we should feel proud. We need to explore why more people aren't choosing Welsh medium education. We have discussed how attendees to council or committees can submit their questions in Welsh.

All of the responses received as part of the consultation will be sent to members and included as an appendix in the report when it goes to full council in March.

Finally, the committee gives its sincerest best wishes to Alan Burkitt on his imminent retirement, and thanks him for his exemplary work over the years.

4. To confirm minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Webb and seconded by Councillor Edwards. The minutes for 6th October were also confirmed, proposed by Councillor Treharne and seconded by Councillor Webb.

5. Action list

6. Strong Communities forward work programme

We will meet as a new administration to work out the forward work programme, which might depend on proposed new scrutiny structures coming into effect.

7. Cabinet & Council forward work programme

8. Date and time of next meeting: 10th March 2022 at 2.00pm

The meeting ended at **10.45 am**

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