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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

**Minutes of the meeting of County Council held
at Council Chamber - Council Chamber on Thursday, 21st July, 2022 at 2.00 pm**

PRESENT: County Councillor Laura Wright (Chairman)
County Councillor Ann Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Tony Kear, Catrin Maby, Jan Butler, Ian Chandler, Sara Burch, Alistair Neill, Su McConnel, Mary Ann Brocklesby, Fay Bromfield, Jane Lucas, Emma Bryn, Peter Strong, Meirion Howells, Paul Griffiths, Jackie Strong, Rachel Garrick, Maria Stevens, Steven Garratt, Angela Sandles, Ben Callard, John Crook, Tomos Davies, Dale Rooke, Catherine Fookes, Sue Riley, Jayne McKenna, Jill Bond, Louise Brown, Tony Easson, Christopher Edwards, Martyn Groucutt, Simon Howarth, Richard John, Penny Jones, Malcolm Lane, Phil Murphy, Paul Pavia, Maureen Powell, Tudor Thomas and Armand Watts

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Matt Phillips	Chief Officer People and Governance and Monitoring Officer
Peter Davies	Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Officer, Resources
Jane Rodgers	Chief Officer for Social Care, Safeguarding and Health
Will McLean	Chief Officer for Children and Young People
Nicola Perry	Senior Democracy Officer
Frances O'Brien	Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Matthew Gatehouse	Head of Policy and Governance

APOLOGIES:

County Councillors Lisa Dymock, Bob Greenland, David Jones and Frances Taylor

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 23rd June 2022

Upon being put to a vote the minutes were accepted as an accurate meeting of the meeting of County Council held on 23rd June 2022.

2. Declarations of interest

None.

3. Public Questions

None.

4. Chair's Announcement

Noted.

5. Cabinet Member Announcements

5.1. County Councillor Catherine Fookes, Cabinet Member for Equalities and

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Engagement - Tackling inequality and poverty

The Cabinet Member highlighted how the manifesto stated that the administration would prioritise tackling inequality and poverty and was pleased to announce that this would be a standing item on the Council agenda to allow regular feedback on these issues.

County Councillor Fookes noted that inflation and food bills are at an all time high and a Wales Governance Centre report has found that the recent National Insurance increase will leave the average Welsh household worse off by £220 per year. She went on to explain what we are doing to alleviate some of the effects of the cost of living crisis.

The Revenue and Benefits team, to date, have issued 17,746 payments of £150 totalling £2.6m. Next steps are to issue post office vouchers, which can be exchanged for cash, for those not registered. Welsh Government provided £500,000 in discretionary funding to MCC, and first payments targeted at free school meals families were made the previous week.

A total of £475,000 winter fuel payments have been issued.

Other work in poverty and equality include the use of discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness, and a Food and Fun school holiday enrichment programme.

A cross-party working group is set to take place which will develop the corporate and community plan and ensure all views and ideas are heard.

Chair welcomed questions and comments.

Following a question from the Leader of the Opposition the Cabinet Member recognised that the Social Justice Strategy developed under the previous administration does require some updating and revisiting but was unsure as to how this would look going forward. She has spoken to officers about the Poverty Group and would work out the cleanest way of working.

County Councillor Fookes added that she recognised and supported the real living wage.

It was expressed that rural poverty must be acknowledged.

5.2. County Councillor Catrin Maby, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and the Environment - Addressing the climate and nature emergency

The Cabinet Member explained that Council has already made commitments to take action on the climate emergency, and on river pollution and stressed the importance of making it clear we recognise that we are in both a climate and a nature emergency. For this reason, the Cabinet Member will be reporting on these matters on a regular basis by making it a standing item on the Council agenda, ensuring that our response to these urgent matters is both coherent and continuous.

The Cabinet Member made the following points:

The most recent reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change make two things very clear:

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1. That human activity has already made irreversible climate change inevitable, that this brings severe consequences that we will need to adapt to, and which we will see increasingly in coming years.
2. That if we do not take urgent action to mitigate further climate change, we are on a path towards making the planet unliveable for future generations.

The Environment Agency confirmed in their report published just last week, *the biodiversity crisis joins the climate crisis as an existential risk to our survival - almost a fifth of UK plants are threatened with extinction, and a third of British pollinator species have declined In fact the UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.*

In Wales, the 2019 State of Nature report confirmed that 30% of wildlife is found in fewer places than it was in 1970 with 1 in 6 species being at risk of extinction. Bringing the focus back to our local area, the need for nature recovery is clear:

- The Greater Gwent State of Nature report identified 34% of species showing a decline in their numbers.
- The Wildlife Trusts 'Bugs Matter' survey identified a 40% decline in flying insects in Gwent since 2004. (On a UK scale, that figure is as high as a 60% decline.)
- Phosphate targets for the Usk are being failed at a rate of 88% and the Wye at 68% - with algal blooms smothering other life in the rivers, especially in hot weather.

The condition of rivers has a direct impact on the species that it provides habitat for – and a Cardiff University study showed a substantive decline in otter populations in 2021 for the first time since the 1970s.

We live in a wonderful county, and we must fiercely protect our natural environment, which is recognised for its significance. For example:

- Monmouthshire has 7 internationally important protected sites (SACs, SPAs and a Ramsar site).
- It has 67 SSSIs and almost 700 Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation including large numbers of small species rich grasslands and ancient woodlands.
- Monmouthshire has 24 Habitats (including Marine) and 219 Species considered to be of 'principle importance for conservation in Wales' as defined by the Environment Wales Act 2016.

During the next few weeks, the Cabinet Member will agree with senior staff a cycle for reporting on the different elements of work to address the climate and nature emergency. The intention is that it will cover the climate and nature aspects of the full range of activities and operations, across buildings, fleet, procurement, land use and land management, as well as waste management, green infrastructure and biodiversity.

Monmouthshire County Council is already doing a lot of good things and wants to ensure to monitor and report back on what we are doing. MCC needs to work together to build a nature-positive response to the challenges being faced, across a full spectrum of activities to restore biodiversity, and both to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

The Chair welcomed questions and comments.

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Reference was made to how the Council is influencing the carbon footprint of the County, and how we can work on that.

A question was raised to how the Council is adapting its services to cope with extreme weather events, for example, how Social Care will respond during heatwave conditions.

With regards to phosphates, we heard that we were looking to work within the Rivers Wye and Usk catchment areas, and the Cabinet Member has joined a cross-border group relating to the Wye River which had been attended by NRW, Environment Agency and Welsh Water. The group is at an early stage but plans to have a serious action plan to push forward. Similarly, a group has been set up by Brecon Beacons for the Usk River and the Cabinet Member awaits a report on that.

In response to a question around bus travel and transport the Cabinet Member advised that there has been work on a response to the bus consultation and WG is working towards a more coherent system for the whole country.

6. Timing of Council Meetings

The Vice Chair of Democratic Services Committee presented the report in order for Council to consider the recommendation from Democratic Services Committee, in line with the Local Government Wales Measure, to review the timing of Full Council meetings for the current term of Council.

County Councillor Ben Callard proposed an amendment to the recommendation that

This Council asks the Democratic Services Committee to table at the October Democratic Service Committee meeting options for the timing of Full Council meetings which can be considered and voted upon.

That individual committees are free to set the timing of their meetings that suit the committee and members of it.

Comments made:

- Where changes are made there should be a lead-in time, possibly 3 months
- Fairer that all members be consulted on the recommendation
- DS Committee had discussed the matter in full and a fair recommendation was being presented
- Corporate Plan to be unveiled in October and evening meetings may not be appropriate.
- Care must be taken to ensure a diverse council
- Evening meetings will impact on family life
- Evening meetings better for working parents
- The amendment could be seen to undermine the recommendation of DS Committee

Following full discussion, a vote saw the amendment defeated.

Debate returned to the original recommendation.

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Upon being put to the vote Council resolved to accept the recommendations:

That meetings of Full Council remain at 14:00 to allow newly elected councillors time to understand the role and impact of being a councillor fully. Democratic Services Committee may review the arrangements again and report back to Council following a minimum period of 12 months.

That individual committees are free to set the timing of their meetings that suit the committee and members of it.

7. Motions for Council

7.1. Submitted by County Councillor Jill Bond

Council resolves that we commit ourselves as a Council to working with our families and our communities, with the Welsh Government and the UK Government to provide practical support to those that need it most. We ensure that we continue to take a coordinated approach towards addressing the cost-of-living emergency.

Seconded by County Councillor Su McConnel

It was expressed that this led back to the need to address the gulf between the amount of core funding to MCC from Welsh Government compared to the average council in Wales.

It was noted that there had been a 100% increase at Chepstow Community Fridge since opening in March 2022.

It was recognised that a key issue is the difference between incomes and the current rate of inflation.

County Councillor Sara Burch, Cabinet Member for Inclusive and Active Communities, highlighted that with the support of WG, MCC have been able to bring forward the programme of summer activities through MonLife. She also stated that reducing household costs equates with reducing our impact on the environment, and how this is being addressed through school uniform recycling and community fridges.

It was expressed that there is a lack of housing strategy and we should revert to building Council housing.

Reference was made to the increasing energy prices and how Council has a duty of obligation to help the residents of Monmouthshire.

The Cabinet Member for Equalities and Engagement highlighted the gender issue around the crisis.

County Councillor Simon Howarth left the meeting at 16:32pm

Upon being put to a vote the motion was carried.

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7.2. Submitted by County Councillor Richard John

This council opposes any proposals from the Welsh Ambulance Services Trust to down grade the ambulance stations in Monmouth and Chepstow by removing the Rapid Response Vehicles. It calls on WAST executives to attend the appropriate select committee for pre-decision scrutiny of their national roster review proposals prior to Welsh Government approval and implementation.

County Councillor Tony Kear left the meeting at 16:40pm

Seconded by County Councillor Alistair Neill.

Members across the chamber were keen to express their support for the motion.

Comments referred to:

- Consequences of ambulance response times.
- Ambulance waiting time outside the Grange Hospital impacting ambulance response times.
- A wide rural area such as Monmouthshire requires good coverage.
- WAST attending a scrutiny committee to present their proposals would allow due diligence scrutiny.
- Lack of care packages impact the bed space at the Grange Hospital
- If most ambulance staff are based in a regional station, how will they provide a rapid response to this in need in rural Monmouthshire. The idea of local fire stations should apply to rapid response vehicles.

Upon being put to a vote the motion was carried.

8. Member Questions

9. From County Councillor Fay Bromfield to County Councillor Catrin Maby, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and the Environment

Will the Cabinet Member provide an update on steps to tackle speeding in Llantrisant?

The Cabinet Member advised that a petition has been received from the local community seeking a speed reduction on the Usk to Wentwood road and the petition is to be reported to Place Scrutiny Committee in September. Meanwhile officers have added the request to the work programme so they can assess the situation and give it due consideration.

As a supplementary County Councillor Bromfield wished to emphasise the concerns of residents and welcomed the Cabinet Member to attend a meeting at the road to understand those concerns. The Cabinet Member agreed to attend.

10. From County Councillor Richard John to County Councillor Rachel Garrick, Cabinet Member for Resources

What assessment has the administration made regarding the impact of the Welsh Government's planned council tax revaluation on Monmouthshire residents?

The Cabinet Member explained that the WG consultation on a fairer council tax opened on Thursday 14th July 2022 and is running until October 2022 and is in the interest of reviewing the

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Welsh council tax system. The scope of the consultation includes completing a council tax revaluation for the 1.5 million properties in Wales to rebalance the system to reflect property values. This is because the current system is now nearly 20 years out of date. The scope also extends to designing a new system of bands and tax rates that is more progressive including considering adding more bands to both the top and bottom ends of the scale if needed. It is looking to revalue more frequently the values of houses to keep the council tax more fairly distributed and on a more regular basis. It looks to improve the framework of discounts, disregarded persons, exemptions and premiums to ensure that arrangements are aligned to WG goals. It is also looking to improve the council tax reduction scheme which provides support to low-income households.

This is the first phase of the consultation which considers revenue support grants and council tax income. Phase 2 is targeted for summer 2023 and the WLGA are considering a joint response which would consider all revenue networks across Wales and the society of Welsh Treasurers. We can also submit a response as an individual council.

The Cabinet Member recognised concerns across the chamber regarding the impact on Monmouthshire and the position of families who are asset rich in terms of their own homes but are income poor. She urged Councillors to bear in mind that the scope of the consultation does include providing support to low-income families.

As a supplementary County Councillor John referred to the previous revaluation in 2003/2004 when MCC was one of the local authorities hardest hit and asked for assurance that the administration will do everything it can to stand up for Monmouthshire residents and ensure that they are not disproportionately impacted by the changes WG decide on.

The Cabinet Member assured the County Councillor John that they would not want Monmouthshire residents to be disproportionately affected compared to the rest of Wales.

11. Date of next meeting - 22nd September 2022

The meeting ended at 5.25 pm

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