

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 24th October, 2023 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor Alistair Neill, (Chairman)
County Councillor Laura Wright, (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: Jill Bond, Alistair Neill, Paul Pavia, Peter Strong, Ann Webb, Laura Wright, Catherine Fookes, Meirion Howells, Maureen Powell, Sue Riley, Paul Griffiths and Martyn Groucutt and Maureen Powell (substituting for Rachel Buckler)

Also in attendance County Councillors Paul Griffiths, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Sustainable Economy, Martyn Groucutt, Cabinet Member for Education

APOLOGIES: County Councillor Rachel Buckler

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing, Highways and Flood
Andrew Jones, Development Management Area Team Manager
Stacey Jones, Senior Accountant
Amy Longford, Development Management Area Team Manager

Note: the following minutes focus on the challenge from members – for the full discussion, the recording of the meeting is at www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MuLQ9WHykQ&list=PLlmqn4nAaFJDsC93C-EKJZrFkDEQBdiXK&index=11

1. Declarations of Interest

None

2. Public Open Forum

None.

3. Planning Annual Performance Report

Cabinet Member Paul Griffiths and Craig O'Connor introduced the report, Philip Thomas delivered a presentation, and they answered the members' questions with Amy Longford and Andrew Jones.

Questions from committee members:

- How was the backlog in enforcement overcome?
- What does the percentage of affordable houses given on p6 equate to? Are we expecting more in 23/24?

- What were the £110k consultancy fees used on?
- Does the council use 'lean principles' to look at processes and determine waste?
- The Planning committee is mentioned as a consultee – did the report go to that committee?
- Is there a mistake on p28, with the number of applications received for this year being less than the number determined?
- Is the table on p31 showing a £2.1m uplift reflecting the RLDP value?
- Does the joint heritage service represent value for money? Do we receive sufficient funds from Blaenau Gwent to cover costs? Does it take away from valuable work in Monmouthshire?
- Could members have a list of all S106 projects that have benefitted from funding in the last year?
– **Share list and info – ACTION**
- How will the Building At Risk strategy be expedited, and when will it be ready?
- How do officers ensure that they get the balance right between applying the law but allowing development of heritage buildings?
- How accurate is the collation of Planning's data and what are our quality assurances?
- How are we securing the best possible scheme for securing outcomes and can we have some detail and context? Have we approached academic institutions to develop those?
- Has the Planning function been fundamentally reviewed and what guarantees can be given that if there were an inspection by Audit Wales or similar we wouldn't be found severely wanting?
- Is the Welsh Government likely to introduce comparative data in future years?
- Are we sure that the phosphate stripping in Monmouth and Llanfoist will be adequate for future demand?
- Is the proportion of planning applications approved a valid measure of performance? How confident are we that approvals are in line with planning policy?
- Enforcement performance is low, with anecdotal reports of our failure to address continued breaches – does this potentially encourage others to breach regulations?
- Is digitising microfiche cost-effective, considering the staff hours required to digitise vs how often it's requested?
- Can the £84m to the local economy be promoted, especially with businesses?
- Is it possible to have a hyperlink that goes directly to the application?
- Is the relatively small number of appeals due to good engagement with applicants?
- The council lost 4 appeals – was that against big developers with big teams? What about appeals from local residents?
- What cost are we incurring in appeals?
- We need to ensure that we build back up the confidence lost in some residents due to the poor performance of 290 days for a positive enforcement action
- Do we prioritise major applications over general ones? If so, is there a good value in prioritising the larger ones?
- The inclusion of 'opportunities moving forward' is very welcome in the report, and is recommended to other services in their performance reports

- Would it be a good idea to involve a planning officer from another authority to oversee the performance assessment, in order to make it as robust and objective as possible? – something officers can take away (Action? [Craig])
- The report's preface references work being done 'in a timely manner', which seems to jar against the 290 days before a positive enforcement action – can they both be correct? Does the inclusion of this line undermine the report's objectivity?

Chair's Summary:

The report was moved and recommendation approved.

4. Chief Officer for Education: Verbal Update

Cabinet Member Martyn Groucott and Will Mclean delivered the update and answered the members' questions.

Questions from committee members:

- Is the answer to the steep decline in learners at GCSE and A-Level us helping to promote languages for job and career opportunities?
- Presumably the Cabinet Member meant that Caldicot and Magor students have been actively encouraged to study languages, rather than 'pressured'? (The CM agreed)
- In addition to a change in aspirations since the pandemic, has there been an effect from wider strategy decisions e.g. Brexit, the change in apprenticeships, the decline of, and underinvestment in, industry, etc.?
- Is the cost-of-living crisis a factor, with people unable to go on holiday and have the experiences that awaken an interest in languages? (The Chair noted that more holidays are being sold now than before pandemic)
- Note that there is a long-term trend in the decline of language, so one measure of the new curriculum's success would be if it reverses that trend – but we won't know for a few years
- Given that the figures showing a decline in uptake are broadly the same for GCSE and A-level, is the key to increase GCSE numbers?
- Has the introduction of Welsh had an impact on the take-up of other languages?
- In previous years, if only a few pupils wanted to learn a language they would join with a different school, as it's not realistic to have a teacher for just a few pupils – so is funding the problem?
- Was there a heyday in language uptake? e.g. twinning was very active in the 80s, and there were lots of exchanges at the time – are there lessons to be learned there?
- Were there more student exchanges and pen friends in previous decades?
- Are there activities planned for the Young Ambassadors to take back to their schools, especially relating to culture, to make the pupils want to engage with languages?
- Are there any early indications around change in the new curriculum from three separate sciences to one, any early lessons that can be drawn?

- Are there many in the schools who don't believe that the approach now to science is the best way forward, and is there work to be done to ensure there isn't a disconnect between what schools are doing and what universities expect?

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to the Cabinet Member and Chief Officer. Will Mclean will bring an attendance report to the committee – **ACTION**

5. Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Plan and Action List

The Covid learning and pandemic preparedness has been confirmed for March 26th. A reminder to members of the joint scrutiny with People on 14th November. The Community and Corporate Plan performance update report will go to Cabinet on 13th December, so the committee might need to add a Special meeting in January to scrutinise it. There is a list of topics from the C&C Plan at the bottom of the work programme for consideration; a list of topics that are coming forward for a future decision and which might be of interest to the committee will be emailed in due course, for a fuller discussion at the next meeting.

6. Council and Cabinet Work Plan

7. To approve the minutes of the previous meeting : 20th September 2023

The minutes were agreed with the following amendment: that Councillor Buckler is missing from the attendance list for the meeting, so needs to be added – **ACTION**

8. Next meeting: 22nd November 2023

The meeting ended at **12.45 pm**