

# Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of People Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, County Hall, Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA with remote attendance on Tuesday, 21st January, 2025 at 10.00 am

## Councillors Present

County Councillor Laura Wright (Chair)  
County Councillor Jackie Strong, (Vice Chair)

County Councillors: Jan Butler, Christopher Edwards, Simon Howarth, Penny Jones, Maureen Powell, Maria Stevens, and Peter Strong substituting for County Councillor Sue Riley.

Also in attendance County Councillors:  
Sara Burch, Cabinet Member for Rural Affairs, Housing and Tourism

**APOLOGIES:** County Councillor Sue Riley

## Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager  
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer  
Ian Bakewell, Housing & Regeneration Manager  
Rebecca Cresswell, Homeless Project Officer  
Cath Fallon, Head of Economy and Enterprise

### 1. Declarations of Interest.

No declarations of interest received.

### 2. Public Open Forum.

No public present.

### 3. Policy Update - Review of Homesearch Policy. To scrutinise the amendments to the policy (report to follow).

Ian Bakewell and Rebecca Cresswell delivered a presentation on the Homesearch Policy and answered the members' questions with Cabinet Member Sara Burch.

- The Chair inquired whether the waiting time in Band 1 homelessness has increased from 11.5 to 12.7 months and whether this is due to a bottleneck around the availability of one-bedroom accommodation?

*Officers confirmed that the increase in waiting time is primarily due to the low number of one-bedroom properties available and also that the readiness of applicants to move on also plays a role.*

- The Chair asked if additional support is offered to individuals with learning disabilities or other support needs, if the simplified policy document is not sufficient for them.

*Officers advised that while the document is lengthy, home search staff are available to answer queries and assist people. Whilst there isn't a simplified version of the policy, it was acknowledged that this may be considered for future reviews.*

- The Chair sought a working definition of "welfare priority" in the context of the policy document, specifically what it means by improving or having a detrimental effect on social well-being.

*Officers advised that social welfare priority can cover a broad range of circumstances where someone's current situation is worsening their physical or mental health or that of their children. It is backed up with evidence from partner agencies and is not massively used but is available when needed.*

- A member asked whether armed forces charities and the Citizens Advice Bureau been consulted on these changes, particularly regarding financial thresholds?

*The Cabinet Member responded that the consultation was not extensive due to the minor nature of the review. However, the team's experience and ongoing links with agencies informed the changes. Officers added that changes to the armed forces covenant are anticipated, which may require further consultation in the future.*

- A member inquired about the support available for using home search, especially for those who are not IT savvy, and whether outside bodies like the Citizens Advice Bureau receive training to help people.

*Officers explained that the main support comes from home search itself and housing support providers. There are also close links with Citizens Advice through housing support work, and the team will ensure they are equipped to assist.*

**Action: Ian Bakewell to ensure partner agencies are suitably trained on the Homesearch policy.**

- A member asked whether there many people who are homeless and struggling but don't get picked up by the system?

*Members heard that while there are people in the community who are still sleeping rough and some who are unable to be accommodated for various reasons, efforts are made to keep this to a minimum. Some individuals may not access support due to various reasons, but there are good networks with faith groups and hubs to help*

*direct people to the right resources. They added that they make every attempt to identify and support people as soon as they are known.*

- A member asked how properties flagged for local need are managed and if they are advertised as local need first.

*Officers advised that properties under the rural allocation policy are ring-fenced for local people and advertised through the home search website. There is additional promotion through social media and the rural housing enabler. The choice-based letting system relies on people being registered and bidding for properties.*

- A member inquired about the policy for developments like Koiduko, which are restricted to people over 50, and how this fits with the Equalities Act. *Officers responded that the policy supports older people, and properties like Koiduko are treated differently to ensure full utilization. He mentioned that the policy is based on long-term support for older people in Monmouthshire.*

- The member asked about Monmouthshire Housing Association (MHA) and the running Capsule as a subsidiary, Capsule and how this affects property availability.

*It was clarified that MHA has an arm's length company called Capsule, which targets intermediate and market needs to generate additional income for the main organization, which is a common practice among housing associations to support their income.*

- A member asked about the success of the suspensions and demotions policy, specifically if people pay up and go back up the ladder or if there are permanent suspensions.

*Officers explained that support is offered to those demoted or suspended to help rectify issues, such as repayment plans for rent arrears and that the policy is not intended for permanent exclusion, and efforts are made to reinstate people on the register. The Cabinet Member explained that the policy is not meant to be punitive but to support tenant-like behaviour, and permanent exclusion should not happen.*

- A member questioned whether officers have figures to show how many members of the armed forces community you have dealt with over the last year, and do you see any patterns in reasons for homelessness or housing need among them? He commented that as Armed Forces Champion, he is pleased to see the changes made.

*Officers advised that they didn't have figures to hand but acknowledged that the reasons for homelessness among armed forces personnel likely fall into the overall homelessness figures and that it would be interesting to look into the reasons for homelessness among the armed forces community. **Action – Rebecca Cresswell to investigate this and provide any data.***

- The Member requested to be kept informed about potential changes in the armed forces covenant going through Westminster Parliament.

*Officers acknowledged the request and indicated that they would keep an eye on the potential changes and their impact.*

- It was asked what the biggest differences the review update will make in terms of outcomes to the department and whether it had simplified things?

*Members heard that the changes from this review are minor and will not significantly impact the department or the applicants. The policy is already considered fit for purpose, and the previous major review has provided substantial benefits.*

- Clarification was sought on whether single people or families are spending less time in homeless accommodation.

*Officers confirmed that single people generally wait longer than families for accommodation, noting that recent funding has allowed for the purchase of more family accommodation, improving the situation for families.*

- The member expressed appreciation for the inclusion of care-experienced individuals in the policy and asked for reassurances that purpose built and adapted accommodation is used for those who need it.

*Members were reassured that the policy supports care-experienced individuals and that adapted properties are allocated to those who need them. It was confirmed that the practice of removing adaptations from properties is not common now. The stock of adapted and accessible properties is growing, and efforts are made to ensure these properties are used by those who need them, although there is still a need for more.*

- It was questioned whether people who've been suspended or demoted due to rent arrears or are evicted from a private rental because of substantial arrears, are treated the same as somebody with a no-fault eviction? Are the duties to house them the same?

*Officers advised that they are generally treated the same as other homeless households. If the arrears are due to genuine financial inability, they would be treated as homeless. However, if they have sufficient financial resources and chose not to pay, they might be found intentionally homeless.*

### **Chair's Summary:**

The Chair thanked everyone present for an informed discussion and highlighted the following points for inclusion into the action list:

- **Armed Forces Covenant:** Further information will be provided to Councillors regarding the Armed Forces covenant, details of why veterans are presenting as homeless, and who that group is.
- **Partner Agencies:** Officers will follow up with partner agencies to ensure they are sufficiently briefed to assist people using home search.
- **Rural Allocation Policy and Capsule:** Officers will provide more information to Councillors on the rural allocation policy and details about Capsule.
- **MHA Presentation:** An updated presentation from Monmouthshire Housing Association (MHA) will be arranged for an all-member seminar.

#### **4. People Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme and Action List.**

The Scrutiny Manager would email all members the details of the budget scrutiny meetings. Members would contact the scrutiny team if they wished to attend rather than observe. **ACTION:** Scrutiny Manager.

The Chair requested that an update on the Tudor Street Day Centre be added to the forward work plan, to review the progress and expectations of the lease granted to the gathering, which recently obtained charity status. **ACTION:** Scrutiny Manager.

Councillor Strong asked to add Age Friendly Status to the forward plan for a progress update. **ACTION:** Scrutiny Manager.

#### **5. Cabinet and Council Planner.**

Noted.

#### **6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting held on 25th November 2024.**

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The minutes were agreed, proposed by Councillor Jones and seconded by Councillor Strong.

**7. Next Meeting: Tuesday 18th February 2025 at 10.00am.**

The meeting ended at **11.19 am**