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MONMOUTHSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held
at County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA on Thursday, 17th March, 2016 at 10.00 am

PRESENT: County Councillor S. Howarth (Chairman)
County Councillor V. Smith (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: D. Dovey and A. Easson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Alan Burkitt	Policy Officer Equalities and Welsh Language
Mark Howcroft	Assistant Head of Finance
Lisa Knight-Davies	Senior Innovation Officer
Owen Wilce	Programme Lead - A County That Serves
Roger Hoggins	Head of Operations
Sian Hayward	Digital and Technology Manager
Emma Jackson	Information Management Officer
Sally Thomas	Interim HR Manager
Kathryn Williams	Learning and Events Coordinator
Hazel Ilett	Scrutiny Manager
Paula Harris	Democratic Services Officer

1. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from County Councillors S. Jones, A. Webb and S. White.

2. Declarations of Interest

None received.

3. People Strategy and a County that Serves

Context:

The purpose of the report is to present a progress report for the People and Organisational Development Strategy for Member scrutiny and to seek approval for the next steps for the concluding year of the current strategy.

Key Issues:

Modern day local government is moving at pace, and our people and organisation need to keep up with the changes in order for the Council to support sustainable communities and economies. The People and Organisational Development Strategy was agreed through the Council's committee approval process and is rapidly changing to meet the ever emerging needs, in essence demand is driving design.

This being the ultimate year of implementation, the business plan has evolved and has been refined through learning and experience, as well as sharing working practices with other organisations to ensure the strategy is robust, sustainable and fit for purpose.

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Whilst we have achieved significant outcomes in the last twelve months, through our collation of evidence we are now in a position to present a new way of working across the whole of People Services. We have created an offer to meet the needs of those people both on and off our payroll and organisation, permitting us to future proof our approach.

Member Scrutiny:

Concerns were raised that the strategy was senior leader led and a member of the committee commented that a random selection of staff should have been invited to come along to the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting to see Members in action scrutinising issues.

Although Officers appreciated that Members may feel that staff feel disconnected, we were reassured that staff have various ways of keeping aware; live streaming, social media, web chat, videos and information on the Hub.

The Chair asked if this would be repeatedly annually and we were told that it would, with each directorate driving it forward for their own staff.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The committee were supportive of the strategy and the actions in place to support staff through, training, development opportunities and HR support and welcomed the cohesive approach to supporting employees. Members raised several concerns in terms of sickness absence and staff morale and the Chair advised that there is a working group currently reviewing sickness absence and that the group has been requested to report their findings to the committee in due course. Members welcomed the activities that have been undertaken, such as holding staff conferences and agreed that holding conferences within each directorate may enable a deeper understanding of issues. Members also felt that surveys would enable staff to provide views in an anonymous format, which may assist in highlighting areas of concern. The Committee agreed that the work should continue, with further progress updates brought as appropriate.

4. Volunteering Strategy

Context:

To introduce the Draft Volunteering Strategy 2016-19

Key Issues:

Monmouthshire ACTS is the draft version of our Volunteering Strategy, we feel it's a strong starting point, leading a different way of thinking about how 'we' – our staff teams and communities can support and enable volunteering and social action in Monmouthshire.

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Our belief is that through the Volunteering Strategy and associated Delivery Plan we can 'professionalise' and improve our 'volunteering offer' which focusses on our four stage model of support for volunteers.

- Plan – Looking at how, where, when, and why we involve volunteers.
- Recruit – Providing clear, consistent guidance to ensure safe and supportive recruitment of volunteers.
- Manage – Providing volunteers with all of the tools, information, support and recognition they require.
- Develop – Challenging volunteers to learn new or build existing skills, motivating and enabling impact. Understanding Monmouthshire's rich social capital and local activism we feel our approach will contribute to our core purpose as an organisation – to deliver sustainable and resilient communities – working together with our communities towards shared outcomes that matter to our county.

This strategy aims to bring together departments and projects involving volunteers from across the council, also the third sector and community together with a shared vision. It is worth noting that we already have 'pockets of brilliance' across Monmouthshire, with some volunteering activities and programmes achieving great outcomes already. Whilst other volunteering programmes are emerging, it is imperative to share best practice and learning to provide a clear consistent offer to our volunteers in Monmouthshire. This is where the Volunteering Network plays a vital role engaging and supporting our Volunteer coordinators.

Our people both staff and volunteers must be enabled with the right tools to operate at their best in what is a permanent state of transition and this is not an easy 'measurable' task. The aim is for this strategy to make a key contribution to embedding good volunteering standards and practices across the county, raising the level of support for volunteers is key. Our goal is to support talent development both within and outside of our organisation and to engage all the people with whom we can create value.

Monmouthshire ACTS gives the story of our ambitious evolution – formed as a direct result of the People and Organisational Development Strategy – it describes our journey through the various necessary stages of growth and development. Lessons learned from mapping, consultation and rapid prototyping gives us the confidence and evidence base to scale our volunteering model up across the county.

Monmouthshire ACTS outlines measures that will allow us to capture information and importantly measure impact. They are not all quantitative methods, we have found success qualitative methods which can convey emotion for example through recent video interviews. The positive impact was publicised and as such more volunteers have expressed an interest in engaging with us.

The strategy is importantly built upon a number of key themes and priorities. These describe the ethos of our work. The five key principles we promote are: -

Support - Excellent support, management and training for volunteers is essential for wellbeing and retention.

Choice - Volunteering is a free choice made by an individual to offer their time and support, there is no contractual agreement but the volunteer does have rights and responsibilities.

Equality - Volunteering should be open to all, welcoming and supporting diversity to promote equality.

Recognition – Volunteers offer their time without financial gain to contribute to personal, organisational, economic or community benefit but should receive appropriate and timely recognition.

Participation - Volunteering is a way in which individuals can participate and shape the activities of their community.

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The strategy is intentionally draft at this stage. Approval and release of the draft strategy will result in a programme of communication and engagement being undertaken with staff and communities over coming weeks such as to seek feedback and ideas on all aspects of the strategy. A final strategy will be brought back to Cabinet for approval before the end of the calendar year.

Member Scrutiny:

Members felt that the report could have been condensed and felt strongly that volunteers should be imbedded, not exploited, with a member giving the example of volunteer drivers not being reimbursed their expenses in the past.

The need for adequate basic training and ongoing support was deemed essential.

Members sought reassurance that all volunteers are scrutinised and stressed that safeguarding is paramount. We were advised of the safe recruitment policy & toolkit which makes it clear to all volunteers what is required from them from a safeguarding point of view.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

Members welcomed the strategy and Volunteer Toolkit that has been developed to support volunteers in playing an important role in service delivery in the county. The Committee acknowledged that significant work had been undertaken by the Volunteer Lead to provide a model that has been based on lessons learnt by others and commended the approach that has been adopted. The committee were satisfied that there are appropriate safeguarding measures in place to ensure all volunteers are vetted and were reassured that the volunteer strand of working has been included within the Council's Corporate Safeguarding Group.

Members highlighted the need to measure the 'added value' of volunteering through several different perspectives:

- The monetary value that volunteering offers
- The impact of volunteering in terms of projects that have been furthered by volunteers which may not have happened otherwise
- The emotional/social value for volunteers, for example, the impact that volunteering has had on their health, happiness and well-being

The committee asked that the Volunteering Lead consider how the added value of volunteering could be usefully measured in these different formats. Members requested future updates from the officer as appropriate, acknowledging that the committee will be inviting Gwent Association of Voluntary organisations (GAVO) to a future meeting to discuss partnership working and that volunteering may be discussed as part of that agenda.

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5. Month 9 Budget Monitoring

Context

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with information on the forecast revenue outturn position of the Authority at the end of reporting period 3 which represents month 9 financial information for the 2015/16 financial year.

Key Issues

That Members consider the position concerning the third period of revenue monitoring in 2015/16 (£162,000 overspend), and seek assurance that Chief Officers will continue to work on delivering the £1.6 million Recovery Plan reported to December 2015 Cabinet.

That Senior officers follow the requirement of the Protection of Employment Policy which requires that all redundancy and pension costs must be reported to and agreed by Cabinet before final approval.

Members consider the position concerning period 3 (Month 9) Capital Monitoring 2015/16 of an estimated £23.8million spend against a net budget of £23.9million, after proposed slippage of £37.7 million, notes the improvement in a need for slippage reported by managers (after excluding 21c schools), and the reservation that this necessitates managers incurring £12.5million expense during the last quarter, when collectively they only spent £11.3 million in preceding periods this year.

Requests the addition of two wholly funded section 106 funded capital schemes to the capital programme, which managers' report will be fully utilised by the end of March 2016:

- A capital budget of £40,000 to allow for the construction of a Puffin crossing in the vicinity of the development at Saw Mill house funded from S106 contributions from the development at Saw Mill house, Little Mill.
- A capital budget of £6,800 to continue the implementation of the Monmouth Links Connect 2 walking and cycling network funded from Section 106 contributions received from the development at the Almshouses, St James' square Monmouth

Member Scrutiny:

Members asked for clarification on redundancy costs in school and were advised that the average redundancy cost is £15 – 20, 000.

A Member asked for a full breakdown on the money going to the Borough Theatre (**ACTION M.H.**).

A Member asked about advertising on highways and we were told by the Head of Operations that when the scheme was first brought to planning, concerns were raised about the locations suggested. Another meeting was taking place shortly to discuss more suitable sites.

It was stressed by a member that it was of the utmost importance that members were kept aware of what is happening in all directorates to ensure members see the whole picture.

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Committee's Conclusion:

Members reviewed the financial situation at month 9 for projects and programmes within their remit, expressing concern for the budgetary position for the highways division. The committee expressed concern for the Home to School Transport budget and acknowledged that given that the Additional Learning Needs transport savings have proven unachievable, it is unlikely that the service is going to be able to operate within its existing budget. Members were concerned that the service has requested further funding via the MTFP in 2016-17 and agreed there is a need to review the Home to School Transport Policy and consider the appropriate funding for this service.

6. Strategic Equality Plan Monitoring Report

Context

The Equality Act 2010 was introduced in April 2011. Within the Specific duties is the requirement to publish an annual report on the progress made by the Council in its compliance with its Strategic Equality Plan, equality objectives and action Plan. The Act's principles and processes ensure that the Council remains true to its corporate values of Openness, Fairness, Flexibility and Teamwork.

Key Issues

One of the specific duties in the Equality Act 2010 requires Public Bodies to publish an Annual Report detailing the progress on achievement of the actions outlined in the plan covering the period 1st April 2014 to 31st March 2015.

Member Scrutiny:

A Member asked why people questioned were reluctant to answer the question of religion or marital status. In answer we were told that in terms of getting to fill in the forms, a push was required from the Chief Executive's office. The results are anonymous and help us form a picture of our organisation. Unless people reveal their issues, we cannot help them.

It was asked who are the 6 employees we don't pay and were advised this would be graduate volunteers.

It was commented that working with people services may improve completion rates in future.

Committee's Conclusion:

The Chair thanked the Officer for the comprehensive update and looked forward to being regularly updated.

The meeting ended at 1.20 pm

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