

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

PRESENT: County Councillor S.G.M. Howarth (Chairman)

County Councillors: D.L.S. Dovey, A. Easson, S. Jones, V.E. Smith,
S. White and K. Williams

County Councillor R.G. Harris attended the meeting by invitation of
the Chairman

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE:

Ms. K. Beirne	- Chief Officer, Enterprise
Mr R. Hoggins	- Head of Operations
Mr M. Howcroft	- Assistant Head of Finance
Mr. I. Bakewell	- Housing and Regeneration Manager
Mr. M. Davies	- Development Plans Manager
Mrs. S. Wiggam	- Senior Strategy & Policy Officer
Miss H. Ilett	- Scrutiny Manager
Mr. R. Williams	- Democratic Services Officer

1. SCRUTINY OF CRIME AND DISORDER MATTER

There were no crime and disorder matters to be discussed.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Mr. M. Hand, Head of Planning.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

County Councillor V.E. Smith declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest, pursuant to the Members' Code of Conduct, in relation to any matters relating to affordable housing.

County Councillor S. White declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest, pursuant to the Members' Code of Conduct, in relation to any matters relating to affordable housing, as she is a Board Member of Monmouthshire Housing Association.

4. PUBLIC OPEN FORUM

Dr. John Holmes, a resident of Coed Morgan, made a request that the County Council reviews its hedge cutting policy. It was noted that Dr. Holmes had previously raised this issue with the Cabinet Member and officers some time ago and that some improvements had been made. However, he considered that Monmouthshire County Council's hedge cutting policy differed to other Councils across Wales. He requested that consideration be given to delaying the hedge cutting to later in the season in order to allow time for the hedges to fruit and for

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

birds to nest. It was considered by Dr. Holmes that the County Council was contravening the Wildlife and Countryside Act with regard to hedge trimming.

The Head of Operations confirmed that he had had a conversation, some time ago, with Dr. Holmes. He had made enquiries as to whether the Authority was contravening the Wildlife and Countryside Act and this was not the case. The Authority makes a judgement to cut twice a year on narrow roads.

Currently, the Authority cuts A and B roads once a year and cuts unclassified roads twice a year. Telephone calls have been received from residents asking for the hedge cutting to commence earlier to alleviate potential safety issues.

The Authority has established a policy to protect wildflowers. Areas designated with a white post are created in which these areas are not cut or are cut later in the year to protect rare wildflower species but could be expanded to protect known nesting habitats for certain birds.

Farmers / landowners cut their hedges after September to comply with European legislation and also to manage growth whereas the local Authority cuts verges / hedges on health and safety grounds.

In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding financial savings achieved, it was noted that some savings have been achieved in the previous year and benefits to pollination have also been achieved.

We resolved that the Pollinator Policy be emailed to Dr. Holmes.

5. CONFIRMATION OF MINUTES

The minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting held on 11th June 2015 were confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chairman.

6. AFFORDABLE HOUSING TASK AND FINISH GROUP – CABINET RESPONSE

Context:

To inform the Select on the Cabinet response to the Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group Report 'A Place to Call Home'.

Key Issues:

The Strong Communities Select Committee commissioned an investigation into affordable housing because of the increasing demand for affordable housing in Monmouthshire. A Task & Finish Group was established to undertake this work.

On behalf of the Committee, the Task & Finish Group had subsequently published their findings in the report 'A Place to Call Home.'

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

The terms of reference of the Task & Finish Group were to critically appraise previous and current attempts to solve the problem of a lack of affordable housing and to evaluate options for addressing the lack of affordable housing in Monmouthshire by making recommendations to Council and other partners.

Key evidence appraised included:

- Evidence of housing need.
- Need for intermediate housing.
- Average earnings.
- Equalities.
- The Allocations Policy.
- Suitability and availability of land.
- Implications of increasing planning gain.
- Opposition to affordable housing delivery.
- Revitalising rural communities.
- Older person's housing – new directions.
- Build your own affordable home.

The findings and recommendations of the Task & Finish investigation have been considered by Cabinet. Cabinet welcomes the importance and recognition that the Committee is placing on affordable housing and more specifically welcomes the recommendations proposed by the Committee for further increasing and strengthening the provision of affordable housing in Monmouthshire. The report provides specific responses and feedback to the Committee with regard to the 'A Place to Call Home' report.

Member Scrutiny:

The following information was noted in respect of the recommendations of the Task and Finish Group and the cabinet responses:

- Recommendation 1 – Options can be explored with the private sector regarding finance.
- Recommendation 2 – In response to a Select Committee Member's question, it was noted that scattered housing developments in the countryside were not being encouraged.
- Recommendation 4 – 60 / 40 split in favour of affordable homes.
- Recommendation 6 – A meeting was being proposed between the Chief Executives of Monmouthshire County Council and the Brecon Beacons National Park to discuss partnership working.
- Recommendation 8 – Working with Monmouthshire Housing Association with a view to the housing association taking on empty homes.

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding the combined housing register and whether it was combined with smaller housing associations, it was noted that not all small housing associations were on the register but many of them did advertise their properties with us.

- Recommendation 10 – Success around homelessness with work being undertaken around financial inclusion. Housing associations were active in Monmouthshire schools. Also, Monmouthshire Leisure Teams were engaging with young people regarding this matter.
- Recommendation 17 – The public have been encouraged to have their say via the planning process, excellent progress has been made via the task and finish group, work has been undertaken providing help in the Afgan re-housing, the shared lodging scheme has been a success, the re-purposing of Careline has also been a success, Officers are skilled in debt counselling, a good working partnership exists with Torfaen County Borough Council and Monmouthshire Housing Association helps provide ways in to work with the Youth Service. The Directorate was keen to re-visit health and social care benefits.
- There was a need for young people to remain in rural communities.
- There has been a positive change in in the Council's attitude with regard to the delivery of affordable homes.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

On behalf of the Select Committee, the Chairman thanked the enabler, Mr. James, and the Team for pursuing the recommendations and that we are providing affordable homes in Monmouthshire.

The Committee agreed:

- A) To encourage the smaller RSL's that are not a part of the Genus to join and work with us.
- B) Investigate private sector schemes, possibly in England, to assess what they stand for and whether something similar would be feasible in Wales.
- C) The churches in Wales (Faith in Housing) want to help with affordable housing. They have landholdings that could potentially be used. Meetings have been held and potential sites have been identified. A report on this matter would be presented to a future meeting of the Select Committee.

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

**7. MONMOUTHSHIRE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN AFFORDABLE HOUSING
SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE**

Context:

To advise Select Committee Members of the results of the recent consultation on Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) on Affordable Housing to support the policies of the Monmouthshire Local Development Plan (LDP).

Key Issues:

The consultation took place for a period of six weeks from Thursday 19th February 2015 to Thursday 2nd April 2015. A notice was placed in the Monmouthshire Free Press on 18 February 2015 and 388 individual notifications were despatched to:

- Specific (including Town and Community Councils), General and Other consultees, as identified in the LDP Community Involvement Scheme.
- Residents who were on the LDP consultation data base and had specifically requested to be notified of the SPGs.
- Agents / developers who work in the Council area.

11 replies had been received. These have been split into 41 representations that were summarised, together with the suggested Council response, in the Report of Consultation.

Member Scrutiny:

- There are some large strategic sites within the LDP which would not be covered by the Rural Allocations Policy set out in Appendix 3 of the Supplementary Planning Guidance.
- A review of the policy was required as it was currently tied down with considerable regulation and legislation.
- There was a need for the Housing Register to work better for the Authority with regard to the prevention of homelessness. Currently, the Authority did not have enough social housing which meant that private renting was currently being used. This was a challenge for the Authority.
- The Housing and Regeneration Manager stated that he could present a report to a future meeting of the Select Committee regarding the Rural Allocation Policy and what this has delivered.

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The Select Committee had reservations regarding the Rural Allocations Policy with regard to the recommendation of the report but welcomed a report by the Housing and Regeneration Manager to a future meeting of the Select Committee regarding this Policy and what was being delivered.

Report Recommendation:

Members agreed:

- (i) to note the contents of the report and the recommended revisions to the draft Affordable Housing SPG;
- (ii) that the Housing and Regeneration Manager presents a report to a future meeting of the Select Committee regarding the Rural Allocation Policy and what this has delivered and that the Adults Select Committee be invited to attend the meeting in respect of this item.

8. SOCIAL HOUSING GRANT PROGRAMME

Context:

To brief the Cabinet Member on the completion of the Social Housing Grant (SHG) programme for 2014/2015 and seek approval for the new SHG Programme for 2015-2018.

Key Issues:

- It is recognised in Monmouthshire that house prices have risen to a level beyond that which is affordable to many local people. The average house price is currently £243,600 (Wales comparison £167,700) and the lower quartile affordability ratio is 9:1. Therefore, the provision of affordable housing is one of the Council's more pressing concerns, both in urban and rural areas.
- The number of applicants on the Common Housing Register is currently 2890.
- During 2014/2015 there were 249 homeless applications determined with a duty being accepted to 112. The Council's Housing Options Team dealt with 758 housing enquiries.

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

Member Scrutiny:

- In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding SHG funding, it was noted that the Welsh Government does not allow local authorities to utilise other local authorities' unspent SHG funding. The Welsh Government does not hold a SHG reserve fund. However, the Welsh Government knows that Monmouthshire County Council does deliver on its funding allocation and in the past, additional funding has been granted to the Authority.
- It was noted that the schemes on the Programme Delivery Plan were not all ready to come forward. However, it was anticipated that they will be ready to come forward in the future. The schemes will be delivered but will likely take time as funding was not currently available.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

Inform Cabinet that having scrutinised the document, The Authority needs to urge Welsh Government to enter into more consultation with the Authority so that we may be able to deliver more affordable homes within Monmouthshire. The evidence to deliver this is outlined in the Programme Delivery Plan: Reserve Schemes.

Report Recommendation:

Members agreed:

- (i) that Cabinet approves the contents of the Programme;
- (ii) that Cabinet urges Welsh Government to enter into more consultation with the Authority so that we may be able to deliver more affordable homes within Monmouthshire. The evidence to deliver this is outlined in the Programme Delivery Plan: Reserve Schemes.

9. LOCAL HOUSING MARKET ASSESSMENT

Context:

To brief the Select Committee on the completion of the Local Housing Market Assessment, April 2015 (LHMA) for Monmouthshire.

Key Issues:

Undertaking this assessment has identified the need for 474 additional affordable housing units per year over the next 5 years. These figures are not an annual

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

delivery target as new build homes are not the total solution to the supply of affordable homes in the County. The Council's target remains as 960 affordable homes over the period of the Local Development Plan (LDP) 2011-2021.

Delivery figures for the previous 5 years are:

- 2010-2011 63 units
- 2011-2012 75 units
- 2012-2013 63 units
- 2013-2014 48 units
- 2014-2015 15 units

Housing and Community Services has established a new Private Sector Housing Team and are working with private sector landlords to increase the availability of units for private rent whilst also trying to bring empty properties back into use.

Headline figures from the report for the three affordable housing tenures are:

- Social rent 271/year
- Low Cost Home Ownership 157/year
- Intermediate Rent 46/year

Member Scrutiny:

- A report will be presented to the Select Committee in January 2016 regarding the findings of the survey in respect of the Gypsy and Traveller report.
- Backlog of Affordable Housing Need / Annum – Data is taken from the housing register and divided by five in order to bring forward an annual figure. It was noted that there was a high figure of need required in all of the main towns within Monmouthshire.
- When the LDP was set, the Welsh Government stated that the Authority had to increase its affordable housing targets because the target in the previous UDP had not been delivered. The Welsh Government asked the Authority to include more housing as it was considered that the Authority was not delivering enough affordable homes. The Authority has the need and the sites but not necessarily the funding. Therefore, in years to come if the Authority has not delivered, concern was expressed that the Welsh Government might expect the Authority to add even more homes to the LDP as targets would not have been met. It was noted that as an authority, we do not put grants into our S106 sites as Welsh Government does not approve. It is down to the viability of the sites and whether the Authority can obtain the required 35%. The 960 affordable housing unit figure from the whole of the LDP period is the Authority's target. However, that figure might be difficult to meet as the larger sites were coming through and it might be

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

necessary to negotiate down from the 35% on some of these sites due to viability issues.

- In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding 'right to buy', it was noted that as housing is devolved in Wales Welsh Government has not indicated that it will be doing this. Welsh Government is currently in the process of suspending the right to buy in Wales.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The committee welcomed the report.

Report Recommendation:

Members agreed the recommendations as follows:

That Cabinet adopts the Local Housing Market Assessment, April 2015.

10. REVENUE AND CAPITAL MONITORING 2015/16 PERIOD 1 OUTTURN FORECAST STATEMENT

Context:

To provide Members with information on the forecast revenue outturn position of the Authority at the end of period 1 which represents month 2 financial information for the 2015/16 financial year. Revenue and Capital forecasting is being brought forward by a month against the usual timescale to provide Members with relevant financial information before summer recess.

Member Scrutiny:

- In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding the level of reserves currently being held by the Authority, it was noted that in the current economic climate, local authorities were being encouraged not to hold their reserves at too high a level.
- The new layout and structure of the report was welcomed providing details that might be built upon over the financial year.
- Capital Outturn Forecast – In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding IT schemes – Infrastructure / Hardware, it was noted that the information contained within the report referred to eight or nine schemes which were legacy updates to systems that the Council has.

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

- Members used to receive an up to date capital programme of highways related works prior to the start of the financial year. The Assistant Head of Finance stated that he could provide such information in future.
- In response to a Select Committee Member's question regarding the overspend at Monnow Vale, it was noted that this was a partnership arrangement between the Health Board and Monmouthshire County Council. There was an historic Service Level Agreement between the two and that any shortfall would be borne by the Authority. It was likely that this Service Level Agreement would be re-negotiated in future. The Chairman stated that he would contact the Chairman of Adults Select Committee with a view to asking that that Select Committee investigates this matter.

Committee's Conclusion:

Chair's Summary:

The committee welcomed the report.

Report Recommendation:

Members agreed the recommendations to be presented to Cabinet, as follows:

- (i) that Members consider the position concerning the first period of revenue monitoring in 2015/16 (£252,000 deficit) and seek assurance of the action Chief Officers are taking to address the over spends in their service areas;
- (ii) a caveated use of reserves is sought in relation to redundancy costs incurred by services this year totalling £13,000, whilst services will continue to find compensatory savings additional to the mandates to mitigate the net cost pressure by end of financial year;
- (iii) Members consider the position concerning period 1 capital monitoring with a revised budget of £58.406 million for the 2015/16 financial year.

11. WORK PROGRAMME

Members discussed the Work Programme for the Strong Communities Select Committee. In doing so, the following points were noted:

10th September 2015 – Agenda Items

- Anaerobic Digestion.
- Public Toilets – progress on transfer of assets (including Raglan toilet).

**Minutes of the Strong Communities Select Committee meeting
held in the Council Chamber, County Hall, Usk on
Thursday 16th July 2015 at 10.00 a.m.**

- Annual Complaints.

Special Meeting – 14th September 2015 at 2.00pm – Agenda Items

- Flood Risk Management.
- Scrutiny of the finances of the Passenger Transport Unit.
- Public protection.

Special Meeting – 12th October 2015 at 10.00am – Agenda Items

- Crime and Disorder Training.
- Whole Place.
- Safer Monmouthshire Plan.

Special Meeting – 22nd October 2015 at 10.00am – Agenda Items

- Budget Scrutiny.

The Chairman would email the Head of Operations to establish whether the Highways Working Group would be re-established.

12. CABINET FORWARD WORK PLANNER

We resolved to receive the Cabinet Forward Work Planner and noted its content.

The meeting ended at 2.50pm.