

## **Monmouthshire Council**

The Task Group visit to Monmouthshire Council took place on the 28<sup>th</sup> January 2008. The Group comprised of Councillor R. Sanderson, Councillor C. Caswill and J. Whittleton.

The Group met with the Area General Manager for Central Monmouthshire and the Area Services Manager for Central Monmouthshire. They were also given a tour of Central Monmouthshire One-Stop-Shop.

### **Monmouthshire:**

Monmouthshire has a population of approximately 88,000. The largest settlements include Chepstow, Caldicot, Monmouth and Abergavenny.

Monmouthshire Council employs around 4,000 people at its main offices in Cwmbran (just outside the County). The Council is split into three directorates; Resources Environment & Regulations, Lifelong Learning & Leisure and Social Services and Housing.

### **Area Working In Monmouthshire:**

Monmouthshire moved to an area based approach approximately five years ago. There were initially 4 areas, but budgetary constraints have meant the amalgamation of two areas. Areas now exist in the Abergavenny area, the Monmouth area and the Chepstow/Caldicot area (Chepstow and Caldicot were amalgamated).

Principally, area working is based around two main elements; one-stop-shops in each of the main towns and governance/community engagement arrangements by means of area committees and area forums.

CDRP'S are based on the Areas used by Monmouthshire Council. They are jointly chaired by the Police and the Area Services Manager and are attended by local councillors and a member of the Council's Youth Offending Team.

### **One-Stop-Shops:**

There are one-stop-shops in each of the County's main towns. These act as the main point of contact between the Council and its public.

Each of the one-stop-shops is staffed by 5 customer serves officers, an admin officer, a team leader, an area community officer and an Area Manager (2<sup>nd</sup> tier officer). Area Managers are supposed to report to different directors (in an attempt to ensure area working is embedded throughout all the Council's services). In practise, they report to the Chief Executive. Area working has had the effect of bringing senior officers back to the front end of service provision.

Functions run through the one-stop-shops include the market, cemeteries, allotments, local projects (e.g. safe route to schools and the welcome centre in project in Monmouthshire) and public consultations.

As previously stated, they also act as the main point of contact between the Council and its public. Customer Services Officers are trained to deal with a variety of enquiries and will often put members of the public through to the right Council officer or arrange meetings between customers and Council officers. Officers from the main

offices will regularly visit the one-stop-shops to conduct 'surgeries' on issues (such as housing).

Local Members (all single member wards) often use the one-stop-shops for surgeries.

Costs for Area Committees and Forums are met by the respective one-stop-shop budgets.

The relationship between the Council and public have improved as a result of area working. Officers in each of the one-stop-shops are known to the community and people have begun to identify with the officers in the one-stop-shops and the area which they serve. Officers recognise that to successfully use this system of area working, good customer relations are essential.

### **Area Committees:**

Functions undertaken by Area Committees include allocating s106 money, prioritising road safety measures and small environmental projects. The Committees no longer allocate grants for community groups.

Meetings are currently held quarterly. However, the frequency of meetings is likely to increase to every 2 months as consultation with the Committees can be by-passed if the meeting cycle is not convenient.

There is provision for speaking at the beginning of each Area Committee, which is well used.

Decisions on local service provision (as suggested in the Wiltshire County Council Area Boards paper) are not a feature of the Monmouthshire system. Such an idea was suggested, but not taken up due to financial constraints and demands on officer time.

After each Area Committee meeting, a newsletter is produced to report on the main issues discussed at the meeting.

Area Committees are not promoted any more than other committees of the Council.

Area Committees are able to refer issues to both Overview & Scrutiny and to Cabinet (Executive).

### **Area Forums:**

The Monmouth Area has two Forums – one based on the Town, the other on the surrounding rural area.

The Monmouth Area Forum is made up of 4 County Councillors, 4 Town Councillors, 4 representatives of the Chamber of Commerce and representatives from voluntary groups in the area (e.g. Friends of the Earth, residents associations, Monmouth Schools Bursar etc). There is currently a mailing list of about 109. Turnout at meetings varies between 20-60. Forums are facilitated by the respective area officers.

The Monmouth Forum has a Chairman, elected independently by the Forum on an annual basis (A Chairman can only stand for two years). The Rural Forum is chaired

by area officers. This reflects the flexibility of the approach – different formats are adopted to suit the preferences of each area.

When first introduced, the subject matter and format of the Forums was led by the area officers at the Council. Now the Forum members are more confident with the set up, they dictate the issues to be addressed (bottom up approach).

Forums will generally undertake community projects, for example the Rural Forum is responsible for a community transport project in the area.

The Council have noted that it is easier for Forums (rather than the Council) to secure funds through bids to Government agencies. However, there are concerns as to who will be responsible if projects undertaken by Forums should get into financial difficulties. The Local Service Board (Partnership) is looking into this issue.

The Forums are becoming better known in the community as time passes. However, they are not so well known in new areas and specific efforts are not made to reach 'hard to reach' groups.

A special effort is made to promote forum meetings when issues of public interest are due to be discussed.

Meetings of the Monmouthshire Forum take place every 2 months. The Rural Monmouthshire Forum meets every 6 weeks.

It is hoped that the Forums will become the principle means of engagement between neighbourhood policing teams and the public, however, a definitive format has yet to be worked out.

### **Development Control:**

Development Control decisions are taken centrally at the Councils offices. Town and Parish Councils are consulted on applications in their area.

Occasionally representations are received on planning matters at the area committees (Members of the Development Control Committee leave during these representations). On these occasions, local members will often attend the Development Control Committee to pass on these views.

### **Overview & Scrutiny:**

There is no area based approach to Scrutiny. The Overview & Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board meets in Cwmbran and has three select Committees, which discharge functions delegated to them by the Co-ordinating Board.

### **Leisure Centres:**

There is a leisure centre in each of the County's main towns, which are under joint use arrangements with local schools.

### **Flexible Working:**

Due to the geographical characteristics, the bad repair of the Council's offices and the cost of building new offices, the Council is looking to move to a flexible way of working.

This will involve a flexible approach to staff accommodation, with more home working and staff based at various locations around the County.

The Council owns a lot of buildings around the County, which could be used for office space. It is anticipated that staff will work from offices close to their homes in order to cut down on travel times.

The Council is currently undertaking an audit for hot-desking and will look at all posts to assess their suitability for flexible working. Some of the Council's buildings will need to be adapted for office use.