

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 21 June 2021

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors G Berry, M Whitcutt, I Hayat, J Richards, M Al-Nuaimi and M Linton

In Attendance: Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Felicity Collins

1 Apologies

Councillors Chris Evans, Charles Ferris and Martyn Kellaway

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 2020/21 Service Plan End of Year Reviews

Regeneration, Investment and Housing

Invitees:

- Tracey Brooks - Acting Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing
- Councillor Jane Mudd - Leader of Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Growth and Investment

The committee was presented with a brief overview of the report by the acting Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing to highlight the key challenges and opportunities that the service area faced during the past financial year. The Lead Officer highlighted that the report offered some insight into unprecedented challenges during the period of the pandemic which had a significant impact on the service area, for instance, it meant dealing a lot with vulnerable residents but also delivering services as usual in the wake of the new way of working.

The committee was advised of how the service area stepped up to the challenge by continuing with support for the neighbourhood hubs. It was implied that it was actually a good year for the community hubs as the operating model was only launched just prior to Covid-19. This showed how Community Hub colleagues and partner services were able to deliver front facing and very critical services either through face to face or virtual methods. It was also pointed out that Flying Start areas were able to keep going due to the team's support and food parcels were still delivered to those who had to shield. Baby bundles were also dispatched to many new mothers in need.

The officer stressed to the members that there was a significant impact on the economic development work. But despite this, the committee was assured that it did not stop the team's aspirations to grow Newport as a City and has not stopped to drive refurbishment and regeneration work within the city. For instance, the work still continues for the Central Arcade and also for a new Health and Wellbeing Centre which would unlock a site for Coleg Gwent to have a new campus. The officer explained that this shows how the team worked well

under pressure to react to the pandemic accordingly yet also had to drive the service forward with facilities and further opportunities.

It was made clear to the committee that the service area's most challenging area was the impact on homelessness from the pandemic. The team tried very hard to accommodate people who were struggling in the face of losing 300 plus units, which were usually used to house those people. The committee was advised that there was a significant reduction in rough sleeping over the course of the pandemic but implied that there has been a big demand in temporary accommodation due to many hotels not operating and usually used hotels for the team's accommodation needs. But however despite this, the team stepped up and delivered in the face of significant challenges in the past year.

The Leader of the Council concurred with the Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing.

The chair opened up questioning for the lead officer.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee queried whether this would be the appropriate channel for reporting maintenance issues with a neighbourhood hub.

The Lead Officer informed the Committee that this will be arranged with the relevant team to deal with the ongoing issue.

- The Committee asked how the team would manage the issue of potential evictions from the backlog of cases.

In response, the Head of Service explained that each case can only be considered on a case to case basis, and that embargo has been extended until September 2021 now in order to push this back.

The Committee noted this and also referred to the report that the biggest success has been the way the council staff has reacted to the unprecedented situation with professionalism.

They agreed that the crisis could overshadow the good work that the Council has done.

- The Committee further acknowledged that the Council officers have dealt with this situation greatly. The Committee then queried whether the positive and lessons learned from going through the pandemic have been logged on how everyone adapted?

The Leader of the Council reassured the Committee by highlighting that there is a monthly update provided to Cabinet on recovery and not just the Covid response. It showed that everything necessary has been logged throughout the pandemic for review.

The committee gave their thanks for the responses provided and confirmed that they had no recommendations as the general consensus was that they were satisfied with the responses provided.

City Services

Invitees:

- Paul Jones - Head of City Services
- Councillor Roger Jeavons - Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for City Services

The Head of City Services gave a brief overview of the report provided and explained that the service area's achievement was keeping the services running smoothly. The ongoing challenges from the second lockdown put a lot of stress on the site supervisors of having to adapt rapidly. Yet despite this, it was argued that the service area kept working effectively throughout, achieved and progressed well on their service plan. For instance, Newport became the second best recycling city in the UK for two consecutive years running and implied that this is something that the Council should be proud of.

The Committee was advised that the area came under budget only due to the Welsh Government support for Local Authorities. Had the Council not being able to reclaim their lost income, City Services would have been £3.5 million over budget. The Head of Service stressed that from the Welsh Government help alone, has been a life line to local authorities, and stipulated that they will have to observe how the services will settle as they usually generate around £1.7 million a year from car parking fees alone. The Head of Service went on to explain that ironically, Covid has helped the service with its performance as it adapted in some ways for instance the Household Waste Recycling Centre would struggle to meet its usual 65% target, but successfully hit 95% this year. The team had to adapt which meant that they filtered people through better through the online booking system and the team was able to separate the materials better than before. There was also a positive impact on the deterioration of high ways also due to the lower number of cars on the road.

However despite this, the Head of Service highlighted that an area that struggled the most was definitely the City Contact Centre with the increase in waiting times. This was not a detriment to the staff as they had taken on a lot more responsibilities such as the Coroner's Court and had to adapt rapidly due to the increase of individuals contacting the council staff through the digital app. It was explained from this increase in communication that the wait time went up. The Committee was assured that the waiting time has been alleviated slightly but the team still monitor the time.

The Cabinet Member for City Services commented to include their sincere thanks to the whole of the City Services staff for keeping the services open and running in a year like no other. The Cabinet Member pointed out the excellent work performed at the WEC and also referred the committee to acknowledge the highways assets and the work that the team have been doing on tackling the airborne disease affects ash trees (Ash Die Back). The Member explained that there has been a lot of expensive and inexpensive work undertaken on this issue, mostly on Caerleon Road.

The Committee wanted to record their sincere thanks to the team of street cleaners, they advised that the community were very much appreciated and also cast their thanks wider to the whole of City Services. They acknowledged that City Services have been at the sharp end in terms of dealing with the pandemic such as highways, recycling and the contact centre. The Committee continued to appreciate that trying to change methods of working must have been a huge challenge such as liaising with emergency services, it was a tremendously difficult job so the committee wanted to convey their congratulations to everyone involved within the service area on their work.

The Cabinet Member welcomed any questions that the Committee may have with regard to what was discussed.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee acknowledged how well City Services reacted to reports of issues such as fly tipping and agreed that they deserve the praise. The Committee mentioned one issue was the loss of face to face service in the Information Station. The members expanded on this point and used an example for areas with a lot of resident parking where elderly are used to renewing their permits by going to the Information Station. The committee argued that there had been a few complaints

about the delay in turnaround for the permits which resulted in them being unfairly booked by the parking wardens. Whilst the Committee applauded the success of the team, they agreed that there was a detrimental side to being forced to do customer service roles virtually. Therefore the Members noted that this could be a lesson of this period that many of Newport citizens really appreciate face to face services and may not be comfortable using IT services.

The Head of Service confirmed that like the rest of the Council, they had to adapt their services at short notice. With regard to the Information Station, due to permits having to be manually printed, the Head of Service explained that this caused a few delays but ensured the Committee that they have made the system live via an electronic process for permits now so paper permits might not be used so much anymore. However, it is recognised that some people do prefer the face to face experience as it has been a lot to adjust to and the service area is in the process of finding its feet in the new method of working. The Head of Service acknowledged that life will not be the same as it was before but the team are working to ensure that nobody is left behind through an inclusive service going forward.

- The Committee queried whether the Cemeteries team have considered going down the line of stopping vehicles in and out of the cemeteries during the week, and what notices were being given out to the public through the press to reach elderly residents in particular.

The Head of City Services explained that the reduced vehicle access was actioned in the first lockdown in 2020, with limited communication tools at the time. The team need a safely operating area so allow vehicles on the weekend as usual and special dispensation for those not as mobile if the team do not have machinations on site. There was sadly an increase in the need for work done at the cemeteries during the pandemic for obvious reasons but with mobility issues the team were happy to assist and as usual, citizens are allowed to visit on the weekends.

- The Committee followed up this response by asking how the service area would communicate this to the elderly without social media for being refused to visit the cemeteries in the week. In addition, the Committee added would the team consider putting in shelter for visitors to go to in adverse weather condition and if water taps could be made more localised in certain areas of the cemeteries.

In response, the Head of Service commented that the more localised water tap request has been noted to be mentioned to the team. It was explained that most of the public are aware of the updated opening times as they try not to encourage visits during the week as this is usually when funerals are taking place. Taking this into account, the Head of Service agreed that the City Services team will look into how to successfully decimate the information virtually.

The Cabinet Member mentioned that they had received many compliments on the peace and quiet within the cemetery grounds whilst the visitors said goodbye to loved ones during the funeral as they have not got cars going around or behind them. The Cabinet Member understood the Committee's comments but on the other hand stated that a calm silence is more appropriate for the setting.

Discussion ensued and the committee came to agree and accept the report and mentioned that the Council should publicise to the maximum that the city is likely to retain for the second year running on being the best for recycling as it is an amazing achievement. The Head of Service agreed that there has been some great progress within the Council over the past three years.

Finance

Invitees:

- Meirion Rushworth - Head of Finance
- Mark Howcroft – Assistant Head of Finance
- Emma Johnson - Income Collector Manager
- Richard Leake – Service Manager Procurement & Payments
- Andrew Wathan – Chief Internal Auditor

The Head of Finance indicated that just as every other service area within the Council, a lot of the finance work was able to be worked on from home. Their colleague's attitude was extremely positive as they were able to take their equipment home to ensure they could work the best as they could. It is essential to note how the Council worked hard to make sure that the teams could work effectively from home. The Members were advised that the Finance area tackled major issues with predominantly business support, this was acknowledged as a national issue. A lot of support was administered by the Local Authority by the Revenue team and Business Support team in RH.

The Head of Service provided the Committee with figures, as it was outlined that the council administered £15,000 to businesses on average and £20 million in relief to businesses eligible for the help. It was explained to the committee that the council borrowed money in the middle of March 2020 to ensure that they could pay out to the businesses as fast as they could. Welsh Government informed the Council that in the middle of March they would be putting them into funds in the middle of April so the Council went and borrowed the money themselves so they could get the money out at a quicker rate to help support businesses and it was reimbursed.

The Revenue Team had been administering support grants in the differing four versions until the end of the financial year, this therefore had a big strain on the team. The team noted a reduction in time to deal with tax queries or business queries as they had to prioritise their time to administer these grants correctly. It was stressed that this was a big challenge, but like every other Council in Wales, they achieved what they needed to do to assist businesses. Further, the Head of Finance emphasised that the Accountancy team was instrumental in coordinating the additional costs and found that across the council, they had incurred £18 million worth of covid-19 costs that they had to claim back from the Welsh Government on top of the £5 million of used income that the Council had lost. The members were informed that the council has been supported by the Welsh Government throughout all of this as instrumental help across Wales so the council could respond appropriately and timely; therefore adding a big layer of additional work onto the Accountancy team.

The Head of Finance went on to praise the Procurement team on their incredible work in working across services for instance, ensuring that key suppliers were supported throughout this period such as bus companies like Newport Bus, Newport Live and Chartwells as it would not have been viable had the Council stopped paying them. The Finance Team acknowledged that such supply chains need to be around and on the other side therefore the officer explained that the council still needed to pay them. In line with national UK guidance adopted by Welsh Government, Councils worked alongside key colleagues and contractors to try help them such as the companies mentioned above. They had to have really detailed issues to ensure that the Council was supporting these organisations as best as they possibly could. From this, the Members were informed of the crucial role of the Auditing Team for continuing to undertake floor checks on business grants as they were stuck until September time. The team were very flexible even with one or two of them working for the test and trace team. The Members acknowledged how grateful the Head of Service was for the staff's flexibility.

The Head of Finance referred to the report in terms of performance and meeting objectives, and informed that report shows that a vast majority of the service area's objectives have been met. This shows that the Finance area were not confined to doing solely Covid

response work, as they were able to keep an eye on key areas as the detail stipulates within the report. Most of the performance measures were green, only a few amber and the Head of Service argued that was quite an achievement given the context.

To conclude, the Head of Finance admitted that they are dealing with the impact of the pandemic and that they have help from the Welsh Government until September 2021. ~~The committee was informed that~~ The Council is still claiming additional costs where they exist at the present time.

The officer explained that although it has slowed down in the revenue team, they now as a result have a lot of catching up in that area. A full normal loaded timetable where they can deliver on that this year on the team's new working arrangements. It was highlighted that is has not been an easy year as the staff have struggled in particular, despite this, it was stressed that the revenue team in particular has been successful and all of the teams' efforts were instrumental in helping the local economy, the officer told the members that it was pleasing to see and hear the good feedback that they did receive in that area.

The Head of Service invited the committee to raise any enquiries that they had with regard to the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee asked for confirmation on whether the area has seen any difference in council tax collection.

In response, the Head of Finance explained that households were making their own decision about what they could or could not do. For individual decisions, for the council taxes in regulated debts, the Finance Team could not go beyond that unless they have been summoned to court. But given the situation, the courts were not operating as much as they were beforehand. The Head of Finance stated that they had one in session from last year whereas they used to have around four to five over the year. The officer also explained that from this, they have staff working on the support grants.

The Income Collection Manager stated that there was an unprecedented amount of work in terms of council tax payers, for instance many were worried they would not have jobs to return to and furlough was not completely watertight earlier on in lockdown. Unfortunately the finance team observed that not everyone has gone back into employment which therefore impacted on tax collection with Newport being 1% lower than previous years. It was then indicated by the officer to the committee that in actuality, a touch in a million pounds more debt combined with current years' council tax that some households face a lot of catching up to do, financially.

The Income Collection Manager further explained that their team were in the process of trying to put things in place for work coming up. They have had issues with court, such as liability orders. The officer went on to explain that they need an attachment to people's earnings but they cannot without a court order. From this, the team were thwarted as courts have not opened back up yet due to the need for social distancing so the members were advised that the finance team were somewhat dependent on availability of court times. Therefore this proved to the members how council tax collection has been affected.

- The Committee asked with regard to business support, as it has been favourable in its response but also acknowledged some criticism from the public. The Committee referred to the survey that the Head of Finance mentioned and queried what was the local businesses' reaction to the help the Council has provided?

The Income Collection Manager explained that they could only speak for the owners they personally dealt with and believed that most have been very appreciative of the grants on behalf of the Welsh Government. The officer provided figures and stipulated that around 7,500 grants of various amounts were administered within the last year. It was highlighted to the committee that the scheme was not designed to help every single business, only the ones that were forced into closure or ones with restrictions in place such as in leisure and retail. The Income Collection Manager went on to emphasise that this help was well received and most businesses appreciated the speed that they got the money out to them. It was further explained that there were also different business grants, that the Regeneration Team worked with for self-employed, and ones without premises such as mobile hairdressers were helped by a different type of fund, but however this was reported as well received also.

- Following this response, the Committee enquired specifically whether the officer could put a monetary value on the 7,500 grants dispersed.

The Income Collection Manager informed the Members that it was around £47 million over the course of the year, not the Business Support Team but from the team that the officer was working with, right until the end of March. As a follow up, the members then queried if said businesses were local Newport businesses. The officer confirmed that the support was administered to businesses operating in Newport but some were chains and businesses with multiple premises.

- The Committee acknowledged that the responses have generally been positive from businesses. Members queried whether they have evidence trail of this as they argued that it would be beneficial to have a record of the good stories from this.

The Income Collection Manager responded by asserting that their team had received many emails and correspondence from businesses expressing their gratitude to the council for navigating them through the scheme.

- Members appreciated the response and referred to the BID, asking if it has acknowledged what the council has done in assisting them during the pandemic, in writing.

The Head of Finance confirmed that they received a lot of correspondence as the Income Collection Manager would be looking at thousands of emails at any point in time and stressed that it was encouraging to see the staff's efforts being appreciated. The lead officer also denoted that it was important to mention that not everyone who applied was eligible for a grant, so clearly there were a few disappointed individuals but the vast majority of correspondents were grateful. The Committee was advised that over the first month or so of the first scheme, that Newport was ahead of the game under the speed of making payments. It was stressed that the team were putting the funds in to get the cash out to businesses as fast as possible.

- The Committee then enquired with regard to businesses claiming support, which area and organisations were hit the worst?

The Head of Finance used an example, the Finance Team supported Newport Live as one of the handful of organisations that the Council kept in close touch with. It was advised that their income was significantly affected due to lack of leisure facilities being open so the council was able to work with them to work out their net losses. Although they were struggling, they were saving money as well through the furlough scheme and for example there was no need for heating water for the pools.

For the lost income claims, the committee was informed that the Council could pay them a higher subsidy to keep the organisation where they would have been as it was not easy for them. Starting to open up the leisure facilities has not been easy as people are not jumping at the chance into their gyms at the rate that they previously were but the committee was advised that the finance department keep in touch with Steve Ward to keep the support going and intend to do so until September 2021.

The Committee recognised the successes of the finance department and Council as a whole in their Covid work as well as helping keeping businesses afloat. The Head of Finance agreed to pass on the praise to the revenue team as it meant a lot to appreciate their achievements and hard work during a difficult period. The Committee agreed that they were satisfied with the report and responses provided and thanked the officers for their reports, input and the Cabinet Members for their input.

Conclusion of Committee Reports:

The Committee noted the performance within Regeneration Investment and Housing, City Services and Finance Service Plan Year-end Reviews and made the following comments to the Cabinet:

Regeneration Investment and Housing

- The Committee firstly wished to thank The Leader for her attendance to the meeting. The Committee were very pleased with the quality of the report, and wanted it to be known that all the officers and staff have every right to be proud of their work and ensuring that the services provided have been of good quality throughout one of the most difficult times in living memory.

City Services

- The Committee again praised the quality of the report and how easy it was to understand. The Committee again wished to thank all the officers and staff for all of their hard throughout the pandemic, and continued high quality of service.
- Members hoped that we are able to clearly pre-warn and advertise through various channels that the Information Station is moving to the Central Library, especially as elderly people are regular users of the services held there and may not be able to access online services to read news updates. Members also wished to express not only how important it is to maintain the face to face process between the Council and residents, but to encourage a smooth transition whenever it takes place.
- The Committee requested if the water taps in cemeteries could be more prominent and localised in certain areas, which would make it easier for visitors of the sites to access these facilities. The Committee also queried if some shelter areas could be installed at points to shelter visitors from the rain.

Finance

- The Committee again wished to express their thanks to all staff and officers for their hard work during the pandemic, and especially how prepared the service area were at the beginning to deal all financial requests from Newport businesses and its residents.
- The Committee praised the positive stories about the Council being able to help numerous businesses over the Covid-19 period, and believe that this is something

that the Council should make more known, as a lot of residents might not fully be aware of the hard work that the service area had undertaken and that £47 million had been dispersed to businesses operating in Newport.

- The Committee queried if the Finance Team could record all highs and lows from working during the pandemic to encourage and to also learn how to become even more efficient in approach, if a similar event was to occur in the future.

4 **Scrutiny Adviser Reports**

Invitees;

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Monday 6th September 2021

- Staff Support
- Economic Growth Strategy and Economic Recovery Plan – Recommendations Monitoring

Monday 1st November 2021

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Law and Regulation
 - People and Business Change

The meeting terminated at 5.20 pm