

# Minutes



## Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

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Date: 4 February 2022

Time: 10.00 am

Present: Councillors L Lacey (Chair), P Hourahine, M Al-Nuaimi, Y Forsey, C Ferris, M Evans and F Hussain

In Attendance: Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Transformation and Corporate Centre), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance), Amie Garwood-Pask (Service Manager Accountancy - Finance Business Partnering), Connor Hall (Scrutiny Adviser), Anne Jenkins (Governance Team Leader) and Samantha Schanzer (Governance Officer)

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### 1 Declarations of Interest

None.

### 2 Apologies for Absence

None.

### 3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Scrutiny Adviser agreed to clear up confusion over Cllr Evans' attendance in the minutes of previous meetings.

A committee member asked for an update on the Economic Development Strategy mentioned on page 8.

The minutes of the previous meeting held 21<sup>st</sup> January 2022 were **accepted as a true and accurate record**.

### 4 2022-23 Budget and Medium Term Financial Projections

The Head of Finance introduced the report.

The Head of Finance informed committee that the detailed proposals were renewed in the two service-based Scrutiny Committees.

The Head of Finance noted that there had been a different process this year as there were no budget savings. The Head of Finance highlighted the optimistic view taken within the proposal based upon the previous years' budget settlements. The Head of Finance noted that they had remained careful despite this optimism and wanted to be realistic in their optimism and have alternative plans if the settlement was lower than expected.

The Head of Finance highlighted that the budget draft settlement had been received from Welsh Government later than usual. The Head of Finance noted that it had been a large settlement across the sector that had been above optimistic assumptions.

The Head of Finance highlighted that Welsh Government had signalled that the settlement needed to cover the increase in social care workers' pay to the national living wage, and there being no Hardship Fund going forward.

The Head of Finance informed committee that Welsh Government had been able to provide a medium-term settlement.

The Head of Finance informed committee that consultation is ongoing.

The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate reiterated that they were in a different situation than previous years due to the increased allocation and good settlement. The Strategic Director informed committee that consultation had taken a different form as a result as there were no specific savings, and instead the focus had been put on the proposed increase to council tax, investment proposals and fees and charges.

The Strategic Director informed committee that they had also undertaken engagement activities throughout the year with the public regarding their prioritisation of services. The Strategic Director noted that they had received almost 1000 responses prior to the budget settlement that indicated a general prioritisation of schools, children's and adult services, city services, and homeless support.

The Strategic Director noted that the current consultation was being undertaken primarily online.

The Strategic Director raised comments made by committee in the previous year:

- The Strategic Director highlighted that social media usage had been raised previously and now was being used regularly to feature the consultations. The Strategic Director noted that pop up advertisements were not being used as they had a negative response.
- The Strategic Director noted that the comment regarding engagement with schools in the previous year and that consultation messages have been sent to all Newport schools.
- The Strategic Director informed committee that the Connected Communities teams were working with "hard to reach" communities to ensure their visibility and engagement as requested by committee in the previous year.

Councillor Forsey raised the following points reporting back from her attendance in other scrutiny meetings:

- The Place and Corporate committee felt relieved at their being no cuts and therefore not having to choose between cuts no one wanted to enact. The committee welcomed the investment in schools but were concerned with inflation. The committee welcomed the increase in provision for the rough sleepers budget. The Finance Officer present explained how the Council had been affected by lack of fees for room hire and leisure services, and that the council had been able to claim for these through the Hardship Fund, which has supported offsetting some financial aspects of the pandemic
- The People committee welcomed the budget and also were relieved that no cuts were necessary. The committee welcomed the investment in schools and the provision of free school meals for all children throughout the year. The committee also welcomed the increase in pay for social care workers, as well as work done to bring children in care back into the local area. The committee discussed the pressure on school places in some areas, and felt that there was a lack of clarification on the size of new schools being built on housing estates being determined and that there were discrepancies between predictions for places and actual applicants.

**Questions:**

Should schools and social care establishments have been consulted?

- The Strategic Director informed committee that the Schools Forum had been consulted on the overall budget. The Strategic Director felt that schools would be pleased. The Strategic Director noted that there were ongoing negotiations with care providers.
- The Head of Finance informed committee that they were engaging and receiving feedback from primary and secondary schools' Headteacher's bodies. The Head of Finance acknowledged that the efforts of the individual schools and that the Welsh Government funding had helped. The Head of Finance noted that the free school meals were not in this budget as there was direct funding from the Welsh Government for this.

Without being able to see more consultation data it was difficult to comment specifically on the consultation aspect of the budget.

- The Strategic Director agreed that this was a valid point and felt in future there may be need to review the timings of meetings and process.
- The Head of Finance felt that expanding the conversation to include budget planning might be helpful. The Head of Finance noted the quick turnaround period and the limitations it created.

Was there any indication of the number of responses that had been received?

- The Service Manager Accountancy informed committee that there had been 556 through bus Wi-Fi and 72 other responses.

There had been an increase in the grant from Welsh Government for the increase in properties in the city - what order of assumption had been made for this?

- The Head of Finance informed committee a large settlement had been received for the current financial year due to a correction to the data that drives the distribution of total funds. The Head of Finance informed committee that Newport gets bigger percentage share every year mainly due to population growth and the young population growing at greater rate than most other council areas in Wales. The Head of Finance noted that is normally taken account of in budget planning and was always a judgement call as it is the size of the total funds that matter, and that they try to be prudent but reasonably optimistic.

## 5 **Conclusions of Committee Reports**

The committee would like to receive consultation data sooner to enable them to be more constructive in their recommendations and comments.

A committee member asked whether the increase to council tax had been discussed at the previously mentioned Scrutiny meetings.

- Councillor Forsey confirmed it had been addressed in the Place and Corporate committee meeting.

The Scrutiny Adviser confirmed that it had been mentioned in the report at hand, and while hadn't been brought up during the presentation, questions could be passed to the relevant Officers.

## 6 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

The Scrutiny Adviser informed committee that the recommendation to clarify questions within the Welsh Language Strategy questionnaire had been completed and that the full strategy would be published in both English and Welsh.

The Scrutiny Adviser informed committee that the Economic Development Strategy would receive an update in the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2022 meeting for Place and Corporate.

- A committee member asked why the strategy had been taken from this committee and given to the Place and Corporate committee.
- The Scrutiny Adviser assured committee that he would ask for clarification.

The meeting terminated at 10.55 am