

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 25 July 2022

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors J. Cleverly (Chair), C. Reeks, M. Linton, J. Harris, M. Howells, S. Adan, G. Horton, B. Perkins, J. Reynolds and K. Thomas

In Attendance: Councillors J Clarke and D Batrouni, Gareth Price (Head of Law and Standards), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director – Transformation & Corporate Centre), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Kevin Howells (HR and OD Manager), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance), Richard Leake (Payments and Procurement Manager), Andrew Wathan (Chief Internal Auditor), Kate Osment (Strategic Communication Manager), Silvia Gonzales-Lopez (Head of Environment and Public Protection), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Pamela Tasker (Governance Officer) and Anne Jenkins (Governance Team Leader)

1 Apologies

None.

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 July 2022

The Minutes of the previous meeting held on the 11th July 2022 were **accepted** as a true and accurate record.

4 2021/22 Service Plan End of Year Reviews

People and Business Change

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall Strategic Director Transformation and Corporate Centre
- Tracy McKim- Head of People, Policy and Transformation

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation gave a brief overview of the report stating that a lot of the work completed was Covid support and the service previously provided Civil Contingencies support and planning and provided risk assessments. Staff moved to a new way of working which was a huge HR and Digital shift during that year. The team led a lot of participatory budgeting supporting communities and the team also led on the development of risk framework and were responsible for the different plans such as Climate Change plan, Energy plan, Strategic Equalities plan etc. The team worked closely with the Shared Resources Section- SRS to provide IT and through this the control of the Councils

Information risk. Last year the team was responsible for Community Cohesion which was moving to a new service next year.

Through the report the major programmes were around the 'New Normal' taking staff into the new way of working. A new project has been started to redesign the Councils Corporate website and there would be further reports on this next year. There was also a lot of information transitions for example, Land and Registry work.

Members asked the following:

- Members asked what safeguards were in place for people's wellbeing working remotely and was there any feedback on this as well as the safety of data.

Members were advised that feedback had been received from the beginning of the pandemic and more recently and people reported to be much less happy when they had no choice but to work from home. Now the Civic Centre was a lot busier, and people were able to come into work more often and the social aspect of this was very important as well as teams working together.

Members were advised that in terms of the Information Governance that not much had changed, the technology and infrastructure in place, in terms of the VPN was the same in the Civic or at home. Staff needed to be more careful with the disposal of confidential waste. Headsets were now provided if people did not want to be overheard. Individual assessments and desks and chairs have also been provided to individuals if needed. The Employment Partnership Forum with the Unions would be taking place soon to look at changes to staff policy to review home working going forward. Members were also advised that regular guidance was provided to avoid problems as a lot of staff were working from home. New systems were being implemented and there was guidance on passwords in circulation to raise awareness.

- Members commented on data disruption and if a staff member wanted to destroy any sensitive data at home.

Members were advised that staff were encouraged not to print at home and to return data to the Civic Centre.

- Members asked as to whether the system logged what was printed.

Members were informed that printing was not actively monitored.

- Members asked whether staff could print to a non-Council printer.

The Digital Services Manager advised that this could be checked but assumed that it was not possible as a driver would need to be installed on the laptop for the printer. Members were advised that the individual was responsible and if an individual really wanted to print they could. Members were informed that there was an Information Governance Group which the Head of Law and Standards was a senior member, and the Committee was assured that data security was taken very seriously.

- Members asked that if Members printed at home, how was this disposed of safely.

The Chair reminded the Committee that there was a confidential waste bin in the Members room.

- Members commented on staff wellbeing and productivity and in terms of productivity if good ideas were made in the office what mitigating steps were put in place to try to get the best of both worlds. Members also asked if Occupational Health were still able to assess and make changes for staff working from home.

Members were advised that individuals were having a 1 to 1 check in with their manager where possible. There were still team meetings taking place online but there were more meetings happening face to face. The Civic Centre was still being looked at in terms of space and trying to keep teams together. In terms of staff wellbeing, it was acknowledged that some staff were working too much and needed to be more flexible, and the team were also working towards a more flexible model so staff could choose their hours. In relation to physical wellbeing individuals could complete their own assessment and if a more specialist assessment needed then a service was used but if more specialist again then the office might be best for those staff.

The HR and OD Manager advised Members that staff were able to log onto the wellbeing portal and staff absence was being managed. Wellness at Work approach was more supportive and proactive rather than the previous Management Attendance. Wellbeing check-ins were also used to develop a supportive workplace which was launched in January 2022 to manage staff absence in a different way. So far 100 wellbeing check-ins had been completed and staff wellbeing was much more at the forefront.

- Members stated that they were pleased that the needs of staff were being considered. Members commented that Councillors were there for the people of Newport and things have changed drastically since lockdown and the way that the Council delivers services have changed. Members asked how was the Council planning for nothing to be lost with the withdrawal of one-to-one services.

Members were advised that the team had worked very hard on risk assessments during the pandemic and the team supported other service managers in their role with the public. Members were advised that the Council was made up of about 5,500 staff where 3,500 worked in schools who worked the whole way through the pandemic. 1000 staff deliver social services whose social care role had not changed. 1200 staff worked at home at any one time. The Pandemic had changed how services were delivered. Some services were delivered one to one, then and now.

- Members asked that if 1,200 people worked at home at any one time what was the current numbers of staff working at home now.

Members were advised that figures could be provided to Committee at a future date and that during an occupancy assessment completed before the pandemic the most people in the Civic was about 354, with about 200 now which was not a huge difference.

- Members commented that it was interesting that staff had said that they were initially unhappy working from home.

The Strategic Director stated that working from home was not good for some people's wellbeing. Some people were working from shared rented accommodation with little space which was not ideal. Staff worked now in a more hybrid flexible way which was encouraged as it cut down on CO2 emissions and congestion in the city.

- Members asked was there an update on the Land Registry.

Members were advised that it was still ongoing and was about 18 months away from completion. It was a national long-term project.

- Members asked about the Brexit Task and Finishing Group and what was the strategy in place to review their role.

Members were advised that the issues discussed there were now general risks; the cost of living, the humanitarian crisis in the Ukraine and Brexit was no longer treated in isolation. Brexit issues were worked on as they arose, and a set of issues were reported to Cabinet from a range of external factors as well as other post Covid pressures.

Members were advised that there was a series of work streams across WLGA for Post EU transition which identified a series of issues and risks associated with the global economy post Ukraine which brought in additional challenges for the Council.

- Members asked for an update as to whether there was a large number of EU migrants coming into Newport.

Members were informed that during the EU transition period there was a lot of support given to EU nationals regarding settlement status applications. Newport was also an Asylum Dispersal Area and there were about 500 asylum seekers housed in Newport. There were 2 schemes in relation to the Ukraine where homes were used to house Ukrainians and Newport was involved in the Afghan translation scheme to support Afghan people with accommodation and support. Following the Syrian conflict Newport was also involved in the Vulnerable Persons relocation scheme for the last 5 years. There were also people who fail asylum who were no recourse to public funds which was a big challenge, but it was unknown as to how many of those individuals were in Newport.

- Members asked about the performance measures for the national number of apprentices per 1000 employees. The target for 2021/2022 was 20 per 1000 and the target for 2020/21 was 29 per 1000 employees. However, as the actual number of 7 apprentices were taken on, what was the target for 2022/2023 and was this realistic and achievable.

Members were advised that there were 2 apprentice campaigns during that year and concluded this year but there had been a poor response. At the time individual areas were recruiting for apprentices. In the first round there were 5 apprentices taken on and there were 12 posts, but these were not filled. There was a need to work with service areas to see if apprentice posts could be filled instead.

- Members commented that the Council stood back and changed their approach which was positive to see.

The Chair thanked the Officers for attending.

Law and Standards

Invitees:

- Gareth Price Head of Law and Standards

The Head of Law and Standards gave an overview of the report, and advised this service area was a period of transition and from the 1st April Public Protection had moved to Environmental Services. Similar with Cabinet member responsibility, in future Public Protection would come under Councillor James Clarke who was Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Housing. Law and Standards and Corporate Services would come under Councillor Batrouni. The Leader was Cabinet Member for Democratic Services, the Democratic process and Mayoralty.

The review was focused on the Public Protection side as it was the Public Protections service that was at the forefront of the pandemic in terms of the trace and protect service and in terms of regulation and the enforcement of restrictions. Members were informed that a special mention was given to Rhys Thomas-Principal Environmental Health Officer who lead

the Covid response from Newport City Council. He has been awarded a Newport Award for his service.

Members were informed that a special mention was given to Keith Leslie-Environmental Health Officer who managed the TTP Service. A special mention was given to Jonathan Keene who had been seconded to Torfaen and managed the Gwent response. A special mention was given to Matthew Cridland-Regulatory Services Manager Commercial Standards and his team who were responsible with the Police to encourage businesses and helping them with risk assessments. The move to the recovery phase and some of the measures that were put in place were refined and carried through to the next phase. Some of the measures that Licensing put in such as regulating tables and chairs on the Highway with social distancing in place, was necessary to regulate that. This was a key improvement in terms of Newport retaining its purple flag status.

Remote meetings were a huge achievement for staff in the Democratic Services Team supported by the Digital Services Team. Member training and development support was also another significant achievement. Staff had been pulled off certain services, however the service plan still showed a good performance but there were impacts there as the targets in the service plan remained challenging. If the team were meeting targets easily then the scrutiny targets were not challenging enough. This was flagged up in the service plan. The areas of backlog were the Food Inspections and there had been a backlog of this over a few years as officers were brought into the Track and Trace service. In terms of recovery a plan had been agreed with the Food Standards Agency so this was prioritised with risk and would take two to 3 years to come back to what the area was pre-Covid.

The only red area was the Local Land Charges as 79% searches were being done in 5 days at the moment. Normally it would be about 95-98% but that's not been possible and have been suspended for a while completely at one time. There was an ongoing project to centralise the data at the Land Registry in Swansea so people would be able to access this service online, but this would take time.

A special thanks was given to former Cabinet Member Ray Truman who previously oversaw the portfolio for many years and was a great support.

Members asked the following:

- Members asked about acronyms such as MTFP and HMLR and whether there was a glossary to explain them.

Members were advised that MTFP was Medium Term Financial Plan and HMLR was Her Majesty's Land Regulation. It was noted that a glossary would be useful for future reports.

- Members stated that they were aware that the Environmental Health Team were seconded to the Track and Trace team, and it was asked were those members of staff back in the team.

Members were informed that a significant number had returned as core staff were kept as not all staff were seconded. The current Gwent Track and Trace was being phased out and there would be a new TTP scheme in the autumn joint managed with Caerphilly. This had been a phased withdrawal over the last 6 months.

Members were informed that there was a recruitment and retention problem across the Council, and this was being looked at corporately. It was a particular issue in Environmental Health, where officers were in high demand and remain that way now post Covid. The Council was now competing with other local authorities and Public Health, so this was a problem going forward.

- Members commented that routine inspections in their ward had been reinstated which was a great relief and that there was a lot of value in becoming a Health and Safety Officer.
- Members commented on the retention of staff and whether the area of Environmental Health could recruit apprentices.

Members were advised that it was an issue across the board and the Council was looking to revise terms and conditions. Internal training was very important, and the challenge was to keep staff once they were trained.

Members were advised that discussions had been held at the Local Government Association meeting around recruitment and retention which was an issue in the Public Sector in general. Members were advised that there was an entry points programme ongoing which included the apprentice scheme as well as the Graduate programme. There was graduate Grad staff starting in September. There was an Emerging Leaders programme also in place to build this internally.

Finally, there was work with the Public Service Board ongoing to work experience placements and work was ongoing with other managers in the Council to develop specific trainee areas. Members were informed that there was an equalities issue and that the Councils need to serve communities better so bringing in younger people and people from different communities was important.

- Members asked how competitive were the Health and Safety Officer posts advertised and how likely are we to retain this staff once employed.

Members were advised that in comparison to other local authorities there were some differences but for this particular issue Council salaries did not compare with Public Health Wales. There was a significant difficulty in recruiting and retaining IT staff as those people could work for any organisation since the Pandemic. Staff stay for a few years and move on. Social workers are similarly paid across authorities, but Newport Council was probably not as competitive as we would like to be.

- Members requested a long-term strategy on how some of these problems could be addressed and how some of these gaps could be closed.

Members were informed that there was no long-term plan as there would have to be a revamp of the pay structure to increase pay ranges and this was not affordable. The only option was to hire staff, train them and accept that they would move on in time and start the process again.

- Members asked on what the options were to tackle this process.

Members were informed that a future work programme could show comparisons of pay grades across the board. For a Local Authority the generation of additional income was not as easy to do as a Public Sector body as we are covered by Welsh Government, so it was more likely to be able to increase the level of people coming in as people were not always motivated by money and they looked at other terms and conditions. These are also attractive and will retain staff.

- Members referred to page 89, point 15 in relation to the landlords response where 229 landlords have not responded what steps were to be put in place to ensure they responded.

Members were informed that those were enforcement issues that had gone on the backburner during Covid. There was a need to now address this, and it would be escalated so prosecutions could be made.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance.

Finance

Invitees:

- Meirion Rushworth - Head of Finance
- Robert Green - Assistant Head of Finance
- Andrew Wathan - Internal Chief Auditor
- Richard Leake - Payments and Procurement Manager

The report was presented to Committee by the Head of Finance who stated that it had been a challenging year during Covid. The Finance service had been at the front end of supporting communities and businesses. The Revenues team had been involved in making rates rebates and providing covid grants to businesses. The Benefits team had been at the front end of supporting businesses with various supports. This year it was still the case. The cost-of-living payments were supported by the Benefits team. There was a knock-on effect so there was some catching up to do. The Benefits service and Customer Services have also joined the service area.

Last year there were lots of successes regarding Covid support. There were 700 Covid grants given at nearly £2million, and a £24 million hardship fund had also been claimed. The area did not meet Performance Indicators for reasons set out in the report due to a lot of illnesses in the team as the team did not have the manpower. There were some challenges on council tax which was still continuing due to the cost-of-living challenge. There was progression on all objectives. However, the team was bogged down in digital projects in the self-service of revenues. The UK Government initiative on council tax had also been delayed. There would be a catch up in the new service plan and the new way of working and new normal was sometimes challenging. Audit have been used to meeting staff and getting records face to face. The Cost-of-living issue seemed to have overtaken Covid and it was early days but there was some pressure there.

Members asked the following:

- The Chair commented on the Cost of Living where letters had been sent out and one of the OAP's in their ward had no access to the internet. The Chair had contacted Finance and had a response very quickly.

The Head of Finance confirmed he had received a few emails regarding the cost-of-living payment which had been resolved. Members were advised that there had been 55,000 individual payments that have been made and the first 30,000 payments had been made in the first 24 hours due to them being paid by direct debit. There was a difficulty getting the last 10,000 payments made as there was a time limit on them.

- Members acknowledged that 55,000 was a huge proportions of households in Newport which was a sobering thought.
- Members referred to the risk assessments and whether there was a lot of change and was it going up.

Members were advised that the financial management reduced this risk, and the financial forecasts became clearer, but the others remained the same.

- Members referred to page 104 on workforce planning and if we were halfway through should it be 50% through timescales rather than 10%. Also on page 108, 10% was in amber.

Members were advised that the team were getting stuck on the projects in revenue. The first part enabled for self-service. There was then an impact on the structure off

the team and the operating model. There was some work done on this as it was green at 10% and its where it should be. On page 108 this was the same issue so repeated, so this was not a lot of concern.

- Members commented on page 110 and the upgrading of the financial system and commented that Councillors had been informed previously that the information could not be migrated on to other devices such as laptops. One of the potential ideas being put forward was being able to access information on various devices, and Members asked where does the department stand on this as there was a lot of sensitive information so if this was being accessed on a mobile this could be a problem.

Members were advised that from an access of systems there were ways of doing this in a safe way. There was a pilot ongoing called Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) which was a portal which segregates on a device so doesn't store any data on the device, so it was a portal into the system to operate from. If the device was lost the data could be wiped by IT. Members were advised that this new system would allow the facility to be available so it was not able to deliver the access issue just because of a single project it would be an organisational switch.

Members were advised that being targeted with ransomware was always a risk but there was a need to know if the risk was worthwhile. The portal pilot was ongoing for 8 months and if the capability was there a business decision would be made. However, if an individual did things outside of the policy, then this was difficult. Members were advised that the new system was cloud based so we would not be hosting this ourselves. Mobile access could be worked on so we can say what is allowed and not allowed.

- Members referred to the data accessed on a mobile and asked that due to this data being accessed through a third-party app it was the persons own data at risk not the Council data.

Members were informed this was correct and that if an individual started to encrypt files, then they would be locked out of the system.

- Members asked about business grants and the Covid grant and where the Council was with fraudulent claims and how we were progressing with recovering them.

Members were advised that fraud checks had been completed and this was well thought through and the amount of frauds identified was very low. The fraud cases identified were given to the Police to be investigated.

- Members referred to the checks completed on Covid grants claimed which was quite strict and stringent and were a lot more difficult to obtain then UK Government.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance.

Conclusions

People and Business Change

- Members commented that it was positive that the Council changed the approach in apprentice recruitment to work more collectively and it was a positive effect from Covid that the Council worked smarter. Members were also pleased to hear about proactive approach made with E-Learning and the new
- Members sought clarification on whether printing was possible on a home printer from a Council laptop.

- Members asked if the service area could provide figures on final staff numbers working from home and what those figures were at present.
- Members requested that a report on staff recruitment and retention is brought to the committee, as well as comparator information against other local authorities and what the Council offer as a whole.

Law and Standards

- The Committee wished to thank all staff in the service area for their response work and support during the Covid pandemic, and were pleased to hear the hard work this had been recognised at a national level by Welsh Government, Public Health Wales and Wales Audit.
- Members requested that future reports could include a glossary of acronyms and abbreviations.

Finance

- Members praised the service area for their prompt response to issuing cost of living payments to residents, and also wished to thank officers for the fast responses to Councillor's emails requesting help on behalf of their constituents.
- Members requested an update on plans for updating financial systems and specific fraud training.

5 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

a) Action Plan

The Scrutiny Adviser stated that on page 127 that the actions and recommendations made had been sent out to the Heads of Service and Cabinet Members. No comments have been sent in as yet so this would be chased up. The first comment made to Regeneration, Investment and Housing regarding information on other options besides emergency accommodation would be chased up with the Head of Regeneration and Economic Development. The comment made to City Services on the plan for residents being made aware of Charging points would also be followed up.

The Scrutiny Adviser then advised the Committee of the dates of the next two meetings, with the following agenda items to be discussed:

Monday 15th September 2022 at 4pm, the agenda item;

- Draft Annual Forward Work Programme 2022-23

Monday 14th November 2022 at 4pm, the agenda item;

- Mid Year Performance Reviews

The meeting terminated at Time Not Specified