

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

- Date: 5 December 2022
- Time: 4.00 pm
- Present: Councillors S Adan, J Harris, G Horton, M Howells, B Perkins, C Reeks, J Reynolds and K Thomas
- In Attendance: Councillors L Lacey and D Batrouni, Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance), Kevin Howells (HR and OD Manager), Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager), Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager), Andrew Wathan (Chief Internal Auditor), Emma Johnson (Income Collection Manager), Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement and Payments), Paul McCarthy (Benefits Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Taylor Strange (Governance Officer), Emily Mayger (Governance Officer).
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1 Apologies

Councillors Jan Cleverly and Malcolm Linton. As the Chair of Committee gave apologies for the meeting, the joint Chair of Committee, Councillor Howells, would chair the meeting.

2 Declaration of Interest

A Member queried as his brother was presenting an item in the meeting, would a declaration have to be made. The Member was advised that as Scrutiny is not a decision making committee, a declaration does not have to be made.

3 Council Service Plans 2022 - 2024

People, Policy and Transformation

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate
- Councillor Dimitri Batrouni – Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation
- Councillor Lacey Lacey – Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Assets
- Tracy McKim – Head of People, Policy and Transformation
- Janice Dent – Policy and Partnerships Manager
- Kevin Howells – HR and OD Manager
- Mark Bleazard – Digital Services Manager

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation gave an overview of the service plan, and advised the Committee that the service area covers a wide range of areas such as Organisational Development, HR and Business Change, and Digital Services to name a few. The service plan also links with the Council's Corporate Plan. The Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation put a large focus on Objective 1 how data already collected

by the council and how this can be used in a more effective way, and also highlighted the goal of aligning more systems into the intelligence Hub. More information on how this information will be laid out in the future in regard to this objective.

The Cabinet Member also wanted to thank the Head of People, Policy and Transformation and the Strategic Director for all their work and informed the committee that they are happy to answer any questions they have

Members asked the following:

- A member asked what was changed in this service plan compared to the last.

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation highlighted that the service area previously managed civil contingencies however this was moved into Infrastructure Community cohesion has become a part of Housing and Communities as it overlaps stronger with their service area. The equality aspect of community cohesion is still part of the service plan. Property and Assets have come into this service as noted by the Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Assets.

The Committee were also advised that Customer complaints, as well as Freedom of Information requests are now a part of digital instead of previously being with city services. Using the complaints can help the greater understanding of the citizens.

- Would the changes to the council website be done in house or externally?

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation noted that the changes to the website would be an 18-month long project. However, changes would be seen throughout the project. A focus is making sure systems don't experience drops off by developing the back-office systems robustly

The Digital Services Manager highlighted that a focus will also be put on improving the standards of digital literacy through skill learning.

- What safeguards were in place to allow non digitally literate members of the public to communicate with the council?

The Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation confirmed that the "to face" element of the council will still exist and not be lost, but rather a greater focus will shift to the use of digital technology such as apps. Due to Newport having one of the largest young person population in wales, there is a large focus on making services more accessible in a digital sense The Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation detailed that the website will be critical in the development of a future digital program of better services on an online platform. The Digital Services Manager highlighted that a focus will also be put on improving the standards of digital literacy through skill learning.

The Committee Member agreed that digitisation is important and reaffirmed the need to not exclude those who are not digitally literate.

- Whether the council is getting a good value from the use of "Newport Norse"?

Members were advised that the Newport Norse partnerships recently came to the Performance Scrutiny Committee – Partnerships to be scrutinised, and details could be given to the Committee after the meeting. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation noted a different model of costing will be considered in the next couple of years.

- Why certain performance targets haven't increased from last years' service plan?

Due to the public service pressure and the scale of change demanded the targets while still high will be set higher in the future.

- A member queried whether any geographical locations had issues with low connectivity

The Digital Service Manager noted that some analysis had been undertaken but that the council has a limited ability to act due to connectivity of homes being a largely commercially driven issue

- Would public Wi-Fi within the city would be extended?

The Digital Services Manager confirmed that 50 buildings have public Wi-Fi with there being plans to save money but still preserve the service. A Member would like school kids to be informed of this due to the focus on the young generation. The Digital Service Manager advised the member that something can be done in relation to this.

- Is the Council a “living wage” employer?

The OD & HR Manager detailed that the council works on a system whereby if employees pay drops below the living wage the wage is topped up to meet the standard. The council does work with partners mainly in the public sector in regard to the “living wage The Strategic Director also confirmed that supplemental pay is provided.

- Can the Council organisations outsource repairs?

The Strategic Director advised that there is a corporate landlord policy in place but that council properties don't specifically have to use Newport Norse, however the business they use must fulfil certain criteria. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation stated that there may be an issue with more affordable companies and making sure that services used by the council are ethical.

- Concern was raised over mental health following the global issues in the past years. Members asked why the percentage of manager checks ins is lower than the target?

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation noted that dealing with community mental health is in various services plans. The Policy and Partnership Manager informed the committee that work with Aneurin Bevan Health Board and Public Health Wales as well as other partners both statutory and 3rd sector. The Council is also looking at becoming a “Marmot city”. The Policy and Partnership Manager also referred to a joint partnership workshop held in November with Public Health Wales. The Council does work within the community such as community events where the public is able to get advice on the cost-of-living crisis and mental health.

The Cabinet Member for Organisational Development detailed the impacts frontline services and how the community looks with a focus on how to capture issues that could impact people's mental health and how that information can be used many services that interact with those suffering. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation highlighted that during covid formal checks were relaxed although informal still were occurring. It was noted that the previous system for formal checks was not the best however a new streamlined system has been given to managers in recent times.

A member iterated the importance of the conversation rather than if its recorded formally, they would like the target to be 100% for staff check ins. The Strategic

Director furthered the point made by The Head of People, Policy and Transformation, in which he mentioned the previous check in system wasn't flexible. Also noting that front line staff such as those in social work have monthly meetings on top of check ins. The Strategic Director was confident that the reached target of staff check ins will be at least to pre pandemic levels.

- Members requested a full list of council assets.

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation highlighted that getting a full list would be difficult at current but that one could be shared in the coming months.

- Members queried whether digital skill learning would be for staff but also the external community.

The Digital Services Manager informed the member that it isn't possible to implement a large-scale program to the general public, however they would support partners who run these schemes. A Member then asked how the strategy would be implemented from start to finish. The Digital Services Manager informed the committee that the strategy is still not complete, with the focus on not making statements that can't be followed through on. The strategy has aims to be ambitious nevertheless.

- A Member asked whether the Digital Plan was a part of the People Plan.

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation informed the member that in order to complete the Digital and People Plan, they needed the Corporate Plan to be finalised. In the coming months both plans will be better developed. Following this the People Plan will then be finalised.

- A Member asked about whether the Equality training provided by the Council was also provided by staff.

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation highlighted that Equality training is provided to wider staff but is more focused on more a more rounded job focused training. The member followed up by asking if they use the fairness commission parameters. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation stated that they relate to the parameters but aren't directly in the training. The Policy and Partnership Manager highlighted the different levels of training that staff have gone through, with the importance being on what they need.

- Is increasing diversity a priority, as well as increasing it in specific fields?

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation informed the member that the Council is working on different ways to be more inclusive. The HR and OD Manager furthered the need to go back to the community and encourage them to apply for "job entry point schemes" as well as finding better ways to advertise them

- A member asked the details of the guarantee interview scheme.

The OD & HR Manager informed the member that for Disability, Armed Forces and care leavers have the scheme in place but those included in the guarantee interview scheme will be reviewed.

- A Member asked about health and safety training for those working from home. The HR and OD Manager stated an online tool was used for assessing whether they have done the required health and safety training.

The Committee thanked the Officers for attending.

Law and Standards

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate
- Councillor Dimitri Batrouni – Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation
- Elizabeth Bryant – Head of Law and Standards

The Head of Law and Standards presented a brief overview of the Service Plan, and talked briefly about the professional and statutory services. It was advised that the Constitution was being reviewed on a continuing basis as the focus should be on what members of the public need, as well modernising working practices. An electronic booking system was being implemented for registering births, a 3-year project will focus on the digitalisation of the land registry. Finally, the Democratic Services Manager will start to look at digital technology that can be implemented during elections.

Members asked the following:

- A Member queried the controversy from the Welsh Government in regard to voter registration

The Democratic Services Manager informed the committee that there have been many challenges due to the differences in England and Wales. With the legislation partly devolved, with the aim of making residence aware of the changes and differences between the parliamentary elections and the devolved elections.

- Could students from the University in Newport be brought into the Council straight after graduation?

It was advised that the Council works closely with the university, such as offering training contracts to law students. The Head of Service also highlighted a legal training post that is currently advertised.

- Could more information be provided about the management situation of the Coroners.

The Head of Service advised that the Coroner's management is not being outsourced, but Newport Council will be taking over the management of the Gwent Police Coroners, of which there are 5 of. This will be discussed with Gwent Police, and the final details will be formalised soon.

- Are fees for registration and land being checked against other local authorities, and re these fees also regulated by an authority?
- It was advised that the fee cost associated with land checks are statutory, however non statutory costs associated are lower than in most other Gwent authorities. A review of Registration fees was done, and it showed Newport were in line with other authorities
- If Land Registration checks are being brought online, would this see an impact to cost those using the service?

Members were advised that the National Land Registration organisation is in control of the timeline of the online service deployment. A transitional payment will be made to the Council. The target for Land Searches is still lower due to the inability during Covid-19 to conduct physical searches, however according to an audit noted that the figure didn't reflect the full level of searches taken.

The Committee thanked Officers for attending.

Finance

Invitees:

- Meirion Rushworth - Head of Finance
- Robert Green – Assistant Head of Finance
- Andrew Wathan – Chief Internal Auditor
- Emma Johnson – Income Collection Manager
- Richard Leake – Service Manager Procurement and Payments
- Paul McCarthy – Benefits Manager

The Head of Finance gave an overview of the service plan, and informed the committee that Customer Services, as well as Benefits were now included in the Finance service area. The Head of Finance commented that the Customer Service Manager unfortunately couldn't be in the meeting.

Members asked the following:

- Members asked for a summary of the changes since the previous service plan.

The Head of Finance detailed to the member that the previous two years were focused on Covid 19 support. The heavy focus on covid support was coming towards its end. There is now a greater focus on self service and digital services as the service area has taken on both benefits and customer services.

- What service area was Benefits previously in?

The Benefits Manager noted that Benefits was previously in City Services

- How will threats of cyber-attack be minimised following the larger use of cloud-based systems?

Members were advised that the new system would be hosted by the supplier, and therefore they would provide security. The Head of Finance did mention that SRS would be on hand to help where needed. The Assistant Head of Finance furthered the Head of Finance point that the company would have had their security checks vetted before being given the contract

- What were the findings from the new recruitment approach?

The Head of Finance noted the difficulties in filling positions in Audit and Procurement due to the competitive nature and the salaries that other organisations can offer. This has therefore led the Council down the trainee route to fulfil these positions. The Service Manager for Procurement and Payments advised the focus is now to train someone up and tailor them to the specific arrangements rather than trying to compete in the highly competitive market. The Head of Finance noted the issues with recruiting qualified professionals in certain fields. Hence the larger focus on trainee roles.

- Are there any council investments that are non-ethical?

The Head of Finance highlighted that currently all investments come from ethical UK based portfolios, however when complicated investments are looked at, it may become more difficult to determine this.

- A Member questioned why collected areas of council tax weren't higher

The Head of Finance stated that the council aims to maximise on all debts up for collection, the councils target is 98% of all debts collected which has been achieved. The Income Collections Manager there is a target every year to recoup 30% of every outstanding debt going as far back as the records go. During Covid-19 this was lowered due to the global impact of the pandemic. It was stated that courts struggled to process the cases in order to recoup although this is slowly being caught up.

- Query was made about the length of call times in the City Contact Centre.

The Head of Finance advised that the Customer Services Manager gave apologies for this meeting, but would get the information to send to the Committee.

- A member asked about conditions around homeworking for new trainees.

The Head of Finance detailed that most staff work 2 days in the office, although the Head of Finance wanted to affirm that new staff will have other staff around them to support them. The Head of Finance also relayed to the committee that staff who wanted to work in the office full time had the capacity too. The Strategic Director highlighted that during the pandemic health and safety measures were in place so that staff would wanted to work in the office could.

- Members advised they would like an update on staff pension funds being invested in ethically based as well as more information the capital and treasury investment strategy considering climate change.

The Head of Finance noted a big push from councils to de-invest funds from certain place, with the trend noted as going in the right direction across Wales. The Head of Finance highlighted that the pension fund is there to make money however they feel that ethically based companies will likely be the ones that are successful in the future, however this will not be achieved at 100% by the 31st of December. The head of Finance noted an annual letter from “the friends of the earth” was published in recent times, with the Head of Finance highlighting that the Council website having included something about it on there.

- What impact would robotics have on staffing in terms of freeing up staff to do other work or reducing job posts?

The Head of Finance pointed out that benefits from robotics will be to make the system as efficient as possible. The Benefits Manager relayed that the robotics will have uses in automating the benefits assessment that someone may be entitled to such as automatically checking if they are entitled to council tax reduction.

- Asked if an update could be provided on those who are entitled to claim benefits yet don't and how they are made aware of this.

The Head of Finance pointed out that benefits from robotics will be to make the system as efficient as possible. The Benefits Manager relayed that the robotics will have uses in automating the benefits assessment that someone may be entitled to such as automatically checking if they are entitled to council tax reduction.

- A Member asked if there is any metrics in the last year for the amount of debt relieve orders or for the total amount of debt written off.

The Income Collections Manager highlighted that they don't feel in the previous year there was an increase in debt relief orders, however as people start to struggle in the

cost-of-living crisis this could change. Debt councillors may also signpost them to such orders therefore potentially leading to an increase. The Income Collections Manager noted they can send the information to the Committee on the amount of debt relief orders given.

- The Chair asked whether there will be a reduced number of staff needed in Benefits as the migration from legacy benefits to universal credit occurs over the next 18 months?

The Head of Finance noted that if a workload decrease occurs then this may lead to a revaluation of the team size.

- The Chair asked whether discretionary housing payments (DHP) would be used to help support members of the city struggling and how well was the information in relation to the DHP publicised? Also, has all the allocated DHP been spent?

The Benefits Manager informed the members that it wouldn't be possible to use it for mortgage or council tax arrears, but it can be used for homelessness prevention. The housing team help indicate those most at risk of eviction in order to help those most suffering with the DHP.

- The Chair asked if all the allocated DHP was spent?

The Benefits Manager detailed to the Committee that all if not more than the allocated money was spent each year. The Head of Finance added that contact with the housing team helps inform the Council with the aim of preventing homelessness where possible.

The Committee thanked the Officers for their attendance.

Conclusions

People, Policy and Transformation

- The Committee wished to give their thanks to Officers for attending. The Committee were happy with what was presented within the draft Service Plan.
- The Committee noted that there are an older demographic that might not have access or be able to use technology for online services, and that they cannot afford to be left behind. Members advised that we need to make sure as a Council, we are accessible for everyone.
- In relation to performance measure ***“Percentage of managers undertaking regular check-ins”***, the Committee would like to see a target of 100%, and would be ideal if managers could meet their staff once a week, whether it be online or face to face. Members took on board how check-ins are currently recorded, but suggested that there could be a different approach made to ensure check-ins are regular and targets are met.
- The Committee discussed **Objective 4, Reference 2** and asked if they could have a list of the Council's assets and land, and also to be made aware if there are any restrictions or availability within the assets and land. Members were advised during the meeting that a project will be put together over the coming months and the service area will share with the Committee.
- The Committee request if the project overview section on the Service Area Projects – ***“Digital Strategy Developments and projects to deliver”*** – could be rephrased to note

that this project is currently in development and what also what the service area are trying to achieve.

Law and Standards

- The Committee wished to give their thanks to Officers for attending. The Committee were happy with what was presented within the draft Service Plan.
- In relation to **Objective 4, Reference 2 – “Undertake a review of staffing structures within the Registration and Coroners Service and identify any changes required to address workload issues, legislative changes and budget pressures”**, The Committee would like to receive feedback from the meeting with the Police in relation to taking on the Police’s five staff members.

Finance

- The Committee wished to give their thanks to Officers for attending. The Committee were happy with what was presented within the draft Service Plan.
- The Committee were pleased to note that the mental health implication of staff has been taken into account with hybrid working and were reassured to hear that staff who wish to work within the Civic Centre everyday are able to.
- Performance Measures **“Percentage of Council Tax arrears collected”** and **“Percentage of NDDR arrears collected”**, The Committee felt that these targets should be higher. However, the Committee were pleased to hear that the service area always try to take maximum collections of all debts.
- The Committee discussed project **“Upgrade to a new financial system”**, which is Cloud-based. After hearing from Officers that the platform is safe and safeguards are in place, Members would like to know whether it was asked in procurement meetings with suppliers that their platforms are secure and have the required safeguards.
- The Committee were pleased to note the update on **Objective 1, Reference 8** relating to Climate Change, as the deadline is fast approaching. It was requested that Members can see a copy of the letter sent to the service area from Friends of the Earth.

4 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee:

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser advised the Committee of the agenda items for the upcoming two meetings:

Monday 23rd January 2023 at 4pm

- 2023-24 Draft Budget Proposals and Medium Term Financial Plan

Monday 20th March 2023 at 4pm

- Retention and Recruitment

The Scrutiny Adviser suggested that the Budget Meeting start at an earlier time, as there will be seven service areas with budget proposals to discuss. The Chair and Committee agreed, and suggested that there be several comfort breaks allotted for officers.

The meeting terminated at 6.45 pm