

# Minutes



## Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

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Date: 15 January 2024

Time: 12.00 pm

Present: Councillors M Howells (Chair), J Cleverly, S Adan, J Harris, G Horton, A Pimm, C Reeks, J Reynolds and K Thomas

In Attendance: Paul Jones (Strategic Director – Environment and Sustainability), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate Centre), David Walton (Head of Housing and Communities), Silvia Gonzalez-Lopez (Head of Environment and Public Protection), Stephen Jarrett (Head of Infrastructure), Tracey Brooks (Head of Regeneration and Economic Development), Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Mark Howcroft (Senior Finance Business Partner (Place and Corporate)), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Taylor Strange (Governance Officer) and Simon Richards (Governance Officer)

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### 1 Apologies

Councillor Linton

### 2 Declaration of Interest

None.

### 3 Minutes of the previous meetings held on 27th November 2023 and 11th December 2023

The Minutes of the previous meetings held on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023 and 11<sup>th</sup> December 2023 were held as a true and accurate record with the following amendment:

27<sup>th</sup> November 2023 – page 8, point 6 – **“The Strategic Director noted that bringing all unadopted roads up to standard would cost £12 million, which is not viable considering the current financial position.”** The Committee wished to include more detail from the discussion in the minutes so residents are aware of the road adoption process. The Scrutiny Adviser advised the Committee that this would be amended.

### 4 2024-25 Budget and Medium Term Financial Projections

Invitees:

- Paul Jones – Strategic Director – Environment and Sustainability
- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate Centre
- Meirion Rushworth – Head of Finance
- David Walton – Head of Housing and Communities

*This document is available in welsh / Mae's ffurflen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg*

- Silvia Gonzalez-Lopez – Head of Environment and Public Protection
- Stephen Jarrett – Head of Infrastructure
- Elizabeth Bryant – Head of Law and Standards
- Tracey Brooks – Head of Regeneration and Economic Development
- Tracy McKim – Head of People, Policy and Transformation

- The Head of Finance introduced a brief overview of the budget process.

### **Budget Pressures and Investments**

The following was discussed:

#### **Housing and Communities**

##### **Shortfall in Housing Benefit subsidy arising from increasing demand for temporary accommodation**

- The Committee raised concerns about the reduction in the Communities for Work grants by the Welsh Government and its impact on homelessness services. They questioned if the proposed additional funding of £600,000 would be sufficient, considering the £1 million overspend from the previous year. They also enquired about strategic asset investment to address the reliance on bed and breakfast accommodations for temporary accommodation and homelessness. The Head of Housing and Communities advised ongoing work with Registered Social Landlord partners to develop more social and transitional accommodations and emphasised the focus on homelessness prevention. The Strategic Director acknowledged the increasing pressures and the need for a long-term plan to address homelessness, while also highlighting the need to monitor the impact of grant changes and refine the financial position accordingly.

#### **Environment and Public Protection**

##### **Costs associated with increasing requirement for tree maintenance**

- The Head of Environment and Public Protection explained that the ongoing costs associated with tree maintenance, including the need for intervention in various tree species, are separate from the specific project addressing ash dieback. The maintenance costs are attributed to the ongoing need to manage and maintain trees on public land, adopted highways, schools, and other areas due to issues causing structural damage and the need to increase tree cover. This ongoing maintenance proves to be quite costly in terms of resources.
- The Committee asked about the projected costs for tree maintenance in the next few years, and the Head of Finance confirmed the figures. The Committee expressed the need for clearer communication regarding such budget items. The Head of Finance acknowledged the suggestion of aligning budget reports for better clarity.
- The Committee asked about the Council's equipment and capabilities for tree maintenance in relation to ash dieback and whether any of the allocated £115,000 would go towards plant and equipment. The Strategic Director explained that the majority of tree maintenance work is outsourced to contractors due to the need for specialised machinery, such as cranes, which would not be cost-effective for the Council to own.
- The Committee questioned whether the allocated budget of £115,000 for tree maintenance in subsequent years could vary, and the Strategic Director confirmed that it could fluctuate based on historic performance and the identification of tree defects.

### Landfill site closure – associated loss of income.

- The Committee enquired about the £975,000 investment related to the closure of the landfill site and its associated loss of income. The Head of Environment and Public Protection explained that the landfill site at the Docks Way site is reaching the end of its life and will no longer be able to accept waste, leading to a loss of income. The Strategic Director clarified that there are no plans for a new landfill site, as the trend is towards reducing disposal and increasing recycling and incineration. The Committee also sought clarification on the impact of the landfill closure on commercial businesses in Newport. The Head of Environment and Public Protection advised on the upcoming workplace regulations that will require businesses to segregate recycling, leading to a decrease in residual waste. Additionally, the Committee sought assurance that the Council would continue to provide businesses with waste collection services. The response confirmed that the Council would continue waste collection services, and non-recyclable waste would be directed to Trident Park for disposal.
- The Strategic Director clarified that the closure of the landfill site would only affect the disposal of waste into the landfill, and that the site's commercial operations and public waste disposal facilities would remain the same. Additionally, the Strategic Director advised that medium-sized businesses may need to consider alternative waste disposal methods, such as incineration, due to cost-effectiveness and tax considerations.

### Infrastructure

#### Bus station departure charges

- The Committee questioned the £225,000 pressure for bus station departure charges and the lack of a budget allocation for the following year. The Head of Infrastructure explained that public transport operators pay a departure charge to use the bus stations, but the bus industry is undergoing significant funding changes. The end of bus transition funding and the consideration of new funding contribute to the pressure. Increasing the departure charge to cover the gap could negatively impact bus routes and residents.
- The Committee enquired about the previous identification of the budget shortfall related to bus departure charges, which the Strategic Director confirmed would have been covered by subsidies in the past. They also discussed the historical context of the issue, highlighting that the shortfall was not a recent development due to the end of transitional funding. The Strategic Director explained that the costs have increased over the years, leading to the current gap in the budget. The Committee sought clarification on whether the figure represented actual costs or a loss of revenue, to which the Strategic Director confirmed it as a loss of revenue. They also discussed the contributions from bus companies and the impact of the departure charge on the budget shortfall. The Strategic Director emphasised the significant gap between the realistic expectation of bus departures and the budgeted revenue. Finally, the Committee enquired about addressing the issue in the future, to which the Strategic Director explained that once the pressure is addressed, the gap in the budget would be eliminated.
- The Committee expressed their concern about including the bus costs in the budget every year without finding a solution. The Strategic Director explained that one alternative would be to pass the costs fully to the bus companies, but this could result in a significant reduction in bus services. The Committee mentioned the need to wait for the Burns report to assess the impact of any changes.

- The Strategic Director explained that the Council subsidises bus routes in various ways, but this budget investment specifically focused on departure charges. The Chair emphasised the need to understand the current payment before determining if there is a deficit. The Strategic Director clarified that the gap in the budget developed due to a decrease in the number of bus journeys, resulting in a shortfall. The Head of Finance provided additional context, advising that many councils charge bus operators for accessing and using bus facilities to cover the costs of infrastructure maintenance. They acknowledged that the current departure charge may not fully cover the costs but increasing it significantly would require careful consideration. The Committee expressed the need for the cost per trip to align with the actual maintenance costs. The Head of Finance acknowledged the comment and explained that the budget adjustments were necessary to ensure the budget is appropriately sized. The cost per trip could be a topic for discussion during the budget review.
- The Committee questioned why the bus charges were not recurring in the budget and why they were not being included. They expressed concerns about inflation and the potential impact on bus services, suggesting that the budget should reflect these ongoing costs. The Head of Finance clarified that there is an existing budget for departure charges, and the £225,000 mentioned is a reduction in that budget line. The bus companies will continue to be charged for using the bus station, and the adjustment is necessary to ensure the budget is appropriately sized. The Committee asked if there would be additional costs in the coming years, to which the Head of Finance explained that it would depend on factors such as bus patronage and service levels. They acknowledged the need to consider future developments, such as the Burns report and the city centre's housing and transportation provisions. The Head of Finance mentioned that if there is higher patronage and more bus services in the future, there could potentially be savings associated with the budget. The Committee emphasised the importance of considering these factors in the budget and showing indicators of future considerations. The Head of Finance clarified that the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) covers a three-year period and assumes a certain level of bus patronage for the next year and relatively flat levels for the following two years. Adjustments can be made if there are changes in bus services and patronage patterns.

#### Fleet maintenance – budget pressures in relation to tyres and other supplies.

- The Committee raised concerns about the ongoing budget pressure for tyres and other supplies, questioning whether it would be included in the budget for future years. The Head of Finance confirmed that once a figure appears in the budget, it is assumed to be a permanent and ongoing cost unless there is a negative adjustment in the following year.
- The Committee questioned why the maintenance contract did not include services such as tyre replacement to avoid repeated payments, and suggested renegotiating the contract to include all maintenance services. The Head of Infrastructure explained that they already secure services competitively and ensure appropriate purchasing through term or framework contracts. The Strategic Director advised that the contract is for a specific duration and parts prices tend to increase over time. The Chair asked if the Council leases vehicles, to which the Strategic Director clarified that the discussion pertained to the maintenance of Council-owned vehicles. The Chair suggested that tyre replacement could be included in the lease charge for full repairs. The Strategic Director acknowledged that such negotiations may have been considered during procurement, but factors such as the number of vehicles and the rising costs of parts and staff wages need to be taken into account.

#### **Regeneration and Economic Development**

### Staffing resource to fulfil the client role in relation to leisure services.

- The Committee requested a broad outline of the new role and if a job description had been written for it. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development explained that the funding management areas are complex, with a document of about 600 pages outlining the Council's expectations and the services to be delivered by Newport Live. They have monthly liaison meetings with Newport Live to discuss relevant issues, but there is room for improvement in understanding the finer details of the funding management agreement. The Committee expressed the need for a better mechanism to provide feedback from constituents regarding the services of Newport Live. They suggested following up on this matter when someone is in place to address it.
- The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development advised that they have client contracts but not one specifically for Newport Live, which is a significant multi-million pound contract. They believe that having additional resources would help them manage the contract more effectively, as it currently requires a significant amount of their time. While they cannot guarantee savings or efficiencies at the moment, they believe that having more focus and scrutiny on contract management would be beneficial, especially considering feedback from audit reviews. The Strategic Director emphasised that Newport Live is delivering services on behalf of the committee. The goal is to ensure that the Council has enough resources to effectively oversee these services. This is seen as an opportunity to address any deficiencies and improve the overall management of the contract.
- The Committee raised concerns about whether the proposed position is necessary for one person, considering that it hasn't been needed previously. They also highlighted the significant salary of £65,000, which they consider to be a reasonably senior position within the Council. They questioned the savings or benefits that would be delivered by this position, especially in a time of budget cuts. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development emphasised the importance of maximising efficiency and return on the multi-million pound contract with Newport Live. They felt that having someone dedicated to scrutinising the contract and ensuring accurate reporting to the Council is necessary. While they acknowledged that additional efficiencies may be derived, they currently allocated a portion of their and the service manager's time to this task.

### Energy budget requirement for new leisure centre.

- The Committee expressed doubts about the figures regarding the energy budget requirement for the new leisure centre, and commented that £500,000 has been allocated to subsidise the medium-term financial plan for this year and the next, but they believe that it doesn't cost £500,000 to run the leisure centre. They suggest that there may be a surplus from the centre that could potentially cover the £500,000 required in year three. The Strategic Director explained that the current budget associated with Newport Centre for energy is £500,000, which has been treated as a saving for the Council in the next two years. However, it was always understood that this money would need to be returned to the budget once the leisure centre was operational. They highlighted that the Council has benefited from this arrangement for the past two years, and the money would be allocated back into the budget in year three.
- The Committee questioned whether the energy costs would reduce significantly, considering the zero carbon nature of the building and the significant solar investment. They wondered if the costs would be much less than half a million pounds going forward. The Strategic Director responded, explaining that the original

budget for energy costs was higher. Adjustments were made when energy prices increased, and some net savings were put forward last year. The challenge lies in the transition from gas to electricity. The savings from using electricity are currently marginal compared to gas, as the price of gas was cheaper. The long-term projection is that the price of gas will increase as necessary, and electricity costs will be lower. The Strategic Director noted that gas cannot be used past 2030, meaning that while there are some savings due to energy efficiency, the fact that gas cannot be used going forward offsets some of those savings.

### Law and Standards

Increased contribution to Coroner's Service, resulting from additional staffing resources and the running costs of the new building.

- The Committee enquired about the input of other councils in the increased costs of the Coroner's Service. The Head of Law and Standards confirmed that other councils are fully involved in the process and will contribute based on their population size.
- The Committee clarified that the minimum investment needed from Newport City Council's perspective is £85,000, which is the Council's share of the investment.

Resources (external and internal) required to support the Transformation Programme.

- The Committee asked if there are plans to take into account the Welsh Government's policy of taking profit out of children's care when looking at children's care transformation. The Strategic Director referred to the Eliminate agenda and the regional and Newport transmission teams associated with it, which are already looking at the transformation of children's care. The Performance Scrutiny Committee - People would be involved in the ongoing work related to the transformation. The Strategic Director highlighted the link between the Eliminate agenda and the assets work, with the goal of reducing the burden on the Council and ensuring the right assets are in place for children's services.
- The Committee expressed concern about the high percentage of children in care in the private sector and the need to address the lack of existing assets. The Strategic Director advised of the existence of an asset board and the involvement of the Head of Children's Services in that agenda.

### People, Policy and Transformation

Property budget pressures, including income shortfalls and additional maintenance costs

- When advised about the price pressures in estate management, the Committee queried about an underspend of £115,000 in 2025-26 that was forecasted. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation agreed to look at these figures and confirm. ***(Following the meeting, it was clarified that the £115,000 was not referring to a future underspend, but the reversal of a temporary budget pressure introduced in 2023/24. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation confirmed that there was an overspending situation year on year.)***

### New Budget Savings for Consultation

**02 - To transform Malpas Court Mansion House into a new Community Learning Centre. To meet changing customer demand, develop Library community outreach whilst reducing the number of physical sites.**

- The Committee expressed support for transforming Malpas Court due to its underutilisation, but opposed the closure of Pill Library, highlighting its importance to the BME community and its role in education and language learning. The Committee suggested relocating the Community at Work team to the library space in Bettws

Library and utilising it for workshops and services for young people. The Head of Housing and Communities acknowledged the importance of libraries to communities and expressed willingness to consider the Committee's input during the consultation process.

- The Committee questioned the workload and responsibilities of the proposed Community Librarian position, which would replace two grade five posts. They expressed concern about one person covering the entire area of Newport and requested more details on the role's responsibilities. The Head of Housing and Communities explained that the workload would be manageable within the existing structure, with support from the community regeneration manager and library manager. The specific program of events and services would be shaped through consultation and tailored to meet the needs of the community.

### **03 - Charge for replacement (residual waste) bins**

- The Committee asked if there would be any dispensation for residents who are unable to control the safety of their bins, such as those living in areas prone to theft or without secure storage. The Head of Environment and Public Protection clarified that the charging only applies to refuse bins, while recycling boxes and garden waste bins would still be provided free of charge. The provision of bins incurs costs related to managing requests and delivery. The Head of Environment and Public Protection acknowledged that some locations may be more disadvantaged in terms of bin placement, but the measure would apply equally to all residents. The Committee enquired about whether residents were charged for replacement bins in the previous year and the revenue generated. The Head of Environment and Public Protection confirmed that the measure was not implemented in the previous year.
- The Head of Environment and Public Protection confirmed that the charge for a replacement residual waste bin would be £23.70, and this appears in the Fees and Charges section in Appendix 5 of the agenda.

### **04 - Highways fees and Charges - Increase of Fees by 8%**

- The Committee enquired about the allocation of funds for unexpected issues such as potholes and pipe repairs. The Head of Infrastructure explained that there is a revenue budget specifically designated for reactive maintenance, including pothole repairs. The budget is utilised on an annual basis to address these issues as they arise. Highway inspectors and customer contacts help identify areas that require action related to potholes. The Chair advised the Committee that the Highways Asset Management Plan will provide more detailed information on maintaining and repairing highways, which will be discussed in future committee meetings. The Strategic Director confirmed that the core revenue budget for highways maintenance has not changed as part of the budget proposals.

### **05 - Reduction in Newport Live Management Fee**

- The Committee enquired about whether the reduction in fee is in line with the agreement. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development explained that the funding management agreement states that the funding will be set each year. However, the fee reduction has not been reviewed since the trust was established and the contract was awarded. Last year, they implemented a 10% reduction in light of the financial situation and the need for businesses to review their operations and delivery. They propose another 10% reduction this year, acknowledging that it may not be necessary to come back every year with the same request. They expressed that, at this time, they consider a further 10% reduction to be reasonable.

## **06- Closure of Civic Centre for two days a week, reducing spend on utilities**

- The Committee asked if the entire building would be closed or if there would still be some areas in use. They also expressed concern about the impact of temperature fluctuations on the building's fabric. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation confirmed that the proposal was to close almost all of the building, with only a few small pockets that required maintenance remaining open. For example, the CCTV staff still needed to work from the building due to the infrastructure involved. They explained that the heating system couldn't be fully compartmentalised due to the building's outdated design. As a result, the proposal aimed to close most of the building, except for the manageable small areas. The Committee acknowledged the challenge of temperature fluctuations and the need to heat the building when people entered, especially considering the fabric's vulnerability. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation agreed that it was a challenge. They mentioned that the proposed closure aimed to extend the weekend by shifting the heating problem from Monday to Tuesday, although there was already a heating challenge on Mondays. They further explained that finding arrangements to close the building for two additional days a week was a real challenge. However, they emphasised the need to explore all budget options and identify ways to achieve savings, with building closure being one of the potential approaches.
- The Committee asked if alternative models, such as closing the building for four days every two weeks, had been considered. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation acknowledged that alternate models could be fed back from scrutiny and explained that this proposal highlighted the cost implications of one day. They advised that different models and different days would result in slightly different savings, as they had calculated based on the varying footfall on different days. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation further discussed the practical considerations, such as handling mail and post, which often required physical scanning and posting, even if electronic methods were used. They noted that many staff did not have printers and relied on coming to the civic building for printing. They emphasised the importance of convenience and mentioned the possibility of exploring other locations.
- The Committee raised concerns about the practical implications of closing the Civic Centre for a few days and asked about provisions made to safeguard employee well-being and ensure the delivery of services, considering the loss of human interaction and collaborative work that occurs in an office setting. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation advised that the unions had been involved in changes to working from home policies. They explained that they would discuss the proposed savings in more detail with the Employee Partnership Forum. They clarified that most Newport City Council staff had contracts allowing them to work from home or come into the building, and some had applied to work full-time from home. They assured that agreements with the unions were in place, but they were also aware of staff who needed to come into the office due to unsuitable home environments or other reasons. The well-being of employees was a priority, and they had conducted staff engagement and well-being surveys to address concerns.
- The Strategic Director added that they had already experienced changes in work practices due to the pandemic and advised of a previous initiative called "The New Normal," which involved extensive engagement with unions and staff. Many employees already had a hybrid work arrangement, coming into the office for 1 or 2 days a week and working from home for the rest. They acknowledged the complexity of maintaining services that required face-to-face interaction, particularly in



departments like social services that had a front door in the Civic Centre. The Strategic Director emphasised the Council's track record of working closely with trade unions to ensure the well-being and welfare of employees. They advised of the ongoing efforts to address concerns and conduct well-being surveys. They also acknowledged the need to consider alternative locations for those unable to work from home full-time and the importance of maintaining engagement and teamwork.

- The Committee enquired whether there were any possibilities of redundancies with the proposal. The Committee were advised that the proposal does not include any staffing impacts because the savings are based on reduced energy consumption.
- The Committee asked if the footfall numbers noted earlier (250 to 300) included both staff and visitors. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation clarified that those numbers were likely only for staff and that they could double-check. They mentioned that the number of visitors to the Civic Centre was generally low, with most coming for specific requirements such as a Taxi Licensing review. They explained that the number of customers visiting would depend on the services located in the building. However, they acknowledged the need to gather more specific figures on visitor numbers. The Committee expressed concern about accommodating visitors who may not have online access or internet and rely on physically coming to the building. They emphasised the importance of informing such individuals that they should visit on Tuesday to Thursday instead of Monday to Friday and ensuring that alternative locations were available for them if needed.
- The Committee inquired about the number of people who visit the Civic Centre on a daily basis, specifically those who cannot work from home and come to the building five days a week. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation advised that the specific data on the number of daily visitors had not been collected yet. They advised that the system for logging in was relatively new, and the footfall numbers provided earlier were averages over a short period. They are currently reviewing the specific needs of departments and services within the Council in case the proposed changes were implemented.

## **07 - Fraud prevention initiative**

- The Committee asked about the process for investigations and potential challenges if someone disputes the accusations. They enquired whether there would be an appeal process, possibly involving Magistrates courts. The Head of Finance responded that they would need to establish their own framework for conducting investigations. They advised that the implementation of the policy would focus on cases where someone had claimed benefits for at least eight weeks when they should not have. They referred to their existing work on the National Fraud Initiative, which involves data matching and investigations resulting in actions being taken. They explained that if deliberate withholding of information was suspected, they would go the extra mile and pursue fines. The Committee then asked about the current appeal process for disputes. The Head of Finance advised they did not have that information but assured the Committee that they would obtain it from the Revenue department.
- The Committee asked about the estimated number of individuals with fraudulent intent per year. The Head of Finance responded that they had made a realistic assumption based on the background information, and the figure they used was 350.

- The Committee asked for background information on the draft budget's mention of legislation for increasing teacher pension costs by £3.4 million. The Head of Finance explained that all public sector pension schemes are valued and revalued every three years to ensure that the funds are sufficient to meet the liabilities. In the case of the teachers' pension scheme, it has been revalued, resulting in a 5% increase in the employer's pension contribution. The £3.4 million figure represents the impact of this increase on the Council's budget. The Head of Finance advised that the teachers' pension scheme is a UK national scheme that applies to all authorities across the country.
- The Committee questioned whether the shortfall in the pension scheme was due to mismanagement by those responsible for it. The Head of Finance clarified that the valuation of the scheme is conducted by the Government's Actuary service, and the cost increase is guaranteed. They explained that they were awaiting final confirmation that the Welsh Government would be funded by the UK government, and if so, the cost would be passed down to local authorities. They assured the Committee that the increase in pension costs would be funded nationally and would not affect Council Tax.

The Chair thanked the Officers for attending.

#### **Conclusions:**

#### **Comments to the Cabinet on the following proposals:**

- a) The Committee noted the budget proposals relevant to the Place and Corporate Directorates and agreed to forward the minutes to Cabinet as a summary of the issues raised.
- b) The Committee wished to make Cabinet aware that throughout the meeting and questioning of Officers, the Committee were concerned that the information presented for consultation is poorly presented and easily misunderstood. For example, in the appendices around budget savings over the Medium Term Financial Plan, the documents do not make clear that investments in Year 1 will continue in Years 2 and 3. Members were concerned that the same misunderstanding could be made by members of the public when responding to the consultation. The Committee also wished to recommend that more detailed budget training is provided to all members to help ensure that the documents are fully understood and to enable proper scrutiny to take place.
- c) The Committee wished to make the following comments to Cabinet on the Proposals within the Place and Corporate Directorate:

#### **02 - To transform Malpas Court Mansion House into a new Community Learning Centre. To meet changing customer demand, develop Library community outreach whilst reducing the number of physical sites.**

- The Committee recommended that Cabinet need to ensure that the impact on service users for this savings proposal is minimal. The Committee also suggested that there were other options which don't appear to have been explored, such as the Community at Work and the Youth Service move into Bettws Library to ensure services are not lost.
- In addition, concern was raised about the workload of the new Community Librarian post that would be created. The Committee felt that it may be too much work for one

person and emphasised the need for realistic expectations and ensuring that residents who use the services would see a significant difference.

### **03 - Charge for replacement (residual waste) bins**

- The Committee were content for this proposal to go ahead. The Committee recommend to Cabinet that the policy is implemented with an element of discretion given to Officers on implementation, to protect the most vulnerable individuals across the city as well as discretion to protect individuals who may not be able to afford replacement bins or who may face difficulties in managing their bins due to their living situations.
- The Committee recommended to Cabinet that the Council should implement a coding/labelling system with a barcode on each bin with its address to prevent theft or misuse.
- The Committee also felt that the cost of the replacement bins should have been noted in the main commentary of the savings proposal and not just in the Fees and Charges section in Appendix 5, making it difficult for members responding to the consultation to locate the detail.

The Committee also wished to leave comments on the following Savings investments for the Environment and Public Protection service area:

#### **Costs associated with increasing requirement for tree maintenance.**

- The Committee felt that they did not get an adequate explanation on this saving investment, only that contractors were called in for tree maintenance. The Committee were also concerned that the documents did not make clear that the budget increase is £115k in Year 1, £230k in Year 2 and £345k in Year 3. The committee questioned the need for £345k investment in Year 3 and also questioned the need for investment of £690k over a 3-year period.

#### **Landfill site closure – associated loss of income.**

- The Committee were content with this savings investment, but wished to comment that consideration must be given to the impact on our net zero targets of having lorries transport waste to other locations to ensure that the net zero goals are not compromised.

The Committee were also concerned about the Stray Dogs Reclaiming Fees within the Fees and Charges in Appendix 5 – regarding dogs reclaimed within 4 hours being charged at £54.00 per dog. The Committee questioned the fairness of the implementation of this fee at the current level and recommended Cabinet gain an insight from the service area into its planned investment. The Committee also asked for further information from officers as to whether there has been an increase in the amount of XL Bully dogs being given up or abandoned since the new laws come into action.

### **04 - Highways fees and Charges - Increase of Fees by 8%**

- The Committee were content with this proposal.

The Committee also wished to leave comments on the following Savings investments for the Infrastructure service area:

#### **Bus station departure charges.**

- The Committee wished to recommend that the bus station departure charges should not be added as a permanent budget line. Instead, it should be treated as an annual

subsidy or grant to the bus operators, subject to review each year based on the performance of the bus services and other factors. The Committee suggested that this addition to the budget is effectively the council subsidising fares for members of the public and should be credited as such. An additional reason for assessing it each year as a subsidy is the ongoing work by the Burns Transport Commission might have a significant impact on sustainable public transport and mean the subsidy may not be needed in future if user numbers increase. Also, the Council should consider the net zero impact of the bus station charge and explore ways to minimise its impact on bus fares and services.

- The Committee also commented that they would like to consider the bus service charges as a future agenda item to be added to the 2024-25 forward work programme. The Committee asked significant questions to officers around the budget, costs of running the service, rent to Friars Walk, infrastructure costs and were not entirely satisfied with the answers provided. The area is complex and a sustainable, affordable transport network is a vital service, so the Committee felt it would be appropriate to give the area focus and scrutiny.

#### Fleet maintenance – budget pressures in relation to tyres and other supplies.

- The Committee wished to ensure that the Council follow best value and procurement practices to obtain better value for fleet maintenance services, as well as considering renegotiating the contract for fleet maintenance services to include the cost of tyres and other supplies as part of lease charges.

#### 05 - Reduction in Newport Live Management Fee

- It was acknowledged that the reduction in the management fee would result in cost savings for the Council, but concern was raised about the potential impact it may have on the facilities and services provided by Newport Live. The Committee would like to know what services, if any, may be cut by Newport Live as a result of the reduction in the management fee and at the time of the committee meeting, that information wasn't available to Officers.

The Committee also wished to leave comments on the following Savings investments for the Regeneration and Economic Development service area:

#### Staffing resource to fulfil the client role in relation to leisure services.

- The Committee questioned whether this resource was needed, as the role was not required in the past, and there was no indication what the extra resource would be made up of as a business case was not presented. The Committee felt that Officers were unable provide acceptable justification for the need for the additional post or whether it was required to be a full-time post. The Committee recommended to Cabinet that it satisfies itself that the post is needed given the budget pressures and the requirement to reduce resources elsewhere.

#### 06 - Closure of Civic Centre for two days a week, reducing spend on utilities

- The Committee recommend that Cabinet put this savings proposal on hold until the proper analysis of the data is understood and the impact that this will have on our people and services. Concerns were raised that more contextual data was needed, such as details of length of time the quoted 250-300 staff were working in the Civic Centre. In addition, no information was available on the number of staff who work at the Civic Centre full-time and no account has been taken of the requirement to heat the building from cold more regularly which could result in higher costs overall. The Committee recommended to Cabinet that whilst this budget line was attractive as a saving, the impact is considerable and should be considered in the wider context of

our overall Asset review, as decisions now may affect the ability of that review to rationalise assets in the future. The Committee were also concerned that the timeframe was too short to consult with staff and understand the impact on well-being.

The Committee also wished to leave comments on the following Savings investments for the People, Policy and Transformation service area:

Property budget pressures, including income shortfalls and additional maintenance costs.

- The Committee queried the 2025/26 £'000 column which the service area will review with Finance. The Committee recommended that Cabinet be satisfied with the correct data given to them and that the consultation documents are amended if needed. In general, the Committee were content with this savings investment.

**07 - Fraud prevention initiative**

- The Committee were content with this proposal but wished to recommend to Cabinet to ensure that the Council develop a robust set of policies and procedures for implementing the scheme to ensure fairness, such as presenting a clear set of parameters for appeals, how they are investigated and how the Council would mitigate the possibility of being fined if appeals are overturned against the local authority. The Committee also cautioned that the costs of the additional investment of resource in investigations and appeals may mean the £70 statutory fine for each case is not worth the effort required to manage the process.
- The Committee would like to receive information about the appeals process for this initiative once available.

The Committee also wished to leave comments on the following Savings investments for the Finance service area:

Resources (external and internal) required to support the Transformation Programme.

- The Committee recommended that Cabinet satisfies itself that these resources are required given the budget pressures and need for savings elsewhere

**5 Scrutiny Adviser Reports**

Invitees:

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

**a) Forward Work Programme Update**

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

**Monday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2024**, the agenda item;

- Highways Asset Management Plan
- Flood Risk Management Strategy

**b) Action Sheet**

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the action sheet to the Committee and advised of the completed and the actions that are still outstanding.

The meeting terminated at 4.10 pm