

Minutes



Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Date: 9 October 2023

Time: 2.00 pm

Present: Councillors P Hourahine (Chair), P Bright, S Cocks and M Evans

In Attendance: Beverly Owen (Chief Executive), Cllr Jane Mudd (Leader of the Council), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Transformation and Corporate Centre), Sally Ann Jenkins (Strategic Director - Social Services), Paul Jones (Strategic Director - Environment and Sustainability), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager), Donald Mutale (Senior Equalities Officer), and Amanda Bouadana (Senior HR & OD Business Partner)

Samantha Schanzer (Scrutiny Adviser), Simon Richards (Governance Support Officer), Taylor Strange (Governance Support Officer)

Apologies: Councillors M Al-Nuaimi, B Davies, G Horton, C Baker-Westhead and L James

1 **Declarations of Interest**

None.

2 **Minutes of the previous meeting held on 8th September 2023**

The Committee asked whether a response had been received following the letter that was sent to the University of South Wales.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate informed Committee that he had received an immediate response from USW which advised there would be an internal discussion and agreed to ask for a follow up.

The minutes of the previous meeting held on the 8th September 2023 were agreed as a true and accurate record

3 **Annual Corporate Plan Self-Assessment Report 2022/23**

**Invitees: Councillor Jane Mudd (Leader of the Council),
Beverly Owen (Chief Executive),
Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate),
Sally Ann Jenkins (Strategic Director for Social Services),
Paul Jones (Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability)**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report, and the Chief Executive gave a summary of the report.

Well-being Objective 1

The Chief Executive (CE) gave a summary of this objective.

Questions:

The Committee queried how visitor numbers were calculated.

- The CE informed Committee that these numbers were based on a national indicator. The CE agreed to provide an answer outside of the meeting for Committee.

The Committee stated that they had been unable to find an update for the Economic Strategy and City Centre Masterplan and felt that it was difficult to compare without this. The Committee highlighted that the report covered the regeneration of the central library and Mercure Hotel but no major development in the City Centre. The Committee felt that collaboration with the Celtic Manor and ICC should be explored to entice businesses into the area. The Committee felt that there were no examples of successes or areas for improvement within the report.

- The Leader noted that the Economic Growth Strategy and City Centre Masterplan were separate reports. The Leader agreed that the Committee's point regarding no overarching update was fair but noted that progress against the objectives within the plan were reported regularly to Scrutiny and were publicly available. The Leader noted that the Local Development Plan had recently been agreed at full Council and highlighted the importance of the Cardiff Capital Region, which must be considered as a whole, not just in relation to Newport. The Leader also highlighted that Microsoft were coming to Newport after making significant investment in the region and that Keep Looking Ahead (KLA) are expanding in Newport. This includes moving sites to focus on their European activities which demonstrated the working relationship with Newport City Council, major international companies, and Welsh Government.
- The Leader noted that there had been a significant shift in retail across the UK and Newport with an expansion of small, independent businesses. The Leader noted that the Business Support Team provided support and had recently launched a Business Support Grant which was funded through the Shared Prosperity Fund. The Leader highlighted the Cabinet decision to provide rate relief for city centre businesses which, when combined with the Welsh Government rates relief, would mean that eligible businesses would not have to pay any business rates. The Leader felt that in addition to providing support and access to funding, the best possible financial environment for businesses was provided. The Leader noted that a significant portion of the city centre has been turned into residential spaces and that they were making progress against the placemaking plan.
- The CE highlighted the feedback received from KLA was positive and noted that the report aimed to balance both successes and challenges. The CE informed Committee of the Business Community Forum, which is led by businesses and assured Committee that Officers met regularly with key city centre businesses and investors. The CE considered the complexity of city centre regeneration and provided assurance to the Committee that the Council is engaged in conversations regarding empty buildings. The CE reiterated that retail is changing, and it is important to look at repurposing the city centre to include leisure, learning, and working.

The Committee agreed with the points raised and felt that attracting more students to live in the city centre should be prioritised in future. The Committee were also interested in attracting more office-based organisations into the City Centre. The Committee felt that the

Mercure was a successful development, and asked what was being done to attract more major hotels into Newport, and to address some of the challenges these may bring.

- The Leader informed Committee that they were engaged in discussions with different companies at various levels of progress but couldn't share more information at this stage due to the of the confidential commercial nature of these talks.

The Committee felt that Newport's heritage offer had potential and needed more prominence in the report.

- The CE agreed that this should be highlighted and would discuss including heritage in the report.

The Committee asked how red areas were prioritized when reviewed on a quarterly basis.

- The CE noted that it was discussed as part of the budget setting process and was about finding balance between delivering ambition and setting a balance budget.

Well-being Objective 2

The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability gave a summary of this objective.

Questions:

The Committee noted that potholes were a major issue and asked what the main factor for this was.

- The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability noted that highways are the largest single asset and required over £100 million of maintenance. The Strategic Director noted that the Highways Asset Management Plan supports the choices made about investments. The Strategic Director explained that there is a natural deterioration of highways but the regime for inspection was done to legislative standards to ensure that the asset is safe.
- The Leader recognised the challenges around highway management and noted that there had been a significant allocation of underspend from other service areas to Highways in the previous year to mitigate this.

The Committee queried why the condition of pavements had not been included in the report.

- The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability confirmed the information was a national indicator and the system for scoring could now be used for footways. The Strategic Director noted that was something to consider in future and agreed that footways were important in encouraging active travel.

The Committee queried whether there had been any cross-border discussions regarding the canal.

- The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability assured Committee that there was frequent communication with neighbouring authorities. The Strategic Director noted that new lining had been fitted to allow for better water retention. The Strategic Director noted that there was more active involvement with the Canal and River Trust and that there needed to be greater investment into the canal system which would start to be delivered next year.

Well-being Objective 3

The Strategic Director for Social Services gave a summary of this objective.

Questions:

The Committee asked if Eliminate could be explained in more detail.

- The Strategic Director for Social Services noted that it was a part of the Welsh Government's program to end profit within social care. The Strategic Director explained that it impacted on residential care and fostering for children. The Strategic Director noted that there were currently 18-20 children who are placed with private residential providers and from 2026-2027 those providers would no longer be able to register to deliver services. The Strategic Director noted that there were currently 44 children placed with independent fostering agencies which were private businesses delivering fostering services and the legislation being drafted would end the ability of these organisations to operate in Wales. The Strategic Director highlighted Eliminate would mean that Welsh local authorities cannot purchase placements with profit-making organisations in England and Wales. The Strategic Director noted that significant grants had been received to improve other service provision, but it was a challenging circumstance due to the removal of these placements.

The Committee noted that the overall assessment measures were green and amber, but the individual measures were red which seemed contradictory. The Committee noted the pressure on social services and thanked social services staff for their hard work.

- The Strategic Director for Social Services noted that there had been discussion regarding reporting and performance indicators. The Strategic Director informed Committee that there had been discussions around including more local indicators to highlight detail and make information more accessible. The Strategic Director noted that balance was important as staff were in a challenging environment but were not failing. The Strategic Director noted that performance was also about collaboration with partnerships across the city and agencies.
- The CE noted that it was difficult to make an overall assessment only using performance indicators in the report and felt that it was not only about indicators, but how projects are progressing. The CE noted the Committee's comment and agreed to reflect on it going forward.

The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability gave a summary of homelessness within this objective.

The Committee queried progress in bringing empty properties into use to support endeavors in this area. The Committee felt that empty properties could be used for temporary/short accommodation.

- The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability agreed that looking at empty properties is critical.
- The Strategic Director for Environment and Sustainability noted that there are challenges with using empty properties as they needed to be brought up to the required standards for habitation. The Strategic Director felt that the previous years had been very challenging, and demand for services had been greater than ever, with work being undertaken on programmes including additional funding to move these forward.
- The Leader acknowledged the challenges that empty properties present but felt that assumptions should not be made that all empty properties are disadvantageous to

communities. The Leader noted that the impact of Covid and the Cost of Living Crisis and the challenge of affordability cannot be ignored. The Leader agreed that there had been an increase in service demand post-pandemic and that the local housing allowance had not kept up with inflation. The Leader informed Committee that there was now more statutory support, but that the pool of accommodation was smaller. This was noted as a particular issue for Newport as a dispersal area when combined with additional pressures on housing stock. The Leader commended the new Head of Service as doing an outstanding job.

The Committee asked for clarification on the Leader's comment that not all empty properties are disadvantageous to communities.

- The Leader stated that was it correct not to assume that all empty properties present a disadvantage to a community simply because they are empty as not all are in decline or have deteriorated beyond repair.
- The Chair noted that if the Committee had specific issues about empty properties it needed to be raised in the correct forum.

Well-being Objective 4

The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate gave a summary of the objective.

Questions:

The Committee noted that the Digital Strategy was impressive and wanted clarification on the percentage of managers who are not completing check-ins with staff.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate noted that the previous system for managing check-ins had been replaced with the current HR system and incorporated into iTrent. The Strategic Director noted that this had been completed pre-pandemic but there was insufficient space to embed this as until recently it had not met the needs of the users. The Strategic Director noted that work had been undertaken with developers and managers to improve the system and that the figure was reflective of managers logging their check-in on the system, not the total amount of check-ins being carried out.
- The Head of People, Policy and Transformation (PPT) noted that figure had increased to over 60% for the first quarter of the year and that the target figure had likely been set too high when returning from Covid.
- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate noted that whilst there was room to improve in the recording on the system, it was unfair to presume that managers do not have check-ins as these could be recorded differently. The Strategic Director noted that staff wellbeing is being considered, especially hybrid workers. The Strategic Director highlighted that this was a critically important piece of work and engagement needs to be increased to develop and retain staff. The Strategic Director noted that part of the reason for the report is due to change in regulations, but it was good practice to be able to use data to identify issues and offer training and support.

The Committee noted that the figure reported for turnover of staff as being almost 20% and asked for more context, and queried whether manager check-ins could in-part address this.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate noted that they did not recognise that figure, but the usual turnover estimate would be 10-15%. A level of turnover should be expected, but unplanned or unexpected turnover raised concern. The Strategic Director noted that there are many factors in turnover numbers including grant funding ending, temporary contracts and staff leaving for other opportunities.

The Committee felt that progress in procurement was impressive and should be highlighted in the report.

The CEO noted that the report was not sufficiently emphasising some positive aspects but reiterated that to the overall aim was to balance the challenges and successes.

Conclusions:

- The Committee asked for clarification on how the number of visitors to Newport is calculated.
- The Committee recommended considering grouping the RAG ratings by objective rather than rating as this may make the assessment easier to understand.
- The Committee recommended the inclusion of scoring for footways in future reports, as highways assessments are already included.
- The Committee was pleased to see successes in the report such as progressive procurement and the heritage offer. The Committee felt that these successes could be highlighted more in the report to reflect the positive outcomes.
- The Committee recommended that the Key Decisions and Achievements table be revised so that the colours used are not the same as those used in the RAG system to ensure clear separation from this performance measurement.

4 Strategic Equalities Plan Annual Report 2022-23

Invitees: Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate)
Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation)
Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager)
Donald Mutale (Senior Equalities Officer)
Amanda Bouadana (Senior HR & OD Business Partner)

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation (PPT) introduced the report and the Policy and Partnership Manager and Senior Equalities Officer gave a summary of the report.

Questions:

The Committee noted that there had been significant improvement since last year.

The Committee queried why the section on Education focuses on exclusion and attendance but not on attainment.

- The Policy and Partnership Manager was unsure attainment had not been included in this report, but assured the Committee that it would be included in the next plan. The Policy and Partnership Manager highlighted that information would be available in other education reports and that the Welsh Government had paused mandatory reporting of these standards during Covid.
- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate highlighted that Education attainment would be monitored in the Performance Scrutiny Committee - People. The Committee noted that the report demonstrated how the authority collected data on attendance and accepted that the results of the process are reported elsewhere but the process regarding attainment was not mentioned.
- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate noted the feedback of the Committee and suggested that the Committee could recommend that it is included in the next report.

- The Senior Equalities Officer noted that when setting objectives, they worked closely with the Equalities Human Rights Commission and attendance and exclusion are included within these objectives.

The Committee noted that not all residents are IT literate and questioned what more could be done to support this demographic. The Committee also noted that the Pride March was successful and wanted to thank everyone involved.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate stated that people who are able to use IT to access services opens up more capacity for non-digital access availability for those who need support. The Strategic Director noted that there would be an end-to-end customer services review and one of the aims would address fair access which included people getting the appropriate access to services.

The Committee queried whether the amount of people who are unable to use the online services and then subsequently call the Contact Centre was recorded.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate assured Committee that they could obtain that data and there was evidence that more people used online services.

The Committee noted that the report outlines how the Council gathers lots of data, but the only data provided in any detail relates to the council workforce.

- The People and Partnership Manager noted that the workforce data was a statutory requirement for reporting.
- The Senior Equalities Officer explained that there are some areas where data has been included as it informs strategic decision making and was reported in other plans including the Corporate Plan and Service Area Plans.

The Committee noted that high staff turnover put pressure on all officers.

- The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate highlighted the overall aim of recruiting and retaining talent; two thirds of the workforce are in schools with the rest delivering varied services and turnover would be different throughout each service.
- The Senior HR and OD Business Manager assured Committee that they would be able to obtain and analyse that data to understand why people were moving on and this can be fed back to service areas. The Senior HR & OD Business Manager noted that some people are leaving for development opportunities where there is not a post available within the Council but were leaving with a positive experience of their employment at the Council.

The Committee noted that the statutory data did not include redundancies.

- The Senior HR & OD Business Manager assured the Committee that redeployment was always the first option for staff at risk of redundancy. The Senior HR & OD Business Manager noted that they collaborated with staff and trade unions but in challenging budget situations, there were regrettably redundancies.

Conclusions:

- The Committee asked to be provided with further information regarding the number of people who contact the City Contact Centre via phone as they were unable to use digital services.
- The Committee highlighted the importance of ensuring that Newport City Council offers accessible and usable services that fulfil residents requirements when interacting with the Council. The Committee highlighted that this was not exclusive to this report but was a wider theme across the Council.
- The Committee recommended that pupil attainment be included in the next Strategic Equalities Plan.
- The Committee recommended that more information about the data used to evidence the need for changes or improvements, and to measure the outcomes, be included in reports.

5 **Scrutiny Adviser Reports**

a) Forward Work Programme

The Scrutiny Adviser Informed Committee that there were no changes to the Forward Work Programme. The Scrutiny Adviser noted the date of the next meeting as the 27th October 2023.

b) Actions Arising

The Scrutiny Adviser noted that there were actions still outstanding, but they had been chased.

The Committee asked for the Chairperson to write to Officers to expedite the response.

- The Chair agreed to do this.

6 **Live Event**

The recording of the meeting can be viewed here.

The meeting terminated at 16:05.