

Minutes



Council

Date: 23 January 2024

Time: 5.00 pm

Present: Councillors C Reeks, S Cocks, E Stowell-Corten, J Harris, A Screen, L James, T Harvey, M Howells, P Bright, J Peterson, A Pimm, D Batrouni, D Jenkins, P Drewett, B Davies, S Adan, M Pimm, C Baker-Westhead, J Reynolds, R Howells, A Sterry, J Jones, G Horton, J Cleverly, P Cockeram, D Davies, M Al-Nuaimi, M Evans, D Fouweather, D Harvey, M Kellaway, M Linton, D Mayer, R Mogford, J Mudd, M Spencer, K Thomas, C Townsend, T Watkins, J Clarke, Y Forsey, P Hourahine, J Hughes, J Jordan, L Lacey, S Marshall, A Morris, F Hussain and B Perkins

1. Preliminaries

1.i Apologies

Councillors Whitehead and Routley.

1.ii Declarations of Interest

Councillor Mogford declared an interest in relation to Item 10.
Councillor Reynolds declared an interest in relation to Item 5.

1.iii Presiding Member's Announcements

This is the last meeting for Elizabeth Bryant, Head of Law and Standards who is leaving to work for Plymouth Council. The Presiding Member and council colleagues wished her all the very best for the future.

The Presiding Member requested a minute's silence for the recent passing of former Councillor Margaret Cornelious' husband Ken.

2. Minutes

The Minutes of the last meeting held on 28 November 2023 were accepted subject to the following:

Councillor Lacey was in attendance at the meeting of 28 November, this was corrected for the approved Minutes.

3. Appointments

To consider the proposed appointments set out in the report.

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Councillor Clarke moved the appointments set out in the report, as agreed by the Business Managers as set out below.

Councillor Reeks seconded the report.

Resolved: That the following appointments be agreed.

Governing Body Appointments

Governing Body	Appointments/ Resignations	Name
Pillgwenlly Primary School	Reappointment	Edward Watts
St Mary's RC Primary School	Reappointment	Charles Ferris
Ysgol Gymraeg Ifor Hael	Reappointment	Jan Cleverly
Ysgol Gymraeg Casnewydd	Reappointment	Alan Speight
Ringland Primary School	Transferred to alternative governor role	Shaninoor Alom
Ringland Primary School	Appointment	Stacey Drew

4. Police Issues

The Presiding Member introduced Superintendent J White of Gwent Police, who provided Council Members with an update on police issues within East, West, and Central Newport.

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to address Superintendent White.

The Leader welcomed Superintendent White's feedback on acquisitive theft, which was a positive outcome for shop owners.

There was concern raised by residents and ward councillors regarding the crossing outside the school on Almond Drive. Could the police add this to their patrols and provide more police presence.

The Superintendent would raise this with Inspector Welty and would make sure that maximised efforts were in place going forward.

Questions to the Police raised by Councillors:

- Councillor Morris asked if there was a definitive guide on what was allowable concerning parking on pavements. The Superintendent advised that the pavement formed part of the highway and if the car straddled the pavement and road where there are double yellow lines, then the Local Authority was responsible for enforcing penalties. If, however, the vehicle was causing an unnecessary obstruction or harm by parking in a dangerous position this could be dealt with by the Police. The Superintendent was happy to discuss in further detail outside of the meeting.
- Councillor Al-Nuaimi paid tribute to Inspector for the city centre, Richard Shapland who kept Stow Hill ward members informed on the incidents in relation to shoplifting and the recent cannabis seizure. Inspector Shapland had also attended a recent ward meeting. The Superintendent thanked Councillor Al-Nuaimi for raising this and would convey his thanks to the Inspector.
- Councillor James referred to drug dealing on Wheeler Street, residents raised concerns regarding needles found outside residents front doors. Councillor James said residents

had raised this with Shaftesbury ward members and police for six months. The Superintendent confirmed that Inspector Welty had returned to that area which would strengthen the support in Shaftesbury. The Superintendent also encouraged residents to link in with local community support officers and report issues as the police appreciated the importance of community led intelligence. The Superintendent said that he would contact Inspector Welty and this would be acted upon.

- The Presiding Member was pleased that Inspector Welty was coming back to Shaftesbury and also wanted to pass on his thanks on behalf of residents. The Superintendent mentioned that positive outcomes were measured by performance and that Inspector Welty would be contacted to link in with Councillor James.

Councillor Hourahine mentioned that the Superintendent's predecessor talked about new initiatives coming into Newport regarding off road bikes. Councillor Hourahine asked if the Superintendent could look into what could be done regarding a pro-active response from police. The Superintendent highlighted that the most important action was prevention of sales of these bikes, and this needed to be addressed with better legislation. It was a nationwide issue and Inspector Giles was the force lead in seizing bikes in Newport, with far more seizures than anywhere else. This is an ongoing challenge and as well as prevention, it was also about using proportionate tactics and there would be more activity in the coming weeks.

5. **Notice of Motion: Protected Characteristics for Care Experienced People**

The Presiding Member invited the Leader of the Council to introduce the motion, with Councillor Marshall to second:

Newport City Council acknowledges that the Children and Young People's Education Committee established by the Senedd Welsh Parliament recommended that care experience becomes a protected characteristic in UK legislation and supports the Corporate Parenting Charter in Wales which the Welsh Government has recently published inviting other public sectors organisations to become a Corporate Parent for care experienced children and young people in Wales.

This council notes:

- *Care experienced people face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives.*
- *Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account.*
- *Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment and in the criminal system.*
- *Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support in different geographical areas.*
- *As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us as an authority.*
- *As corporate parents Newport Council will commit to acting as mentors, hearing the voices of care experienced children and young people and to consider their needs in any aspect of council work.*
- *Councillors will be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society.*

This Council therefore resolves:

- *That it recognises that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination.*
- *That it recognises that Newport Council have a duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration.*
- *That future decision, services and policies made and adopted by the Council should be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic.*
- *That in the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty the Council includes care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and the annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment.*
- *To formally call upon all other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic until such time as it may be introduced by legislation.*
- *For the council to continue proactively seeking out and listening to the voices of care experienced people when developing new policies based on their views.*

Councillor Mudd reserved the right to speak at the end of the debate.

Councillor Marshall reserved the right to speak at the end of the debate.

Comments of Councillors:

- Councillor Davies mentioned that whilst protected characteristics were acknowledged under the Equalities Act 2010. Sadly, care experience is not one of these characteristics, whilst evidence showed it is clear that this has a life changing impact. There is discrimination against those growing up in the care system and the outcomes of children growing up in care has been extensively researched. There is a clear pattern of lower educational attainment and less likelihood of transitioning to higher education, as well as lower outcome of health and general wellbeing. Adults with care experience are overrepresented in socially excluded populations, such as prisons, homeless people, and sex workers. Councillor Davies therefore formally supported the motion to call upon other bodies to treat the care experienced as a protected characteristic and more importantly pro-actively seek out and listen to the voices of care experienced people to help support policies and actions going forward.
- Councillor Harvey added that care experienced children should be treated the same as children at home, who would not necessarily leave a family home at 16 years old and therefore supported the motion.
- Councillor Hourahine was pleased that this motion came from a resident of St Julian's ward and the Social Services' team had embraced and thoroughly researched this. If this motion was passed, Newport would be paving the way for future generations.
- Councillor Lacey was delighted to support the motion. Many care leavers had life experience that made them resourceful and resilient and would make them an asset to further education or in the workplace and should be supported by their Corporate Parent.

- Councillor Drewett thanked the young people in the public gallery for supporting the motion today and for Rowan Aderyn who came up with the idea. This motion would strengthen the corporate parenting function and change the policy to support former care leavers. If this motion was passed it would be the catalyst for other councils in Wales and therefore, Councillor Drewett strongly supported the motion.
- Councillor Hughes, as Cabinet Member for Social Services (Adult Services) confirmed that councillors had met the Pathway to Independence team and the children who were the future of Newport earlier that day. As a Corporate Parent the Council has a duty to those in care and therefore supported the motion.
- Councillor Corten supported the to be passed.
- Councillor Evans also supported the motion and mentioned that care leavers were at risk of homelessness, adding that it was imperative that the council set out a clear plan for social housing and support with employment and education.
- Councillor Reynolds was happy to support the motion. This motion went so far to addressing issues experienced by young people leaving care. and Councillor Reynolds was therefore proud to support the motion and hoped it was passed unanimously.
- Councillor Marshall spoke to both support and second the motion to recognise 'Care Experienced' as a protected characteristic within the framework of the Council's commitment to Diversity and Equality.

Councillor Marshall was glad to note that Newport City Council was always a trailblazer in promoting and celebrating principles of diversity and equality, and today we had the chance to take another bold step forward. This was amongst the growing momentum in Wales to acknowledge 'Care Experienced' as a protected characteristic aligning with our commitment to inclusivity and reflected a broader societal understanding of the challenges faced by care experienced individuals.

The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England, led by Josh McCallister, highlighted the need to make care experience a protected characteristic.

. As corporate parents, we have a collective responsibility to provide the best possible care for the children looked after by our authority.

In conclusion, this motion represented a progressive and compassionate step forward for our council. Councillor Marshal urged colleagues to consider this proposal, with Newport leading the way in Wales, setting an example for other councils to follow.

- The Leader of the Council thanked all colleagues that spoke to the motion. The Leader spoke not only as a Leader of the Council and a Corporate Parent, but also as a mother and grandmother. The Leader was privileged to give Mike Foster, The Pride of Gwent, Life's Time Achievement award in December for his service to fostering over 50 young people, giving them stability to their lives.

The Leader also shared words with Councillor Colleagues from Rowan and Terry:

Every 15 minutes a child leaves care, they are twice as likely to be unemployed, ten times more likely to experience homelessness, face a 70% increased chance they will die prematurely, and if they do make their way into the world of work experience one of the biggest pay gaps in the UK.

Tonight, I stand before you, not just as one of those children, but as a testament to their resilience and potential.

Growing up "fostered" wasn't just a label; it was a whisper that followed me through school hallways, a doubt in the eyes of teachers, a barrier blocking certain opportunities.

In high school I really wanted to take four A-levels, but my dream was met with resistance. Teachers would say "You already have so much on your plate." I had to have meeting after meeting to justify why I should be supported. It was an action born of kindness, but behind those words was a message that I should limit my potential, that I should not expect to achieve as much as my peers, and not because I didn't have the grades but simply because I was fostered.

I am here to ask you to rewrite the narrative for all care-experienced children. I was lucky I refused to be defined by limitations. I fought for my chance, and with the support of some wonderful people I have continued to learn and grow. I have achieved a highly successful career as a Lead Business Architect for one of the largest financial firms in the UK, and succeeded in completing a long list of qualifications including a master's degree for which I earned a distinction.

My story thankfully is not unique, however examples like these are often seen as the exception when they should be the norm. Care-experienced individuals possess immense strengths and perspectives, yet we face systemic disadvantages across health, housing, education, and employment.

These are not the only spaces where care experienced people face barriers. Even recently, at a local club, a member of the committee told me "We don't want care-experienced children or adults here." These aren't isolated incidents; and they by no means the worst examples I have heard. They are echoes of a system that doesn't see care experience as valid, as deserving of equal chances.

Tonight, we have the opportunity to change this narrative. By recognizing care experience as a protected characteristic, we send a powerful message: "We see you. We value you. And we are committed to building a future where you can thrive, alongside everyone else."

And before we build that future, let's take a moment to acknowledge the incredible people who brought us here.

Without foster care I simply would not be alive today. Without the social workers, and the doctors, and the police and the teachers who worked to create a safe space where I could grow, I would not be sat here with you. And all the wonderful things I have achieved and the beautiful family who I am so very proud of would have remained just a dream.

So to the foster parents who open their homes and hearts, to the social workers who fight for our safety, to the educators who see our potential, and to the employers like mine who break down barriers, and to every single voice that joined this chorus for equality – thank you. Your courage, your unwavering support, your belief in us is the foundation on which this movement stands.

Terry ignited this change over two years ago and tonight we ignite that spark in Wales.

But our journey isn't over. By recognizing care experience as a protected characteristic, we provide the focus to continue to build a better future for these children and where focus flows, progress follows. We will enable a conversation, encourage consideration, and safeguard the future lives of so many. As we embed this recognition throughout

processes and communities our efforts will unlock opportunities for these children to thrive.

This is about investing in our entire community. Studies show that supporting care-experienced individuals leads to better economic outcomes, stronger families, and a more cohesive society. It's not only about fairness, justice, and equity.

I stand before you not just as a product of the system, but as a testament to its potential. Today, let's vote yes, let's build a future where every child, regardless of their background, has the chance to thrive. With the right support, every care-experienced person can realise a future they may only dream of. Let's invest in their futures and the futures of all those yet to come. Together we can.

Finally, the Leader mentioned John Griffiths MS, Jayne Bryant MS, Cabinet Members, Councillor Hourahine, Rowan and Terry for sharing their stories and everyone present at Council today. For those reasons the Leader therefore supported the motion.

Resolved:

That Council unanimously supported the motion.

6. Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to present the first report which detailed the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024-25 that required Council approval.

Council Tax Reduction provides reductions for low-income households reducing the council tax they are liable to pay.

Unlike in England, there is an all-Wales scheme that provides a framework for assessing applications and removes the postcode lottery that could result from individual schemes.

The all-Wales scheme, along with some discretionary areas must be approved annually by Council.

The report today also laid out some technical amendments to the scheme. The technical amendments to the scheme are relatively minor in nature and cover the annual uprating of personal allowances and non-dependant deductions, as well as some technical regulation changes as detailed in the report.

There are areas where the Council has discretion in the operation of some aspects of the scheme which are beneficial for both the Council and recipients of the reduction.

If the scheme in the report is not formally adopted, the discretionary areas would be lost, and the default standard all-Wales scheme would instead apply.

Councillor Harvey seconded the report.

Comments of Councillors:

- Councillor Davies mentioned that Newport had one of the lowest Council Tax in Wales, however, there are always residents that would struggle to pay for a variety of reasons. It is important that those receiving benefits applied for support. The money specifically set aside in the Council budget supports these individuals. This also applies to those eligible for discount such as people living alone, or those who had been assessed as mentally impaired, entitling them to 25% reduction in payments. Registered Carers in receipt of carers allowance are also eligible.

Resolved:

Council unanimously approved the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024/25 in accordance with the Council Tax Reduction Schemes (Prescribed Requirements and Default Schemes) (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2013 ("the Prescribed Requirements Regulations") exercising its local discretions as indicated in the report.

7. Council Tax Premiums

The Presiding Member invited the Leader to present the next report which dealt with long-term empty and second homes in the city and the possibility of introducing Council Tax premiums for these properties. Increasing demand for housing and the shortage of housing in the city have 'financial' costs to the Council and 'societal' costs in terms of the impact of this on individuals and families.

In addition to a general lack of available housing, Newport has a large number of unoccupied properties that remained persistently high: Council Tax premiums, if introduced, would encourage owners to take steps to bring their properties back into use.

At its January meeting and following a public consultation exercise, Cabinet decided to recommend that Council should adopt the proposal to introduce council tax premiums for both long-term empty properties and second homes in the city. The report set out the proposal.

Council tax premiums, if introduced would see owners of second homes and those that left properties empty for more than a year charged additional council tax.

The objective was to encourage owners to take steps to bring properties back into use.

Whilst second homes are fewer in number, a consistent approach should be taken for these underused properties.

The report summarised the support from the public for both of these changes to go ahead as noted in the 470 responses gathered during the public consultation.

The report therefore included recommendations to adopt council tax premiums in Newport, for both second homes and long-term empty properties.

The legislation provided some exceptions that prevented a premium being charged in some circumstances. Following feedback from the consultation and to address stakeholders' concerns, some additional limited 'local' exceptions were also recommended.

Comments of Councillors:

- Councillor Evans had mixed views on the report and referred to figures in the corporate plan as inadequate. Whilst he recognised that radical action was needed, empty properties are a complex issue which may not be addressed under this approach. Whilst there were statutory exemptions to the payment of premiums, a more pragmatic approach should be taken. There are only 15 second homes in Newport and Councillor Evans did not believe that their council tax should double and may not be worth collecting or chasing. Councillor Evans was not against taking reasonable actions against the backlog of empty properties blighting the city but could not support the changes regarding second homes and would therefore abstain from supporting the report.
- Councillor Davies referred to empty homes abandoned in Newport and commented that one house that was in a state of disrepair and seen as a blight by neighbours could be

utilised for one of over 9,000 registered people in Newport needing affordable homes additionally these homes being used could also prevent anti-social behaviour. There were 2,565 empty properties.

- Councillor Clarke mentioned that the position in Newport was similar throughout UK. Newport wanted to work with property owners and by working together, produce positive outcomes. We also had to listen to residents of Newport and in the consultation, it showed this was what they wanted.
- Councillor M Howells declared an interest at this stage and referred to 3.1 in the report on Registered Social Landlords (RSL) and strategic empty properties ear marked for large scale development. Cllr Howells queried whether the council would develop a policy to balance the needs of homes and future developments. Scrutiny colleagues would be aware of this as social landlord properties remaining empty had been raised at Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate that. This was also something that residents complained about to ward members in Lliswerry. The report mentioned that Policy would be developed to deal with this. Councillor M Howells wanted clarification on whether this would go to full Council for ratification or would it be dealt with at Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate. Additionally, in relation to this, Councillor M Howells would like to see council take this further as it was a problem in Newport and would like to see reports that looked at ear marked properties for redevelopment, and if they could be used for temporary accommodation. Finally, Cllr M Howells queried whether business properties could also be utilised or repurposed for those seeking homes.

Councillor Drewett, Councillor Adan, Councillor Corten and Councillor Harvey spoke to support the motion.

- Councillor Evans asked for a point of clarification regarding second homes consultation, as the figures were different to that in relation to the consultation regarding empty homes.
- The Leader thanked colleagues for engaging actively in the debate and listened carefully to the comments made. As a Council regulatory and statutory powers could be put in place such to bring about change. As a listening council this is the change that residents have asked for. The toolkit has been in place for some time and an action plan is now needed to provide incentive and guidance for people to strengthen this. This was about working together, and the Leader thanked the Revenue and Benefits Manager for working hard on the report. The next steps with RSL partners was to further develop and seek their views to create a policy, which would come back to Performance Scrutiny Committee – Place and Corporate in due course.

Resolved:

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation to introduce council tax premiums for long term empty properties. Council therefore moved a recommendation to introduce Council Tax premiums in line with paragraph 3.1 outlined in the report, from 1 April 2024 for long-term empty homes and 1 April 2025 for second homes at a rate of 100%.

8. Governance and Audit Annual Report

The Presiding Member invited the Strategic Director, Transformation and Corporate to present the report.

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The was the first Annual Report from Newport's Governance and Audit Committee. The report looked at work undertaken by the Committee in the year 2022/23 and represented best practice.

The role and function of the previous Audit Committee was changed as a result of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. This created the Governance and Audit Committee as it currently stood. The terms of reference of the Committee were included within Appendix 1 of the report.

The committee consists of three Lay Members – Mr Gareth Chapman (Chair), Mr Don Reed (Vice Chair) and Dr Norma Barry, along with five Elected Members, Councillors Cocks, Harris, Horton, Jordan, and Mogford.

The Strategic Director thanked all Members of the Committee for their challenge and assessment of various governance arrangements. This is a critical part of the Council's assurance processes and the robust work of the Committee should provide a level of comfort to Council regarding collective management of financial controls, risk, and governance arrangements.

The report summarised the key activities undertaken by the Committee during 2022/23.

The Annual Report concluded that the Committee acted in accordance with the requirements set out in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and discharged its legislative duties.

Councillor Evans seconded the report.

Comments of Councillors:

- Councillor Cocks as a member of Governance and Audit Committee reflected on the thoroughness of internal audit and officers. It also gave a tremendous view of the work of the officers during a difficult financial climate and how well they delivered services.

Resolved:

- Council accepted that the Governance and Audit Committee had met its legislative responsibilities and agreed the Committee's annual report.
- Council thanked committee members for their robust challenge and hard work during the year.

9. **Schedule of Meetings 2024/25**

The Presiding Member introduced this item to Councillor colleagues providing the dates for committee meetings for 2024/25.

Resolved:

To adopt the schedule of meetings as the basis for arrangements for May 2024 to May 2025, recognising it is subject to change and amendment to meet the needs of the work programmes of each committee or other group.

10. **Mayoral Nomination 2024/25**

Presiding Member asked the Leader to present this item regarding the nomination of the Mayor for 2024/25.

The Leader formally moved Councillor Ray Mogford as the Mayor for the municipal year 2024/25, which was seconded by the Opposition Leader, Councillor Matthew Evans.

Councillor Mogford was councillor for Langstone Ward since 2012 and sat on a number of committees including Planning, Governance and Audit Committee and is currently the Chair of Democratic Services Committee.

Councillor Mogford is also on the board of governors for Langstone and Llanmartin Primary Schools.

The Leader took the opportunity to wish both Ray and Sallie all the very best for their term in the Mayor's office for 2024/25.

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Evans also supported the nomination of Councillor R Mogford as Mayor for 2024/25.

Resolved:

Council supported the nomination of Councillor R Mogford as Mayor.

11. Questions to the Leader of the Council

Before Commencement with questions, the Leader made the following announcements to Council:

Tata announcement

At the end of last week, Tata made its shattering announcement of massive job losses in its steel businesses in the UK, mainly in Port Talbot whose employees include Newport residents.

Its statement also talked about potential redundancies in Llanwern steelworks here in the city.

The council understands that up to 300 jobs could be lost at Llanwern steelworks over the next few years while 2,500 people are to lose their jobs in Port Talbot. This is another terrible blow for an industry that was once so important to the economy of Newport and South Wales.

I am sure we are all thinking of those workers, and their families, who now face yet another period of uncertainty while waiting to find out how the announcement will affect them.

Our work and skills team will be available to offer advice and support to our residents who are facing redundancy, at either Llanwern or Port Talbot, when they need it.

Warm Spaces

I am pleased to update colleagues that we have again been able to support the provision of warm spaces in Newport this winter.

To date, 16 grants have been awarded to community groups across the city offering a safe, welcoming, and comfortable environment to residents who may be struggling to heat homes or who are at risk of isolation.

In partnership with GAVO, more than £35,000 has already been given using funding from the UK government's Shared Prosperity Fund.

It follows the success of a similar scheme last year when grants were given to 21 groups who delivered 448 sessions, attended by more than 6,300 people.

This is just one of the ways that we are supporting organisations and residents during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

There is an incredible amount of excellent work across the city with support being provided by our staff and partners. This has included providing shopping vouchers, Newport Live memberships and pantomime tickets for carers, and financial assistance to food banks.

Another of those initiatives was a wide range of free activities for families and children that were held across the city during the recent school Christmas holidays. And as an added benefit, we were also able to partner with Newport Bus to offer free transport for those sessions.

Christmas tree collections

We also kicked-off the new year with another positive scheme – the collection of real Christmas trees.

Residents were able to book a free doorstep collection – over 2,000 bookings were made, and every tree has made its way to our in-house composting facility to be chipped and composted.

New and improved play areas

Earlier this month I was honoured to join the Heddlu Bach students from Malpas Court Primary, the Mayor and Mayoress and Cabinet colleagues to mark the completion of the new and improved Darwin Drive play area in Malpas.

The play area has benefitted from a complete replacement of the play equipment and flooring, as well as a repainting of the fence.

New play equipment installed on site includes multi-play areas for toddlers and juniors, a seesaw, new swings, and a wheelchair accessible roundabout.

It is the latest play area to be upgraded as part of the council's programme of investment in improving play areas across Newport.

Every play area included in the programme will be upgraded following consultation with local residents, so that their needs and preferences are considered at all stages of the work.

Consultations are now open for play areas in Shaftesbury and St Julians, so please make sure to visit our website and have your say.

Crackdown on illegal tobacco and vapes

Last week our trading standards team once again took part in a multi-agency operation as part of an ongoing crackdown on illegal tobacco and vapes.

Officers have been extremely successful in uncovering these operations, seizing the illegal products, getting the premises closed and obtaining prosecutions.

I cannot say much more as these latest raids are subject to ongoing investigations, but it shows our determination to root out these businesses which are often used to fund criminal activities.

I would like to thank the dedicated officers involved in this work and our partners.

Half-term activities

I have already mentioned the successful family activities held over the Christmas period - over the February half-term school holiday, council teams, including our youth and play workers, will once again be running free events for children. These will include inclusive activities for all the family, quiet and sensory sessions.

Information about what is happening in the next half-term break will be publicised as soon as all the details are available, and I would encourage members to spread the word locally. The events take place in different venues and are open to children from across the city.

Finally, on behalf of Newport City Council liked to say a huge thank you to Newport County on their One-Nil victory over Wrexham over Rodney Parade at the weekend. As well as good luck to manager and players for FA game at Newport against Manchester United.

Leader's Questions

Councillor Evans:

Because of the 15 Minute limit, opposition members felt that they did not have the opportunity to ask questions, therefore Councillor Evans declined the opportunity to raise a question.

Councillor Morris:

When would the Leader get a grip of the council budget, cut out the waste and start providing value for money for services and provide realistic rate increases that would not hurt the people that were represented.

Response:

The Leader pointed out to colleagues that this was not the budget debate but was the regular questions to the Leader and was therefore unable to comment upon as the results of the consultation which had not been completed as yet.

The Leader however made some general points on the budget and on finances for all members. Last month, on 12 December, there was a training session made available to all members on the finance and the budget. A similar training session took place the previous December. These were two opportunities for members develop an understanding of local authority finance. Whilst training was in place, there was a difference between revenue, capital, and reserves in relation to budget. The Head of Finance could provide a more detailed note to members to help them understand the difference between reserves and ear marked reserves.

The Leader also made a point on budget underspend, the progress was regularly reported to Cabinet and Council on progress against the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP). As we know, in any given year, there may be a fluctuation in expenditure. As an example, for this year, and at this point in time, it had been reported back on the increased cost of social care, the increased pressure with homelessness and how it impacted spending. Report had been presented on numerous occasions that there was an overspend at the point in time in those areas. At the moment in time of the meeting, the forecast remained an overspend due to the pressures on service provision. It was important to understand that whilst the financial year ended on 31 March, Cabinet was not able to consider reconciled accounts until in June or July and this was where an overspend or underspend would be gleaned. If the Council was still at an overspend at this point, then provision must be made, which was Finance must be regarded as something that is flexible and not consistent at any one point in time and when considering spending patterns, particularly around the revenue budget, related to forecast of expenditure. The Leader once again proposed that ahead of the finance debate, the Head of Finance would circulate a briefing note to elected members setting out the basics in relation to finance, to give them confidence in their contribution to discussing the budget.

Councillor Drewett:

Could the Leader provide an update on the Newport City events calendar and demonstrate the positive impact of these events across the city.

Response:

The Leader was pleased to recommend that councillors look at the Newport Events webpage. This is open to all groups and different businesses and voluntary sectors to load their events to the page. This means that there is a contemporary calendar of events happening across the city. The Leader is proud of this development which brought everything together for citizens and visitors.

In terms of evidence, it is difficult to capture but the Leader is pleased to advise that according to data from the official counting software, footfall in the city centre for the period to the end of October 2023 was 5.3% ahead of the first 10 months of 2019. This was the last trading year before Covid. We were therefore starting to see a recovery and the software used helped to highlight the difference that the impact events made. The Leader was proud of the statistics and across Wales the footfall for the same period was down by 13% and in the UK as a whole was down by almost 14%. Most of these events were free of charge and provided opportunities for citizens to attend events, it also helped to put Newport on the map. According to the Business Improvement District (BID) the countdown to Christmas event attracted almost 9,000 visitors, this made a difference to business and visitors to shop in the city centre during this time.

There was a number of notable events in 2023, such as the Welsh National Armed Forces Day, seeing families and young people engage in activities and the free concert in the evening was incredible. Other events that took place was the Big Splash, Pride in the 'Port, Food Festival and Newport Rising and the wonderful torch lit parade. Newport, as a City Council was getting behind groups and individuals to make our city a destination for everybody. Businesses were starting to develop across the city because of events and as councillors, we should not lose sight of the benefits the event calendar can bring. The Leader was looking forward to seeing colleagues going to events during 2024, particularly, the 80th Year Anniversary of D Day.

12. **Questions to the Cabinet Members**

Question 1: Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and Assets

Councillor Reeks:

The proposed 2024/2025 budget is looking to raise revenue by increasing charges across car parks including the Kingsway Centre car park by 9%, potentially putting off more shoppers from heading into the city centre.

Would the Cabinet Member not agree with me that by better managing the car park itself, such as not having the lighting running all night and opening up the car park on all Rodney Parade match days to bring more trade into the car park, then potentially more revenue could be raised, and shoppers would not be penalised for bringing their trade into the city centre?

Response from Councillor Lacey:

Kingsway car park provides an excellent facility for visitors to the city, being a modern car park close to the City's attractions. The facility, which utilises energy efficient lights, operates emergency level lighting when the car park is not in use. Along with our other work in reducing the carbon emissions of the Council's activities such as the increase in our own EV fleet, we are currently progressing a scheme to install a solar panel system on the roof of Kingsway that will provide energy for the car park.

The car park is typically open everyday bar Christmas Day and New Year's Day, with opening on Boxing Day being considered on an annual basis. As such, any demand from Rodney Parade match days would be accommodated apart from those two days per year. In the event of Kingsway being closed, the Council's other surface car parks will be available.

Question 2: Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Biodiversity

Councillor Mogford:

Within the previous NCC corporate plan (2017-2022) it was stated "We have restored the "Pride in Newport" waste and litter programme and established zero tolerance initiatives for fly tipping throughout the city."

In a recent response to my 'question at any time' regarding worrying levels of fly tipping in the city the Cabinet Member simply stated "With regards to fly tipping Newport has the second highest successful prosecution rate in Wales"

However, if we look closely at the statistics for the previous period 2022/2023 (source Welsh Government) there were 5,631 investigations carried out by NCC and less than 40 fines issued (of which only 14 prosecutions made).

Can the Cabinet Member confirm that continuing on as part of the corporate plan and now on their watch; this NCC administration has really established and maintained a zero-tolerance approach to fly tipping and if so, why does the Cabinet Member think the trend remains one of increasing fly tipping across Newport?

Response from Councillor Forsey:

The Council has, over the last few years, increased the resources available to tackle fly tipping, with the expansion of the waste engagement and enforcement team. There has also been increased work with partner organisations and volunteer groups, and a number of key projects such as covert operations or the successful Road to Nature project.

The Council actively encourages people to report fly tipping, and the waste team carry out proactive routes and monitoring of hotspots. While all this can lead to an increase in the number of incidents recorded and reported, it is the right approach to ensure fly tipping incidents are adequately managed, and more importantly it has resulted in a significant increase in the number of actions taken as a result.

Actions cover a wide range of activities and in many cases, officers cannot reach the Fixed Penalty Notice or prosecution stages due to the lack of evidence, as there are set rules that need to be followed and the legal process is complex. This is why the level of sanctions issued across UK has traditionally been and still is low, however Newport City Council has improved dramatically over the last few years and this trend continues.

This concluded the meeting of full council. Date of next meeting for Council would be Thursday 29 February 2024.