

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 29 July 2024

Time: 2.00 pm

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

In Attendance: Councillor Dimitri Batrouni (Leader of the Council), Councillor Rhian Howells (Cabinet Member for Assets and Infrastructure), Councillor Pat Drewett (Cabinet Member for Communities and Poverty Reduction), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Corporate and Transformation), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager), Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager), Kevin Howells (HR & OD Manager), Shaun Powell (Transformation and Intelligence Manager), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Paul McCarthy (Benefits Manager), Louise Hughes (Revenues and Benefits Team Manager), Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement and Payments), Ceri Foot (Service Manager Customer Services), Anghard Blayney (Interim Assistant Head of Law and Standards), Jane Clarke (Registration and Coroner Services Manager), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic Services and Electoral Services Manager), Katharine Majer (Deputy Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Emily Mayger (Governance Officer), Simon Richards (Governance Officer) and Taylor Strange (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies

Councillors Linton, Alex Pimm and Bright

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 Service Area Plan End of Year Reports 2023-24

People Policy and Transformation

Invitees:

- Councillor Dimitri Batrouni (Leader of the Council)
- Councillor Rhian Howells (Cabinet Member for Assets and Infrastructure)
- Councillor Pat Drewett (Cabinet Member for Communities and Poverty Reduction)
- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Corporate and Transformation)
- Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation)
- Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager)
- Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager)
- Kevin Howells (HR & OD Manager)
- Shaun Powell (Transformation and Intelligence Manager)

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The Head of People Policy and Transformation (HoPPT) gave an overview of the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee discussed the impact of environmental issues, such as post-Covid-19 effects, on sickness days. The HR & OD Manager (HRODM) explained that an increase in sickness towards the year's end is common across industries due to factors like mental health issues.
- The Committee asked if sharing best practices could increase check-ins across the Council. The HRODM advised that increased engagement and the introduction of new behaviours and values from the People Plan led to higher check-in rates.
- The Committee enquired about the compilation of a comprehensive asset list. The Committee were advised that a Strategic Asset Management Plan was in progress, aiming to review and optimise the Council's assets for future sustainability, and also noted the complexity of assets due to varying degrees and leases with external parties.
- The Committee sought insights from a recent cyber security workshop. The HoPPT shared that the workshop was helpful in reviewing industry standards and recovery training, with human error being a significant risk factor.
- The Committee suggested including tutorial videos for operating online-only Newport services. The HoPPT advised that there has been a review into customer service across the Council that aimed at making the website more user-friendly, with plans to look into troubleshooting and FAQ pages. They also clarified that this comes under the Finance service area.
- The Committee requested an update on the budget saving measure leading to the Civic Centre's additional closing days. The HoPPT noted ongoing work to manage this change effectively.
- The Committee queried whether unsuccessful interview applicants were contacted. The HRODM confirmed that applicants who fail at the interview stage are contacted if they are willing to share information.
- The Committee noted confusion regarding a figure on page 37, indicating an action due to finish in 2027 was marked as complete. The HoPPT clarified that a stage of the work had been completed, not the entire piece.
- The Committee suggested improvements to the report process for clarity and to address confusion. The Leader agreed, emphasising the need for clearer reports.
- The Committee enquired about plans to incorporate qualities from the People Plan. The HoPPT advised that the priority for 2024/25 is to deliver the People Plan and the Strategic Equalities Plan, focusing on staff engagement.
- The Committee were advised of the improvements in the HR Payroll system's link to the Greater Gwent (Torfaen) Pension Fund for better data transfer. The Committee were also advised that all enquiries regarding this should be directed to Torfaen County Borough Council, who manage the scheme.
- The Committee asked about compensation for home-based work. The HoPPT explained that working from home is not mandated but a voluntary request, indicating no compensation plan for home-based work expenses.

The Committee thanked the officers for attending.

Finance

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Corporate and Transformation)
- Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance)
- Paul McCarthy (Benefits Manager)
- Louise Hughes (Revenues and Benefits Team Manager)
- Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement and Payments)
- Ceri Foot (Service Manager Customer Services)

The Head of Finance (HoF) gave an overview of the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee enquired about the junior posts within the Internal Audit Team. The HoF noted that the junior staff members were performing well within the team.
- The Committee discussed the potential benefits of an external public sector partnership for auditing. The HoF emphasised that such a partnership would be advantageous for the Council due to factors such as risk management and access to key specialisms. It was also advised that that the team's audit plans would be reviewed by the Governance and Audit Committee, followed by Cabinet and Council.
- The Committee queried whether a market supplement could be applied within the audit team. The HoF advised that pay is a significant factor in internal hiring decisions. The Strategic Director - Corporate and Transformation (SD-CT) highlighted the Council's limited flexibility in pay compared to the private sector and discussed the challenges of relying on traineeships and apprenticeships.
- When asked if the public partnership was similar to another arrangement, the HoF clarified that there were various titles for the external audit company, but they were considered external partnerships. The SD - CT added that there were different models in public sector partnerships, like those employed within Shared Resource Service (SRS).
- The Committee enquired about upgrades to the financial system, particularly forecasting assets. The HoF advised that transactional payment services went live in April 2024, with forecasting going live between June and July, and the debtor's system expected to go live in the autumn.
- The Committee questioned if the system upgrades would be noticeable externally. The HoF assured that while there would be changes, the standard services would be delivered, with the internal system seeing the most difference.
- The Committee raised concerns about the 34% rate of Council Tax arrears collection being below the target. The HoF explained that the performance indicators referred to all arrears collected, not just those from a single financial year, and that additional staff had improved arrears collection.
- The Committee queried the use of AI in Customer Services. The Service Manager for Customer Services (SMCS) explained that AI would be utilised to direct issues to the appropriate place through online forms when a customer raises an issue. This approach aims to streamline the process of issue resolution by ensuring that concerns are quickly forwarded to the correct department or officer for action.

The SD - CT clarified the distinction between robotic processes and AI. The initiatives described by the officers were identified as robotic processes, which are rule-based systems that automate specific tasks, allowing staff to focus on more complex issues that require human intervention.

- The Committee enquired about feedback received on online systems. The HoF noted that systems capable of online interaction have been well-received.
- The Committee raised concerns about the layout of the report and the clarity of performance indicators. The HoF acknowledged these issues and mentioned that they are being addressed in the new service plan.
- The Committee enquired what support was needed for the service area. The HoF highlighted the challenge of resource constraints across service areas but expressed appreciation for the Committee's support. A key priority was the recruitment of a Deputy Head of Finance to strengthen the team's leadership and capacity.

The Committee thanked the officers for attending.

Law and Standards

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director- Corporate and Transformation)
- Anghard Blayney (Interim Assistant Head of Law and Standards)
- Jane Clarke (Registration and Coroner Services Manager)
- Leanne Rowlands (Democratic Services and Electoral Services Manager)

The Strategic Director (SD - CT) gave an overview of the report.

The Committee asked the following:

- The Committee observed that check-in targets were below the required level. The SD - CT advised of service gaps and long-term sickness as contributing factors. The Interim Assistant Head of Law and Standards noted a recent increase in check-ins due to having a full team of managers in place. The Committee also noted the low amount of sickness, with the SD - CT highlighting that sickness within the Corporate directorate was typically low compared to the average.
- Concerns were raised about only 58% of Members attending Carbon Literacy training. The Committee expressed a desire for a quarterly training record, which the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager (DESM) confirmed would be addressed, with the first report due in a month.
- The Committee emphasised the importance of safety training for both Elected Members and Community Councillors. The SD - CT advised that a session on personal security was held in the autumn of 2023, along with a range of online training covering personal security. The DESM noted low uptake for Community Councillor personal safety training, with plans to offer a further date.
- The Committee enquired about the applicability of the lone working policy to Members. The SD - CT clarified that the policy differs for Members since they are not employees.
- The Committee queried the succession planning metric, noting it was statutory work. The DESM explained that temporary support was used to free up staff for additional work. While the action for reviewing job descriptions was marked complete, the Committee noted this should be an ongoing task.

- The Committee praised the ward meetings and suggested they could support issues beyond key items like the budget. The DESM advised that there would be two fully supported ward meetings, with space on the agenda for other items.
- The Committee enquired about feedback from the 2024 elections. The DESM explained that a lessons-learned review would take place, and data had been shared with the Electoral Commission. The difference in election rules between a national and local level was noted as a challenge, with a focus on maintaining a clear message.
- The Committee asked about the new Coroners Court facility And were advised it is a modern rented space in Langstone Business Park, chosen after an extensive review of Council properties.
- The Committee enquired about the recruitment of trainee solicitors. The Committee were advised that the two trainees are performing well, with one contributing significantly to the Childcare Team.
- The Committee discussed the importance of succession planning and job description reviews within the service area, acknowledging ongoing efforts to adapt and improve these processes.

The Committee thanked the officers for attending.

Conclusions

People Policy and Transformation

- The Committee requested that Officers explore informing Members of what assets were in their wards and also requested a comprehensive asset list which details what assets belong to the Council and their status.
- The Committee recommended that the report adopted an incremental approach to project management, where each phase of a project transitions into the next with clear objectives, timelines, and expected outcomes.
- The Committee felt that offering face-to-face exit interviews could encourage more candid feedback, higher participation and more consistent data collection from departing employees.
- The Committee recommended including specific figures and quantitative data in the reports to clarify comments such as "highest rate in a few years" and "more and more managers" to allow for a clearer understanding of the trends and issues being discussed.

Finance

- The Committee recommended strengthening the support for individuals who may not be comfortable or able to navigate online services. This included maintaining and, where possible expanding, resources dedicated to face-to-face support, ensuring equal access to services regardless of digital literacy or access to technology.
- The Committee recommended the creation and publishing of online tutorials and troubleshooting guides that are easily accessible. These resources should cover how to effectively operate and navigate the Council's services and websites, including booking forms.

Law and Standards

- The Committee recommended that the Flexible Working Policy and how it applies to Elected Members is communicated and clarified.

- The Committee requested the exploration of the possibility of providing handheld devices or systems for Members working in the community, similar to those used for staff lone workers, and investigate additional safety measures like GPS tracking, emergency alert systems, or safety apps. The Committee also requested for comprehensive updates on the application of these safety policies and systems to ensure Members have the necessary support for community engagement.
- The Committee asked if the WLGA guidance on Members working with the public and engaging in community activities could be shared to Members.

4 **Scrutiny Adviser Reports**

Invitee:

- Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser)

a) Actions Arising

The Committee were advised of Actions Arising.

b) Draft Annual Forward Work Programme Update

The Committee were advised of the draft Annual Forward Work Programme. The Committee accepted the dates and agenda items. The Chair advised that it would be beneficial if the Committee discussed the Committee's forward work programme in more detail at the next meeting.

c) Outcomes Monitoring

The Committee were advised of the up-to-date outcomes.

The meeting terminated at 4.24 pm