

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 13 January 2020

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors C Evans (Chair), M Al-Nuaimi, G Berry, J Clarke, I Hayat, J Richards and D Williams

In Attendance: Beverly Owen (Strategic Director (Place), Paul Jones (Head of City Services), Rhys Cornwall (Head of People and Business Change), Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager), Gareth Price (Head of Law & Regulation), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Owen James (Assistant Head of Finance - Technical and Development), Meryl Lawrence (Scrutiny Adviser) and Neil Barnett (Governance Officer)

Apologies: Councillors K Critchley and D Fouweather

1 Declaration of Interests

None.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meetings

The Minutes of the meetings held on 4 November 2019 and 18 November 2019 were **approved** as a true and accurate record.

3 2020-21 Budget and Medium Term Financial Projections

Attendees:

- Beverly Owen – Strategic Director – Place
- Paul Jones – Head of City Services
- Rhys Cornwall – Head of People and Business Change
- Mark Bleazard – Digital Services Manager
- Gareth Price – Head of Law and Regulation
- Meirion Rushworth - Head of Finance
- Owen James – Assistant Head of Finance

City Services

Proposal 12 - CS2021/01 - Increase in Fees

The Head of City Services clarified the proposal to increase the following two fees:

1. Increase in emergency road closure charge from £250 per event to £800 per event. This was a fee paid by utility companies and statutory undertakers when the need arises to close an adopted highway at short notice. The original lower price meant there had been

more emergency road closures than need be, and caused problems with informing residents of emergency works in time.

2. Introduce a charge for waste receptacles for new build low-rise properties when residents initially occupy. There is already a charge for Houses in Multiple Occupation and this new charge is part of the Housing Supplementary Planning Guidance, but no value had been set.

Members asked the following:

- A Member asked if the fees are in line with other Councils.

The Head of City Services advised that they were broadly in line.

- A Member voiced concern about the large increase in the fees for emergency closures, and worried how this would affect community events.

The Head of City Services clarified that community events were not emergency road closures and would be classed as planned road closures.

Proposal 13 - CS2021/06 – Removal of non-statutory ALN Home to College Transport Provision and Post 16 Travel Grants to Mainstream Schools and Colleges

The Head of City Services clarified that the two grants in this proposal were for transport for pupils after finishing secondary school and the removal was proposed to be phased over the next two years so that students currently on two-year courses could complete their courses.

- Members expressed concern regarding the removal of the grants and the impact upon vulnerable people. Further concern was expressed at the potential environmental impact of the proposal to withdraw funding, which could result in an increase in traffic as parents / young people drove to college themselves and it was questioned whether some work could be undertaken with bus services on a travel card scheme, like an Oyster card.

Proposal 14 - CS2021/08 - Increased Recycling - Bag Sorting at Household Waste Recycling Centre

The Head of City Services advised the Committee of the improved recycling performance over the year, but that recycling performance via the HWRC could be increased further. Many Councils had stopped allowing mixed bagged waste, and any mixed bagged waste brought to the HWRC intended for the non-recyclable waste skip would be taken to a designated bag sorting area. Site operatives would open bags and sort into designated containers. This would be undertaken at quieter periods, not at peak times with a view to users expecting to bring pre-separated waste to the site.

Members asked the following:

- Members voiced concern that this could create further issues with traffic tailbacks on the Southern Distributer Road.

The Head of City Services advised that this had been taken on board and the proposal is that it would be done at peak times and after Christmas and Bank Holidays, but the aim was to change behaviour so that users brought pre-separated waste to the HWRC to increase recycling further.

Proposal 15 - CS2021/13 – Car Parking – Faulkner Road

The Head of City Services advised that the Faulkner Road car park was currently being heavily used by Council staff. There had been complaints from residents and visitors about not being able to park in this public pay and display car park. The proposal sought to limit the car park spaces for Council staff to 50.

Members asked the following:

- How would the proposal affect Blue Badge holders, and would the proposed 50 staff spaces be on a first come first served basis.

Members were advised that the proposal would enable the release of more spaces for the public, including blue badge holders. In terms of allocation, Council staff were using the car park on a first come first service basis; however there would be a broader piece of work on staff car parking with HR and Asset Management going forward. The Strategic Director –Place added that a lot of feedback from staff upon the proposal was expected as part of the consultation to be fed back to the Cabinet and that it had been agreed to set up a project team to look at a focussed review of staff parking.

- A Member raised the issue of staff parking in streets near the Royal Gwent Hospital and the risk of this happening in streets around the Civic / Faulkner Road, as a potential impact from this proposal.

The Head of Service advised that was already happening in this area. There was a need to encourage staff to use other forms of transport, so if less people drove to work, there should be less impact, and the spaces would be available for public use.

- A Member enquired whether there had been any shared learning from other organisations.

Members were advised that the proposed Project Team would look at this thoroughly as well as best practice solutions for staff parking in large companies. The Strategic Director advised that they would look at how to balance economic growth with climate change as the city grew. The review would look at how staff park and how it interfaced with public parking.

- A Member asked how the fifty spaces would be allocated, would it be fairer to remove all staff parking spaces, or should lower paid employees be able to access the spaces. He also asked could the proposal that potentially staff would have to look for parking elsewhere impact on employment.

The Head of Service advised that the Project Team set up would examine and it was currently a question of balance between public and staff parking provision. Issues with Social Workers and similarly visiting officers who need to leave the office a number of times a day and return would also be considered. Feedback from the consultation on the Budget Proposal would be fed back into Cabinet in February.

- A Member inquired about Park Square car park and whether it was a Council car park.

Members were advised that the operation of that car park should transfer to Council on 1st April.

- A Member inquired about the number of unoccupied spaces.

It was advised that demand had been considered and had edged up a little, since the start of parking enforcement.

- Members suggested that other car parks could be reviewed and places of worship or businesses may wish to buy spaces for their visitors and could consider charging staff to park.

It was advised that charging staff for parking could be one option to encourage sustainable travel.

- Members expressed concern about time being lost while staff returning to the Civic Centre between appointments circulated to find available parking.

The Chair thanked the Invitees for attending.

People and Business Change

Proposal 16 - PBC2021/03 - Public Building Wi-Fi "Community Cloud" – reductions in provision

The Head of People and Business change explained that current provision for Community Cloud had originally been put in place via the Super Connected Cities funding and since that ended two years ago, the Council had been funding the provision. Technology has moved on in a number of ways: a far greater 4G connectivity internet access and the amount of data for mobile users had also increased, so there was less demand for this provision. Within the financial constraints and challenges, this was a discretionary service so was being proposed for potential savings.

There were currently around 50 council and community buildings where Public Building Wi-Fi had been provided free to the public. The recommended option was to review the contract and remove service provision for some public buildings with free Community Cloud Wi-Fi, depending on usage. The availability of the Gov Wi-Fi with password access would minimise some potential impact of the proposal.

Members asked the following:

- Members enquired about the numbers of people are using the Community Cloud in these locations and the need for the provision.

It was advised that numbers for usage had not yet been aggregated as the usage at sites was currently being analysed.

- A Member asked about the impact of the proposal upon the list of 50 locations with current Community Cloud Wi-Fi access.

Members were advised that if the provision could be reduced or removed, but members of the public could use Gov Wi-Fi, by getting a password via a text. An example was given of a reduction of service at sites, that the Council may be spending £5000 at a site but only £3000 being used, so could achieve savings from downgrades to slightly slower speeds.

- A Member asked how the sites had been selected.

The Head of Service advised when Super Connected Cities came into action the infrastructure had been put in place, as free provision for whoever signed up for it. Rather than stop the provision when the funding ended, the Council carried on paying for it. The

Digital Services Manager added that the proposal reflected the change to funding, and a review of usage.

- A Member advised it was important to know that communities knew where the connectivity is being taken away and expressed concern that an important link for people could be removed. Public should be consulted about the buildings the Wi-Fi may be removed from.

The Head of Service clarified that the proposal was to potentially reduce or remove some Community Cloud Wi-Fi provision, which was not the same as connectivity and advised that the list of buildings that currently had Wi-Fi access had been given to the community for consultation.

- A Member acknowledged that while the Community Wi-Fi is good if it can be afforded, Services are faced with difficult choices.

The Head of Service assured that an evidence base of usage behind the decision would be utilised to minimise the effect.

The Chair thanked the Invitees for attending.

Law and Regulation

Proposal 17 - LR2021/04 – Reduction in Public Protection Statutory Enforcement and Prosecution work

The Head of Law and Regulation advised of the proposal to reduce staffing across three services areas. This would reduce the level of statutory enforcement and prosecution work carried out by the Public Protection service and focus on more serious, higher risk offences. Although these were statutory functions, it was a strategic decision for the Council as to how to discharge its statutory enforcement duties.

Members asked the following:

- Members voiced their concerns regarding the reduction in service.

The Head of Service advised that the service area had been given a target for reduction. Previously areas that could have work reduced had been cut, so the only thing left to offer up is reduction in service and staffing levels. Examples of previous efficiency savings were given, including: restructuring the Public Protection department and ways that services were delivered. Collaborative regional working had also been explored for Trading Standards, but came out as a more expensive option than in-house provision.

- A Member voiced concern at a reduction in service for a statutory service and the potential impact of the proposal.

The Head of Service advised that the proposal is to reduce cut back on proactive spot checks and gave assurance that the service would still respond to complaints. The Housing Response Team would first refer residents to the landlord. Currently they carried out inspections on every complaint, but there would be a triage service for risk and response, e.g. landlords complaints made via tenants. The Head of Service advised that this was a reducible minimum, close to core service and that the proposal was not being put forward lightly.

- A Member asked whether there were any other options.

Members were advised that the Council had a statutory duty to provide the core service but had discretion on how it discharged the service provided.

- A member questioned the use of temporary agencies for staff, which could take away cost savings.

The Head of Service advised Members that temporary agency staff would not be replacing staff, but had been used to fill a post while reviewing.

- A Member queried how vacant post could be realised as a saving.

The Head of Service advised that the posts were factored into the budget, and would be deleted and would try to avoid compulsory redundancy.

The Chair thanked the Invitee for attending.

Finance and Non-Service

Proposal 18 - NS2021/01 – Council Tax Reduction Scheme

The Head of Finance advised that the Council Tax Reduction Scheme budget was used to subsidise household Council Tax bills when occupants are eligible for support because of income levels. This budget had been underspent for a number of years due to lower numbers of claimants. The proposal is predicated on reducing the budget to the level of demand, which would, over the three years shown, reduce the current level of underspending on this budget. It was proposed that the budget is reduced over a three-year period.

Members asked the following:

- A Member inquired about the impact of the reduction.

The Head of Finance advised that the scheme was an 'All Wales national scheme' with nationally set criteria for eligibility and support levels and that the proposal to reduce the budget to take into account the level of underspend had no impact on the scheme nor the recipients.

Proposal 19 - N/A – Increase in Council Tax

The Head of Finance advised of the draft proposal for an increase of 7.95% and that it was well documented that Newport's council tax is low compared to other Local Authorities in Wales. He advised that Newport had the second lowest council tax levels in Wales. The Welsh Government uses the Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) to calculate the level of spending required to deliver a 'standard level' of service in each council area. However, Newport's actual spend was well below its SSA (around £8.3m in 2019/20), which is mainly due to its low level of council tax funding.

The Head of Finance advised the Committee that the Cabinet's Draft Budget Proposals had been developed ahead of receipt of the Local Government Settlement being received and that subsequently; Cabinet had flexibility of around £7M to consider its final budget proposals following consultation responses and any proposed new investments.

Members asked the following:

- A Member asked what was the % RSG.

The Assistant Head of Service advised that with a 5.4% increase, they need to take into account assumptions in the report such as pay awards and pension increases out of any RSG.

- A Member questioned whether it was possible that the 7.95% increase could be lower, given the flexibility.

The Head of Service advised that it would be a consideration, but that only last week the minimum wage had gone up by 6%, which was much higher than planned for, so currently considering a range of issues.

- A Member asked whether Newport could end up in the middle of the table on page 73, when compared with other authorities.

Members were advised that Newport would not be in the middle of the table, as the table contained the current years' council tax before other authorities' increases were added. It was predicted that Newport would be in the bottom 3 or 4, or possibly second lowest.

- A Member enquired whether there is a cap in Wales upon Council Tax.

Members were advised that there is no capping regime in Wales.

- A Member referred to future financial difficulties in paragraph 1.5, page 26 of the report and more savings need to be found; at least £22M by 2023 based upon current planning assumptions and asked the Officers when would local authorities be out of austerity and financial pressures.

The Head of Finance advised that he could not give a prediction, as it was a matter for national government. Following the national budget on 11th March 2020, the Fiscal Team at Cardiff University would analyse it to predict the Welsh Budget.

- A Member asked whether the budget process was the same as last year.

The Head of Service advised that the Budget Process was the same as the previous year, however The Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee had each year asked for a more strategic approach to a longer term MTFP and there was a need to move to a more strategic approach to plan further ahead.

- A Member commented that if possible, the increase of Council tax should be kept to a minimum, because of the impact on residents and in light of the better than expected Local Government Settlement.

Conclusion - Comments to the Cabinet

The Committee noted the Draft Budget Proposals relevant to the Place and Corporate Service Areas and agreed to forward the minutes to the Cabinet as a summary of the issues raised.

The Committee wished to make the following comments to the Cabinet on the Proposals within the Place and Corporate Service Areas:

Proposal 13 - CS2021/06 - Removal of non-statutory ALN Home to College Transport Provision and Post 16 Travel Grants to Mainstream Schools and Colleges

- The Committee requested that this Proposal be removed, due to the impact on vulnerable people and potential environmental impact and the flexibility within the Budget from the Local Government Settlement.

Proposal 14 - CS2021/08 - Increased Recycling – Bag Sorting at Household Waste Recycling Centre

- The Committee expressed concern regarding the potential impact of an increase in traffic backed up on the Southern Distributer Road, but acknowledged that an assurance had been provided that Bag Sorting would not be done at peak times and would work towards changing behaviour and increasing recycling at the HWRC.

Proposal 15 - CS2021/13 - Car Parking – Faulkner Road

- The Committee requested that the removal of 50 staff parking spaces from Faulkner road Car Park should not impact upon the lowest paid and also needed to take account of staff such as social workers and visiting officers who frequently went out on visits and returned to the Civic Centre a number of times daily.
- The Committee felt that the Business case could have been more detailed, but acknowledged that the Project Team upon Staff Car Parking would be set up to facilitate a thorough review of staff car parking.

Proposal 16 - PBC2021/03 - Public Building Wi-Fi “Community Cloud” – reductions in provision

- The Committee commented that details of the specific buildings to be affected by the removal or reduction of Community Cloud Wi-Fi was required, to obtain meaningful consultation upon the proposal.

Proposal 17 - LR2021/04 - Reduction in Public Protection Statutory Enforcement and Prosecution work

- The Committee expressed its concern about the proposed reduction in service, despite the assurance that the core service would be delivered and requested that if there was flexibility in the Budget, the proposal be re-examined.

The meeting closed at 18:00