

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 19 November 2020

Time: 5.00 pm

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

In Attendance: Councillors Jane Mudd and Roger Jeavons, Ben Hanks (Housing & Assets Manager), Paul Jones (Head of City Services), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Tracey Brooks (Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing), Owen James (Assistant Head of Finance - Technical and Development), Emma Johnson (Income Collection Manager), Richard Leake (Strategic Procurement Officer) and Andrew Wathan (Chief Internal Auditor)

1 Apologies

Councillors K Critchley and M Kellaway

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 2020/21 Service Plan Mid-Year Reviews

Regeneration Investment and Housing

Invitees

- Councillor Jane Mudd – **Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Growth and Investment**
- Tracey Brooks – **Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing**
- Ben Hanks – **Housing and Assets Manager**
- Mike Lewis – **Culture and Continuing Learning Manager**

The Leader of the Council presented an overview of the report. It was advised that Covid had issues on the service delivery and targets however, wanted like to make clear the outstanding performance of the service area redeployment in the emergency response. There are a number of pressures experienced, most notably the pressure on Housing Services given the impact of the Coronavirus regulations introduced by Welsh Government for homelessness and rough sleeping.

Whilst the service area have been able to accommodate rough sleepers, the impact of lockdown been significant on existing accommodation situations, such as an increase in presentations for support. This is understandable, as the lockdown did place pressures on families, individuals and the community.

The Leader advised of the impact of performance within the Planning department, in terms of timeframes of decision making as officers were unable to undertake site visits.

The Leader then thanked all officers in organisation for going above and beyond the requirements of their normal working day to deliver services to the city.

The Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing then expanded on what the Leader had advised the committee. A number of services had to stop such as closing libraries, the Disabled Facilities Grant stopped and construction sites close so progress on projects such as the Market Arcade had to stop. However, staff stepped up to deliver some of those critical services. The Hub Teams provided out of hours childcare for key workers and also weekend and summer holiday cover to allow key workers to carry on working.

The service area also administered the food parcel scheme on behalf of Welsh Government and those residents who were shielding. The team telephoned over 5,000 residents to see whether they needed any assistance and if they needed a food parcel. Over 600 weekly food parcels were delivered as a result of those phone calls. The Head of Service wished to point out the massive achievement of the service area being able to provide 15 units of fully supported, emergency accommodation in just 7 days.

The Business Support team had provided advice and support for over 5000 businesses over the lockdown period, as well as administering the grant funding alongside Business Rates colleagues. Millions of pounds worth of funding were given to businesses, which made a difference to keep on surviving. The Head of Service advised some of this work is not always reflected in service plan however, it is important to emphasise the work done outside of the actions. There are also a number of red indicators in the performance indicators in which the report gives explanations why.

Members asked the following -

- Members discussed Action Point 1 on page 14 of the report - **Encourage inward investment and support growth of new and existing businesses within the City and as part of a Regional Business Support partnership**, and asked for further elaboration of the action commentary, which states a high level of interest from Inward Investors remain at the current time.

The Leader provided an overview to the committee to explain that it was important to update the Economic Growth Strategy in relation to the impact of the pandemic. The Leader and the Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing held a roundtable with business leaders to listen to concerns and the issues to get a sense of the impact that they were facing on the future of investment within the city. The feedback was largely positive. It was important to note that whilst some areas of delivered had been impacted, there is continued collaborative work with the Cardiff Capital Region, the City Deal and ongoing discussions around inward investment with Western Gateway. There is still confidence and interest in investing in Newport.

Members wish to follow up on this query to find out which areas are of high interest?

The Leader advised that there has been development of clusters in terms of compound Semi-conductors, as well as cyber and technology. There are plans to move the Information Station to the Central Library and Museum, which will allow the expansion of cyber within the station buildings. This is an area of growth within the city and the Council is confident in the interest being shown from external businesses which include international interest.

The Leader lastly wished to advise that in relation to this, the Council are looking at the skills agenda, and earlier this afternoon the Leader attended a meeting of the Regional Skills Partnership Board. It was explained that this is important whilst we have investment opportunities and we can see the growth and expansion of new businesses

- Members were reassured that there is a lot of activity. There are a number of significant projects in the pipeline, possibly 7 coming through region as a whole. The application process is incredibly rigorous, and is scrutinised by an investment panel and professional advice. There is a positive working relationship with the region and Cabinet is looking at economic development, still ongoing discussions for this. Members were also advised that the region is going for a Gateway review, the UK Government evaluate the effectiveness of the City Deal and the work that has been completed to date. The Leader was pleased to advise that so far the feedback from the UK Government has been really positive.
- Members enquired about the Red measures on pages 30 and 31 – **Percentage of all planning applications determined in time** and **Number of new business start ups**, which show a strong correlation with the Covid crisis. Comment was made that it was bound to hit the authority in managing to complete planning applications, and praised the officers for keeping business going with the surrounding circumstances.

Members were advised that there are improvements being seen going forward. Appointments are starting to be re-booked. There is work ongoing with business start ups. It is unknown what will happen when the furlough scheme ends, however there are plans lined up to deal with big increases and support.

- Members queried on Page 11 for the Service Area Risks – **Pressure on Homelessness Services**. This is showing as the highest risk with a score of R1. What mitigations are in place to deliver the services to meet the long-term needs of service users?

The Leader advised that we have put a number of bids jointly with partners to help access further units of accommodation via the Government Phase 2 Homelessness fund, in which a number of those bids have been successful. As a result, 50 additional units have been secured, using modern methods of construction which will aid the emergency and environmental issues and also links into the foundational economy. A Strategic Housing Forum meeting was held yesterday with our Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners. The Council have got a continued and ongoing commitment with them to try and access additional properties. One way that RSL's are doing this is by looking at any void properties take out of their housing register that do not meet Welsh Housing quality standard and adjust them to provide temporary units.

The Leader gave additional information that Welsh Government had agreed to fund a scheme with Newport Mind, in which the flats that are located above the Mind offices in the city centre will be converted into supported living accommodation for people that experience serious mental health issues. The Leader also advised the committee about the work undertaken by the Rough Sleepers Floating Support Team and a Rough Sleepers Group that is being chaired by the Police. This will now become a sub group of our Strategic Housing Forum.

The Leader lastly advised the committee of the ongoing scheme which has been a massive success working with people who have drug dependency issues. It was explained that this treatment could have the potential to change people's lives who are in the most difficult of circumstances, and also reduce the pressures on public services. The Housing and Assets Manager then advised the committee of the treatment which is called Buprenorphine, which replaces Methadone and is administered by trained nurses in a controlled environment once a month. This allows individuals to go about a stable lifestyle and seek support with our partners. In the first instance this would be via the Floating Support service and in the longer term, seek support services to help them gain independence such as shopping, cooking and managing

their own budget. There has been a lot of positive responses from Mission Court so far and has had a profound impact on users in Newport.

- Comment was made about Action no 5 on Page 28 – **Investigate opportunities to improve domestic energy efficiency and relieve fuel poverty in Newport** – Do we know when work with partner organisations are due to restart?

The Housing and Assets Manager advised the committee that this remains a key focus. There has been discussions in the Strategic Housing Forum with the RSL's and it is something that they are very keen to support. The Leader has also made a commitment to have discussions with the Public Services Board, in which Council officers will also support. Those discussions are planned to take place but had been stalled due to the Covid pandemic.

The Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing then gave the committee an overview of the Retrofit scheme with our RSL's. A large bid has been accepted by Welsh Government, which will help give properties insulation, external cladding and LED light replacements. RSL's are a part of that bid, and will help a number of properties in Newport. The Head of Service advised that a figure has not yet been released about the number of properties that will be affected in Newport as a result of this scheme, but this had been raised in the meeting yesterday with partners, as well as finding out what the impact on the carbon footprint in Newport will be as well as what the reduction of the running costs for users will be.

The Chair thanked the Leader and the officers for attending.

City Services

Invitees

- Councillor Roger Jeavons – **Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for City Services**
- Paul Jones – **Head of City Services**

The Head of City Services gave apologies on behalf of the Deputy Leader. He then gave an overview, which advised of the challenges the service area had faced in the first half of the year, which included the impact of Covid and Storm Dennis, which was a massive challenge for front line operational services. A lot of things that were set out originally in the report for the performance indicators had to change to deal with new issues such working out how to man vehicles in their own bubbles, working out how to run the City Contact Centre from Customer Service Officers' households and operating the Household Waste Recycling Site whilst remaining compliant with social distancing and introducing a booking system. The Head of Service praised his service area for their hard work, specifically the frontline supervisors and managers for juggling tremendously difficult operational challenges.

The service area has remained in budget. It was explained that the figure of being 1% down is a false figure as the service area had been severely impacted from income loss and by operational costs for shielding staff, however this has been reclaimed from Welsh Government. Service delivery hasn't been impacted too much, key projects had been caught back up on. Some capital projects are a little behind, but the Head of Service is pleased with the progress made on Active Travel, as well the work that has taken place at Fourteen Locks and road improvements in Coed M... More of these improvements are being rolled out, such as Monkey Island and the preliminaries for Devon Place work has just started.

The Head of Service then gave information on the performance indicators, which included ones that had been affected by cover, the reduced visitors to the Leisure Centres as a result of Covid 19 and the increased number of Active Travel journeys. Members were then advised of a correction in the report relating to "Customer transaction requests mediated",

they should be 70% against a target of 30%. They are slightly down but broadly where they should be.

Lastly, it was advised that our recycling rate has increased, with the booking system for the Household Waste Recycling Centre helping with that performance. Another highlight given was that roll out on LED street lights have been completed, and now work on buildings have started, which will be a huge carbon saving and cost saving for the Council.

Members asked the following –

- Members praised the good performance of the service area and congratulated officers on maintaining the collection of waste and recycling.
- Members were advised that transport pressures will not go away. The Commission printed in July and will produce the final report soon, the Council will work with them on outcomes. During the lockdown somethings went unnoticed. The committee were advised that there had been good improvements with replacing the Newport Transport fleet, however as we cannot really push people to use public transport it is difficult to make long-term projections.
- Members queried Point 1 on page 69 – **Identify funding source to deliver the required Hostile Vehicle Mitigation**. Can the Head of Service provide an update on this?

Members were advised that at the start of the year, UK Government had stopped funding. At the end of the first lockdown, additional money was made available in terms of helping the City Centre using open space safely, so was able to use funding for that purpose. Example was given of putting yellow gates and system in place and barriers outside pubs. The long term ambition remains. Welsh Government will reassess the budget. Members were then told that there is an interim agreement in place for this.

- Members commented that there are appointment only visits being allowed to the Household Waste Recycling Centre. Has this increased flytipping in the city?

Members were advised that most flytipping issues are not due to individual households, but relates to organisations where people do not want to pay for the costs for waste removal. There has been a small increase of fly-tipping but not much different from previous years. It was explained that the booking system has advantages and disadvantages. There is less traffic on the Southern Distributer Road, and 46,000 cars and customers have attended the site, which shows a big success.

The committee were then advised that cameras have been placed around the city over the last six months, and the service area expects to see some significant results from those.

- Members hoped that we are able to clearly advertise through various channels that the Information Station has moved to the Central Library, especially as elderly people are regular users of the services held there.
- Members asked when will the temporary gates be removed? Comment was also made about the level of consultation with businesses in the city centre. How many businesses were asked and what were the responses?

Members were told that the gating are in locations to enforce the existing traffic order. Businesses reduce or extend the opening times. Regeneration Investment and Housing did that with businesses and compromised with the Newport Business Investment District (BID). It was decided that there was to be no drinking inside venues, so we had to help support that.

The gates that have been put in temporarily are not a durable long term solution. When Covid restrictions are fully released, that may change however the gating themselves are at points which have existing traffic orders. The timings could change to reduce to make sure that the pubs are able to open at the right times.

- Comment was made about Action no 3 on page 103 – **Improvement to community green and open spaces for amenity and leisure**. Members said this was a great help to people once we were able to reopen parks and keep them open longer than 4pm.
- Members queried Action no 3 on page 71 – **Build a new household waste recycling centre**. Have any potential dates been discussed to start this project, and what mitigations are in place to avoid further delays?

It was advised that this project is linked with increasing recycling, so the service area have been focussing on making jobs work, and prioritising first line services.

Members were advised that the purpose of building a new household waste recycling centre was to help meet targets, the impact of on smaller bins means that the Council exceeded in the overall plan, the target was 64% and we reached 67%. However, this is one of many medium term projects that needed to take a back seat.

- On Page 67 in Service Risks – **Ash Die Back Disease** and **Highway Network** both show as high impact and probability. Are the service area confident that they are able to deal with these risks, and if so, what mitigations are in place?

Ash Die Back Disease was flagged as high impact and probability as Newport was impacted dramatically during lockdown. It arrived from Northern Europe and hit the United Kingdom quicker than expected. Caerleon Road had to be closed to deal with the problem. It is a huge issue as Newport has a large amount of ash trees on highways. It is also flagged as high risk because the budget for trees is £150,000. The Council had to spend three times this amount for the work on Caerleon Road. It was explained that this is a national problem. The Tree Team are dealing with this will, with identifying the problem areas and putting PANs in place. A number of trees would need to be removed, which play an important role in health and blocking out noise. Lastly, there are a large number of mature Ash trees and their roots go into the drainage system. These trees would need to be replace, this would be a large project that would take around four years to complete.

Members thanked the Head of Service for attending.

Finance

Invitees –

- Meirion Rushworth – **Head of Finance**
- Owen James – **Assistant Head of Finance**
- Emma Johnson – **Income Collection Manager**
- Richard Leake – **Procurement Manager**
- Andrew Wathan – **Chief Internal Auditor**

MR – Not normal over 6 months.

The Head of Finance gave an overview of the report which included the work that the service area had completed. The Revenues Team have continued to collect Council Tax as well as dealing with the challenges around Business Rates, which were cancelled for hospitality and retail businesses in line with the Welsh Government scheme. In the first quarter, 2,500 grants which were worth £31 million was paid to businesses during the first lockdown period. In the second circuit breaker lockdown, 1,500 grants have been paid to date which equates to around £2.7 million, which had put a huge strain on the Income Collection Manager and her team. The Head of Service was extremely proud of the hard work that his service area had undertaken and advised that businesses had sent in letters of thanks for the help and fast action of support. Some Councils waited for Welsh Government to transfer money, however Newport borrowed money short term at the end of March to ensure businesses could get support.

The Procurement Team have been busy working with suppliers during this period, and explained that there are Government rules on supporting suppliers in this period and paying them even if couldn't deliver services. But it was important that the Council supported the suppliers. Examples were then given of the hard work that was undertaken with Chartwells and the bus companies to try and keep them afloat in terms of their contracts with the Council to ensure that they are still around for when the pandemic ends.

The Audit Plan was difficult to make any movement on over the first quarter, but a lot of their work was around the flexibility and helped out with the business grants and fraud related work for grants. A lot of staff were seconded into the Trace and Trace scheme. Performance has struggling in Council Tax and Business Rates. This is a difficult area, as work is being completed doing the grants and collecting money when residents are going through hard times.

Lastly, the Head of Service advised that the original Audit plan cannot be met, so a new one has been done. It is a little over half of what the original plan was and started in October. Trying to get through that, but it is difficult to achieve as the auditors cannot go into schools and other venues, but do the best they can. Some projects that have been delayed are highlighted in report, however the service area has made reasonable progress on most of them. The service area are focussed on collecting revenues and also doing the financial management of the grants. The service area are making sure that working with service areas is being completed to make sure big key suppliers are still going to be around when the pandemic ends.

Members asked the following:

- The Committee were pleased with the content of the report and were happy there are no financial issues as such to worry about.
- Members were advised that the business rates that were cancelled for retail and hospitality businesses that were under a half a million pounds rateable value for the full financial year. The Council were compensated by Welsh Government. Members then asked how long would we defer the payments? The Income Collection Manager explained that the team entered into arrangement with certain rate payers and these are done on an individual and negotiated basis. This is not to say that payments will be wiped, the Council will still collect the business rates, but we have recognised their position and agreed that they would pay them by March 2021 instead of the normal monthly payment instalment. Members were then reassured that there are regular meetings with rate payers to check in and see if they are on course. Some have begun to pay.

- Members asked for clarification that Business Rates have no financial benefit to the Council, only Domestic Rates are collected and used.

The Head of Finance clarified that the Council collect Business Rates for Welsh Government, which are put in a pool and then distributed to all local authorities.

- Members queried Page 126 – **Work with partner agencies and 3rd sector to provide advice and assistance to those with debts and financial problems**. Are the service area confident that this action will be completed by the end date of 1st March 2021?

The Finance Manager advised that the service area set up a pre-Covid intention to set up a network of meetings, but have not really had a chance to do everything with that target. We work closely with benefit agency partners such as the Citizens Advice Beureau. They help residents who need to spread their payments. This is a key priority for the service area.

The Chair thanked the Head of Service and officers for attending.

Conclusion of Committee Reports

The Committee noted the performance within Regeneration Investment and Housing, City Services and Finance Service Plan Mid-Year Reviews and made the following comments to the Cabinet

Regeneration Investment and Housing

- Members congratulated officers for keeping business running during the pandemic and up to current date. Comment was made that some red measures, such as Planning determinations and business growth were inevitable due to the surrounding circumstances.
- Members were pleased to hear the updates on fuel poverty and are happy that it remains a key focus moving forward to reduce the carbon footprint.
- The Committee were extremely happy with how the service area were able to accommodate for those who have been rough sleeping and/or homeless and wish to see this good work continue.

City Services

- Members were pleased with the performance shown in the report, and congratulated the service area on maintaining the collection of waste and recycling during the pandemic. They were also extremely happy that recycling figures exceeded in the overall plan.
- Members hoped that we are able to clearly advertise through various channels that the Information Station has moved to the Central Library, especially as elderly people are regular users of the services held there.
- Committee were pleased to hear about the improvement to the community greens, which will be a great help to people once we are able to reopen parks.

Finance

- Members were pleased to get clarification on how Business Rates and Council Tax are being handled this financial year through the pandemic and that the Business Rates have no financial benefit to the Council, only Council Tax is collected and used by the Council.
- The Committee were pleased with the content of the report and were happy there are no financial issues as such to worry about.
- The Committee were appreciative that the service area are working closely with rate payers that may have trouble making their agreed payments, as this is already a stressful time for everyone involved.
- The Committee wished to thank the Head of Service and his entire staff for the hard week they have undertaken during the pandemic.

4 **Forward Work Programme Update**

Invitees

- Neil Barnett – **Governance Officer**

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

18th January 2021/22

- Draft Budget Proposals

The meeting terminated at 6.45 pm