

Minutes



Cabinet

Date: 15 November 2023

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors J Mudd (Chair), D Davies, D Batrouni, J Clarke, Y Forsey, D Harvey, J Hughes, L Lacey and S Marshall

1 Apologies for Absence

None received.

2 Declarations of Interest

None received.

3 Minutes of the Last Meeting

The Minutes from 18 October 2023 were accepted as a true record.

4 September Revenue Budget Monitor Report

The first report presented by the Leader explained the current forecast position on the Council's revenue budget and the financial risks and opportunities within the July update.

This was the second revenue budget monitor report presented to Cabinet this financial year and it reflected an underspend of £3.5m, which was a £0.5m improvement on the July figures.

This position considered the contingency budget and the anticipated in-year underspend against capital financing budgets.

Whilst an overall underspend was projected, it was noted that service areas were collectively forecast to overspend by £3.5m, excluding schools.

This update provided confirmation that some of the known risks, as at the start of the year, have materialised and were causing significant overspends, especially within Children's Services. It was anticipated however, that it would be possible to offset service area overspends with the general contingency and underspends within capital financing.

The key variances contained within the overall position included:

- (i) An increased demand across key social care areas including children's out of area and emergency placements. These two areas alone contributed an overspend of almost £4.5m to the overall service position.
- (ii) An increased demand within adult residential and non-residential services also contributed £2.1m to the overall service position. This was, however, offset by the

overachievement of community care income as a result of an increased number of users contributing to their care.

- (iii) Significant pressures were evident within Housing and Communities, in relation to homelessness. Despite the Council allocating a significant budget increase for 2023/24, to address the ongoing impact of the overspend incurred last year, costs had increased further and an overspend of £1m was being projected. This was an area that had seen a significant increase in costs over the last two years, following the Welsh Government's policy aim to dramatically reduce homelessness.
- (iv) There were forecasted underspends against non-service budgets, specifically the general contingency and capital financing. Savings in these areas, as set out within the report, were more than offsetting the net service area overspends, resulting in an overall underspend for the whole Council.
- (v) There was an anticipated shortfall against the delivery of 2023/24 and prior year savings of over £1.6m. The two services responsible for the majority of the shortfall were Adult Services and Housing and Communities. It was not possible to evidence achievement of the saving within Housing and Communities, especially given the overall overspend in this area. Within Adult Services, whilst some proposals were proving difficult to currently achieve, it was identified that previously unachieved staffing-related savings (totalling £481k) could be permanently offset against the levels of residential income being received from service users. Cabinet was asked to approve the virement required in order for this saving to be shown as permanently achieved.

As school variances were managed via individual school's balances, the overall underspend of £3.5m did not include the schools' position. Schools were collectively forecasting an overspend against budget of £5.4m which would see balances reduced from £14.4m to £9.1m by the end of the financial year.

In light of the significant level of savings that schools needed to deliver during 2023/24 and the level of recurring expenditure included within the £5.4m overspend, officers would continue to closely monitor school balances over the medium term as part of the Council's deficit avoidance and prevention strategy.

Cabinet colleagues also noted that the report contained a request to approve the use of the Transformation Fund to support the resources required to deliver various aspects of the Council's Transformation Programme, predominantly the Assets stream of work. The request totalled £774k and covered a three-year period.

The report confirmed that there was adequate funding within the Fund to cover this expenditure. It was, however, important to note the Head of Finance's comments regarding the need to prioritise the replenishment of this fund from any underspend this year, to ensure that adequate funding was available for future commitments.

Now that the midway point of the year was reached, some of the previously reported risks no longer existed, such as the NJC pay award for this year, which was confirmed as being in line with previous expectations. Some risks remained however, particularly around demand-led services, which could show a high level of volatility. With this in mind, there remained the possibility that the position could change between now and the year end.

Given that there was a risk that this position could change and an overspend or reduced underspend emerged, efforts must continue to be made to mitigate overspending within service areas and to bring the service area position back towards a balanced position by the end of the year.

Part of the reason for needing to ensure an underspend was achieved, was because of the current constraints on capital resources and the Transformation Fund. A revenue budget underspend was one way of assisting with this challenge. This re-iterated the need for overspending service areas to take steps to improve their positions and underspending service areas should continue to ensure that their positions did not negatively change during the remainder of the year.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Davies noted that there were no spending reserves in Newport schools and as the Cabinet Member for Education and Early Years, Councillor Davies had to consider the risk that some school budgets might become unsustainable. Councillor Davies however was confident that the finance team, having worked closely with all schools, were on course to set a balanced budget for the next financial year, with support being provided where concerns were highlighted. Councillor Davies also mentioned that the overspend on additional learning needs (ALN) represented an increasing cost as well as an increasing need and understood the level of support these children required and was grateful for the support provided by schools but that Newport City Council was tied with funding.
- Councillor Batrouni was concerned that the underspend would be seen as a positive position for the Council, however, it was important that residents read the detail of the budget and the revenue pressures. There was overspends in out of area placement for children and in schools and whilst this was offset by capital finance, this might not be the case next year.
- Councillor Marshall highlighted context around children's issues and as a Local Authority, the Council was readying itself. The journey was challenging and placements were limited in relation to childcare provision. Officers were working hard to look at new assets to combat this moving forward. Councillor Marshall wanted to assure residents that this was always at the top of the agenda when meeting with officers.

Decision:

Cabinet:

- Noted the overall budget forecast position outlined within this report, which was comprised of service area overspending, offset by underspends against non-service budgets.
- Noted the risks identified throughout the report and in the Head of Finance comments, such as in relation to demand issues being faced.
- Noted the overall shortfall in the delivery of savings accepted as part of the 2023/24 revenue budget.
- Noted the forecast movements in reserves.
- Noted the overall position in relation to schools' budgets, acknowledging the risk that some individual deficit positions could emerge by the end of the financial year.
- Approved the virement within Adult Services, as detailed within the report.
- Approved the use of the Transformation Fund to cover the cost of internal and external resource requirements for the Transformation Programme, as set out in the report and Appendix 5 of the report.
- Noted the recommendation from the Head of Finance that replenishment of the Transformation Fund was made a priority for any underspend at the end of the financial year, in order to ensure adequate funds to be able to support savings proposals that would be critical for future years' budget setting processes.

The Leader presented the Capital Programme monitoring and additions report for September 2023.

This was the second monitoring report of the year on capital activity and provided an overview of the updated capital programme, alongside the projected outturn position as of September of this year.

The report provided an update on the level of available capital headroom and also detailed the additions to the programme that was identified and sought approval for these additions.

The first section outlined the movement in the capital budget since the last report was presented to Cabinet in September, which was the July 2023/24 monitoring and additions report.

The net value of additions and amendments to the current capital programme in 23/24 since then was £5.5m, and a breakdown of these additions was given in Appendix A. Cabinet was required to approve these additions and amendments.

As a result of these additions as of September 2023, the current budget for 2023/24 was now £90.3m, which was still substantial and would be challenging to deliver in full.

The additions within this report included the addition of works to the Duffryn District Heating System totalling £3.139m, for which the Council was liable. The report explained the specific accounting implications surrounding this and Cabinet was specifically required to approve the retrospective use of the Capital Expenditure reserve to fund the creation of the provision that would cover these costs.

Cabinet noted that the balance in the reserve carried forward into this financial year would now be reduced by £3.139m. The overall level of capital headroom, however, was no lower than it would have been, as this was the funding source that would have been used for these works, had a provision in the 2022-2023 accounts not been required.

The report also outlined the level of slippage currently being forecasted against the revised £90m budget.

Currently, a variance of circa £8m was being projected, the majority of which related to slippage. The report however, noted that these figures were subject to continual review and might change between now and the end of the financial year.

The report also detailed the level of capital headroom currently available, which could be used to support new schemes and emerging priorities. This was £8.259m, having decreased by £3.139m following the addition of Duffryn District Heating System onto the programme.

Whilst the level of available headroom was higher than it was a year ago, Cabinet noted that it only took a few significant issues to arise for this to be consumed. The use of this needed to be very tightly controlled, in order that the Council was able to respond to critical issues, as and when they emerged. This would require clear prioritisation of only the most pressing and urgent issues.

In addition, any opportunity to further increase the headroom needed to be taken, so that it was possible to support as many priorities as possible to ensure that sufficient funding existed to respond to any issues that arose.

These regular updates included information on the Council's compliance with its prudential and treasury management indicators.

The Council complied with all of its indicators, as of 30 September 2023, as referred to in Appendix D. The Leader thanked the finance team for assuring the Council's compliance.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Davies noted in the report the wonderful work being undertaken in Education, such as completion of work in Bassaleg School, as well as the Whitehead site, which was on its way to being developed for the new Pillgwenlly School. The original Pillgwenlly School site would then be used for the seedling school Ysgol Gymraeg Nant Gwenlli. The Capital budget was going at pace and doing right by the children of Newport.
- Councillor Batrouni emphasised that despite the challenges and thanks to prudence, the Council was investing in the highest level of capital in 92 years. Significant investment as outlined in the report meant that Newport was not holding back. This was testament to the Leader, Cabinet, and the finance team.

Decision:

Cabinet:

1. Approved the additions to the Capital Programme requested in the report (Appendix A), including the addition of the Duffryn District Heating System and the retrospective use of the Capital Expenditure Reserve to fund this.
2. Noted the predicted capital expenditure outturn position for 2023/24.
3. Noted the amendments to the capital programme.
4. Noted the available remaining capital resources ('headroom') and the earmarked usage of that resourcing.
5. Noted the inclusion of the treasury management prudential indicators, included within the report.

6 Half Yearly Treasury Management Monitoring Report 2023/24

The Leader presented the Council's treasury management report which outlined the activity for the first half of 2023-2024 and confirmed that the treasury activities completed so far during the year complied with the Treasury Strategy previously considered and set by Members.

The report compared activity with the year-end position for 2022-2023 and detailed the movement from April to September 2023-2024 and the reasons for those movements. This is the first of two reports received by Cabinet on treasury management during the year.

The report included the following information:

- Reminder of the Treasury Strategy agreed.
- Details of borrowing and investment activity throughout the year.
- Wider economic considerations e.g. economic climate.
- A medium to long-term outlook for borrowing need.
- An examination of activity against prudential indicators, confirming compliance.

The report was presented to Governance and Audit Committee in October and was endorsed by them prior to the report being considered by Cabinet.

The key highlights included the level of borrowing, which, as of 30 September 2023, decreased by £3.1m from the 2022-2023 outturn position and was now £135.5m. This decrease is in relation to:

- a number of loans which are repaid in instalments over the life of the loan,

- the redemption of two small Public Works Loan Board (PWLB) maturity loans at the end of September, which did not need to be re-financed, and
- this was netted off by a minimal amount of new long-term borrowing that was taken out, totalling £300k from Salix which was interest free and linked to a specific energy efficiency project.

As at the end of September, the Council's overall borrowing also included six Lender Option/Borrower Option (LOBO) loans totalling £30m. Whilst in the first half of the year these loans were not subject to any change in interest rates, in late October the Council received notification that the lender of a £5m LOBO had elected to increase the interest rate. Following advice from the Council's treasury advisors, the Council redeemed the loan, rather than accept the increased interest rate. This was because the revised interest rate was higher than the current rate and not dissimilar to current borrowing rates via the PWLB. The Council had sufficient investment balances available at this point to be able to afford the repayment, without the need for new long-term borrowing.

The Council received notification earlier this month from another lender of a £5m LOBO loan who had also elected to change the interest rate. Again, following advice, the Council chose to redeem this loan as well, as the revised interest rate was higher than current borrowing rates from the PWLB.

Whilst redeeming these loans would ultimately accelerate the Council's need to undertake new external borrowing, exiting from LOBO arrangements allowed the Council to de-risk an element of its borrowing portfolio, by taking away the risk of further interest rate rises on these specific loans.

With regard to investments, the report confirmed that the level of investments increased by £7.4m to £54.7m. However, it was anticipated that investment balances would naturally reduce as the year progressed, mainly due to progress in delivering capital schemes.

Within the report was a forward-looking indicator called the Liability Benchmark, which provided a graphical illustration of the Council's existing and future borrowing requirement. This was an important indicator to understand as it demonstrated the impact that decisions taken now in relation to capital expenditure had on the long-term net borrowing requirement, which ultimately impacted upon the revenue budget in the form of capital financing costs.

The Council's underlying long-term need to borrow, coupled with the need to refinance existing loans, means the Council would be exposed to a higher level of interest rate than experienced over recent years. As a result, the Council continued to defer the need to take out long-term borrowing for as long as possible. It was hoped that, by adopting this approach, interest rates may have reduced from their current levels by the time new borrowing was required, reducing to some extent the impact upon the revenue budget of undertaking new borrowing. Any decision regarding the undertaking of additional long-term borrowing would be made in line with advice from the Council's treasury management advisors and only where there was a clear financial benefit.

The final aspect outlined was the Prudential Indicators. The Authority measured and managed its exposure to treasury management risks using various indicators, as shown in Appendix A. The report confirmed that for the first half of the year, the Council complied with the Prudential Indicators set for 2023/24.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Davies thanked the finance team led by the Head of Finance, alongside the Audit team and Governance and Audit Committee. With prudence and care, the Council was borrowing and investing appropriately. Councillor Davies was grateful for the work the team undertook.

- Councillor Batrouni mentioned that Newport was investing heavily in capital due to sound financial management. The internal borrowing mechanism also minimised the way the Council paid. Councillor Batrouni added that bank rates might have peaked, however, they could spike further. Therefore, to be prudent to offset any increases in rates or loans was sound financial management.

Decision:

Cabinet noted the report on treasury management activities during the first half year period of 2023-24 and provided feedback as required for the subsequent report to Council.

7 Council Tax Premiums Report

The next report presented by the Leader dealt with the matter of consulting with residents on the introduction of a Council Tax Premium applied to long-term empty properties and second homes in the city as an incentive to bring these homes back into use.

Full Council would determine whether this would be undertaken and this report was asking for the Cabinet's approval to start a consultation exercise with residents on the issue.

There was a high demand for affordable homes in the city, while at the same time, there were nearly 1,000 long-term empty properties in the city and to a lesser extent, second homes.

Newport City Council tried to incentivise homeowners to bring these back into use when it was agreed to charge the full rate of Council Tax on these properties and ended the 50% discount, they previously had in 2018/19. Unfortunately, this did not have the impact the Council was seeking.

Councils in Wales have the power to charge a Council Tax premium on certain properties such as long-term empty properties and second homes in order to meet various housing and community-related policy objectives in their local areas. The vast majority of other Councils in Wales had already or were soon to introduce some form of premium.

Cabinet therefore wished to explore the use of these powers and this report asked Cabinet to approve a consultation on this issue with the residents of Newport. This would be available on the Council's website.

There was concern about the increasing demand for quality and affordable housing in the city and the need to bring as many of these properties back into meaningful use as soon as possible.

Cabinet would consider the results and decide on this towards the end of the year and if it would be taken forward, it would be brought to Council in January.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Clarke referred to the demand for temporary accommodation. This applied not just to Newport but throughout the UK. Councillor Clarke also mentioned the Council's commitment to improve the outcome for citizens and to ensure that homelessness was rare. This proposal encouraged property owners to put their properties back into use and would be welcomed by residents. Councillor Clarke hoped that residents would get behind a consultation process, should it take place, and put their opinions forward.
- Councillor Harvey agreed with charging a premium but would much prefer to allow a family to be homed. This issue was not just with homeless people but with people struggling to

find a home or fleeing domestic violence. Councillor Harvey therefore fully supported the report.

- Councillor Hughes thanked the Leader for bringing this report forward and said that it was not just about raising revenue but a civic duty for residents who owned empty properties to think about what they were doing as part of the development of the city. Councillor Hughes therefore encouraged residents to get involved in the consultation as it would make a difference in the environment and the city that they lived in within Newport.
- The Leader agreed with comments and added that it was important to get houses to a usable standard. The use of council tax premiums would inform the Council's thinking. In 2019, the Leader made a commitment to being a listening Council and would consider the results of the consultation and address this at the end of the year and bring to Council in January.

Decision:

Cabinet noted the contents of the report and agreed that a public consultation on the introduction of council tax premiums was undertaken.

8 Leisure and Wellbeing Project Update

In February 2021, Cabinet approved the delivery of a brand-new Leisure and Wellbeing facility on the land adjacent to the University of South Wales (USW) campus on Usk Way. This decision followed a public consultation exercise which saw over 1000 people giving feedback on their views. There was overwhelming support for the provision of a new leisure and wellbeing facility.

The Leader was pleased to note that work on the detailed design of the new facility was progressing well, and the report provided an update on the project.

The proposed new leisure and wellbeing facility replaced the former Newport Centre and would provide new, modern, and accessible facilities for residents and visitors, complementing the wider sporting offer which was available across the city.

As outlined in the previous report to Cabinet, retaining the former Newport Centre was not a viable option. It was the oldest facility within the Council's leisure estate and needed significant investment. It was also the most expensive Council-owned leisure facility to operate. The centre had complex and outdated plant systems and was wholly reliant on gas. Upgrading this building to achieve carbon net zero standards and comply with modern accessibility standards would not have been achievable without further significant, direct capital investment from the Council.

The new facility was being designed to be carbon net zero in operation and Cabinet was advised that this scheme had the potential to be the first carbon net zero leisure centre in the UK and the first all-electric facility of its type in the UK. The design team also recovered materials from the Newport Centre for reuse in the new facility, including light fittings, timber panels and glass. This showed a true commitment to circular economy principles.

The development of a new leisure and wellbeing facility on the new site also enabled the release of the former Newport Centre site to Coleg Gwent in order for them to relocate their Nash Campus to the City Centre. This was huge benefit to learners who would have a new, modern, and accessible campus in the city centre.

Having over 2000 students coming into the city centre would also bring more vibrancy and footfall to the city centre, supporting and benefitting our local businesses. Importantly,

residents wanted a new, modern leisure facility and they supported the reuse of the Newport Centre site for a new college campus.

The report confirmed that good progress was being made in delivering the new facility. Planning permission was in place and early in the new year further enabling works would be undertaken on the site. The tender for the main construction project was programmed to be released in February with construction to start on site in June. The build time for the new facility was expected to take approximately 18 months.

The benefits of the new leisure and wellbeing facility could not be understated and would enable the Council to continue delivering transformational regeneration within the city centre, and deliver a fit for purpose, modern and sustainable leisure and wellbeing facility for the people of Newport and visitors from further afield.

The Leader looked forward to seeing the development commence in the new year.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Harvey mentioned that the people of Newport wanted this new facility and provided the following statistics: 94% of residents said that they wanted a new leisure and wellbeing facility; 85% indicated that they supported the reuse of Newport Centre for the provision of a new college campus and 74% said that they would use the new facilities more often. This was a win-win situation.
- Councillor Hughes mentioned that it was worth noting that Newport continued to invest in its future. The improved carbon neutral modern facilities would increase footfall, which would bring economic regeneration. This was positive news for Newport and was delivering on the corporate plan. As we approached the building phase, Newport could look forward to a landmark building in the city that served the people.
- Councillor Clarke referred to the points made by his colleagues, which were well-made and felt that the report was a timely update. There was a need to recognise that we were in tough times and councils within in the UK were struggling. Whilst the Council was making tough decisions in Newport there was a determination to move forward. The new facility would provide another attraction to Newport, health and wellbeing for all and an increase in footfall. Residents of Newport would therefore recognise this as a positive move.
- Councillor Davies mentioned the shop owners talking about loss of trade in the city centre and their worries. Councillor Davies was able to talk about the leisure centre and the positive knock-on effect, with increased footfall as well as the new campus for the city centre. Links to opportunities and employment was a positive impact that would make great changes.
- The Leader also referred to Small Business Saturday next month and thanked colleagues for their contributions.
- Councillor Marshall was pleased to hear the progress and that change was already visible, with the old leisure centre already completely removed. It was important to add significant changes with college students coming to the city. People wanted to socialise, and this would be a draw. Councillor Marshall hoped that this would be an exciting city centre moving forward, that allowed more people to consider studying and apprenticeships.
- Councillor Forsey echoed the comments of colleagues and noted that the new development would be an energy efficient facility and commended the net zero design.

Decision:

Cabinet noted the good progress being made on delivering the new leisure and wellbeing facility.

9 **Annual Digital Report 2022/23**

The report provided an assessment of the digital programme for the Council and highlighted where action was required to deliver improvements.

This was the fourth Annual Digital Report and the first reporting on the Digital Strategy 2022-27 agreed by Cabinet earlier this year.

The strategy was a key component of the delivery of the Council's Corporate Plan's aspirations for digital infrastructure, skills and services and would be an important underpin for data-driven transformation of services.

The annual report was presented to Overview and Management Scrutiny Committee on 8 September 2023 where valuable feedback and comments were received.

The Council, much like other organisations, had an increased reliance on IT systems for effective and efficient service delivery and this was highlighted further by the impact of the pandemic.

The report highlighted progress towards the outcomes of the Digital Strategy 2022-27. This was guided by important principles: innovation, data driven, user centred, inclusive, collaborative, secure and green.

The strategy had four themes, and the report outlined some key achievements:

At this point, the Leader invited Councillor Batrouni to comment on the report. Councillor Batrouni thanked the Digital Team who did a tremendous job during the pandemic by rapidly upscaling and up-skilling the digital provision. This work was continued post pandemic.

The Cabinet Member highlighted issues achieved as outlined in the report.

In the Digital Transformation theme, the website redevelopment project commenced with an implementation partner to implement Local Government Drupal. A Council "Smart Home" pilot was launched, led by Adult Services to promote the use and availability of assistive technologies for independent living as well as accessibility issues to meet the needs of residents in the 21st century. For those who were not digitally connected, those voices were heard, and opinions taken on board, with initiatives such as free Wi-Fi in public buildings.

In the Digital Skills and Inclusion theme, the Adult Community Learning team delivered a range of fully accredited ICT and Digital Skills courses. Digital skills courses and Computers Don't Bite were now free. All Council libraries provided free public access to internet-enabled PCs and the Council provided a free public Wi-Fi service in over 50 public buildings and on Newport buses, in partnership with Newport Transport.

With regard to data and collaboration, Newport was at the forefront of this agenda and Monmouthshire Council would be visiting Newport soon to talk about further collaboration.

Great strides made with Shared Resource Service (SRS) were highlighted, alongside the work of the Council's Digital team and service areas in improving IT provision and the impact on service delivery. Audit Wales acknowledged that considerable progress had been achieved by the Council in using evidence and data to inform decision-making through use of the Newport Intelligence Hub services. Information risk management arrangements were reported in the Annual Information Risk Report. Information and Cyber Security were also reported in the Corporate Risk Register which was also reported to Cabinet.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Davies was pleased to see, as noted in the report, that the Ed Tech grant of £567,000 was effectively used to support learning for schools including 924 digital devices as well as projectors and digital screens. The IT strategic group formed by Karen Keane, Assistant Head of Education – Engagement and Learning, continued to function, working closely with SRS to ensure that any purchase was evidence based and informed by digital development in Education.
- Councillor Marshall mentioned that the speed of which technology progressed was phenomenal. The annual report set out some of the ambitious work. Automation was a great tool to free up staff time and the change with mobility and hybrid technology made a difference. Residents' ability to access more from the Council's services was improving. Grant provision from Welsh Government to care homes for broadband for residents was also making a difference. The Smart Hub also allowed people to stay at home in the community a lot longer, which helped their confidence. This was exciting and Councillor Marshall was looking forward to the future and thanked all the officers involved.
- Councillor Clarke referred to the reliance on IT moving forward was important and it was great to see positive progress being made. Officer involvement was invaluable and the leadership and efforts of Councillor Batrouni should be.
- Councillor Hughes supported Councillor Marshall's comments and referred to the transformation of Social Services provision. Newport City Council was using precise data for the long term, and this helped meet the needs of clients.
- The Leader also thanked the volunteers who came forward to help support with the website development.

Decision:

Cabinet endorsed the Annual Digital Report 2022-23 and proposed actions.

10 Annual Compliments, Comments and Complaints Report

The Leader presented the report, which provided an overview of how the Council manages compliments, comments and complaints and the Council's performance for the last year.

This report provided an overview broken down by service areas and complaint types and highlighted key trends and themes drawn from the data.

The report also reflected on lessons learned for the Council and actions to deliver improvements.

This item was presented to Governance and Audit Committee in September where valuable feedback and comments were received.

The report itself detailed compliments, comments and complaints separately and some of the key points relating to each were:

- 106 corporate compliments and 36 Social Services compliments were recorded in 2022/23.
- The Council was raising awareness with service areas to ensure that compliments were recorded appropriately.

- 2693 comments were recorded during 2022/23. This was a 63% decrease since 2021/22 which reflected improvements made to the categorisation of feedback received, to ensure requests for service were recorded effectively.

At this stage, the Leader invited Councillor Batrouni to comment on the report.

Councillor Batrouni built on his previous comment about collaboration as well as being a listening Council, which was fundamental. It was important to understand when residents had issues and when they were happy with the service as this was critical to the Council's understanding. Councillor Batrouni asked residents to please comment on any improvements that could be made by the Council.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Davies welcomed the openness and transparency of this report, which was a positive outcome for the Council and residents. Whilst no one wanted complaints, they were a lesson to be used to improve processes which was a positive outcome. Councillor Davies always welcomed the compliments and passed this on to the Refuse team, in City Services, when a request for a blue bag was delivered in 24 hours, which made a massive difference to a family, and their recycling needs. Councillor Davies said well done to all involved. Councillor Davies added that we were never quick enough to give compliments or praise for officers that worked hard. Officers cared passionately about Newport and Councillor Davies wanted to extend her thanks.
- Councillor Lacey mentioned that City Services had the highest number of complaints as well as the highest number of compliments. Councillor Lacey then read out two compliments, one relating to the new footbridge over the train station, where a resident started coming into the city centre more frequently as a result. The other compliment referred to a Highways operative, Simon Lock, who helped a distressed mother whose baby was choking. Simon looked after the mother and child and made sure that they went home safely.
- The Leader agreed that officers were a tremendous asset to the Council.

Decision:

Cabinet endorsed the Annual Report on Compliments, Comments and Complaints Management 2022-2023 and proposed actions.

11 **NCC External Pressures - Cost of Living**

The Leader presented the final report, providing colleagues with an update on the external pressures facing the Council and information on how we were collaborating with our partners and communities to support those in need across the city.

This report provided local and UK research on how the cost-of-living crisis continued to impact on household finances, including information on a 6.9% increase in private rental prices across Wales.

In Newport, the lead reason for homelessness continued to be due to loss of rented accommodation and rising rent costs, which had the potential to further increase demand on our housing and homelessness services.

The Council was working closely with local and national partners to provide support, advice and guidance where possible, including promoting national schemes such as Warm Wales, and the Welsh Government 'Help to Stay' equity loan scheme launched last week to support

homeowners who were struggling to afford their mortgage payments and facing the threat of repossession and homelessness.

The Leader took the opportunity to urge residents experiencing difficulties to reach out and contact the Council for information and signposting on the advice and support available; this could be done in person, by phone or by visiting our support and advice pages on the website.

Colleagues would be aware of Cabinet's commitment within the Corporate Plan to work towards Newport becoming a Living Wage City. The importance of this commitment was reinforced with the announced 10% increase in the Living Wage estimated to benefit over 22,800 workers in Wales.

Officers working with our partners and Welsh Government, made significant progress in moving on Ukrainian guests from their initial accommodation by finding alternative housing solutions.

The Leader was delighted to attend the formal launch of the Building a Fairer Gwent report event at the Lysaght's Institute last month, which further ignited the regional commitment to address health inequality across all of our communities.

As the Leader of the Council and Chair of OneNewport, the Leader continued to advocate for partnership working as being vital in supporting residents and businesses and once again encouraged anybody in need to access the support available. This included linking residents with third-sector partners and the police.

Comments of Cabinet Members:

- Councillor Harvey echoed the Leader's comments that there was a lot of support for residents. Newport Live was providing support as well as Maindee Primary, that provided a drop-in session once a month, Housing services were available at Newport Library, as well as the Living Wage Foundation. Councillor Harvey thanked staff for their work and added that it was an emotional strain on staff and therefore wanted to recognise what they did for residents of the city. In relation to winter fuel payments, Councillor Harvey urged residents to pick up the phone and contact a councillor, the City Contact Centre, or Library, to find someone who would provide support.
- Councillor Batrouni referred to the cost-of-living situation and also echoed comments of the Leader and Councillor Harvey, adding that officers were committed to providing support.
- Councillor Marshall referred to financial abuse within homes, particularly around Christmas. Residents should reach out to seek support. Welsh Water hosted a Cost-of-Living event at the Riverfront recently which was a success. There were free events during Christmas such as carol services and community support was invaluable. Councillor Marshall also asked that people remember that staff working in shops were also finding it difficult and that people should consider this.
- Councillor Clarke echoed the comments of his colleagues. Christmas was a difficult time and reiterated that residents should get in touch with the Council.
- Councillor Hughes thanked all those people involved with the Royal British Legion, supporting veterans and their family during this crisis. Councillor Hughes also thanked all the staff in Newport City Council for supporting the Civic events that had taken place over the weekend.
- The Leader and Deputy Leader attended a 'Let's Connect' event recently and were overwhelmed with the positivity, range of support and advice and were proud to say that

it was done in partnership with Community Connectors and the engagement team. It was important to highlight that it was a very accessible event, and it was good to talk to everyone involved and the work that they did. The Leader added that all officers involved with this work touched the lives of citizens and therefore thanked them for their continued efforts. The Leader also thanked Councillor Harvey for her oversight.

Decision:

Cabinet considered the contents of the report on the Council's activity to respond to the external factors on Newport's communities, businesses, and Council services

12 **Work Programme**

This was the regular monthly report on the Work Programme.

Decision:

Cabinet agreed the Work Programme.