

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 11 December 2023

Time: 2.00 pm

Present: Councillors M Howells (Chair), S Adan, J Harris, G Horton, M Linton, C Reeks, J Reynolds and K Thomas

In Attendance: Councillor James Clarke (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Regulation and Housing), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Emma Johnson (Revenue and Benefits Manager), Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance), Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement & Payments), Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Mike Wallbank (Assistant Head of Legal Services), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager), Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager), Kevin Howells (HR & OD Manager), Tracy Brooks (Head of Regeneration and Economic Development), Andrew Ferguson (Planning and Development Manager), Matthew Tribbeck (Regeneration and Place Manager), Alastair Shankland (Strategic Economic Development Manager), Katharine Majer (Deputy Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Simon Richards (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies

Councillor Jane Mudd (Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Economic Growth and Strategic Investment), Councillor A Pimm and Councillor J Cleverly

2 Declaration of Interest

Councillors Reeks and Horton declared an interest in relation to the Regeneration and Economic Development Mid-Year Review.

3 2023/24 Service Plan Mid-Year Reviews

Finance

Invitees:

- Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance)
- Emma Johnson (Revenue and Benefits Manager)
- Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance)
- Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement & Payments)
- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate)

The Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate introduced the report and the Head of Finance provided a summary.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee received an update on the Audit Team, including the recruitment of two Auditors, the creation of a Senior Auditor position through team restructuring, and the close completion of fourteen individual audit assurance jobs by the South Wales Auditor Partnership (SWAP). They are also exploring a longer-term partnership with SWAP. The progress is expected to be in place by April 2024, with a reduction in the initial risk score due to mitigation measures. The role of Auditors in facilitating improvements in poor audit reports was discussed, with assurance that the workload is manageable and additional audits are conducted in case of poor results.
- The Committee enquired about the progress of self-service functions and the My Council Services (MCS) app, as well as reassurances for non-IT literate residents. The Customer Services team are working on expanding the system across other Council departments. The system has been rolled out to further service areas, with a particular focus on three-weekly bin collections. Face-to-face assistance is available at the Central Library, and customers can still call the City Contact Centre.
- The Committee asked about the progress and challenges of the new finance IT system. Testing of the system would resume in mid-December, and the expected completion date has been pushed back to April 2024. Major issues have been identified and resolved, with a focus on addressing smaller issues as they arise.
- The Committee enquired about the completion of the dashboard and reports. The majority of works on the dashboard will be completed by the end of December 2023, and around 80% of reports have been completed. Testing is expected to commence by the end of December 2023 or the start of January 2024.
- The Committee emphasised the importance of ensuring that vulnerable citizens can contact the Council and acknowledged the need for transitioning to online services.
- The Committee enquired about the rate of citizen adoption of online services. The Head of Finance advised that they don't have the data but will pass the request to the Customer Services Manager. The Revenue and Benefits Manager advised a significant increase in residents using the online change of address form, and the Committee noted a 9% increase in Newport citizens utilising online services.
- The Committee enquired about the progress of the City Contact Centre and the Capita Portal. The Revenue and Benefits Manager advised that the Capita Portal went live earlier this year, with over 2000 people using the online change of address form. The rollout of payment management features has been delayed but is being resolved through collaborative work. The Head of Finance assured the Committee that positive progress is being made.
- The Committee queried whether the proposed new houses in the development plan will increase revenue. The Head of Finance advised that it should bring in an additional £300-£400, 000 as Council Tax generates around 25% of the Council's overall budget.
- The Committee expressed concern about the below-expectation performance figures of the Contact Centre and questioned the suitability of the current approach. The Committee were advised that a review of the Council's entire customer journey is

currently underway, with a findings report to be brought to the Committee at a later date.

- The Committee highlighted their own experience with reporting an emergency and inquired about measures in place for emergency reporting. The Head of Finance noted the potential for implementing emergency reporting but highlighted the need for careful consideration to avoid misuse.
- The Committee noted a decrease in call wait times for Council Tax and enquired about the proportion of arrears due to residents struggling to pay. The Revenue and Benefits Manager clarified that most residents pay their Council Tax without arrears, and measures are in place to assist those facing difficulties.
- The Committee enquired about the update on residents opting for the 12-month payment plan. The Revenue and Benefits Manager mentioned that the data is not available but residents are informed about the option on paper bills and the website.
- The Committee noted low percentages in the report with completion dates of March/April 2024 and asked about the nature of these changes. The Head of Finance advised that they are aware of these percentages and aim to complete them, but there is a degree of subjectivity.
- The Committee stated that staffing levels will be discussed during budget talks and enquired about plans to eliminate unfilled vacancies. The Strategic Director advised that service plans would be adjusted accordingly if there are any savings.
- The Committee enquired about the uptake of Council Tax schemes to help struggling residents. The Chair suggested adding this topic to the forward work programme.
- The Committee enquired about the progress of back-office integration with MCS. The Head of Finance noted the need to review the service plan due to delays caused by additional work. The MCS system will be featured heavily in the ongoing customer services review.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

Law and Standards

Invitees:

- Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards)
- Mike Wallbank (Assistant Head of Legal Services)
- Leanne Rowlands (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager)
- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate)

The Head of Law and Standards provided a summary of the report to the Committee.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee enquired about electoral reforms and readiness for a potential general election. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager (DESM) informed the Committee about the implementation of Voter ID legislation, a community outreach programme, and planned communication for 2024. They also discussed challenges related to absent voters and the processing of applications, highlighting the need for a risk-based management approach. Additionally, the DESM mentioned the ongoing discussions with the Welsh and UK Governments, and the potential use of grant funding for additional staff.

- The Committee enquired about the additional time given to officers at the polls to manage Voter ID. The DESM advised of the recruitment of additional staff to manage new duties, including capturing data and ensuring the placement of experienced staff at polling stations. The Committee emphasised the importance of ensuring maximum voter participation.
- The Committee enquired about the management of boundary changes in Newport West and the agreement with Caerphilly County Borough Council (CCBC). The DESM discussed collaboration with CCBC to reflect the new boundaries and ongoing efforts to mitigate potential issues.
- The Committee enquired about the polling station at Islwyn and whether CCBS will manage it. The DESM confirmed the use of the same polling station and staff as before, and discussed the potential management of votes between Newport and Caerphilly.
- The Committee enquired about the forms of ID accepted if residents do not have a passport or driving license. The DESM advised of the acceptance of 24 forms of ID and the option for residents to obtain a Voter Authority Certificate through an online form, with assistance available if needed.
- The Committee expressed concerns about potential additional costs and voter apathy if a general election and Police and Crime Commissioner election are held at different times. The DESM explained that the budget for elections is set by UK Government and plans are in place for both elections to be held together or separately.
- The Committee enquired about the ongoing need for casual staff in the Registration Service and highlighted concerns about the current review. The Head of Law and Standards discussed the ongoing review and the challenges in managing casual staff.
- The Committee highlighted a £65,000 overspend and inquired about the impact of this on the Council. The Head of Law and Standards explained the overspend due to the cost of locums and the recruitment of trainee solicitors to address the issue long term. They also discussed high levels of staff sickness and recruitment challenges.
- The Committee enquired about the retention rates for trainees and the apprenticeships offered. The Head of Law and Standards discussed the difficulty in determining retention rates and the availability of apprenticeships for Paralegal Support and Corporate Admin, highlighting the changes in how solicitors become qualified.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

People, Policy and Transformation

Invitees:

- Tracy McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation)
- Janice Dent (Policy and Partnership Manager)
- Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager)
- Kevin Howells (HR & OD Manager)
- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Transformation and Corporate)

The Head of People, Policy and Transformation gave an overview of the report to the Committee.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee enquired about fair and equitable access to services for residents who are not IT literate or do not have access. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation (PPT) highlighted the inclusion of equality themes in the People Plan and digital inclusion in the Digital Plan. The Digital Services Manager (DSM) discussed the digital services offered to ensure digital equality and eliminate disadvantages for residents.
- The Committee enquired about the Computers Don't Bite scheme and its implementation. The DSM noted the scheme's current implementation as part of adult community learning and its focus on signposting to specific groups and communities. The Policy and Partnership Manager discussed efforts related to making Newport a Marmot region and the commitment to turning policies into actions, including the establishment of an anti-poverty group.
- The Committee noted reduced sickness and absence figures after policy changes and inquired about the effectiveness of the policy adjustments. The Head of PPT and HR & OD Manager discussed the positive reception of policy changes, ongoing engagement with managers, and plans for further adjustments to the Wellness at Work Policy. The Committee emphasised the importance of positive interactions with staff.
- The Committee enquired about the user testing demographics for the new corporate website design. The Policy and Partnership Manager discussed efforts to ensure fairness and inclusivity in user testing and the focus on making the website work across various devices. The Head of PPT highlighted the upcoming changes to the website, aiming for a more streamlined and easily updatable design.
- The Committee highlighted duplicate answers in the report and sought clarification. The Policy and Partnership Manager acknowledged the oversight and committed to amending the report. The Head of PPT clarified the differences between the points and assured that corrections will be made.
- The Committee noted a deadline for Newport becoming a living wage city and its current completion status, and enquired about reaching the target. The Head of PPT explained the complexity of the work and the need to amend the report, as the target will not be completed by the specified deadline.
- The Committee enquired about the new Participatory Budget Programme. The Head of PPT explained the distribution of funds throughout the community via separate steering groups and mentioned previous projects funded by different sources, including the Home Office, the Council, and Welsh Government.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

Regeneration and Economic Development

Invitees:

- Councillor James Clarke (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Regulation and Housing)
- Tracy Brooks (Head of Regeneration and Economic Development)
- Andrew Ferguson (Planning and Development Manager)
- Matthew Tribbeck (Regeneration and Place Manager)
- Alastair Shankland (Strategic Economic Development Manager)

- Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director for Corporate and Transformation)

The Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Regulation and Housing introduced the report, and The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development gave an overview.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee enquired about the delays in the Transporter Bridge Visitor Centre and its impact on the budget. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development (RED) acknowledged the complexity of the project and challenges faced. They expressed confidence in delivering within the outlined timescale and mentioned that the budget is evolving as work progresses.
- The Committee enquired about LADs in the contract for the Transporter Bridge project. The Regeneration and Place Manager explained that the primary delay is due to the Transporter Bridge itself, and the contract provisions have not been impacted. They discussed the different monitoring framework required and built-in provisions for challenges.
- The Committee enquired about the potential need to stop work on the Visitor Centre if the bridge sensors are triggered. The Regeneration and Place Manager confirmed that health and safety regulations would require all work to stop in such a scenario.
- The Committee enquired about a backstop extension to the completion date. The Regeneration and Place Manager mentioned that Newport Norse is reviewing the project plan to provide a new completion date.
- The Committee enquired about additional funding requested for the former IAC building and whether the Council would provide it. The Head of RED explained that the developer is reluctant to complete internal work until an occupier is in place, and the Council will incur any additional costs.
- The Committee enquired about the percentage of occupancy developers seek before completing work and expressed disappointment in the lack of information. The Head of RED stated it is a commercial decision subject to contract.
- The Committee enquired about interest in the IAC building post-Covid and the timeline for a business to occupy it. Currently, there is no timeline as the market has changed and workforces have adapted to hybrid working. The Committee highlighted the developer's loan terms from the Council and was assured there are no concerns about losing money, with no repayments until project completion. The Committee enquired about taking the building back if no payments are made after a certain time. The Head of RED explained it would be brought before Cabinet if needed.
- The Committee inquired about contingencies for participants unable to genuinely take part in the DWP Restart Programme. The Head of RED explained the programme focus and experience of working with non-engaging participants.
- The Committee asked if the Council has any legislation or measures in place to ensure that developers and landowners undertake necessary work on deteriorating buildings in Newport within a specific timeframe. The Head of RED advised the availability of completion notices that can be issued to set an expectation for completion.
- The Committee enquired about the progress of the International Technology Institute and any updates regarding its implementation. The Head of RED shared that they have been actively exploring the potential opportunities this institute would bring to

Newport. A meeting had also been held with the Welsh Government to discuss maximising its benefits.

- The Committee emphasised the importance of meeting the needs of citizens by providing desired facilities in Newport. The Strategic Economic Development Manager explained that this objective would align with the Placemaking and Cultural Plans. The Cabinet Member stressed that there is a long-awaited opportunity at hand and emphasised the significance of approaching it correctly to create a lasting legacy for Newport.
- The Committee suggested collaborating with the Education sector to offer opportunities for students to experience high-tech advancements. The Cabinet Member highlighted the need for knowledge-sharing to keep young people in Newport and mentioned the importance of upskilling and reskilling. The Strategic Economic Development Manager acknowledged the potential utilisation of resources such as Coleg Gwent and the Cardiff Capital Region.
- The Committee enquired about the Council's support for apprenticeships and how other businesses are being assisted. The Head of RED explained that the Shared Prosperity Fund plays a significant role in providing 12-18 month placements for apprentices. They also noted the positive response received for the 21 available apprentice positions, which will commence in the upcoming weeks. Additionally, the Head of RED discussed the support available for graduates, undergraduates, and the exploration of postgraduate support. The Committee commented that apprenticeships should be given priority if they are the best fit for a role. The Strategic Economic Development Manager mentioned the Quick Start scheme, originally a DWP scheme, which matches candidates to vacancies.
- The Committee conveyed their congratulations to the Building Control Team for their award nomination.

The Committee thanked the officers for their attendance.

Conclusions

Finance

- The Committee have asked to receive data on the number of individuals accessing online services.
- The Committee expressed concern regarding the current call wait times at the City Contact Centre and emphasised the need for improvement.
- The Committee were pleased to see the level of assistance and engagement provided by the service area to support individuals facing difficulties in paying their Council Tax.
- The Committee suggested increasing awareness among residents about the option to pay Council Tax on a 12-month basis, particularly targeting existing Direct Debit customers. They recommended either including an additional information flyer in the annual paper bill or highlighting this information more prominently within the paper bill itself.

Law and Standards

- The Committee expressed satisfaction upon learning that the service area had established apprenticeship roles within the Legal team, acknowledging the challenges associated with recruitment in this particular field.

- The Committee requested a timeline outlining the proposed actions by the service area to raise awareness of electoral reform. They specifically enquired about the communication campaign and the timing of its distribution.

People, Policy and Transformation

- The Committee requested an update on the sickness policy review that was reported in the end of year reports in July 2023. Officers confirmed that the review is ongoing with some amendments to the policy likely to be proposed around changes in terminology and sickness triggers, following which discussions will take place with the unions. The Committee welcomed these proposed changes and requested that these changes are included in the service area's work plan for the End of Year reviews.
- The Committee enquired about whether diversity was taken into consideration during the testing of the new corporate website. They also requested information on which communities faced the most challenges during the testing process.
- The Committee requested information for the participatory budgeting to be sent.
- The Committee requested if the duplicate answer shown on page 69 Reference 1, and page 71 Reference 4 could be amended.

Regeneration and Economic Development

- The Committee expressed interest in knowing the completion date for the Transporter Bridge Visitor Centre. Additionally, they raised a concern about the safety perspective of the ongoing works, particularly in the event of a safety alert triggering a temporary halt in work near the Transporter Bridge and the Bridge itself. The Committee enquired about the measures taken to ensure the safety of other buildings and vehicles in the area during such situations.
- The Committee requested that the Council engage with larger hotels and facilities in the area to encourage them to showcase Newport attractions on their websites, with the aim to provide residents of Newport and visitors with easy access to information about what is happening in Newport and the surrounding areas.
- The Committee wished to extend their best wishes to the Building Control Team as they head to London for an award.
- The Committee raised concern regarding the IAC building on Mill Street and the potential for the building to remain unoccupied. The Committee would like to seek assurances that the Council is engaging with the developer to ensure tenants are found for the site. Concern was also raised about the growth of knotweed on the site.

4 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitees:

- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

a) Forward Work Programme Update

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the Forward Work Programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two committee meetings:

Monday 15th January 2024, the agenda item;

- 2024-25 Draft Budget Proposals and Medium Term Financial Plan

Monday 19th February 2024, the agenda item;

- Highways Asset Management Plan
- Flood Risk Management Strategy

It was suggested by the Committee that the Monday 15th January 2024 meeting start earlier than the current 2pm start time. The Scrutiny Adviser noted the request and advised the Committee that once agreed, the Committee and officers would be notified.

The meeting terminated at 5.26 pm