

# Minutes



## Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

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Date: 22 January 2018

Time: 4.00 pm

Present: Councillors C Evans (Chair), M Al-Nuaimi, G Berry, J Clarke, M Cornelious, K Critchley and J Richards

In Attendance: Owen James (Assistant Head of Finance - Technical and Development), Joanne Gossage (Green Services Manager), Leanne Rowlands (Customer Services Manager), Keir Duffin (Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing), Gareth Price (Head of Law and Regulation), Rhys Cornwall (Head of People and Business Change) and Meryl Lawrence (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Apologies: Councillor W Routley

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### 1 Declarations of Interest

The following interests in the Revenue Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan 2018-19 Draft Proposals were declared by Members, as listed:

- Councillor M Al-Nuaimi declared an interest due to his association with the Belle Vue Bowling Club;
- Councillor C Evans declared an interest due to his business association with Belle Vue Café;
- Councillor G Berry declared an interest due to his association with Friends of Newport Ornamental Parks and the Woodlanders Association.

### 2 Minutes of the Meeting held on 11 December 2017

The Minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the meeting.

### 3 Revenue Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan 2018-19: Draft Proposals

Invitees:

- Owen James – Assistant Head of Finance
- Joanne Gossage – Green Services Manager, Streetscene & City Services
- Leanne Rowlands – Customer Services Manager, Streetscene & City Services
- Keir Duffin – Head of Regeneration, Investment and Housing
- Gareth Price – Head of Law and Regulation
- Rhys Cornwall – Head of People and Business Change

The Assistant Head of Finance provided an overview of the budget proposals within the Committee's portfolio and advised that since the Draft Budget had been published, the final settlement from Welsh Government had been received, which was slightly better than anticipated. However, due to in-year pressures and the Local Government Pay Award, the Authority was not in a better position overall.

Note: Due an emergency, the Head of Streetscene was not able to attend the Scrutiny Committee. The Strategic Director – Place was also not able to attend.

The Committee received Apologies that the Strategic Director - Place and the Head of Streetscene and City Services were unable to attend the meeting and was advised that the Green Services Manager and Customer Services Manager would be presenting the draft budget proposals for Streetscene and City Services and receiving Members' questions.

### **SS181902 - Closure of Public Conveniences**

The Green Services Manager provided an overview of the proposal to the Committee, to close 6 public convenience sites across the city as listed in the report. Members were advised of the costs of maintaining and servicing the toilets on an annual basis, the high level of vandalism that occurred and that the usage of the public conveniences had declined. It was proposed that people could be offered alternative conveniences nearby with buildings in Council ownership or linked to the Council.

The Members asked the following:

Members queried in terms of distance how far away were the conveniences as even 100 yards may be too far for some people. Due to the emergency short notice of attending the Committee, the Officer was not sure of actual distances but could find out.

Members had concern with this this proposal regarding how the decline in use had been measured, attracting visitors to the city, as well as potential issues for the elderly and disabled. Members queried what the alternative suggestions were for people and were advised that in Caerleon village there are discussions open with a local group, while the suggestion for the city centre was for people to use local shops and the Newport Centre.

Members enquired if there had been any consultation work with other authorities to see how they have dealt with similar proposals and whether any businesses had been consulted yet, as nearby alternative facilities should be signposted to meet the needs of disabled people. The Green Services Manager was unsure whether businesses in the Business Improvement District had been consulted yet, but there had been discussions with Cardiff Council and other authorities.

### **WS181904 - Reducing telephone and face to face services within Customer Services**

The Customer Services Manager provided an overview of the proposal to the Committee, to reduce front line Customer Service resource by 0.88 fte, by reducing channels through which customers could arrange Special Collections and reorder recycling containers from telephone and face to face to online only.

The Members asked the following:

Members were concerned about customers without access to the internet. They were advised that over 60% of all transactions are currently done online, and while there were challenges for some customers, the Council had been supporting people to go online for the past 5 years by having internet access in libraries and community centres, as well as offering free WIFI throughout the city. Members were also told that there would be engagement sessions in the city to help people who aren't computer literate.

Concerns were expressed for customers who are not computer literate, visually impaired and people who do not want to use computers and how they would be able to access these services as not everyone can rely on family go online for them. Members were advised that this was considered in the impact assessment and recognised that these services are important for everyday life. If some people struggle to access the service online, customer services staff at the information station can assist.

Members raised the potential for call wait times to increase and asked whether volunteers had been considered to assist Customer Services Officers with work. Members were advised that customers were likely to continue to phone for a while as they get used to the new online service, but these should drop off after 3 months after the changes had been embedded. With regard to volunteers, it was explained that this would be difficult to achieve in Customer Services, however, volunteers could be trained as Digital Champions to help more people who would like to use the internet in the community.

#### **SS181905 - Introduce parking charges within city parks**

The Green Services Manager provided an overview of the proposal to the Committee, to install meters for visitor parking in the city parks, initially in Belle Vue Park and extended to other sites such as Tredegar Park and Fourteen Locks as potential second phase. Members were advised of the issue of the free parking attracting commuter parking all day which stopped park or café users parking in the car park and that outside the park was mostly restricted residents' parking. Additionally, the former sheds and outbuildings used by the gardening team now based at Belle Vue Lane Nurseries was attracting anti-social behaviour.

Members asked the following:

Members agreed with the importance of the park and welcomed the proposal of spending money to upgrade and enlarge the car park, however, concern was expressed that the charges would be difficult for the public to accept. It was acknowledged that commuters using most bays all day from early each weekday morning caused problems for people wishing to use the parks facilities. Concern was expressed that the report hadn't mentioned consultation with users, and the impact upon parking for Bowling Club matches which are for a number of hours. It was asked if reduced parking could be considered in the afternoons for visiting clubs such as Bowling, to use the car park. Members were advised that consideration could be given to a cut-off point where parking could be free after 4pm.

Members were concerned about issues that could arise with making the targeted income e.g. café or event customers, people not paying, not using the park and the viability in other areas to be rolled out. Members were advised that the café concession was being re-advertised and the new agreement would include details that for any booking package the need to include a number of parking tickets and for the council to be reimbursed.

#### **SS181901 - Composting at Docks Way**

The Green Services Manager provided an overview of the proposal, which involved terminating the current contract with an external provider who composts the household green waste and bring back the operation to the Council by the creation of 2 fte posts.

Members asked the following:

It was enquired if other Local authorities had been consulted to see what innovative ideas they had. Members were advised that it was believed that other Councils had been contacted before the proposal had been developed. The plan included the purchase of equipment for composting which would be an investment but would still be less expensive than paying an external provider.

Members asked whether the Department was confident of achieving the savings and were advised that they were.

#### **SS181903 - Review of Back Office Cemetery Operations and Facilities in some Parks**

The Green Services Manager provided an overview of the proposal, which involved transferring operations out of cemeteries and centralising the operations in Telford Depot. Members were advised that there had been break-ins at one of the cemeteries which involved data security computers being stolen, so continuing the operation from buildings located within cemeteries would be too high a risk. Centralising operations at Telford Depot

would make savings from no longer having the utility bills and running costs of the buildings and there was also the potential to let out the buildings e.g. to florists or stonemasons.

The Members asked the following:

Members enquired given the proposal, how could a member of the public research the location of a relative's grave or arrange to view a potential burial site. Members were advised that this could be requested online or an appointment booked at the Civic Centre.

#### **NS181901 - Council Tax - Increase Council Tax by a further 1% from current assumption of 4% to a total of 5%**

The Assistant Head of Finance gave overview of the proposal, which involved increasing the rate of increase in Council Tax from the modelled 4% to an increase of 5%, with the additional 1% giving a net saving of £466,000.

The Members asked the following:

Members discussed the merits of the proposal and the potential public reaction. Members were concerned about the pressures this would put on the public but understood the need to balance the budget. The Assistant Head of Finance gave context to the Members that the Council Tax in Newport was one of the lowest in Wales, due to historically low council tax rates in Newport. Welsh Government believed that the Council should be making £8.3million from Council Tax payments and the increase is in line with other local authorities or Welsh Government assumptions.

There was concern about ongoing austerity upon the lowest paid and the need to safeguard staff. However, Members recognised that the proposal would make a contribution, but it would not provide the answer looking ahead to 2022.

Members discussed the difficulty with cutting services whilst increasing Council Tax due to the budget settlement, and would rather see increase of Council Tax but preserve services, but a debate would be needed at Council.

#### **Increase of Fees and Charges:**

##### **Regeneration Investment and Housing**

The Head of Regeneration Investment and Housing presented an overview of the proposed increase of fees and charges within his Service Area.

Members asked the following:

Members enquired about the 4% blanket increase and asked how the 4% amount was decided and how much difference would be made. Members were advised that modelling had been done on 4% in line with the budget, which on average was 40 to 60 % increase on these fees and charges and that discussion with users about proposed fee increases had returned no major feedback or complaints. Each charge was reviewed individually and adjusted up or down where appropriate.

Members questioned there being no increase in Building Control Fees and the potential opportunity for increased income given the number of new build properties being built. Members were advised that there are external providers as well as the Council and it had been considered to be better economically to keep fees stationary and retain its share of the total market.

##### **Streetscene and City Services**

The Green Services Manager presented an overview of the proposed increase of fees and charges for Streetscene and City Services, which included increasing the administrative cost

for research of burial records and increasing the age limit for free child burials from under 16 to under 18.

Members asked the following:

Members enquired the current capacity rate for hiring allotments and were advised that allotments were not near fully occupied, so it was running at a loss and there was a need to look at ways to increase occupancy. There had been an approach for a larger plot to be used as a community garden which could be considered.

Members asked about checking burial details. They were advised that information can be provided, but if the clerk is asked to provide the data there would be a charge. There are plans to try and get an online system so people would be able to do these themselves.

### **Corporate Services**

The Head of Law and Regulation presented an overview of the proposed increase of fees and charges within his Service Area, which included the increase of Licensing fees.

The Head of People and Business Change then presented an overview of the proposed increase of fees and charges for his Service Area, which included increasing the fees for street naming and numbering.

Members asked the following:

Members queried the blanket 4% increase across Licensing and Legal services. It was advised that the 4% reflected the budget pressures and cost for delivering services, and based on the financial model and pressures faced as a starting point, 4% is the normal amount. It was advised that charges such as taxi licensing are reviewed every 3 years to make sure that true cost is reflected.

It was clarified that where the Council is in competition with private providers, the Council can decide their charges although there are rules and regulations on what can be charged.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the Committee agreed to make the following:

#### **Comments to Cabinet on following Proposals:**

Note: The Head of Service was unable to attend the Scrutiny Committee due to an emergency. The Committee understood this, and wished to thank the Officers within Street Scene who had to cover the meeting at very short notice.

As these Officers were not the owners of the business cases, there were naturally some questions from Members that they were not able to answer. This is reflected in the comments as the Committee felt unable to draw conclusions on the achievability, impact and risk of some of the proposals, as the information within the business cases was not sufficient.

#### **SS181902 - Closure of Public Conveniences**

The Committee had concerns that the Business Case was not complete as:

- The impact of this proposal upon disabled people was not sufficiently mitigated in the Business Case.
- The Business Case did not contain information regarding usage or consultation with users, particularly those with access issues such as disabled or elderly users.
- How near and the location of alternative facilities needed to be identified and signposted and Members suggested this could be done via Maindee Unlimited /other

businesses / Business Improvement District partners.

- There was no evidence in the Business Case of what potential solutions other Cities or neighbouring local authorities have used to address similar issues to those identified in the business case, and the rationalisation and identification of alternative provision in the community.
- With the recent City Summit in mind, this proposal was not conducive with the growth and development of Newport and attracting visitors, as it was the view of the Committee that this proposal would have a negative impact on the image of the city.
- Need to develop Business Cases to fully explain the impact on citizens, and what consultation has taken place. It would be beneficial to engage earlier in the development of proposals in future to ensure meaningful involvement when developing the proposals.

#### **WS181904 - Reducing telephone and face to face services within Customer Services**

The Committee had concerns about:

- The Loss of 0.88 FTE face to face contact and the impact on users as a result.
- Issues regarding moving people online from face to face or telephone contact including:
  - Computer literacy / those unable to access computers ;
  - The difficulty of navigating the Council website;
  - The City free Wi-Fi is inconsistent and crashes a lot.

In order to mitigate the impact upon citizens, the Committee suggested the exploration of:

- Live chats and ring back service as offered by other call centres;
- Assistance in libraries for citizens to access computers, and;
- The potential for sharing call centre resources with a partner e.g. Newport City Homes.

#### **SS181905 - Introduce parking charges within city parks**

The Committee welcomed the investment in Belle Vue Car park, but had concerns that the Business Case was weak due to the lack of evidence of consultation with users particularly on the pricing structure. Furthermore, the current business operator located in the park had not received the correct information.

The Committee recommended that:

- More detailed consultation and communication with existing regular users be undertaken urgently before introduction and particularly on pricing strategy, e.g. for event customers, Bowls Team tournaments, etc.
- The rollout of this proposal to other parks be removed from this proposal and when necessary, should be the subject of future separate fully costed and consulted upon business cases / proposals.

#### **SS181901 - Composting at Docks Way**

The Committee welcomed this proposal to make a saving and bring the service in house.

#### **SS181903 - Review of Back Office Cemetery Operations and facilities in some parks**

The Committee noted that there is information that is not included within the Business Case, namely:

- The impact on citizens is not accurately reflected - under the new arrangements an enquiry by a member of the public making about burial records for the City's cemeteries would be dealt with centrally via telephone or an appointment in the Civic Centre. This would present a change to the current provision, and as such would have an impact on citizens, not being able to access the burial records at the respective cemetery that the relevant grave is located.
- Within the summary in the Business Case, it is indicated that the proposal includes the closure of the toilet facilities in the Cemetery. However, this is not referenced in the 'Impact upon Citizens' nor the 'Risk / Mitigation' sections. Closure of the public toilets in the cemeteries would impact upon citizens and this impact should be explained within the Business case.
- There is no mention of the 36% increase in fees to £15 for 30 minutes for an administrative research of burial records which is included in Street Scene Fees and Charges schedule later in the report.

**NS181901 - Council Tax - Increase Council Tax by a further 1% from current assumption of 4% to total of 5%**

While the Committee realised the challenges faced by the Council and that the Council Tax had been frozen for a number of years, it was concerned about the impact on citizens to pay the increased Council Tax.

The Committee recognised the issues and noted that this proposal would be debated at Council.

Comments to Cabinet on following Fees and Charges:

**Regeneration Investment and Housing:**

The Committee stressed that proper communication and consultation with the service of facilities users / fee payers upon proposed fee and charges increases is necessary to feed into the annual review of fees and charges.

**Streetscene and City Services:**

The Committee welcomed:

- No charge for the interment of a child up to the age of eighteen (from sixteen previously) and recommended that this is publicised;
- the freeze on car parking charges to encourage visitors.

The Committee clarified that the 36 % increase of the charge for an administrative research of burial records to £15 is for 30 minutes. (This wasn't mentioned in the Business Case for which includes the centralisation of burial records above.)

The Committee was surprised at the under occupancy of allotments, given their rise in popularity in other areas and suggested promotion to younger demographics via social media to increase uptake and revenue.

**Corporate Services:**

The Committee had concerns that between this year and last year, the pay award was 2% but costs were increasing an average of 4%.

The Committee suggested the promotion of the house naming in order to maximise the opportunity of the building boom, to increase this income stream.

Comments upon the Budget process or public engagement to Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee:

**Public Engagement**

- Concerns about the levels of consultation with citizens / service users and poor evidence of this within business cases.
- Overall engagement and consultation for the 2018-19 Budget was poor with one Community Engagement Event planned in the Market in the daytime compared with a number of events in previous years. Members referred to past engagement when they had circulated hundreds of forms to constituents and respondents and Officers had attended Ward Meetings.
- The engagement was not as good as in previous years, but recognised it could be partly as a result of budget fatigue.
- It was difficult to find the budget consultation online and there was a long form to complete which wasn't easy to use and off-putting, while constituents would prefer a short form to comment on a single or few issues.
- A Member commented that sending a twitter link to constituents required searching back a number of days to find budget # and that other social media could be used more to engage.
- The Council website wasn't easy to navigate for citizens wishing to engage and that it needed a redesign to provide easier access to engagement.

**Budget Process**

- A Member commented that the lack of information demonstrating the budget modelling process didn't provide a justifiable explanation of the 4% starting point for fees and charges and examples of how this was reviewed and adjusted for individual fees and charges.

Note: Due an emergency, the Head of Streetscene was not able to attend the Scrutiny Committee. The Strategic Director – Place was also not able to attend.

The Committee appreciated that emergencies happen and Officers had been asked to attend at short notice, however stressed the importance of the appropriate Strategic Director, Head of Service or relevant Officer(s) knowledgeable about each proposal / business case attending Scrutiny to answer Members questions about each, before the Committee can conclude.

This impacted upon the Committees ability to draw conclusions on these proposals. If the Business Cases were more complete and robust in particular regarding impacts, risk and mitigation and sufficient consultation activity included, this would be less of an issue. The information that is contained within the business cases should contain sufficient information to ensure meaningful engagement with the public.

4 **Forward Work Programme Update**

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer presented the report to the Members and outlined the purpose of the report in seeking the Committee's approval for items on its work programme for the next two meetings including: the information requested; invitees, and; any additional information or research required. The Scrutiny Officer clarified that there had been no information reports circulated since the last Committee.

The Committee **approved** the work programme for the next two meetings on 5 March and 9 April 2018.

The meeting terminated at 7.10pm