

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 15 November 2021

Time: 4.00 pm

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

In Attendance: Councillors Ray Truman and David Mayer, Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director - Transformation & Corporate Centre), Gareth Price (Head of Law & Regulation), Tracy McKim (Partnership Policy & Involvement Manager), Kate Osment (Strategic Communication Manager, Shaun Powell (Newport Intelligence Hub Manager), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Louise A Thomas (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies

Councillor Jason Hughes,

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 September 2021

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 6 September 2021 were accepted as a true and accurate record.

4 2021/22 Service Plan Mid-Year Reviews

Law and Regulation

Invitees:

- Gareth Price – Head of Law and Regulation
- Councillor Ray Truman – Cabinet Member for Licensing and Regulation

The Head of Law and Regulation gave a brief introduction to the Service Plan Mid-year review. The report indicated that the Service Area had performed very well in relation to meeting targets, however, this failed to highlight the extreme effort behind the scenes in order to achieve this. The Head of Service wished to pay tribute to all staff that had helped to deliver the Service Plan during this highly challenging period. The last 6 months had been slightly different as we had been in the Covid recovery phase although significant challenges from the Covid legacy would continue for the remaining 6 months of the year. Covid Test, Trace and Protect would continue until next June and the Environmental Health team were still involved in the enforcement of Covid regulations. However, as these regulations gradually relaxed, staff would be moving back slowly to their original business work.

The legacy of the past eighteen months would remain for a significant time and there were a number of areas of backlog including food inspections, birth registrations and local land

charge searches. Also, a large piece of work would be the preparation for the upcoming elections in May with the Local Government and Elections Wales Act to implement and work in democratic services in terms of preparing for hybrid meetings. The Constitution had to be rewritten, which would be a significant piece of work in itself to incorporate all the new legislative changes that would be brought into effect together with a new induction training programme for members, as well as delivering the elections themselves.

Members asked the following questions:

- Members had been told that there was a lack of taxi drivers in the City meaning some failed to turn up as arranged. What was the impact of any work backlog on the taxi licensing process?

The Head of Law and Regulation confirmed that there hadn't been a reduction in terms of numbers of licences granted during that period and no backlog in terms of applications being dealt with. Clearly the initial lockdown period had been very difficult for the taxi and private hire drivers. There had been a reduction in the number of applications submitted and income had reduced but as soon as the renewal applications had come in, they had been processed. If any taxis failed to turn up to a pre-arranged booking this would be a breach of their licence and could be investigated by the licensing team.

- Members queried the graph contained in the report with regards to the budget as the figures did not match with the narrative.

The Head of Law and Regulation confirmed that the graph in the report was incorrect and the correct one would be re-circulated. The budget figure was £6.7 million and due to an increase in hardship funds in terms of loss of income we now had a predicted underspend of approx. £27,000.

- Members raised concern about the recent press reports regarding drink spiking throughout the Country in pubs and clubs, and wondered if there was any easy way of reporting incidents of this type or other dangerous behaviour, possibly via the Council app.

The Head of Law and Regulation confirmed that this was something we could look into. We worked closely in partnership with the police in terms of law enforcement and although drink spiking would primarily be a criminal act, we could look at it in terms of reviewing licences. If we felt that the premises manager hadn't done enough to ensure safety within the premises we could investigate. Currently people were able to complain via the website for issues such as noise complaints and so it may be a relatively simple solution to allow people to complain about potential breaches and criminal behaviour within licenced premises also. We did work closely with the police in terms of monitoring licenced premises and now were picking up more of the routine licencing inspections also. Currently we monitored compliance with Covid passes required within nightclubs and at the same time we looked at some of the dual security arrangements within those nightclubs for example we monitored door security in partnership with the Police.

People and Business Change

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate Centre
- Kate Osment – Strategic Communication Manager
- Tracy McKim – Policy Partnership and Involvement Manager
- Shaun Powell - Newport Intelligence Hub Manager

- Councillor David Mayer – Cabinet Member for Community and Resources

The Strategic Director gave an overview of his Service Area during the past 6 months. He commented on the incredibly hard work carried out by his Teams during the pandemic, some of which were critical to the organisation in terms of immediate response. Civil Contingencies were critical during this time and although a small team were front and centre from the very start of the pandemic.

From a digital I.T. point of view, we had come on massively over the course of the pandemic and continued to do that through 21/22. Our prior investment into I.T. had put us in a really good position to be able to quickly work in a flexible, hybrid and remote way. We had worked very closely with other service areas, Welsh government and others to develop a local area energy plan as part of the climate change agenda and a carbon neutral agenda and we continued to work with Home Office around asylum seekers and resettlements. Work had progressed around the Local Government elections with an all member seminar held recently to discuss the implications of that and Manager HR self-service applications had continued to be rolled out. Strategic communications had been vital during this period including the public messaging around Covid and its implications.

The budget forecast was a small underspend due to some additional funds received to deliver additional work because of the pandemic and some project work had been delayed. Costs had also reduced by rationalisation of IT systems and procurement and this was something that would continue to be looked at going forward. The Committee had previously been told about the importance of Newport Intelligence and this had been vital during the pandemic in terms of spatial data and data mapping which supported the vulnerable and shielding lists during the pandemic. Going forward, projects included the one stop shop mapping spatial data and intelligence. Another project in progress was the review and redesign of the corporate website, with an extended timescale to complete as this was a significant piece of work and lastly, implementation of the Local Land Charge registration which was a national change requirement.

Members asked the following:-

- In regards to the budget, why were the actual figures not reported rather than those forecast?

The Strategic Director explained that from a good budget management point of view it was important for managers to look at where the budgets were likely to end up, as well as managing the actual spend against those. The problem with actual spend was that that this often lagged because there may have been commitment for a piece of work, but if it was with a third party provider, having to wait for the invoice could cause a lag. Forecasts therefore took these actual and planned commitments into consideration and provided a fairly good indicator for the organisation of budget expenditure across the organisation for the year and gave some headroom within the organisation to areas that might overspend and thus enable a more reactive budget.

- Members asked if we had been applying the 'new normal' in regards to flexible working since the start of the financial year and there would presumably be a financial saving if this continued?

The Strategic Director commented that given the current Covid rates, Welsh Government advice was still to work from home wherever possible. In the future, should organisations continue with a hybrid working model there would not necessarily be a financial saving because this was balanced out by increased costs such as providing workstation, IT equipment etc, for both the office and for home working. The Civic Centre was still open and heated so there was no saving there.

There were pros and cons for both sides of the argument but there had not been any sizeable saving by the current hybrid working model in Newport. The Civic Centre was an incredibly important building for the City of Newport and a primary asset and while previously underutilised there had been no discussions held about disposal in order to make savings.

Whilst discussing hybrid working it was also important to remember that the workforce was approximately 5,500 staff of which 3,500 were school based and a further 1,970 were non- school based, with approximately 700 being front facing staff such as City and Social Services. Only about 1,200 staff were able to work flexibly in a hybrid manner and this represented just over a fifth of the total workforce.

- Members asked about the website redesign and the progress on the corporate newsletter.

The Strategic Communication Manager explained that we were currently asking the public to sign up for the e-newsletter as it was an important tool to disseminate information and help reduce burden on the Contact Centre. The electronic newsletter would be more up to date than Newport Matters which took time to print and distribute. The e-newsletter had been live for a few months and was sent out every fortnight. In terms of the website redesign, it was agreed that the current website was not very user friendly and difficult to navigate. The Council received a huge number of Freedom of Information requests which took up an inordinate amount of officer time to research so this was also a reason for the redesign so that all departments' data and the public would be able to easily research and find out the required information for themselves.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their contribution and responses to Member's questions.

Conclusions - Comments to the Cabinet

The Committee wished to make the following comments to the Cabinet:

Law and Regulation

- The Committee firstly wished to thank the Cabinet Member and Head of Service for their attendance and wanted it to be known that all the officers and staff have every right to be proud of their work and ensuring that the services provided have been of good quality throughout the pandemic. The Committee also praised the quality of the report. It was noted that the Law and Regulation – Mid Year Forecast vs 2021/22 Budget graph on page 19 of the agenda didn't match up to what was said in the Executive summary about the financials, so if possible could the Committee have the up to date graph sent out to them.
- The Committee appreciated that complaints around anti-social behaviour, such as noise complaints can now be reported via an app, but would like to know if the ability to report further anti-social behaviour such as instances of drinks being spiked in Newport pubs and clubs could be extended to the app as this could be a vital tool in reducing this kind of anti-social behaviour.
- Members were pleased to learn that there has not been a reduction in the number of taxi licences granted during the pandemic and as soon the renewal applications come in the service area processes them. Members wished to note this, as the Council are ensuring that everything is being done on their side to ensure taxi drivers have everything in order for their employment.

People and Business Change

- The Committee again wished to thank the Cabinet Member and Head of Service for their attendance and wanted it to be known that all the officers and staff have every right to be proud of their work and ensuring that the services provided have been of good quality throughout the pandemic, especially helping the Council move forward in adapting to the new normal. The quality and detail of the report was also praised.
- In responses to the Director, emphasising that the new normal was not driven by cost savings, but by broader considerations and the response to the pandemic, the Committee advised that it would be useful to know how those aims were working in practice, and that it would be beneficial for the committee at the next service review to have an officer assessment of how the aims envisaged in the new normal are being realised. Members also would find it useful to track the new normal aims, progress achieved and the extent to which they have met Council and HR requirements, and would be good for that to be an ongoing action with percentage given if possible.
- The Committee were pleased to hear that the E-newsletter goes out every fortnight and people can sign up to it via the website. It was also good to know that the service area are reviewing it for content and also looking at the frequency as it progresses.

5 Scrutiny Adviser Reports

Invitee:

- 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 29th November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- 2021-22 Service Plan Mid-Year Review for:
 - Regeneration Investment and Housing
 - City Services
 - Finance

Monday 29th November 2021 at 4pm, the agenda items;

- Economic Growth Strategy and Economic Recovery Plan – Recommendations Monitoring

The meeting terminated at 5.30 pm

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