

Minutes



Performance Scrutiny Committee - Place and Corporate

Date: 24 July 2023

Time: 4.00 pm

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

In Attendance: Councillor Dimitri Batrouni (Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation), Paul Jones (Strategic Director – Environment and Sustainability), Rhys Cornwall (Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate), Tracey Brooks (Head of Regeneration and Economic Development), Andrew Ferguson (Planning and Policy Manager), Matt Tribbeck (Regeneration Manager), Tracey McKim (Head of People, Policy and Transformation), Kevin Howells (HR and OD Manager), Mark Bleazard (Digital Services Manager), Shaun Powell (Transformation and Information Manager), Janice Dent (Policy and Partnerships Manager), Elizabeth Bryant (Head of Law and Standards), Mike Wallbank (Assistant Head of Legal Services), Leanne Rowlands (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager), Jane Clarke (Registration and Coroner Services Manager), Meirion Rushworth (Head of Finance), Robert Green (Assistant Head of Finance), Louise Hughes (Assistant Revenues Officer Local Taxation), Emma Johnson (Income Collection Manager), Richard Leake (Service Manager Procurement and Payments), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser), Taylor Strange (Governance Officer) and Emily Mayger (Governance Officer)

1 Apologies

Councillor Jane Mudd

2 Declaration of Interest

None.

3 2022/23 Service Plan End of Year Reviews

Regeneration and Economic Development

Invitees:

- Paul Jones – Strategic Director – Environment and Sustainability
- Councillor James Clarke – Cabinet Member for
- Tracey Brooks – Head of Regeneration and Economic Development
- Andrew Ferguson – Planning and Policy Manager
- Matt Tribbeck – Regeneration Manager

The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development gave an overview of the report.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee noted that Brexit and the cost-of-living crisis impacted tourism, and requested additional figures. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development

indicated that the drop in figures could be linked to these reasons, although the evidence is anecdotal.

- The Committee raised concerns about the transporter bridge not being finished on time, despite being highlighted in green. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development assured that progress in 2023 is satisfactory and that the project has now started, reducing the associated risks.
- The Committee inquired about the former IAC building. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned increased construction costs due to Covid-19 and ongoing efforts to raise additional funds.
- The Committee requested information about the temporary vaccine centre in Friars Walk. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development explained that interest was shown in the former Debenhams store in Newport, but the size of the space has posed challenges in finding a new tenant. The Head also emphasised that the vaccine site is temporary.
- The Committee asked about performance indicators for affordable housing units. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned using the current financial year as a benchmark and expressed the need for a percentage indicator for the number of units.
- The Committee requested reports on the Council's contribution to the 106 contributions. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development confirmed that this information can be provided.
- The Committee believed that the completion of the Destination Management Plan should be a higher priority. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development explained that the plan is part of a broader range of interconnected plans. The Committee wanted progress updates on the work undertaken, and the Head highlighted that these plans will be presented to the Scrutiny Committee for questioning.
- The Committee requested more information on the storage of the Medieval Ship. The Regeneration Manager mentioned the need for storage space with specific key factors.
- The Committee asked if the search for properties is limited to council-owned properties. The Regeneration Manager clarified that all available options are being considered.
- The Committee inquired about obtaining more funding for the projects. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned the Shared Prosperity fund and the Levelling up fund, noting that the funding decisions will depend on more information.
- The Committee noted successes in bringing properties back into use. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development emphasised that these are mainly commercial properties, and there is a priority list of properties. The Enforcement Officer is responsible for making progress on these properties, but it will take time.
- The Committee asked about plans to create a body of Newport employers to promote the living wage. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development stated that this would be a focus once other projects are progressed and mentioned talks with employers and the potential formation of an action group.

- The Committee questioned the functionality of the Place website. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development confirmed that the website is currently functioning and explained the challenges of accessing back-office data. The Committee requested the website link, which is www.cityofnewport.wales. The Strategic Director clarified that the restriction is not in accessing the website but in obtaining the data.
- The Committee asked for an update on the new leisure centre. The Head of Regeneration & Economic Development reported that the project is progressing well, with efforts to maximise space and facilities usage.
- The Committee inquired about the time scale for the leisure centre construction and the demolition of the old site. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned an estimated 18-week construction period and highlighted that different teams handle the funding for demolition and construction.
- The Committee asked about Newport's peer cities. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned cities like Coventry and confirmed that the peer cities information will be shared. The Committee requested highlights from those peer cities, and the Regeneration Manager mentioned similar challenges across these cities.
- The Committee questioned how the strategy aims to attract high-end technology staff. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development highlighted Newport's historic and cultural aspects, emphasising the importance of creating a place to live and stay, not just work. The Committee stressed that being a cultural city may not help with employment, to which the Head acknowledged and mentioned the connection between culture and technology, such as the Riverfront Theatre.
- The Committee acknowledged the focus on technology but suggested also focusing on key service training, like hospitality, to attract people to the city.
- The Committee asked about plans for vocational colleges with construction subjects. The Head of Regeneration and Economic Development mentioned the Workplace Skills team, Regional Skills partnership, and the National Technology Institute, which will offer training based on employer needs. The Head emphasised the importance of employers communicating their skills requirements. The Committee requested the publication of information from the Workplace Skills group to assist employers.
- The Committee inquired about the timeline for the National Technology Institute. The Head of Regeneration & Economic Development reported ongoing feasibility work and over 60 letters of support from industries, particularly from Semiconductor employers.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

People, Policy and Transformation

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate
- Councillor Dimitri Batrouni – Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation
- Tracey McKim – Head of People, Policy and Transformation
- Kevin Howells – HR and OD Manager
- Mark Bleazard – Digital Services Manager
- Shaun Powell – Transformation and Information Manager
- Janice Dent – Policy and Partnerships Manager

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

The following was discussed:

- The Committee acknowledged concerns about elderly people and those at an economic disadvantage being pushed towards digital platforms. The Head of People, Policy and Transformation advised that the Digital Strategy aims to address these groups and explore ways to assist them using simple digital devices. The Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation encouraged elderly individuals to visit the smart hub in Newport market to enhance their quality of life, and commented that an important factor to consider is that Newport is a young city and that this group must be looked at and helped.
- The Committee inquired about the demographics of the Get Connected initiative. The Digital Services Manager will provide the metrics to the Committee, emphasising that the data can be misinterpreted.
- The Committee expressed concern about the increase in staff absences. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation acknowledged the complexity of sickness data and highlighted the shift towards a well-being approach for managing absences.
- The Committee questioned the measures taken to facilitate check-ins for managers. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation explained the steps taken to simplify the check-in process and provide guidelines for managers.
- The Committee enquired about the decrease in the apprenticeship metric. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation discussed new strategies to fill hard-to-fill positions through apprentice schemes and support for existing apprentices.
- The Committee asked if the council assists businesses seeking to hire apprentices. The HR and OD Manager explained that they typically contact scheme providers directly, but regional collaboration poses challenges.
- The Committee asked about the planned and stretch targets for social media communication. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation acknowledged the limitations of the metric and expressed the need to improve monitoring and measure engagement. The Committee suggested contacting schools and youth councils. The Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation mentioned efforts to engage the over 65s on Facebook and assured the Committee that the teams are addressing their concerns.
- The Committee noticed a missed green metric deadline on Page 54 point 1. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation explained that the project has been completed, but some outstanding asset work remains.
- The Committee expressed interest in knowing all owned assets. The Head of People, Policy, and Transformation mentioned ongoing work to compile a comprehensive asset list, focusing on revenue, carbon footprint, and community needs. Progress will be shared in 6-monthly updates.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

Law and Standards

Invitees:

- Rhys Cornwall – Strategic Director – Transformation and Corporate
- Councillor Dimitri Batrouni – Cabinet Member for Organisational Transformation
- Elizabeth Bryant – Head of Law and Standards
- Mike Wallbank – Assistant Head of Legal Services
- Leanne Rowlands – Democratic and Electoral Services Manager
- Jane Clarke – Registration and Coroner Services Manager

The Head of Law and Standards gave an overview of the report.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee inquired about county-wide issues in the process of registering deaths, noting concerns from residents. They also raised questions about post-mortem exams and the time taken. The Registration and Coroner Services Manager mentioned changes due to the Covid-19 act and other factors such as the time of year. A change to medical examiners will be implemented by April. The officer highlighted that this is a national issue. The officer confirmed that the target of offering an appointment for registering a death within 2 days is being met. The 5-day target does not apply to cases referred to the coroners.
- The Committee inquired about the diary system for registering births and deaths. The diary, which currently records all births and deaths, is being tested. The next stage is to transition to an online system for booking appointments.
- The Committee raised concerns about the challenges faced by elderly people with voter ID. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager mentioned feedback received on the topic and emphasised the goal of informing people about acceptable documents. No communications regarding voter ID were sent out in Wales, as the focus was on England. However, voter ID will be implemented in Wales in September.
- The Committee asked about the progress of appointing coroners. The Registration and Coroner Services Manager shared that two assistant coroners are undergoing training, and the number of cases has decreased from 13 months to 8-9 months. They expect to meet the target by the end of 2023-24.
- The Committee enquired about the employment status of staff in relation to Gwent Police and NCC. The Head of Law and Standards explained that options are being explored, including advertising a new position. They also mentioned that NCC staff will be brought to the same level as police staff and that Gwent Police would like a service level agreement.
- The Committee questioned the percentage of people who feel they can influence decisions in their local area. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager explained that national survey metrics were collected for Wales and a local survey will also be conducted to gain more understanding of local issues. The manager noted the challenge in obtaining information on participation and engagement.
- The Committee acknowledged that residents may engage directly with elected members, not just through surveys. They inquired about the origin of the figure of 159,000 regarding participation. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager stated that it includes all Newport residents but was unsure if it includes children as well.
- The Committee asked whether filling out the accreditation for carbon literacy training is mandatory. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager expressed the desire to have as many members as possible accredited.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

Finance

Invitees:

- Meirion Rushworth – Head of Finance
- Robert Green – Assistant Head of Finance

- Louise Hughes – Assistant Revenues Officer Local Taxation
- Emma Johnson – Income Collection Manager
- Richard Leake – Service Manager Procurement and Payments

The Head of Finance gave an overview of the report.

The following was discussed:

- The Committee acknowledged the completion of work and discussed the conclusion of various schemes, including COVID schemes.
- The Committee enquired about underperforming service areas and requested a breakdown by department. The Head of Finance mentioned that some services may be below average and efforts are being made to improve these numbers.
- The Committee enquired about the revised budget monitoring process. The Assistant Head of Finance explained the changes made this year, emphasising reliance on budget managers' forecasts. The Assistant Head of Finance mentioned providing support to managers and highlighted the focus on higher risk areas like Social Services.
- The Committee asked about the capacity for Audit following the departure of staff. The Head of Finance mentioned the challenges of finding auditors and discussed strategic considerations, such as merging with another council's Audit team. The Head of Finance stressed the severe risks to the 2023-24 audit and informed the Committee's chair. The Committee noted having councillors informed of the importance of audits.
- The Committee asked about delays in the accounts and the reasons behind them. The Head of Finance cited external impacts and recruitment difficulties, as well as delays from audit Wales. The Head of Finance anticipated the signing off of the 2023-24 accounts by November.
- The Committee asked about assisting less technologically capable residents. The Head of Finance mentioned the availability of face-to-face centres and ongoing website revamp.
- The Committee raised concerns about customer wait times. The Assistant Head of Finance highlighted staffing issues in the council tax line and ongoing discussions on resource allocation for improved wait times.
- The Committee expressed interest in addressing frequently occurring issues more effectively. The Head of Finance suggested involving the council tax department for certain challenging calls and lowering the call time target once the issue is addressed.
- The Committee enquired about the use of robotics. The Head of Finance mentioned that the self-service solution outperformed the robotic solution.

The Chair thanked the officers for attending.

Conclusions

Regeneration and Economic Development

- **PI – “Number of new affordable housing units granted planning permission during the year”** – Members advised that it would be useful in future reports to see the figure as an overall percentage.

- The Committee would like to know how much money the Council is bringing in terms of Section 106 agreements. It was also requested if they could be told how it compared to previous years.
- Discussion ensued regarding the Place Making Plan, Destination Management Plan and the Cultural Strategy. The committee felt that more clarity around actions to drive traffic to the website and to get people to visit Newport would be helpful. The Committee request if they could receive information reports on the three strategies by the end of September.
- **Page 25 Reference 6 - “Develop a Place Marketing Plan which promotes Newport as a great place to live, work, learn, visit and invest in”**, Members would like to know what are the other peer locations that we have been looking at, and also what have been the highlights so far.
- Members were keen to consider the important of the night time economy in achieving the objectives of the plan.
- Members requested to have the public contact details for the Working Skill Group.
- **Page 29 Ref 4 - “Use effective enforcement powers to protect against inappropriate development and bring back some of the City’s long standing vacant and derelict properties”**, - Members noted the new post created to lead on the progression of priority cases, and comment was made about the 2 successes. Members suggested that a PI is set for future report to make sure we are getting value for money from the post.
- The Committee request for the Place Making Plan website address be circulated to Members and further search engine optimisation work conducted.
- Members asked if they could receive a breakdown of each business type within the city centre.

People, Policy and Transformation

- **Page 46 Ref 6 – “Development of digital skills of citizens, employees and members”**, The Committee would like to know what was the take up for the Get Connected Digital Skills course, and what the demographic of the take up was.
- Members were pleased to see the improvements made for staff check-ins.
- Members requested clarification of a likely completion date for the Asset Management Plan, as Members would like to fit this on the committee’s forward work programme as an agenda item.
- **Page 59 – PI – “Total number social media followers”**, Members requested if the measures for social media are appropriate. Suggested was also made if we could utilise schools, such as sixth formers to use as a part of their coursework to help with engagement. The Youth Council could also be included.
- The Committee request that the Mid-Year Review report include an update on the implementation of the sickness policy, and how it compares with other local authorities.

Law and Standards

- The Committee request to have a link to the Participation Strategy. They would also like to know what the age of children were in the engagement.

- Members were pleased to hear about the backlog reducing in the Coroner’s Office, but noted that there were no figures given for the backlog. Members request if they could receive these figures.
- **Page 82 Performance Measure – “Percentage of people who feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area (National Survey for Wales and local data)”** – For future reports, Members asked if number of engagement methods could be included.

Finance

- **Performance Measure – “Budget monitoring – Budget Manager submissions Percentage of monthly forecasts submitted by budget managers”** – Members asked if it could be specified which service areas are below target, and the reasoning to why they are underperforming.
- The Committee voiced their concern about the lack of resources within the Audit department, and noted that this needs to be recognised as it may represent a considerable threat to the Council. The Chair of the Committee advised he will write to the Chair of the Audit Committee to share the concerns of the Place and Corporate committee, as well as Scrutiny Members who also sit on the Audit Committee.
- **Performance Measure – “Customer Contact Centre average wait time – Council Tax enquiries”** – Members suggest that the 25 minute target be lowered as the current target is being comfortably met. Members also asked if they could be provided details of the peak call times for lines in the Customer Contact Centre.

4 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 11th September 2023, the agenda item;

- Replacement Local Development Plan Preferred Strategy

Monday 27th November 2023, the agenda item;

- 2023-24 Mid-Year Service Plan Reviews

b) Action Sheet

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the action sheet to the Committee.

5 Recording of the meeting

[To view the recording of the meeting please click here](#)

The meeting terminated at 7.30 pm

