Draft Minutes

Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee

Date:	11 June 2021
Time:	10.00 am
Present:	Councillors L Lacey (Chair), M Al-Nuaimi, G Berry, C Ferris, Y Forsey, P Hourahine and Hussain
In Attendance:	Rhys Cornwall (Head of People and Business Change), Gareth Price (Head of Law & Regulation), Neil Barnett (Scrutiny Adviser) and Ellie Howard (Graduate Trainee)

1   **Declarations of Interest**

None.

2   **Minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 April 2021**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2021 were **accepted** as a true and accurate record.

3   **The New Normal - Newport City Council Operational Model**

Invitees;
- Rhys Cornwall, Head of People and Business Change

The Head of People and Business Change gave an overview of the report, and first addressed the Active Travel aspect of the report. It was advised that Newport are currently part of the Gwent Active Travel Network, and prior to the pandemic a survey had gone out to employees regarding how they get to work. The barriers to active travel have been listed in the report, and these are in line with responses elsewhere, and are as expected for walking and cycling. This report will go to Cabinet on the 7th July 2021. The process from here is that the report will go to Cabinet with a series of recommendations, and then staff consultation will also need to take place. The Head of People and Business Change then case updates on the current position:

Welsh Government Remote Working Wales Initiative
It was advised that Welsh Government (WG) are setting up remote working hubs across Wales. Newport City Council (NCC) are working with WG on this initiative, with the aim for 30% of the workforce to work remotely from home or near home. This aims to increase staff's ability to have a short commute to their working hub, preferably using active travel. These are also ideally going to be placed in town centres.

Climate Change
As a city on the M4, air quality is a really important issue. The lower amount of vehicles travelling into Newport, the better, as traffic is a large contributor to air pollution in Newport.

Staff

This document is available in welsh / Mae's ffurflen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg

In terms of technology, lots of work is going on to improve Newport's Digital Strategy, but Cabinet will not be asked to make any decisions on this. There have been investments over the past few years to improve Newport's digital approach. Wellbeing, remuneration and personal development will be the key concerns. The Council have carried out surveys regarding wellbeing of staff working from home. Most of the responses suggested that working from home had been a positive for individuals. The overall position is that as a council, we need to look at the way we support staff wellbeing in a working world. Regarding remuneration, there is a tax claim scheme which allows employees to not be taxed on their working from home money. The Council want to ensure this is in place for employees. The Committee were then told that the council are not advocating that any staff solely work from home. The wellbeing and personal development aspects are the key elements of this. It is important that staff feel involved and feel like part of the organisation.

The HR and OD Manager explained that the Council are considering how to help people working remotely, particularly regarding training and development. Her team are looking to pull together a whole package of support to allow people to work remotely on a long term basis, in order to support wellbeing whilst working from home. The Head of People and Business Change explained that health and safety, and culture are the main challenges to staff working at home. Whilst we feel we have the capability to work remotely as an organisation, and that staff can achieve this, there are detrimental impacts to this as well. Being pragmatic, we need to look at individual needs, for example, health and safety. It is important to maintain an organisational culture, and that is very difficult to do if people are never together.

The Head of People and Business Change advised that the first question for the Cabinet is: once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, we could go back to the previous model. There is nothing stopping us. So a decision needs to be taken assuming that is not what we are going to do. In regards to staffing, a home-working policy will need to be developed, allowing for staff to work from home at least one day per week. The flexible working scheme will also need to be reviewed. There is a need to invest in new approaches to supporting mental health support and long-term health conditions in a post-pandemic environment and to employ different tactics to engage with a dispersed workforce. Currently, our primary goal is to ensure the safety of staff, members and public. Following that, our priority remains looking after the health and safety of all. However, there is no point in achieving that if it has a detrimental effect on wellbeing, mental health and physical health

Members asked the following:
- Members expressed that an issue with home working is the tax implications are very complicated. Is the plan for there to be agile working contracts instead of home working contracts?

    The HR and OD Manager advised that there are options around what we choose to do. If we are going to designate an employee's home as a place of work, that will need to be outlined formally. It will also be important to consider things such as desk and meeting space availability in the Civic Centre. Ultimately, it is not expected to make contracts for people as home workers on permanent basis.

- Members asked if we would be looking at setting up a booking system for hot-desking.

    The Head of People and Business Change replied that we are looking at the optimisation of the space we require in the Civic Centre. A booking system is being considered upon the return to work. It is important to consider the purpose of the building, both in terms of the work that people do, but also as it being a publicly accessed building. The model at the moment gives us 250 work stations, but also

significantly more collaborative work spaces. A zoned approach will be used to ensure colleagues can be with their team members.

- Issue was raised of staff having difficulties from disconnecting from their work at the end of the day. This may be even worse for less senior staff who may feel they need to prove themselves. How can we communicate to staff and give training to show that staff are expected to take breaks and have space between home and work life?

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that we certainly have a bigger issue with people over-working than under-working. Training and information for staff is necessary, however this is also a cultural issue. It is very difficult for staff to get down time, as it is known that people can always be reached on their laptop or phone. For most of our staff, as an organisation we need to be much better at ensuring they can switch off at the end of the working day.

- Members commented regarding active travel. Offering secure bike parking for employees is important. Rewarding active travel could also be a key part of this. Active travel mentors could also be utilised, for example for people who would like to cycle but don't have the confidence or experience.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that the active travel mentors is a really good idea, and it could be explored how that could work. Rewarding active travel can also be reviewed as part of the Travel and Subsistence Policy review. Members were also advised that the Civic Centre does have some secure bike parking, but perhaps not enough. Similarly there are shower facilities, but again not enough.

- Members discussed the possibility of renting out the Civic Centre to other partners.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that this is definitely part of the plan going forward, as we have a lot of space in the Civic Centre that it will be important to utilise.

- Comment was made that the choice of employees is very important.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that this is a difficult issue. We need to consider their role and type of work, but also what suits the employees best.

- Comment was made that aggressive motorists has not been mentioned within the list of barriers to active travel in the report. It would be good to see this being added.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that cyclists can be very vulnerable road users. Most drivers are reasonably considerate, but there is often a risk to cyclists. It is still commonly believed that cyclists are a bit of a nuisance, so there does need to be an attitude change to this.

- Members commented that it is important to remember that face-to-face contact is extremely important, and it shouldn't be neglected. Both from a staff perspective, and a citizen perspective, it is very important for people to be able to interact in person. We need to pay important attention to this, as it is at the heart of local engagement and democracy.

The Head of People and Business Change replied that the Civic Centre should be a publicly accessible building. However, it is important to note that many members of the public prefer to access services online. If we can service as many people as possible online, it means we can offer better face-to-face service for those who need it. We want it to be as easy as possible for members of the public to speak to staff when needed. Members were then advised that this section of the report will be added to before it goes to Cabinet.

- Members enquired whether Full Council meetings would need to be in person to be legally binding.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that this applies in England only, not in Wales.

- Members asked what percentage of the building is occupied?

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that pre-pandemic occupancy was about 40% of the building. Currently, only Social Services are really using the building as well as a few staff when necessary. Members were then advised that the plan is not to leave the building empty. We would want to have other organisations in the building to utilise the space and bring more business to the town centre. It would be ideal to have many people using the building on a daily basis.

- Members commented that lots of roadworks are going on near the Civic Centre in order to improve cycling access. This is going to make cycling safer around Newport.

Building
The Head of People and Business Change explained the plans for the Civic Centre. There are ongoing conversations around the best use of the building. We already have third partners in the building, for example Health, the Coroners Court and the Police. There are certainly opportunities to bring others into the building. It is important to consider security of the building in conjunction with this. There are also IT implications, as the servers are currently in the building but will move to a purpose built data centre. We want to ensure that the building is being utilised fully. Members were then told of the two broad options, one is to return to the way that civic centre was used in the same way pre-pandemic. The other is to maintain a more flexible approach, which is the preferred option. The plan for this is to have zoning in the Civic Centre so people are working within their staffing groups- there will be a booking system associated with this. The plan also aims to ensure that there are facilities within the building to work with members of the public or using technology. Also looking at utilising the reception area and meeting rooms. Again, the purpose of this plan is to bring the building into full use.

Members asked the following:
- A Member commented that he had previously worked in a remote environment and would be happy to share his experiences of this.

  The Head of People and Business Change explained that this would be welcome.

- Members enquired whether it is feasible to consider letting out spaces in the Civic Centre, when lots of the spaces are out of date and require refurbishment.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that the Civic Centre is an iconic building and is in a significant location in Newport. We need to maximise its use. In their current state, we couldn't be seeking a revenue stream for the office space. We

will need to find grant streams or investment opportunities in order to renovate this space.

Democratic Function

The Committee were advised that as part of the Local Government and Elections Act, we have a duty to ensure public access to council meetings. In the future, will have to make provision for in person and virtual council events. This is to promote a more diverse range of people being able to serve as Members. There is also work being undertaken in Council Chambers and meeting rooms in order to ensure they are fit for purpose. We are looking at how to enhance the wellbeing programme for members, and considering the requirement to fund members to carry out their duties, for example with equipment and facilities. This will also be discussed at Democratic Services Committee.

Members asked the following:
- Members enquired whether Microsoft Teams is a government preferred system, or if other video conferencing tools will be used. There have been significant issues with Teams over the past 12 months.

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that this is not necessarily a Welsh Government preferred tool. The current issue is due to a Microsoft update. Most of the issues we have experienced have been due to individual issues, for example a certain laptop or home internet issues. Microsoft is a resilient system, but there are weaknesses within that. The Council use Microsoft, not just for Teams, but also for applications such as Outlook and Office. The Council has recently updated their Office 365 system, meaning we get Teams included in the package. Any alternative would mean a significant increase in cost. There will always be external factors, such as home connectivity and isolated issues. These are inevitable and not due to Teams. It was then advised that NetMotion is currently used for remote connectivity, and this is going to change in the coming months to use a different VPN. This will make it better, but there are still issues which will impact this.

Technology

The Head of People and Business Change explained that Newport joined the Shared Resource Service in 2017. We now have an exceptional IT team led by Mark Bleazard. There has been a significant increase in resourcing over the past few years, which served the Council very well in the transition to home working during the pandemic. We are increasing our bandwidth, which means that things will work faster. We are also introducing a new VPN, which streamlines things that need to be used in a secure network. The purpose of all of this is to augment and enhance the work that is being done face-to-face. The lockdown triggered an enhanced risk to cyber security. With people working from home, there is always going to be a weakness in that system, despite many safeguards being in place. This is not just an issue for our organisation, but is across public sector bodies in the UK.

Members asked the following:
- Members commented that there are some service areas where the information being dealt with is highly sensitive and confidential, e.g. social services. How is this encrypted?

  The Head of People and Business Change replied that there is Information Security training in order to ensure that all staff understand the rules around information sharing. We also currently have Egress encryption for confidential emails, and our whole email system is encrypted.

- Members commented that there needs to be assurance that the Council can cope if a cyber-attack was to occur.

The Head of People and Business Change replied that we have facilities in place in order to respond to a cyber-attack. We have classifications for different systems and business continuity arrangements, to ensure that if any systems do go down, there are still arrangements for operating. We are very reliant on IT provision, so it is extremely important these things are in place.

The Chair thanked the officer for attending.

<u>Conclusions</u>
The Committee **agreed** to recommend the report to Cabinet with the following comments and recommendations to the Cabinet Member:

- The Committee would like for further exploration on how mentors for Active Travel could work, for people who would like to cycle but do not have the experience or confidence. It was also requested that rewarding active travel could be reviewed as a part of the Travel and Subsistence Policy review.

- Members spoke of the importance of face-to-face contact and it shouldn't be neglected. Both from a staff perspective and a citizen perspective, it is very important for people to be able to interact in person. The Council need to pay important attention to this, as it is at the heart of local engagement and democracy.

- The Committee were pleased with the assurance that the Council is able to cope and have facilities in place with cyber-attacks.

- Members requested if there can be additional information included in the report about the potential future usage of the Civic Centre building. Members would also like to for "aggressive motorists" to be added within the list of barriers to Active Travel.

4   **Scrutiny Adviser Reports**

Invitees;
- Neil Barnett – Scrutiny Adviser

The Scrutiny Adviser presented the forward work programme, and informed the Committee of the topics due to be discussed at the next two meetings:

9 July 2021
- Annual Corporate Safeguarding 2020/21
- Annual Information Risk Report
- Annual Digital Report

30 July 2021
- Parks PSPO

The Scrutiny Adviser advised the Committee that another meeting in July had been requested for the Parks PSPO to be scrutinised, as the Parks PSPO is due to be renewed. This additional meeting had been agreed with the Chair of the Committee.

The meeting terminated at 11.50 am