

**Minutes of Communities Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 8 September 2016  
at 9.30 am at Conference Room 1a, County Hall, Ruthin**

**Present:**

Councillors Brian Blakeley, Bill Cowie, Huw Hilditch-Roberts (Chair), Martyn Holland, Rhys Hughes (Vice-Chair), Cefyn Williams and Cheryl Williams

**Also Present:**

Councillors Raymond Bartley, Hugh Evans, Hugh Carson Irving, David Smith and Eryl Williams

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**1 APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors Bob Murray, Anton Sampson, David Simmons and Co-optees Debra Houghton and Gareth Williams.

**2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

Declarations of personal interest based on their position of school governors were submitted by Councillors Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Martyn Holland, Rhys Hughes, Cefyn Williams and Cheryl Williams for items 7 and 8.

**3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR**

There were no urgent matters.

**4 MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on the 30 June, 2016 were submitted:-

**RESOLVED** – *that the Minutes be received and approved as a correct record.*

**5 DWP / PEOPLE PLUS PROVISION IN DENBIGHSHIRE**

The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) had apologised ahead of the meeting that they did not have a senior official available on the day to attend the Committee's meeting for the discussion. They had however sent a letter outlining

the background to the Work Programme (WP) contract, recent changes, reassurance that all WP customers are receiving the same level of service and information on the forthcoming development of the Work and Health Programme.

PeoplePlus, the agency contracted to deliver the WP on the DWP's behalf, had undertaken to send a representative to the meeting to discuss the decision to relocate DWP services from Rhyl to Flint with the Committee. Unfortunately, no representatives were present. The Committee registered its disappointment that no representatives were in attendance and consequently:

**Resolved: - to**

- (i) write to both the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and PeoplePlus inviting them to attend the Committee's next meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> October 2016 for the purpose of discussing the decision of relocating services from Rhyl to Flint; and*
- (ii) discuss with the DWP the development of the new Work and Health Programme and potential opportunities for the Council to work with the DWP with the aim of improving outcomes for residents, reducing poverty and the number of young people that become NEET, and fulfil the objectives of both the Corporate and Well-being Plans.*

## **6 RESIDENTS SURVEY**

The Lead Member for Customers and Libraries introduced the report (previously circulated) informing the Committee of the key findings of the Residents Survey and gave them the opportunity to comment on the results.

The Lead Member explained that in 2011 the survey had been outsourced to consultants and whilst the response was excellent it had cost the Authority £25000. Subsequently in 2013 the survey had been circulated with County Voice, this was less expensive but there were fewer responses. The latest survey undertaken in 2015 had been circulated electronically and only resulted in 711 responses – less than the intended sample size of 1000. Whilst services had been using the information contained in the survey it was with a degree of reservation.

In the report author's absence the Manager –Corporate Programme Office detailed the analysis of the survey results. Officers advised that:

- the response rate to the survey had been disappointingly low. This was probably due to the fact that the exercise had been undertaken electronically (apart from those completed by schools) with a view to reducing costs;
- it was important to bear in mind that the survey results measured people's perceptions of the Council, which may at times contradict validated data on the Council's performance; and

- not all respondents had answered all questions, individuals tended to answer questions in relation to areas that were of most relevance to their personal circumstances.

Responding to members' questions and observations officers:

- acknowledged that restricting the survey to an electronic questionnaire had not realised the desired outcome. Nevertheless the information gleaned from the responses received had provided the Council with valuable information which would help plan and improve service delivery;
- advised that the next survey, due to be undertaken during 2017, would not be undertaken solely by electronic methods, other methods would also be used in order to make it easily accessible to all residents;
- agreed that the contents and quality of the questions asked was of utmost importance;
- highlighted the importance of recognising that the results measured peoples' perceptions which might seem at odds with the Authority's performance indicators
- advised that the Head of Customers, Communication and Marketing was currently exploring options for a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System that would meet the majority of the Council's needs;
- undertook to discuss with the relevant officers why the 'County Conversation' exercise currently underway would not be holding a public event in Rhyl, and explore whether one could be arranged for the town; and
- outlined the process that would follow-on from the 'County Conversation' exercise for the purpose of determining the 'new' Council's corporate priorities and Corporate Plan.

Members emphasised the importance of the Council utilising all tools at its disposal for the purpose of seeking residents' opinions and views on matters e.g. county councillors, residents groups etc. as they could potentially reach out to various sectors of the community and seek their views. Allowing residents to call in to civic offices etc. to complete questionnaires etc. may also help improve public interaction with future surveys.

The Committee agreed that exercises such as residents surveys etc. benefitted greatly from careful planning – for them to be effective it was important for the organiser to determine what the organisation needed to know, why they needed to know it and for what purpose the information received would be used.

The Leader suggested that, as the term of the current Council would be coming to an end in May 2017, it may useful for all councillors to be interviewed prior to the

election (a similar process to 'exit' interviews offered to staff) to seek their views on what areas they feel work well, which areas require improving and seek any ideas they may have for future improvement. At the conclusion of the discussion it was:

***Resolved: - subject to the above observations that –***

*(i) a report be presented to the Committee in early 2017 outlining the proposed contents and questions to be contained in the 2017 Residents Survey along with the methodology(ies) under consideration for undertaking the survey; and*

*(ii) the Leader discuss with Group Leaders the feasibility of undertaking 'exit style' interviews with county councillors ahead of next year's local authority elections for the purpose of seeking their views on what the Council does well and which areas would benefit from improvement*

## **7 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM**

The Education Social Work (ESW) Team Leader introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) detailing their contents. He explained the difference between authorised and unauthorised absences and the process followed prior to the issuing of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs). All process relating to school absences were highlighted in school publications to ensure that every parent was aware of their responsibilities and of the consequences of not sending their child to school.

The management of school absences was devolved to each individual school. However, the Council did regularly monitor absences and as part of the Schools Standard Monitoring Group (SSMG) process headteachers and chairs of governors were held accountable for their school's performance in relation to managing absences as well academic attainment. The Education Social Work (ESW) Team also monitored school absence rates on a monthly basis, taking into account Free School Meals (FSMs) and Looked After Children (LAC) factor.

Members advised that they had requested the report on the basis of statistical information and a press release they had seen some time ago, as they were concerned that poverty levels in the county would not improve if pupils were absent from schools for long periods at a time. Responding to members' questions officers advised that:

- records were not kept at county level with respect of 'authorised absences' as such absences had been granted by headteachers;
- headteachers had been keen for the Council to apply FPNs consistently across the county. Since the date this had been stringently implemented there had been a considerable increase in the number of warning letters/FPNs issued. However, this was expected to fall once parents realised that the Council would not be hesitant in enforcing the policy;

- the County did regularly monitor and check whether schools applied all policies and procedures. Attendance at school was key as it affected life outcomes for the pupils;
- regular unauthorised non-attendance at school was examined in detail to establish the underlying reasons for a child's absence. In such cases the Council would then offer relevant appropriate support to the child and the family to help overcome any barriers and get them engaged with the education system;
- for the most challenging pupils there were opportunities via the TRAC Project. This had been a very successful Project in Denbighshire and had helped the county to move from 19<sup>th</sup> position to 16<sup>th</sup> position in the Wales ranking. Whilst getting pupils engaged with the Project was in the main the responsibility of the school, they were supported by the Corporate ESW Team;
- a number of schools were now employing their own Attendance Officers;
- under the Welsh Government's All Wales Attendance Framework headteachers had discretion to permit up to 10 days authorised absence. There had recently been a High Court appeal against Isle of Wight Council who had served an FPN on a parent for taking his daughter out of school on holiday despite a request for 'authorised absence' being declined. The appeal was upheld and since then legal teams across the UK had been examining the judgement to determine whether policies and procedures required to be tightened;
- despite the fact that a number of parents were initially averse to officers telephoning them about their child's attendance at school, in the majority of cases by the conclusion of the conversation they understood the Council's reasons and concerns;
- performance was improving in this area and it would continually be monitored with a view to improving performance even further for the benefit of all pupils; and
- whilst the All Wales Attendance Framework applied to all education authorities in Wales, policies and procedures in this area were not applied consistently across the country.

Prior to the conclusion of the discussion officers agreed to circulate to members information on unauthorised absences and free school meals data at each of the County's schools. Members raised concerns with respect to the latter point above and asked that their concerns in relation to this be noted as they felt that this may affect Denbighshire's ranking in the performance table. Having reviewed the information provided the Committee:

**Resolved: subject to the above observations to -**

- (i) *endorse the policies and strategies utilised to improve pupil attendance in Denbighshire's schools;*
- (ii) *note the improved performance attained to date; and*
- (iii) *register their concerns that not all authorities across Wales were applying the policies and procedures in relation to unauthorised absences as stringently as Denbighshire.*

## **8 HAZARDOUS ROUTES TO SCHOOLS**

The Traffic, Parking and Road Safety Manager and the Road Safety Engineer introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) explaining the legislative framework that governed the hazardous routes to school. They also outlined the assessment process followed, in line with statutory guidance, when assessing the safety of a walking route to school. Any changes in traffic flow or volumes would automatically instigate a review. This had happened in Rhuddlan recently which had consequently resulted in the installation of a traffic island to aid safe crossing of the highway for pupils walking to school.

Whilst the introduction of traffic calming measures would assist to slow down traffic it would never eliminate accidents from happening, as the majority of accidents were down to human error on the part of one party. Responding to members' questions officers advised that:

- the cost of any modifications to the highway to ensure the safety of pupils would be the subject of budgetary discussions between the relevant services e.g. education and highways. Monies could be vired from the school transport budget to the highways budget towards the cost of modifications etc. if required;
- whilst it was acknowledged that some roads, particularly in rural areas, were deemed hazardous for children to walk to school, where it was safe for them to walk the school route there were added benefits as it contributed towards the pupil's health and well-being as physical exercise was recognised as a way of reducing obesity;
- if traffic volumes or flows altered on any school routes, once notified of the changes or a request for school transport was received stating that the route had become hazardous, a hazardous route assessment would be undertaken. Councillors were encouraged to inform officers if any such traffic flow or volume changes occurred in their wards;
- if members so wished officers could inform Member Area Groups (MAGs) on an annual basis of routes due to be reviewed within their areas, and include

councillors in the consultation process. Members concurred with this suggestion and officers agreed to adopt this approach from now on;

- with respect to routes subject to the bio-diversity grass cutting regime, officers did act with caution when assessing routes and gave human life priority over wildlife. However, they did acknowledge that the assessment could only be based on the visual evidence available at the time it was undertaken. If verge growths were proving a hazard the Streetscene Team would deal with them as a matter of urgency and if landowners were responsible for hedges etc. they would request that they cut them on safety grounds. If the landowner/responsible person did not respond to the request the Streetscene Team for safety reasons would cut back the growth and recover the costs later from the responsible person.

Members referred to a number of examples across the county where officers' help in reducing traffic speed or introducing traffic calming measures, particularly in and around schools, had been invaluable. Work was continuing in those areas with a view to getting enforcement officers to enforce the measures where some road users seemed to be flouting the restrictions.

Prior to the conclusion of the discussion the Committee requested the Road Safety officers to e-mail all county councillors who have non-hazardous routes within their wards seeking them to inform officers immediately they become aware that a route may no longer be a safe walking route to school to enable officers to assess it as soon as possible. Councillors should also be asked to inform Highways and Environmental Services officers immediately they become aware that vegetation impair the visibility of road signs in their area.

The Committee:

**Resolved: subject to the above observations –**

- (i) *to endorse the contents of the report and the method by which Denbighshire County Council applies the Welsh Government's operational guidelines with respect of risk assessing walked routes to schools;*
- (ii) *to recommend that school routes that lie within areas subject to bio-diversity grass cutting schedules, and which have not been assessed within the last 12 months, be assess at the earliest possible opportunity;*
- (iii) *that all Member Area Groups (MAGs) be informed and consulted on an annual basis on the routes due for review in their area; and*
- (iv) *to support the proposal to carry out periodic reviews of home to school walking routes every five years, unless significant changes to traffic volumes or flows are reported, or requests are received for a review to be undertaken.*

## **9 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME**

A copy of a report by the Scrutiny Coordinator (SC), which requested the Committee to review and agree its forward work programme and which provided an update on relevant issues, had been circulated with the papers for the meeting.

A copy of the 'Member's proposal form' had been included in Appendix 2 The SC requested that any proposals be submitted to herself. The Cabinet Forward Work Programme had been included as Appendix 3, and a table summarising recent Committee resolutions and advising on progress with their implementation, had been attached at Appendix 4.

The Committee considered its draft Forward Work Programme for future meetings, Appendix 1, and agreed the addition of The DWP and PeoplePLus to the next Communities Scrutiny Committee on 27<sup>th</sup> October.

The Committee requested that the Leader and Lead Member for Social Care, Adult Care and Children's Services be invited to attend the next meeting.

## **10 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES**

As the meeting followed the August recess there were no meetings for Members to feedback from.

The Meeting closed at 11:55am.