

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in on Thursday, 3 September 2020 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Mabon ap Gwynfor, Brian Blakeley, Rachel Flynn, Tina Jones, Merfyn Parry, Anton Sampson, Glenn Swingler, Andrew Thomas, Graham Timms (Vice-Chair), Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair).

Councillor Huw Hilditch Roberts – Lead Member for Education and Children’s Services was present for item 5.

Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill Lead member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets was present for item 6.

Councillor Brian Jones - Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment was present for item 7.

Observers: Councillors Joan Butterfield, Meirick Lloyd Davies, Gwyneth Kensler, Barry Mellor and Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Economy & Public Realm (GB), Corporate Director: communities (NS), Interim Head of Education (GD), Interim Head of Children’s Service (RM), Head of Finance and Assets (SG), Lead Officer Corporate Property & Housing Stock (DL), Head of Highways, Facilities and Environmental Services (TW), Risk and Asset Manager (TT), Scrutiny Coordinator (RhE) and Democratic Services Officer (KE)

The Local Democracy Reporter and a representative from Audit Wales were also in remote attendance to observe proceedings.

POINT OF NOTICE

Due to the current restrictions on travel and requirement for social distancing as a result of the coronavirus pandemic the meeting was held remotely by video conference and was not open to the general public. All members had been given the opportunity to attend as observers. The Local Democracy Reporter and a representative from Audit Wales had also been invited to observe.

1 APOLOGIES

No apologies were received.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following declarations of interests were made – all of which were personal interests:

Councillor Huw O Williams – his son is a pupil in one of the County's schools
Councillor Meirick Lloyd Davies – governor at Ysgol Cefn Meiriadog
Councillor Cheryl Williams – governor at Christ the Word School
Councillor Tina Jones – governor at Ysgol Melyd
Councillor Andrew Thomas – governor at one of the County's schools
Councillor Merfyn Parry – governor at Ysgol Bryn Clwyd and Ysgol Gellifor
Councillor Graham Timms – governor at one of the County's schools
Councillor Emrys Wynne – governor at Ysgol Brynhyfryd and Ysgol Borthyn
Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts – parent governor at one of the County's schools

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent items had been raised.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 12 March 2020 were submitted.

Accuracy

Page 6, Declarations of Interest - Councillor Meirick Lloyd-Davies advised that he had declared personal interests as a Governor of Ysgol Cefn Meiriadog and as a member of the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority not Board.

Agreement on the recommendation was by consensus. No formal vote was taken. All members indicated they were in favour of the recommendation, no one indicated they were against it and no one indicated they wanted to abstain.

Resolved: - subject to the above corrections, that the minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 12 March 2020 be received and approved as a true and correct record

5 RECOVERY PLAN FOR SCHOOLS

The report (previously circulated) was introduced by the Lead Member for Education, Children' Services and Public Engagement who began by thanking all of Denbighshire County Council's staff in Education Services – including the outgoing Head of Service, school head teachers, parents and children for their hard work and commitment during the challenging time of lockdown.

Before the summer holidays commenced learners were given the opportunity to attend sessions to check-in, catch up and prepare for the new term. On average a

50% take up rate had been experienced although some schools had seen up to 85% - 90% attendance.

The Region, local authority (LA) and schools had been preparing for four possible eventualities at the beginning of the new school term but were surprised when Welsh Government had announced that the least expected outcome – 100% return to school – the week before schools closed for the summer holidays. A further announcement (but no guidelines) regarding the use of face coverings was also delivered by Welsh Government last week. In response a meeting had been held with all Head Teachers who had agreed that secondary school children would be required to wear face coverings when moving between classes in the corridors.

The Interim Head of Education acknowledged the role of various other departments throughout the Authority that had had a part in helping the Education Service meet their challenges. He gave his assurances that schools were ready for the return of the children, all were expected to have returned by 14th September. Detailed risk assessments covering catering, cleaning, transport, HR etc. had been undertaken to ensure the wellbeing of Denbighshire's 16,000 students.

In response to questions the Committee were:

- reassured that capacity and support were in place for the Education and Children's Services following the previous Head of Service's recent move to another Authority;
- advised that the interim appointments for Heads of Education and Children's Services had been made for a period of 12 months (commenced in June 2020) with the expectation of a permanent decision on the Service's structure in December;
- assured that the changes made to the Housing Allocation Policy and Homelessness Regulations by the Welsh Government(WG) in response to Covid-19 were still in place and discussions were ongoing with WG in relation to them.
- confirmed that Welsh government guidelines and subsequent operational protocol would be followed should any child display symptoms whilst in school;
- advised that there were no plans to test asymptomatic children – that was a decision for Public Health Wales rather than Local Authorities;
- informed that fixed penalty notices for non-attendance would not be issued at that time and attendance data submitted to Welsh government would not be used in the current or previous academic year;
- reassured that the child protection process had been ongoing during lockdown and contact had been made throughout with all known vulnerable children. It was anticipated that the volume of child referrals would increase once the schools had re-opened fully;
- advised that additional costs for PPE etc. were currently being met through the school budget but Covid-19 grants were being accessed;
- acknowledged that school transport arrangements were difficult given the reduced capacity for social distancing; and
- emphasised that WG COVID-19 guidelines in relation to Schools and associated support services' operating practices changed on a regular basis.

At the end of the discussion the Chair reiterated thanks to the Lead Member for Education, Children's Services and Public Engagement, Corporate Director: Communities, Interim Head of Education and Interim Head of Children's Services.

Agreement on the recommendation in the report was by consensus. No formal vote was taken. All members indicated they were in favour of the recommendation, no one indicated they were against it and no one indicated they wanted to abstain.

Resolved: - subject to the above observations to:

- (i) support the action taken to date to enable schools to safely open for all pupils in September 2020, and endorse the evolving post COVID Recovery Plans for Schools; and***
- (ii) extend the Committee's sincerest gratitude to all Education and other Council services' staff for all their hard work and efforts during the lockdown and in planning and facilitating the re-opening of the County's schools***

6 RECOVERY PLAN FOR COUNCIL BUILDINGS

The lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets introduced the report (previously circulated) outlining progress on Council buildings where office staff may be located:

- Preparing buildings for re-opening
- Decommissioning any temporary use of buildings and
- Property maintenance

The document had been prepared by a multidisciplinary team covering all aspects relating to working arrangements (social distancing) and Health, Safety and Welfare in the office workplace to which appendices 1 and 2 referred. Each Service was responsible for undertaking risk assessments in their own areas.

In terms of building structures a number of compliance works were suspended over the lockdown period:

- I. Asbestos – fortunately works completed prior to lockdown meant that the programme of works were still on target.
- II. Fire Risk Assessments had a small backlog but would be picked up moving ahead a
- III. Routine gas servicing etc. had been taking place and had no issue.

There was a complete list of status of properties. Status – Red (closed), Amber (partially open, reduced hours) and Green (fully open) – very much reflected the position of the recovery phase.

The Head of Finance and Assets reminded the Committee that the report was about preparing buildings and processes for returning to work in the office – not agile working which would be part of another recovery theme. Since the preparation of the report the Senior Leadership Team had agreed to the use of face coverings

for employees where a risk assessment deemed it necessary, which was now going through consultation with the unions.

The Committee were advised that no buildings had been decommissioned as a result change of working patterns over lockdown.

Agreement on the recommendation was by consensus. No formal vote was taken. All members indicated they were in favour of the recommendation, no one indicated they were against it and no one indicated they wanted to abstain.

Resolved: - subject to the above observations to:

- (i) support the progress made to date to prepare the Council's buildings for reopening, decommissioning any temporary uses, and facilitating and dealing with maintenance backlogs;***
- (ii) extend the Committee's sincerest gratitude to all staff for all their hard work and efforts in securing the safety of Council buildings during the pandemic and preparing for their safe re-opening; and***
- (iii) request that a follow-up report be presented to the Committee in six months' time on the progress made in relation to the recovery of Council buildings post COVID-19***

7 RECOVERY PLAN FOR HIGHWAYS AND PUBLIC REALM

The Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment introduced the report (previously circulated) explaining the two phased approach to recovery as:

1. Short term – resuming normal highway maintenance activities and
2. Sustainable model – a longer term maintenance plan involving future structures of the department and new technology for increased efficiency.

The Head of Highways, Facilities and Environmental Services acknowledged that the report did not paint a particularly positive picture but there was a need to be open and honest about the challenges the Service faced. The 7 months of disruption to highway maintenance occurred at exactly the time when the majority of maintenance for the year would have been undertaken. The loss of the entire annual highways maintenance cycle meant that roads that had required work before had deteriorated further and would cost much more to bring up to an acceptable standard again. Highways work had resumed as a matter of urgency in order to achieve as much as possible before the onset of winter with its inherent risks - winter gritting and potential second spike in Covid-19. Contingency plans were being developed to manage that risk.

Responding to members of the Committee the Head of Highways, Facilities and Environmental Services and Risk and Asset Manager:

- highlighted the difficulty of securing surfacing contractors when they were so few in numbers and in demand across the whole country;

- advised that contractors were generally easier to secure when larger volumes of work are available, leaving Denbighshire's relatively small programme at a disadvantage;
- highlighted that the local road condition scoring surveys that are usually undertaken twice yearly had been suspended for the past 6 months, due to Covid-19. However the roads survey for the national Key Performance Indicators had been completed on August 6th. The results were expected back in the Spring of 2021;
- agreed to look at reconvening the members workshop (virtually) on the Highways Code of Practice and Maintenance Strategy planned prior to lockdown;
- acknowledged the limited capacity due to the balancing of resources for gully and ditch maintenance. For that reason, some capacity is kept available for reactive work, although much of that work is scheduled;
- confirmed that land owners were contacted regarding the condition of their roadside hedgerows and served notice to cut them back, where necessary; and
- advised that road surface water was rarely the responsibility of Welsh Water or Natural Resources Wales but, when it was, the Authority worked with them to resolve it;

At the end of the discussion agreement on the report recommendation was by consensus. No formal vote was taken. All members indicated they were in favour of the recommendation, no one indicated they were against it and no one indicated they wanted to abstain.

Resolved: - subject to the above observations to:

- (i) ***support the recovery plan, as set out in Appendix A, to the report;***
- (ii) ***extend the Committee's sincerest gratitude to all staff within the Highways and Public Realm Service for all their work and efforts in delivering services to the best of their abilities during the lockdown restrictions period, and also for their work in preparing and planning for the Service's recovery from responding to the pandemic to delivering day to day business and the Service's recovery objectives; and***
- (iii) ***request that the Member Workshop on the Highways Code of Practice and Service associated matters that had to be cancelled due to the pandemic be rescheduled and held via video conferencing as soon as possible.***

8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator introduced the report (previously circulated) seeking to review the Committee's forward work plan with a view to focus on the recovery phase from the Covid-19 pandemic and the rescheduling of topics previously listed on the Committee's forward work programme.

The Committee were reminded that whilst they had last met in March the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group had met meantime and agreed to clear all Scrutiny

Committees' initial work programmes when meetings reconvened, parking all topics in the existing programme, in order to focus on the Covid-19 recovery themes.

In addition the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-chairs Group had scheduled an extra meeting on 12th October 2020 (after all Scrutiny Committees had met), when they would be in a better position to filter the outstanding items (appendix 1b) into the forward work plans, bearing in mind that some reports might be delayed due to conflicting priorities by departments in resuming normal service.

The reports that were originally scheduled for July/September 2020 were now available:

- Community Benefits Policy
- Welsh Government Free Childcare
- Allocation of 21st Century School Band B Funding.
- Impact of Ruthin Primary Education Area Review (follow up report)
- Future Proposals for Ruthin Gaol.

Originally the October meeting was set aside to address flooding issues with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Dŵr Cymru. NRW had been tied up responding to the impact Covid-19 and unable to progress some of its modelling work and would not be in a position to report to the Committee before the meeting on December 10th.

It was proposed that the following reports be added to agenda for the October meeting:

- Future Proposals for Ruthin Gaol.
- Community Benefits Policy
- Impact of Ruthin Primary Education Area Review (follow up report) and
- Allocation of 21st Century School Band B Funding.

Appendix 4 reported on progress on recommendations from the last meeting in March. The Moorland Officer post was in the process of being filled. Members asked if the Fire and Rescue Authority had reconsidered their rejection of contributing to the role's funding. The Scrutiny Co-ordinator advised that the Fire and Rescue Authority had not met since the Committee's last meeting, but she agreed to pursue the matter with them.

Agreement on the recommendation was by consensus. No formal vote was taken. All members indicated they were in favour of the recommendation, no one indicated they were against it and no one indicated they wanted to abstain.

Resolved: - subject to recommendations made during discussions on earlier agenda items and the inclusion of the items suggested during the above discussion to approve the Committee's forward work programme