

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held via video conference on Thursday, 1 July 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Brian Blakeley, Rachel Flynn, Tina Jones, Merfyn Parry, Anton Sampson, Peter Scott, Graham Timms (Vice-Chair), Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair).

Cabinet Members – Councillor Brian Jones, Lead member for Waste, Transportation and Environment; Councillor Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities and Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill, Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets.

Observers – Councillors Meirick Lloyd-Davies and Barry Mellor.

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Economy and Public Realm (Graham Boase), Head of Highways and Environmental Services (Tony Ward), Flood Risk Manager (Wayne Hope), Asset and Risk Manager (Tim Towers), Lead Officer - Community and Housing (Geoff Davies), Lead Officer - Corporate Property & Housing Stock (Dave Lorey), Head of Finance and Property Services (Steve Gadd), Lead Officer – Strategic Asset Management (Tom Booty), Scrutiny Coordinator (RhE), Committee Administrator/Host (Kath Jones) and Democratic Services Officer/Minutes (Karen Evans).

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Alan Hughes.

2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

Nominations were sought for the office of Vice-Chair of the Committee for the 2021/22 municipal year. Councillor Brian Blakeley nominated Councillor Graham Timms for the position of Committee Vice-Chair. Councillor Merfyn Parry seconded Councillor Timms' nomination. No other nominations were received and by a majority vote the Committee:

Resolved: to elect Councillor Graham Timms as its Vice-Chair for the 2021/22 municipal year.

Councillor Timms thanked the Committee for their continued support.

3 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

Councillor Cheryl Williams declared a personal interest in business item 7 as a tenant of a Council property.

4 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters had been raised with the Chair prior to the meeting.

5 MINUTES

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on the 13 May 2021 were submitted.

No matters were raised in relation to the contents of the minutes.

It was:

Resolved: that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 May 2021 be received and approved as a true and correct record of proceedings.

6 SECTION 19 INVESTIGATION REPORT ON THE FEBRUARY 2020 FLOODS IN DENBIGHSHIRE

In his introduction the Lead Member for Waste, Transportation and Environment in his introduction, Councillor Brian Jones, highlighted that the flooding experienced across Denbighshire in February 2020 had been a significant event. The Head of Highways and Environment (TW) introduced the Section 19 Flood Report (previously circulated) relating to the floods which had occurred as a result of Storm Ciara. Denbighshire County Council as a Lead Local Flood Authority had a duty under Section 19 of the Flood and Water Management Act to investigate flooding and publish the findings.

The majority of the flooding had occurred from main rivers – Ceidiog, Clwyd, Elwy and Ystrad - which came under the remit of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) for investigation. There was also some surface water flooding which was the responsibility of Denbighshire County Council to investigate.

The report sought to answer 3 questions in relation to each area that was flooded:

1. Why did the flooding happen?
2. How likely was it for that scale of flooding to happen again in that location?
3. What improvement actions were needed to ensure that flood risk in the County was appropriately managed in future?

The majority of the recommended improvement actions fell to NRW to progress (pages 33 to 35) as they had the authority and the powers to take action on main rivers.

Members expressed disappointment that the majority of information contained in the report related to responsibilities that were within the gift of NRW but there was no NRW representative at the meeting to respond to questions arising from it. Officers advised that the report itself contained the findings of the Council's investigation into the flooding and its causes, the intention was to present the report, accompanied by the Committee's comments to County Council in September 2021. If members wished representatives from NRW could be invited to

attend that meeting. It was agreed to request an update from NRW on intentions relating to their recommended actions and timescales to be included in the report that was to go to full Council and that NRW representatives be invited to attend.

Members also requested that a historical report or presentation be provided by NRW on rainfall measurements over the previous 10 to 15 years (within Denbighshire), along with an analysis on the quality and reliability of data from rain gauges. This could assist the Authority to gauge the potential impact of climate change on flooding locally. This information could possibly form part of the business item at the County Council meeting in September, or presented to the Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership Task and Finish Group.

It was confirmed that NRW had already been invited to present the findings of their modelling work in relation to Rhyl Cut and Prestatyn Gutter, at Communities Scrutiny Committee on 9th September 2021.

Responding to members' questions officers' advised:

- Rain gauges and river level stations were the property of NRW. Clarification would be sought as to their degree of accuracy.
- With regards to data gathering DCC had some telemetry at key locations, their purpose was to notify the Authority of high river levels in order to respond to potential blockages. DCC were looking to add telemetry to smaller water courses in future.
- The Authority's remit was to understand the pattern of risk of flooding within the County.
- The assessment of risk terminology adopted by NRW e.g. 1 in 100, could be confusing and potentially led to the belief that it was a low risk of flooding.
- New housing developments were covered by TAN15 planning guidance which sought to achieve a protection of 1 in 1000 annual exceedance probability. There were no national standards for existing developments.
- There was no clear indication that climate change was having a significant effect on flooding as weather behaviour tended to be cyclical.
- Where possible the technical mitigation should be identified to alleviate the risk of flooding existing developments. However, sometimes there was no possible technical mitigation or the cost of implementing it was prohibitive.
- Priorities needed to be established around places where there could be a defence through mitigation – noting that the risk would only be impacted, not removed.
- That every effort had been made by Council officers to assist individual residents and communities affected by main river flooding to enter into dialogue with NRW about reducing the risk of flooding in future.

At the conclusion of an in-depth discussion the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations and the provision of the additional information requested when the report is presented to County Council in September 2021, to recommend that the Council -

- I. seeks assurances from Natural Resources Wales at its September 2021 County Council meeting that the recommendations identified in the Natural Resources Wales' flood investigation reports will be carried out, and that the anticipated timescales for their implementation and completion be confirmed; and***
- II. through the Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership Task and Finish Group, seeks assurances from Natural Resources Wales that flood risk from main rivers in Denbighshire is being appropriately managed.***

7 COUNCIL HOUSING TENANTS SURVEY

The Lead Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Tony Thomas introduced the report (previously circulated) informing the committee that of the 3277 Standardised Tenants and Residents (STAR) surveys sent out there had been 381 responses (11%). The survey results would also be shared with Denbighshire's Tenants Federation.

Whilst there was a statutory requirement to undertake the survey every 2 years some Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) had submitted data compiled pre Covid - 19. Denbighshire County Council had undertaken the survey during the autumn/winter of 2020/2021 and it was subsequently noted by Welsh Government that its response was impacted by the pandemic.

Overall satisfaction rates were lower than the 2019 survey results reflected in the increase in non-committal responses (neither satisfied or dissatisfied) – indicating that tenants were not able to fully rate the service due to the pandemic lockdown.

The Lead Officer – Community Housing (GD) expressed disappointment at the reduced overall satisfaction rates but they were as could be expected on a limited service (emergency only during lockdown). Whereas previously residents prioritised the service standards for their own homes, during the pandemic their focus had transferred to the safety of their neighbourhood and community.

Areas for improvement had been identified including a re-running of the STAR survey at the end of the year to reset the data in order that all councils and RSLs could be compared with data within the same date range.

In response to members' questions the Lead Officer – Community Housing advised:

- it was important that tenants of social landlords received a similar service for the rent they were paying. Benchmarking data was published by Welsh Government. Information and would be circulated to members.
- That a good working relationship existed between the Council and RSLs in the county.
- There were more online and younger respondents to the survey than previous years.
- Endeavours were made to ensure that a representative sample responded to the survey. Dynamic surveys were also undertaken throughout the year.

- The biggest maintenance concern for residents was damp/condensation issues in older housing stock, whilst problems in relation to dog fouling featured amongst the highest number of complaints on a continuous basis.
- The quality of work on capital projects drew a high satisfaction rating on a regular basis, whilst communication with tenants registered a far lower level of satisfaction despite every effort being made to improve and adapt interaction and communication methods with the Council's tenants.
- There was an opportunity going forward under the carbon efficiency agenda to replace heating systems with energy efficient ones – air source heat pumps and solar panels etc.
- Tenants were responsible for their own garden maintenance. There was a proactive inspection routine by Housing Officers. Consideration was given to initiatives such as 'no mow May'. Where necessary the Council could help tenants maintain their gardens by providing them with necessary equipment.
- Tenants housed by Adra Housing Association at the new development in Trefnant were all selected from the common housing register – used by the Council and all RSLs which required prospective tenants to evidence a connection to the local area

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above observations to –

- (i) endorse and support the Community Housing Standardised Tenants and Residents (STAR) Action Plan 2021 drawn up to respond to the findings of the October 2020 survey of the Council's housing tenants and support the delivery of the Housing and the Resilient Communities corporate priorities; and***
- (ii) request that an Information Report be provided to Committee members detailing the benchmarking and satisfaction survey results of Registered Social Landlords operating in Denbighshire.***

8 COVID-19 RECOVERY THEME - COUNCIL BUILDINGS

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets, Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill, updated the Committee on the Covid-19 Recovery Theme for Council Buildings since September 2020. He reminded the Committee that the remit of the report did not cover occupation of schools or housing stock.

The Authority was still operating under the Welsh Government guidance that advised that staff who can work from home should continue to do so. Attendance at the office where necessary was being managed by line management and the Facilities Management Unit to ensure compliance with the current regulations.

Once conditions allowed and staff moved back into offices it would be managed under a rota basis to limit the amount of staff in any building at any time, up to a maximum of 50% occupancy. Longer term it was anticipated that a hybrid system would be in use where attendance in buildings would be for meetings rather than transactional purposes.

In regard to buildings' maintenance there had been a reduction in reactive maintenance over the previous 12 months but that had given opportunity for work to be completed on larger scheme projects. There had not been any significant disruption to the programme of works.

Responding to members' questions the Committee was advised by the Lead Member and the Head of Finance and Property:

- That last year there were underspends generated as a result of staff working from home e.g. less heating, travel and printing costs, NNDR rebates. The closure of school buildings for prolonged periods had also reduced costs. However, moving forward costs incurred for ICT investments, Health and Safety and printing would increase again.
- It was anticipated that new ways of working would lead to lower occupancy but not necessarily less office buildings. Shared spaces were still being explored with partner organisations.
- Whilst generic guidance had been shared with Town, City and Community Councils on managing their buildings at the beginning of the pandemic, the Authority did not have sufficient resources to help with property management and maintenance.
- There was also a working group looking at new ways of working for elected members. It hoped to be completed and implement its work in time for the next local elections. All elected members had been given an opportunity to input into this work via a questionnaire/survey.

The Committee:

Resolved: - subject to the above comments and observations, to receive the information provided in relation to the latest position with regards to Council office building arrangements and maintenance work undertaken throughout the pandemic and lockdown periods.

9 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator presented the report (previously circulated) seeking members' review of the Committee's work programme and provided an update on relevant issues.

The Committee were reminded that there was a special meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 26th July to consider a report from the task and finish group established to support and monitor the process of developing the statutory Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA).

The next meeting would be on 9th September. The only item on the agenda was one on the Flood Management Responsibilities in relation to the Rhyl Cut and Prestatyn Gutter. The Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group was meeting on the afternoon of 1st July which could potentially lead to further items being added to the work programme for September's Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting.

The information report on benchmarking with the RSL Surveys was requested for the next meeting.

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above comments and observations to confirm the Committee's forward work programme.

10 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

Councillor Huw Williams advised that the Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership Task and Finish Group was ongoing, progress was being made.

Councillor Peter Scott advised that there had been several meetings of the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment Task and Finish Group which was also progressing well and would meet again on Monday 5th July.

It was:

Resolved: to receive the information provided on the work of the various groups by Committee representatives.

Meeting concluded at 12:30pm