

PARTNERSHIPS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee held by video conference on Thursday, 4 November 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Joan Butterfield, Rachel Flynn, Pat Jones, Christine Marston, Melvyn Mile, Rhys Thomas, David Williams and Emrys Wynne (Vice-Chair)

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Communities (NS), Head of Legal, HR and Democratic Services (GW), Head of Planning and Public Protection (EJ), Head of Finance and Property (SG), Economic and Business Development Lead Officer (GT), Business Support Manager (PB), Traffic, Parking and Road Safety Manager (MJ), Senior Engineer Road Safety and Sustainable Transport (BW-J), Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RE), Zoom Host (KJ) and Committee Administrator (SLW)

Mr Stuart Davies, (Llangollen Resident)
Rod Urquart, Civica

Lead Members, Councillors Brian Jones and Julian Thompson-Hill attended at the Committee's invitation.

Observers - Councillors Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Bobby Feeley, Tina Jones, Meirick Lloyd Davies and Tony Thomas

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones (Chair) and Ann Davies

The Committee conveyed their best wishes for a full and speedy recovery to the Chair, following her recent stay in hospital.

In the Chair's absence the Vice-Chair chaired the meeting.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No interests of a personal or prejudicial nature were declared at this juncture in relation to any of the business items under discussion. Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts declared a personal interest during the discussion on business items 5, as the owner of businesses in two of the county's towns.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters had been raised with Chair ahead of the meeting.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16th September 2021 were submitted.

Matters arising –

Business item 4 ‘Denbighshire Voluntary Services Council (DVSC) – The Scrutiny Coordinator (SC) advised that information had been received from DVSC indicating that the refurbished Market Hall in Ruthin was expected to re-open during the first two weeks in December, date to be confirmed. DVSC’s new website was in the process of being developed and was expected to be launched towards the end of the year. The organisation was due to hold its Annual Meeting on 30th November 2021 and an invitation had been sent out to all stakeholders.

Business item 5 ‘Community Safety Partnership’ – Members were reminded that representatives from the Police were due to attend the November 2021 County Briefing session to discuss their work in tackling County Lines and other drug related crimes in Denbighshire.

Subject to the above it was:

***RESOLVED** that the minutes of the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 September 2021 be received and approved as a correct record.*

5 POST COVID RECOVERY IN TOWN CENTRES AND NNDR

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets, Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill, introduced the Post Covid Recovery in Town Centres and NNDR report (previously circulated).

The report detailed the number of vacant business premises in Town Centres and National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) initiatives. The report also highlighted the challenges town centre businesses faced across the county and approaches being taken to address those.

Whilst the total number of Empty Properties within the Council’s area had increased from 267 properties (April 2020) to 294 properties (Sept 2021), the total amount of Business Rates properties had also increased from 4,361 properties (April 2020) to 4,455 properties (Sept 2021). The empty properties represented 6.7% of the overall 4,455 Business Rates properties.

There were different exemptions from empty property rates, such as within the 3 or 6-month initial empty period, Insolvency, below the chargeable Rateable Value threshold, listed buildings, land, telecommunication masts and prohibited by law. Appendix 1 of the report showed the breakdown of the empty properties and associated exemptions.

There were two key Welsh Government (WG) initiatives which provided support to certain classes of Businesses through relief schemes. Those initiatives would reduce or even nullify the Business Rates liability.

The two schemes were:

- The Small Business Rates Relief Scheme, which awarded up to 100% relief, for Businesses with a Rateable Value below £6,000 and were on a tapered reduction from £12,000 to £6,000 Rateable Value.
- The Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Rates Relief Scheme, which provided a 100% reduction in Business Rates for qualifying Businesses in 2020/21 and 2021/22

There was a further option for Local Authorities to award a reduction in rates payable, utilising the powers granted under the Localism Act 2011. This would be through awarding a discretionary relief. However, the full cost of any award under this scheme would be paid by the Council.

A further issue with an award under the Localism Act was that other Businesses could claim that the Council had created an anti-competitive environment, in that it was subsidising some ratepayers, thus disadvantaging others.

Whilst relief schemes were available, there had still been shops closing both locally and nationally, which led to a number of properties then becoming empty. There were four main reasons for this:

- Whilst the Business Rates charge had been reduced property rents had not seen an equivalent reduction and, in many cases, there had been no rent reduction offered by landlords.
- Some larger companies had moved individual shops into larger premises e.g. Carphone Warehouse, closed in Prestatyn Retail Park and Rhyl, and being subsumed into the larger premises at the Clwyd Retail Park in Rhyl.
- Other shop units had closed too and had a presence in another shop, such as Argos in Sainsbury's or Costa Coffee being part of a garage.
- The switch to online shopping had been further accelerated by Covid19. Many businesses, particularly banks had closed many branches due to people utilising online services. Additionally, customers now utilised retail shops either as a pick up or drop off point far more, having ordered the goods via the internet.

Footfall data for towns had been included in Appendix 3. The data showed the clear negative impact Covid-19 had on town centres due to government guidance on trading and travel restrictions.

Economic and Business Development (EBD) had commissioned a business survey in order to gain an understanding of the challenges that businesses were facing as a result of Covid-19. The launch had been aligned with the conclusion of furlough to provide a greater insight. A report of the findings would be available in early 2022.

The Transforming Towns (TT) Thematic programme gave Local Authorities in Wales a broad and flexible package of support, aimed at revitalising town centres throughout Wales. The programme followed a 'Town Centres first' approach to

regeneration, and was conferred and prioritised at a regional level. In the instance of North Wales, prioritisation was overseen by the Regional Regeneration Officers' Group, comprising of the six local authorities. Projects currently being delivered through this package included Llangollen 2020 Castle Street, Hummingbird Denbigh, Queens Market Phase 1 & Rhyl Town Centre Gateway Phase 1

EBD was supporting the application for the Levelling Up Fund. The purpose of the Fund was to invest in infrastructure, including regeneration of town centres and high streets, upgrading local transport, and investing in cultural and heritage assets.

Rhyl had been selected by the Welsh Government as one of four pilot towns for the Town Centre Entrepreneurship Fund. The fund offered up-to £10k per business in the way of revenue to start up or relocate in the town. To date 22 businesses had expressed an interest, and the applications were being processed by Business Wales.

During discussions, the following points were raised:

- During busy times of the year, certain areas were experiencing a high footfall and a suggestion of transportation from town to town for visitors could alleviate the “honeypot” scenarios. It was confirmed that officers were looking at creative options to encourage visitors to explore different towns including contacting commercial operators to discuss the possibility of transport.
- It was confirmed that addressing and filling empty business properties were a priority of both DCC and the Welsh Government.
- A suggestion of an update to all Member Area Group (MAG) meetings on a regular basis could be viable and a way of keeping all members informed rather than waiting for the item to be presented at Scrutiny Committee. Officers confirmed a regular update (e.g.: every 3 months) could be provided to MAG meetings and that this information could include updates on regeneration projects and Levelling Up Fund initiatives.
- Pop up shops were being trialled in Rhyl. These would give small traders and start-up businesses the opportunity to showcase their products and business.
- To encourage businesses from the outskirts of towns into the town centres was a priority of the Welsh Government. There was a scheme called “Town Centre First” run by the Welsh Government and that information would be circulated to members. The Town Centre First Scheme did link into the Local Development Plan (LDP) work for the future of Denbighshire.
- It was queried whether some businesses were reticent to join schemes or to change their operating hours or business models with a view to capitalise on modern day living practices, some of which had changed considerably since the onset of the pandemic, but it was confirmed businesses would be given encouragement to adapt. DCC were to carry out a specific survey relating to this, the results of which would be circulated to members.
- The two Digital Projects were:
 - Smart Towns Maybetech - The project would be run in conjunction with Menter Môn, Rhyl Business Improvement District (BID) and the technology provider Maybetech and would provide a digital platform for town centre businesses in Rhyl. Rhyl had been selected as a pilot

location for the adoption of new technology to enhance the town's competitiveness and sustainability. The platform provided businesses with insightful data to help inform business decisions to recover and grow

- Denbighshire County Council Digital Grant Scheme - The scheme provided financial assistance to businesses to adopt digital technology to improve productivity, stability and growth. The scheme was open to businesses county wide who undertook a review of their business with Superfast Business Wales as the subject matter experts. The findings of the review assisted with the grant application to which a decision was made, and on which packages were funded
- Officers advised that survey results were only an element of the information they used to help signpost small to medium sized town centre business to support packages available to them. Other data sets, such as footfall information was also used. They also encouraged members to inform the Service if they were aware of empty business premises within their wards which did not appear in the list held by the Council;
- Whilst every effort was being made to help support local businesses to survive and thrive in the wake of the pandemic, a number of businesses had been hit hard and dependent upon the nature of their business may continue to struggle for some considerable time until some resemblance of 'business as usual' and consumer confidence returned.

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

RESOLVED that subject to the above comments and observations to receive the information on work underway to support the post Covid-19 recovery of the County's town centres, national non-domestic rates (NDR) initiatives and to reduce the number of vacant business premises.

BREAK - 11:35 - 11.45

6 COVID-19 ACTIVE TRAVEL PLAN SCHEMES

A member of the public, Mr Stuart Davies, had requested to address the Committee and it was agreed he could speak following the members and officers.

Councillor Brian Jones, Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment, introduced the Covid-19 Active Travel Plan report. The report detailed the temporary active travel schemes that were implemented in a number of Denbighshire town centres in late 2020 and which had now all subsequently been removed.

The report was a further update on the findings from the project as a follow-up to a report that was presented to the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee in December 2020 and was included in Appendix A to the report.

The Traffic, Parking and Road Safety Manager gave a summary of the background to the original scheme. Schemes had been developed for Denbigh, Llangollen, Rhyl and Ruthin town centres. These had been awarded WG funding in June 2020,

with the exception of Denbigh which was withdrawn. The December 2020 report included in Appendix A provided more detail surrounding the grant and process followed.

Following initial delays due to contractor availability and material shortages, the schemes in Llangollen, Rhyl and Ruthin were implemented in November 2020.

Ruthin Scheme - The scheme in Ruthin encountered initial teething problems which were largely addressed by making slight amendments to the scheme. A number of businesses, which had been directly affected by the measures, complained about the loss of spaces for parking and loading outside their premises. Whilst some mitigation for those losses had been included within the overall scheme, this had not been considered to be enough by some business owners. In light of the concerns, meetings were held with Ruthin MAG which led to the Lead Member taking the decision to withdraw the scheme and this work took place in February 2021.

Llangollen Scheme – The scheme in Llangollen initially received little feedback following its introduction in early November 2020. However, from March 2021, a number of incidents began to occur involving pedestrians tripping over the bases of the temporary bollards that had been introduced. As these incidents continued, the bollards were replaced with narrow planter boxes which put a stop to the tripping incidents. The temporary scheme had also resulted in an increase in some large vehicles mounting the pavement in order to manoeuvre past obstructions caused by the opposing lane of traffic.

Despite the concerns, the Dee Valley MAG were keen to retain the temporary scheme on the basis that the additional pavement width that had been created was proving really useful for the heavy pedestrian footfall that was being experienced in Llangollen. The view had also been based on the feedback from a follow-up online consultation where although views on the temporary scheme were mixed, approximately 60% of respondents indicated that they felt that the scheme should remain either because they felt it was working well, or because they felt it was too early to draw any conclusions to the contrary. On-site observations by officers observed plenty of usage of the widened pavement area even outside peak periods such as weekends and school holidays.

Following the relaxation of the Welsh Government Covid restrictions in mid-August 2021 and the move to Alert Level 0, the Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment took the decision to remove the temporary scheme following discussion with the local members.

Rhyl Scheme - Once implemented the Rhyl temporary scheme had generated little feedback from residents. However, concerns were raised by local businesses who stated that the loss of on-street parking had a detrimental impact on their businesses. Some of residents and local members raised concerns that the scheme had increased traffic queues at the A548 Wellington Road/Bodfor Street junction. The Lead Member took the decision following consultation with the Rhyl MAG, and the scheme was removed in late April 2021.

The particularly negative reaction to the Denbigh scheme had resulted in a short consultation being agreed for all four of the temporary schemes proposed.

With the exception of the Denbigh scheme, the other three schemes had been mostly supported by the consultation respondents. By the time the projects were introduced in late October/early November the peak spring/summer footfall had subsided and the October “firebreak” had just taken place. The colder weather combined with the further lockdown that commenced on the 20th December 2020, and ran until Spring, resulted in many of the town centres being relatively deserted. This made the purpose of the temporary schemes seem less obvious especially as this had often been at the expense of on-street parking. This had undoubtedly been a factor in the early removal of the Rhyl and Ruthin schemes.

It was confirmed that DCC had ongoing dialogue with the Welsh Government and had communicated some of the issues and hurdles which had been encountered regarding the schemes.

During the discussion:

- Committee members acknowledged that the emergency scheme fully funded by WG was aimed at helping town centre businesses during a national crisis when social distancing rules were in place, the tight timescales and stringent rules entailed with it had hampered its delivery and overall effectiveness;
- Officers advised that other local authorities who had acted quickly without consulting with local businesses in order to get the schemes off the ground quickly had also been criticised regarding their implementation and delivery
- Local members for Llangollen were of the view that the scheme there had been a success and had helped keep residents and visitors safe during an exceptionally busy tourist season in the area;
- Regular discussions had taken place during the schemes’ implementation at the Council’s Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meetings and local authorities had been regularly reporting to WG on their schemes, their successes and any opposition and hurdles encountered with them;
- Lessons learnt from this particular exercise would be useful when developing future long-term active travel schemes aimed at addressing the effects of climate change

At this juncture, Mr Stuart Davies was given the opportunity to address the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee. Mr Davies referred to the report relating to Llangollen which, in his opinion had been incomplete. He felt the report failed to acknowledge significant issues. He recognised the short timeline involved but felt it had been agreed in principle without any prior consultation with Llangollen Town Council or members of the public. He went on to state that the report failed to acknowledge a petition of 600 verified signatures in opposition to the scheme which had been presented to DCC officers and councillors. He stated 80% of local businesses had opposed the scheme. Given the number of injuries to members of the public, there had been a failure by DCC officers and relevant councillors to exercise due diligence by documented risk assessment that took into account risk of injuries to the public despite public concerns being expressed from the outset. The July public consultation recognised that the majority of the responses stated they were not encouraged to use active travel measures more. Following a spate of injuries to the public and despite Llangollen Town Council requesting that a risk

assessment be undertaken for lane defenders to be used as an extension for pedestrians on a public highway, and subsequently planters, one was never received. Initial concerns from the public were ignored until the accidents documented by CCTV footage and photographs from Mr Davies were copied to MPs and the Press. In Mr Davies' view Llangollen had received some of the worse publicity possible as a result of the national press with reports appearing on the BBC and in the Daily Mail. Even then, in his opinion DCC officers continued to assess the scheme as being fit for purpose without any documentation or fact based evidence to support their statement. The scheme in Llangollen went on to have modifications, at additional cost, whilst resisting public calls to remove the scheme. The closure of Short Street was part of the scheme and based on personal opinions with unspecified safety concerns being quoted. Subsequent Freedom of Information requests (FOI) revealed there had not been any accidents there in the previous five years. Mr Davies called upon Partnerships Scrutiny Committee to ask why was there a lack of proper risk assessments which led to serious injuries to the public. A failure to take public opinion into account being progressed and why did DCC try to fit something which was not fit for purpose in the first place. Ruthin had their active travel scheme removed, why could this not happen in Llangollen?

Following the statement by Mr Stuart Davies, it was proposed by Councillor Rachel Flynn and seconded by Councillor Joan Butterfield that the Council review the process utilised to implement and remove all Covid-19 Active Travel Plan Schemes in Denbighshire.

A vote took place and it was unanimously agreed to the additional recommendation.

Following detailed discussion on all aspects of the Schemes the Committee:

RESOLVED: - *subject to the above comments and observations to –*

- (i) receive the information provided; and*
- (ii) request that the Council review the process utilised to implement and remove all Covid-19 Active Travel Plan Schemes in Denbighshire with a view to identifying good practice and lessons learnt that may be applied when distributing future short-term emergency funding streams that may become available.*

7 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

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

Members were reminded to use the Scrutiny Proposal Form if they had anything they would like to be scrutinised.

Members felt that the pre-meeting business planning session held the day before the present meeting had been extremely useful and requested that a similar one be held ahead of the Committee's next meeting.

It was therefore:

RESOLVED: - *subject to the above comments –*

- (i) to confirm the Committee's forward work programme; and*
- (ii) that a virtual pre-meeting briefing session be held ahead of the Committee's next meeting.*

8 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

None.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12.48 P.M