

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held by video conference on Thursday 27 January 2022 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Hugh Irving (Vice-Chair), Geraint Lloyd-Williams, Bob Murray, Pete Prendergast, Arwel Roberts (Chair), Peter Scott and Andrew Thomas

Cabinet Members – Councillors Bobby Feeley (Lead Member for Well-being and Independence), Huw Hilditch-Roberts, (Lead Member for Education, Children’s Services and Public Engagement), Brian Jones, (Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment), Tony Thomas (Lead Member for Housing and Communities) and Councillor Mark Young (Lead Member for Planning, Public Protection and Safer Communities)

Observers – Councillors Meirick Davies, Rhys Thomas, Graham Timms and Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Chief Executive (GB), Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services (EJ), Head of Communities and Customers (LG), Head of Highways and Environmental Services (TW), Strategic Planning and Housing Manager (AL), Senior Officer Strategic Planning and Housing (JA), Housing Development Manager (MD), Lead Officer – Community Housing (GD), Operational Manager Community Equipment Service (NJ), Principal Librarian (BH), Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager (HJ), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Administrators (KEJ & SJ [Webcaster])

Public Speakers – Ysgol Dinas Bran Students attended for business item number 7

1 APOLOGIES

Councillor Martyn Holland

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No declaration of interests had been raised.

Members were advised that being a school governor did not preclude them from participating in business item number 7 on the meeting’s agenda.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters had been raised.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held on 25 November 2021 were submitted.

Matters Arising – The Scrutiny Coordinator referred to an update on issues requested by the Committee at the last meeting, including information on dementia awareness and care training, which had been contained in the Committee's Information Brief circulated to members earlier in the week.

***RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2021 be received and approved as a correct record.*

5 PROGRESS ON DELIVERING DENBIGHSHIRE'S HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS STRATEGY

The Chair welcomed to the meeting Councillors Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities and Bobby Feeley, Lead Member for Wellbeing and Independence who had joint responsibility for delivering the Housing and Homelessness Strategy. The Head of Customers and Communities, Strategic Planning and Housing Manager, Senior Officer Strategic Planning and Housing and the Housing Development Manager were also in attendance for this item.

Councillor Thomas introduced the report (previously circulated) on progress made to date in delivering the revised Housing and Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan approved by County Council in December 2020. The Strategy included priority areas for action based on six key themes with progress on the action plan set out in an appendix to the report. Delivery of the action plan was overseen by the Strategic Housing and Homelessness Group (SHHG) together with allocation of the Social Housing Grant to help bring forward affordable housing development. Councillor Thomas highlighted key areas of progress including the launch of the empty homes matching service and work on creating a supply of affordable housing, including energy efficient Passivhaus standard homes with work on site in Denbigh and Prestatyn, together with progress on future planned developments.

Councillor Feeley drew attention to the comprehensive report and the revision of the Strategy to reflect the greater emphasis on addressing homelessness with a theme dedicated to the main concerns and projects in that regard. She was pleased to report that the Housing First project had been rolled out as business as usual and would be funded under existing budgets; work was underway to provide Denbighshire's first temporary accommodation at Epworth Lodge, Rhyl, and Awel y Dyffryn Extra Care facility in Denbigh would be fully open in February. The Strategy promoted resilience and independence and also supported corporate priorities. Finally she took the opportunity to thank all the officers for their input in the process.

The Strategic Planning and Housing Manager added that, given the Strategy had only been adopted by Council in December 2020, its delivery was still in the early stages. However, most actions were on track for delivery despite a few experiencing minor difficulties with delays largely due to the impact of Covid-19 and

issues relating to the Local Development Plan. She also reported upon the work of the SHHG in monitoring progress and welcomed scrutiny of the action plan.

The Chair noted that no major issues had been identified in terms of progress with the action plan. Consequently he asked the Committee to focus on the minor issues identified given that all other actions were on track or had been completed.

The Lead Members and officers responded to questions/comments as follows –

- Tai Teg was the affordable housing register and assurances were provided that it was regularly reviewed and councillors kept informed of any housing available in their areas; there was a link on the Council's website to the relevant webpage
- 168 households were currently presenting as homeless which consisted of 218 individuals and the increase of those threatened with homelessness had largely been due to Welsh Government introducing a moratorium on evictions during the coronavirus pandemic which had since been lifted; significant work was ongoing to support those at risk of homelessness
- the Council only had a duty to house Denbighshire residents and did not provide housing for people from outside the county who presented as homeless – in those cases the Homeless Prevention Team worked with the local authority in whose area they had last resided
- for various reasons there were occasions where local authorities, including Denbighshire, housed homeless people outside of their own county area and questions were raised as to whether there was an imbalance in this regard with Denbighshire's neighbouring authorities, particularly in relation to the use of hotels for temporary accommodation – the Chief Executive advised that further research would be carried out with partner authorities to ascertain the current position and the Chair proposed an information report back to members thereon
- the age range of those presenting as homeless was varied but there was a significant number under the age of 35
- members had previously identified the unauthorised residential occupation of holiday caravans as an issue, hence its inclusion in the action plan, and previous work undertaken in that regard and the involvement of one of the scrutiny committees was also highlighted. To further address the issue required significant resource and a strategic/corporate approach. The Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services advised that his service would likely lead on that work and he was meeting with key officers in the near future with a view to progressing that action as appropriate. He agreed to liaise with the Scrutiny Coordinator to ascertain when the last report on the issue had been submitted to scrutiny and whether a further update or new report was required
- the impact of Covid-19 on progress with the replacement Local Development Plan (LDP) had been highlighted in the report and Councillor Mark Young also referred to the impact of the delays associated with Technical Advice Note 15 and Flood Maps which was also beyond the Council's control. However, he provided assurances that the Strategic Planning Group work would continue and the necessary information handed over to the new Council
- any queries regarding empty homes should be directed to the Strategic Planning and Housing Manager in the first instance and Councillor Tony Thomas referred to his willingness to assist and confirmed that he provided a quarterly update to all councillors with details of empty homes in their particular ward areas

- the Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services agreed to ascertain whether occupants of holiday caravans could register that address on the electoral register to vote and report back to the Committee thereon
- the Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services also agreed to look into Councillor Meirick Davies's request for a Community Garden in Trefnant and report back to him directly outside of the meeting
- an update on the development of Llys Awelon Ruthin was provided together with the reasoning behind its delay predominantly due to Covid-19 and other factors including planning conditions, signing of the tender contract and cost increase of building materials. Assurances were provided that despite those issues the development would proceed as originally planned and there would be an uplift in the bid with funding already in place from the Welsh Government in that regard. The development was likely to commence very soon in the New Year.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee –

RESOLVED that, subject to the above observations and the provision of the additional information requested during the course of the discussion to –

- acknowledge the work undertaken to date to implement the Housing and Homelessness Strategy Action Plan, along with the progress made thus far with its delivery, and*
- request that a further progress report on the Action Plan's delivery be presented to the Committee during the autumn of 2022.*

6 LIBRARY SERVICE STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE

Councillor Tony Thomas, Lead Member for Housing and Communities introduced the report by the Principal Librarian (previously circulated) detailing the Council's performance in relation to the 6th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards 2017 – 2020 (extended for 2020 – 2021) and progress in developing libraries as places of individual and community wellbeing and resilience.

Councillor Thomas reminded the Committee that library authorities in Wales had a statutory duty to deliver a comprehensive and efficient service to its residents and the report compared Denbighshire's performance against the national standard. He commended the valuable service provided in Denbighshire which had also been heavily impacted by Covid-19 and took the opportunity to thank staff for their excellent service during difficult times, noting staff had been redeployed at an early stage in the pandemic to commence the proactive calling of residents. The performance data for 2020 – 21 included 12 core entitlements which Denbighshire continued to meet, together with 6 quality indicators for which a self-assessment had been carried out and detailed in the report. A number of interesting and informative case studies had also been provided on service activity.

The Head of Communities and Customers highlighted the success of the library service and how service provision had been adapted in line with the changing Covid alert levels and to operate in the modern world, citing the 166% increase in digital downloads during the first lockdown as an illustrative example. She referred to the

tremendous work being carried out in the library service which had been reflected in the positive report but recognised the work required going forward to build community capacity and cohesion in which the library service had a key role.

During debate the Committee welcomed the positive report and recognised the importance of the library service to residents' wellbeing and the valuable contribution made within communities. Members provided examples of service provision in their individual ward areas and commended the initiatives and range of services provided, including work with partners, and thanked all the staff involved.

The Lead Member, Head of Communities and Customers and Principal Librarian responded to questions as follows –

- in line with general levels of town centre footfall, library visits had not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels and that situation had been mirrored across Wales; work was being carried out to re-engage with schools and welcome back partner service provision/group activities in libraries to increase attendance; it was also recognised that people needed to rebuild their confidence to re-engage with different services/facilities in their communities
- it was acknowledged that the library service was more than just a building and physical visits, with people using libraries in very different ways as evidenced by the digital access to services including the Order and Collect Service
- the memory bags to support people living with dementia were borrowed in the same way as a library book and had been very popular; funding had also recently been received to start a collection of jigsaws for people living with dementia and it was hoped that they would prove just as popular
- the financial contribution by Rhuddlan Town Council and St. Asaph City Council to their local libraries together with the partnership working and shared vision for libraries working within communities had made those libraries so successful – the Chair suggested there may be merit in progressing that partnership approach to support local libraries in other towns/communities across the county
- whilst there had been a decrease in the take up of the 2021 Summer Reading Challenge it continued to be an extremely successful scheme and Denbighshire continued to perform well and further work had been planned with schools, particularly given the importance of reading to education and wellbeing
- the reduction in staffing levels had been carried out in such a way as to minimise any impact on library users and customer feedback had been closely monitored with no negative feedback; the service would continue to use its resources in the most effective way possible for the benefit of residents
- levels of use in terms of visits and borrowing were slowly increasing and further services were due to reopen the following week, as restrictions eased, and it was difficult to make comparisons pre-pandemic given the changes over the last two years and people's behaviours; all had a responsibility to help to rebuild people's confidence to re-engage within their communities and there was a clear message that the library was a welcoming and safe place to visit.

The Chief Executive had been pleased to hear the positive feedback on the library service and set the future challenge as to what more could be done to embed those excellent facilities to improve the lives of residents. In closing the Chair again paid tribute to the excellent service provided and work of the staff involved in that regard.

The Committee –

RESOLVED that, subject to the above observations –

- (a) *to acknowledge the efforts of the county's libraries to adapt and deliver an excellent service to Denbighshire residents during the Covid-19 pandemic;*
- (b) *to receive and note the information provided on the Library Service's performance in delivering against the 6th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards during 2020/21 along with the update on developments to date during 2021/22, and*
- (c) *to request that a further report on the Service's performance in delivering against the Welsh Public Library Standards during 2021/22 be submitted to the Committee in January 2023.*

At this point (11.17 am) the meeting adjourned for a short break.

7 REDUCTION OF SINGLE USE PLASTICS AND CARBON REDUCTION IN THE SCHOOL MEALS SERVICE

The Chair welcomed all present for this item, including Councillors Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Lead Member for Education, Children's Services and Public Engagement and Brian Jones, Lead Member for Waste, Transport and the Environment whose portfolios covered the service area and the environment respectively, together with the Head of Highways and Environmental Services and Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager. A warm welcome was also extended to two pupils from Ysgol Dinas Bran's Student Council who would be invited to ask questions on the item.

Councillor Huw Hilditch-Roberts introduced the report by the Principal Catering and Cleaning Manager which provided an update on progress, and the challenges, in relation to reducing single use plastic and carbon within the School Catering Service together with estimated associated costs. In terms of context he advised that the report had been based on the current service provision situation and that implementation of the Welsh Government's decision to provide free school meals to all primary school children would have a significant impact on the service.

The Committee was guided through the report which referenced the following –

- the current model for school catering relied on income from drink sales in secondary schools with drinks generally sold in single-use plastic containers. Options to eradicate the sale of drinks in single-use containers included (1) not selling drinks with pupils bringing their own drinks to school resulting in a £220k pressure, or (2) selling drinks decanted into re-usable containers
- Option 2 had been trialled at Ysgol Glan Clwyd and the difficulties encountered together with the financial impact had been set out in the report, with the service concluding the trial could not be rolled out to all secondary schools given it was too logistically challenging; lack of space in some schools; waste created from non-recyclable plastic drink cups, and it was not financially viable

- the service had made good progress in other areas to reduce single use plastics and had reduced food item packaging purchased and disposed of. However, there was an increase in price for recyclable alternatives and concerns that those items were not being recycled by students. Where possible the use of plastic cutlery had been stopped and food was served on plates but many schools did not have the dining room capacity to accommodate pupils
- detailed actions taken by the service to deliver the catering function in a low carbon way and future challenges in terms of improving recycling by pupils with a new post to promote behaviour change, and discussions on the potential reduction of red meat on menus which was a sensitive issue.

Councillor Hilditch-Roberts emphasised the commitment of the service to reducing single use plastics and carbon despite the challenges faced with progress in a number of areas. He reiterated the significant financial impact associated with actions identified in the report - £220k per annum for stopping the sale of drinks in secondary schools, and £197k per annum for selling/decanting drinks into reusable cups. That deficit would need to be met by an increase in revenue subsidy, an increase in school meal prices, or by passing the costs on to schools. The expansion of the service to provide free school meals for all primary schools would also increase its carbon footprint. It was noted that the current model treated all schools equally and unless an individual school wished to take a different approach (and fund any budget gap) the consistent model across schools would be retained.

Councillor Brian Jones reported on previous work undertaken with a view to reducing single use plastics leading up to the current report, and he highlighted the need to align financial budgets with climate change priorities and find innovative ways of addressing the issues raised. He welcomed the participation of the two students from Ysgol Dinas Bran and collective working with schools and others to find innovative solutions in order to move the climate change agenda forward.

At this point the Chair invited questions from the Ysgol Dinas Bran students who referred to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and sustainable procurement and questioned why the service was not using positive alternatives to single use plastics in line with the Act and how much extra waste had been generated by single use plastics to match student demand. The students also queried the actual cost associated with the current use of plastics in schools in comparison to eco-friendly alternatives, and challenged the reference in paragraph 10.2 of the report regarding schools' desire for change given the ongoing commitment of Student Councils. In response the Lead Members and officers –

- explained the tight timescales for serving meals across the eight secondary schools together with limited space and dining room capacity which significantly impacted on how the service was delivered whilst also trying to accommodate pupils' preferences and ensuring the service was financially viable
- elaborated on steps taken to reduce single use plastic packaging for sandwiches and pasta and the challenges in using stainless-steel cutlery and plates given the time restrictions on the service and lack of dining capacity in schools together with cutlery not being returned and subsequent cost impact, and in using plastic alternatives such as bamboo and affordability for pupils

- waste generated varied between individual schools with some pupils not recycling any single use plastic and the non-return and inappropriate disposal of utensils etc. (including littering) which were issues beyond the service's control, and there was a need to educate and change behaviours in that regard to ensure that waste generated as a result of the service was disposed of in the best way. Funding had been secured for a new post to promote behaviour change and work with the catering service and schools would be prioritised
- explained that the reference in paragraph 10.2 that it was not clear schools had a consistent/collective desire to change to a new model had followed a general discussion at a head teacher cluster meeting regarding the sale of drinks, with concerns regarding the withdrawal of pure fruit juice (given the health benefits) and use of cans as an alternative to plastic (given that cans could not be resealed and accidents involving shredded cans on the school field). Ysgol Glan Clwyd (YGC) had been keen to undertake the drinks trial but when it had been rolled out the majority of pupils had not wanted to participate
- the sale of drinks in schools had been recognised as the biggest issue for the service in terms of single use plastics and whilst the simplest way of dealing with the issue was to stop selling drinks in schools, there would be significant implications arising from that action, notwithstanding the budget deficit which must be met, but also in terms of health considerations and potentially other hidden factors, and the matter required a political discussion and consultation with all schools to reach an agreement as to the best way forward
- the expansion of the service as a result of the future requirement to provide a free school meal to all primary pupils would necessarily increase the carbon footprint of the service which also represented a significant challenge.

During a lengthy debate members scrutinised the report in detail and took the opportunity to raise questions and discuss with the Lead Members and officers various aspects of the report. The Chair also permitted follow up questions from the Ysgol Dinas Bran students and non-Committee members. The Committee recognised the challenges faced in terms of balancing the needs of the service and school meal provision against climate and ecological priorities, not least the financial implications and necessary behaviour changes to meet those ambitions.

Main points of debate focused on the following –

- ideally stainless steel cutlery would be used but service provision was restricted by the available space, facilities and seating capacity within schools together with the length of lunchtime, and thousands of stainless steel utensils went missing each year with some being inappropriately disposed of; whilst a bamboo alternative was available there was a significant cost element attached in comparison with plastic cutlery with a mark-up of 10p – 15p for each utensil, and the cost increase having to be passed onto the customer
- it was hoped that the Council could do more in future to work together with schools to improve behaviours to ensure all the material produced from school meals was recycled and to address the problem of littering
- the current catering model focused on a whole school approach and therefore a change in one school had a financial impact on all other schools, for example if the selling of drinks was stopped in one school, the budget deficit as a result of

that action would need to be absorbed equally across all schools and therefore all schools would need to agree to such an approach

- it had been hoped that the drinks trial at YGC would have proved successful and subsequently rolled out across all secondary schools but unfortunately that had not been the case with other problems created as a result
- assurances were provided that there was an appetite in all schools to try and address the issue of single use plastics and carbon reduction and whilst progress had been made by the service in areas such as packaging and disposal, in reality the challenges in schools were proving difficult to overcome, and the financial implications of those changes difficult to surmount
- there was some debate on the national picture, given the wider global issue of climate change, and whether the Council should look to the Welsh Government to work with local authorities across Wales and provide the necessary funding to effect a step change, particularly given the financial challenges already facing local government and pressures across schools and other service areas. The Chair proposed an approach to the Welsh Government as a way forward
- the majority of schools staggered dining times and as a result of Covid-19 had also used other areas of the school in addition to the canteen which proved continually challenging
- a refundable deposit for reusable cutlery and drinks containers had been disregarded given the associated administration arising from that process and the potential cross contamination from drinks containers
- some schools did not allow cans and switching from single use plastic containers to cans was still not ideal given that cans were another form of single use container; erecting signage to deter littering etc. did not necessarily stop it
- explained the need to comply with Welsh Government guidance on nutrition and food, and the lack of facilities and counter space in schools to accommodate self-vending together with cross contamination issues arising from reusable containers, and confirmed there had been no difference to income generated from drink sales as a result of school water fountains not being in use
- research had concluded that priorities for catering managers looking to reduce carbon emissions should be switching to low carbon waste disposal methods and reducing the amount of red meat in menus – the latter would require a political discussion as it would have significant implications for the county
- provided assurances that steps had been taken and progress made in reducing single-use plastics and it was agreed that small changes and incremental change could collectively make a significant difference
- the current service model was a whole system approach and treated all schools equally regardless of size, if Ysgol Dinas Bran wished to take a different approach and was prepared to fund the budget gap, it was entitled to do so and the Council would support the school in those endeavours as best it could.

Councillor Graham Timms had been disappointed to hear the Committee's response to look to the Welsh Government and instead felt that the Council should be addressing the issue. He asked whether any work had been carried out to develop and cost a service model which would eradicate single use plastics and reduce carbon which the Council could then fund and implement together with work to educate children in best behaviours. Councillor Hilditch-Roberts cautioned against formulating a service plan at this stage given that the implications arising

from the future requirement for the provision of free school meals to all primary pupils was as yet unknown, and he had caveated the report as the current situation which was subject to future uncertainties including potential restructure and investment. The Ysgol Dinas Bran students also recognised the financial reality of the situation but highlighted that climate change was also a reality which need to be addressed. The Chair suggested that the Committee's recommendations to seek support from the Welsh Government could also include the YGC drinks trial as an illustrative example of the difficulties faced, and suggested that Ysgol Dinas Bran may also wish to contact the Welsh Government directly to express their disappointment regarding the lack of funding to progress matters.

Whilst there was no current solution to address the issues raised, the Head of Service confirmed the commitment to continue that work. In light of the new requirements for free school meal provision the service needed to prioritise its resources on delivering that work over the next eighteen months, and whilst it may take longer to achieve those service goals in reducing carbon and single use plastics, assurances were provided that all were committed to resolving the issue. In bringing the debate to a close the Chair reaffirmed his proposal, seconded by Councillor Ellie Chard and upon being put to the vote the Committee –

RESOLVED *that subject to the above comments, concerns and observations to request that the Cabinet on behalf of the Council write to the Welsh Government seeking it to –*

- (a) *work with local authorities across Wales in a bid to reduce and eradicate the practice of using single use plastics and non-recyclable goods in the supply, preparation and serving of school meals, and*
- (b) *provide sufficient financial resources to all local authorities to enable them to realise the above objectives, facilitate carbon reduction measures within their School Catering Services whilst securing the delivery of a sustainable school meals service.*

The Chair thanked the students from Ysgol Dinas Bran for their input and challenging questions and also to all members for their contribution to debate, with special mention to Councillor Graham Timms, and to officers for bringing the report and answering questions thereon.

8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator submitted a report (previously circulated) seeking members' review of the committee's work programme and providing an update on relevant issues.

Discussion focused on the following –

- the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group had allocated an item to the next meeting on 17 March in relation to Staff Absences and Turnover in Denbighshire during 2020/21 & 2021/22 and its impact on Customer Service and had also

decided to reschedule the two education items listed for 17 March to the July meeting to be considered by the new Committee following May's elections

- the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group had previously resolved that no scrutiny committee meetings should be held after the commencement of the pre-election period (18 March) unless urgent business necessitated a meeting being held – therefore the Committee's last scheduled meeting for the current Council term was 17 March
- members were encouraged to submit any proposal forms regarding topics for scrutiny by the new Council directly to the Scrutiny Coordinator.

RESOLVED that, subject to the inclusion of the items requested during the course of the meeting and the amendments outlined above, the Committee's forward work programme as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report be confirmed.

9 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

The Chair reported upon a meeting with David Wilson, Audit Wales at which Scrutiny's role in examining matters such as staff absences, retention and recruitment were discussed. The Committee would be given an opportunity to fulfil its role in relation to this at its March meeting, and all members were encouraged to attend and provide effective challenge.

Councillor Peter Scott advised that the Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership Task and Finish Group would be submitting a report to Communities Scrutiny Committee on 10 March 2022.

Councillor Hugh Irving represented scrutiny on the Queen's Building Project Board and he reported that the situation remained challenging, and officers were working hard to address ongoing unanticipated problems associated with the project. A report on the detail of the project would be submitted to Cabinet in February.

The Chief Executive praised the level of debate and scrutiny during the meeting and also the contribution of the students from Ysgol Dinas Bran within that process which had provided a greater understanding of the complexities involved.

RESOLVED that the feedback from representatives following their attendance at various meetings on the Committee's behalf be received and noted.

In closing the meeting the Chair thanked the Committee's support officers.

The meeting concluded at 12.50 pm.