

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 5 September 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Karen Edwards, Jon Harland, Carol Holliday, Brian Jones, Delyth Jones, Cheryl Williams and Huw Williams (Chair)

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Governance and Business/Monitoring Officer (GW); Head of Housing and Communities Service (LG); Head of Adult Social Care and Homelessness (AL); Service Manager – Community Support Service (NJ); Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services (EJ); Lead Officer – Trees and Woodlands (TH); Countryside and Heritage Services Manager (HR); Works Unit and Streetscene Manager (AC); Head of Corporate Support Service: Performance, Digital and Assets (HV-E); Climate Change Manager (JH); Insight, Strategy and Delivery Manager (RL); Head of Highways and Environment (PJ); Scrutiny Co-ordinator (KE); Committee Administrator/Host (ED); and Committee Administrator/Minutes (SLW).

Observers – Councillors Joan Butterfield, Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones. Pauline Edwards, Huw Hilditch-Roberts, Gareth Sandilands, Andrea Tomlin and Eryl Williams.

Lead Member for Housing and Communities, Councillor Rhys Thomas was in attendance for Agenda Item 8

Lead Member for Environment and Transport, Councillor Barry Mellor was in attendance for Agenda Items 6, 7 and 9

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Michelle Blakeley-Walker, James Elson and Merfyn Parry.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Cheryl Williams declared a personal interest in Agenda Item 8 – SARTH Inhouse Provision Update – as she is on the SARTH list.

3 APPOINTMENT OF VICE CHAIR

The Chair, Councillor Huw Williams, requested nominations for the appointment of a new Vice-Chair of Communities Scrutiny Committee for the 2024-2025 municipal year.

Councillor Huw Williams proposed Councillor Karen Edwards, Seconded by Councillor Cheryl Williams.

No further nominations were proposed.

All members present affirmed their assent to the appointment of Councillor Karen Edwards

Councillor Edwards thanked everyone for voting her to be Vice-Chair.

RESOLVED that Councillor Karen Edwards be appointed as Vice-Chair of Communities Scrutiny Committee for the 2024-2025 municipal year.

4 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No urgent matters.

5 MINUTES

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny meeting held on Thursday 9 May 2024 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 9 May 2024 be approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

At this juncture there was a change in the order of Agenda items.

6 SARTH INHOUSE PROVISION UPDATE

The Lead Member for Housing and Communities, along with the Head of Adult Social Care and Homelessness, Service Manager for Community Support Services, and the Head of Housing and Communities were in attendance to present the report on SARTH Inhouse Provision update.

Lead Member, Councillor Rhys Thomas, introduced the report to update Communities Scrutiny Committee and provide members the opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the SARTH register, following service provision redesign in 2023.

The Service Manager for Community Support Services, Nigel Jones, explained to Committee that the service had been brought back inhouse in April 2023. Denbighshire SARTH partnered with Conwy Borough County Council, Flintshire County Council, social housing and community housing but Denbighshire had the responsibility for holding the register.

ICT system changes had delayed the access to data for a substantial period of time initially. This was out of the control of DCC as software consultants worked on the issue and eventually full working order had been restored.

The service was now running extremely well and were now reaching the target of 28 days from application to assessment. Previously this had taken 3-4 months.

The main advantage of working inhouse was the ability to carry out reviews on time and maintaining the register and keep it up to date. Every case was to be reviewed on a six-monthly basis and the resident would be contacted to ascertain if there had been a change in their circumstances.

There were further developments, and one was the specialist housing register. This year 9 specialist properties had been found which was a marked improvement on previous years.

Now SARTH sat within the homeless service, there was a lot of cohesion in the service.

It was confirmed that the partnership with Social Landlords and Community Landlords had been held up as best practice.

The new process provided an enhanced customer journey and was able to identify homelessness quicker. From a customer perspective, it was a more seamless process.

The Head of Housing and Communities stated that prior to the setting up of SARTH, every council had a housing list and now with SARTH the key driver for DCC was to take a more homeless prevention approach.

If the funding streams continued at current levels future pressures would be met.

Members thanked all the officers for their work on SARTH.

RESOLVED that Communities Scrutiny Committee were assured that the service provision redesign of SARTH was performing and meeting expectations set out at the time of the decision to bring the service back in house from the former commissioned provider, Flintshire County Council.

7 TREE MAINTENANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The Lead Member for Environment and Transport along with the Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside, the Lead Officer – Trees and Woodlands, the Countryside and Heritage Services Manager, and the Works Unit and Streetscene Manager were in attendance to present the report on Tree Maintenance and Management.

Lead Member, Councillor Barry Mellor, introduced the report to provide Members with an understanding of how DCC's trees were managed across the authority, within the context of each service area.

As a landowner, the Council had a duty of care to ensure, as far as was reasonably practicable, all the trees on its land were kept in an acceptable condition and did not put persons or property at unreasonable risk.

The work to respond to Ash Dieback had been a priority during the past few years.

A team of tree officers had been created to deal with ash dieback in 2020. Work took place with all the departments who had trees in their portfolio eg: planning, streetscene and work involving protected trees whilst working towards the policy attached to the report.

Three surveys had been carried out and a significant amount of work had been undertaken in the hope of saving as many trees as possible.

Trees were a key to delivering a Greener Denbighshire, and a Net Carbon Zero and Ecologically positive Council by 2030. The existing tree asset would be managed and developed appropriately to help to achieve those goals.

Managing resources had always been challenging but savings had been made in the service over the years and were kept under review. It was confirmed there were sufficient resources especially to deal with the ash die back problem.

The question of ownership of trees was raised and whether it had caused problems. Officers responded that Highways also dealt with trees in urban areas outside the 30mph. Streetscene officers carried out highway safety inspections. Under the Highways Act DCC had a duty of care to carry out inspections. The partnership between the two services works exceptionally well.

As part of the Ash die back project progress had been made in contacting landowners in terms of informing them of their duty of care to respond to issues. If there were issues due to storm damage or trees on a highway then residents would be contacted to deal with the hazard. Unfortunately, there was a slight backlog of work as the primary focus had been on Ash die back. Therefore, the Strategy was welcomed as there needed to be a targeted way forward.

If there were issues with trees which were on school grounds, support was in place for schools as they did not have the expertise to deal with such issues. The service was in contact with Education and Health and Safety.

In the past, budget had been the primary issue which only allowed officers to focus on health and safety grounds. The Strategy would set out the way forward in terms of how the services work and to use resources in a better and more targeted way.

Officers confirmed they would notify local members when tree maintenance was to be carried out within their Wards.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above, the Communities Scrutiny Committee notes the contents of the report.

8 HIGHWAYS GRIDS AND GULLIES MAINTENANCE PROGRAMME

The Lead Member for Environment and Transport, along with Head of Highways and Environment were in attendance to present the report on Highways Grids and Gullies maintenance programme.

Lead Member, Barry Mellor, introduced the report to provide Members with an understanding of how DCC's statutory duties under the Highways Act and Flood and Water Management Act were met in terms of managing surface water through maintenance of the highway drainage network and critical flood risk culverts to ensure that the highways were well drained and, therefore, safe and properties were protected during times of storms.

Members stated that the main cause of blockages to gullies were leaves. The Lead Officer explained that often gullies were reported as blocked but it was only the temporary coverage of the leaves that was causing an issue – the resources needed to clear those were not the same as actual blockages. Correct reporting of the issue would prevent delay in responding. It was queried how to make sure the correct information was gathered to ensure the correct resources were sent out to the area concerned. Also how to raise awareness at City, Town and Community Councils.

The Head of Highways and Environment, Paul Jackson, responded that occasionally it was the capacity of the drain, if there was a sudden heavy downpour and sometimes the gully would clear by itself. The education of the public, Councillors and City, Town and Community Councils would be the way forward as this would assist in managing resources and this would be picked up in the future.

During discussions the following points were raised –

- (i) How significant was run off from properties who had paved over their gardens and permeable driveways? Also, to a certain extent, the farming community where compacted land existed so it contributed to flooding issues.

The Head of Service responded there was no hard evidence regarding this but it was a trend for some homeowners. Discussions were taking place with Welsh Water and the Welsh Government as it was recognised that waterfall was on the increase. Also liaising with the Planning team and other departments needed to take place regarding permits for new developments around that particular issue. Unfortunately, it was likely to be a continuing problem if the current trend continued.

- (ii) The Lead Member for Environment and Transport informed the Committee that meetings had taken place with Welsh Water regarding the old Victorian drains in Rhyl as they could only take so much water where it goes into Marine Lake and pumped into the storage system there. Unfortunately, the tank was not big enough to take all the water if there was a substantial downpour. When the tank was full, it was let out into the sea but it was not only water but sewerage also. It was stated that both Welsh Water and NRW needed to come together to work on a solution for this issue.

- (iii) The Head of Service clarified that work was done on a risk based approach and it would be dependent on the level of traffic on a particular road, on the speed limit on the road and the level of risk associated with the risk assessment as to how quickly the team could get to the location and deal with the issue. If a report was received of an issue in a known flood area, where there was a heavy amount of traffic and properties were at risk of flooding that would be a major priority. If a report was received of an issue on a more rural road where there was little traffic and not a known flooding area, it would be lower on the risk assessment.

The Authority had two tankers one which covered the north of the county and one which covered the south of the county. There was a demand on those two tankers to cover the whole of the county and, therefore, the risk based approach had to be taken and every issue assessed on its own merits at the time it was reported.

- (iv) Councillor Sandilands raised issues regarding the Rhyl – Prestatyn gutter but this was recommended to be discussed further outside the meeting as this was not the responsibility of the council. Councillor Sandilands then asked how often do the grids and gullies get inspected in the year, especially the subsidiaries which led in to the Rhyl and Prestatyn gutter.

The Head of Service responded that the gullies were assessed on a risk based approach so, if it was a known flood area they would be inspected more frequently during the year than areas where there were no historic reports of flooding. The gullies referred to were inspected twice a year but if an amber or yellow alert for flooding was received then they would be checked again. Potentially inspected three times per year.

It was confirmed that the relationship between DCC, NRW and Welsh Water was good but, unfortunately, NRW and Welsh Water also had financial issues and were dealing with those accordingly.

- (v) Issues were raised regarding grids in certain areas of Denbigh and it was confirmed that the Head of Service would look into those issues outside the meeting.
- (vi) It was confirmed that there was an issue recruiting winter maintenance drivers, but this was a national issue not just local. Therefore, if needed to carry out winter maintenance and short of drivers then the driver from the tanker would be utilised. That had to be managed as a service and it had been an issue for a number of years.
- (vii) Officers and staff who traverse the county on a regular basis, could, if they had an understanding of what issues may look like, report them, that would be extremely helpful. It would all rely on education, not only of staff but members of the public, and councillors. There was a lot of work to be carried out to make the general public aware of what the capability capacity was of the drainage network in the county.
- (viii) Information on Gullysmart. It was confirmed that Gullysmart was now in operation but it would take some time to collate all the data. Unfortunately, they were unable to give a timescale on completion but the work had begun.

- (ix) Issue regarding sand causing problems after particularly strong winds on the coast.

It was confirmed that highways and streetscene had a co-ordinated approach to clear sand from the highways. If the sand was on privately owned land then it was the responsibility of the owner to manage the risk.

The Chair summarised the discussion, as working with the Communication Team to educate the general public, councillors and staff. Concerns were raised regarding planning aspects, especially new developments. There had been some items which were to be dealt with outside the meeting in their relevant forums.

RESOLVED that, subject to the above,

- (i) *the Communities Scrutiny Committee has considered the report and confirmed it was happy that the correct approach to highway drainage maintenance was being applied so that the best alignment between the risk to users and the available funding was being achieved, and*
- (ii) *it was recommended that communication with City, Town and Community Councils would take place to assist in managing resources.*

At this juncture (11.30 a.m.) there was a 5 minute break.

The meeting resumed at 11.35 a.m.

9 DENBIGHSHIRE'S LOCAL AREA ENERGY PLAN

The Lead Member for Environment and Transport, along with Head of Corporate Support Service: Performance, Digital and Assets, the Climate Change Manager and the Insight, Strategy and Delivery Manager were in attendance to present the report on Denbighshire's Local Area Energy Plan (LAEP).

Lead Member Councillor Barry Mellor introduced the report as an effective route for the local area to contribute towards meeting the national net zero target, as well as meeting its local net zero target.

The Denbighshire LAEP would contribute towards the Corporate Plan 2022-2027 theme of "A Greener Denbighshire", specifically providing a positive contribution to the Climate and Nature Strategy (2021/22 – 2029/30) by reducing emissions across Denbighshire County Council. It also supported "A prosperous Denbighshire" theme, with the opportunity to stimulate economic growth and grow Denbighshire's green economy.

Jane Hodgson, Climate Change Manager presented a Powerpoint presentation which outlined the LAEP.

During discussion it was noted that the key part was education and the sharing of information. Officers were asked what DCC could do to promote that kind of information and avenues where people could find them as well as understanding the cost of them, as there was a perception that it would be expensive.

The Head of Service responded that there was an action within the LAEP report where schemes were mentioned and support was available for businesses, and residents. The scheme was run by Flintshire County Council on behalf of DCC. Unfortunately, it was limited due to resources but information, education and support was available for businesses and certain residents of DCC. The Action within the LAEP report and all LAEP reports of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales, was for Welsh Government and it informs that the Climate Champion and Communication workplan that the climate change division in Welsh Government deliver.

DCC, and other Local Authorities struggled to engage with some private businesses eg: major haulage companies, and private house developers. They could be working towards carbon net zero but there was a need to all liaise to meet the pace of change within the LAEP.

The Chair then stated that as a small business owner himself it was difficult as tax incentives had been removed, energy prices were rising and the retail cost of electric vehicles was very high. He suggested passing that information on to the Welsh Government.

The Head of Service confirmed she would pass that on to the Welsh Government.

The Chief Executive, Graham Boase sat on the PAN Wales Climate Strategy Panel and there was a forum at which the point raised by the Chair could be submitted.

At this point, the Insight, Strategy and Delivery Manager informed Committee that there were opportunities coming up for businesses and communities to work with one of the growth deal projects called Smart Local Energy. There would be funded packages that businesses and communities could obtain over 18 months to do some of the feasibility studies to look at how to roll out some of the projects that were outlined in the report. She confirmed she would work with the team to look at how best to capitalise on that for Denbighshire within the Ambition North Wales broader programme of work.

Officers were asked if they had considered the use of green hydrogen within the scope of the report rather than blue or grey hydrogen. Blue and grey hydrogen would not contribute to the target for net zero. The statement within the report referred to hydrogen and not which specific hydrogen.

It was confirmed that the Plan did not decipher which hydrogen.

The LAEP was to be presented to Cabinet on 24 September 2024 for endorsement and a Members' Briefing session in autumn 2024.

The LAEP was provisionally due to be reviewed in five years' time, as we approach 2030 and the public sector net carbon zero target deadline.

RESOLVED that –

- (i) Communities Scrutiny Committee considered the LAEP Main Report and Technical Report and provided feedback on aspects contained therein.*
- (ii) Communities Scrutiny Committee had read, understood and taken account of the Well-being Impact Assessment as part of its consideration.*

10 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator guided members through the Communities Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme.

The next meeting of Communities Scrutiny Committee was to be held on 24 October 2024.

The next Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group meetings were to take place on 16 September 2024 and 25 November 2024.

RESOLVED that the Communities Scrutiny Committee forward work programme be agreed.

11 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

There was no feedback due to recess.

The meeting concluded at 12.07 p.m.