

Public Document Pack

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held via video conference on Thursday, 11 March 2021 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

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

Cabinet Members- Councillor Julian Thompson-Hill Lead Member for Finance Performance and Strategic Assets and Councillor Mark Young Lead Member for Planning, Public Protection and Safer Communities.

Observers - Councillor Barry Mellor, Rhys Thomas and Emrys Wynne

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Economy and Public Realm (GB), Head of Finance and Property (SG), Head of Customers, Communications & Marketing (LG), Head of Planning, Public Protection and Countryside Services (EJ), Lead Officer – Strategic Asset Management (TB), Senior Practitioner (LA), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Administrators (SJ and SLW).

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Cheryl Williams.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

None.

4 MINUTES

The minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on 21 January 2021 were submitted.

RESOLVED that – *The minutes of the meeting held on the 21 January 2021 be received and approved as a correct record.*

5 GYPSY AND TRAVELLER - RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS AND UNOFFICIAL ENCAMPMENTS DRAFT PROCEDURES

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets explained to members that the report (previously circulated) was a joint report with Lead Member for Planning, Public Protection and Safer Communities.

It was highlighted to members the report illustrated how best to improve the process when having to attend unauthorised encampments. The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets explained a regional North Wales Joint Protocol on Managing Unauthorised Encampments was agreed in 2015. Following this a report had been submitted to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) that had summarised the current arrangements in place. SLT had since provided recommendations to progress and update procedures.

Members were provided with the legal arrangements and powers that Denbighshire County Council had in place. During the Covid 19 pandemic guidance from Welsh Government (WG) had been issued regarding relocating and evicting encampments stating local authorities should not evict, relocate or disperse unauthorised encampments unless there were immediate and substantial risks to public safety and public health arising from continued occupation.

It was explained that each case was treated as an individual case and WG Guidance was followed accordingly. An initial welfare assessment to obtain the best method of intervention had been adopted. Within the guidance it was stressed a single point of contact would be the best practice. That individual would be the first point of contact for any questions or queries regarding gypsies and travellers. It was recommended that option B of the proposals put forward was taken forward. This option had already received the support of SLT and Cabinet Briefing. Members heard that option incorporated the Single Point of Contact role which would eventually be part of be in Liz Grieve's Customers, Communications and Marketing Service.

The Lead Member for Planning, Public Protection and Safer Communities explained the difference between encampments on non-Council land and land owned by Denbighshire County Council. Members were guided through the procedure for both.

It was confirmed that a lot of cross service work had been undertaken to collate information, with a lot of officer time involved. This work had highlighted the benefits and importance of cross-service work in relation to dealing with unofficial encampments involving the gypsy and traveller community, and how the adoption of a corporate approach to the work in future would deliver a better service for all involved. The Lead Members stressed the importance of the single point of contact individual in delivering this corporate approach. Regional working and working cross county may develop over time and the new post holder would work closely with other local authorities.

The Chair thanked the officers for the detailed introduction and report. During the discussions, officers and Lead Members expanded on the following:

- The nature and number of unofficial encampments that occurred in Denbighshire were explained. Members were informed that even a couple nights caused a great deal of disruption. It was hard to provide accurate figures for the number of encampments that took place on non-Denbighshire County Council owned land as often officers were not informed. It was hoped that the new point of contact would improve the connection with the community, providing a contact to inform the Council.
- The potential new post would be working closely with temporary encampments. Engagement and communication with officers from different sectors of the Council would continue and the potential new post would be key in supporting and strengthening communication between all stakeholders involved and affected by unofficial encampments. The creation of the post would also provide a clear separation of responsibilities between the welfare aspects, which would be instigated and supported by the officer, and any legal eviction work which would be contracted out to external bailiffs to undertake.
- During the Covid-19 pandemic there had been 3 unofficial encampment incidents of which the Council had been notified. 2 of these had been on council land and one on private land. Due to the travel restrictions it was observed that the numbers had been lower. One of the observations that was noted within the Welsh Government guidelines had been that gypsies and travellers should not be issued with an eviction notices unless an alternative location was available.
- The intention of the post holder was to raise awareness and build resilience in the community, within Denbighshire County Council and within the gypsy and traveller community. The officer would work with all stakeholders to obtain a better outcome. It was confirmed that SLT had concluded the post would sit best with Community Housing Section of the Customers, Communication and Marketing Service as unofficial encampments was a community housing related matter and being within that Service would enable the officer to engage with all parties.
- Confirmation was provided that open communication existed between the Council and the Police and the gypsy and traveller community had continued.
- The Head of Finance and Property informed members that officer time was the most significant indirect cost to the authority arising from unofficial encampments. The majority of costs were contained within existing resources; however, a central code had been set up with a budget of £20k a year for any additional costs that may occur.
- Confirmation was provided that a welfare visit had taken place at the 3 encampments reported to the Council in recent months. All visits had been in line with the Social Services and Wellbeing Act. The visits were non-intrusive and offered support to all parties. The visits had been received well.

The Chair thanked all officers for the work that had been involved on the proposed way forward for dealing with unofficial encampments and the procedure for doing so.

It was therefore;

RESOLVED that members support the recent developments and decisions relating to the way the Council responds to unofficial encampments by Gypsy and Travellers.

6 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

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

Discussion focused on the following –

- The items listed on the forward work programme for the next meeting on 13 May 2021 were reaffirmed. Confirmation from Officers and Natural Resource Wales representatives that the agenda items would be available had been sought.
- The COVID-19 Recovery Theme – Council Buildings update report had been deferred until July 2021 with the Chair's agreement due to the ongoing pandemic situation.
- Members were asked to submit any proposal forms regarding topics for scrutiny.
- The Information Brief document had been circulated to members prior to the meeting including 3 information reports.
- The Task and Finish Group to look at Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership, hoped to first meet in April.

RESOLVED that, subject to the amendments and inclusions to the draft forward work programme proposed during the meeting to confirm the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

7 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

No reports from committee representatives had been received.

The meeting concluded at 10.55 a.m.