

# Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees 2020 to 2021

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## What is scrutiny?

Scrutiny is a key component of the Council's political structure. Many of the Council's important decisions are taken by Cabinet, a group of eight councillors to whom the County Council has given its powers to take decisions relating to policies and procedures on its behalf.

The term 'scrutiny' derives from the Latin word 'scrutinium / scrutari' which means 'to search'. In the context of local government Scrutiny's role is to research and examine policies and decisions to assess whether they could be improved or strengthened to deliver better services for residents and visitors to Denbighshire. Scrutiny is often referred to as the Council's 'critical friend', its purpose is to provide constructive criticism in order to continually seek improvements to services, secure better decisions and realise better outcomes.

Scrutiny Committees cannot take decisions, but they can influence policies, review decisions taken by Cabinet and Officers, make recommendations, and examine a range of topics that affect residents, local businesses and visitors to the county.

## Scrutiny in Action

Scrutiny should at all times work in an impartial way. It should not be influenced by party politics, its focus should be on improving the lives of residents and on securing better outcomes for the county area.

Whilst Scrutiny Committees have an active role to play in developing policies and reviewing performance. They also have the responsibility of holding the Cabinet and other decision makers to account on the decisions they make.

If a Scrutiny Committee believes that an issue should be looked at in more depth before a decision is implemented, it can request a review under the "Call-In" procedure which will allow Scrutiny Committees to formulate alternative proposals.

## How does scrutiny work in Denbighshire?

Scrutiny acts as a 'critical friend' to the Council's leadership, driving improvements not only to services delivered by the Council itself, but to services delivered in partnership with other public services in the area by enabling the concerns of the public to be heard.

The Council's scrutiny work is undertaken by three thematic, cross-cutting Scrutiny Committees, meeting approximately every 7 weeks and comprising of 11 elected members from all political parties/groups on the Council.

The three committees in Denbighshire are:

- Communities Scrutiny Committee
- Partnerships Scrutiny Committee
- Performance Scrutiny Committee

When examining education matters representatives appointed by the Church in Wales and the Catholic Church, along with representatives elected by parent governors, also serve on the committees. When dealing with education matters these representatives have full voting rights. All the parent governor representative posts on Scrutiny are currently vacant. If you are a parent governor at one of the Council's primary, secondary or special schools, and would be interested in representing your sector on Scrutiny please get in touch with us (contact details can be found in the 'How residents can participate in Scrutiny' section towards the end of this report).

## Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group

The Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the three scrutiny committees serve on the Council's Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) along with the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Governance & Audit Committee and the Chair of the Democratic Services Committee. This Group acts as a co-ordinating group for the committees' work. Requests for items to be considered by a scrutiny committee, be they from county councillors, Council officers, residents, businesses or the general public are examined by this Group to determine whether they meet the criteria for Scrutiny, or whether they would benefit from being considered by another forum or group. The explanation on the PAPER test on the following page illustrates the criteria and process for determining whether a topic is suitable for scrutiny.

During 2020/21 a total of 17 requests for items to be scrutinised were considered by the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group. Of these 17 requests:

- 10 were submitted by county councillors
- 5 by officers
- 1 by a resident/general public (a number of the requests submitted by county councillors were done so in response to concerns raised with them by their constituents) and
- 1 as a result of a Notice of Motion to County Council

The Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group ensures that the scrutiny committees' work programmes are balanced and that subjects are not duplicated. It also has a role to play in supporting and strengthening the Council's scrutiny function through the identification of best practice and helping to implement any necessary changes to scrutiny practices.

## The process for determining a topic's suitability for scrutiny

### Step one: considering the request

Proposal form or request received and careful consideration given to the reasons for it.

### Step two: does it stand up to the PAPER test?

- **Public interest:** is the matter of concern to residents?
- **Ability to have an impact:** can Scrutiny influence and change things?
- **Performance:** is it an underperforming area or service?
- **Extent:** does it affect a large number of residents or a large geographic area?
- **Replication:** is anyone else looking at it?

**If not**, then no further action is required by a scrutiny committee and the request should be referred elsewhere or an information report requested.

**If yes:**

### Step three: assessment and planning

- Determine the desired outcome(s)
- Decide on the scope and extent of the scrutiny work required and the most appropriate method to undertake it (i.e. committee report, task and finish group inquiry, or link member etc.)
- If task and finish route is chosen, determine the timescale for any inquiry, who will be involved, research requirements, expert advice and witnesses required, reporting arrangements etc.

## Scrutiny's work during 2020/21

**2020 was the year that no one will ever forget!** As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020/21 was a very different year for Scrutiny, as it was for the rest of the world. No one could have foreseen how everybody's daily lives were about to be thrown into turmoil and how day to day work routines would abruptly come to a sudden halt.

From mid-March until September 2020 all County Council decision-making was suspended, with only urgent decisions being taken by Cabinet, in order to make sure that all available resources were directed to delivering critical front line services and supporting Denbighshire's residents through the difficult weeks and months that lay ahead. With a large number of Council employees working mainly from home new ways of working had to be devised to ensure as little disruption as possible to the delivery of critical services to residents. In addition, with all county councillors and Council officers that support them generally working from home, work was required to introduce, facilitate and familiarise all with the use of various video conferencing platforms to enable the Council's democratic processes to restart.

Aware of the fact that the impact of the worldwide pandemic would alter the Scrutiny Committees' focus for the remainder of the current Council's term of office, work began on how to restart the committees' work and rebuild their programmes of work. During the summer of 2020 the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) began this work in earnest and a decision was taken that the first meeting of each of the three scrutiny committees from September onwards would focus on various Council services' recovery plans from dealing with the pandemic. Nevertheless, the Group was keen that items of business already scheduled on to the committees' forward work programmes prior to COVID-19 were not forgotten, or lost forever because of the pandemic. To ensure that this would not happen all these topics were placed on a 'holding list' while enquires were made on when it would be feasible for Council services to provide committees with the required information to examine them once the services' resources were re-focussed on day to day business rather than on responding to the pandemic. Eventually each individual scrutiny committee was tasked with rescheduling the 'historic' items on to their forward work programmes.

## Scrutiny and the Council's Corporate Priorities during 2020/21

Although the scrutiny committees did prioritise examining COVID-19 recovery work at their first few meetings, during the course of the year the committees also continued their work examining areas aimed at supporting the delivery of the Council's corporate priorities and ultimately its Corporate Plan. The Corporate Priorities are:

**Housing:** ensuring that everyone is supported to live in homes that meet their needs

**Connected Communities:** making sure communities are connected and have access to goods and services locally, online and through good transport links

**Resilient Communities:** making sure that the Council works with people and communities to build independence and resilience

**Environment:** securing an attractive and protected environment which supports well-being and economic prosperity; and

**Young People:** creating a county where younger people will want to live and work and have the skills to do so

The Council's Corporate Plan and its priorities were set and agreed at the start of the current Council's term of office in 2017, with the aim of delivering the entire Plan when its term comes to an end in 2022. Due to the scale and impact of the pandemic on all aspects of everyday life Scrutiny felt it was important to revisit the corporate priorities as early as possible during its examination of the recovery work, in order to make sure that they would still be relevant in a post-pandemic Denbighshire. Having considered the pandemic's impact on the local population, the effect of the restrictions and lockdown periods on the young and old alike, Scrutiny was certain that the priorities adopted by the Council back in 2017 were more relevant than ever. The way people lived their lives had changed greatly during the pandemic, in a lot of cases probably forever. The importance of good quality safe housing, connected and resilient communities, an attractive environment and young people and their futures had been brought to the fore during the pandemic. Going forward securing the delivery of these priorities would be more important than ever.



## Scrutiny and the COVID-19 pandemic

Assured that the corporate priorities were still current and relevant Scrutiny proceeded to examine how frontline services had responded to the pandemic. It wanted to understand what lessons had been learnt from dealing with the pandemic which could be applied when responding to similar incidents in future. In addition, Scrutiny wanted to know how services planned to emerge from the reactive response stage to resuming 'normal' service delivery when safe to do so, or even whether they were planning to adapt their services for the needs of the 'new normal', whatever that may look like.

Scrutiny plays a key role in examining pupils' educational achievements in external examinations and teacher assessments. With the disruption to the school year and the cancellation of external examinations in 2020, Scrutiny was acutely aware of how the pandemic had affected the education and the wider welfare and well-being of the county's pupils. It therefore focussed on the recovery plans put in place for the safe re-opening of schools in September 2020 and the role played by various Council departments and partners to enable schools to re-open and for pupils to be transported to them safely for the start of the new academic year. No mean feat considering that the county has in the region of 16,000 pupils attending its schools. Scrutiny commended the team effort that had ensured the realisation of the re-opening as well as the concerted efforts of all involved in securing the delivery of the educational curriculum and associated well-being experiences to pupils and staff during the initial and subsequent lockdown periods.

In early 2021 Scrutiny examined how the Council's Education Service in partnership with GwE, the regional school effectiveness and improvement service, had evolved and modified the support available to schools during the course of the pandemic and how schools in turn had adapted to the new ways of working in response to the COVID-19 restrictions. The Council, schools, staff and pupils had been forced, due to the restrictions, to become accustomed to distance learning as well as elements of blended learning. While there were disadvantages associated with these types of learning there were also advantages which could be adopted for the delivery of some aspects of education in future.

Whilst COVID-19 naturally placed severe pressures on frontline services such as education and social care, the restrictions associated with the pandemic also affected the

delivery of a number of other Council Services. Amongst these services was its Highways and Public Realm Services, as its on-going schedule of highways maintenance work was disrupted for approximately 7 months, at exactly the time of year that the majority of maintenance work would usually be carried out. As a result, the annual highways maintenance cycle had been lost, which meant that roads that required work before the pandemic struck had deteriorated further and would cost much more to repair to an acceptable standard. While highways maintenance work had resumed as a matter of urgency in order to achieve as much as possible before the winter season set-in, there was a risk that the restrictions associated with another lockdown and the usual wear and tear caused by winter weather and gritting for example would further exacerbate the problems. Scrutiny was reassured that contingency plans were in place to manage these risks. Nevertheless, the limited number of highways surfacing contractors, coupled with the nationwide demand for their services within a limited period of time before winter set in would prove challenging, particular given the relatively small size of Denbighshire's highways network in comparison to other larger counties.

Housing and Homelessness issues came to the forefront during the pandemic and Scrutiny was therefore keen to ensure that the county's most vulnerable residents along with its housing tenants were provided with adequate high quality support during the prolonged restriction periods. Whilst non-urgent renovation work on Council owned housing was suspended for a period during the initial lockdown period, work to reduce the backlog caused by this suspension began in August 2020 and Scrutiny examined the recovery plans for getting the renovation work back on track. It also examined the proactive support provided by the Council to its tenants during the pandemic, with over 3,000 support calls made to vulnerable tenants during the first lockdown period. In addition, the Council's social media platforms had been widely used to draw tenants' attention to the support that was available to them if they wished to access it. Not unexpectedly rent arrears had risen, but through clear communication with tenants and by working closely with Citizens Advice Denbighshire (CAD) and the Welsh Government (WG) the Council had been able to support those tenants who were experiencing financial difficulties.

Since the introduction of Universal Credit (UC) Scrutiny has examined the impact of the benefit's introduction on residents and its knock-on impact on support provided by the

Council, such as the Council Tax Reductions Scheme, Housing Benefit, Free Schools meals, as well as the income it receives from Council Tax payments. As part of its monitoring of the UC in Denbighshire it was no surprise to learn that the number of residents claiming UC had increased during the year, this increase in numbers was mostly due to the pandemic. While there had been an increase in claims for UC during the period these claims were not always for the full UC allowance, some were for more low level support, as residents intermittently dipped in and out of claiming UC due to furlough or the impact of the easing of restrictions on their ability to undertake more paid work. Nonetheless, Scrutiny was reassured to understand that residents were receiving robust advice and effective financial support and that the close working relationship fostered between the Council, CAD and Civica (who administer various benefits on behalf of the Council) over a number of years had proved invaluable to help support residents during extremely testing and unpredictable times.

Scrutiny nevertheless had concerns that the Housing Benefit Administration Grant, paid to the Council for administering Housing Benefit was being reduced despite the fact that the workload remained constant. Additional pressures were also being faced as the numbers claiming through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme had increased by 2.8% and there had been an 10.95% increase in the number of Free School Meal (FSM) applications made between March and November 2020.

Acutely aware of the higher risk posed by the virus to people who were homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless, the Welsh Government (WG) amended regulations relating to homelessness in a bid to make sure that the most vulnerable in our communities were not at a greater risk of contracting and spreading the virus due to their living conditions. To comply with the new regulations the Council had to partially change its allocations policy for social housing, in order to respond to the Covid-19 requirements on emergency/temporary accommodation for homeless households. In addition, the WG also emphasised to local authorities that any households provided with emergency accommodation during the pandemic lockdown would be owed a full duty for permanent re-housing. These Government's changes to the regulations to address the specific problems caused by the pandemic placed extra pressures on the Council's homelessness services. At the same time as the Service saw the number of households presenting themselves at risk of becoming homeless almost double, it was expected to draw up a

plan aimed at ending homelessness and introducing a rapid rehousing model. This in turn required the development of a new model in order to deliver the WG's vision for homelessness support services in future, a model based on adopting a corporate approach with a number of services working together, to deliver a seamless package of early intervention services to individuals and families who were experiencing housing related problems. Scrutiny examined these proposals and supported the proposed delivery plan. It was reassured to learn that capital funding had been secured for the purpose of reducing the Council's use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families and that revenue funding had been granted to support the development of the new housing related support services model. In order to make sure that the new model is fit for purpose and will deliver its intended outcomes for vulnerable residents Scrutiny will monitor the re-modelled service's progress in delivering housing related support services during 2021/22.

Coronavirus was, and of course continues to be a public health crisis, but its impact is far more wide-ranging with every walk of life affected to a greater or lesser extent. With everybody told to stay at home and non-essential shops and retail outlets along with hospitality and entertainment venues forced to shut for prolonged periods of time the effect of the pandemic on the economy, businesses and individuals' livelihoods was likely to be devastating. It was therefore crucially important for Scrutiny to examine the impact of the closures on the county's town centres, along with the plans developed for their re-opening and the work undertaken to date to help support the recovery of businesses across Denbighshire. It was envisaged that businesses may well struggle to recover in the medium to the long term, with possibly some being unable to survive.

Scrutiny examined the four specific aspects of the Council's Business Support Recovery work. These related to the following themes:

- Town Centres
- Business Contact
- Tourism
- Procurement

Each of these themes had a recovery plan of its own, which complemented each other's objectives and fed into the overarching Business Support Recovery Plan. The recovery plans also aimed to contribute towards the regional economic recovery work undertaken in partnership with the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB) and the Welsh and UK Governments. All of the above work was in addition to day to day work undertaken by the Council's Economic and Business Development Service. Every effort was made to highlight the services and support available to businesses via press releases and social media posts. These were effective methods of communicating information as the types of funding and support available to businesses constantly changed with each WG announcement.

One particular aspect of the business support recovery work which drew some considerable level of attention from residents and businesses, some favourable but the majority less favourable, were the various 'COVID-19 Active Travel Schemes' that were planned and/or implemented across the county. These were schemes funded by the WG's COVID-19 sustainable transport grant. They were regarded as pilots for potential future active travel schemes across the county, the ultimate aims of which were to reduce town centre congestion, improve air quality and encourage pedestrians and cyclists into town centres to increase footfall and support local businesses.

In response to concerns raised by residents and some businesses in relation to how these schemes were drawn-up and agreed, Scrutiny examined their purpose, the rationale behind the various schemes in towns across the county, along with the effectiveness of their initial implementation. As the development of these schemes had been driven by the offer of funding from the WG to bring them into fruition Scrutiny extended an invitation to the WG's Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, the Government Minister responsible for allocating the funding, to attend the meeting to discuss the funding application and allocation process. Unfortunately, the Deputy Minister was unable to attend the meeting for the discussion but he did provide the Committee with an evidence statement on the Scheme. This statement included information on the financial support allocated to Denbighshire to fund each of the approved schemes and gave examples of the different types of schemes funded across Wales.

It became evident during Scrutiny's examination of the COVID-19 Active Travel Schemes that the concept behind them was well-intentioned. However, the extremely tight

timescales given by the WG to local authorities to draw up plans and submit their funding applications had meant that the officers involved with drawing up the schemes had not been given sufficient time to consult with local councillors, businesses or residents on the proposed plans. As a result, because of local opposition some initial schemes were cancelled and others had to be amended which led to delays in authorising the contracts for their development. This meant that the schemes were not in place to benefit from the increase in footfall during the summer months. Scrutiny acknowledged the difficulties encountered in developing and implementing the schemes due to the short timescale set by the Government to apply for the funding for them. This had hindered the success of the implementation stage of the schemes. It was therefore important that the lessons learnt from the process entailed with these schemes were heeded when preparing for similar schemes in future, as business owners were concerned about what the future would look like for them. As the schemes that were eventually implemented are in place for a trial period of 18 months Scrutiny, along with the local Member Area Groups (MAGs), have agreed to monitor their impact on the towns within which they operate.

Back in March 2020 at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a bid to reduce the amount of social contact and reduce the risk of spreading the virus, both the Welsh and UK Governments instructed all employees who could work from home to do so. This instruction remained in place for the remainder of 2020 and continues to be in place for those employees who can undertake their work just as effectively from home for the majority of the time.

The Council had to act swiftly to extend the capabilities of home working to enable the majority of staff in a short period of time to work from home. At the beginning of the first lockdown only essential and urgent frontline work was being undertaken, with non-urgent work, Council meetings and non-urgent policy decisions being suspended until home working capabilities and remote meeting platforms were up and running and had been robustly tested. However, with the number of staff working remotely increasing from around 200 a day pre-pandemic to 1,600 per day during the pandemic the robustness of the 'New Ways of Working' were tested. As time passed and 'normal' business resumed, albeit wherever possible delivered remotely, the capacity of the Council's IT and communications systems were tested.

Scrutiny examined the effectiveness of these new ways of working. The benefits of the new ways of working were becoming evident to managers, staff and councillors alike. Whilst the pandemic had forced the Council's hand to adopt these new methods of working far more quickly than originally intended, the benefits of them were already being reaped. For example, the Council's carbon footprint had decreased considerably due to a reduction in travel to work journeys, along with a reduction in business and meeting attendance mileage. This in turn had reduced local traffic congestion and pollution levels, whilst working from home had improved the work life balance for many people, staff and elected members alike. For these reasons, it was proposed that the model would be maintained to an extent when social distancing was no longer a requirement. It was widely accepted that in future the majority of routine meetings should be held virtually and working from home for at least part of the time would be the normal way of working, a type of hybrid model where staff would attend Council buildings or hubs some days to work or for team building and networking events, but undertake the majority of their work from home. It was likely that in order to support this model Council buildings may well be required to be reconfigured. Scrutiny, whilst supporting this approach going forward, emphasised the Council's duty to safeguard the well-being of its staff and its elected members, acknowledging that not all members of staff would welcome the isolation of working from home continuously. Concerns were also raised on the potential economic impact of homeworking on the town centres where Council offices were located, as the footfall would decrease considerably and could potentially have a severe impact on the viability of certain sectors of the retail and hospitality sector, which had already suffered greatly as a result of the pandemic.

Other aspects of the recovery work which Scrutiny examined were the measures drawn up to re-open Council owned buildings once COVID-19 restrictions eased and the Council was permitted to open its buildings to the public once again. Scrutiny examined the work undertaken by a multidisciplinary team to prepare Council offices ready for re-opening. This work included all aspects relating to working arrangements such as social distancing measures in the workplace, Health, Safety and Welfare measures, along with property and equipment maintenance during the lockdown period. Trade Unions representing staff had been consulted on the measures taken to prepare buildings for re-opening. Whilst no buildings had been decommissioned as a result of changes to working patterns during the lockdown period some had been closed, others partially open and operating reduced

hours of opening with others fully open. Their 'open' status was dependent upon the services delivered from those buildings. Due to the extended lockdown measures in place some buildings continue to be closed or operating on reduced hours Scrutiny has decided to revisit the work undertaken in relation to the recovery of Council buildings once the restrictions ease.

As the Council continued its recovery work from its initial response to COVID-19 it was important for Scrutiny to focus on the effectiveness of the steps taken to restart the delivery of the non-essential services, which were suspended during the initial lockdown and to examine the lessons learnt from the pandemic in order to plan for the future. It became clear early on that life in post-pandemic Denbighshire would be different for everyone. Another aspect that came to the fore during the pandemic was the important role played by communities in supporting their more vulnerable residents in their hour of need e.g. through arranging to collect prescriptions, shopping or just keeping in contact with them to check on their welfare and well-being. The Council had already committed as part of its Corporate Plan 2017-22 to work with people and communities to build independence and resilience as part of its 'Resilient Communities' corporate priority. One of the positive things that stemmed from the pandemic was the community spirit that was fostered across the county. Whilst it probably existed below the surface before the crisis it became far more visible to residents and to the local authority during the first lockdown and shielding period, with various groups using social media, circulating leaflets etc. to alert residents to the fact that help and assistance was at hand if they needed it. This visibility gave the Council an opportunity to contact these groups to engage and work with them with a view to strengthening communities and empowering them to become even more resilient than they already are.

Scrutiny therefore examined the Council's post pandemic proposals for developing and enhancing Community Resilience. These proposals include closer working with the Voluntary Sector and community groups and in doing so using the lessons learnt from COVID-19 as the basis for developing and implementing new approaches to future service provision, in order to build resilience and adapt to an environment where COVID and risks associated with it remain a challenge.

During the initial lockdown the Council adopted a proactive approach by redeploying staff, whose daily roles were temporarily redundant due to the suspension of some services, to



telephone residents who were on the WG's shielding list, to check on their welfare and see if they required any assistance. These welfare calls were very well-received by residents. the Council was keen to develop the approach going forward and was looking at developing a business case to support the initiative. Another aspect which the Council was keen to develop was support for those residents who were economically vulnerable, through working with other organisations the Council wants to maximise available funding to help support people in the county into employment and address food poverty. Last, but not least the Council wants to review the work delivered in and through schools throughout the lockdown to ensure that it effectively supports vulnerable learners to achieve their full potential. Scrutiny was supportive of all of these proposals as they saw them as excellent opportunities to harness and galvanise working relationships which had been forged during a time of crisis and utilising them to strengthen the sense of community spirit, responsibility and empowerment, that would support the work required to deliver the Council's vision in relation to its Resilient Communities corporate priority

Despite being unable to hold meetings for six months more or less and then initially having to focus their work on COVID-19 recovery work the Council's three scrutiny committees have been able to schedule all of their relevant outstanding pre-pandemic topics on to their forward work programme from the Autumn of 2020 onwards. Some of these topics have already been considered during the Winter of 2020 and Spring of 2021, the others will be considered during the remainder of the Council's term of office up until May 2022. Amongst the items considered during the 2020/21 year have been matters relating to policy development, proposals for service delivery changes and the progress made with changes which had to be made in the wake of COVID-19 restrictions and the delays caused by the pandemic. In addition, Scrutiny has continued its work on monitoring the Council and its partner organisations' performance in delivering its statutory functions and services to the residents, as well as assessing the community impact of Council decisions and proposals on the residents of Denbighshire. More information on these subjects can be found under the sections in the report on the individual committees.

## Call-in of Cabinet decisions

The Council's Call-In Procedure was invoked twice during 2020/21 when two decisions taken by the Cabinet on 22 September 2020 were called in to Scrutiny for review. These decisions were in connection with the:

- Disposal of land adjacent to Ysgol Pendref, Denbigh; and
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme Band B Projects

In order to comply with the timescales, set out in the Council's Call-In Procedure Rules Communities Scrutiny Committee held a Special Meeting on 5 October 2020 to consider the basis for the call-ins and review the evidence upon which the Cabinet had taken its decisions.

Having considered the evidence in relation to the decision to dispose of land next to Ysgol Pendref Scrutiny asked Cabinet to reconsider its original decision in the light of the vision set out by the WG for future social and affordable housing set out in the draft new national development framework 'Future Wales – the National Plan 2040. It also asked Cabinet to consider options to make the land which was to be disposed of more attractive to social landlords and smaller developers by breaking it up into smaller parcels/plots, and also to make sure that the Council did not create an oversupply of large unaffordable homes in Denbigh which would not meet local needs. Following consideration of Scrutiny's recommendations on this matter Cabinet re-affirmed its original decision. Nevertheless, a number of Cabinet members acknowledged the concerns raised by Scrutiny in relation to the availability of affordable homes in Denbigh and the oversupply of potentially unaffordable homes in the area.

After considering information provided with regards to the Cabinet decision relating to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme Band B Projects, which included details of the background to the funding and the prioritisation process followed to determine which schools merited benefiting from the investment, the request for the Cabinet's decision to be reviewed was withdrawn by the councillors who had initially instigated the call-in. This withdrawal was made on the understanding that further information on the investment made to date in the county's schools and a clear outline of future investment plans, subject

to the availability of central and local government funding, was shared with councillors as soon as they were available.

## Positive outcomes of the scrutiny process

One of the main objectives of the scrutiny process is to add value and to try and ensure that decisions taken by the Council have a positive impact on the lives of people who live, work and visit Denbighshire. There is an expectation for Scrutiny to evidence the benefits it has added to the decision-making process and how those benefits manifest themselves in better outcomes for businesses and residents of the county.

Whilst all Scrutiny recommendations are aimed at contributing towards better decisions and improvement in services for residents it is not always easy to illustrate those improvements or benefits in a tangible way. Mention has been made in previous reports to the devastating wildfire on Llantysilio Mountain in July 2018 and the subsequent inquiry held by Scrutiny into its cause, the management of the fire incident and the moorland itself, along with the long-term impact of the fire on the area. One of the recommendations from that inquiry was that a Moorland Management Officer post should be established to help foster effective working relationship between all organisations and individuals involved with grazing and the management of the mountain. It is extremely pleasing to report that following Scrutiny's work on this matter Denbighshire County Council and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) agreed to jointly fund the creation of this post and an officer was appointed to the role in early 2021. In addition to delivering the objectives laid out in the Scrutiny Inquiry report this officer will also have an integral role to play in supporting the Council's recently adopted Climate and Ecological Change Strategy. This is a clear example of what careful and effective scrutiny can achieve.



## Communities Scrutiny Committee



Cllr. Huw Williams (**Chair**)



Cllr. Graham Timms (**Vice-Chair**)

This Committee's role is to examine matters that directly affect local communities and residents' daily lives. These may be matters within the Council's direct control or aspects of day to day life which the Council may be able to influence.

Following the initial focus of its work on COVID-19 recovery plans the Committee held a Special Meeting to review two Cabinet decisions which had been called for detailed examination under the Council's Call-In Procedure Rules. These decisions related to Band B of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools Programme and the sale of land adjacent to Ysgol Pendref, Denbigh. Details on the outcome of this call-in meeting is included elsewhere in this report.

During the year the Committee examined the impact on education in the Ruthin area of the review of primary education which commenced a number of years ago and concluded in 2018, when all schools subject to the review either moved to their new schools or the building work at their locations were completed. In assessing the impact of the review the Committee wanted to ensure that all the anticipated benefits and educational outcomes had been achieved at the end of the settling-in period for pupils and staff alike.

The Committee considered and supported the introduction of a Community Benefits Policy for Denbighshire. The aim of this policy is for the Council to realise financial benefits from contracts or projects awarded within the county for the advantage of local communities,

and for those communities to potentially maximise any financial benefits received even further through external funding streams not available to the local authority e.g. windfarm community benefit funds etc.

Amongst proposals and plans centred in specific communities but expected to reap county-wide benefits which the Committee examined during the year were those relating to Ruthin Gaol and the Regeneration of Rhyl. The Ruthin Gaol proposals are aimed at expanding the heritage themed offer at Ruthin Gaol, if and when the Archives Service's bid for National Lottery Heritage Horizon Fund money to build a new purpose built archive building in Mold for Denbighshire and Flintshire's Archives Service, is successful. Work to regenerate Rhyl and reduce the levels of deprivation in the town has been underway for some years. With the foundations now laid the work is gaining momentum and the focus is now on regenerating the town centre. The Committee examined the vision for the Town Centre and the governance arrangements in place to monitor and support the delivery of that vision for the benefit of the entire town, its neighbouring areas and the county as a whole. It will now continue to monitor this work on at least an annual basis.

Another aspect of economic regeneration the Committee has examined during the course of the year is the Council's existing Car Park Tariff Policy and Residents Parking Schemes. Scrutiny was asked to determine whether these were sufficiently flexible to meet the needs of all areas of the county. Currently, car parking tariffs are the same across all Council car parks, with three different tariffs in place – long stay, short stay and beach car park tariffs. Some towns and business feel that, due to the different offer available in each town and the prevalence of tourist or passing trade in some areas more than others, it may be worthwhile for tariffs to be varied in some towns. With a view to testing this concept the Committee supported a proposal to undertake a pilot project in Llangollen which will see car parking tariffs varied in specific car parks within the town, on the understanding that there should be no net loss in car park income from all the car parks in the town centre. The findings of this pilot project will be reported back to the Committee in due course.

Improving how the Council deals with household waste and plans to further improve its recycling rates has again featured on the Committee's programme of work. It looked at

the delivery plans for introducing the new household waste and recycling service across the county, including its proposals for communicating and educating residents about the new Service's introduction and how it would benefit and impact on them.

Unauthorised encampments by members of the gypsy and traveller communities periodically cause tensions and distress to local residents and businesses. With a view to developing a co-ordinated approach towards dealing with such encampments - and safeguarding the welfare of both Denbighshire residents and members of the gypsy and traveller community - the Committee considered and supported procedures drawn-up to improve the way the Council responds to unofficial encampments. An important part of these new procedures is the establishment of a Gypsy Traveller Liaison Officer. This person will act as a single point of contact in relation to unauthorised encampments and will work with all Council services, residents and local businesses, as well as the gypsy and traveller community in a bid to secure a positive outcome for all whilst safeguarding everyone's welfare. With the Council currently in the process of developing its new Local Development Plan (LDP) the Committee supported a proposal for establishing a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group to monitor the development of a new Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA), in line with Welsh Government Methodology and to assist with the development of a stakeholder engagement plan for the project. The GTAA is one of the requirements of the LDP. As Scrutiny had in the past emphasised the need to enter into early engagement with all stakeholders when developing a Needs Assessment, the Committee agreed that it would be beneficial to include Scrutiny at the earliest opportunity during the development of the new GTAA. This Task and Finish Group will report its conclusions to the Committee before the end of the current Council's term of office.

In recent years various communities in Denbighshire have suffered severe loss and destruction due to flooding. The latest flooding incident being in January 2021 when part of the town of Ruthin was flooded and Pont Llannerch, between Trefnant and Tremeirchion was washed away by the torrent in the River Clwyd. In late 2020 the Committee met with representatives from Natural Resources Wales (NRW), Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water (DCWW) and officers of the Council to discuss each organisations' approach to flood risk management. At that meeting all organisations agreed that it would be

beneficial to establish a Task and Finish Group to examine in detail Flood Risk Management and Riparian Land Ownership. This Group will consist of county councillors, representatives from NRW, DCWW, representatives of the farming unions and landowners, as well as officers from Denbighshire County Council. They will look at ways of strengthening communication and working relationship between flood risk management authorities and landowners/tenants, in a bid to improve each other's understanding of their responsibilities in relation to flood risk management. They will try and foster a mutual level of trust between all parties to help and support each other to find practical and workable solutions to reduce the risk of flooding and ensuring the unobstructed flow of water through the land for which they are responsible. This Task and Finish Group will report its findings to the Committee when it concludes its work.

The following link will take you to [information about the Communities Scrutiny Committee, its agendas and reports on the Council's website](#)



## Partnerships Scrutiny Committee



Cllr. Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones (**Chair**)



Cllr. Emrys Wynne (**Vice-Chair**)

This Committee's remit is to examine the effectiveness of services provided by the Council either in collaboration, or in partnership, with other public sector organisations in meeting residents' needs. In normal times the Committee meets with representatives of the Health Board on a fairly regular basis to examine its delivery of services to Denbighshire residents and any proposed new service delivery models or facilities in the county. It comes as no surprise that meetings on such matters could not proceed during 2020/21 due to the Health Board's need to prioritise its work on responding to the pandemic.

Nevertheless, following an initial focus on examining Council's services COVID-19 recovery plans the Committee continued scrutinising the effectiveness of partnership working in delivering services for Denbighshire's residents, as well as proposals put forward for future partnership working arrangements and the anticipated benefits to residents and the Council from entering into those arrangements. As part of this work the Committee examined key documents and the governance arrangements associated with the Final Deal Agreement for the North Wales Growth Deal between both UK and Welsh Governments and the local authorities represented on the North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB). From now on, as the Council's designated committee to formally scrutinise the work of the NWEAB, Partnerships Scrutiny Committee will receive regular update reports on the progress made by the Board in delivering its vision, securing investment and realising growth in the North Wales economy. The Committee will also invite Board representatives to meet with it periodically to discuss its programme of work.

Proposals for working with Conwy County Borough Council (CCBC) to procure a joint contract for managing Household Waste Recycling Centres in both counties were examined and supported by the Committee. If this proposal comes into fruition one of the benefits for residents of both counties will be the ability to use their nearest household waste recycling centre regardless of which of the two counties it is located.

In line with its duty as the Council's designated Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee the Committee examined the Community Safety Partnership's (CSP) performance in delivering its priorities during 2019/20 and the priorities it had set itself for 2020/21. It also focussed on the statistics relating to community safety matters during the initial lockdown period and the approaches taken to deal with intimidation, anti-social-behaviour and incidents of COVID-19 restriction infringements.

In early 2021 the Committee again examined the Council's Highways Grass Verge, Hedge Maintenance and Pesticide Application Policies to ensure that they continued to support the Council's delivery of its environment priority whilst also making sure the county's roads are safe for road users and pedestrians.

During the course of the year the Committee continued to focus on ensuring that the county's most vulnerable residents were protected from harm's way, be that during the COVID-19 crisis or in their everyday lives. In fulfilling this role, the Committee monitored the statistics detailing the Council's performance in Safeguarding Adults during the 2019/20 year. It also examined the Council's Market Position Statement outlining the Authority's vision of the types of social care services it envisages requiring to commission in future for the purpose of delivering safe, appropriate support and care to the county's residents.

Plans are already in place for the Committee to resume its regular meetings with Health Board officials during 2021/22 where it will discuss proposed investment in health service facilities in Denbighshire, and whether appropriate interfaces are in existence between the Council and the Health Board to facilitate the delivery of integrated health and social care services.

The following link will take you to [information about the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee, its agendas and reports on the Council's website.](#)

## Performance Scrutiny Committee



Cllr. Arwel Roberts (**Chair**)



Cllr. Hugh Irving (**Vice-Chair**)

Councillor Arwel Roberts was appointed Chair of this Committee at the start of the 2020/21 Council year following the untimely passing of Councillor Huw Jones, who had been its chair since the beginning of the current Council's term of office in 2017.

Performance Scrutiny Committee has a vital role to play in making sure that the Council delivers quality services to residents and to support the Council's ambition of delivering its Corporate Plan by 2022. Through its work in regularly monitoring the Council's progress in delivering its corporate priorities it will help ensure that the Council's aspiration of realising its Corporate Plan will be achieved. As part of this work it reviewed whether, because of the disruption caused by the pandemic to the Council's day to day business and to residents lives in general, the corporate priorities required redefining or the monitoring arrangements for their delivery needed to be changed. Now that responding to the ever-changing rules and restrictions associated with COVID-19 was being treated as part of the Council's normal day to day business the Committee felt that the priorities were still relevant and the governance arrangements to monitor their delivery was also still appropriate. Following this review, the Committee continued its work in monitoring the delivery of the Corporate Plan.

In addition, the Committee continues to monitor services' compliance with the Council's corporate complaints policy, which aims to make sure that any complaints received are dealt with appropriately and on time. This policy also gives residents an opportunity to suggest how services may be able to improve their service delivery practices and provides them with a chance to pay compliments to individuals or services. This in turn helps the Council to deliver services of the highest quality to residents.

On an annual basis the Committee examines the Council's Library Service's performance against the all-Wales Library Service Standards. In doing so this year it considered how the Service had adapted the way it provided its services during the pandemic. The Committee congratulated the Service's staff on the crucially important role they had played in undertaking the proactive welfare telephone calls to residents who were shielding alongside the work they had been doing to support library customers to access on-line services, establishing a click and collect service and providing the home delivery library service for those unable to collect their books from the library itself. Throughout the pandemic the Service had continued to offer the various health and well-being services, such as the variety of the Reading Well on Prescription Schemes on offer to both adults and children.

The Committee continued with its twice yearly review of the Council's Corporate Risk Register, which entails assessing whether the authority has identified the main risks that could impede the delivery of its day to day business and in doing so had drawn-up appropriate measures to minimise the potential impact of those risks on residents and Council business.

It also considered the results of an external evaluation of its Trade Waste and Recycling Service, along with the proposal put forward for the future direction of the Service in order to align it to new model for dealing with household waste - which would support efforts to meet the requirement to increase even further the Council's recycling rates and reduce the amount of residual waste that it has to arrange for its disposal.

Reducing the amount of plastic being used by the Council was the focus of a Task and Finish Group established by the Committee and during the 2019/20 Council year Performance Scrutiny Committee supported the Group's proposals for reducing the amount of plastics used in Council office buildings. In early 2020 County Council approved those proposals and sanctioned the Committee's request that the Task and Finish Group be permitted to continue its work for a further 12 months to examine ways to reduce the use of plastic in two specific areas, school catering and the Council's procurement practices. Unfortunately, just as the Group was about to start this piece of work COVID-19 struck. For health and safety purposes for the duration of pandemic plastic has become a necessary commodity and will remain so until the threat from the pandemic eases. Consequently, the Group was unable to progress its work sufficiently

within the timescale given to it. The Committee therefore agreed with the Group's request that its work be brought to an end and that in future the plastic reduction work form part of the wider Ecological and Climate Change Strategy, with the progress made in reducing the amount of plastic being used across the Council being monitored as part of the performance monitoring associated with delivering that Strategy. The Ecological and Climate Change Working Group have agreed to include this as part of their work and County Council have approved this approach.

In response to concerns raised by parents the Committee discussed the provision of Learner Transport to Welsh-medium Secondary Education in the county and the definition of Category 1 (Welsh-medium) Schools. At the conclusion of this discussion the Committee agreed to write to WG Ministers asking them to ensure that the conclusions of reviews underway, to both school transport regulations and school categorisation according to Welsh-medium provision, dovetail together to support the delivery of the widest possible choice of educational opportunities for pupils in Wales.

For the remainder of the current Council's term of office Performance Scrutiny Committee's work is likely to consist of a mixture of its normal performance monitoring and policy development work as well as focussing on COVID-19 recovery work as and when necessary.

The following link will take you to [information about the Performance Scrutiny Committee, its agendas and reports on the Council's website.](#)



## Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the Conwy and Denbighshire Public Services Board

This Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee was established by Conwy County Borough Council and Denbighshire County Council for the purpose of fulfilling their statutory duty of scrutinising the Joint Conwy and Denbighshire Public Services Board (PSB). It is made up of 16 members, 8 from each Council reflecting the political balance of their respective authorities. As mentioned earlier the COVID-19 situation during 2020/21 led to all non-urgent decision making being suspended for a substantial part of the year, and when day to day business resumed all organisations were focussed on their recovery from responding to the pandemic. Whilst the Joint Committee had hoped to resume its programme of work during the autumn of 2020, due to the fact that a number of the agencies represented on the Public Services Board were still committed to the response to the pandemic, it was unable to do so until January 2021. At that meeting the Joint Committee considered the Public Services Board's Annual Report for 2019/20, its key statutory deadlines for 2021/22 and Audit Wales' Review of Public Services Boards in Wales. The Joint Committee is due to hold its next meeting in June 2021.



Cllr. Brian Cossey (**Chair**)



Cllr. Graham Timms (**Vice-Chair**)

## Membership

### Conwy County Borough Council

- Cllr. Geoffrey David Corry
- Cllr. Brian Cossey (Chair)
- Cllr. Chris Hughes
- Cllr. Ifor Lloyd
- Cllr. Elizabeth Roberts
- Cllr. Harry Saville
- Cllr Nigel Smith
- Cllr. Joan Vaughan

### Denbighshire County Council

- Cllr. Jeanette Chamberlain-Jones
- Cllr. Rachel Flynn
- Cllr. Hugh Irving
- Cllr. Melvyn Mile
- Cllr. Arwel Roberts
- Cllr. Peter Scott
- Cllr. Graham Timms (Vice-Chair)
- Cllr. David G Williams

The following link will take you to [information about the Joint Committee, its agendas and reports on the Council's website.](#)



## Task and Finish Groups

Scrutiny continued its use of Task and Finish Groups to undertake detailed policy development work on its behalf during 2020/21, but like everything else progress with this work was affected by the pandemic. One of the task and finish groups whose work was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic was the well-established group examining potential future delivery models for **Adult Social Care Services**. With all non-residential day care and work opportunities services suspended from March 2020 onwards, and all Social Care staff deployed to deliver services to vulnerable residents in a COVID-safe way, the Task and Finish Group's work has been temporarily suspended until COVID restrictions are eased and day care and work opportunities services in group settings are permitted to re-open.

As was reported in last year's Annual Report concerns on the damage caused to the environment by our **Use of Plastics**, in particular single use plastic and the methods used to dispose of them have received a lot of media exposure in recent years. Therefore, Scrutiny established a Task and Finish Group in early 2019 to try and find solutions to the Council use of this type of plastic. This resulted in the Group making recommendations on how to reduce the use of plastic in Council office buildings, by stopping the use of disposable cups, stirrers etc. and not purchasing plastics documents in future. These recommendations were supported by Scrutiny. County Council when approving the recommendations also agreed that the Task and Finish Group could continue its work for a further twelve months for the specific purpose of exploring how to reduce single-use plastic usage in the Council's school catering services and in the Council's procurement of goods. Just as this work was about to start the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As the country went into lockdown, schools closed and when they eventually re-opened the School Catering Service had no option, for health and safety reasons and to reduce the risk of virus transmission, but to use single use plastic for the foreseeable future. Consequently, the Task and Finish Group was unable to commence the second phase of its work, and with the restrictions likely to be in place for some considerable length of time it was felt that the Group would not be able to complete this phase of its work within the given timescale. Both Performance Scrutiny Committee and County Council agreed to the Task and Finish Group's request to conclude its work and for the ambition to reduce the Council's use of single-use plastics in school catering and procurement to be passed to the Climate and

# Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees 2020 to 2021

Ecological Emergency Working Group to progress and monitor as part of the wider Climate and Ecological Change Strategy.

Another aspect associated with climate change is the frequency and severity of flooding incidents across Denbighshire. Communities Scrutiny Committee is keen to explore whether improving working relationships and strengthening communication channels between all flood risk agencies, landowners, and tenants of land which have main rivers or watercourses flowing through them could potentially reduce the damage caused by flood water during periods of severe weather. This Group held its inaugural meeting in April 2021 and will report its progress, findings and recommendations to Communities Scrutiny Committee in due course.

Communities Scrutiny Committee has recently established another task and finish group. This time to monitor the development of a new Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment (GTAA) and to assist with the development of a stakeholder engagement plan for the project. This Group will commence its work within the next few weeks and will report its findings to Communities Scrutiny Committee before the end of the current Council's term of office.

## Additional work

As in previous years Scrutiny Committee members have continued with their scrutiny roles outside of the formal committee meeting arena. They have represented their committee on various groups such as Service Challenge Groups and the Council's Strategic Investment Group (SIG) etc. Under the standing business item on all Scrutiny Committee meeting agendas representatives report back to their committees on the discussions, recommendations and decisions taken at the meetings they attend.

## Scrutiny requests from residents

For a number of years Denbighshire's scrutiny committees has operated an established mechanism which enables residents to draw matters of concern to Scrutiny's attention. This is facilitated through the completion of a Scrutiny request form, available on the Council's website or from the Scrutiny Co-ordinator. Completed scrutiny request forms are presented to the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group, in the same way as requests received from councillors and officers, for consideration and determination on whether the subject merits examination by one of the Scrutiny Committees, or whether greater benefits could be achieved if the matter was examined by another forum.

## How can residents participate in Scrutiny?

### Would you like scrutiny to look at a particular matter?

You can raise a matter for consideration by one of Denbighshire County Council's scrutiny committees by filling out the Scrutiny Request Form (overleaf) or by downloading the form from the Council's website and submitting it by e-mail. The Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the three scrutiny committees meet periodically to decide how to allocate the work of the scrutiny committees and will consider if any matter raised should be examined in detail by one of the committees, or if another course of action should be pursued. This can range from a referral to the service responsible, to full scrutiny of the matter by one of the scrutiny committees, or even the establishment of a specialist 'task and finish group' to investigate and report on a particular matter.

### Would you like to attend a meeting of a scrutiny committee?

Denbighshire County Council's scrutiny committee meetings are generally open to the public, and residents of Denbighshire and the general public are encouraged to attend or watch the webcast on the Council's website. A list of upcoming scrutiny committee meetings and the matters to be discussed are available on the 'Scrutiny' page of the Council's website.

If you wish to take part in the discussion on a particular matter you will require the permission of the Chair of the committee (further details overleaf).

Occasionally some items being discussed by a committee will contain confidential information and cannot be discussed in the usual public forum. Any such items (referred to as 'Part Two (II)') will be clearly identified when the meeting papers are published, and the Chair of the committee meeting discussing a 'Part II' item will make it clear that the meeting should continue without the press and public in attendance in order to avoid divulging confidential information.

## Would you like to speak to a committee on an item being discussed?

Members of the public are very welcome to attend scrutiny committee meetings (once COVID-19 restrictions permit) but will require the permission of the Chair of the committee if they wish to speak or make representations at a committee meeting. If you wish to submit evidence to a committee, or address members on your experience in relation to a subject under discussion, please contact the Scrutiny Co-ordinator in advance of the meeting so that this can be arranged and any paperwork can be circulated to members of the committee.

Occasionally scrutiny committees may wish to 'co-opt' an individual with particular experience or expertise to become a temporary member of the committee or ask them to contribute to an inquiry as an expert witness.

## Keeping up to speed with decisions made by Denbighshire's scrutiny committees

You can keep track of what is being discussed at each scrutiny committee meeting, as well as any other public Council meeting, by visiting the 'meetings' page of the Council's website. The latest 'work programme' for each of the scrutiny committees is available with the meeting papers for each meeting and the confirmed agenda for each meeting will usually be available 5 - 7 days before the meeting is due to take place.

The minutes of previous scrutiny meetings and a record of the decisions made are also available on the Council's website.

Further advice or information is available by contacting the Scrutiny Co-ordinator, Rhian Evans on [rhian.evans@denbighshire.gov.uk](mailto:rhian.evans@denbighshire.gov.uk) (01824 712554) or the Democratic Services Officer, Karen Evans, on [karen.a.evans@denbighshire.gov.uk](mailto:karen.a.evans@denbighshire.gov.uk) (01824 712575).



## Scrutiny request form

Is there something you would like scrutiny to have a look at?

Please give a brief description of the topic you would like to be considered by one of the Scrutiny Committees and why you think it should be considered

Would you like to attend a meeting of a Scrutiny Committee?

YES / NO

# Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees 2020 to 2021

It would be useful if you could give us the following details so that we may respond to your request

Your name:

Address:

Postcode:

Email:

Telephone number:

Please return this form to:

Scrutiny Co-ordinator

Legal, HR and Democratic Services

PO Box 62

Ruthin

LL15 9AZ

or e-mail it to [democratic@denbighshire.gov.uk](mailto:democratic@denbighshire.gov.uk)