

COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held in the Council Chamber, Russell House, Rhyl on Thursday, 19th January, 2012 at 9.30 a.m.

PRESENT

Councillors D.I. Smith (Chair), I.W. Armstrong, B. Blakeley, J. Cahill, J.M. Davies, D. Hannam, R.T. Hughes, P.W. Owen and C.H. Williams

Councillors M.L. Davies, R.L. Feeley and D. Owens attended as Observers and Councillor I. Gunning was in attendance as the Council's representative on the North Wales Police Authority.

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Learning and Communities (HW), Chief Constable: North Wales Police (MP), Chief Inspector for Denbighshire: North Wales Police (IJ), Director of Finance & Resources: North Wales Police (MP), Head of Facilities Management: North Wales Police (SR), Chief Executive: North Wales Police Authority (TM), Police Authority Member (DW), Project Manager: Business, Planning & Performance (SLP), Maritime Regeneration and Development Manager (MB), Rhyl Going Forward Programme Manager (TB), Housing Strategy Manager (SK), Housing Strategy Officer (SL), Head of Operations: Highways & Infrastructure (MH), Section Manager: Network Management (TT), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Democratic Services Officer (RAH).

POINTS OF NOTICE

The Chair welcomed everybody to the meeting and extended a special welcome to the representatives of North Wales Police and the North Wales Police Authority in attendance.

The Committee was notified that the order of business would be amended slightly, and the Chair proposed that the Committee consider the North Wales Police's Estate Review before receiving the minutes of the last meeting. It had also been requested that the item on the Local Housing Strategy be considered before the item on Highway Verge Grass Cutting to enable Highways officers to travel from another meeting. This was accepted by members of the Committee.

The Chair congratulated the town of Rhyl on being named as a finalist in the Wales in Bloom competition.

1. APOLOGIES

Councillors E.R. Jones and S. Thomas.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor I.W. Armstrong declared a personal and prejudicial interest in business item 6 as Chair of the Foryd Harbour forum and a member of Rhyl Yacht Club.

3. URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No items were raised which in the opinion of the Chair, should be considered at the meeting as a matter of urgency pursuant to Section 100B(4) of the Local Government Act, 1972.

4. NORTH WALES POLICE ESTATE REVIEW

The Director of Finance & Resources: North Wales Police (DFR:NWP), Mr Mike Parkin, commenced by giving an overview of the financial pressures facing North Wales Police following the budgetary cuts made to public services, and the considerations that have prompted the review of the Police Estate.

The Committee was informed that the Police Service faced 20% cuts in funding and needed to make £16m worth of savings from their budget. To obtain these savings North Wales Police had earmarked the redundancy of 150 Police Officers, 150 Police Staff, and a reduction in the non-pay budget of circa £5m. The number of redundancies had since been revised to circa 130 police officers and circa 112 civilian staff. However this meant that the non-pay budget savings would increase considerably as pay costs accounted for the majority of the Police's budget expenditure. It was estimated that the between £1.2 - 1.4m of the non-pay budget savings could be found through the review of the Police Estate, which would account for 9% of total savings.

The DFR:NWP informed the Committee that the retention of aging and expensive buildings was less important than the retention of staff, and that maintaining under-used facilities would mean savings would have to be found elsewhere, potentially leading to further redundancies.

The Head of Facilities Management: North Wales Police (HFM:NWP), Mr Stephen Roberts, gave a presentation to the Committee of the key recommendations stemming from the Estate Review report completed by DTZ in October 2011. The report proposed:

- the consolidation of services at the Force HQ in Colwyn Bay and at the Local Policing Service HQ in St Asaph;
- the closure of the Administration of Justice Department offices in Prestatyn; and
- the consideration of vacating the Force Training Centre and Joint Communications Centre in St Asaph when the leases of these buildings expired in 2015.

The report recommended that the Force should operate from 9 Response Hubs, and that the provision of the 40 Police Stations be reviewed. Of the 40 stations, the report proposed that 9 should be retained, 12 be relocated, 4 be closed and the remaining 15 should be reviewed. The proposed relocation of Holywell police station was used as an example of the savings that could be made in moving to shared facilities.

The HFM:NWP explained the consultation procedure for the Estate Review, informing the Committee that public consultation on the proposals was taking place between 9th December 2011 and 31st January 2012 and that a draft statement analysis of the Estate Review was available to be viewed by the public on the Police Authority's website. The Committee was informed that the final Estate Strategy would be presented for approval at a meeting of the Police Authority on 17th February 2012. Should the final plan be approved at this meeting, the recommendations of the Review were to be implemented over 5 years, with a projected saving of £16.5m in this period.

Mr Douglas Wynne JP, a member of the North Wales Police Authority (NWP) assured the Committee that the Police Authority was in support of the Strategy, and that the Authority was involved with the on-going consultation to ensure that the Estate Review will not inhibit the performance of North Wales Police.

The Chief Constable of North Wales Police (CC:NWP), Mr Mark Polin, added that following the review of North Wales Police's budget and finances, the emphasis was on preserving staffing levels and maintaining a Police presence. He added that the Police were continuing to recruit Police Officers but that the overall number of Officers will not be increasing.

The representatives from North Wales Police and the NWP invited questions from the Members of the Committee about the Estate Review and its impact on Denbighshire County Council and the citizens of Denbighshire.

Councillor D. Hannam questioned how much effort was being made to ensure that a Police presence was sustained, adding that the Police should focus on guaranteeing community safety by providing a visible presence. Councillor Hannam conveyed her concern at an increase in cases of violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery between 2001 and 2009.

The CC:NWP conceded that overall crime rates had risen by 4% and that burglary was up 25% and that North Wales Police shared responsibility for this, along with its other local partners who were also facing budget cuts. He added that North Wales Police used to respond to every crime that was reported, but that this was not seen as an efficient use of Officers' time. North Wales Police had had to accommodate the loss in funding, and the Estate Review was one way of sustaining current services without sacrificing a disproportionate number of staff.

Councillor R.T. Hughes questioned the plans for his ward of Llangollen, observing that the police station in Llangollen was rarely staffed and that even though Llangollen was a small town, when it hosted large events it became very populous. Councillor Hughes expressed his disappointment that he had not been consulted on the plans for policing in the area.

The Chief Inspector for Denbighshire (CI:NWP) confirmed that NWP was exploring the possibilities of relocating Llangollen Police Station. However the policing of Llangollen would be supported by officers based at the Police Hub at Corwen and the Chief Inspector gave assurances that appropriate resources, such as additional Police Officers and Special Constables, would be allocated at busy times. He also told Councillor Hughes that he would be consulted on future policing provision in Llangollen in future, as would all councillors in their local areas.

The CC:NWP added that whilst he understands the desire for the public to have a local police station to use as a contact point, for the Police to continue to provide services that are underused is not an efficient use of resources. This would mean having to find savings elsewhere and could potentially result in further staff redundancies.

The Chief Executive of the NWPA, Mr Tal Michael, added that the Police were available by contacting '999' or '101' in non-emergency cases, and that it was more efficient for the public to call for help when they needed it than maintaining an inefficient service. Mr Michael cited the project that Flintshire County Council was leading on that would bring public services together in a shared facility, with the benefit of a general reception for enquiries such as non-emergency Police assistance, as an opportunity to explore.

Councillor B. Blakely asked if the budgetary restraints on the Police would mean a move away from community policing meetings. The CC:NWP stated that these meetings would continue and that there was no desire to reduce the level of interaction with local communities. It was reasserted that the review of the Police estate would assist to allow this type of community engagement to continue.

The Chair cautioned that the closure of police stations could lead to a negative public perception of North Wales Police's approach to community policing, and that this could be mitigated against by an increase in Police Officer patrols. Police visibility would be key in order to reassure residents.

The DFR:NWP responded by saying that the closure of facilities would not necessarily equate to a reduced presence. He cited the example of the Administration of Justice Department moving from Prestatyn police station to a shared facility in the town as a way that building costs can be reduced whilst retaining a local presence.

Councillor J.M. Davies queried how the building would be used after this move. The HFM:NWP said that full savings could only be realised with the sale of the building, but that vacating the building alone would account for 60% of this saving. However, discussions with other occupants would have to take place before the building itself could be sold.

Councillor R.L. Feeley praised the use of Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs) in dealing with petty crime, but said that she believed that the draft review of police estates had not taken this into account in proposing the closure of smaller

police stations. Councillor Feeley also asserted that there did not seem to be a plan to deal with the impact that the review would have on community policing.

The Chief Executive of the NWPA responded by saying that detailed planning could not be done before consultation on the proposed strategy had been carried out. The Council's input would be sought when the detailed plans for individual stations were developed.

Councillor M.L. Davies asked why Special Constables were undertaking work that should be done by full Police Officers, rather than concentrating on supporting community functions. The CI:NWP explained that although the role of Special Constables was primarily to support community policing, allowing Special Constables to gain experience in other aspects of policing helped develop their overall skills which could be reapplied in community policing.

Councillor M.L. Davies also observed that police stations such as the Divisional HQ at St Asaph and the station in Denbigh were not open around the clock, and members of the public had difficulty accessing the help of Officers. The HFM:NWP explained that North Wales Police did not own the building in St Asaph, and so extending its opening hours would incur costs as it was a Public Finance Initiative (PFI) building, as well as increasing staffing costs, again impacting on other service provision.

Councillor D. Owens stated that there was no reference to the 'Carbon footprint' in the Estates Review, which has been a priority for Denbighshire County Council. The HFM:NWP replied that North Wales Police do adhere to carbon reduction obligations and had been meeting their targets successfully. Members were advised that further information on this was available on North Wales Police's website.

Councillor I. Gunning, who served as the Council's representative on the NWPA informed the Committee that he had initially resolved to defend the community police stations from threat of closure, but having considered the proposals that had emanated from the review he was firmly of the view that they represented a positive way forward and would deliver a better quality of service to residents. He was now in full support of the plans contained in the Estate Review.

The Chair thanked the representatives of North Wales Police for attending the meeting and agreed to form a response on behalf of Denbighshire County Council to the proposals put forward under the Estate Review. It was:

RESOLVED – that,

- a) the Committee receive the presentation and note the factors that had motivated the Estate Review; and
- b) an official response be drafted and submitted to North Wales Police Authority, formally noting the Committee's comments and recommendations

5. MINUTES

The Minutes of a meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee held on Thursday, 8th December, 2011 were submitted.

The progress to date in implementing the Committee's resolutions from the meeting were reported in Appendix 3 of the Work Programme report and in the Information Brief circulated to Committee members

Business item 6: Denbighshire Adult Community Education Estyn Inspection – The Scrutiny Coordinator informed the Committee that a response from School Effectiveness Performance Officer: Secondary had not yet been received, and that this would be followed up.

RESOLVED – *that, subject to the above, the Minutes be received and approved as a true and correct record.*

6. FORYD HARBOUR MOORING FEES AND CHARGES

The Rhyl Going Forward Project Manager and the Maritime Regeneration and Development Manager had prepared a report for the Committee to consider regarding the proposed management arrangements for the Foryd Harbour.

Prior to presentation of the report Councillor Brian Blakely proposed that, as the Foryd Harbour Forum had not yet been consulted on the proposed fees and charges and management arrangements as set out in the report, the item should be deferred until full consultation on the plans had been carried out.

The Project Manager: Business, Planning & Performance had no objection to the issue being deferred to a later meeting, but emphasised that the plans needed to be approved as soon as possible, preferably before the summer season.

The Chair, supported by the Committee, accepted that consultation with the Foryd Harbour Forum was necessary and agreed that discussion on this item be deferred until the Committee's next meeting on 1st March, 2012. This would allow time for the Foryd Harbour Forum to meet and relay any concerns to the Communities Scrutiny Committee.

RESOLVED – *that the scheduled item on the Foryd Harbour Mooring Fees and Charges be deferred to next meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee to be held on 1st March, 2012.*

7. LOCAL HOUSING STRATEGY

The Housing Strategy Officer (HSO) introduced her report, circulated prior to the meeting, which gave an update on the progress made in relation to the Local Housing Strategy action plan for 2011/12, detailing the number of new affordable homes that had been developed and the funding streams that had been secured.

The Committee was informed that a full review of the Local Housing Strategy would be undertaken during 2012, which would include exploration of avenues for collaboration on housing issues with Conwy County Borough Council. The Council's affordable housing policy would also be reviewed as part of the emerging Local Development Plan.

Welsh Government funding had been secured to help redevelop an area of West Rhyl, targeting the reduction of the number of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and developing new family housing. It was anticipated that this would result in the resettlement of up to 120 residents. The regeneration of this area was identified as a key challenge and a policy to support displaced residents was under development.

It was further noted that due to a significant reduction in funding from the Welsh Government that alternative funding mechanisms were being explored and that the Department would seize any opportunity for funding.

The Housing Strategy Manager (HSM) and HSO then invited questions and comments from the members of the Committee on how the Strategy could be improved.

Councillor R.L. Feeley questioned the policy requirement for all newly built housing initiatives to consist of at least 30% of homes classified as affordable housing, suggesting that some housing projects had been cancelled due to this policy and that, while the principle was commendable, in practice it could be counter-productive. The HSM stated that there had been less affordable housing becoming available because the economic downturn has caused an overall reduction in newly built housing. He also added that where it was not economically viable for developers to guarantee that 30% of homes in a prospective building project to be classed as 'affordable', the policy did allow some flexibility in meeting the requirement. It was recognised that where the 30% guarantee of affordable housing posed problems that risked an overall project, it was better to have some affordable housing at a lower proportion than none at all. It was also stressed that the policy had worked particularly well in rural areas, where house prices were at a premium and well out of the reach of first time buyers.

Members of the Committee registered concern about the displacement of people resulting from the redevelopment in West Rhyl. The HSM explained that they were working closely with displaced families to ensure that their resettlement would be a smooth and satisfactory process. Most families had indicated that they wished to remain in the area.

Concern was also raised about the level of deprivation in areas such as West Rhyl and that migration from other areas compounded the deep social problems that such areas were already experiencing. The HSM assured the Committee that there was no concerted policy for bringing people to Denbighshire and attributed Rhyl's popularity to the availability of relatively cheap accommodation. It was noted that West Rhyl would need large scale private investment if it were to change the social demographics of the area, but that effective community engagement would go some way to helping this process.

Councillors queried how many of the properties that fell in to the 'affordable homes' category were currently unoccupied in Denbighshire, and also how many potential homes in general were not occupied. The HSM stated that any empty 'affordable homes' were usually due to transition, and were not empty for long. The total of empty homes across the County was placed at approximately 800, most of which were privately owned. Many of these empty properties required maintenance work to make them habitable and Denbighshire County Council's Empty Homes Team were working to facilitate renovation works.

The Chair was of the view that the strategy for West Rhyl would merit further scrutiny and thanked the Housing Strategy Manager and Housing Strategy Officer for attending the meeting. It was:

RESOLVED – *that the Committee*

- a) notes the progress made against the Local Housing Strategy action plan 2011/12 and the challenges encountered in achieving the key actions;*
- b) recommends the key headline projects listed in the report for inclusion in the revised Local Housing Strategy 2012/17 and that significant emphasis should be included in the revised Strategy on the need to bring empty homes back into occupation; and*
- c) recommends that the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group considers the most appropriate Committee to scrutinise the Strategy for West Rhyl;*

8. HIGHWAY VERGE GRASS CUTTING

The Head of Operations: Highways & Infrastructure (HO:HI) and the Section Manager: Network Management (SM:NM) presented a report to the Committee detailing the options available for the Council's grass verge cutting programme. The report proposed two options;

- 1) an option to undertake an initial cut of internal bends and junctions only (Biodiversity cut) followed by a full cut later in the season, as happened last year; and
- 2) the option of reverting to two full cuts per year as in previous years.

It was explained that the 'Biodiversity cut' allows one side of verges to grow which limits the negative ecological consequences of a full cut, but that this will have the effect of 'narrowing' carriageways at some points and will look less tidy than the full cut.

Last year, as part of a collaboration project with Conwy County Borough Council, external contactors were brought in to undertake grass cutting work along roads in Denbighshire at a cost of £92,000, compared with costs of £162,000 the previous year when a portion of the work was undertaken internally. With the tender valid until 2015, the report recommended the retention of the current contract.

Councillor R. T. Hughes suggested that leasing machines and undertaking some of the grass cutting programme internally could present an opportunity for savings. The SM:NM indicated that it could prove difficult to acquire leased machinery during the cutting season, and that the real savings had been found in outsourcing the work.

Councillor R. L. Feeley registered her support for the ecological consideration of the 'Biodiversity cut', but recognised that road safety was the priority.

The Corporate Director: Learning and Communities suggested that a plan for road cutting be published so that communities were aware of any potential disruptions. The roadworks timetable had been well received by the public and was cited as an effective example to follow. The SM:NM agreed that this could be implemented.

Following an in-depth debate the Chair proposed that a combination of the two options be implemented. This would include two full cuts per year across the County except for areas which lie within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which would firstly receive a 'Biodiversity cut' on all roads which are deemed to be safe for a 'Biodiversity Cut', followed by one full cut. The Committee supported this approach and it was:

RESOLVED – *that, having considered the proposals for the provision of grass verge cutting, the Committee recommends that*

- a) Option 1 is implemented in the AONB on all routes which are deemed safe for a Biodiversity cut, and that Option 2 is implemented across the remainder of the County's roads;*
- b) the current arrangement for outsourced work be retained subject to capacity and quality monitoring measures being taken ; and*
- c) a timetable of scheduled grass cutting plans be published and distributed to town and community councils and Member Area Groups.*

9. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Coordinator presented a report identifying scheduling considerations for the Committee's Forward Work Programme which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

Committee members were reminded that a workshop had been arranged on the 'Supporting People Operational Strategy and Plan 2012-13' for 22 February ahead of the Committee's consideration of the report on 1st March.

The Committee was notified that the Corporate Director: Learning and Communities had requested that an additional element be included in the item already scheduled on the 'Monies Allocated to Member Area Groups and Future Community Funding' for 1 March on a proposed Community Endowment Fund. The Committee approved the request.

The Scrutiny Coordinator highlighted a number of items listed as 'future issues' with no scheduled date for consideration. The Committee was alerted to the prospect that these issues would need to be scoped prior to the inauguration of the new Council or

they may not be scrutinised. The Chair suggested that a Work Programme could be put in place for the successor Communities Scrutiny Committee following the election in May, and that although he would not wish to restrict what the Committee scrutinises in future, it may help ensure that pertinent issues were not missed.

The Committee was reminded of plans to help facilitate more convenient scheduling of education items which necessitated Co-opted Members to sit on Scrutiny Committees. The Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) had decided at their meeting on 5th January that the item on the Provision of Music within Schools, scheduled for consideration at the Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting on 12th April, had been reassigned to the Partnerships Scrutiny Committee for consideration at their meeting 19th April. It was intended that this would be a more efficient use of the Co-opted Members' time.

A request from a member of the public for the scrutiny of the Council's policy for disposing of buildings had been received by the SCVCG and the issue had been allocated to the Communities Scrutiny Committee. It was agreed that the Committee would not have time to consider this issue before the Election and that the item should be added to the 'future items' list, to be allocated accordingly when the new Council returns in May.

The Committee were also notified of the postponement of the special meeting to discuss the proposals emanating out of the NHS Service Reviews that had been scheduled for February. The outcome of the Reviews had been delayed therefore a special meeting had been provisionally scheduled to take place in July.

The minutes of a meeting of the Conwy and Denbighshire Caravan Site Working Group, attended by Councillor S. Thomas, were received by the Committee. An addendum note expressed Councillor Thomas's concerns regarding the problem of year-round occupation of caravans and the strain this placed on local services. This prompted the Chair to recognise the need for a list to be compiled of all Councillors' committee/working group memberships.

RESOLVED – *that, subject to the above amendments, the Forward Work Programme be approved as set out in Appendix 1 of the report*

The meeting concluded at 1:00pm.