

PERFORMANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Performance Scrutiny Committee held in Council Chamber, County Hall, Ruthin and by video conference on Thursday, 18 April 2024 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

Councillors Ellie Chard, Bobby Feeley, Martyn Hogg, Carol Holliday, Alan Hughes, Hugh Irving (Chair), Paul Keddie, Diane King, Terry Mendies, Gareth Sandilands (Vice-Chair), and Andrea Tomlin.

Lead Members in attendance at the Committee's invitation:

Councillor Emrys Wynne: Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage and
Councillor Julie Matthews: Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities.

ALSO PRESENT

Corporate Director: Governance and Business (GW), Corporate Director: Social Services and Education (NS), Head of Corporate Support Service: Performance, Digital and Assets (HV-E), Strategic Planning and Performance Team Leader (IM), Strategic Planning and Performance Officer (HB-P), Digital Officer (PB), Principal Manager Community Resilience (CT), Openreach's Partnership Director for Wales and the West of England (MW), Scrutiny Coordinator (RE) and Committee Administrators (SW and NH)

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Liz Grieve, Head of Housing and Communities, whose attendance was required at another meeting.

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

No interests of a personal or personal and prejudicial nature in any items of business listed for discussion were declared.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

No items of an urgent nature had been raised with the Chair or the Scrutiny Co-ordinator prior to the commencement of the meeting.

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 7 March 2024 were submitted.

Accuracy

Business item 5. 'Elective Home Education' – during the discussion on this business item Councillor Andrea Tomlin had enquired about the level of library usage by parents of Elective Home Educated (EHE) pupils to support their children's education and whether the impact of the reduction in library opening hours on these parents and the pupils' education had been assessed. Responding to this query the Head of Education advised that no data was held on the usage of

libraries by parents of EHE pupils for the purpose of obtaining educational resources, although parents most probably would use their local libraries for this purpose. Following the change in library opening hours if parents of EHE pupils encountered difficulties in accessing their local library to obtain the resources they required they should contact the Education Service who would make every effort to signpost or support them to obtain the resources.

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the inclusion of the above that the minutes of the meeting held on 7 March 2024 be received and approved as a true and correct record of the proceedings.

Matters arising

Business item 5. 'Elective Home Education' – it was confirmed that officers and the Lead Member for Education, Children and Families were due to meet imminently to draft a letter to the Welsh Government's Minister for Education and Welsh Language seeking the Government to introduce regulations governing the responsibilities of those who chose to educate their children at home.

5 INTERNET CONNECTIVITY IN DENBIGHSHIRE

The Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage introduced the Internet Connectivity in Denbighshire report (previously circulated) to the Committee.

Out of the total 50,501 premises in Denbighshire, 2,690 premises received internet speeds of 30Mbps or less and 1,145 premises received internet speeds of 10Mbps or less (Appendix A to the report provided further details to Members).

'Helping residents to understand options and solutions for improved internet connectivity' was an aim within the Corporate Plan and Denbighshire County Council (DCC) had invested in a Digital Officer post (from February 2020 to May 2025) to advise individuals, businesses and communities on this. The Digital Officer worked closely with Members and City, Town and Community Councillors when advising communities.

The Council was also represented on the Ambition North Wales Digital Board and Digital Programmes. The work was at a strategic and regional level and concentrated on improving infrastructure across the region.

The changing commercial and policy intervention environment made this work challenging due to commercial changes and announcements from Openreach and interventions from the UK government which could result in North Wales Ambition Board Projects becoming no longer viable or required as the commercial roll outs and UK Government's interventions progressed. This work was medium to long term and as such projects were subject to change to reflect the changing environment.

The Principal Manager Community Resilience further explained to members of the Committee the importance of internet connectivity within the community.

There were 3 pillars of digital inclusion-

- Access to equipment
- Knowledge on using equipment
- Connectivity Infrastructure

Not having access to the internet could have a detrimental impact on life opportunities. Having broadband connectivity was about having the ability to engage and connect within the community including access to education, employment opportunities, and health advice.

The Digital Officer explained that whilst most counties had a handful of companies installing fibre network infrastructure in Denbighshire Openreach was the only company that was actively installing the required infrastructure. Despite this Denbighshire was above the Welsh average for internet connectivity however, there was a need to ensure rural parts of the county had access to the same level of connectivity as more urban areas. 762 premises within the county who previously did not have a fibre connection would in the near future be connected to fibre, this had been secured via Gigabit voucher schemes. This in turn would help nearby premises access the fibre network at a more affordable price.

The Partnership Director for Wales and the West of England for Openreach stated that Denbighshire had some of the best connectivity across Wales in relation to fibre. There had been a £11 million investment so far to upgrade the copper network to full fibre and 11 new exchanges across the county had now been earmarked for being commercial build.

The Gigabit voucher scheme had temporarily been paused, however, 4 new voucher lead schemes to help residents with their connectivity had been launched in Denbighshire recently, one of the communities to benefit from this scheme was Llandyrnog.

The Chair thanked the Officers and the Lead Member for the report and welcomed questions from Members.

Members questioned where the infrastructure build would be by the end of 2025 and which communities/exchanges would still be without fibre. The Openreach representative explained that by the end of 2026 they would hope that 80% of the properties in the current exchange upgrade program would be connected to full fibre.

Members requested clarity on the Starlink system referred to within the report. The Digital Officer explained that this was a new satellite system, the cost to a household to have this system would be £75 a month which would provide 100 megabytes per second.

Members referred to the UK Government Gigabit Voucher scheme which would be ending in March 2025, it's cessation having an impact on fibre being brought to

rural areas via Openreach's Fibre Community Partnership. The Digital Officer and Openreach Officer reported that the voucher scheme had just been extended for two years.

Members referred to the map attached to the report on the planned exchanges between now and December 2026 and questioned how areas were prioritised. The Openreach Officer explained that the plans were based on the viability of the infrastructure build within the area.

Members questioned if there was a difficulty in getting residents to utilise the fibre connection available to them and use the equipment they had at home and whether there was data on how many internet users there were in the County. The Principal Manager Community Resilience stated that a digital survey had been conducted on tenants in Council properties, the survey contained an array of questions relating to the use of the internet. Members felt that data on the number of residents who use and do not use the internet would be helpful in the future.

Responding to questions on whether having communities within a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) was challenging in terms of gaining permission to erect telegraph poles etc. and whether if this designation were to change to National Park status this would be even more problematic, the Openreach representative advised that whilst this may be a consideration the main obstacle was the rurality of the area and sparse nature of properties within these rural communities. Due to the costs entailed with laying the essential infrastructure needed to deliver the services it was imperative that sufficient funding was secured before fibre, 4G or 5G could be rolled-out to any areas in Denbighshire or anywhere countrywide.

Members emphasised the importance of retaining the role of a Digital Officer within the Council as this post had a key part to play in educating and supporting residents and communities during the continued roll out of full fibre across the County.

At the conclusion of a comprehensive discussion the Chair thanked everyone for their input. He also thanked Martin Williams, Openreach's Partnership Director for Wales and the West of England for attending and answering the Committee's questions.

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above answers and observations to –

- (i) receive the information provided regarding the current situation in respect of internet and telephony connectivity in Denbighshire;***
- (ii) acknowledge and emphasise the importance of the Council's Digital Officer post in supporting Denbighshire residents and communities, particularly those in hard-to-reach areas, to access affordable effective internet and telephony services; and***
- (iii) request that a further report be presented to Scrutiny in 12 months' time detailing local and national progress in relation to internet and telephony connectivity matters.***

At this juncture in the meeting the Committee paused for a comfort break. The meeting resumed at 11.15am

6 CORPORATE RISK REGISTER: FEBRUARY 2024 REVIEW

The Lead Member for Corporate Strategy, Policy and Equalities introduced the Corporate Risk Register: February 2024 Review report to the Committee.

The Corporate Risk Register was developed and owned by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) alongside Cabinet. It was reviewed twice yearly by Cabinet at Cabinet Briefing. Following each review, the revised register was then shared with Performance Scrutiny Committee and the Governance and Audit Committee. The previous review was undertaken in September 2023. Papers last submitted to Performance Scrutiny Committee (30 November 2023) were available online.

The Council's Risk Appetite Statement had been applied to the discussions that had taken place with risk owners, and the Council's risk exposure was analysed within the Corporate Risk Register.

The Council currently had 13 Corporate Risks on the Register. Summaries of the review were provided in Appendix 2. No risks had been de-escalated during the review and neither had any new risks been added. Whilst all risks had been reviewed, no significant changes had been made during the February 2024 review, and residual risk scores remained unchanged for all 13 Corporate Risks.

The Strategic Planning and Performance Team Leader explained that the 13 risks noted within the report had remained static with no change. There was a pilot process for the review approach of the Corporate Risk Register which would see the register reviewed 4 times a year and quarterly updates given to Performance Scrutiny Committee.

The Chair thanked officers for their report and questions were welcomed from the Committee.

Members welcomed the more frequent approach of reviewing the Corporate Risk Register.

Members referred to risk 01 which was based heavily on Social Services and questioned if there should be more of a focus on the HR Service and the vetting process of people joining the Council. The Head Of Corporate Support Service: Performance, Digital Assets stated that this would be something that could be brought back to a future meeting once the details had been obtained. The Monitoring Officer reassured members that there was a process in place for safeguarding checks which was extended to any agencies the Council used. Mandatory checks were completed upon the appointment of new recruits and safeguarding training was mandatory for all Council employees regardless of their roles, with more intensive training provided to those who delivered frontline care services.

Members sought clarity on risk 21, referring to any improvements in connectivity/communication between the Health Board and the Council since the Board was placed back under Special Measures. The Corporate Director: Social Services and Education explained that the relationships between the Council and the Health Board were continuing to improve. A new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) had recently been appointed in the Health Board and a meeting with the Chair and CEO of the Health Board had taken place which was very positive.

Members referred to risk 45, Climate Change and Ecological Emergency and questioned if the Council had fully impact assessed the risk to the Council of not meeting the carbon reduction target and the potential knock-on effect of increasing energy prices on the Council's financial stability. The Head of Corporate Support Service: Performance, Digital Assets stated that the risk was continually assessed, not reaching the carbon target would ultimately mean spending more on energy.

Members discussed risks 51 and 52- Economic Climate and referred to the scaling back of services. They questioned if the Council were in danger of neglecting other services while focusing on others. The Monitoring Officer stated that broadly this was why risks 51 and 52 were noted on the Corporate Risk Register. The Council did not have enough money to provide the level of services they previously had done. Cuts needed to be made to services however, the level of services the Council were legally obliged to provide would continue. It had been made clear that with the reductions in services, remaining staff would not be expected to carry out the workload of others. Service transformation would form a key part of the work to develop the Council's budget for 2025/26, Scrutiny would have a role in examining any service transformation proposals.

The Chair thanked the officers and Lead Member for their detailed report and for attending the meeting.

At the conclusion of an in-depth discussion the Committee:

Resolved: subject to the above comments and observations to –

- (i) acknowledge the latest review of the Corporate Risk Register and receive the February 2024 version of the Corporate Risk Register;***
- (ii) endorse the amendments to the Council's Risk Appetite Statement, as detailed in paragraphs 4.7 to 4.8 and Appendix 3 to the report; and***
- (iii) approve the proposed revised approach to Corporate Risk reporting as outlined in Appendix 4 to the report.***

7 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator introduced the report and appendices (previously circulated) the purpose of which was to seek the Committee to review its programme of future work.

The next meeting of Performance Scrutiny Committee was scheduled for the 6 June 2024. Four items were scheduled for the meeting –

- 2018 Estyn Inspection Recommendations

- Recruitment, Retention and Workforce Planning
- Denbighshire's Revised Draft Climate and Ecological Change Strategy 2021/2022-2029/2030
- Council Performance Self-Assessment Update (Q4 and Annual)

Appendix 2 contained a copy of the Member's Scrutiny Proposal forms and Members were encouraged to complete the form if they had any items which they thought would merit scrutiny.

Appendix 3 showed the Cabinet Forward Work Programme for information.

Appendix 4 outlined the progress made with respect of the Committee's recommendations from its previous meetings.

The Committee:

Resolved: subject to the inclusion of the progress report on Internet Connectivity requested during the course of the meeting, to confirm its forward work programme as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

8 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

Councillor Martyn Hogg provided the Committee with an overview of the recent Service Challenge meeting for Corporate Support Service: People which he had attended as the Committee's representative. He outlined the Service's strengths and weaknesses along with the actions identified to try and address any weaknesses. One of the key weaknesses identified was the Council's C360 Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system which required replacing. Work was currently underway with a view to procuring a replacement system.

The Chair and Vice-Chair along with other members of the Committee raised concerns with respect of the proposed changes to the Service Challenge process for the 2024/25 year. They were concerned that in future only the Chair or Vice-Chair of Performance Scrutiny Committee would represent Scrutiny on all Service Challenge meetings and that the whole Service Challenge process would be conducted within a 3-to-4-week period in November. This would create a heavy workload for the Chair/Vice-Chair of the Committee and may well cause pressures on their time and availability for other work, whilst also depriving other scrutiny members of an opportunity to take part in the process and bring their individual expertise to the table.

The Chair gave an overview of his latest annual meeting with an officer from Estyn in relation to the Committee's role in scrutinising education matters.

Members:

Resolved: to receive the information provided.

Meeting concluded at 12.20pm