

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, 30 January 2025 at 10.00 am.

PRESENT

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

For business item 5: Education Co-opted Members Colette Owen and Neil Roberts

ALSO PRESENT

Monitoring Officer (GW), Corporate Director: Social Services & Education (NS), Section 151 Officer (ET), Head of Education Service (GD), Head of Corporate Support Service: People (CR), Head of Housing & Communities Service (LG), Principal Education Manager (JB), Principal Librarian (DO) Scrutiny Co-ordinator (RhE) and Committee Administrators (RhT-J and ED)

For Business item 5: Neil Foley (Headteacher of Prestatyn High School and Executive Headteacher at Christ the Word), Simon Smith (Director of Education for the Salford Diocese representing the Diocese of Wrexham) along with GwE representatives Jacqueline Chan (Core Lead – Primary) and Mair Herbert (Core Lead – Secondary)

Lead Member for Education, Children and Families, Councillor Diane King; Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets, Gwyneth Ellis; Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture & Heritage, Emrys Wynne, all in attendance at the invitation of the Committee.

Observers: Councillor Brian Jones and Councillor Will Price.

1 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Terry Mendies and John Droog (Chair of Governors, Christ the Word School).

2 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The following members declared a personal interest in business item 5, Christ the Word:

Councillor Ellie Chard as a Local Education Authority (LEA) Governor at Ysgol Tir Morfa and a Town/Community Council Governor at Christchurch School
Councillor Bobby Feeley as an LEA Governor at Rhos Street School, Ruthin
Councillor Martyn Hogg as a Parent Governor at St Asaph VP School
Councillor Carol Holliday as a Town/Community Council Governor at both Ysgol Penmorfa and Ysgol Clawdd Offa
Councillor Alan Hughes as a Community Governor at Ysgol Caer Drewyn, Corwen
Councillor Paul Keddie as a Governor at Ysgol Bryn Collen, Llangollen
Councillor Gareth Sandilands as a LEA Governor at Ysgol Clawdd Offa
Councillor Andrea Tomlin as grandparent to a pupil attending Christ the Word School.
Councillor Emrys Wynne as an LEA Governor at Ysgol Borthyn, Ruthin
Co-opted Member Colette Owen in her role as the Catholic Church's statutory Scrutiny Co-opted member for education matters and an Education Adviser for the Wrexham Diocese
Co-opted Member Neil Roberts as a Governor at Ysgol y Parc, Denbigh

Councillors Gareth Sandilands and Alan Hughes also declared an interest in item 6 Update on the 2025/26 Revenue Budget Setting in their role as Denbighshire County Council representatives on the North Wales Fire and Rescue Authority.

3 URGENT MATTERS AS AGREED BY THE CHAIR

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

4 MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

The minutes of the Performance Scrutiny meeting held on the 28th November 2024 were submitted.

Matters arising- Page 10. 'Corporate Risk Register'. It was raised following the previous meeting by members to look more closely at Risk 50 to eliminate profit from the care of Children Looked After and a Scrutiny Request was submitted. It was advised by the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that a formal request had been put forward at Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs. The Group, having received an information report from the Head of Children's Services, were confident that the Council was monitoring the developments closely and awaiting further guidance from the Welsh Government (WG). They had therefore agreed that this item be included on the forward work programme for Partnerships Scrutiny Committee for examination in January 2026. It was anticipated that the legislation relating to this, and the number of potential providers would be far clearer by then. The Corporate

Director: Social Services & Education assured the Committee that if there were any further updates in the meantime, members would remain informed.

RESOLVED: that the minutes of the Performance Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 28 November 2024 be confirmed as a true and accurate record of the proceedings

EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

Due to the confidential nature of the information that would be discussed under the following item of business Councillor Gareth Sandilands proposed that the meeting be moved to Part II business, Councillor Ellie Chard seconded the proposal. The Committee was in agreement, and it was:

RESOLVED that under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the Press and Public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 12 and 15 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

5 CHRIST THE WORD

The Lead Member for Education, Children and Families introduced the report (previously circulated) to the Committee and advised that Christ the Word Catholic school opened in September 2019. Following an Estyn Inspection, in May 2022 the school was placed under special measures. Since then a considerable amount of work had been undertaken by all stakeholders with a view to addressing the 5 recommendations from Estyn and to achieve sustained improvements at the school. The Head of Education Service outlined the improvements and progress made to date as referenced in the report, emphasising the significant amount of support which continued to be provided to the school on various fronts. The main focus of the work that had been undertaken included consolidating the Senior Leadership Team, ensuring stability in leadership that would support the development of robust improvement plans that would secure sustained advancement going forward.

In response to members' questions, the Lead Member, Council, GwE and school officials:

- advised that the recruitment of staff was a problem across both primary and secondary education nationally, Christ the Word being a 'through school' did not contribute to this problem. Assurances were provided that officers had expertise in the relevant educational sectors. As Christ the Word was a 'through school' the qualities for a Head did require knowledge and experience of dealing with

children from ages 3-16, leadership skills were essential, these types of skills were transferable between both sectors. As Christ the Word was a Catholic school it was a requirement for its Headteacher to be a practicing Catholic. Consequently, this resulted in those eligible to apply for the role being fewer in number. This was not unique to faith schools, similar challenges were encountered when recruiting to a Welsh-medium schools.

- provided reassurances to Members that the amount of support provided to Christ the Word was not having a direct or indirect negative impact on other schools such as Prestatyn High School whilst staff were seconded to support the work at Christ the Word. The situation was being closely monitored. Prestatyn High School had an exceptional Estyn profile and other staff at the school had stepped up to a leadership role at that school and were gaining valuable experience.
- gave assurances that the fact that GwE as an organisation would shortly be coming to an end would not be to the detriment of the support provided for the school, as the provision of school support services was a statutory requirement, therefore the service would continue to be delivered albeit under a different delivery model. A Transition Board had been established made up of Heads of Education and HR to support the delivery of the new model.
- emphasised that in order to help with recruitment, it was essential to make teaching posts in all sectors desirable and attractive and work had been done to fulfil this.
- confirmed that the relationship with other local schools had been examined in detail. In addition, open evenings were being held in order to boost pupil recruitment. Other work was being conducted to help with recruitment in pupil numbers, this included improving the public perception and image of the school through various marketing tools, increasing social media presence, working with Prestatyn High School to organise joint school trips etc. (as this would make them more affordable for families), publication of a regular newsletter, as well as promoting initiatives such as pupil of the day/week/month in order to try and create positivity in the school.

The Chair thanked all in attendance for providing comprehensive answers to members' questions. At the conclusion of an in-depth discussion, it was:

RESOLVED: subject to the above and having regard to the observations made by Estyn following its November 2024 visit to the school, to –

- (i) acknowledge the progress achieved to date in delivering the Post inspection Action Plan (PIAP) and the joint local authority & GwE School Support Plan following the 2022 Estyn Inspection;***
- (ii) request that a further progress report be presented to the Committee in early 2026; and***
- (iii) request that in the interim a progress report be circulated to Committee members for information towards the end of the Summer Term 2025***

**AT THIS JUNCTURE (11.30 A.M.) THERE WAS A 10 MINUTE BREAK
THE MEETING RECONVENED AT 11.40 A.M.**

PART I

6 UPDATE ON 2025/26 REVENUE BUDGET SETTING

The Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets introduced the report (previously circulated) explaining that the Council was legally obliged to set a balanced budget. Work was continuing on improving budget monitoring indicators, but caution was being exercised to ensure accuracy and reliability. It was also noted that sufficiently financing Council services was an ongoing challenge. The Section 151 Officer emphasised the importance of reviewing the budget for the periods 2025/2026 and 2027/2028 on a regular basis and confirmed that regular updates would be presented to the Cabinet. She highlighted that the Council was highly dependent on settlements from the Welsh Government (WG). The impact of pensions and pay increases and the allocation of in-year grant funding awards just before the announcement of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) settlement was also acknowledged. This had resulted in the actual position showing a cash increase of 7% for 2024/25. The WG was working towards taking a more sustainable approach in addressing financial settlement matters going forward. Whilst the position going forward was far more positive than originally anticipated, the Authority was still facing budgetary pressures due to an increase in demands for services, particularly complex intensive social care services.

Members queried the Council's ambitious pledge to address the Climate Change Emergency, asking whether it should be considered a budget pressure. Officers advised that this was an overall ambition and therefore not handled in the same way as other pressures e.g. homelessness which could be quantified clearer with respect of funding needs. Although the net carbon zero target may not be reached by 2030, it was still kept as an ambition. Officers drew members attention to Appendix 1 of the report which included a £250,000 investment in priorities specifically related to climate change. It was important to remember that an allocation towards realising this ambition was also included within the Council's capital budget. It was advised that the revenue-to-capital ratio needed to be checked, as rates were changing continuously, and further consideration was needed across all budgets to addressing climate change. It was explained that this approach was different from the usual method, as it was a choice being made to instigate intervention measures now, rather than addressing problems at a later date which would be more costly. It was important to have funding factored into the medium-term financial plan (MTFP) for this purpose.

Members requested clarification on costs related to National Insurance (NI), having regard to concerns raised by the Scottish Government regarding the rising costs. It was noted that these additional costs had not been fully funded with the RSG settlement. Officers agreed that it was important to be aware of these issues but emphasised that no assumptions had been made regarding what would be received in terms of income or funding to cover the in-direct costs of the employers' NI contributions on services which the Council commissioned from external service providers. It was proposed that the Committee write to both the UK Government and the Welsh Government to seek clarification on the situation regarding the provision of sufficient funding to cover the costs of the increase in employers' National Insurance contributions.

Members emphasised the need for a sensitive and careful approach when addressing future transformational projects. It was asked whether the budget was sufficient to address all identified pressures. Officers responded by highlighting the democratic aspect, noting that members had been given a lot of information throughout the year, and it was important to make assumptions based on the predictions. All budgetary assumptions and predictions were based on the Wales Fiscal Analysis, a tool which was widely used by public authorities as the basis for their budget setting work. It was confirmed that more work had been done in identifying pressures, with ongoing discussions that would continue in the Members Workshop the following day.

Members suggested that it might be wise for the Council to either hold back some of the additional funds (the "windfall") that had been received rather than spend all of it, or consider a higher increase in Council Tax, in order to create a cushion for potential future budget shortfalls. It was noted that efforts had been made to adopt a more preventive and careful approach but acknowledged that concerns needed to be addressed. The Head of Finance and Audit concluded by stating that the settlement was better than initially expected, and that the Lead Member and officers were looking at the budget from a medium-term perspective.

RESOLVED: subject to the observations provided to recommend to Cabinet that -

- (i) based on the information currently available on Denbighshire's provisional local government funding settlement for 2025/26 along with the budget pressures identified, to support the proposed measures taken to date in a bid to set a balanced budget for the 2025/26 financial year;***
- (ii) the Lead Member for Finance, Performance and Strategic Assets be requested to write to the UK Government's Chancellor of the Exchequer seeking urgent clarity on whether local authorities will be provided with sufficient revenue funding to cover the additional costs incurred as a***

result of the increase in employers' national insurance contributions, and that future budget announcements be more explicit in relation to similar in-direct costs. A copy of the letter also to be sent to the Welsh Government's Cabinet Secretaries for Finance & Welsh Language and Housing & Local Government; and

(iii) consideration be given to identifying in future budget strategies/medium term financial plans the anticipated cost/pressures of delivering the Council's ambition of becoming a Net Carbon Zero and Ecologically Positive Council by 2030.

7 LIBRARY SERVICE STANDARDS AND PERFORMANCE 2023-24

The Lead Member for Welsh Language, Culture and Heritage introduced the annual report (previously circulated) which detailed the Library Service's performance against the National Standards. It was highlighted that the year 2023/24 had been very positive overall but mentioned areas that still required improvement, such as staffing and training. He was of the view that the Council was on the right path to ensure future success.

The Head of Housing & Communities Service pointed out the performance of the Library Service for the end of March 2024, noting that changes to Library Service's opening did not come into effect until June 2024, therefore the impact of these changes would feature in the 2024/25 report. However, it was emphasised that the Service was starting from a positive position. It was also noted that one indicator that had never been met, specifically relating to Staffing levels and qualifications. The reason was that a number of the Council's libraries housed the One Stop Shop service and therefore staffing levels reflected the needs and skills to staff multi-purpose community facilities. Several areas of good service were highlighted, particularly the number of library events, such as "Knit and Natter," reading clubs, Meet the Author events and children's activities etc. and it was emphasised that libraries were increasingly serving as hubs for the community.

In response to members questions the Lead Member and officers advised that:

- formal training had to be conducted when libraries were closed. This was proving challenging at the moment due to the need to train staff on the new Library Management System.
- the importance of the Service being professionally led was emphasised, but libraries often provided advice on essential services which residents needed, and it was therefore crucial for Library Service staff to be trained to advise on many of different services.

- despite the reduction in opening hours the aim was that the Service was provided on an equitable basis across the entire county
- the requirements to make savings would impact the Service's ability to continually realise improvements. Nevertheless, individual libraries had been able to source local funding to run specific projects, e.g. St. Asaph and Prestatyn libraries.
- the 450+ responses received to the Public Library User Survey, which had been conducted in October 2024, were currently being analysed. The findings of this survey would support future service planning.

Members added that it was important for the Council to stay up to date with the needs of local communities, ensuring that services were aligned with current demands. Members were pleased that the Welsh Government's Culture Division's (WGDC) assessment of the Council's Library Service was similar to the conclusions of the self-assessment process, providing valuable feedback for future improvements. It was:

RESOLVED: subject to the above observations to –

- (i) acknowledge and congratulate the Library Service's performance against the 6th Framework of Welsh Public Library Standards; and***
- (ii) request a further progress report on the Service's performance against the national standards in January 2026.***

8 ARRANGEMENTS FOR REVIEWING THE ROLL-OUT OF THE NEW WASTE AND RECYCLING SERVICE

The Head of Corporate Support Service: People introduced the report (previously circulated), informing members that the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) had, in response to a scrutiny request from the Leader and the Lead Member for the Environment and Transport, recommended that a task and finish group be established to review the roll-out of the new waste and recycling system. The objective of the review was to identify any shortfalls in the planning, implementation, and rollout, of the new Service with a view to learning lessons that would support the planning of future service changes or large transformation projects. With a view to ensuring a fair distribution of members, both geographically and politically, each Member Area Group (MAG) was asked to nominate two representatives each, both of whom would not be member of the current or previous, administrations.

A maximum timescale of 12 months had been set for the Task and Finish Group to conclude its work. The Group's first task would be to map out a clear plan for its work, decide on its workstreams, and agree a timetable of meetings.

The Scrutiny Co-ordinator confirmed that the final nominations to serve on the Task and Finish Group had been received that morning. The next step would be to check that the nominations were as politically balanced as possible. If not, Group Leaders' advice would be sought on the appointments.

Confirmation was provided that the Task and Finish Group had the power to slightly amend the terms of reference if required. The terms of reference were intended as a guide to the Group in undertaking its work, it should not fetter the Group's investigation. For procedural purposes, the Task and Finish Group required to be formally established by a Scrutiny Committee, and for completeness in due course it would be required to report its findings and conclusions to the same committee, hence the reason for submitting the report to Performance Scrutiny Committee. Members:

RESOLVED: subject to the above, and having considered the information and the draft terms of reference for undertaking the review (Appendix 1 to the report), to –

(i) confirm the proposed arrangements for undertaking the review, as detailed in paragraphs 4.5 and 4.6 of the report; and

(ii) agree to receive the findings and conclusions of the review in due course.

9 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator introduced the report and its appendices (previously circulated) to the meeting to discuss the forward work programme for the Committee.

It was advised that the Committee's next meeting would be held on the 13th March and there were three items due to be presented. These included Recruitment, Retention & Workforce Planning, Economic & Business Development Strategy, and Internet and Telephony Connectivity in Denbighshire. It was advised that, following receipt of an information report, feedback had been received from members wishing to receive a formal report on Car Park Income following the increase in tariffs and changes to charging hours agreed as part of the 2024/25 budget. The Scrutiny Co-Ordinator suggested that this be proposed for the next meeting held on the 13th March and for Internet and Telephony Connectivity in Denbighshire item to be deferred until May 2025. Members agreed and it was:

RESOLVED: subject to the inclusion of a report on 'Car Park Income' on the forward work programme for the Committee's next meeting on the 13 March, and the rescheduling of the 'Internet and Telephony Connectivity in Denbighshire' item from March to May 2025, to confirm the Committee's programme of future work.

10 FEEDBACK FROM COMMITTEE REPRESENTATIVES

None

The meeting concluded at 1:05pm.