
COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 14-05-2013

PRESENT - Councillor Eric M. Jones (Chairman)
Councillor Angela Russell (Vice-chair).

Councillors:- Stephen Churchman, Craig ap Iago, Dilwyn Morgan, Tudor Owen, Mike Stevens, Mandy Williams-Davies, Gruffydd Williams, Gethin Glyn Williams, Robert J. Wright. and Eurig Wyn.

OFFICERS: Gareth James (Members Support and Scrutiny Manager), Llyr B. Jones (Senior Manager – Economy and Community), Arwel Wyn Owen (Senior Housing Manager), Anne Smith (Homeless Service Officer), Dewi R. Jones (Head of Education Department), Aled Davies (Head of Regulatory Department), Dafydd Williams (Chief Engineer – Transportation and Street Care), Eluned Williams (Senior Ancillary Services Officer) and Ioan Hughes (Members Support and Scrutiny Officer).

OTHERS INVITED TO THE MEETING: Councillor John Wynn Jones (Cabinet Member for the Economy), Councillor John Wyn Williams (Cabinet Member for Planning), Councillor W. Gareth Roberts (Cabinet Member for the Environment), Councillor Elfed Williams (Local Member in relation to item 8 on the agenda – Noddfa Hostel, Deiniolen), Chief Inspector Gareth Evans (Gwynedd Local Policing Service, in relation to item 8 on the agenda – Noddfa Hostel, Deiniolen).

APOLOGIES: Councillors Annwen Hughes, Louise Hughes, Linda Morgan, Caerwyn Roberts

1. CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED to re-elect Councillor Eric M. Jones as Chairman of this Scrutiny Committee for 2013/14.

2. VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED to re-elect Councillor Angela Russell as Vice-chair of this Scrutiny Committee for 2013/14.

3. CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chairman noted that it was not possible for cabinet members to be present in relation to item 9 on the agenda (Transport). However, officers from the Education and Regulatory Departments were present.

He added that questioning cabinet members was part of the responsibility of Scrutiny Committees and he had been given to understand that the matter was being considered.

Councillor Mandy Williams-Davies was congratulated for being elected mayor of Blaenau Ffestiniog.

4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Eric Merfyn Jones declared an interest in item 9 on the agenda (Transport) as his eighteen year old grand-daughter received transport from Waunfawr to Ysgol Brynrefail.

5. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 26 March 2013 as a true record.

6. TOWN CENTRES

a) Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for the Economy with the Senior Manager – Economy and Community also present.

An outline was given of the work undertaken to date, the challenges linked with the Revitalising and Improving the Image of Town Centres Scheme and opportunities for the future.

In relation to emerging opportunities, he referred specifically to a 'loyalty card' scheme which would encourage Gwynedd ratepayers to support local shops and would then be given a discount on the price of goods. It would be the responsibility of the shop owner to determine the size of any discount.

Tourists would also have an opportunity to take advantage of the scheme by purchasing a card. The Cabinet Member noted that there was considerable work to undertake prior to the adoption of the scheme, but he was hopeful that it would develop successfully. He called for the members' observations on the matter.

He added that several people had expressed concern regarding business rates, but he explained that it was the Welsh Government that was responsible for this and that they were currently reviewing the situation.

b) The Senior Manager – Economy and Community noted that town centre areas were facing a considerable challenge and that the budget of nearly £223,000 linked with the scheme was limited.

However, he was confident that all the measures noted could be completed before the end of the three year scheme, which had now reached its final year.

c) Members responded to the report and they highlighted the following main points:

- That there was a tendency to forget the gap that existed in villages where there were no shops at all;
- That consideration needed to be given to the effect of the economy on wholesalers and how this affected the local economy;
- Although the idea of a loyalty scheme should be praised, it would be difficult for small businesses to be part of the scheme and reduce their prices;
- That information was required regarding any specific areas within which individuals could use the loyalty cards. As an example, it was asked whether all Gwynedd residents would be considered as 'local shoppers' in any part of the County;
- That there was a need to work with the large companies in order to have an anchor store on the high street. Although this would create competition to local businesses, it would also attract more people to the high street with businesses benefitting from that;
- More traders, with no direct link to the high street, should be attracted to be part of the Chamber of Commerce;
- Detailed attention should be given to the empty shops on the high street and consider developing them into housing rather than leaving them as eyesores;

- That companies were eager to develop some empty buildings, but that the planning system caused problems.
- The Council should work in order to develop local business groups so that the work came within the community;
- That problems extended beyond shops and included other businesses such as pubs and hotels;
- That high parking costs deterred people from coming to the towns;
- A loyalty card for reducing parking costs would be a general advantage;
- The Council should adopt a policy to buy locally;
- That, in the past, Bangor had been developed as a main shopping centre at the expense of other towns;
- That vandalism caused problem in some places and the owners should be assisted to protect the shops;
- That this matter should be added to the Committee's Work Programme.

ch) The local member referred to the Blaenau Ffestiniog Town Regeneration Scheme noting that the successes emanated from collaboration between the people of the town and Gwynedd Council and with the support of European grants. She referred to various ideas which were part of the scheme, such as 'mystery shoppers' and suggested that this could be extended to other areas. She supported the idea of having an anchor store as they offered a level of professionalism that the small businesses could emulate.

The success seen in Blaenau Ffestiniog was underlined with the fact that the Chamber of Commerce had a membership of four 18 months previously but that this had now increased to 62.

d) The local member noted that the Tywyn Chamber of Commerce had been re-established some years previously and that it was now known as the 'Chamber of Tourism and Commerce. This meant that the membership included various traders and societies. Despite the small number of empty shops in the town, the member emphasised that one or two had been left for several years and that they were now dilapidated and eyesores. The same problem was apparent with two houses near the beach, and the member called on the Council to intervene.

dd) In response to the observations and questions, the Cabinet Member and Senior Manager – Economy and Community, noted the following:

- That the scheme focused on town centres and that the problems prominent in villages were part of the 'rural agenda';
- That there was an opportunity to bring together various services involving town centres in order to create a strategic plan;
- Planning to provide more flexibility in some areas could be undertaken which would provide more support to the alternative use of buildings currently empty;
- That a pilot scheme to try to improve the image of empty shops had commenced and that it was hoped that they would be extended across Gwynedd;
- That there was a link between the Planning Department and the Economy and Community Department but that there was room to strengthen this relationship;
- That steps had been taken with the Enforcement Department in order to protect listed buildings which were being left dilapidated;
- That Gwynedd Council was one of the best in terms of local procurement, but that work was being undertaken to ensure further improvements;
- That a review of parking costs was part of the scheme.

In response to a further enquiry, it was explained that the financial package of £165,000 allocated for the Empty Shops Initiative, was being spent on encouraging the use of empty

shops by supporting and promoting entrepreneurship targeting the Communities First cluster.

The work would involve:

1. Contacting the owners of empty shops to assist them to identify use for the empty building;
2. Working with Communities First Officers to see whether any individuals or groups would be interested in venturing into the business world;
3. Providing set-up and development support to the businesses.

The matters raised would be given further consideration at the Preparatory Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee on 5 June 2013.

7. NODDFA HOSTEL, DEINIOLEN

a) Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for Planning with the Senior Housing Manager and the Homeless Service Officer also present. Chief Inspector Gareth Evans was also present.

It was explained that providing services for homeless people was one of Gwynedd Council's statutory responsibilities and, during a period of financial constraints and welfare reforms, many observers forecasted that the demand for homelessness services was likely to increase.

c) The local member, who was not a member of this Scrutiny Committee, was given an opportunity to make observations and he drew attention to the following main points:

- That the Noddfa Hostel had not benefited the residents of Deiniolen Ward;
- That 'high risk users' had been staying at the hostel and, therefore, conditions regarding receiving some to the hostel had been breached;
- That the police did not report to Council officers every incident linked with the hostel;
- That the original intention of the hostel was to care for women and children but that it was now being used as a centre for the homeless;
- That £100,000 had been spent on the hostel during the last six years but that this had not benefited the Deiniolen ward at all. It would have been better had the money been spent on having a community centre for the area;
- That 1,000 people had signed a petition objecting to the hostel and that this should not be ignored.

c) Chief Inspector Gareth Evans emphasised that he was not present to express the police's opinion regarding the location of the hostel. Rather, his intention was to submit statistics regarding the impact of the hostel on the police.

He elaborated, and noted:

- That the police had dealt with 208 crimes in Deiniolen between 2011 and 2013 and 10 at Noddfa Hostel during the same period.
- In terms of antisocial behaviour, the police had dealt with 145 cases in Deiniolen between 2011 and 2013 and 17 at Noddfa Hostel.

It was added that some of the crimes which had been associated with Noddfa had been committed against the hostel users. Consequently, it was noted that the hostel did not have an impact on the police.

ch) The Senior Housing Manager referred to one specific incident which was a prominent part of the background of the request made by the local member for a report.

Although acknowledging that the incident had taken place, he noted that such incidents were few and far between. He added that the Licence Agreement had been adapted following the incident.

He explained that Noddfa Hostel provided a service for vulnerable people and families. It was mainly women who benefited from the service; women escaping violence, pregnant women and mothers.

A breakdown of placements since April 2012 showed that:
 49% of the placements were families with children;
 77% of the placements were women;
 less than 10% were single men.

It was added that the Council was undertaking a risk assessment in order to ensure that the hostel was the most suitable accommodation for each individual. It was noted that the hostel was not used for people with a violent background.

d) The Homeless Service Officer emphasised that Noddfa Hostel was a place for families and that the intention was to offer support to users to live independently. Consequently, many agencies would go there to offer support.

It was added that the service provided in the hostel was cost-effective and that other options would be extremely costly.

dd) In response to the report and observations, members highlighted the following main points:

- That the condition of the building had deteriorated in recent years;
- That some homeless people refused to go to Noddfa Hostel and that the real reason for this needed to be considered;
- That providing for the homeless was one of the Council's statutory responsibilities and the hostel could not be closed lightly;
- That consideration needed to be given to whether Deiniolen was a suitable location for such a hostel;
- That the suitability of the service should be investigated not only in terms of the local community but also in terms of the users;
- That the users needed to be within reach of important services and this raised doubts regarding the suitability of the location of Noddfa hostel;
- That the location of the hostel affected the police's response times to incidents;
- Between 2011 and 2013, the number of cases of antisocial behaviour associated with the hostel, was between 11% and 12% of the total in Deiniolen;
- That it was possible that tension existed because people who required different services were within the same unit – families with children, women and single men;
- That consideration needed to be given to whether a hostel was the best way of responding to the needs of all the above-mentioned categories;
- That Cartrefi Cymunedol Gwynedd had some empty houses that could be suitable for vulnerable families.

e) In response to further enquiries it was noted that the majority of the hostel users came from Arfon and despite varying numbers, there were usually eight people there. It was added that there was constant demand for the service provided there and it was emphasised that the hostel offered a very important provision for vulnerable people.

In terms of costs, it was noted that Noddfa Hostel did not incur a cost for the Council as money was received via benefits and supporting people funding. It was noted that the cost

of bed and breakfast would be between £350 and £400 per week. It was estimated that the cost of closing Noddfa Hostel and organising other provision could be approximately £500,000.

The Cabinet Member noted that he would support the intention to undertake a detailed investigation which would consider the needs and the way forward for the service.

It was agreed that the Chair and Vice-chair of the Services Scrutiny Committee should be invited to be part of discussions in order to consider the matter further at the Preparatory Meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee on 5 June.

8. TRANSPORT

This item was chaired by the Vice-chair.

a) Submitted – a report by the Head of Regulatory Department referring to the response of the Cabinet Member for the Environment to the observations made by members of this Scrutiny Committee.

It was noted that the report provided information regarding the work being undertaken by the Integrated Transport Unit.

Despite considerable and regular work being undertaken, it was noted that it would take some time to complete the Work Programme.

b) A member noted that the response provided was extremely comprehensive. He added that categorical evidence had been collected and that this was important for dealing with individual incidents.

c) In terms of Transport for Education, the background of the situation was outlined by the Head of Education Department who referred to a report submitted to the Council Board on 25 January 2011.

Members were reminded that the whole matter of payment for post 16 transport had derived from corporate discussions as the Council had looked at adopting a substantial Savings Strategy.

The Savings Strategy had been adopted on 10 December 2009 when the full Council had decided to include post 16 transport within the Strategy.

When considering the Savings Strategy at the time, the Education Department had one basic principle, namely that as little as possible would be done that would affect the education of pupils at schools. Consequently, matters such as transport to schools had to be looked at.

The Head of Department further emphasised that there was no statutory requirement on any Authority to provide, or even arrange, post 16 transport.

Further attention was drawn to the fact that the new Post 16 Transport Policy had been operational since 1 September 2011. Therefore, the Council was in its second educational year of implementing the Policy.

In terms of the fees, the Head of Department referred to the standard fee of £100 a term and he underlined the fact that cheaper transport of £60 a term was offered to those who chose to attend a secondary school within their own catchment area.

ch) The Head of Education Department responded to the following observations made by members of this Scrutiny Committee in relation to the following matters:

- To reconcile the level of support within the County to facilitate access to courses offered to students who attended courses at a Secondary School or Further Education College in each area (Arfon, Dwyfor, Meirionnydd);
- To extend the period of the times and dates during which a term token could be used;
- Constant provision for vocational elements of certain courses at later times in the evenings.

By now, a request for information had been submitted to Phillip Roberts, Learners' Services Manager, Menai Site, Bangor and John Elfyn Griffith, Learners' Service, Pwllheli Site, regarding:

1. daily numbers of students requiring transport between 9:00 and 12:00;
2. daily numbers of students requiring transport between 13:00 and 18:00;
3. daily numbers of students requiring transport after 20:00;
4. start and finish location of every journey.

d) The Head of Department explained that this information was needed before being able to consider what provision was required. At times when there would be a constant arrangement, such as a catering course on one specific evening every week, the Education Department would consider commissioning the Regulatory Department to provide the necessary transport.

dd) In relation to observations regarding reducing the cost of the annual transport token from the current £180, the Head of Department referred to a report completed by the 'Transforming Transport' consultants on the transport of the six authorities in north Wales. Their recommendation was that the six Authorities should consult on charging £300 a year for post 16 transport or not offer it at all.

He added that the number of young people who attended schools in Gwynedd and who took advantage of this transport had reduced as many chose to use their own cars and share personal transport. Given the situation as a whole, it was noted that consideration should be given, in the near future, to whether it was worthwhile to continue to provide the service as it was not statutory.

e) According to the policy, a period of up to three weeks was provided for the pupils to travel free of charge. Members of the Scrutiny Committee wanted to see this period extended to six weeks.

In response, the Head of Department noted that the purpose of the period of three weeks was to allow plenty of flexibility for the young person to decide whether he/she wanted to continue with the course or not. He believed that this period was adequate.

f) In response to further enquiries, it was noted:

- that tokens could be paid for by cheque, postal order, debit card or credit card;
- that the Integrated Transport Unit, Regulatory Department would organise two vehicles should there be complaints of overcrowding;
- that it was the Integrated Transport Unit that was responsible for the safety and standard of the vehicles.

g) In response to the observations of the Head of Education Department, members highlighted the following main points:

- That difficulties arose when some young people went home after half a day. As the post 16 transport was not available at that time, a bus ticket must be bought despite the learner having paid for a term token;

- That the situation described above was equivalent to paying for the transport twice and reference was made to one particular case where the extra cost was £5.40 a day;
- That flexibility was needed to deal with such a situation and it would be simple enough for a daily ticket to be released by the college in order to avoid the problem of forcing learners to pay for a bus ticket;
- That some were already investigating the system in order to provide for the next educational year and that the matters needed to be considered without delay;
- That further consideration needed to be given to the contracts between the Council and the bus companies;
- That the tickets were based on school hours and that this did not correspond with college courses;
- That families did not object to paying for the term token but that they expected value for money;
- That the policy was complex and that further discussions should be held in order to ensure fairness for the learners as well as Council officers;
- That a large proportion of the education maintenance allowance of £30 a week, issued to low income families, had to be spent on transport rather than resources.

ng) In response, the Head of Education Department emphasised that efforts were being made to work within the policy in a fair way. He added that the number of post 16 learners was consistently increasing and he confirmed that the Department would consider the potential of the idea of issuing travel tokens for those who had bought a term token but who had to pay for a bus ticket to travel home after half a day.

He explained that the system of transporting learners from one school to another during the day was not part of the policy as this was a completely different arrangement between the schools.

It was agreed that a letter should be sent to the learners' services managers at the Menai Site, Bangor and Pwllheli Site calling for an immediate response to the Education Department's request. The observations made will be summarised and submitted before the Preparatory Meeting of this Scrutiny Committee on 5 June.

9. ANNUAL WORK PROGRAMME

It was noted that several proposals had been received regarding items to be included on the Work Programme.

It was added that a meeting of the Annual Workshop would be held on 18 June when the proposals would be considered. It was confirmed that the matters referred to at this meeting would also be considered.

RESOLVED not to make any changes to the work programme at present but that full consideration will be given to the matter at the annual workshop.

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 12.40pm.