
THE COUNCIL 24.01.13

Present: Councillor Selwyn Griffiths (Chairman)
Councillor Huw Edwards (Vice-chairman)

Councillors: Craig ab Iago, Stephen Churchman, Anwen Davies, Lesley Day, Eddie Dogan, Dyfed Edwards, Elwyn Edwards, T.G. Ellis, Aled Ll. Evans, Jean Forsyth, Gwen Griffith, Alwyn Gruffydd, Sian Gwenllian, Chris Hughes, John B. Hughes, Louise Hughes, Jason Humphreys, Peredur Jenkins, Anne Ll. Jones, Brian Jones, Charles W. Jones, Dyfrig Jones, Eric M. Jones, John W. Jones, Linda W. Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, Beth Lawton, June Marshall, Dafydd Meurig, Dilwyn Morgan, Linda Morgan, Dewi Owen, Michael Sol Owen, W. Roy Owen, Caerwyn Roberts, John Pughe Roberts, Mair Rowlands, Angela Russell, Gareth Thomas, Ioan Thomas, Paul Thomas, Ann Williams, Eirwyn Williams, Elfed W. Williams, Gethin G. Williams, Gruffydd Williams, Hefin Williams, John W. Williams, R.H. Wyn Williams, Mandy Williams-Davies, Eurig Wyn

Also present: Harry Thomas (Chief Executive), Iwan Trefor Jones, Dafydd Lewis and Dilwyn Williams (Corporate Directors), Dilys Phillips (Monitoring Officer / Head of Democracy and Legal Department), Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance Department), Arwel Ellis Jones (Senior Manager - Corporate Commissioning Service), Vera Jones (Members' Manager – Democratic Services), Iwan Evans (Legal Services Manager) and Gwyn Parry Williams (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer)

Apologies: Councillors Trevor Edwards, Alan Jones Evans, Gweno Glyn, Simon Glyn, Annwen Hughes, Aeron Jones, Elin Walker Jones, Llywarch Bowen Jones, Sion W. Jones, Dilwyn Lloyd, W. Tudor Owen, Nigel Pickavance, Peter Read, Liz Saville Roberts, W. Gareth Roberts, Dyfrig Siencyn, Mike Stevens, Owain Williams, R.J. Wright

The meeting was opened with a prayer from Councillor John Wynn Jones.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillors Huw Edwards and Eryl Jones-Williams declared an interest in the urgent item "Notice of Motion - Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board's recent decision to restructure the Health Service" as they represented the Council on the Gwynedd Community Health Council.

The members were of the opinion that it was not a prejudicial interest and they participated fully in the discussion on the item.

2. CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

Councillor Huw Edwards was welcomed back to the Council following his recent surgery.

The member thanked everyone for all the support he had received during his illness.

- ii) Dwyfor Leisure Centre was congratulated for winning an APSE award for the best progress in the Sports and Leisure Establishments Category. They had won out of seven other centres throughout Britain which had all reached the final in Blackpool.

Also, Sir Dave Brailsford from Deiniolen, who was famous in the world of cycling, was congratulated on his success in the Olympic Games.

- iii) Staff from the Highways Department who had been so busy clearing the roads during the recent heavy snow were thanked. There had been a lot of praise for their work. Also to staff from other departments who had been assisting during the bad weather and especially the Social Services Department who had been responsible for keeping the elderly warm and safe.
- iv) A service would be held at Neuadd Reichel, Ffriddoedd Road, Bangor the following day, 25 January 2013 at 10.30 as part of the Holocaust Memorial Day. Everybody would be welcome to attend the service, joining thousands of people from across the world to remember the past and set the foundations for a safe and fair world in the future.
- v) A fund would be established for those who had been affected by the recent floods. It was intended to accept contributions from those who wished to do so and share the money amongst those who had submitted an application. In order to ensure that it was seen to be independent of the Council, it was intended to ask a panel of two or three prominent people in our community to help to allocate the money.

3. NORTH WALES POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONER

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr Winston Roddick, North Wales Police and Crime Commissioner and Ms Anna Humphreys, Chief Executive, North Wales Police and Crime Commissioner's Office.

Mr Roddick gave thanks for the invitation and the warm welcome and noted that this Council was the first for him to address as part of his role as Commissioner.

He drew attention to the following matters -

- That he needed to create a strong relationship with several public bodies including local councils.
- That he had the authority to appoint a Chief Constable.
- That he was responsible for creating a police and crime plan which would include policies and priorities over the next three years. In addition, he was responsible for presenting the police's budget annually and for raising the precept – the proposed level of the precept would be submitted to the Police and Crime Panel which would then decide on the level of resources to be provided to the

Chief Constable to provide the policing service in North Wales. This panel included representatives of local councils in North Wales.

- That on 12 December 2012, his office had published a Call for Evidence, namely an invitation to the residents of North Wales to assist him to create the Police and Crime Plan by expressing their opinion on how North Wales was policed etc.
- That the most important priority was to ensure safety at home and safety in public places and, in order to fulfil this, he had recommended to the Police and Crime Panel that the precept for 2013/14 should be increased by 3.47%, equivalent to an increase of 3.98% on the Council Tax. The panel had accepted the recommendation. This would enable the funding of 51 additional police officers, an increase from 1,417 to 1,468.
- That he had visited police stations in Holyhead, Caernarfon and Llangefni as well as Victim Support Offices in order to learn more about their work with victims and witnesses.
- That rural theft had cost £52.7m annually to the agriculture industry and that there had been an increase of 6% in the number of agricultural offences.
- That Gwynedd needed to make a great effort if it was to succeed in attracting a prison to the county and that North Wales Police was strongly in favour of it.

The following matters were raised by members -

- That there was a need for more police officers in tourist towns and villages during the summer season.
- That the intention to fund 51 additional police officers was welcomed.
- That there was a need for more police officers to police rural areas.
- Was there an intention to appoint an appropriate officer in the three areas which would be a way of preventing theft from farms etc?
- That a further discussion was needed on the possibility of establishing a prison in Gwynedd.
- That the opening hours of police stations had been reduced and that notices had not been displayed with the opening hours.
- That four police officers employed by the police in Dyffryn Nantlle could not speak Welsh.
- That the Council's Central Licensing Committee had decided not to implement the late night levy.
- The public's perception of and attitude towards the police – how could it be ensured that the perception was positive?
- The political status of the police. Should police officers and the police service be devolved?
- That a good relationship should be nurtured between the police and establishments/partnerships involving vulnerable people in the communities.

The Commissioner responded appropriately to the points.

The Commissioner was thanked for the presentation.

4. WELFARE REFORM

- a) Councillor Brian Jones, Cabinet Member for Deprivation submitted the following statement -
- i) That it had been resolved to take proactive measures to prepare for the changes stemming from the Government's Welfare Reform system that would have entailed, originally, that over 11,000 Gwynedd residents would have been at a financial loss from April 2013.
 - ii) That the main concern stemming from the new system had been that 8,200 people in Gwynedd would have had to pay Council Tax for the first time from April 2013 onwards. In addition, 3,300 people in Gwynedd would have seen an increase in their current contributions.
 - iii) That a Multi-agency Task Group had been set up in the County under the Council's leadership, in order to ensure that joint-planning and collaboration would be undertaken to prepare local people for these changes. A comprehensive work programme had been agreed by this Group, which had offered clarity on who did what – and this was to ensure the cohesiveness of the work.
 - iv) That three important work streams had been established by the Task Group, namely -
 - A joint communications programme between the various agencies in order to have an agreed procedure when contacting local residents regarding the changes.
 - A financial literacy scheme to support families to manage their budgets in light of the introduction of universal credit.
 - Financial policies and debt recovery processes, mainly via the Finance Department's work.
 - v) Priority had been given to this work recently as several diverse plans had been developed within the different work streams.
 - vi) However, on 17 January 2013, the Welsh Government had presented new regulations for 2013, which would amend the procedure and increase the highest level of support from 90% to 100%. Therefore, this meant that there would be no effect on those facing paying the Council Tax for the first time or facing higher contributions. This change was good news as it would continue to provide the current levels of support in 2013/14 for the claimants, and pay 100% of the Council Tax if they were eligible.
 - vii) Adjustment to the new 2013 regulations would have an impact on the Council's project to alleviate the effects of the original proposals.
 - viii) The project would now manage residual problems, such as benefit reductions to underoccupied homes from April 2013, 'Universal Credit' that would gradually replace housing benefit from October, and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2014/15.
 - ix) He emphasised that the work of the Task Group would continue. The underoccupation changes, as part of the Welfare Reform system, would affect nearly 1,350 people in Gwynedd and would come into force in April 2013. Planning for the impact of this was being addressed within the Task Group's work streams, along with the work of preparing local people for the universal credit.

- b) Iwan Trefor Jones, Corporate Director, reported that the new Welfare Reform arrangements were being driven by Westminster. He noted that it simplified the benefits arrangements; would try to encourage more people receiving benefits back into work and would try to make substantial savings of approximately £4 billion. He drew attention to the implications for a large number of residents in Gwynedd. He provided details of the changes in the Welfare Reform system which would affect the people of Gwynedd. He referred to the Universal Credit which would mean that, rather than benefits coming from many directions to families, they would only receive one payment. However, there were implications to this in terms of budget management skills and ensuring that families would put money aside to pay rent at the end of the month. In terms of the work of planning and responding to these changes, a Multi-Agency Task Group had been established which included representation from the third sector, CCG, housing associations, CAB, Shelter, Age Concern etc.
- c) Members were invited to make observations.
 - i) A member noted his wish for any relevant information considered by the Task Group to be shared with the members.
 - ii) A member welcomed the fact that the Task Group had been established.
 - iii) A member drew attention to the need to be aware of the need to promote the Credit Unions. He noted that a negative side effect was that dubious people were travelling around the communities offering loans.
 - iv) A member noted that he had attended a CCG meeting the previous day and that the committee had stated that attention needed to be given to the new arrangements by working with the Council.

In response to some of the points mentioned above, Iwan Trefor Jones, Corporate Director noted that any problems needed to be identified very early on and that working together and sharing information was extremely important.

In terms of the role of the Credit Unions, this was very important, and discussions were currently being held with North Wales Credit Union to see what could be done in Gwynedd in order to develop a specific scheme within the county. He drew attention to the concerns of several agencies that individuals were visiting housing estates offering high interest loans and that we needed to be mindful of this.

The Director noted that CCG had been a key part of the Task Group and that there was effective co-operation and collaboration happening with them at present. The Council had been successful in attracting substantial resources from the Families First programme in Gwynedd. He drew attention to the fact that much smaller houses would be needed from now on especially those with two bedrooms and there was a shortage of this type of provision.

- v) A member enquired whether any cohort was exempted from this legislation and whether the Council had any proceedings to safeguard children. He also asked whether it would be possible to establish the Credit Unions on a local level.

In response, the Head of Finance Department noted that, on 6 December 2012, the Council had sent a letter to all benefits claimants affected by the 'bedroom tax', namely housing benefit reductions from April 2013 for underoccupied homes according to the DWP regulations. He noted that there was agreement with the social landlords that they would take responsibility for visiting all tenants affected.

The Head of Finance Department further noted that the Council was responsible for paying benefits in accordance with the DWP regulations and that there was no choice but to implement the reduction; however, a comparatively small hardship fund was available to assist on a temporary basis in some exceptional cases. One type of application which would be considered would be families who fostered children, as they were required to keep one empty bedroom in their houses for children who would need to be fostered at a later date. The Council needed to prioritise this when allocating from the hardship fund and assist in order to ensure that the bedroom would be available for future fostering needs. The Head of Finance Department also noted that there would be substantial pressure from many other directions including housing associations, to allocate from the relevant hardship fund and the Council needed to prioritise prudently.

The Head of Finance Department noted that pensioners in England had been exempted from the reduction in Council Tax but in Wales it was implemented consistently on all ages, including pensioners. However, he confirmed that pensioners were exempt from the "bedroom tax".

Iwan Trefor Jones, Corporate Director, noted that the Credit Union offered a very important facility to enable people to have loans on low cost terms. Discussions would be held with North Wales Credit Union to consider submitting an application to Europe. This would be done jointly with Anglesey and Conwy Councils. The aim was to try to develop a substantial Credit Union in Gwynedd.

In relation to safeguarding children, the Chief Executive noted that it would be possible to convey the message to the Social Services Department to consider providing the appropriate advice to people who intended to have lodgers. As the Welsh Government had introduced new regulations on 17 January 2013, this had meant that the allowance provided for in the Financial Strategy needn't be as big for the deterioration in the Council Tax collection rate and, in light of that, it would be possible to increase the hardship fund in order to alleviate the impact in the first year.

RESOLVED to accept the information.

5. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME

Submitted – the report of the Head of Finance Department providing details for the implementation of the new Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

The Head of Department reported that from April 2013 onwards, the Westminster Government would end Council Tax Benefit and reduce the relevant funding by 10%, as the responsibility would transfer to the Welsh Government. He also noted that the Welsh Government had provided regulations to ensure that every local authority in Wales presented consistent plans.

The original regulations had been approved by the Welsh Assembly on 19 December 2012 which had reduced the finance available by 10%. However, on 17 January 2013, the Welsh Government had presented new regulations for 2013, which would amend the procedure and increase the highest level of support from 90% to 100%. He noted that this change was good news as it would continue to provide the current levels of support in 2013/14 for the claimants, and pay 100% of the Council Tax if they were eligible. Under the 2013 regulations, all claimants who received support would not have to pay a proportion of their council tax bill, which was also good news for the Council as the tax collector.

The Head of Department also noted that the additional cost of this change had been supported by an additional grant of £22 million from the Welsh Government, which equated to the 10% cut by the Westminster Government. He explained that these regulations and the funding were effective for the 2013/14 financial year only and would be reviewed by 2014/15 and that the Council needed to adopt a scheme reflecting the changes by 31 January. He noted that the new scheme included a few specific optional elements and the Council was required to consult on these elements. He referred to the consultation results, which had been based on the original regulations, and had expired prior to the Minister's statement.

On 22 January 2013, the Cabinet had agreed to support the amended recommendations and members had been keen at that meeting to send a message to the Minister for Local Government asking him to act in an inclusive manner and provide prompt information regarding the scheme and the funding for it in 2014/15.

RESOLVED to adopt the provisions of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme Regulations and the Prescribed Requirements Regulations (Wales) (2012), as amended by the Amendment Regulations (2013), as Gwynedd's Council Tax reduction scheme for 2013/14, subject to the following discretionary elements -

i) Apply a 100% disregard for war disablement pensions, war widows' pensions and war widowers' pensions, for both pensioners and working age claimants.

ii) That no increase in the extended reduction periods for pensioners and working age claimants be applied from the standard four weeks currently contained within the Prescribed Scheme.

iii) That no increase in the backdate period for pensioners and working age claimants be applied from the standard three months contained within the Prescribed Scheme.

iv) To enhance the process for notifying claimants of decisions, above the minimum requirements set out in the Regulations, if appropriate.

6. URGENT MATTER - NOTICE OF MOTION

The Recent Decision by the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to Restructure the Health Service

(This item had not been included on the Council agenda; however, the Chairman agreed to include the item under Section 100B (4)(b) of the Local Government Act 1972, because the letter had been received after the agenda had been sent to members and because of the urgency to act.)

The Monitoring Officer noted that the Standing Orders needed to be put aside for this item as it had been received without warning and due to the wish to discuss it at today's meeting.

RESOLVED to put the Standing Orders aside for this item.

In accordance with Procedural Rule 13, it was reported that an urgent notice of motion, along with a procedural motion, in accordance with Procedural Rule 13(12), had been received from Councillor Mandy Williams-Davies, requesting that the notice of motion be discussed at the Full Council rather than be referred to a committee:-

RESOLVED to discuss the proposal at this meeting.

The following proposal was proposed and seconded:-

"Following the recent decision by the Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board to restructure the Health Service, it is proposed -

a) That the Council holds a meeting with the Health Board to discuss the financial implications, expectations on the service and that no changes take place until the discussions have been held.

b) That we ask the Community Health Council to refer the matter for consideration by the Health Minister, Lesley Griffiths."

The member reported that the Health Board's decision to close Blaenau Ffestiniog Memorial Hospital had caused great concern locally. She had been given to understand that the beds would be removed from there during the next eight weeks; however, no business plan had been prepared thus far providing details as to what would replace them. This would likely take up to two years to go through the Welsh Government for financial appraisal etc.

A member noted that this matter had been discussed at the Services Scrutiny Committee's preparatory meeting on 17 January 2013 with a request for it to be discussed at the Council today, which had been refused. He had no objection to the member's notice of motion; however, he was of the opinion that this undermined the scrutiny process.

In response, the Monitoring Officer noted that a request had been received to place the matter for discussion on the Council agenda as an urgent item; however, in the time available, it would not have been possible to provide adequate background information to allow for a discussion on the effect of the decision on this Council. The Cabinet had not yet discussed the implications to the Council and a presentation would be made by the Cabinet Member for Care to the Council on 28 February 2013 on the care procedure which would take this into account. The notice of motion submitted today was an entirely different matter.

RESOLVED to adopt the notice of motion.

The meeting commenced at 1.00pm and concluded at 3.30pm.

CHAIRMAN