
CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 16/06/16

Present : Councillor Jason Humphreys (Chair);
Councillor W. Roy Owen (Vice-chair).

Councillors:- Trevor Edwards, Aled Wyn Jones, Charles W. Jones, Dyfrig Jones, June Marshall, Michael Sol Owen, Eirwyn Williams, Gethin Glyn Williams, John Wyn Williams and R. H. Wyn Williams.

Officers present:

Vera Jones (Democratic Services Manager) and Eirian Roberts (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Present for item 6 below:-

Councillor Peredur Jenkins (Cabinet Member for Resources)
Dewi Morgan (Revenue and Risk Senior Manager)
Nia Davies (Planning Policy Manager)

Present for items 7 and 8 below:-

Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn (Deputy Leader)

Present for item 9 below:-

Councillors:- Stephen Churchman, Annwen Daniels, Annwen Hughes, Eric Merfyn Jones, Dilwyn Morgan, Caerwyn Roberts, Mike Stevens and W. Tudor Owen (Members of the Communities Scrutiny Committee)
Councillor Dafydd Meurig (Cabinet Member for Planning)
Dafydd Wyn Williams (Acting Head of Regulatory Department)
Dafydd Gibbard (Senior Corporate Property Manager)

Apologies: Councillors Anwen Davies, Lesley Day, Elwyn Edwards, Gweno Glyn, Linda Morgan, Angela Russell, Glyn Thomas and Hefin Underwood.

1. ELECTION OF CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Councillor Jason Humphreys as Chair of this committee for 2016/17.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED to elect Councillor W. Roy Owen as Vice-chair of this committee for 2016/17.

3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee that took place on 14 April, 2016, as a true record.

5. THE CABINET'S RESPONSE TO THE CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Submitted - a report by the former chair, Councillor Dyfrig Jones, reporting back on the Cabinet's response to the recommendations of this committee in relation to the following matters:-

- Gwynedd Council Procurement Strategy: Category Management and Keeping the Benefit Local;
- Draft Information Technology Strategy;
- The benefits to Gwynedd from Retaining the Business Rates.

It was noted that no detailed discussion had been held on the recommendations of the scrutinisers in relation to the Draft Information Technology Strategy as the Cabinet was moving on to discuss the strategy during its meeting that day, however, the observations of the scrutinisers had been considered as part of that discussion.

The Cabinet Member for Resources added that the Cabinet had now adopted the Information Technology Strategy and that the department had received additional resources for its implementation.

RESOLVED to accept the report.

6. REPORT OF THE HOLIDAY HOMES AND TAXES INVESTIGATION

Submitted - the report of the Holiday Homes and Taxes Investigation.

The Chair set out the context and invited Councillor Eirwyn Williams, Chair of the Investigation, to formally submit the report to the committee and to the Cabinet Member for Resources.

Upon submitting the report, Councillor Eirwyn Williams thanked the members of the investigation and the officers for their work and also thanked the professional officers outside the Council who had given their time to speak with the members as part of the investigation.

During the discussion:-

- It was noted that a continuous increase had been seen in the number of houses that transferred from the Council Tax system to the Non-domestic Rate system and that there was a need to continue pressing for a change in the legislation.
- It was suggested that the Cabinet Member should contact other councils to ensure that they also fully understood the situation.
- It was noted that these transfers were a threat to the Council Tax base.

- It was asked whether or not it could be argued that Gwynedd was a special case in light of the high number of houses in multiple occupation within the county and that this was reflected by the Government in its annual grant settlement.
- Disappointment was expressed that members of the scrutiny committee had not been aware at the meeting before the Council on 3 March that a forewarning of one year needed to be given before charging a premium on second homes and that the investigation had expressed that as a reason for not making a decision by that date regarding issuing a notice for implementing that from the 2017/18 financial year onwards.
- It was noted the Council needed to decide by December this year whether or not it would charge a premium on second homes from 2018/19 onwards and it was suggested that the investigation should be extended to consider the options (and risks) associated with that, and also look at other matters such as the possibility of charging a 5% tourist tax in order to fund community-based facilities. It was agreed to discuss that further at the end of the meeting during the Committee's Preparatory Meeting.
- It was noted, although the vows of the different political parties to reduce the business rates of small businesses was welcomed, that the owners of self-catering units that had transferred to the Non-domestic Rates system would benefit from that as well, and that Assembly Members should be lobbied to see whether or not something could be done about the situation.

The Cabinet Member thanked the scrutinisers for their thorough work that had led to a better understanding of the situation and he noted that he accepted the three recommendations of the investigation in the fields of taxation, valuation and planning. He added that he believed that the answer to the problem was to be found within the planning system. He also suggested that the scrutiny committee should look at the options (and risks) associated with charging a premium on second homes and submit suggestions to the Cabinet. It was agreed to discuss that further at the end of the meeting during the Committee's Preparatory Meeting.

RESOLVED to accept the report and submit it to the Cabinet Member for Resources.

7. GWYNEDD CHALLENGE ENGAGEMENT

Submitted - a report from Councillor John Wyn Williams and R. H. Wyn Williams who had represented this committee at a meeting of the Gwynedd Engagement Group on 5 April that took stock of the Gwynedd Challenge exercise to see which lessons could be learnt regarding the Council's engagement arrangements in the future.

It was noted that one of the group's main conclusions was that one of the potential weaknesses of the Gwynedd Challenge was that some of the content provided by the services was difficult to understand and that it used complex language and too much "Council terminology" that the public could not understand (in Welsh or English) and that the inability to communicate clear and simple messages was a weakness that needed to be addressed. It was suggested that there could be some scope here for a Scrutiny Investigation or Task Group to look at how this could be improved.

It was noted that this exercise was a new and different exercise in terms of scrutiny and members were asked to attempt to assess whether there were strengths and/or

weaknesses in these arrangements so as to conclude whether or not this type of scrutiny exercise could be used in future, and that in different fields.

During the discussion:-

- It was concluded that the exercise in terms of scrutiny had been a successful exercise, and that efforts could be made to undertake similar work in other fields in the future.
- It was noted that this type of exercise avoided duplicating work.
- It was suggested that officers did not need to accompany scrutinisers in such meetings and that the members should draw up their own record / report regarding the conclusions of the discussion.

The Deputy Leader noted that including the scrutinisers in the group had been very valuable and he provided details on further work that was to be done in the context of the Gwynedd Challenge exercise.

8. FURTHER SCRUTINY WORK - CLEAR LANGUAGE (IN ENGAGEMENT WORK)

Submitted - scope for the scrutiny investigation following the conclusion of the Gwynedd Engagement Group that one of the potential weaknesses of the Gwynedd Challenge was that some of the content provided by the services was difficult for the public to understand and that they used complex language and too much "Council terminology" that the public could not understand (in Welsh or English) and that there was room, possibly, for work by a Scrutiny Investigation or Task Group to look at how this could be improved.

RESOLVED to establish a Clear Language (in Engagement Work) Scrutiny Investigation and that Councillors John Wyn Williams and R. H. Wyn Williams are members of it.

9. REGULATORY DEPARTMENT SAVINGS

Members of the Communities Scrutiny Committee were welcomed to the meeting to joint-scrutinise this item with members of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee.

(A) Part 1 - Further Savings

Submitted – the report of the Acting Head of Regulatory Department asking the scrutiny committee to scrutinise the savings plans referred by the Cabinet for further work by the scrutinisers, namely two plans relating to reducing the Public Protection budgets and a plan relating to reducing the budget for advertising planning applications.

The Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee was invited to say a few words before the Acting Head of Regulatory Department outlined the content of the report.

The members were given the opportunity to question the Cabinet Member and officers and submit observations. During the discussion:-

- Support was expressed to supporting the Council's staff and empowering them.
- Disappointment was expressed in terms of looking at the savings from the perspective of the people of Gwynedd rather than from the Council's perspective.
- It was noted that collaboration could possibly be easier from now on.
- The members noted a risk in relation to charging fees as details did not currently exist.
- It was noted that it had been beneficial to scrutinise the report jointly between both committees.

The Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee was invited to summarise before the Chair of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee closed the discussion.

RESOLVED

- (a) To accept the information in the report, including what had been achieved regarding the savings to date.**
- (b) To recommend to the Cabinet that the Department proceeds to meet a saving of £278,440 by implementing an alternative scheme that will focus on raising income, changing structure and reducing the risks that prevent approved savings from being realised.**
- (c) That the department reports to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee on the progress of all savings and cuts along with robust figures to commit to them in terms of the alternative scheme in 9 months' time.**

(B) Part 2 - Further Savings - Pest Control

Submitted - the report of the Senior Corporate Property Manager updating members on possible options for the provision of the Pest Control and Dog Warden Service in the future and asking them to scrutinise the options proposed to close the current financial deficit.

The Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee was invited to say a few words before the Senior Corporate Property Manager outlined the content of the report.

The members were given the opportunity to question the Cabinet Member and officers and submit observations. During the discussion:-

- Support was expressed to the alternative way of delivering the savings / cuts and for the innovation shown.
- The development to run the service as a self-sufficient business was welcomed.
- Emphasis was placed on the need for the marketing work to be done as soon as possible to increase the service's level of use (particularly in Arfon).
- The risk of increasing the cost excessively (risk that people would take their business elsewhere) was noted; however, a level of 10% below the market was welcomed.

- It was also emphasised that the service's reputation needed to be maintained, and continue to ensure that the service was swift and effective.
- The guarantee of having a same-day service for vulnerable clients, e.g. homes for the elderly, was welcomed.
- The risk posed by the abolishment of the service was noted - as a lot of the work was internal, it could lead to private companies charging very high prices, and in turn, this would write off any savings.
- The fact that the same price would be charged to clients across the county was welcomed.
- The need to ensure a swift payment method for the service, and the development of that method, was noted.
- It was noted that there were often negative messages in the press and that this presented an opportunity to take pride in meeting the savings that have to be realised in a much more innovative way.

The Chair of the Communities Scrutiny Committee was invited to summarise before the Chair of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee closed the discussion.

RESOLVED

- (a) To recommend to the Cabinet that it realises the steps suggested in part 3 and 4 of the report with the aim of realising an increase in income of approximately £40,000 per annum, rather than abolish the Pest Control Service in its entirety.**
- (b) To ask the service to report back to the Communities Scrutiny Committee within a year.**

The meeting commenced at 10.00 am and concluded at 12.25 pm

CHAIRMAN