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## EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 8/06/23

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**Present:**

**Councillors:** Elwyn Jones (Chair)  
Paul Rowlinson (Vice-chair)

**Councillors:** Jina Gwyrfai, Iwan Huws, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Gwilym Jones, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dewi Owen, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen, John Pughe Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands and Rhys Tudur.

**Officers in attendance:** Geraint Owen (Corporate Director), Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

**Present for item 7:** Councillor Menna Trenholme (Cabinet Member for Corporate Support), Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Support Department) and Helen Kilgannon (North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service Manager).

**Present for item 8:** Councillor Nia Jeffreys (Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Economy), Llyr B. Jones (Assistant Head of Economy and Community Department) and Esyllt Rhys Jones (Regeneration Programme Manager).

### 1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

**RESOLVED to elect Councillor Elwyn Jones as Chair of this committee for 2023/24.**

### 2. APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

Two names were proposed for the post of Vice-chair, namely Councillors Paul Rowlinson and Richard Glyn Roberts, however Councillor Richard Glyn Roberts asked that his name be withdrawn as he would not have sufficient time to undertake the role.

The proposer withdrew her proposal.

**RESOLVED to elect Councillor Paul Rowlinson as Vice-chair of this committee for 2023/24.**

### 3. APOLOGIES

An apology was received from Colette Owen (The Catholic Church).

### 4. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received.

### 5. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

### 6. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 23 March 2023 as a true record.

## 7. REGIONAL EMERGENCY PLANNING SERVICE

The Cabinet Member for Corporate Support, the Corporate Director, the Head of Corporate Support and the representative of North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service were welcomed to the meeting.

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Support inviting the committee to scrutinise the arrangements in place relating to Emergency Planning within the Council, and specifically:

- How does the regional service contribute to the resilience and safety of communities in Gwynedd?
- What is the service's current work programme?
- What is the structure within Cyngor Gwynedd to respond to an urgent or emergency situation?

The Cabinet Member set out the context and the members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

It was asked whether there was a coastal pollution emergency plan specific to Gwynedd, as it was crucial that the county itself was a key part of any recovery plan following an incident of pollution.

In response, it was noted that:

- There was a draft plan that was used for Gwynedd years ago, and that revising the Coastal Action Plan was one of the priorities of the Emergency Planning Service this year.
- The Service looked at the best practice across England and Wales with the aim of creating a template that was suitable for Gwynedd.

Concern was expressed that there was a pattern in Gwynedd of not cleaning watercourses or dredging around bridges, and it was noted that there was a desire to see pressure being brought to bear on Natural Resources Wales to undertake regular maintenance work. It was noted that this was in essence a resource problem within Natural Resources Wales, but it was vital that the work was carried out as minor problems became major problems, if there was no place for the water to go.

In response, it was noted that:

- There were specific responsibilities that belonged to the Highways, Engineering and YGC Department in this context.
- It was believed that the Flood Strategy, which would be introduced in the autumn, placed a great deal of emphasis on collaborating with Natural Resources Wales.

In response to a question, it was confirmed that Flintshire contributed less than its share according to population to the Regional Service because it hosted the scheme.

The need was noted to correct the references to '*North Wales Resilience Forum*' in the report to read '*North Wales Local Resilience Forum*'.

It was noted that one of the risks identified in the report was the Covid-19 Pandemic, and it was asked how resilient our preparations were for such an emergency; how effective was our response in Gwynedd and across the north, and what steps were being taken to learn from the experience and to improve our response in the future in terms of resilience. In response, it was noted that:

- It was probably true to say that Gwynedd was as prepared for the pandemic as any other county, and that no one would have predicted the type of emergency that arose during that period.
- There was a regional plan to respond to a pandemic, and a regional exercise was held a few months prior to the event, looking at how to respond to a flu pandemic specifically.
- Lessons were learnt from the pandemic. Part of that was to re-examine our response structures so that it was possible to respond much more effectively and resiliently, and there were purposeful emergency arrangements to respond to this type of emergency and other emergencies in the future.
- It was ongoing work to ensure that our response arrangements were effective, and that was the purpose of having the Regional Service and the constant work that took place to develop the response plans, not just within Gwynedd, but by working with our regional partners too.
- Changing the on-call arrangements was a practical example of the lessons learnt from the Covid period. Before the pandemic, the arrangements relied heavily on just two or three individuals, but a new arrangement was introduced where the seven senior officers named on page 28 of the report, together with the Chief Executive and the other Corporate Director, worked on a rota basis as a point of contact for the Regional Service to contact the Council should there be any emergency that affected Gwynedd. The arrangements appeared to work much more effectively than the old system, and the lines of communication were clearer between us and the Regional Service as a result.
- Much of the Council's resources were currently being used to gather information for the national Covid inquiry.
- Elements of the work carried out by the Regional Emergency Planning Service in conjunction with the councils during the Covid period included organising mortuary facilities and supporting the Health Service to reorganise maternity services, identify sites for vaccination centres and introduce the vaccination programme.

It was asked how many, and whom among Gwynedd's staff had received anti-terrorism training. In response, it was noted that that information was not at hand, but it was suspected that the figure was low and that this was something to look at.

Concern was expressed that there was no reference in the Preparing for Emergencies booklet to the long-term effects of the pandemic, such as the mental impact on adults and children, the impact on children's speech, businesses going bust, etc. In response, it was noted that:

- There was a need to recognise the after-effects of Covid and focus more attention on that.
- The Recovery Sub-group, led by the Head of Economy and Community, was well suited to being part of that focus at least.
- There was work going on beyond what was described as a Major Emergency Plan, but perhaps the booklet should reflect more on what happened outside of that.

Concern was expressed that animal diseases could come to Britain from the continent in unsuitable food. It was asked what plans the Council had for dealing with that, how many people worked in the Animal Diseases Department in Gwynedd and how many resources were on hand should such a disease break out. In response, it was noted that:

- Detailed information was not at hand regarding that proactive element on a day-to-day basis, but there were certainly plans for responding to the different types of crisis that could arise from any disease, and the Council had responded to similar situations in the past, such as Foot and Mouth Disease.
- The Regional Emergency Planning Service was looking at plans to ensure the safety of animals in conjunction with the Animal and Plant Health Agency, which is also a member of the North Wales Local Resilience Forum.

It was noted that this committee should ask the Cabinet to investigate this matter and ensure that arrangements are in place in case an animal disease breaks out next winter. In response, it was noted that the Public Protection Service could be asked to provide members with information regarding the resource available to deal with such situations, and inform the Cabinet Member of the observation regarding the need to prepare adequately.

The Regional Emergency Planning Service representative's opinion was sought on the changes to the on-call arrangements. In response, it was noted that:

- The new arrangement worked very well from the perspective of the region and that the structure in Gwynedd was reflected in some other counties.
- The on-call system in Gwynedd was highly developed and the Service knew who to contact at any time, with the relevant numbers stored in the Service's phones.

Concern was expressed that officers no longer received out-of-hours pay for dealing with an emergency over the weekend. In response, it was noted that:

- In some fields within the Council, where it had been decided that it was necessary to have people on call or on duty, the payment continued.
- Individuals who were called out on a weekend, who did not normally work on a weekend, received a minimum two hours' additional pay for doing so, and if those hours exceeded 37 hours, time and a half for overtime work was payable.
- The Service was not aware of any problems in terms of these arrangements, but the officers would be very pleased to discuss any examples with the member outside the meeting.

Referring to the booklet, *Preparing for Emergencies*, it was asked how it was intended to inform the public of the steps to follow, such as preparing an emergency pack. In response, it was noted that:

- The North Wales Local Resilience Forum was looking at sharing information and that an annual campaign in September looked at emergency planning, the risks and how to get people to prepare.
- Other events were held throughout the year and the *Preparing for Emergencies* booklet was a public document that was shared.
- The wish was to take information to county shows, etc. in the future, and the Service was expecting the results of a pilot scheme relating to community resilience and was presenting a programme of community resilience to town and community councils so that people were more aware of the risks and knew how to prepare.

It was asked what arrangements were in place in Gwynedd if a missile hit Britain. In response, it was noted that:

- If there was an act of war, it would be a matter for Central Government to engage with the Welsh Government and local authorities to provide advice and information and respond to the situation.
- The Covid period had highlighted the support that Gwynedd received from the Emergency Planning Service, and also regionally and nationally, and in an emergency there were arrangements, not only within the Gwynedd structure, but also within the regional structure, with a representative from Gwynedd attending strategic and tactical level meetings.
- The Chief Executive had received gold training, and more Council officers would be receiving the training.
- Gwynedd was collaborating with the Regional Service at present to keep our method of responding to emergencies alive in the minds of the officers by holding annual desk top training for senior management from now on.

The observation that senior management received training was welcomed, but it was noted that it was important that the workers on the coal face also received the training. In response, it was noted that each of the four sub-groups had members who represented the coal face, and that training was provided for all those members.

**RESOLVED to accept the report and to note the observations.**

## **8. GWYNEDD TOWN CENTRES**

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Economy, the Assistant Head of the Economy and Community Department and the Regeneration Programmes Manager were welcomed to the meeting.

The report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for the Economy was presented, inviting the committee to consider the following in the context of the fact that an element of the 'Regeneration of communities and town centres' project in the Council Plan 2023-28 is to prepare Town/City Centre action plans for individual towns:

- The arrangements for preparing action plans
- Who is included in their development?
- How is it intended to measure the effect of the action plans?

The Cabinet Member set out the context, and the Regeneration Programmes Manager elaborated on the content of the report. Members were then given an opportunity to ask questions and submit observations.

It was asked what the arrangements were for monitoring that all these multi-layered and cross-departmental plans worked effectively and in a timely manner, and it was asked whether the Council had sufficient capacity to undertake the work. In response, it was noted that:

- The Council worked through a cross-departmental forum over the last two to three years, bringing town centre issues together, and that was the intention in terms of this plan, to have input and representation from different departments.
- What would be monitored was very dependent on individual action plans within town centres, and it was believed that there was room in every town centre in Gwynedd to

either develop or update a town centre plan to identify the priorities and monitor the progress against those priorities.

- During the first year of the plan, the need to strengthen the data held for town centre areas was seen. There was some historical data available, but it was believed that there was room to set slightly stronger data for individual towns, rather than counties, so that this was a means of monitoring the trends.

It was asked what would happen if there was a slippage in plans. In response, it was noted that this work-stream had been identified as one of the priorities of the Council's Plan and that it would be an important part of the Department's performance management arrangements over the next five years.

It was asked how confident were we that there was sufficient funding available from the Transforming Towns programme to realise what we were trying to achieve, which was quite ambitious. In response, it was noted that:

- We were currently in year 2 of the three-year Transforming Towns programme, and would have to plan ahead on the basis that there would be a subsequent regeneration programme.
- UK Government funding, namely the Levelling Up and Shared Prosperity funding, had proved to be significantly greater funding than what the Transforming Towns programme had to offer, but over the last two years it was seen from the UK Government programmes that plans needed to be almost ready to start in order to be eligible for the funding.
- It was necessary to prepare the plans in advance and try to anticipate what was going to happen in terms of the UK Government's current programmes, assuming that the focus would continue to be on town centres.
- Gwynedd, in conjunction with other organisations, such as Hwb Caernarfon, had started implementing the Welsh Government's Smart Towns programme which installed free wi-fi in the county's towns to enable information to be captured on, e.g. the number of people who had visited different parts of a town and the length of stay, etc. It did not set a full baseline, and there was more work to be done in terms of data assessment, but it was a means of seeing the impact of specific events or developments on the numbers of people on the high street, etc.

In response to a question regarding the tables in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 of the report, it was confirmed that the towns were not listed in order of priority, and that the intention was to focus attention on all of them as part of the plan. However, it was noted that it would sometimes be necessary to prioritise, as it would not be possible to meet all needs in every town.

It was emphasised that businesses in the villages were just as important to those villages as any business in the centre of a town, and it was asked if there was a danger of the villages missing out as this plan focused on town centres. In response, it was noted that:

- The definition of 'town' was difficult, and varied even from county to county within north Wales.
- We had a significant number of towns in Gwynedd and attempting to focus attention on all of them was a considerable challenge.
- It was hoped that any support for business would be open to villages in any case, and there was very little differentiation between business support in urban areas and in rural areas.

- However, some of the interventions and measures within town centres might be slightly different in their nature to those in villages, but this work was not intended to exclude businesses in villages from being eligible for business support.

It was asked if there was a danger that the Department focused resources on regional plans at the expense of specific plans for Gwynedd. In response, it was noted that Cyngor Gwynedd had taken responsibility for the administration and management of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) programme on behalf of north Wales, which had meant a reduction in working capacity on Gwynedd projects, certainly in the short term.

It was noted that the Arfor 2 plan had created a degree of frustration externally. In response, the Cabinet Member stated that the Department did not deal directly with Arfor 2, but that she would look into this and get back to the member.

Referring to paragraph 4.2 of the report, it was asked how much money came to Gwynedd from the Welsh Government's revenue fund. In response, it was noted that, although it was not believed that there was a specific figure allocated for this, the amount was small, as there was not much revenue money available unfortunately.

Concern was expressed that Aberdyfi could soon be without a grocery shop or a post office, and it was asked what help was available to the community council and the local member to see if it was possible to have at least one grocery shop in the village. In response, it was noted that:

- There would be opportunities arising quite soon in terms of business support for resources in towns and there could be a further conversation with the local member regarding that, outside the meeting.
- Cyngor Gwynedd had to work together with other organisations to respond to the challenges and opportunities in town centres, and it was believed that the community and town councils were extremely important organisations in that process.

It was asked what power the Council had to tidy up empty properties in towns, such as installing window graphics, etc. In response, it was noted that:

- A cross-departmental group had been established to focus on empty properties and it was believed that this also formed part of the Council's priorities.
- Although the Council had enforcement powers in various areas, it was difficult to identify the threshold at which an empty building became an unsightly building which affected local amenities.
- It was difficult to enforce solely on the basis that a building was empty, and when considering any enforcement case, the Council had to present evidence of the harm that was created because of the condition of the property.
- Although the initial work had highlighted complications and some barriers, it was believed that there was more that could be done, and no doubt the empty property group would look at that.
- The method of proving the impact of an empty property on nearby amenities varied from building to building, and depended entirely on which legislation the Council would consider relevant to its specific case, e.g. planning legislation, building control, etc.

It was noted that there was an intention to install window graphics on empty properties in the National Eisteddfod area in August, and it was suggested that this was something for the Council to build on in the future.

In response to a question, it was stated that it was believed that the Council could, in some cases, demand that utility companies restore roads and pavements to their original standard following street works, but this would have to be checked with the Highways, Engineering and YGC Department, and get back to the member.

It was noted that there was a shortage of doctors, nurses, dentists, opticians, etc., in south Meirionnydd, and especially in the Tywyn area, and it was asked how the Council could make Tywyn a more attractive town for people to want to live there. In response, it was noted that:

- It was clear that there were concerns regarding Tywyn specifically, and that a series of meetings had been held recently to discuss the situation.
- The challenge for the future would be to try to identify how to build on the assets and particular characteristics of Tywyn to make it a more attractive town for people to live in.
- It was possible that the element of trying to attract a specific profession or sector was something to be considered as part of the work on Tywyn town centre, in partnership with the relevant stakeholders, such as the Health Board.

The fact that the Department recognised that each town was unique, and tried to plan individually, rather than adopting a top-down approach, was welcomed, starting with the local members and the community councils and other stakeholders in the town. Hope was also expressed that the officers pushed this in the regional discussions and opposed any tendency to obtain solutions from the top down for our towns.

It was suggested that Bethesda was a post-industrial town, rather than a rural centre, as described in paragraph 2.6 of the report, and clarification was requested on the categories of towns in paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6. In response, it was explained that:

- The intention in terms of the categories was to identify the main towns that it was wished to incorporate within the plan.
- The study prepared by Hatch (referred to in paragraph 2.6 of the report) was a piece of work across north Wales to try to identify different types of towns.
- There was a suggestion in the report that different types of towns faced different types of challenges, and that it might be necessary to consider specific measures to respond to the type of challenges these towns were facing.
- It was agreed that Bethesda did not fit neatly into the 'Rural Centres' category, but that some of the post-industrial towns across north Wales were significantly larger towns than Bethesda, and not exactly in the same category either.
- It was hoped that the Hatch study gave some foretaste in terms of identifying different types of towns, and how to set about trying to respond to the challenges of those towns, but that the details would follow in the individual town plans.

It was asked how the Town Centre Plans interwove with the Ardal Ni 2035 regeneration framework, which covered the whole of Gwynedd, and not just the towns. In response, it was noted that:

- Regarding the regeneration framework, the local action plans would offer the framework for projects, whether those were urban or rural, villages or towns.
- What was in the report before the committee were interventions that specifically targeted town centres, but which did not overlap other programmes.

- No doubt there would be a work-stream in terms of rural development, and hopefully there would be opportunities there to realise some of the other priorities that had been identified within the regeneration framework.
- There would be an attempt to identify what the local priorities, interventions and projects were so that we were then able to take advantage of financial opportunities to proceed that met local objectives.

It was asked to what extent movement was seen within town centres as shops selling essentials moved to retail sites on the outskirts/went online, to be replaced by leisure shops and restaurants, etc., e.g. in Pwllheli, where the Maes seemed to be thriving more than the High Street, and Caernarfon, where the area surrounding the Castle seemed to be flourishing more and of a better appearance than Pool Street. In response, it was noted that:

- This was true in every town, and possibly the previous plans did not consider the changes to town centres over the last 10-15 years.
- Changes very often offered new opportunities, and this was believed to be a consideration when developing the current town centre plans.

It was asked whether a situation was anticipated in the long term where some buildings on the high street would need to be demolished as they had no use. In response, it was noted that:

- The current plan would not be able to respond to every challenge in every town centre in Gwynedd, but an attempt would be made to lay the foundations and to do as much as possible during the next five years.
- Work was currently taking place on the Caernarfon town centre plan which was considering some more radical proposals for some sites in the long term.
- It would be necessary to strike a balance between identifying a clear vision and trying to set an achievable target within five years, as it was not the wish to have plans that could not be realised.
- It was necessary to aim to have short and medium-term programmes that were achievable, identifying slightly more radical plans for the long term.
- The passage of time showed how the movement in places like Pwllheli and Caernarfon had taken place, and that there was room for more cross-departmental work in the long term.
- The planning system and process obviously came into that, and there were examples in places like Bethesda, for example, where a shop had been re-purposed as a house.

The importance of ensuring that there were facilities, such as cafés, in town centres was emphasised so that older people, in particular, could socialise. In response, it was noted that:

- Local bodies had the role of looking at more creative ways, possibly, of offering this type of provision.
- There were third sector bodies, etc., that stepped in to offer socialising opportunities, etc.
- It was desired to find solutions that worked for an individual town, which was obviously going to vary from town to town, in accordance with the enthusiasm and vision that was in that town to respond to challenges.

**RESOLVED to accept the report and note the observations and receive an update on the matter within a year.**

**9. EDUCATION AND ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD PROGRAMME 2023/24**

Submitted - the committee's forward programme for 2023/24.

It was agreed to:

- Identify items over a period of 18 months, in order to facilitate preparation for the first meetings of 2024/25;
- Schedule an update on the Gwynedd Town Centres item around this time next year;
- Add Additional Learning Needs in the mainstream and special schools as a potential item on the forward programme.

The Scrutiny Advisor was asked to discuss the forward programme with the Chair and present the revised forward programme to the next meeting, or before that by e-mail to the members.

Members submitted the following observations in relation to the arrangements for the meetings:

It was suggested that this committee was dominated by education items, and it was asked if it would be possible to establish a system of having one meeting to scrutinise education matters, and a subsequent meeting to scrutinise matters that were of a more economic nature. In response, it was noted that:

- An attempt was made to spread the matters across the whole year so that all the pressure did not fall on one department at a certain period.
- The economy items could be put first on the agenda, but the co-opted members attended for the education items specifically, although they were welcome to stay throughout the meeting.

It was suggested that the presence of the co-opted members for the education items alone was not enough of a reason to put the economy/corporate items last on the agenda each time, and that it was necessary to establish an alternating order, informing the co-opted members when the discussion on the education matters was about to start.

A member noted that she remembered a request being made to separate education and economy matters, and that this had been done neatly in the forward programme, but that consideration needed to be given to achieving a balance in terms of the order of the items on the agenda of Committee meetings. She elaborated that she would prefer to see two completely separate scrutiny committees, one for the scrutiny of education matters, and the other for the scrutiny of economy/corporate matters, due to the workload. Another member suggested that economy matters should be scrutinised by the Communities Committee as there was a considerable overlap between the two fields, and that that committee's workload was lighter.

In response to the observations, it was noted that:

- As a result of the review of the effectiveness of scrutiny in Gwynedd, and interviews with some members, a draft report from Audit Wales was expected soon.

- A promise was given at the election last year, when the current system of sharing responsibilities between the three scrutiny committees was established, that that system would be reviewed in 18 months.
- There was an intention, therefore, in the autumn, to review the current system, together with any recommendation in the Wales Audit report, and the members would have input into any changes that would result from that.

A member noted that he was not aware that there had been an opportunity for the members to make observations to Audit Wales, stating that he would be pleased if there was another opportunity for the councillors to make observations individually. In response, it was stated that the intention was to consult the scrutinisers in terms of the internal review of the scrutiny procedure, and the members would be informed of the arrangements after the summer.

**RESOLVED to adopt the committee's work programme for 2023/24.**

#### **10. CORPORATE SUPPORT AND LEGAL PERFORMANCE CHALLENGE MEETINGS**

Submitted - the report of the Scrutiny Advisor inviting the committee to nominate a representative to attend the Corporate Support Department and the Legal Service's performance challenge meetings, in place of Councillor Paul Rowlinson, who had now been nominated to attend the Finance Department's performance challenge meetings.

**RESOLVED to nominate Councillor Cai Larsen to attend the performance challenge meetings of the Corporate Support Department and the Legal Service.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 12.45 pm

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**CHAIR**