EXTRAORDINARY MEETING OF THE COUNCIL 24/10/24

Present: Councillor Beca Roberts (Chair)
          Councillor Ioan Thomas (Vice-chair).

Councillors:- Craig ab Iago, Menna Baines, Beca Brown, Stephen Churchman, Glyn Daniels, Anwen Davies, Dafydd Owen Davies, Elwyn Edwards, Elfed Wyn ap Elwyn, Alan Jones Evans, Gwilym Evans, Dylan Fernley, Delyth Lloyd Griffiths, Jina Gwyrfai, John Brynmor Hughes, Louise Hughes, R. Medwyn Hughes, Iwan Huws, Elin Hywel, Nia Wyn Jeffreys, Anne Lloyd Jones, Berwyn Parry Jones, Dawn Lynne Jones, Dewi Jones, Elin Walker Jones, Elwyn Jones, Gwilym Jones, Gareth Tudor Jones, Huw Wyn Jones, Linda Ann Jones, June Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, Cai Larsen, Beth Lawton, Dafydd Meurig, Dilwyn Morgan, Linda Morgan, Dewi Owen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Gwynfor Owen, Llio Elenid Owen, Gareth Coj Parry, Nigel Pickavance, John Pughe, Rheinallt Puw, Arwyn Herald Roberts, Elfed P Roberts, Gareth A Roberts, John Pughe Roberts, Meryl Roberts, Richard Glyn Roberts, Huw Llwyd Rowlands, Paul Rowlinson, Angela Russell, Dyfrig Siencyn, Peter Thomas, Menna Trenholme, Rob Triggs, Rhys Tudur, Hefin Underwood, Einir Wyn Williams, Elfed Williams, Gareth Williams, Gruffydd Williams, Sasha Williams and Sian Williams.

Officers: Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Geraint Owen (Corporate Director), Dylan Owen (Corporate Director and Statutory Director of Social Services), Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance), Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Ian Jones (Head of Democracy Services), Vera Jones (Democracy and Language Service Manager), Sion Huws (Propriety and Elections Manager) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

1.   **APOLOGIES**

     Apologies were received from Councillor Annwen Hughes.

2.   **DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

     No declarations of personal interest were received.

3.   **THE CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

     Condolences were expressed to Councillor Hefin Underwood on the recent loss of his brother.

     It was also noted that the Council wished to express condolences to everyone within the county's communities who had lost loved ones recently.

     The Council stood in silence as a mark of respect and remembrance.

     It was noted that several Council members had been ill recently, and they were wished a full and speedy recovery.

     Councillor Gwilym Evans, the new member for the Llanberis Ward, was congratulated and welcomed to his first meeting of the Council. His predecessor, Kim Jones, was also thanked for all her work.

     It was noted that there had been a period of change recently and Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn was thanked for his tireless work leading the Council since 2017. It was explained that there would be an opportunity to formally thank him at the next Council meeting.

Councillors Beca Brown, Berwyn Parry Jones, Dafydd Meurig and Elin Walker Jones were also thanked for their hard work as Cabinet Members.

It was noted that the Council would be moving forward with the arrangements to identify the next Leader over the coming days.

4. **URGENT ITEMS**

None to note.

5. **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS (WALES) ACT 2021 – DECISION ON ADOPTING A SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE SYSTEM FOR CYNGOR GWYNEDD ELECTIONS**

Submitted – a report by the Cabinet Member for Corporate and Legal Services noting that Section 8 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 permitted any principal Council to choose between a Simple Majority System ("first past the post") or a Single Transferable Vote System ("STV") for principal councils, and invited the Council to consider the following statutory question following a consultation on changing the voting system:-

In accordance with Section 8 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, that the Council decides to adopt a single transferable vote system for Cyngor Gwynedd elections hereafter.

In presenting the report, the Cabinet Member noted:-

- According to the requirements of the Act, this meeting had been called to discuss this decision only.
- The consultation was undertaken between 15 July and 15 September this year.
- In accordance with the Council's decision, they had consulted with Gwynedd local government constituents and the town and community councils, which was the statutory requirement, and a breakdown of the consultation results was available in Appendix 1 of the report.
- An extensive consultation process had been undertaken using the Council website, the press and the county's libraries. In addition, direct contact was made with every town and community council in Gwynedd.
- The consultation had received extensive publicity in the press and on social media.
- Steps were taken over the consultation period to re-push the information.
- The objective of the consultation was to seek views on a proposal, and not to hold a referendum on the question, and the consultation results contributed to the considerations, rather than set the direction.
- The Council's decision, whatever it may be, had to be based on a range of considerations, including the evaluation of the consultation's results.
- If the members voted in favour of moving to an STV System, it would be a historical opportunity for Cyngor Gwynedd to lead Wales in joining Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in their use of the system, instead of staying with England on the First Past the Post System.
- Every vote was important, and every voice must be heard.
- In the last election, 28 of the 69 seats on Cyngor Gwynedd had been uncontested, and since introducing the STV System in Scotland in 2017, there were fewer uncontested seats in the total number of elections than there had been in only one election in Gwynedd in 2022.
- That Cyngor Gwynedd often led the way in terms of introducing policies that broke new ground, therefore why not this?
- The STV System was a gold standard for electoral systems and it was believed that this was the right thing to do for voters, for the Council and for democracy in

Gwynedd. Therefore, it was proposed that the Council voted in favour of introducing an STV System for Cyngor Gwynedd elections.

- Should the Council decide to adopt the STV System, that would lead to a directive by the Minister for the Democracy and Boundary Commission Wales to hold a review of the electoral arrangements for Cyngor Gwynedd.
- The objective of the process would be to create new wards of between 3 and 6 members, which was required for the implementation of the system.
- The Commission, in accordance with the direction received, would conduct a process similar to the previous electoral review in 2017-2021. According to the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, the Commission, through a consultative process, must develop a model in accordance with the requirements. As the process concluded, the Minister would issue an order, changing the electoral arrangements of Gwynedd.

The Monitoring Officer highlighted some additional points regarding the procedure, namely:-

- That this meeting had been called in accordance with the statutory arrangement that must be followed in terms of issuing a notice of the meeting, etc.
- The consultation process had had to be delayed due to the UK General Election in July.
- In accordance with the statutory procedure, the consultation responders were asked to provide information to be able to check that they were on the current electoral register for local government.
- The report did not include any recommendations or decisions sought as there was only one statutory question for the vote. Also, as two thirds of the number of seats on the Council were needed to vote in favour, there was only one statutory question presented, and the members were asked to vote on that question.
- Should the Council adopt the STV System, it would not be possible to revisit the decision for two election cycles.

The statutory question was proposed by the Cabinet Member, and was seconded.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations.

In terms of the order of the meeting, there was an enquiry whether the Plaid Cymru Group members had received a direction on how to vote on the matter locally or nationally. In response, it was explained that a question could not be asked to another person during a debate, but a member of the group could take the opportunity to answer the question when speaking later on.

The following questions then arose regarding the report:-

- Were the officers happy with the response to the consultation considering that it was unrepresentative of the county's population with only 29% of the responders speaking Welsh and 38% describing themselves as Welsh?
- From reading the observations from the town and community councils in detail, was it true to say that some of the observations noted as being in favour of introducing an STV System actually raised suspicion regarding the procedure by expressing concern regarding increasing the size of wards?
- How was it possible to reconcile the fact that the Language Impact Assessment noted that the consultation had not identified any negative impacts, but Llannor Community Council had referred to a possible adverse effect on the Welsh language?

In response, the Monitoring Officer noted:-

- It was not the officers' place to give their opinion on the propriety of the level of response to the consultation, but it was amongst the highest received to the Council's consultations over the last year and reflected the response level that was generally received to these types of consultations.
- All the information gathered had been included in the papers for the members to draw their own conclusions on the results and the views presented.
- In terms of the Equality Impact Assessment, ultimately we had to assess the bulk of the response and the impact, and the consultation was only part of the information. The assessment had found that the impact on the Welsh language and other characteristics was neutral, which was based on the overall evidence. Therefore, it was believed that the assessment was correct and balanced in terms of the responses.

During the follow-up discussion, a number of observations in favour and against adopting the STV System for Cyngor Gwynedd elections were presented. When presenting his observations, the Chair of the Plaid Cymru Group confirmed, although Plaid Cymru's national policy was to support an STV System on every level, the Group had not received any direction or whip from the centre on how to vote, and that some Group members intended to vote in favour of the STV System, and others against.

The reasons for supporting an STV System included :-

- That an STV System produced results that were more representative of the way that people voted.
- That the Simple Majority System created majorities out of minorities and that it was fair to have a system that reflected the proportion of the vote.
- That all the political parties across the UK had trouble finding candidates, and that the STV System was one way of doing that. By using those candidates, it could be ensured that more people had the opportunity to vote for them.
- The current arrangement was broken and people had questioned what mandate did the Councillors have who had come onto the Council uncontested.
- The STV System better reflected the wishes of the electors.
- That it seemed that a multi-member ward system worked well in the Isle of Anglesey County Council and the arrangement was also popular in Scotland and Northern Ireland because electors were able to contact more than one councillor to get a solution to a problem.
- Creating multi-member wards did not mean losing the local connection as the councillors would still be known in the area, and sharing a seat also meant sharing the burden.
- The current arrangement was disproportionate and unfair. For example, in the last General Election, Labour won 80% of the seats in Wales, with just over a third of the votes.
- The current arrangement was wasteful with most people's votes not leading to electing anyone. For example, in the last General Election, 18,500 of Meirion Dwyfor electors had gone out to vote but not elected anyone. To the contrary, every vote counted with the STV System.
- The STV System empowered the elector at the expense of political parties as it allowed people to vote for individuals as well as the party. Therefore, it was healthier for democracy in the long run as it did not put too much power in the hands of parties.
- An STV System would lead to kinder politics as people would have to look, not only for their own first votes, but a second, third and fourth vote for other people. Also, there would be less temptation for people to criticise each other, especially during an election period.
- This Council had been described recently as one of the most outward-looking councils in Wales due to matters such as the Council Tax Premium and Article 4

Direction, and they wished to see Gwynedd continuing to lead Wales as a leading, bold council by adopting the STV System.

- One of the most obvious characteristics of the STV System was that it encouraged councillors to work hard as they competed against councillors from the same parties.
- It was a matter of sadness that so few people, especially young people, fully associated with the democratic process, and although introducing an STV System would not solve all the frustrations, this could go a long way towards being more inclusive and fairer, by making people feel that their vote counted.
- An STV System would encourage better choice, better variety and provide a better sense of representation for the people of the county.
- It was understood that there were concerns that an STV System could give a foothold to the extreme right-wing, but political frustration was partially responsible for driving people in this direction. It was assumed that the right-wing campaign groups and parties would possibly be less attractive if people felt that they were included and heard by the electoral system. It was also noted that no extreme right-wing member had been appointed in Scotland under the STV system.
- Those members who represented Bangor City on this Council already worked together and shared expertise across ward boundaries, and also in Bangor more widely due to the nature of the city.
- There was no need to worry too much about the changes to the boundaries as a result of adopting an STV System as there would be an opportunity for the Council to discuss the options proposed with the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales.
- In terms of work pressure, councillors would not be expected to serve on every community council within the ward under the STV system.
- There was no need to worry about the complexity of the STV System with regards to the electors, and although there were complexities in the counting, there would be professional people doing the work.
- Although it was accepted that members knew their areas, it was not a bad thing for them to get to know a wider area.
- Councillors would not be alone in large wards as they would have to work with other people. It was believed that this would be good in terms of coming to understand and appreciate other people's views.
- The current arrangement could not provide sufficient choice to the people of Gwynedd and was failing to attract people out to vote.
- The STV System managed to attract more young people, more women and more people which better reflected the community into politics.

The reasons for objecting an STV System included:-

- There was a risk for the large wards that would be created under an STV System to weaken the relationship between county councillors and the communities that they represented.
- That some councillors were already on three community councils as well as school governing bodies, and those requirements would increase should the wards be extended.
- That an STV System better suited national politics than local politics.
- That the Simple Majority System was a procedure where the boundaries were completely known, a system where councillors lived and had been brought up amongst their electors and had a good recognition and understanding of their area, and a system where councillors represented an area with its boundaries close to their homes.
- The current election system was completely clear and it was easy to conclude who had won. To the contrary, the STV System was an expensive and unclear

process which took about two days to count the votes and could cost approximately £16,000.

- It was not true to say that every vote counted under the STV System as people would lose, and the same number of councillors would be elected ultimately.

- There was a myth that the STV System would encourage more collaboration, but it was believed that the reality would be a lack of accountability, people representing areas that were too large and no one dealing with specific local matters.

- There was talk that the STV System would be more inclusive, but it was a procedure that would certainly favour political parties and their tactics.

- An STV System would lead to losing the personal connection with the local councillor, as there would be regional councillors afterwards. Also, there would be a loss of responsibility for local matters, loss of insights on local matters and knowledge of the area.

- Naturally, 3-6 member wards would also be 3-6 times bigger in terms of size, and no one could do justice with such a large and unmanageable ward and representing all the constituents within that ward. It would, therefore, be a matter of picking and choosing and sharing duties, which would be more difficult, awkward, time-consuming and ineffective. Also, the larger the wards, the more difficult it would be to canvass at the time of an election.

- An STV System would mean losing the sovereignty of a small area with no one no longer representing a completely rural area. It would also mean losing historical areas and their boundaries.

- Larger wards would mean that the majority of constituents were urban and it would be difficult for the councillor to represent two cohorts in their ward, namely countryside people and townspeople.

- As the boundaries for wards under the STV System were currently unknown, the Council was expected to vote blindly on the matter.

- The Local Democracy and Boundary Commission Wales would decide on the boundaries of the new wards under the STV System, namely the exact people who had recommended to create a new constituency for Senedd Cymru that would extend from Aberdaron all the way to the border with England. It was believed that this was completely unsuitable and incompatible.

- It was not believed that the system was broken. Instead, indifference prevented people from going to vote as they had been disappointed so much over the years with politicians' empty promises, and moving towards an STV System would not change that.

- In terms of closed lists, there was a risk for people from outside of the community to be elected to safe seats, as it was parties, and not electors, that decided who would represent them.

- It was the role of the local councillor to be a local voice on behalf of their community and to not be part of a consortium that serves a whole region. Such an arrangement would mean losing accountability.

- Although it was claimed that no-one would be elected uncontested under an STV System, there was no assurance that more people would stand for election in 3-6 member wards.

- It was not believed that an STV System would lead to kinder politics, but instead, the opposite of that.

- That 61% of the town and community councils who had responded to the consultation had responded strongly against any change to the arrangement. As those town and community councils had been elected via a democratic system, they were representative of the county's population. To the contrary, 72% of the individuals who had responded were in favour of changing the arrangement, but it was believed that town and community councils bore more weight on the scales.

- Changing to an STV System and increasing the size of wards would cloud the relationship between our areas' population and those who represented that

population, leading to distance, unfamiliarity, alienation and lack of information amongst representatives and the population of the areas that they represented. The arrangement would also surely lead to more indifference and less interest due to thinning the link between local elections and local areas.

- An STV System would favour wealthy and organised parties. In Gwynedd's case, although it would surely favour Plaid Cymru, it would also favour other parties, including extreme right-wing parties.

On a more general note:-

- There was considerable discontent that the Welsh Government had asked individual councils to decide on their own voting arrangement, instead of providing a direction on how to act from the centre.
- It was suggested that the response to the consultation should show that a voting system was not at the front of people's minds in the county during a period of cuts and financial austerity.

A vote was taken on the proposal, namely:-

In accordance with Section 8 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, that the Council decides to adopt a single transferable vote system for Cyngor Gwynedd elections hereafter.

The Chair noted that 45 members had voted in favour, 1 abstention and 22 against.

(In order to adopt the single transferable vote system, the number of members who voted in favour had to be at least two thirds of the number of seats on the Council, namely 46 out of 69. As the threshold of 46 was not met, the system will not change for the 2027 elections and the review of Electoral Arrangements will not commence.)

RESOLVED not to adopt a single transferable vote system for Cyngor Gwynedd elections hereafter in accordance with Section 8 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

The meeting commenced at 1.30pm and concluded at 3.10pm.

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CHAIR