

THE CABINET TUESDAY, 26 NOVEMBER 2024

Present -

Councillors: Nia Jeffreys, Craig ab Iago, Dilwyn Morgan, Paul Rowlinson and Menna Trenholme.

Also present -

Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Geraint Owen (Corporate Director), Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Dewi Morgan (Head of Finance Department) and Rhodri Jones (Democracy Services Officer).

- Item 6: Lowri Wyn Morton (Senior Research and Analytics Officer, Corporate Services).
- Item 7: Carys Fon Williams (Head of Housing and Property Department).
- Item 8: Sioned Eirian Williams (Head of Economy and Community Department).
- Item 9: Ian Jones (Head of Corporate Services Department).
- Item 10: Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department).

1. APOLOGIES

The Cabinet Members and the Officers were welcomed to the meeting by the Deputy Leader of the Council.

All Council staff were thanked for their hard work to ensure that Gwynedd residents were safe following the recent poor weather.

Attention was drawn to the global White Ribbon campaign day (25 November), which worked to stop violence against women and girls. It was confirmed that Cyngor Gwynedd had received an accreditation in May 2022, as an acknowledgement of efforts within the organisation to make a genuine difference.

No apologies were received.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

There were no declarations of personal interest.

3. URGENT ITEMS

There were no urgent items.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY

There were no matters arising from overview and scrutiny.

5. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2024 were accepted as a true record.

6. COUNCIL TAX: DISCRETIONARY POWERS TO ALLOW DISCOUNTS AND / OR RAISE A PREMIUM ON SECOND HOMES AND LONG-TERM EMPTY DWELLINGS

The report was submitted by Councillor Paul Rowlinson.

DECISION

Recommend to the full Council that the following is the preferred option with regards to the level of Premium on the Council Tax of Second Homes and Long-term Empty Dwellings for the 2025/26 financial year:

- **That Cyngor Gwynedd allows no discount on class A second homes, under Section 12 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (i.e. no change).**
- **That Cyngor Gwynedd allows no discount and raises a premium of 150% on class B second homes, under Section 12B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (i.e. no change).**
- **That Cyngor Gwynedd allows no discount on homes that have been empty for 6 months or more and charges a premium of 100% on homes that have been empty for 12 months or more, in accordance with Section 12A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (i.e. no change).**

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted confirming that a decision had to be made on the Council Tax premium levels for second homes and empty dwellings annually in a meeting of the Full Council. Members were reminded that the Premium levels were currently 150% for second homes and 100% for dwellings that had been empty for 6 months or longer (long-term). It was explained that the premium levels would automatically increase if there was an increase to the Council Tax setting.

A recommendation was proposed for the premium levels for second homes and empty dwellings to remain on the same levels for the next year.

The need to follow guidelines published by the Welsh Government was explained, confirming that new guidelines had been introduced since the premium levels were decided by the Full Council last year. It was detailed that the latest guidelines noted that the Local Authorities had the power to increase empty dwelling premium to encourage owners to bring these dwellings back into use, as well as increasing the supply of affordable housing available and make communities more sustainable.

It was reported that the latest guidelines introduced by the Welsh Government noted that a number of factors should be considered when deciding on the premium levels of Council Tax for second homes and empty dwellings. It was detailed that these included:

- The number and percentages of long-term empty properties and second homes in the local area
- The locations of the buildings
- Impact on house prices and affordability
- The local economy

- Tourism industry
- Public services
- The local community
- The Welsh language

It was reported that the Council had considered a number of other measures to ensure that more houses were available for residents to bring empty properties back into use.

It was confirmed that a public consultation was undertaken before introducing a Council Tax premium for second homes and empty dwellings for the first time, and before the premium was raised over 100%. It was ensured that the Council had implemented this requirement, reminding members that the latest consultation had been undertaken when increasing the Council Tax premium for second homes to 150%, back in 2022. It was noted that the latest guidelines had noted that there was no need to undertake further consultation should the Council wish to increase the premium levels once again, but evidence must be presented to show that detailed processes had been followed to justify reaching that decision.

It was reiterated that the Council's Research and Information service had been undertaking research on the impact of the Council Tax premium on second homes and empty dwellings recently, noting that there was not much change to the situation. It could be concluded from the results of the work that the premium levels did not need to be changed this year. It was reported that the results of the research did not show that the current premium levels were unsuitable. It seemed that the historical tendency of a main dwelling being converted into a second home had changed as a result of the premium, confirming that more second homes had been converted back into main residences. It was suggested that the Council Tax premium policy worked.

It was emphasised that the Article 4 Direction was also a useful tool for the Council because a planning application had to be presented to convert a main residence into a second home or short-term holiday accommodation, since it had become operational in September 2024. It was explained that these planning applications could be refused if the building was in an area where residents experienced difficulties finding a home due to the pressures of second homes on the community. The importance of monitoring the Direction was emphasised, ensuring the need for it to be operational for longer before assessing its impact fully.

Attention was drawn to the fact that the Welsh Government had expanded letting thresholds within the Non-domestic Rating (Amending the Definition of Domestic Property) (Wales) Order 2022, to approve a self-catering property paying non-domestic tax instead of Council Tax, if it did not reach the thresholds of the definition of the Order. It was explained that the property had to pay a second home Premium, as well as Council Tax if it did not address relevant thresholds. It was confirmed that the Council had the discretionary power to choose not to increase the premium in such situations, noting that consideration would be given to using these powers in the future, reiterating the need to develop a clear policy of the relevant exemptions. It was reiterated that the relevant types of developments included barns that had been converted into holiday accommodation, annexes, holiday cabins and caravans.

It was explained that the Welsh Government's latest guidelines noted that it was possible to appoint a revised premium level for dwellings that were empty for a long period. It was confirmed that this allowed the Local Authority to increase the incremental Council Tax premium levels on empty dwellings as they became empty for increasing periods of time. It was reported that some Local Authorities increased the premium levels according to this arrangement and it was noted that this would be considered by Cyngor Gwynedd for the future.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- Attention was drawn to Plan 3E of the Housing Action Plan which detailed Council Tax exemptions on empty homes, in situations where residents purchased homes in which they were unable to live until work had been completed.
- It was confirmed that further research into the impact of the premium on the housing stock in Gwynedd was intended, to ensure that the latest information was available for the Council when deciding on the Council Tax premium levels annually.
 - In response to an enquiry on capacity and resources to gather the necessary data, it was acknowledged that the Information and Research Service was not located within the Finance Department but officers had given assurance of their enthusiasm to continue to gather this data for the future.
- It was asked whether a timetable had been taken into account to consider increasing the incremental premium levels on dwellings that were empty for extended periods.
 - In response, it was confirmed that a timetable had not been decided at present, but the need to engage with other Authorities was emphasised to get a better understanding of their arrangements and the impact that this had to ensure that empty dwellings were used once again.
 - It was assured that conducting this research was a priority for the Council, confirming that resources would be released to complete this.
- The possibility of conducting a public consultation following this necessary research on empty dwellings' incremental premium levels was explained. It was confirmed that some Authorities were increasing the premium level to a maximum of 300% for properties that were empty for a period of 5 years or longer and conducting a consultation would be necessary to ensure that such an arrangement was suitable to this area.

7. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PROPERTY

The report was submitted by Craig ab Iago.

DECISION

To accept and note the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted confirming that the housing crisis continued in Gwynedd and nationally.

Pride was expressed that Cyngor Gwynedd was the only authority in Wales that had reduced homelessness numbers and the costs of bed and breakfast emergency accommodation this year. It was reported that this confirmed the Department's robust procedures and policies. It was reiterated that the Department had held a 'Homelessness Awareness Week' recently to educate and draw attention to this subject, noting that the response to the campaign had been positive.

Pride was expressed that Dôl Sadler, a supported accommodation site for homeless individuals, the first location of a wider plan in Gwynedd, had reached the short-list for the 'Best Supported Housing Development: Rural/Suburban' award from Inside Housing recently. Hundreds of nominations had been presented for the award and the Department was very proud to reach the short-list.

It was reiterated that other projects were underway to get to grips with the homelessness emergency, namely 137 High Street, Bangor. It was confirmed that this project was a good example of the support available for anyone who experienced homelessness and it was hoped to get more similar locations in the future.

It was confirmed that over 317 social houses had now been built since commencing the current Housing Action Plan. It was reiterated that this had helped to provide 840 Gwynedd residents with a home. It was reported that there were over 220 houses underway over the next year.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- Attention was drawn to the fact that the figures for providing Telecare service had reduced recently and it was asked whether there was an opportunity to collaborate more effectively with the team providing the service.
 - In response to the observation, it was acknowledged that these figures had reduced recently because officers were developing a digital version of the service, instead of an analogue version. Due to this, it was noted that they needed to visit each house that used the service to upgrade it. It was acknowledged that this had put an additional workload on the service and had led to a drop in numbers who received Telecare support for the first time. It was confirmed that this work was proceeding well and they hoped that every service user had the digital version by the end of March 2025.
- It was confirmed that the Scrutiny process was very important to the Council's operation, noting that the Department had received positive feedback about the Housing Action Plan from the Care Scrutiny Committee.
 - It was reiterated that the Department had also attended a Care Scrutiny Committee to discuss the Allocation Policy and other matters, noting that they were very constructive sessions. It was added that a recent Scrutiny session had been held with the Department and representatives from the Housing Agencies and that it was a very valuable opportunity to share a lot of information.
- Reference was made to the support Packages available for private landlords as part of the Leasing Scheme Wales, appealing to Meirionnydd landlords to contact the department to discuss the opportunities available to them.
- The Department and its partners were congratulated for their work in the homelessness field.

8. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMY AND COMMUNITY

The report was submitted by the Head of Economy and Community Department.

DECISION

To accept and note the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted, reminding members that the Department was responsible for three schemes within the Council Plan. It was reported that a general risk was seen in all of those schemes, which was that their main funding source would come to an end at the end of March 2025.

It was explained that updates had been confirmed since submitting this written report to the Cabinet. There was an update that the Government's 'Levelling up' plan funding had been extended until March 2027. It was reiterated that the Department was expecting confirmation that the SPF (Shared Prosperity Fund) budget was being extended for an additional year, with an official confirmation on its way.

It was acknowledged that financial uncertainty continued with some funds, namely the ARFOR fund. It was noted that more information regarding this budget was expected following the Welsh Government's budget announcement within the next few weeks.

Details were given on the Regenerating Communities and Town Centres project, noting that there was progress to the project's development following the SPF budget. It was explained that 22 enterprise and local organisations projects were being implemented within the project. It was confirmed that a budget of £1.8 million was currently being used to develop these projects until March 2025. It was reported that a Placemaking Plan had been developed for Pwllheli, Porthmadog and Bala, with a plan being prepared for Dolgellau. It was reiterated that additional Transforming Towns funding had been confirmed to improve Canolfan Bro Tegid, Bala and Cynllun y Tŵr, Pwllheli.

It was confirmed that the Strategic Outline Case for the Bangor Health and Well-being Hub had been approved by Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board, noting that a request for financial contribution from the Welsh Government had already been submitted.

Attention was drawn to the 'Creating the best possible circumstances in Gwynedd for community enterprises and businesses to thrive, and support the people of Gwynedd into work' project. It was explained that a £1.4 million budget funded by the SPF had been delegated to Business Development Funds, with 45 Gwynedd businesses having received offers of support to date.

Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn was thanked for his prominent work to ensure an ARFOR budget to Authorities in west Wales, with the hope that the funding would continue for the next financial year. It was also reiterated that he had also been doing leading work within the North Wales Growth Deal Application plan, giving special attention to the Digital Programme, Energy, Tourism, Agri Food and Land and Property plans.

Reference was made to the 'Gwynedd Business Week' held in October. It was explained that it had been a very successful week with many businesses taking part in events in Dolgellau, Bangor and Pwllheli. It was confirmed that a specific newsletter would be shared with all Gwynedd Councillors with further details about the events and the feedback received from Gwynedd businesses.

The Gwaith Gwynedd service was thanked for their support this year, as they ensured that 203 Gwynedd residents had got a job during 2024/25 to date. It was reiterated that 8 job fairs had also been held to help residents to find work and help employers to fill vacant posts. It was confirmed that over 130 employers had attended these fairs with over 750 individuals present.

It was noted that a new management structure for the Sustainable Visitor Economy Plan was now operational and led on the development of the Action Plan for 2024/25. The fact that arrangements had been successful was added, thanking all the partners.

Reference was made to the Llewyrch o'r Llechi programme which created local benefit to the Wales Slate Landscape World Heritage Site designation. Attention was drawn to upgrading work which had been undertaken in Neuadd Ogwen, Bethesda recently, noting that it had almost been completed by now. It was noted that many investments were being developed currently, namely Parc Padarn, Llanberis Slate Museum, Blaenau Ffestiniog link path and Aelwyd yr Urdd Blaenau Ffestiniog. Pride was expressed that £2m had been confirmed by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to extend support to the slate communities for a period of 5 years.

Pride was expressed that the Byw'n Iach company had managed to restore the service following very challenging years as a result of the pandemic. It was confirmed that performance levels had increased to the same levels as the pre-Covid-19 period. Reference was also made to a number of improvements and upgrading work underway in Parc Padarn and Parc Glynllifon. It was explained that these Rural Parks used a new customer satisfaction reporting system and an increase had been seen in the results compared to 2023/24 when the system was used for the first time.

It was acknowledged that the summer season's fluctuating weather this summer had had an impact on the Department's maritime service. It was explained that this was mainly seen in the lack of income in the car parks of the county's beaches. However, it was noted that the fluctuating weather had been beneficial to some services, such as Neuadd Dwyfor.

It was explained that the Lloyd George Museum was closed so as to complete renovation investments currently. It was hoped that the museum would re-open by Easter 2025 after the work had been completed.

It was reported that there was a pattern of reduction of the number of people who used library books. However, it was emphasised that an increase had been seen in the number of digital service users, as well as the services provided in libraries to support people. It was confirmed that a very positive response had been received from service users. Nia Gruffydd (Library Service Strategic Manager) was thanked for her leading work to develop changes to the library management system (LMS) for the

benefit of libraries throughout Wales. It was confirmed that her work would ensure a more cost-effective service nationally.

It was noted that the Department was working to achieve savings plans currently. It was acknowledged that further work was being undertaken to check the income levels of Neuadd Dwyfor as part of this work. It was anticipated that the Department would overspend by approximately £127,000 by the end of this financial year. However, it was emphasised that steps had been identified to try to manage and reduce this deficit over the coming months.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn was thanked for his work within the Economy and Community field locally, regionally and nationally. Specific attention was drawn to his work on the Sustainable Visitor Economy Strategy, ARFOR and the Rural Forum.
- The Byw'n Iach company was praised for ensuring an increase in use and income following the pandemic. Attention was drawn to the Byw'n Iach customer satisfaction results, asking the Department whether there was an intention to upgrade fitness rooms and other departments of the leisure centres.
 - It was confirmed that there was an intention to upgrade the centres. It was emphasised that a financial bid had been submitted to the Council this year. It was also explained that a fund was available to this end, but it would be used as required, instead of completing all the work across the County together. It was also noted that this allowed the Department to have the opportunity to assess whether the upgrading work would lead to an increase in users and income.
- The Department was thanked for their work. The staff and councillors were encouraged to share information about the successes of the economy with the County's residents.

9. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR CORPORATE AND LEGAL SERVICES

The report was submitted by Councillor Menna Trenholme.

DECISION

To accept and note the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted on the Corporate Services Department, drawing attention to the following main points:

It was confirmed that the Department led on 6 projects within the different priority fields of the Council Plan 2023-28.

It was reported that a fifth series of the 'Women in Leadership' development programme was currently underway. Pride was expressed that women from every department were interested in taking part in the programme. Pride was expressed that

the figure of women in managerial posts was 41%, which was an increase of 11% since establishing the project. It was confirmed that data was increasing, and the impact of the project was being updated continuously.

A pilot to submit anonymous job application forms was held this year. It was noted that the pilot would be adopted in the long term for posts from the 'Team Leader' and higher pay point, following positive feedback by managers who had appointed staff during the plan's period. It was explained that it was a standard method of considering applications and it was confirmed that the arrangements would be reviewed every 6 months.

Members were reminded that the Strategic Equality Plan 2024-28 had been adopted as part of the 'Ensuring Fairness for Everyone' project. It was explained that different services within the Council collaborated to manage various aspects of the plan. Pride was expressed that work had been undertaken to develop detailed milestones for all areas, with all of them on track to be completed in a timely manner this year. In addition, it was noted that training on manager duties in the equality field was in the process of being created, with specific information on how to conduct equality impact assessments. It was emphasised that heads of departments had access to information that provided an accurate picture of the number of staff who had completed the core training on equality.

Pride was expressed that there were over 300 applications for the apprenticeships plan this year, noting that this was approximately twice the number of applicants last year. It was confirmed that 15 new apprentices and 5 new professional trainees had been appointed. It was explained that this meant that the Council currently employed 51 apprentices and professional trainees on full-time contracts. Pride was expressed that 8 apprentices and 2 professional trainees had completed their qualifications and received full-time jobs with the Council recently. Attention was also drawn to 4 additional people who had been employed through the Talent Pool.

Specific attention was drawn to the Information and Research Service, thanking them for their detailed work in assessing the impact of the Council Tax Premium recently. It was reiterated that they had also received acknowledgement recently for their review of older people care services for the future in Gwynedd through the Llechen Lân plan, as the work had reached a short-list in a national event in the research field, with the result to be announced soon.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- The Department was congratulated on the success of the 'Women in Leadership' plan and apprentices plan.
- Reference was made to the 'Keeping the Benefit Local' plan, asking for further information on the development of the plan.
 - It was explained that the plan tried to ensure that local businesses could compete and win procurement contracts with the Council to ensure that as much of the Council's expenditure as possible would remain local. It was noted that this led to social benefits for Gwynedd. It was reported that there was an intention to build on the benefits for the future.

The report was submitted on the Legal Services Department, drawing attention to the following main points:

It was explained that the Legal Service's performance was being monitored by receiving feedback from the Departments that used it. It was reiterated that the feedback received within the current financial year confirmed that 100% of the Legal Service's users were very satisfied with the service provided.

Pride was expressed that the Service had benefited from being part of Cynllun Yfory for some years, and it was noted that the Service had managed to attract individuals' interest who achieved their qualifications and received jobs within the Service. It was elaborated that the Service had also benefited from the apprenticeships scheme, noting that the Service's first para-legal apprentice had been appointed recently. It was confirmed that an apprentice had also been appointed within the Elections Team.

Assurance was given that the recruiting problems within the Legal Service had now been resolved, noting that the Service could plan to address regional requirements. It was explained that an increase was seen in the demand for resources as the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee prepared to be operational.

It was confirmed that two elections had been held recently. It was explained that the General Election was a new challenge for the Elections service as it was a cross-border election, requiring effective collaboration with the Conwy and Denbighshire authorities.

All the staff from the Corporate Services and Legal Services were thanked for their work over the last year.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- Attention was drawn to the Welsh Government's pilot scheme to establish the most accurate and effective way to register electors without them having to apply.
 - It was explained that the Council had committed to the pilot to automatically register residents to Government elections, using data that was available to the Council. It was hoped that this would increase the number of voters in the United Kingdom elections and the Senedd elections in Wales. It was noted that the pilot would be implemented from 2025 onwards and therefore the Elections team worked on systems to resolve any defects.

10. PERFORMANCE REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ADULTS, HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The report was submitted by Councillor Dilwyn Morgan.

DECISION

To accept and note the information in the report.

DISCUSSION

The report was submitted thanking all care workers who were working to support vulnerable people throughout the year, and especially during the extreme weather recently.

It was confirmed that there had been work to upgrade care homes in Abermaw and Dolgellau. In the same manner, pride was expressed regarding the work in Hafod Mawddach. It was confirmed that work was ongoing to find suitable individuals to use the equipment available in Abermaw and Hafod Mawddach currently. Pride was expressed that the necessary specialist Dementia care was now available to patients in Hafod Mawddach following a challenging period.

It was acknowledged that the Council's ability to act as a landlord in Tŷ Meurig, which provided accommodation to individuals who received the Department's support, had been challenging in the past. Despite this, it was confirmed that the Council had received confirmation that it was possible to act as a landlord and provide tenancy, ensuring more control over the provision for similar developments. It was elaborated that the Department had collaborated with the Housing and Property Department to design the building in the hope of receiving planning permission when timely.

It was explained that there was a slight slippage in the timetable to develop supported housing where it was intended to be ready by the end of the current financial year. However, it was confirmed that the Department was trying to ensure that this house in Pwllheli would be ready before summer 2025. It was elaborated that a second house in Penrhyndeudraeth was likely to be ready by spring 2025.

It was reported that the tendering work to develop Canolfan Dolfeurig had been undertaken recently, but the bids submitted were substantially higher than the funding committed to within the Council's Plan. It was elaborated that the department had been holding discussions with the Welsh Government regarding the possibility of funding the gap in the plan's costs and it was emphasised that the decision would be announced very soon, to be able to commence the development of the site.

Pride was expressed that a Learning Disability Career Pathway Coordinator had been appointed and work to promote work opportunities and support individuals into paid work was underway.

It was explained that the percentage of unmet domiciliary care hours was at its lowest for a year, with 84 individuals waiting for domiciliary care. It was emphasised that the Department was holding discussions with partners nationally to ensure that fewer people had to wait for a domiciliary care service in the future.

Attention was drawn to the Older People, Physical and Sensory Disabilities Service, acknowledging that the waiting list to receive a care assessment continued to increase. It was explained that the main challenge related to lack of occupational therapists' capacity. Emphasis was given to the fact that the Department was aware of these challenges, trying to ensure that resources and officers were targeted effectively to resolve some of the problems arising.

It was noted that an increase could be seen in the percentage of adults who received direct payments to fund their own care arrangements. It was elaborated that many guidelines had been developed, as well as campaigns to promote this proposal.

Observations arising from the discussion:

- All the individuals in the County who were unpaid carers were thanked. It was acknowledged that their work was extremely important as part of Care provision in Gwynedd. It was emphasised that one of the Department's strategic priorities was campaigning to share information about the support available for unpaid carers, such as education and work support, encouraging carers of any age to contact the Council if they were caring for their loved ones.

The meeting commenced at 1.00pm and concluded at 2.30pm.

CHAIR