

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Date of meeting:	3 NOVEMBER 2020
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Gareth Wyn Griffith
Contact officer:	Dafydd Wyn Williams – Head of Environment Department
Contact Number:	32371
Subject:	Appoint three Community Engagement Officers to assist with work deriving from the pandemic

THE DECISION SOUGHT

That the Cabinet agrees to underwrite the cost of employing three Community Engagement Officers for the Environment Department for an interim period, up to 31 March 2022, and agrees for the Head of Environment Department to recruit as soon as possible.

REASONS FOR THE NEED FOR A DECISION

In order to be able to recruit as soon as possible to assist with the work of responding to the pandemic, by appointing three Community Engagement Officers to advise and to engage with communities and businesses in Gwynedd.

As part of the above, to set up a training scheme for the three Community Engagement Officers, which could contribute towards providing the Council's Public Protection Services with resilience in future.

INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 Following the workshop held on 10 September 2020 with Cabinet Members, the matters that had arisen during the pandemic were reported to a meeting of the Cabinet held on 15 September 2020. One of the matters that arose and required attention from the Environment Department and then the Cabinet referred to the field of Public Health, where it was noted:

"The lockdown and the period that followed have highlighted a great desire by our residents to ensure that we address public health matters. The demand has been significantly higher than the resource we have to satisfy it.

Looking at these matters through the eyes of our residents, the aspiration is not unreasonable. Unfortunately, a decade of financial hardship has meant that we no longer have the resilience resources. Consideration will need to be given as to how to close the circle."

- 1.2 This report includes the Department's temporary response to the above, and looks at providing a short-term urgent response that will assist the work of the Public Protection Services by being the direct contact with businesses and communities. Also, we are looking at this as part of a training scheme over time, which will set the foundations for attempting to contribute towards long-term resilience for the Public Protection Services.

FUNDING AND REGIONAL MATTERS

- 1.3 The situation of the Public Protection Services, as noted above, is not unique to Gwynedd, and recently the six Councils in the region have submitted an application for grant funding from Welsh Government's Hardship Fund. The application mostly focuses on attempting to gain an urgent resolution by receiving funding to employ three (FTE) Public Protection Enforcement Officers (Covid-19) each for the six Councils. It is noted that these would be Community Engagement Officers for Gwynedd, and more is explained about their role in parts 1.11 to 1.15 of the report.
- 1.4 The application was submitted by Conwy Council on behalf of the region's authorities, and Welsh Government has approved a grant of £426,000 for the authorities. The grant is expected to be shared equally, meaning a grant of £71,000 for Gwynedd, and the fund will be available up until the end of March 2021; however, it is understood that this will also be extended for the following financial year (this is to be confirmed).
- 1.5 The grant funding from the first bid has not yet been received (although it is on the way) and there is no formal confirmation of what will happen with the grant for the next financial year. Therefore, the Cabinet is requested to agree for the Council to underwrite the cost of employing the three officers on a GS4 salary, for a period commencing 1 December 2020 to the end of March 2022, at a total cost of £113,220 (including on-costs).

THE COUNCIL'S PUBLIC PROTECTION SERVICES

- 1.6 Prior to the pandemic, there were three Public Protection Services in the Department, namely:
- Pollution Control and Licensing Service
 - Trading Standards and Animal Health / Animal Feed Services
 - Food, Health and Safety Service (including infectious diseases)
- 1.7 In light of the pandemic, Public Protection duties involving infectious diseases have clearly become one of the Council's main priorities, and therefore new Services have been created to support the relevant work, namely:

- Test, Trace and Protect Services - Covid

- 1.8 In light of the pandemic, the importance of the role of the Public Protection Services has become more apparent in terms of protecting the health of our communities, as well as advising and supporting the businesses of the County and the expectation that we use our enforcement powers in light of allegations of breaching the Coronavirus regulations.
- 1.9 The majority of the duties with regard to enforcing new Coronavirus regulations have been implemented by Public Protection officers, however, there is a need for stricter enforcement and, at the same time, visual presence is required in our towns.
- 1.10 As the Public Protection Services go about examining complaints, advising and enforcing where there is justification to do so, it is extremely difficult to provide a regular visual presence out in our communities to engage with communities and businesses.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OFFICERS

- 1.11 In the short term, the purpose of the three Community Engagement Officers is to have a visual presence in our communities and towns, who advise and assist businesses and residents on Covid issues, as well as report back on issues that could arise at the time. It is intended for them to become familiar faces in our communities, and a direct contact between Public Protection Services (and other Council Departments where practical) and Gwynedd residents and businesses. This can then assist the Public Protection Services to focus more on issues that are more complex and contentious in nature.
- 1.12 The Community Engagement Officers will be part of the current network of Council officers who work with communities such as Regeneration Officers etc., as well as working closely with partners such as the Police. Of course, they will also be an important contact with the Town and Community Councils as well as Local Members.
- 1.13 It is intended to use the temporary period as an opportunity to invest in these Officers in the short term, but with an eye on the long term. Therefore, as well as an initial training programme (which will be undertaken by the Public Protection Services) in order to prepare the individuals to go out to the towns and communities, a programme of more comprehensive training will be drawn up for the full period, and this includes:
- Training and experiences of working in various fields of work across the Public Protection Services.
 - Allocating officers from the Public Protection Services to mentor the Community Engagement Officers.
 - The above will include shadowing Public Protection officers in their day-to-day work.

- 1.14 Appointing the interim posts would therefore not only contribute towards the work of the pandemic, but will also be an opportunity to attempt to develop careers for the individuals in Public Protection fields, which could assist the Council to create more resilient Services in the long term. This could be an opportunity for various individuals in the Council as a short term secondment. Recent experiences have shown that it is difficult to attempt to recruit officers for Public Protection Services, in light of the need for relevant qualifications, training and experiences, and the training programme could be a solution for this whilst recruiting for the long term.
- 1.15 The three posts would sit underneath the Covid Test, Trace and Protect Services, with officers from this Service as well as the three Public Protection Services being allocated to mentor new officers. Although it would sit beneath the Covid Test, Trace and Protect Services, which have of course, as the three new posts, been specifically created to respond to Covid, the three posts would naturally become an integral part of the entire Public Protection Services. It is expected that a reasonable amount of time will be required for initial training and to familiarise with Council arrangements, before the new officers will be in a position to fully undertake their duties.

2. ANY CONSULTATIONS UNDERTAKEN PRIOR TO RECOMMENDING THE DECISION

- 2.1 Discussions with the Chief Executive and with the Public Protection Services.

3. NEXT STEPS AND TIMETABLE

- 3.1 Draw up an initial and a more comprehensive Training Programme for the entire period and allocate officers for mentoring.
- 3.2 Advertise the three posts with the intention of appointing so that the officers commence from 1 December 2020.

VIEWS OF THE STATUTORY OFFICERS

The Monitoring Officer:

No observations in relation to propriety to add.

Head of Finance:

In the 2020/21 Revenue Budget Review report presented to Cabinet on 13 October, I noted that the Welsh Government had established a hardship fund of up to £ 264 million towards compensating local authorities with increased costs and income losses arising from the Covid-19 crisis. A recent letter from the Minister for Housing and Local Government recognizes the cost of enforcing Covid-19 restrictions, and agrees that local authorities can claim (up to the level of their offer) from the Local Authority Hardship Fund to increase their enforcement capacity. A total of up to £ 2.5m has been allocated in the All Wales Hardship Fund for this purpose in 2020/21, of which £ 426,000 is for the 6 North Wales authorities. It could be expected that there will be around £ 71,000 allocated for Gwynedd, but that is to be confirmed

In order for the Environment Department to move forward and recruit suitably qualified staff, if it is a priority, the Cabinet can underwrite the cost of employing 3 Community Engagement Officers for a temporary period up to 31 March 2022. We will claim the relevant expenditure from the Welsh Government's Covid-19 hardship fund, where appropriate, but until we receive confirmation of the amount of grant that can be claimed, for the time being Cabinet will need to underwrite the full cost of £ 113,220 from the Council's balances. Technically, that would prejudice a one-off budget bid for 2021/22, if the Government's hardship fund did not cover all the cost. It is not usual for the Cabinet to prejudice 'bid', but I support the proposal in the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 crisis, and because of the practical difficulties of recruiting for very short contracts.
