

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Date of meeting: 7 SEPTEMBER 2021
Cabinet Member: Councillor Gareth Wyn Griffith
Contact Officer: Dafydd Wyn Williams - Head of Environment Department
Contact Number: 32371

Subject: CABINET MEMBER'S CHALLENGE PERFORMANCE REPORT - ENVIRONMENT

THE DECISION SOUGHT

To accept and note the information in the report.

THE REASON WHY A DECISION IS NEEDED

In order to ensure effective performance management

1. INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update my fellow members on developments in the fields within my remit as Cabinet Member for the Environment. This includes outlining the latest developments against pledges within the 2018-2023 Gwynedd Council Plan; the progress of performance measures; and the latest on the savings and cuts schemes.
- 1.2 I will remind you that all matters have already been the subject of discussions and have been scrutinised at a meeting of the Environment Department's Management Team, which also included representatives from the Communities Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.3 On the whole, I am satisfied with the department's performance and I acknowledge the challenges that have faced this department over the past year and the impact of that on some services. However, I am confident that the department is monitoring these matters and is planning appropriately in order to recover the situation. I will elaborate on the progress within the report.

2. GWYNEDD COUNCIL PLAN PROJECTS 2018-2023

2.1 Climate Change Action Plan

Following the Cabinet's decisions back in January to fund the project manager to lead on the work of coordinating the council's efforts in the field and the action plan; an appointment has been made and a Climate Change Programme Manager has commenced in the role at the beginning of July. The priority will be to adopt a work programme for the rest of 2021, and a meeting of the Climate Change Board was held at the end of July in order to recommence this field of work urgently. It is intended to hold workshops with all Council members soon, with the intention of adopting a Climate Change Action Plan before the end of 2021. I will update you further in my next report.

2.2 Public Protection Capacity

The department is looking at plans in an attempt to provide more resilient Public Protection Services in the future in order to contribute towards protecting the health of Gwynedd's communities and to support businesses. This work includes looking to retain the expertise we have in the Services, creating more robust staffing structures, including the continuation of tracing work, increasing capacity and succession planning for the future. It is intended to submit this report to the Leadership Team / Cabinet after the summer 2021.

2.3 Other risks

It is believed that attention needs to be drawn to another matter that has been identified in the department's risk register, namely the control of motorhomes. The department is leading on a piece of cross-departmental work, in an attempt to respond to the challenges that the substantial increase in the number of motorhomes visiting the county has posed over the past year and a half. This has included a short-term response that has been a combination of enforcement work (where possible), erecting signage in locations county-wide, communicating and raising awareness etc. of the need for visitors to respect the area and make arrangements beforehand before visiting (e.g. booking a plot in a licensed caravan park). In addition, the department is leading on a piece of research into the motorhome sector and has recently been out to public consultation via a questionnaire to ascertain the views of the communities of Gwynedd. The questionnaire is open until the end of August 2021, and the responses will be analysed and incorporated as part of the research.

3. PERFORMANCE

Below, I outline the main matters that have derived from the department's performance in Quarter 1 of 2021/22. The information does not refer to each service in the department, only towards those we feel that need to be brought to your attention.

Planning Service

- 3.1 It is not possible for me to report on our usual measure, which shows **percentage of service satisfaction** (C1). This is because the customer care questionnaires have not been undertaken since the beginning of the pandemic period as we have prioritised the continuation of day-to-day services. However, work is progressing to attempt to develop better methods for undertaking this work, and I hope to report on the measure once again in my next report.

- 3.2 Reference was made in the department's Annual Report that it had taken more time for us to reach decisions because of various factors, including the impact of the pandemic on committees, lack of capacity due to long-term sickness or working arrangements during the crisis and a delay in receiving responses from the statutory consultees. The **How quickly all planning applications have taken on average to be determined** (C2) measure continues to increase and is higher than the average of 63 days in 2019/20, 68 days in 2020/21, with the average since 1 April 2021 being 93 days. The department has attempted to address this by recruiting two temporary officers for a one-year period and I have asked the Department to look at the resources that will be needed in the future in order to meet the demand for the service.
- 3.3 In April, an increase was seen in the number of **planning enforcement cases** received, compared with the previous months, and a total of 88 new complaints were received relating to planning breaches during Quarter 1 of 2021-22. A total of 29 cases were investigated, and this is lower than what we as a department would have hoped for during a three month period. This was as a result of a reduction in the unit's capacity to deal with the complaints as a result of transferring a full-time officer to deal with planning applications. It is hoped that one of the temporary officers can assist with the work for a temporary period only.
- 3.4 Of course, the substantial number of houses in Gwynedd that are being used as holiday homes (as short-term holiday lets and second homes), is a major concern with the side-effects including an increase in house prices, which is a major barrier to local residents being able to live in their communities. As the housing crisis is one of the Council's main priorities, research on holiday homes was commissioned by the Cabinet, in order to gather evidence to see what could be done to better control the situation. The 'Managing the use of dwellings as holiday homes' research undertaken by the Joint Planning Policy Service was published in December 2020. I believe that this is a significant piece of work, which has triggered discussions and a national response to the matters surrounding holiday homes.
- 3.5 Also, the research published after the Council's research, namely 'Second Homes - Developing New Policies in Wales', by Dr Simon Brooks, refers to and responds to the evidence and recommendations in the Council's research. More recently, the Council's research has been acknowledged by Welsh Government, which has now expressed their intention to put steps in place to facilitate better control of holiday homes, with the intention of trialling measures in pilot areas, with the Gwynedd area likely to be a part of this.
- 3.6 The findings of the holiday home research (as well as any other relevant evidence) will feed into the process of reviewing the Joint Local Development Plan.

Building Control Service

- 3.7 In the first quarter of 2021/2022, an increase was seen in building control applications, with 221 applications being submitted, compared with 132 in the same period in the previous year. This results in an increase in the fees being attracted to the Council. However, the significant projects, which charge a higher fee, continue to be low. A private Approved Inspector has been established in the sector recently and so, the local competition has had a negative impact on the number of applications that reach us. This has meant that the market proportion of building control applications received has reduced from **85%** in 2020/2021 to **80%** at present. It is also noted during the past months that there is evidence of the Service losing officers to the private sector, and consequently, the department is looking at the Service's structure in terms of its resilience, and the nature of the work in terms of work that attracts a fee and work that does not (e.g. enforcement work).

- 3.8 The percentage of decisions made in line with the statutory timetable has also improved compared with the average figure for the previous year (97.5% compared with 92.1%). Understanding the new Building Control software has assisted the surveyors to achieve this improvement and the aim is to meet the statutory deadlines in 100% of cases.
- 3.9 The time taken on average to process a 'Naming and numbering houses/streets' application has reduced substantially, and takes 8 days on average during Quarter 1 2021/22, compared with 21 days on average during 2020/21. This is because of improvements to the system and in the speed of the consultation responses of the Royal Mail in confirming the registration.

Public Protection Service

- 3.10 As a result of this service's efforts to respond to the pandemic, the work of measuring the **percentage of customers who responded to a survey and said that they were pleased with the service level** has not been undertaken recently. I hope to report on this in my next report.
- 3.11 No inspections were carried out at high-risk food businesses during Quarter 1 2021/22 either. The inspections programme has been suspended since the beginning of the pandemic as staff time has been prioritised to focus on the work of preventing the spread of Covid-19. Inspections have now recommenced, and priority has been given to new businesses and high-risk businesses in the first place, in line with the Food Standards Agency guidance.
- 3.12 An increase was seen in **average time taken to process an application for a taxi licence** from 10 days in 2020/21 to 15 days in Quarter 1 2021/22. This is because of a number of reasons, including delays as individuals seek to obtain a medical examination certificate, DBS disclosures and certificates, as well as in-house problems such as lack of capacity due to sickness and difficulties with the arrangements with the post during this time.

Network Management Service

- 3.13 The Service is responsible for implementing parking enforcement arrangements across the County and the period since 1 April 2021, as with the previous 12 months, has been incredibly challenging, as a result of the number of people visiting the area in their cars, but also due to examples of unacceptable behaviour towards our officers. The Service has employed two additional officers on a temporary basis in an attempt to support the efforts to ensure that vehicles are parked safely and in accordance with any legal restrictions in place. The measure for parking relates to **the number of appeals to the independent adjudicators that were approved**. It seems that the work done by the Service in terms of signage and gathering evidence have contributed to the fact that appeals have reduced over the past years, with only two appeals lodged over the past three months, and the decisions on both being favourable to the Council.
- 3.14 Following a review of the Council's strategy and car park fees, the new fees agreed by the Cabinet in February 2021 became operational on 30 June 2021. Unfortunately, the service has received a number of complaints for Long Stay fees (Band 2) since then and after considering the feedback in full, the service intends to add two additional fees to the tariff of these fields, namely £1 for two hours and £2 for four hours. It is intended for these fees to be operational before the end of July.

Transport and Road Safety Service

- 3.15 Generally, the public's use of Public Transport services is substantially lower, and from the feedback we receive, the reason behind this is confidence in mixing with others on the journey in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also restrictions on the numbers able to travel on a bus and the need to keep windows open and wear face covering. The Department is working with Public Transport providers as well as other bodies to try to re-establish passengers' confidence and enable the most vulnerable people in our communities to have the freedom to live independently once more. The observations received in terms of the satisfaction of public transport users assists the Service to respond directly or by drawing the matter to the attention of the relevant provider for a response, where needed.

Countryside Service

- 3.16 Following the service's Ffordd Gwynedd review, identifying measures has been challenging, but work on different elements continues. I hope to be able to update you in my next report.

Tracing Service

- 3.17 Since June this year, this service ensures the compliance of Gwynedd residents with legislation as they return from abroad, and it deals with positive cases and contacts within the county.
- 3.18 In addition, the service now employs three COVID-19 Community Engagement Officers to work with our communities to engage with and educate residents and business owners regarding compliance with the COVID-19 Act. The officers have already visited over 300 businesses, have ensured presence at every school gate and have patrolled all towns and large villages, sharing essential information in order to stop the spread. I am glad to say that the roles of these officers is being appreciated in all locations and by businesses, which welcome clarity under difficult circumstances.

4. FINANCIAL POSITION / SAVINGS

- 4.1 The Environment Department underspent by £100k at the end of the 2020/21 financial year. A detailed review of the department's financial position will be undertaken as part of the council-wide revenue review at the end of August, which will be reported to Cabinet on 12 October 2021. No material issues are anticipated to be reported to date
- 4.2 The department has three savings schemes for 2021/22, as well as two additional schemes that continue from previous years because of a delay. These have currently been realised or are on track to be realised by the end of the financial year.
- 4.3 However, it is very early in the financial year and so I hope to be able to confirm that these plans are moving forward in my next report.
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Views of the statutory officers

The Monitoring Officer: *No observations to add in relation to propriety*

Head of Finance Department:

The report highlights a number of ways in which the pandemic has had a significant impact on the Department's performance measures and as such has created a delay in some savings plans. I am aware of the great pressure on the Public Protection Service as they are drawn into the Test, Trace and Protect programme for Gwynedd and their work will continue for the foreseeable future. I note that there is an intention to report to the Leadership Team / Cabinet in due course in terms of the capacity of the service.

The knock-on effect of the pandemic has also created new risks for the Department (e.g. vehicle control in some areas and particularly motor homes) with an increasing number of visitors deciding not to go abroad on holiday and visiting Gwynedd instead. The financial impact of these challenges will remain under review.