

GWYNEDD COUNCIL CABINET



Report to a meeting of Gwynedd Council Cabinet

Date of meeting: 21 DECEMBER 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 plans.
- 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 under the circumstances 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 PRIORITIES 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 commenced in the role at the beginning of July. A work programme has been developed and meetings of the Climate Change Board are being held to steer the work for producing the Climate Change Action Plan. It is also intended to hold sessions with all Council Members so that they can have an input into the work.

- 2.2. The proposal is that there will be two parts to the Climate Change Action Plan, with the first part focusing on the direct impact the Council is having on climate change, with this part adopted by the end of March 2022. The second part of the Plan will focus more on the further steps that the Council can take to contribute towards mitigating the impacts of climate change, with this happening during 2022/23.

2.3 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. The Department has conducted a review of the Public Protection Service's staffing structures, with the objective of retaining the expertise we have, create more robust staffing structure that will need to include a continuation of the tracing work, increase capacity, and plan for future succession. The Department also has financial plans that go hand-in-hand with the actions required as a result of reviewing the staffing structures, and this includes submitting revenue bids to the Council's transformation fund.

2.4 Control of Motorhomes

The department has been leading on a piece of work jointly with the Economy and Community Department, in an attempt to respond to the challenges that a substantial increase in the number of motorhomes visiting the county have presented over the past eighteen months. As well as short-term responses to the challenges (e.g. enforcement where possible, erecting signage in locations across the County, communicating and raising awareness), research has been conducted into the motorhomes sector in an attempt to look at whether more long-term solutions are needed to obtain better control. This research was submitted to the Cabinet on 9 November 2021, when it was resolved:

- i. To authorise the Head of Environment Department, in consultation with the Head of Education and Community to hold a pilot project to use up to six of the Council's parking sites (or part of the sites) within the Gwynedd Planning Authority Area, to provide facilities for motor homes to stay overnight, including the designation of the locations, but subject to securing capital funding and necessary permissions.
- ii. That a further report on the outcomes of the pilot are submitted to the Cabinet within three years.
- iii. Give consideration to and take enforcement measures to accompany the above.
- iv. Present the research to the Welsh Government and ask them to review the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act 1960.

- 2.5 The Department has now established a Project Board to implement the decision.

3. PERFORMANCE

Below, I outline the main matters that have derived from the department's performance since the beginning of July 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 **satisfaction with the service** (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. Normally, this work is undertaken via telephone calls, but discussions are continuing with the providers of the Service's back office system so that the questionnaires are automatically facilitated via the system.
- 3.2 Reference was made in the department's 2020/21 Annual Report that it had taken more time for us to reach decisions as a result 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, 88 days in 2020/21, with the average for 2021/22 being 94 days. Nevertheless, and excluding the month of August, an increase has been seen in the number of unresolved planning applications since I reported to you in September, as officers return from periods of sickness, but this is too early to have a positive influence on the performance. Also, the department has recruited a temporary planning officer for a period of one year to assist with this work, 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 During the period from 01/07/21 to 31/10/21, the Planning Enforcement Unit received 117 **new enforcement cases** relating to breaches of planning regulations with the total since 1 April 2021 at 207. During the period, it was reported that 20 of the new cases were investigated and 79 cases were closed. The reduction in the Unit's capacity from 4 to 2 officers, as well as the time it takes to deal with complex cases, makes it very challenging for the Unit to cope with the workload, which creates a back-log of cases that continue to be open, whilst new cases continue to come in. In an attempt to respond to this, a temporary officer was employed in May 2021 and following a period within the support team (Department's Business Service), the officer was transferred to the enforcement team in August 2021. I have asked the Department to also look at plans to respond to the short- and long-term requirements of the Planning Service in relation to the enforcement work.

Joint Planning Policy Service

- 3.4 I am pleased to report that the research led by the Service, "Managing the use of dwellings as holiday homes", is a significant piece of work that has triggered discussions and a national level response to the matters surrounding holiday homes, with all of this now seen in a series of Welsh Government consultations.

- 3.5 The Service has completed the third Annual Monitoring Report (2020/21) for the Joint Local Development Plan that has been submitted to Welsh Government (along with the 2019/20 Report), since October 2021. The three Annual Monitoring Reports that have been provided include important evidence that feeds into the statutory review of the Plan that has commenced since August 2021. During November 2021, a six-week period of public consultation was commenced on the Review Report (following a review of the current Plan), and awareness raising sessions were held for all Council Members to correspond to this.

Building Control Service

- 3.6 During this reporting period in 2021/2022, an increase was seen in building control applications, with 302 applications being submitted compared with 241 during 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 **77%** 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).
- 3.7 Due to the challenges in terms of capacity, the percentage of decisions made according to the statutory timetable for this period reduced to 91.25%, compared with 97.5% reported to you in September 2021 (namely Quarter 1. Temporary arrangements are in place in an attempt to address the lack of capacity, but I continue to be eager for the Department to look at long-term plans.
- 3.8 The average time taken to process a 'Naming and numbering houses/streets' application has reduced substantially, and takes 7 days on average during this period, compared with 8 days in Quarter 1 2021/22, and 21 days on average during 2020/21. This is as a result of improvements to the system and in the speed of the consultation responses of the Royal Mail in confirming the registration.

Public Protection Service

- 3.9 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. Normally, this work is undertaken via telephone calls, but discussions are continuing with the providers of the Service's back office system so that the questionnaires are automatically facilitated via the system.
- 3.10 The Council's food hygiene and standards inspections have recommenced since 1 September 2021, with priority given to new businesses and high-risk businesses initially, in accordance with the guidance in the Food Standards Agency's Recovery Plan. Welsh Councils have agreed with the Food Standards Agency that they would strive to follow their food safety recovery plan, as the demand on public protection services in relation to Covid work reduces over time.

- 3.11 On 1/10/21, 2132 food businesses in Gwynedd were subject to the food hygiene scoring system. Of these, 2117 met the satisfactory or higher food hygiene standard (99.3%) and 15 did not meet the standards (0.7%). It should be noted that the food hygiene inspections programme has basically been suspended since March 2020 until September this year, which has led to a backlog of inspections that have not been undertaken.
- 3.12 Since the inspections programme recommenced at the start of September 2021, ¼ of the team are now focusing on food safety work, whilst 3.5 FTE officers continue to focus entirely on Covid work. Of the 1679 late / accumulated food hygiene inspections, 137 inspections have been completed, and of the 826 late / accumulated food standards inspection, 157 inspections have been completed.
- 3.13 A reduction was seen in **the average time taken to process an application for a taxi licence** from 15 days in Quarter 1 2020/21 to 7 or 8 days during this period. This is as a result of numerous reasons, including a reduction in the delay that used to occur when individuals attempted to obtain a medical examination certificate, DBS disclosures and certificates. There is a long-term sickness absence at the Licensing Unit, at a time when the taxi licensing renewal cycle is about to commence, and so I have asked the Department to monitor the situation.

Network Management Service

- 3.14 The Service is responsible for implementing the parking enforcement arrangements across the County and the increase in visitors that decided to remain in Britain instead of venturing abroad on holiday escalated all the problems in terms of the lack of parking spaces across the County; there is a lack of additional powers to deal with vehicles that create an obstruction and control of motor homes. Since the beginning of 2021/22, the service has employed three additional temporary officers to support the team through an unusually busy time. The measure for parking relates to **the number of appeals to the independent adjudicators that were approved**. I am pleased to report that the number of such appeals has reduced over the past years, and I confirm that three cases have reached this point during 2021/22 to date, with the outcome of two in favour of the Council. Two cases were received during 2019/20, with one in favour of the Council.
- 3.15 As the number of vehicles on our roads increases, it is essential that suitable and appropriate measures are present and are monitored regularly in order to control traffic flow and keep the network as safe and obstruction-free as possible. Traffic prohibitions and restrictions relating to parking, speed, one-way arrangements, weight restrictions and clearways are covered by official and legal orders. We appreciate that the principle behind painting yellow lines on the highway sounds like a simple enough task without any complications, but in reality, many factors can influence and create delay in the process and in some circumstances an order has taken up to 12 months to become operational. Any application needs to be taken through a statutory consultation period of 28 days and the traffic service needs to give due attention to any objection. Further delay has occurred during this period as a result of workload or lack of resources in the Legal Department.

Transport and Road Safety Service

- 3.16 The pandemic recovery period has posed additional challenges to the public transport services and bus companies, with the need to keep to the restrictions on the numbers who can travel on a bus, and the need to keep windows open and wear a face covering. During the period reported upon, the comments received in terms of the satisfaction of public transport users highlights matters relating to a lack of service on

specific routes, and this due to a lack of drivers or a commercial service coming to an end. The Department is working with Public Transport providers as well as other bodies to try to respond to any concern or obstruction arising, for example, by arranging an on-demand service or establishing a new service.

Countryside Service

- 3.17 Work is continuing to develop measures for the Access and Biodiversity work fields. In order to steer the Service's work for the next years, the following strategic documents are being prepared:
- Right of Way Improvement Plan (RoWIP) - the Scrutiny Committee on 4 November received a final draft for public consultation.
 - Nature Recovery Plan - there is an expectation that public bodies prepare a Nature Recovery Plan in response to loss of habitats and biodiversity and the steps they can take to prevent further decline and recover the situation. The plan will be completed during 2022.
- 3.18 The Service experienced pressures from many directions during 2021.
- The increase in the number of Planning applications during the summer of 2021 placed additional pressures on the Biodiversity team. It is necessary for officers to provide observations on the impact of developments on protected biodiversity and species. As well as the number of applications, many complex and contentious applications were seen. The following steps were taken to reduce the pressures:
 - i. a temporary arrangement had been established with experienced companies for them to prepare comments on some planning applications.
 - ii. The Department's underspend will be used to employ a temporary biodiversity officer.
 - The impact of the above steps will be monitored over the coming months.
- 3.19 The availability of grants towards the work fields of the Service has increased during 2021, mainly from Welsh Government. For example, for the 20/21 and 21/22 years, almost £400k was received to improve the rights of way network and a similar amount to upgrade the Lonydd Glas with £130k from the Local Places for Nature programme. The presumption is that the grants will continue for the coming years, which raises a question about the Service's current capacity to take advantage of and make the best use of the grants, considering that rights of way officers are also responding to day-to-day matters. The Department has submitted a bid to the Transformation Fund for funding to support the "Project Officer" post to be responsible for the development, administration and implementation of grant programmes.
- 3.20 **Climate change** - there is a close relationships between the work of preparing the Climate Change Plan and duties in the Biodiversity field, particularly when considering the contribution of woodlands and other Council lands to absorb carbon. Nevertheless, it was obvious that this information was not available and that there was a need to move to measure the values of Council lands and how they can be better managed. In order to meet this challenge, the Department has submitted a bid to the Transformation fund for an officer within the Biodiversity team.

Tracing Service

3.21 The staff recruitment process has been challenging. This is specifically because the service is coordinated on a regional/national level and is being hosted by another authority, which means that the TTP Service in Gwynedd does not have full control over the recruitment campaign. This situation has left the service vulnerable in terms of having a sufficient number of staff to respond to the crisis. Following recent discussions with the host authority here in the North, Gwynedd Council has now escalated its role and takes a prominent part in the process. We are also continuing to receive support from officers from other Council Departments that have transferred to the service on a temporary basis. The service is developing regularly, and is getting more digital that will, ultimately, mean that there will be a need for fewer staff resources to run.

4. FINANCIAL / SAVINGS SITUATION - REMAINS THE SAME

4.1 The Environment Department underspent £100k at the end of the 2020/21 financial year. A detailed review of the department's financial situation will be held as part of the end of November revenue review for the entire Council, this will be reported to the Cabinet in due course. No material issues are anticipated to be reported at present.

4.2 The department has three savings schemes for 2021/22 as well as two additional schemes that are continuing from previous years due to a delay. These have currently been realised or are on track to be realised by the end of the financial year.

4.3 I hope to be able to confirm that these schemes are moving ahead in my next report.

Views of the statutory officers

The Monitoring Officer:

No observations to add in relation to propriety.

Head of Finance Department:

I can confirm that the information set out in Part 4 of the report is a fair reflection of the financial situation. A review of the revenue budget to the end of November together with the savings position will be reported to Cabinet on 18 January.
