

THE COUNCIL THURSDAY, 2 DECEMBER 2021

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**Present:** Councillor Elwyn Jones (Vice-chair in the chair)

**Councillors:** Craig ab Iago, Stephen Churchman, R. Glyn Daniels, Anwen Davies, Elwyn Edwards, Alan Jones Evans, Aled Evans, Peter Antony Garlick, Gareth Wyn Griffith, Selwyn Griffiths, Alwyn Gruffydd, Annwen Hughes, John Brynmor Hughes, Louise Hughes, Judith Humphreys, Nia Jeffreys, Peredur Jenkins, Aeron M. Jones, Aled Wyn Jones, Anne Lloyd Jones, Berwyn Parry Jones, Elin Walker Jones, Eric Merfyn Jones, Gareth Tudor Morris Jones, Huw Wyn Jones, Kevin Morris Jones, Linda A. Jones, Sion Wyn Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, Beth Lawton, Dilwyn Lloyd, Dafydd Meurig, Dilwyn Morgan, Linda Morgan, Dafydd Owen, Dewi Owen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Gwynfor Owen, W. Roy Owen, Nigel Pickavance, Rheinallt Puw, Peter Read, Dewi Wyn Roberts, Gareth A. Roberts, John Pughe Roberts, Mair Rowlands, Paul Rowlinson, Angela Russell, Dyfrig Siencyn, Mike Stevens, Gareth Thomas, Ioan Thomas, Hefin Underwood, Catrin Wager, Cemlyn Williams, Eirwyn Williams, Elfed Williams, Gareth Williams, Gethin Glyn Williams, Gruffydd Williams and Owain Williams.

**Officers:** Dafydd Gibbard (Chief Executive), Morwena Edwards (Corporate Director), Iwan Evans (Monitoring Officer), Dafydd Edwards (Statutory Finance Officer), Geraint Owen (Head of Democracy Services), Carys Fôn Williams (Head of Property and Housing Department), Sioned Williams (Head of Economy and Community Department), Dewi Morgan (Assistant Head – Revenue and Risk), Sion Huws (Senior Solicitor - Corporate) and Eirian Roberts (Democracy Services Officer).

**1. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors:- Menna Baines, Beca Brown, Dylan Bullard, Annwen Daniels, Simon Glyn, R. Medwyn Hughes, Keith Jones, Cai Larsen, Jason Parry and Elfed Roberts.

**2. MINUTES**

The Chair signed the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 7 October, 2021 as a true record:-

**3. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST**

Members had received a briefing note from the Monitoring Officer in advance regarding item 7 - Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022/23, and Item 8 - Council Tax: Discretionary Powers to Allow Discounts and/or Raise a Premium 2022/23.

(1) The following members declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda - Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2022/23 for the reasons noted:-

- Councillor Stephen Churchman as he was in receipt of Council Tax benefit.
- Councillor Gareth A. Roberts because a close family member had received the Council Tax discount.

The members were not of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and they did not withdraw from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

(2) The following members declared a personal interest in item 8 on the agenda - Council Tax: Discretionary Powers to Allow Discounts and/or Raise a Premium 2022/23 for the reasons noted:-

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- Councillor Gareth A. Roberts as he owned a vacant property that was being rebuilt.
- Councillor Dewi Roberts as a member of his family had a second home.
- Councillor Angela Russell because she owned a second home.
- Councillor Aled Wyn Jones because close relatives of his owned a second home and holiday homes.
- Councillor Gethin Glyn Williams as close connections of his owned empty properties and second homes.
- Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn because a close relative of his owned a second home.
- Councillor Elwyn Edwards as he was part owner of two flats above Awen Meirion, High Street, Bala.
- Councillor Peredur Jenkins because he owned a second home.
- Councillor Linda Morgan as a member of her family owned a second home.

The members were of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and they withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

- (3) Dewi Morgan (Assistant Head of Revenue and Risk)<sup>1</sup> declared a personal interest in item 12 on the agenda - Appointment of a New Section 151 Officer as the decision confirmed his appointment as the prospective holder of the Post of the Council's Head of Finance, as the new Section 151 Officer for the Authority from 1 January 2022, in accordance with the requirements of Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.

The officer was of the opinion that it was a prejudicial interest and withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

#### 4. THE CHAIR'S ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Chair noted, with sadness, the news of the death of Mrs Patricia G. Larsen, Penisarwaun, the former chair of this Council, and one who gave a lifetime of service to her local community. He paid tribute to her, expressing the Council's deepest condolences with Councillor Cai Larsen, and the family in their loss.

It was also noted that former Councillor Wyn Myles Meredith, Dolgellau, had died recently. Councillor Peredur Jenkins paid tribute to him and expressed the Council's deepest condolences with his family.

It was also noted that Cefin Edwards, a staff member of Gwynedd Consultancy had died very recently. The Chief Executive paid tribute to him and expressed the Council's deepest condolences with his family.

It was also noted that the Council wished to sympathise with everyone in the county's communities who had recently lost loved ones.

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

In congratulating Dewi Morgan, who had been appointed Head of Finance Department, the Council also conveyed best wishes and gratitude to Dafydd Edwards, who was attending his last meeting of the Council in that role. The Chief Executive also thanked Dafydd Edwards for his service over the years, and for his support for him personally.

It was noted that several staff members had been taken ill recently, and they were all wished a speedy recovery.

The Chief Executive noted that the Covid case numbers in Gwynedd were higher than they had ever been, although there were signs that we had now reached the peak of the

wave, and we would see a fall in cases soon. Until the situation was stable, specific units within the Council were still under pressure, with a number of staff absent from work, and service continuation arrangements were now in place in several units across the Council. The Council's emergency management arrangements were entirely robust at the moment; however, it was inevitable there would be an impact on services in the short-term, and the members were asked to assist by spreading this message in their communities. However, it was very much hoped that there would be no impact on front-line services, and it was noted that the members would be updated regularly on the situation.

It was noted that Tim and Inger Hancock who had come forward to provide foster care for seven siblings, had been honoured with an 'Outstanding Contribution to Foster Care' Award by the UK Fostering Excellence Awards. The Council sent them its warmest congratulations for being recognised by the awards and their outstanding contribution to fostering in Gwynedd. It was also noted that this was an opportunity to thank all our foster carers who looked after for our children, noting that the Council very much appreciated their hard work and commitment.

It was noted that the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service had recently been presented to Barmouth Community First Responders by Edmund Bailey, the Lord-Lieutenant for Gwynedd. This was the highest award given to voluntary groups in the United Kingdom, awarded to outstanding voluntary groups who had a positive impact on the lives of others. This committed group of volunteers delivered goods to vulnerable self-isolating members of the rural communities of Bontddu, Barmouth, Talybont and Dyffryn Ardudwy, in addition to their usual activities during the first lockdown.

Darron Garrod from Llanengan Ward was congratulated for his part in the British Rally Championship.

## **5. URGENT ITEMS**

None to note.

## **6. QUESTIONS**

*(The Cabinet Members' written responses to the questions had been distributed to the members in advance).*

### **(1) Question from Councillor Gareth A. Roberts**

"Many older and ill people find it difficult to look after themselves and we have a shortage of care homes and care workers.

If a family member wishes to move in to care for an elderly or ill relative, they are not required to pay Council Tax on their own homes, but the person they care for will only receive a discount of 50% Council Tax.

Will the Council permit both the person who provides the care and the person receiving the care to receive a full 100% Council Tax discount?"

### **Response from the Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas**

"A statutory exemption exists which means that Council Tax is not payable on property that has been left vacant by someone who has moved away to provide personal care to someone else. There are 10 properties that receive this exemption in Gwynedd, with the taxpayers of five of them providing care to individuals who live in other properties in Gwynedd, and the other five are providing care for individuals who live outside the county.

The costs of any additional discretionary discounts would be funded entirely from the Council's coffers. If we were to talk of five properties, the cost of providing the additional discretionary exemption would be approximately £10,000.

However, there are now 400 properties receiving either a 25% or 50% discount because at least one of the residents is receiving care, but where no properties have been left vacant by the carer. It is noted that the question relates to a further discount on Council Tax for care receivers.

We cannot see how the Council could make a fair decision, that can be defended legally, to give five properties an additional Council Tax discount without giving it to up to another 400 properties also. This would cost around £500,000 a year for the Council, and would mean having to prioritise Council resources, and the inevitable outcome of this would be to introduce savings and cuts elsewhere.

If the person who is receiving care pays Council Tax (or a proportion of Council Tax if they receive a discount), the value of the amount paid is included in their financial assessment to increase the amount of income they can keep every week before having to begin paying for their care. Everyone can keep enough money to pay for their Council Tax before they begin to pay for their care.

Given all the factors relating to taxation matters and calculating care costs, I cannot see how the proposal in the question could be affordable or how it could increase fairness in the system across the county. Nevertheless, the Finance Department will continue to consider which discretionary discounts would be appropriate, if at all, and will keep the cases in question under consideration as part of this."

**(2) Question from Councillor Nia Jeffreys**

"Following another blow to our communities with the announcement that Barclays Bank is leaving Porthmadog and Caernarfon, what support schemes are available to promote businesses and protect essential services on the high-street in Gwynedd?"

**Response from the Cabinet Member for Economy and Community, Councillor Gareth Thomas**

"The past twenty months have been an unprecedented challenge for individual businesses and for our town's commercial centres. Therefore, Barclays Bank's announcement that it was turning its back on the communities of Porthmadog and Caernarfon was a bitter disappointment, as it will be a further blow to our residents in trying to access core services and in creating lively town centres.

All Members will be aware of the enormous effort the Council has undertaken to support our local businesses over the pandemic with more than 22,000 payments worth more than £112 million distributed by the Finance and Economy and Community Departments.

Simultaneously, the Council has responded to the challenge in our town centres highlighted by the pandemic. A cross-departmental Town Centres Group was established and a liaison officer designated for each of the eighteen main towns. They worked with local partners in every area to realise a programme of interventions and improvements as town centres reopened after the lockdown, including £82,000 of financial support to enable local retailers and hospitality businesses to adapt.

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Our efforts continue and in the written response, you will see a number of other initiatives listed. I would like to give you a taste of the type of things the Council has been doing to support businesses.

Firstly, information. The Council communicates regularly with businesses and over 4,300 receive the Council's information bulletin every week. There are loans for businesses, £3 million in loans have been handed out. We have a buildings renovation scheme. We have town centre improvements; the Welsh Government Town Transformation programme is run by the Council and there are loans to renovate vacant buildings in town centres and all of this has been noted in greater detail in the written response."

### **A supplementary question from Councillor Nia Jeffreys.**

"Is Banc Cambria, promoted by Welsh Government, an idea that would work for us in Gwynedd to keep services in the high street, and as Barclays Bank are turning their backs on the people of Gwynedd, is it time for us as a Council to turn our backs on them, and move our business to another bank?"

### **Response from the Cabinet Member for Economy and Community, Councillor Gareth Thomas**

"In terms of Banc Cambria, I'm totally supportive. I think that, by now, we see that Wales is often let down by these international companies. They are turning their backs on us, and the banks are just as bad, and I'm a strong believer in doing things for ourselves in our own country. Therefore I'm very pleased to hear about the development of Banc Cambria in Wales, and hope very much that this bank will open soon, and will open in buildings in our towns here in Gwynedd. In relation to Barclays Bank, I have been given to understand that the Council is a customer of this bank, and I will hold discussions with the Cabinet Member for Finance to see if we can put some pressure on them to overturn the decisions they have made. But there is a need for the Council also to maybe consider, if Banc Cambria is established, would it be better to transfer the Council's entire business to this type of bank? Therefore, we will hold the discussions on this."

### **(3) Question from Councillor Alwyn Gruffydd**

"As the Gwynedd Council Housing Strategy 2019-2024 is approximately half way through its lifetime, could the Housing Portfolio Holder enlighten us on the successes and weaknesses of the Strategy, and what has been learnt in seeking to meet the demand for over 800 houses every year to meet the need for safe, comfortable and affordable homes for Gwynedd residents?"

### **Response from the Cabinet Member for Housing, Councillor Craig ab Iago**

"The Councillor has mentioned the Housing Strategy, and I will answer the question about the Housing Strategy, but of course, there is another document, the Housing Action Plan, which implements the Strategy, namely our vision. In addition to the written response, I would like to say a couple of things. There are three parts, in my opinion, to the question - one about the successes, one about the weaknesses, and the third about what I have learnt since the Strategy. The greatest successes of the Strategy are - when we were writing the Strategy, the Housing Service was part of the Property Department. It did not have its own department. By now, we have our own department, and of course, we have the Housing Action Plan to implement the Strategy, which is more important than the Strategy itself - major successes in my opinion. We have changed the game, we have changed the Council's mindset on housing, and our role in the Housing Department. In terms of the Strategies' weaknesses, we wrote it in a different

time, under a different chief executive. This was three heads of department back. It was a struggle to create the Strategy at times, and if we were to write it today, it would be much more ambitious. It would be easier to understand, but that pertains to the document, but as I have said, the most important document is the Housing Action Plan. What have I learnt? I have learnt that we need much more than 800 houses every year, and this only to keep up with the demand. I have learnt that we are in a real housing crisis, and although we in the Housing Department are doing everything within our ability and going the extra mile to make sure that we house our people in their communities, the solution to the problem lies in the planning system, and the people who are able to change that system is Welsh Government. We are currently using a planning system that is based on the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. It was created in a different country, in a different century, by a Government full of people who went to Eton, and it's time for us to have a planning act for a twenty first century Wales. This is what's needed to solve the fact that we are unable to provide enough houses to meet the need."

**A Supplementary Question from Councillor Alwyn Gruffydd**

"How many homes have been provided over the last eight months?"

**Response from the Chief Executive**

"In terms of figures, 220 empty houses have been brought back into use through investment from Gwynedd Council since the Strategy was introduced in 2019. There are disability adaptations to be made to make houses accessible for people to continue to live in their homes - there are 521 of these. Specific grant had been given to people that would not be eligible to receive a grant from a bank - there are 24 of these. 1,836 people have been housed in social housing. 237 new social houses have been constructed and 14 people have received a grant towards purchasing their first house. In terms of the number of people who have received support from all of this, the figure I have is 2,852."

**(4) A question from Councillor Annwen Hughes**

"What impact is the Government withdrawing the Llanbedr bypass (access road to the airfield) likely to have on the broader economy of Meirionnydd?"

**Response from the Leader, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn**

"I wish to thank the Councillor very much for her continued efforts to support the people of Llanbedr, who are genuinely concerned about the situation.

Welsh Government's decision to withdraw its support for the Llanbedr road scheme is a difficult blow for us as an Authority, and for the people and businesses of Llanbedr in particular.

The decision, in our opinion, is unfounded for a number of reasons, including any impact on the environment. According to our research, it would have a positive impact on the environment, and specifically on the quality of air for the residents of Llanbedr. The arguments in terms of the errors in the Welsh Government's review have been set out in detail in a letter to the First Minister sent on 12 December, and I believe that this letter has been appended to the written response, or has been sent out separately to all members.

In terms of the economic impact, I believe that this is of significant concern. Creating jobs in the countryside and in Meirionnydd is a priority for us, and this decision is therefore, astounding. We need quality jobs across rural Gwynedd and

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there is a special effort to target quality work in the Meirionnydd area. This location is unique and this is its strength. It enables access to safe aerospace apart from over Ceredigion Bay, which enables the type of tests on novel air-planes that cannot be carried out at other centres. It is not possible to locate it anywhere else.

We have a clear ambition in terms of the development of this centre, based on low-carbon and carbon-neutral technologies, such as electric airplanes, and planes that use hydrogen. A report from 2020 suggests that 500 jobs could be created here if the centre is developed to its full potential.

Developing this site is central to a number of the Welsh Government's own policies and strategies including Wales: A Sustainable Space Nation - a document that sets out a clear role for the centre in aiming for Wales to gain a space market work £2bn by 2030.

I have a significant element of concern about the report that is the basis for this decision. It suggests that the centre should not receive support as it is not located within an area that has been designated as a growth area in the National Development Framework. There are far-reaching implications to this statement. We have argued that this suggests that there would be no support for investments to create new jobs in rural areas across Wales and we have raised the matter at the Rural Forum and with the Welsh Local Government Association.

There is also a need to recognise the impact on the companies that have invested substantial money in preparing detailed tenders to design and construct the road. We were ready to commence this work at the beginning of the year, and none of these will now be given that work, and they will not be in a position to secure work for their workforce in the coming months.

To close, I'm of the opinion that this decision will have implications far beyond the development of one work centre. Given the full picture, there was an opportunity here to contribute to genuine campaigns to develop new low-carbon and carbon neutral technologies on a global level. It brought hope of success to one of our most economically vulnerable areas with the lowest weekly wage in the United Kingdom. The opportunity is still there as all the relevant consents are in place. But we will consider the next steps after receiving the Welsh Government's response to our concerns."

### **Supplementary Question from Councillor Annwen Hughes**

"Have you received a reply to the letter you sent in November to the First Minister of Wales?"

### **Response from the Leader, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn**

"Yes, I have received a reply in these last few days, but the answer is extremely disappointing as the First Minister makes it perfectly clear that the decision will not be reconsidered. I will share a copy of the letter with all members this afternoon. We did not receive an answer to our analysis of the defective report of the Independent Panel or to other points raised - only to say that we will have an opportunity to discuss them with Transport Wales. I question how qualified they are to hold a meaningful discussion on the matters, and we did not receive an offer to meet a minister, despite our request, which is disappointing given the good relationship that has been developed over recent months in several areas. Naturally, this type of approach from the Government undermines elements of the trust we have developed between us and them. The residents of Llanbedr have been sacrificed to suffer, not only the traffic problem, but also the resulting

pollution. The economic success of the people of Meirionnydd and every other rural area in Wales is being sacrificed as a result of the Government's simplistic policy which disregards the complexity of the situation. Here we are once again - an example of the countryside having to pay because of climate change policies. We will see if our populated areas, that are responsible for the majority of carbon emissions, contribute as much as we have to. I believe that this is a major transgression. In terms of the next steps, I will be responding to the First Minister's letter, of course, and will seek to arrange a meeting with the Minister for the Economy. I will have several opportunities to do this, and to seek answers from him, because there are questions about his entire strategy in terms of the economy here in Gwynedd, and in north Wales, and in fact in all of rural Wales. I have already raised the matter with the Rural Forum and I will ask for the support of the WLGA to try to open the door to give us access to Government officers and ministers. In the meantime, we must consider all available legal options, and also look at any possibilities for other funding."

**(5) A question from Councillor Gwynfor Owen**

"Following the Welsh Government's statement on introducing measures to control second homes and holiday homes, can the Leader provide an update on the details of the measures and the next steps for the Council in implementing them?"

**Response from the Leader, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn,**

"Obviously, I welcome the Welsh Government's recent statement, which will begin a process of adaptations to the planning regulations, among other recommendations, to seek control of holiday homes on second homes.

This statement, of course, following years of lobbying from the Council, including submitting detailed evidence to Welsh Government in December 2020, following research on holiday homes and second homes, which highlighted the need for better control, along with proposing recommendations for achieving this. I believe that the evidence base deriving from the Council's research has been significant in the Government's recent announcement, which, I believe, is a recognition of the need to gain much better control of holiday homes and second homes, in the interest of our communities now and in future generations.

Therefore we have seen the launch of the "Legislation and Planning Policy for Second Homes and Short-term Holiday Lets" consultation on 23 November 2021 and will be open until 22 February 2022, and there is a link for you to see the details of the written response, and I encourage every member to respond to it as it is important that we have strong support for these proposed measures. This consultation offers changes that will give those authorities that have been affected by high numbers of holiday homes the opportunity to seek better control of the situation. This involved collecting evidence as a basis for legal instructions that would then mean, from the date of the directive, that planning permission would be required to use a house as a holiday home and second home, within a specific area.

The officers have begun a process of coordinating the response to the consultation that, most likely, will consider a number of matters such as the practicality of implementing and enforcing the proposed amendments, along with what this would mean in terms of Council resources.

The consultation in the planning field is one of a number of consultations the Council is responding to in relation to holiday homes, and I draw attention in particular to the "Welsh Language Communities Housing Plan" that has also been launched and will run until 22 February 2022. There is a link in the written



response, and again, I recommend that you should all contribute to that consultation.

A general briefing session for Members will be arranged for 14 December, 2021, and one of the items presented to Members will be an overview of these consultations.

The Council will continue to hold discussions with Welsh Government regarding the variety of plans referred to in their statement, including financial support for Gwynedd for empty houses and funding to assist people to buy homes in their communities."

#### **A supplementary question from Councillor Gwynfor Owen**

"Could you expand more on your specific role as Leader along with Gwynedd Plaid and Gwynedd Council in the process of reaching this significant point?"

#### **Response from the Leader, Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn**

"I believe that it is true to say that this Council has led on the issue of second homes for years. With the perseverance of my predecessor, Dyfed Edwards, in convincing Government ministers, he succeeded to introduce the right to raise the Premium. I remember the first meeting I had with the Local Government Minister very soon after the County Council elections and taking the role of Leader - Dilwyn Williams (the former Chief Executive) and myself met with the Minister, Julie James, and one of the main issues we had was holiday homes. Speaking of Dilwyn Williams, we should thank Dilwyn for his thorough work in introducing a detailed case and clear steps that could be taken to regulate second homes. Very clear papers were prepared, as Dilwyn was able to do, to be submitted to the Rural Forum, and they were accepted by the 9 counties of that body. That paper was also submitted for the WLGA's approval, to seek the support of all Welsh counties to what we were calling for, namely the steps in the planning field, in the taxation field specifically and also in the licensing field. There is no doubt that the research work done by our Planning Policy Team has been very valuable, and we need to pay a tribute to them for this work.

Very many people and campaigners have been working on this for decades. I remember participating in campaigns in the 70s. I believe that Dafydd Wigley presented a bill in Westminster in the 80s and Elfyn Llwyd after him in the 90s, submitted a bill to Parliament seeking regulation of this field. Of course, there are other people around us. We have acted in the political arena, but over the years, campaigners, be it Cymdeithas yr Iaith, Cymuned or Hawl i Fyw Adra - all of them have contributed to be able to convince this Government that there is a case for change, and the case is now stronger than ever, as we have seen in the current housing crisis. But there is more work to be done, of course. This is only the start of it. We have set the foundations here. We have won the day on the principles, but we must now ensure that the action taken in the planning field is effective. We must ensure that the taxation proposals will work and we are expecting an announcement very soon from the Government in relation to this. Of course, we still need a discussion with the Government on what is proposed exactly for the pilot scheme in Dwyfor, and that discussion will continue. There is no time to rest on our laurels - this is where the work begins."

## **7. COUNCIL TAX REDUCTION SCHEME 2022/23**

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The Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas, submitted a report asking the Council to confirm the continuation of the current Local Scheme to provide assistance towards paying Council Tax for the year commencing 1 April 2022.

In response to a question, it was explained that there were different types of support available for people on low wages, but as this varied according to the individual's circumstances, it was impossible to provide a single solution. However, anyone who was struggling was encouraged to contact the Department to see what could be done. It was also noted that discussions were being held to see if it was possible to operate on a more cross-departmental level to offer support.

### **RESOLVED**

- **To continue the Council's Local Scheme for the year commencing 1 April 2022 as it was in 2021/22. Therefore, the following conditions (a - c below) regarding the continuation of the discretionary elements would apply:**
  - a) **To apply a 100% disregard for war disablement pensions, war widows' pensions and war widowers' pensions, for both pensioners and working age claimants.**
  - b) **Not to increase the extended reduction periods for pensioners and working age claimants from the standard four weeks in the Prescribed Scheme.**
  - c) **Not to increase the backdate period for pensioners and working age claimants from the standard three months contained within the Prescribed Scheme.**
- **Where appropriate, to delegate powers to the Head of Finance Department, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance, to make minor amendments to the scheme for 2022/23, provided that it will not change the substance of the scheme.**

## **8. COUNCIL TAX: DISCRETIONARY POWERS TO ALLOW DISCOUNTS AND / OR RAISE A PREMIUM**

The Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas, presented a report asking the Council for formal confirmation for 2022/23, of the previous decisions not to give discounts to second homes and to disallow discounts on empty properties, and to raise a premium of 100% on such relevant properties.

Members were given an opportunity to make observations and ask questions. The following matters were raised by individual members:

- It was noted that the circumstances of individuals and families who owned long-term vacant properties varied greatly, and it was asked what support could be given to those individuals. In response, it was noted that the recommendation remained to raise a Premium on long-term vacant properties as such properties could cause social problems in some locations, but that a policy could be introduced under another section of the act which allowed the Council discretion to reduce the Premium in some cases, such as where a property had been inherited by family, and there was work to bring the house back to order as part of the estate.
- It was asked how close we were to the estimation that an additional £3.9m generated by the 2021/22 premium would be available to the fund, given that 2,045 properties had been transferred from the Council Tax list to the Non-domestic Rating list. In response, it was explained, in preparing the estimates every year, there was a need to look prudently at how many would transfer, anticipating that the pattern of transferring would continue without legislative intervention. Late transfers in this financial year could mean loss, maybe, that

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would be back-dated for a period. Therefore, it was impossible to say how close we were to the £3.9m, but currently, we could be quite confident that we would be relatively close in terms of the money coming in.

- In response to a question, it was explained that the definition of a property that was unsuitable for habitation was in the hands of the District Valuer. Anyone who owned this type of property was asked to contact the Valuer, and should the Valuer conclude that it was unsuitable, it would be removed from the banding. The valuer had recently tightened the definition, so that the property had to be more or less derelict before being removed from the list. It was noted, should members have concerns about a specific property in their ward, they could discuss them with the Finance Department in the first instance.
- Concern was expressed that caravan owners did not pay any Council Tax, yet they used Council services, and it was suggested that this should be reviewed.
- The importance of adhering to the policy of raising a Premium on second homes and keeping the pressure on Welsh Government to solve the holiday homes problem was emphasised.
- It was suggested that the extended exemption period of 12 months to renovate long-term empty property was not enough as it was very difficult nowadays to find a builder / joiner / plumber / electrician to collaborate and complete all the work within such a tight schedule. In response, it was noted that the Housing Action Plan made a provision for cases that required more than 12 months. Support was available for local people to have a further period of tax exemption, and members were welcome to contact the department if they were aware of specific cases.
- It was noted that the greatest problem was people turning their houses into businesses, and it was asked what the Council was doing to prevent this, especially in preparing for the pilot scheme in Llŷn. It was suggested that there was more or less no purpose to having the Premium, if the properties were being lost, and if people were avoiding paying any Council Tax. Also, referring to the pilot scheme, it was asked how much emphasis was placed on the Welsh language and Welsh speaking communities, and the need for these communities to be earmarked as areas of special interest, globally in fact. In response, it was explained that the Leader had already referred to this in answering Councillor Gwynfor Owen's question under item 6 above. The Planning Policy Department had undertaken a piece of work a year ago, and this was Welsh Government's basis for commissioning a report from Dr Simon Brookes. It was this, and the discussions between the Council and Welsh Government, that had led to the statement last week, and more information on this was awaited from the Government. It was further noted there was a consultation in the pipeline on how to close the gap, or the ability to transfer to Non-domestic Tax. The Council's perspective had been very clear for years that a house was a house, and it was not possible for people to avoid paying the tax. Amending Section 66 of the current Housing Act and closing the gap was a very easy way of preventing this from happening, and this is what would be conveyed as firmly as possible in Gwynedd Council's response to the consultation.
- Concern was expressed that the Council was always trying to keep up with the transfer problem, and that the situation was not being policed. People were turning their houses into businesses and using the Council's waste collection service. Welsh Government legislation was still holding us back, and ministers refusing to speak to us. There was a need to change the situation, and encourage everyone to fight, so that we are able to maintain control over our housing stock in our communities.

**RESOLVED that the Council makes no changes to the scheme for 2022/23. For 2022/23, that Gwynedd Council:**

- **Allows NO discount on class A second homes, in accordance with Section 12 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.**

- **Allows NO discount and RAISES A PREMIUM of 100% on class B second homes, in accordance with Section 12B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992.**
- **Allows NO discount on homes that have been empty for 6 months or more and RAISES 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.**

## 9. GWYNEDD COUNCIL'S DIVERSITY DECLARATION

The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee, Councillor Anne Lloyd Jones, submitted a report inviting the Council to adopt a work programme to support Gwynedd Council's Diversity Declaration.

The Corporate Support Cabinet Member thanked the Chair and the members of the Democratic Services Committee for their work on this important subject.

Members were given an opportunity to make observations and ask questions. The following matters were raised by individual members:

- The Cabinet Member for Corporate Support was thanked for ensuring that the declaration would be amended to include people who identified as LGBTQ+, and anyone with protected characteristics were encouraged to stand for election in May.
- It was noted that it was very important to have diversity on the Council, and for the Council to reflect the people of Gwynedd today.
- The importance of keeping this matter in mind when discussing conditions and recognition for elected members was emphasised, as these matters were crucial in attracting people to be part of the Council.

**RESOLVED to adopt the work programme to support Gwynedd Council's Diversity Declaration.**

## 10. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS (WALES) ACT 2021 - ARRANGEMENTS FOR FUTURE COUNCIL MEETINGS

The Chair of the Democratic Services Committee, Councillor Anne Lloyd Jones, submitted a report inviting the Council to approve arrangements to hold Council meetings in order to address the new requirements in Part 3 of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.

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

A number of members expressed their concerns regarding the virtual / hybrid arrangements on the following grounds:-

- There were broadband issues across the county, and it was asked if the Council could do more to assist with this, for the benefit of the county's businesses and councillors. In response, it was noted that the Growth Deal would invest in the region's digital infrastructure.
- That the old arrangements (i.e. in-person meeting in the Chamber) were better.
- That the report did not refer to mental well-being or loneliness, and these matters would worsen if everyone continued to work alone in front of a screen, without the opportunity to socialise and chat with colleagues and councillors.
- There was concern about how new members from May onwards would receive the support and assistance they required.
- It was important to have in-person meetings to enable staff to get to know new staff and for councillors to get to know their new fellow councillors after May.

Hope was expressed that there would be a continuous review of the arrangements.

The shift to hybrid meetings was supported by other members on the grounds that it would give members the choice of coming to the chamber, or participating in the discussion from home.

Referring to the 'Virtually only' sub-heading in the 'Type of Meeting' column in Appendix A of the report, concern was expressed that this closed the door to in-person meetings forever, and an amendment was proposed to remove the sub-heading, so that all meetings would become hybrid, and therefore retaining the option for councillors to attend meetings in a location.

In response to the amendment and to the members' observations, it was noted:-

- That adopting the procedure of holding some meetings virtually only would not close the door, and it was very important to monitor and review the arrangements continuously (at least annually).
- There was reference in the report to exceptions that would occur from time to time, such as initial meetings after elections, so that new members could familiarise themselves with the Council's work, and for returning members to be able to meet their new fellow members.
- That the amendment to make all meetings hybrid would transform what the Democratic Services Committee had put forward, and meant that every meeting would have to be held in a chamber as a starting point. Should the amendment be accepted, the matter would have to be referred back to the committee to consider the implications, and to receive a further report on the matter. The Council was not in a position to make a decision there and then to hold every meeting in a chamber the second the restrictions would be lifted.
- The desire to return to the chamber was appreciated, but there was substantial work to be done to get the systems to work to hold committees where some members were in the chamber, and others at home, and it was strongly suggested that we should get the listed committees (namely the Council, the Planning Committee and the scrutiny committees) to work properly in the first place, especially in terms of matters such as the voting system. After this, it would be possible to review, and if everything was working well, consideration could be given to extending the arrangement in future.

The Chair of the Democratic Service Committee noted that hybrid meetings involved another different way of working, and that chairing hybrid meetings would be a different experience, and would require different and new skills. She thanked the staff of the Democratic Service for ensuring that the members had been able to meet and see each other (virtually) over the last two years, and she noted that she would ensure that the arrangements would be reviewed in moving forward.

#### **RESOLVED**

- **To adopt the arrangements for future Council meetings in accordance with the principles set out in paragraph 9 of the report to Council, with meetings of the Full Council, Planning Committee and scrutiny committees to be held from a location (hybrid) with the remainder remaining virtual meetings.**
- **To confirm the responsibility of implementing a start date to the Head of Democracy Services in consultation with the Monitoring Officer, Chair of Democracy Services Committee and Council Chair, following the lifting of the current restrictions.**

**11. LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND ELECTIONS (WALES) ACT 2021 - GOVERNANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE**

The Monitoring Officer submitted a report detailing the Constitutional changes to the Governance and Audit Committee and seeking the Council's guidance on the size of the committee in future.

Members were given an opportunity to make observations and ask questions. The following matters were raised by individual members:

- Concern was expressed regarding the loss for the Independent Group, which currently held the chairpersonship and vice-chairpersonship of the Audit and Governance Committee. However, it was understood that these were changes introduced by the Welsh Government.
- In response to a question, it was explained that the 12 elected members on the committee would be appointed by the groups, in accordance with the political balance.
- It was suggested that the lay members appointment panel appeared to be very small.
- In response to a question, it was explained that the lay members would be appointed before the new provisions would come into force in May, and therefore the current chair of the Audit and Governance Committee would be able to sit on the panel.

**RESOLVED**

- **To note the changes to the Constitution made by the Monitoring Officer in Appendix 1 of the report.**
- **To confirm the recommendation of the Governance and Audit Committee to set the total membership of the Governance and Audit Committee at 12 elected members and 6 Lay Members for May 2022.**

**12. APPOINTMENT OF NEW SECTION 151 OFFICER**

Submitted - the report of the Cabinet Member for Corporate Support, Councillor Nia Jeffreys, inviting the Council to confirm Dewi Aeron Morgan, as prospective holder of the post of the Council's Head of Finance, as the new Section 151 Officer for the Authority from 1 January 2022, in accordance with the requirements of Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.

**RESOLVED That the Council confirms Dewi Aeron Morgan, as prospective holder of the post of the Council's Head of Finance, as the new Section 151 Officer for the Authority from 1 January 2022, in accordance with the requirements of Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972.**

**12. NOTICES OF MOTION**

Submitted - the following notice of motion by Councillor Gethin Glyn Williams, in accordance with Section 4.20 of the Constitution, and it was seconded:-

**Over the centuries the lands and resources of Wales have been used for extraction of all manner of commodities for the benefit of others. The latest 'commodity' being seized upon from our landscape is the potential in carbon, as investment companies from outside Wales are purchasing farms, gaining large Glastir Woodland Creation (GWC) grants and using the land for afforestation to offset their carbon emissions.**

**The Council calls on the Welsh Government to:**

- Urgently amend the eligibility of their Glastir (GWC) grant so that only active farmers in Wales are able to apply.
- Introduce planning development legislation to enable local planning authorities such as Gwynedd to control afforestation projects.

**It is vital the Welsh Government moves to protect Wales' rural environment and resources for the benefit of a new Green circular economy and to strengthen Welsh industries, communities and services."**

The member set out the context to his motion, members expressed their support of the motion, noting:-

- There was no clarity as to who the investment companies buying the farms were.
- That this practice had to be stopped, and ensure that the resources remained in the hands of the people of Wales.
- That people did not understand how reliant farmers were on grants such as Glastir, and it should be legislated that farms should be run as farms by local people, rather than being used to plant trees.
- It was claimed that using farming land in this way was an offset for carbon emissions. However, removing farming land from Wales meant that we were producing less food, and the inevitable result of that was having to import food, which added to carbon emissions.
- That some farmers in Pen Llŷn had applied for the Government's woodland grant, but had been refused.

**RESOLVED to adopt the motion, namely:-**

**Over the centuries the lands and resources of Wales have been used for extraction of all manner of commodities for the benefit of others. The latest 'commodity' being seized upon from our landscape is the potential in carbon, as investment companies from outside Wales are purchasing farms, gaining large Glastir Woodland Creation (GWC) grants and using the land for afforestation to offset their carbon emissions.**

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**It is vital the Welsh Government moves to protect Wales' rural environment and resources for the benefit of a new Green circular economy and to strengthen Welsh industries, communities and services.**

The meeting commenced at 1.00 pm and concluded at 4.10 pm

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CHAIR