

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the hybrid meeting held on 19 October 2022

PRESENT: Councillor R. Llewelyn Jones (Chair)
Councillor Dyfed Wyn Jones (Vice-Chair)

Councillors Neville Evans, Aled M. Jones, Jackie Lewis, Llio A. Owen, Dafydd Roberts, Keith Roberts.

Co-Opted Member – Mr John Tierney (The Catholic Church)

Portfolio Members

Councillors Gary Pritchard (Portfolio Member for Children - Social Services and Youth Services), Alun Roberts (Portfolio Member for Adults' Services – Social Services), Councillor Ieuan Williams (Portfolio Member for Education and the Welsh Language), Councillor Robin Williams (Portfolio Member for Finance, Corporate Business and Customer Experience), Councillor Nicola Roberts (Portfolio Member for Planning, Public Protection and Climate Change)

IN ATTENDANCE: Chief Executive
Deputy Chief Executive
Director of Function (Resources)/Section 151 Officer
Director of Social Services
Director of Learning, Skills and Young People
Head of Adults' Services
Head of Housing Services
Head of Highways, Waste and Property
Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation
Programme, Business Planning and Performance Manager (GM)
Community Housing Service Manager (LW)
Principal Development Officer (Housing) (AJ)
Scrutiny Manager (AGD)
Committee Officer (ATH)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Douglas M. Fowlie, Llinos Medi Huws (Leader of the Council)

ALSO PRESENT: Mr John R. Jones (Chair of the Standards Committee), Mr Rhys Davies (Member of the Standards Committee (present as observers), Mr Gethin Jones (Communications Officer)

1 DECLARATION OF INTEREST

No declaration of interest was received.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee held on the 26 September, 2022 were presented and were confirmed as correct.

3 POVERTY AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The report of the Chief Executive setting out how the Council is responding to poverty and the national cost of living challenges that are affecting individuals, families, communities, businesses and other bodies on Anglesey was presented for the Committee's consideration and scrutiny. The report contained information about the availability of benefits and financial support, the free school meals scheme and other preventative schemes.

The Chief Executive in setting the context said that poverty and cost of living challenges are now impacting on the lives of many of Anglesey's residents, including children and are being felt more widely across Wales and other parts of the United Kingdom. A shortage of quality job opportunities, adequate salaries, benefit dependency and rising costs are all contributing to the crisis. Recent increases in inflation, interest rates, mortgage and borrowing costs are putting individuals, communities, businesses and organisations under extra pressure. The prevailing uncertainty is affecting everyone including the Council making it difficult to predict how and where any further measures by the UK Government and the Bank of England will affect the people of Anglesey. While the recent change in the UK Government's policy including the decision not to pursue the growth plan has brought some measure of financial stability, the uncertainty continues on the ground. The announcement of the Chancellor's new economic plan on 31 October alongside a forecast by the Office for Budgetary Responsibility should provide more clarity as regards the introduction of any additional measures to combat the cost of living crisis and the consequent effects on Welsh Government budgets.

The Chief Executive provided assurance that in the meantime, the Council's staff will continue to work hard to support the residents of Anglesey as best they can. Although up to date information is not available since national processes for collecting, analysing and reporting data are not fully up and running since the Covid pandemic, information gathered by the Citizens' Advice Bureau shows that the five main cost of living issues locally over the past five months have been personal independence payments, financial capacity, energy costs, financial capacity and life events, and Council Tax reduction. The Council is aware that child poverty has increased on Anglesey between 2015 and 2021 according to figures provided by the End Child Poverty Coalition. Rising fuel costs are hitting rural areas particularly hard and although the number of people claiming unemployment benefit decreased from 4.7% to 3.2% in August, 2022, the news about potential redundancies at the Alpoco plant in Holyhead is concerning. The Council is trying to create a more detailed and up to date analysis of poverty and cost of living indicators but the task is challenging. While the crisis has led to an increase in demand on a number of services requiring the delivery of interventions and supporting measures, there has been no corresponding increase in capacity to deal with the extra work. Despite the uncertainty and personal pressures, the commitment of the Council staff and their desire to help others remain strong and they are to be thanked especially front line staff and those who are, and have been processing benefit payments.

In working together with communities and other organisations, the Council will be able to achieve more and the collaborative arrangements between the Council and local organisations which worked so effectively during the pandemic are again proving their worth in the current crisis. The Council has updated its website to provide information about where further help and support with the cost of living can be obtained and links are shared through its social media channels. While the current challenges are significant, the Council is doing all it can within available resources to help people locally by administering benefits and financial support, free school meals, and by delivering a range of support service and interventions, many in partnership with other organisations. The Council will itself have to

adapt in the face of an expected reduction in funding and resources at a time when demands for the Council's support are rising.

The Director of Function (Resources)/Section 151 Officer provided an overview of the benefits and financial support available and delivered to individuals facing financial hardship. These interventions were set out in detail in Appendix 1 to the report.

The Director of Education, Skills and Young People reported on how the Council has implemented the new Free School Meals Scheme working with the catering company Chartwells and the Property Service to realise this plan in Anglesey's schools (Appendix 2 to the report) and he also referred to the School Holiday Enrichment Programme as another important element of support provided by the Learning Directorate providing education on food and nutrition, physical activity, enrichment session and healthy meals for children in areas of social deprivation over the summer holidays.

The Head of Housing Services explained where and how the Council delivers services and interventions either alone or in partnership to minimise the impact of poverty on the Island. The table in Appendix 3 to the report provided an overview of some of the identified poverty areas that Anglesey residents have faced and continue to face and highlights the identified risks and how as a Council working with partner agencies, these risks are mitigated.

The Committee in recognising the severity and complexity of the current cost of living crisis acknowledged the hard work of Council officers in trying to ameliorate the worst effects on the people and communities of Anglesey by providing financial help, support and advice and by signposting individuals and families to other organisations able to give assistance. In the ensuing discussion the following matters were considered with Officers providing clarifications and assurance about how the issues raised are being addressed –

- Take-up of winter fuel payments and encouraging people who are eligible to make a claim
- The importance of communication and raising awareness of the range of help available especially within the rural population and for people who don't have access to a computer and internet.
- The adequacy of national interventions in supporting the individuals and communities on Anglesey.
- The cost-effectiveness of sub-contracting some of the assessment or payment processing work to external companies
- Supporting schools to respond to sensitive situations where there are low income families who are just above the threshold for free school meals and are therefore not eligible
- Helping people in ways other than through financial support by directing them to/providing them with advice about reducing energy consumption and improving their budgeting and cooking skills for example in order to reduce food costs
- Gaps in areas that require further consideration in terms of the Council's forward planning
- Expediting the development of a debt service within Housing Services to supplement and reduce the pressure on the Citizens' Advice Bureau as the only debt advice provision within Anglesey.

Portfolio Members provided assurance that they are working closely with the Officers of their service portfolios to keep abreast of developments and to ensure the best use of scarce resources and the delivery of value for money in all that the Council does.

It was resolved –

- **To note the schemes and interventions in place to support individuals and communities across Anglesey throughout the cost of living crisis**
- **To note and accept the resilience and adequacy of the schemes and interventions in place to support the people of Anglesey.**

4 ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT 2021/22

The Annual Performance Report for 2020/21 was presented for the Committee's consideration and comment. The report looks back on the Council's performance for 2021/22 and outlines how the Council has realised the expectations of the Annual Delivery Document and the Transitional Plan.

Councillor Robin Williams Portfolio Member for Finance, Corporate Business and Customer Experience presented the report drawing attention to some of the key highlights in terms of the progress made against the Transitional Plan and the Annual Delivery Document and the Key Performance Indicators results for 2021/22.

In considering the Annual Performance Report the Committee discussed the following matters –

- Lessons to be considered for the new Council Plan from the completion of projects/objectives in the Transitional Plan and Annual Delivery Document. The Committee was assured that good practice is identified though regular service reviews and cascaded down to staff through the managers' forum and more recently via the business managers.
- The challenges of maintaining the Council's good performance through what are expected to be difficult times ahead. The Committee was advised that the Council is facing significant financial challenges with a potential budget gap of £18m in the coming period. The Council will set a balanced budget as it is required to do but that will be challenging given the uncertainty around the national economic situation and the funding allocation the Welsh Government and consequently Welsh councils might receive, and is likely to mean finding significant savings. The Council is currently consulting on its new Council Plan – Our Future – and the strategic objectives of the Plan over its initial period must recognise the climate in which the Council is operating and the limitations which that poses. Those objectives can be adapted and broadened if and when the economic situation improves.
- The need to ensure as wide as possible a response to the consultation on the new Council Plan so that the range of people and organisations' views can inform the Council's priorities for the next five years. The Committee was assured that the consultation which was launched on 20 September, 2022 and runs until 14 November, 2022 has been publicised through a range of means including social media channels, local radio, presentations and the distribution of paper copies to libraries, leisure centres and Oriel Môn.
- The extent to which the Annual Performance Report reflects the Council's actions as regards environmental sustainability, protection and improvement. A suggestion was made that the environment and green issues be given greater prominence in the

new Council Plan and further, that the environment be included as one of the guiding principles for scrutiny in section 3 of the scrutiny template as a permanent reminder for Members when they are scrutinising issues. The Committee was advised that the new Council Plan has to balance the environment and green issues with social issues and with job creation and opportunities. Once the Plan is adopted, a scorecard can be developed to capture the Council's performance management measures in terms of net zero and environmental sustainability. The Council's report templates and paperwork are being reviewed across the board to ensure that environmental protection matters, net zero and carbon reduction are being considered and can be evidenced in the decisions the Council makes. The aim is to embed green issues within the culture and day to day business of the Council. The Council has also developed a Biodiversity Plan upon which it is required to report annually and which could be presented to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee if it so wishes.

As part of the Committee's recommendations to the Executive with regard to the Annual Performance Plan, the Chair suggested that ensuring a balance in the new Council Plan as regards biodiversity and net zero aspects be included. While agreeing with the sentiment, the majority of the Committee's members deemed it premature at this time to be making a recommendation on the content of the new Council Plan as the Plan is still out to consultation until mid-November.

It was resolved –

- **To recommend to the Executive that it agrees the content of the 2021/22 Annual Performance Report as a fair and complete reflection of the Authority's work over the period and that the Executive recommends its adoption to the Council at its meeting on 27 October, 2022.**
- **That the Council's Biodiversity Plan be added to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee's Forward Work Programme.**

5 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Scrutiny Manager setting out the Corporate Scrutiny Committee's updated Forward Work Programme for 2022/23 was presented for consideration.

It was resolved –

- **To agree the current version of the Forward Work Programme for 2022/23.**
- **To note the progress thus far in implementing the Forward Work Programme.**

**Councillor R. Llewelyn Jones
Chair**