

CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held in the Committee Room and on Zoom on 15 January, 2025 (P.M.)

- PRESENT:** Councillor Douglas Fowlie (Chair)
Councillor Sonia Williams (Vice-Chair)
- Councillors Geraint Bebb, John Ifan Jones, R. Llewelyn Jones, Llio A. Owen, Keith Roberts, Alwen Watkin, Ieuan Williams, Arfon Wyn.
- Co-opted Member: Mr John Tierney (The Catholic Church)
- Portfolio Members**
- Councillors Gary Pritchard (Leader of the Council and Portfolio Member for Economic Development), Robin Williams (Deputy Leader and Portfolio Member for Finance and Housing), Neville Evans (Portfolio Member for Leisure, Tourism and Maritime), Carwyn Jones (Portfolio Member for Corporate and Customer Experience), Dyfed Wyn Jones (Portfolio Member for Children, Young People and Families), Alun Roberts (Portfolio Member for Adults' Services and Community Safety), Dafydd Roberts (Portfolio Member for Education and the Welsh Language), Dafydd Rhys Thomas (Portfolio Member for Highways, Waste and Property).
- IN ATTENDANCE:** Chief Executive
Deputy Chief Executive
Head of Highways, Waste and Property
Head of Democracy (DS)
Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation (CE) (for item 3)
Corporate Planning Performance and Programme Manager (GP) (for item 3)
Executive Manager (SOJ) (for item 4)
Scrutiny Manager (AGD)
Committee Officer (ATH)
Webcasting Officer (FT)
- APOLOGIES:** Councillors Aled M. Jones, Jackie Lewis, Wenda Owen (The Church in Wales), Gillian Thompson (Parent Governor – Primary Schools Sector), (Mr Marc B. Hughes (Director of Education, Skills, and Young People)
- ALSO PRESENT:** Helen Kilgannon (Regional Manager - North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service), Jon Zalot (Emergency Planning Officer) (for item 4)

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 19 November, 2024 were presented and were confirmed as correct and progress against the actions agreed at the meeting was noted.

3 SELF-ASSESSMENT REPORT 2023/24 – UPDATE ON PROGRESS AGAINST IDENTIFIED IMPROVEMENT ACTIONS

The report of the Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation which provided an update on progress in implementing the improvement actions identified in the Self-Assessment Report for 2023/24 was presented for the committee's consideration.

The report was presented by Councillor Gary Pritchard, Leader of the Council who confirmed that from the actions in the six areas identified as providing opportunities for improvement and monitoring from the 2023/24 Corporate Self-Assessment Report only two are behind schedule with all others either completed or on track to be completed. The March 2025 timescale for the publication of a new smallholding asset management strategy has slipped with it being recommended that a cross party task and finish group is established to progress the strategy while work on rationalising council assets is ongoing including the adoption of a new computer aided facilities management system, empty/surplus buildings processes in place and disposals accelerated as well as the development of a more complete asset data set to support decision-making.

In response to a question about the revised timescale for the production of a new smallholding asset management strategy the committee was advised that a revised draft strategy had been prepared to replace the strategy that was in place until 2021 but its approval through the democratic process was paused due to the local government election in 2022. Should the task and finish group when operational decide to support the existing draft strategy with minimal amendment then it is possible that the strategy can be finalised within a few months. More substantial changes or a change of direction/approach would have to be consulted upon necessitating further work and a longer timescale. The Chief Executive confirmed that the Political Group Leaders had been asked to submit nominations for membership of the Task and Finish Group.

Reference was made to area six on the update report which sets out specific actions to address identified workforce planning challenges and a request was made for an update and overview of the current situation within the Council generally with regard to staff recruitment and retention and whether the Council has plans either singly or in collaboration with partners and local educational establishments to ensure it can meet future staffing requirements.

The Chief Executive advised that the Council's staffing situation is at present stable. The Council is able to attract and retain good staff and can provide its staff with experiences and career progression. There is some concern regarding single points of failure within the system where the absence or loss of an individual with specific expertise and knowledge in a particular area has wider implications for the Council as a whole in terms of maintaining the level of service. While Service Heads are aware of the importance of workforce planning within their services there is more the Council can do as an organisation to raise its profile as an employer and to emphasise what it can offer prospective employees in terms of work flexibility, training, and growth opportunities. Welsh Government's new education strategic workforce plan to address challenges in the education sector is being looked at and the Council's own trainee scheme in being targeted at areas where there are gaps will ensure the Council remains sustainable. The Council may in future need to focus attention on some of the main roles within the organisation to ensure it can attract the right talent in a competitive market where a service head is expected to specialise in several areas.

The Head of Profession (HR) and Transformation referred to a number of schemes within the Council to support recruitment including the Denu Talent Programme which provides individuals with direct experience of working in the Council and which has proved especially successful in Adult Services; the availability of SCWWDP funding to help develop the social care workforce and the Council's longstanding relationship with Bangor University in delivering the MA Social Work programme. She confirmed that the corporate trainee scheme will be focusing on areas/posts within the Council where there are identified gaps the emphasis being on a grow your own approach. The Council also offers management and leadership development programmes internally for its staff. She highlighted that the Council's staff retention rate is 82%. The Director of Social Services briefed the committee on how the Council's investment in recruitment and training measures have helped Social Services achieve workforce stability. The Head of Highways, Waste and Property advised that the main recruitment challenge for the service is in relation to technical staff. While the grow your own approach is producing results there remains a risk that with hybrid working arrangements staff may be attracted by opportunities further afield with higher pay.

In response to a question about the recruitment challenges in the secondary education sector specifically in science based disciplines, the Deputy Chief Executive reiterated that the Welsh Government's new education strategic workforce plan to address the challenges will be carefully studied. Efforts have been made nationally for some time to enhance the profile of the teaching profession and those efforts continue.

Councillor Gary Pritchard, Leader of the Council referred to a positive working environment as being a key factor especially in the Council being able to retain existing staff. The Council's induction programme for new staff highlights the opportunities within the Council for career progression, continuing learning and development, and workforce planning forms part of every service's annual self-assessment. He noted that recruitment challenges are being experienced by the local government sector as a whole particularly in relation to more specialised roles where there can be strong competition for a limited pool of candidates hence the importance of promoting the Council as an employer.

Having scrutinised the update report and received assurances with regard to the matters raised, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee resolved to note the progress against the improvement actions identified in the Self-Assessment Report.

4 NORTH WALES COUNCILS REGIONAL EMERGENCY PLANNING SERVICE (NWC-REPS) ANNUAL REPORT 2023/24

The annual report for 2023/24 of the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service (NWC-REPS) was presented for the committee's consideration.

The annual report was introduced by Councillor Gary Pritchard, Leader of the Council as providing an overview of the service's activity during 2023/24. The Council has emergency planning and response duties under the relevant legislation and regulations and is a principal responder. The Council meets its obligations by collaborating with the North Wales local authorities through the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service for which Flintshire County Council is the host authority. The report summarises both regional activity during the year with regard to incident management and emergency response as well as activity within the six North Wales local authorities individually. Councillor Garry Pritchard thanked all staff who had been involved in the work carried out during the year and praised the collaboration as a valued partnership.

The Regional Manager for the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service was invited to comment and she highlighted the regional service as the only one of its kind in Wales saying that since its establishment the service had made significant savings for the six local authorities in North Wales, reduced duplication and ensured the availability of increased resources for the local authorities.

In scrutinising the annual report the committee discussed the following matters –

- Noting recent issues in relation to bridge closures on Anglesey and noting also that the only contingency plan for both bridges closing simultaneously was dated 2011 the committee sought assurances regarding progress with updating the document and taking the matter forward.

The Emergency Planning Officer confirmed that since the last report to Scrutiny the Chief Executive had raised the issue with the Local Resilience Forum in a letter to the Chair of the Forum and a task and finish group was established to examine the issue. He confirmed that the 2011 document listed each agency's responsibilities in the event of both bridges closing simultaneously and needed to be updated to reflect current arrangements and ensure all relevant agencies are included and had an input. The updated document was tested in an exercise held in November 2024 in the Business Centre in Llangefni and the issues and options with responding to both bridges closing were discussed including ensuring passage for emergency vehicles. North Wales Police have been investigating options for HGV stacking with Welsh Government also providing an input on this matter.

The Chief Executive said that a great deal of work had been achieved in a short timescale and while the emergency response would now be more robust than it would have been a year ago, further work needs to be done particularly with regard to the unresolved issue of HGV stacking. The only existing HGV stacking plan dates back to Brexit and its main elements would take two weeks to put in place which is not ideal in a crisis. While it is frustrating that a reasonable up to date plan has not yet been produced definitively, progress has been made since the letter to the LRF was sent with the response to the closure of Holyhead Port in the wake of Storm Darragh with signage to warn drivers not to make the journey to the port cited as an example.

The Head of Highways, Waste and Property confirmed that the existing HGV stacking plan offers limited capacity close to the A55 in Holyhead and does not address the challenges involved in the closure of both bridges affecting the resilience of the whole of the island. An Anglesey wide plan is required covering both Holyhead and the link with the mainland as well as regional recognition of the importance of this issue.

In response to further questions the Head of Highways, Waste and Property clarified the working relationship between the Council and the North and Mid Wales Trunk Agency and explained what he understood to be the position regarding HGV stacking arrangements for the mainland saying that the delay in producing a plan for Anglesey may be due in part to a failure at national level to appreciate the significance of the bridges to the island and the real impact of the closure of one or both bridges and the port.

- The immediate priorities of the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service

The Regional Manager advised that the service is currently looking at the priorities of the LRF to ensure alignment and to ensure also that all issues relevant to North Wales are covered. Finalising the recovery plan is a priority as is the continuation of work in relation to coastal pollution and the production of a plan that meets the needs of the five local authorities with a coastline. Work with regard to the bridges will continue as will the delivery of training. Reviewing the preparedness of the service and making sure its plans are up to date are priorities for the next six to eight months.

- The feasibility of including within the contingency plan a provision to inform the public of the optimum times to make the crossing to the mainland to avoid traffic bottlenecks on the bridges as a result of ferry arrivals and/or departures.

The committee was advised by the Emergency Planning Officer that when Menai Bridge was closed for repairs the North and Mid Wales Trunk Road Agency (NMWTA) undertook to investigate peak traffic times on Britannia Bridge and the options available for managing traffic e.g. by installing traffic management lights on the slip roads joining the bridge. He confirmed that he would take the query back to the Traffic Wales as the traffic information service for trunk roads and motorways in Wales to ascertain whether the relevant data can be shared more widely.

- The savings generated by collaborating regionally to provide an emergency planning service to discharge local authority responsibilities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and relevant regulations.

The Regional Manager advised that in the event of any serious incident e.g. storms the service will attend Police Headquarters on behalf of the local authorities to co-ordinate their response and provide information from the multi-agency partners thereby saving six officers' time. In terms of finance the service has only reduced costs and since 2014 has not had an increase and has returned in the region of 5% annually. The service will in due course have to review its structures in order to achieve further savings. This year the service has supported the Council in testing a range of its business continuity plans to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose.

The Head of Highways, Waste and Property confirmed that the co-ordinating role taken by the regional service in recent storm events meant that Council Officers could remain on Anglesey and thereby provide a better response to residents by being able to liaise with local members, senior management, and officers on the ground.

The Chief Executive advised that a review of the service has been undertaken internally by Flintshire County Council where the service is hosted which resulted in savings mainly from reducing staff. Working collaboratively produces greater resilience and provides the Council with expertise that might not otherwise be available to it. Because of the regional structure the Council is able to focus on its actual response instead of being expected to co-ordinate it with strategic partners.

- The regional service's role in dealing with pollution and interaction with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) including input into contingency plans in the event of a nuclear incident.

The committee was advised by the Regional Service Manager that the service is represented on the environment sub-group of the LSF which works with NRW through the group on matters of pollution. The service works with NRW as the regulator on sites in which it is involved such as the control of major accidents and hazard sites. One of the service's officers is aligned to statutory duties with an industrial focus and in that capacity the officer attends Wylfa and Trawsfynydd stakeholder group meetings to keep up to date with events as well as national groups to look at best practice. Should there be an issue at a site the officer would be an integral part of the offsite plan that would need to be created for the site.

Having scrutinised the update report and having regard to the Officer response to the matters raised, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee resolved to note the progress of the North Wales Councils Regional Emergency Planning Service work in 2023/24.

Additional actions agreed –

- **To ask the Chief Executive to write a further letter to the Chair of LRF to expedite the production of a current up to date HGV stacking plan for Anglesey**
- **To ask the Emergency Planning Officer in consultation with Traffic Wales to provide members with traffic flow data on Britannia Bridge.**

- To ask the Regional Service Manager to provide members with information about the savings generated by the service and value for money provided
- To ask the Regional Service Manager to provide members with an update on the development of contingency plans for nuclear sites.
- To request that for 2024/25 the annual report includes an illustration of how the regional service has reduced duplication for each of its constituent councils.

7 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

The report of the Scrutiny Manager incorporating the Committee's Forward Work Programme to April, 2025 was presented for consideration.

It was resolved –

- To agree the current version of the Forward Work Programme for 2024/25.
- To note the progress thus far in implementing the Forward Work Programme.

**Councillor Douglas Fowlie
Chair**

DRAFT