

NAME OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE	Communities Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	14 MAI 2013
TITLE OF ITEM	RESPONSE TO SCRUTINY SUGGESTIONS: COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE CO-ORDINATING, PLANNING AND PROVIDING TRANSPORT SERVICES
CABINET MEMBER	Cllr. W Gareth Roberts

CONTEXT

- 1 Thank you for the information I have received in relation to the discussion held in the last meeting of the Communities Scrutiny Committee. I understand that a number of points were raised by the three interviewees, that members of the Committee have questions in relation to these matters and that that is the information that has been referred to me for consideration.
- 2 I can confirm that I have had an opportunity to have an initial discussion with the Regulatory Department's officers and that I have provided an initial response to the Chairman of the Committee within the timescale set. This report has been based on that original response with minor additions for clarity.
- 3 The message I received noted that some of the observations should be referred to other members of the Cabinet. I would like to confirm that this reflects the situation correctly. Where this is relevant, I have referred to this under individual points, restricting my observations to matters within my field of responsibility.

CO-ORDINATING, PLANNING AND PROVIDING TRANSPORT SERVICES

- 4 I note that you, as a Committee, want to thank the Service for their work in this field. I too would like to express my thanks to the Service for all the hard work done over the last two years in looking again at the transport provision across Gwynedd. Because of past weaknesses, there is no doubt that dismantling historical arrangements and rebuilding them once again is a substantial task and undertaking such work is not likely to please everyone every time.
- 5 I believe that the members of the Service are undertaking these duties thoroughly and professionally and I am also thankful to them for doing this and for enabling me as a Cabinet Member to lead on the matter. The work is not yet completed, but I am confident that the Service has a good grip on what has to be achieved and that matters of priority receive appropriate and timely attention in the work programme.

- 6 During the past two years, the priority of the Integrated Transport Unit has been to re-design the Public and School Transport Service. This work is to continue during 2013 /14 with attention paid to the Arfon Area. It is intended that the focus will be on Community transport and its provision in relation to social services.
- 7 By now, almost every post within the Transport Unit has been filled or the work is being carried out through a particular arrangement and this enables us to assign specific officer time to facilitate work on specific tasks which are prioritised in the work programme.

WORK WITH THE 3RD SECTOR

- 8 Over the last few years some work has been done with the 3rd sector to try and identify opportunities for collaboration and providing sustainable community transport services. Although this work has not been completed a draft programme has been prepared and it is intended to resume this programme again during 2013 / 14.
- 9 Whilst an important contribution is being made, the Community Transport sector cannot remain static nor in its traditional form. It is intended to use resources from the 3 Year Plan to work with the sector to transform / re-design the Community Transport services throughout the County. This cannot be avoided, especially with the Community Transport funding arrangements now being prepared on a regional level. Although the focus will be on making the provision sustainable in Gwynedd, this will have to be done in the context of working jointly with other authorities to ensure consistency across North Wales.
- 10 Much work has to be done in the first place to collect information and perhaps we will not be able to run a pilot scheme within one area of Gwynedd during this year. It must be remembered that on call services have already been introduced in a few parts of Gwynedd. I believe the work of collecting information should be completed in good time to consider the suitability of further plans for realisation from 2014 / 15.

MAPPING PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES ACROSS THE COUNTY

- 11 I can confirm that the first part of this work has already been done in the Meirionnydd and Dwyfor areas for the retendering process. Once the work of retendering public and education transport in the Arfon area has been completed, the second part of identifying and assessing the suitability of the provision can be completed. At that time, there will be an opportunity to identify the provision which is not being used and to identify opportunities to add services in areas or at other times.
- 12 Once this baseline is established, then careful consideration can be given to how to adapt the services further so that they meet the public transport needs of the communities of Gwynedd.

- 13 It should be noted that the Cabinet is keen to see transport receiving attention in the proposed Strategic Plan, because of its contribution to fulfilling some of the Council's strategic objectives such as; reduce carbon emissions; improve access to work; promote sustainable rural communities. I consider this to be one of the matters that I, as a Cabinet Member, must continue to give priority to over the next two years.
- 14 Of course, it must also be kept in mind that we are living in a period of financial hardship and further cuts from central Government could mean that cuts will have to be made rather than enhancing services. Changes in terms of providing services regionally and changes in providing funding regionally are also likely to have quite an influence on this field in the future. I cannot confirm what is likely to happen with these matters at present but I consider that they are matters that every one of us should keep in mind.

ALTERNATIVE TRANSPORT ARRANGEMENTS

- 15 Work in relation to good practice in other areas of rural England and Wales is considered when assessing possible opportunities to establish services in Gwynedd. I consider this work is a continuous element of the Transport Unit's work. If there are lessons to be learnt from other areas or good examples that could be used, the brief the Integrated Transport Unit has received from me gives a clear indication that these matters should be considered.
- 16 I'm sure that the Committee members are already familiar with the steps already implemented to offer alternative provision in Gwynedd. Over the last two years, some similar services have changed to become responsive services or 'on call' (Demand Response Transport – DRT). This is one method of sustaining services in areas where the population is low and the use of public transport is low, whilst at the same time keeping the cost to the public purse down and helping to ensure that vehicles do not travel empty.
- 17 One of the most prominent alternative provisions in Wales if not further afield, is the Sherpa service which is maintained in partnership with Conwy Council and the Snowdonia National Park Authority. With this arrangement, income from car parks and progressive partnership with providers enables a service to be maintained which helps the effective control of traffic, parking and road safety, promotes the economy in villages and in local service centres, facilitates visitor movement and helps to provide transport services that local residents, as well as visitors, can use.
- 18 In the light of the above, I feel that further definite steps are required in relation to commissioning research. Having said this, if any members have examples to bring to my attention, I would be more than happy to receive them and ensure that they are considered by the Unit as part of the developmental work.

FUNDING COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PROVISION

- 19 Unfortunately, the Committee's request to consider funding the present community transport provision in Gwynedd for three years in order to be able to plan for the long term and monitor the situation annually, is not one that can be agreed to.
- 20 From 1st April 2013, because of the Minister's decision, the resources for community transport are being distributed by the Regional Transport Consortia on the basis of specific conditions. Gwynedd Council does not have the right to commit funding for 3 years. It is the Consortia's intention to keep to the present level of contribution for the first year of 2013 / 14. After that, work will be done to enable the Consortia to target the money more specifically and to ensure that the money is not considered as a permanent annual payment but rather as money which enables the present single providers to be established as sustainable in the long term and also to divert some of the money to extend the provision.
- 21 Naturally, I will make every effort to make sure that community transport provision in Gwynedd receives its rightful support from the Consortia. However, I will be trying to influence and I cannot give any certainty that our arguments will carry the day against the arguments of other authorities and areas, not to mention the possible wishes of the Government which will become obvious through the criteria of any funding plan. Having said that, perhaps this change in the funding arrangements will mean that it might be possible to fund new pilot plans as raised by members of the Scrutiny Committee.

FREEZING SPENDING ON BUS SHELTERS AND SIGNS

- 22 I note the wishes expressed by members of the Scrutiny Committee. However, it is not possible to ignore these elements when considering providing transport services. Clean and convenient bus shelters contribute to the level of service use and signs and the timetables in the bus shelters are key in relation to promoting the number of users. Failing to make the investment would be injurious to the service levels and so appropriate investment must be given to these elements. In addition, consideration must be given to health and safety and so a budget must be set aside for these elements.
- 23 I should also draw your attention to the fact that the money earmarked for these elements at present is totally inadequate to support and improve them e.g. no money has been earmarked for maintaining and cleaning the bus exchanges such as those at Bangor, Caernarfon and Oakeley Arms etc. This proposal therefore, in my opinion, is one that would be unpractical to implement.

INTERGRATION OF COUNTY AND REGIONAL TRANSPORT

- 24 I agree one hundred per cent that transport paths across the County and beyond the County boundaries need to be co-ordinated. This is key if an integrated service which is convenient for users is to be established. I also support the principle of starting services earlier in the morning and continuing until later in the evening in rural areas.
- 25 However, we are all aware that the Council's ability to extend provision in this way is completely dependent on the financial resources available. The services early in the morning and late at night are often the ones that are not used by many travellers and

- therefore are services that are not commercially viable for companies to provide which makes it difficult for the Council to justify financial subsidies or, indeed, the Government.
- 26 Through the present re-tendering process, which has already been completed in Meirionnydd and in Dwyfor, a baseline of core Public Transport services will be established. Once the process has been completed in Arfon, which is expected in September 2014, it can then be considered whether the Council has the resources to provide extra services to extend the service by starting earlier in the morning and continuing later in the evening in rural areas.
- 27 At my request, the Transport Unit has already looked at extra provision of this kind in one area, and it became very clear that the cost of subsidizing the service would be £58 for every £1 of income paid by travellers on the buses. This is clear evidence that the level of service use in that area is extremely low and therefore, it must be carefully considered whether this is something the Council should be providing. I can confirm that I have asked the Service to look again at this case and to try and find other cheaper options that could be considered.
- 28 The time to look at the suitability of the core network is when the re-tendering process has been completed across the whole County, and I have already instructed the Regulatory Head of the Transport Unit to establish a programme for achieving this. This will give me the opportunity to consider a series of choices in relation to providing extra services and to reduce services which are not used.
- 29 It is too early for me to make any promises or observations until this work, on the basis of a full baseline, has been completed and any decision will have to be taken in the financial context that is facing the Council, including the influence of the levels of finance apportioned by the Government.

EDUCATION TRANSPORT

- 30 I note the series of matters raised by the Scrutiny Committee in relation to Education Transport. However, a number of these are ones that should be considered in the first place by the Education Department as they are matters of funding and policy. It must be kept in mind that the role of the Integrated Transport Unit is procurement and services management on behalf of the client departments namely, in this instance, the Education Department.
- 31 The Transport Unit would have specific responsibilities for implementing some of these matters should the Education Department wish to provide them, and for adapting the requirements the Transport Unit are expected to implement. However, I do not believe it is appropriate for me to respond to these matters and they should be referred in the first place to Councillor Siân Gwenllian as the appropriate Cabinet Member.

- 32 The one matter I would like to make an observation on in relation to this field is on the **Safety and Quality of Vehicles**. Through the re-tendering process, contracts have been significantly tightened to try and ensure that matters of safety and quality receive appropriate attention. As they are now matters which are in the contracts it is possible to monitor them effectively and if that shows companies are not meeting the conditions of their contracts, then the Council will be taking appropriate steps, including referring the matter to VOSA or the Transport Commissioner, in order to ensure that vehicle safety and quality receive appropriate attention.
- 33 To close, I trust that this report answers the points the Committee members have raised. If you would like more information or clarification on any aspect of my response you can ask a question in the Meeting or individual members can contact me or the Service through e-mail. We will try to deal with the matter as soon as is practically possible.

TRANSPORT UNIT'S WORK PROGRAMME

- 34 As additional information, and in an effort to offer evidence that much progress is being made in transforming and redesigning Transport provision in Gwynedd, the presentation to the committee will refer to the Integrated Transport Unit's work programme. This is a programme which responds to what I regard, and I hope you regard, as important, and it has been developed by the Transport Service's Senior Manager and Head of the Regulatory Department. There are some substantial challenges ahead of us, especially in dealing with financial elements, and in the context of regional control of transport provision, but I am confident that this programme will be agreed in the next weeks and that it will be a foundation for providing effective and efficient transport services in the County.