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## CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, 13.12.12

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### 3. THE RURAL AGENDA

**Cabinet Member: Councillor John Wynn Jones**

The committee was asked to identify the matters it wished to investigate and decide on the best way of acting on this.

- (a) A presentation was received by Bethan Gritten, Gritten Management on a Study, commissioned by YnNi Llŷn, of Energy Use in Aberdaron, Botwnnog, Tudweiliog and Enlli.

I was explained that the study was an example of a piece of work which looked at one element of deprivation in the countryside, and that it had been submitted to the committee for information, so as to give the members ideas on how to proceed with the work of scrutinising the rural agenda.

Bethan Gritten was thanked for her detailed and interesting presentation.

Arwel Jones then gave a brief explanation of the reasons for commissioning the work, and explained that the aim was to gather evidence of the problems people had been speaking of in the community for years.

- (b) Members were given the opportunity to question Bethan Gritten and Arwel Jones.

During the ensuing discussion the following general observations were noted:-

- That the presentation reflected the problems that were common to every rural area.
- That people should have a tax reduction for having to use vehicles in rural areas.
- That the Council should encourage people to take advantage of schemes that were available to help them reduce the impact of their fuel bills, such as Nest.
- That it was hard for people in the middle, who could not afford the high cost of insulating their homes, but who were ineligible to receive grants.
- That people should be assisted to reduce their fuel bills e.g. by changing suppliers, buying electricity over the internet and not paying by cheque.
- That rural areas needed to adopt the approach of being self-supporting.
- That they saw the advantage of keeping the population stable in terms of being self-supporting, but that they should not push to get more people into the rural areas because of the impact of that on the Welsh language.
- It mustn't be accepted that there was no future to the countryside.
- Rather than expecting people to travel from the countryside to the services, those services should be taken to the people e.g. a van going around combining a number of services. People's access to services should also be facilitated through plans such as the 'Door to Door' community transport scheme in Pen Llŷn.
- That everything must be done to keep young people in the rural areas.
- That many older people left rural areas because they were over an hour away from the local hospital.

- That the problems referred to in the study affected everyone, but intensified the furthest one lived from the centres.
- (c) An oral presentation was received from Councillor Dyfrig Jones, the Vice-chairman, summarising the observations of the Arfon Area Committee on the matter. He noted:-
- That the area committee agreed that fuel poverty and transport poverty was a matter of concern and a matter of importance, and that there was a need to look in more detail at the challenge of living in the countryside compared with living in a town.
  - That they must be careful with respect to how this fits in with the work going on in other parts of the Council.
  - That a definition was needed of what was meant by '*countryside*' and '*town*' as the way people thought about rural and urban was steered by their own personal perspectives.

It was emphasised that the aim was to ensure that everyone in the county received the same opportunities to use the Council's services.

- (ch) An oral presentation was received from Councillor John Wynn Jones, Cabinet Member for the Economy, on the priorities of the Rural Agenda. He emphasised that the rural agenda was a priority by the Cabinet, but that the right context must be established, as the agenda could mean different things to different individuals, according to their situation. He then gave details of the different projects and initiatives by the Council and other organisations for promoting the rural agenda and the aim of securing sustainable communities. He referred specifically to:-
- The Joint Local Development Plan
  - The Work of the Gwynedd Environmental Partnership in the Three Year Plan
  - Green Gwynedd
  - Digital Gwynedd
  - Meirionnydd Employment Scheme
  - Eryri Enterprise
  - Campaign for Keeping the Benefit Local
  - Free Parking Scheme
  - Campaign for Revitalising Town Centres
  - Tourism Schemes
  - Work of the Gwynedd Economic Partnership
  - Rural Development Programme

- (d) The members were given the opportunity to question the Cabinet Member.

During the ensuing discussion the following general observations were noted:-

- In response to the Cabinet Member's comment that he hoped there would be adequate fibrespeed in most of Gwynedd by around March, a member noted that BT had a responsibility to inform people of their programme, and the member asked for submitting a request to BT, through the Cabinet, for information regarding when the high-speed broadband would reach the different wards.
- The importance of giving good experiences to visitors to the area was noted e.g. good standard toilets etc.
- Reference was made to some specific examples of a lack of services in the rural areas, such as bus services and dementia care.

- It was noted that high street shops were at a disadvantage, as the cost of the units in business rates terms was higher than the cost for the large supermarkets on the outskirts of towns. Also, high street customers had to pay for parking whilst people could park free of charge in the shopping centres. In response, the Cabinet Member noted that the Welsh Government was currently looking at business rates, and there would be a special meeting of the Council's Cabinet to look at the entire parking system.
- It was noted that it was understood that Gwynedd Council had started issuing £70 fines for parking half a metre from the kerb, and it was decided to ask for the Cabinet Member for the Environment's response to this.

**RESOLVED to establish the rural agenda as a topic for a scrutiny investigation and to decide on the remit of the investigation at the next Preparatory Meeting on 19 December.**