
CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, 27.03.14

Present: Councillor Simon Glyn (Chairman)
Councillor Dyfrig Jones (Vice-chairman)

Councillors:- Lesley Day, Elwyn Edwards, Aled Evans, Gweno Glyn, Selwyn Griffiths, Jason Humphreys, Charles W.Jones, Eryl Jones-Williams, June Marshall, Dafydd Meurig, Mair Rowlands, Gareth Thomas and Eirwyn Williams.

Officers present: Geraint George (Head of Strategic and Improvement Department), Gareth James (Member Support and Scrutiny Manager) and Eirian Roberts (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Present for items 3 and 5 below:-
Councillor Dyfed Edwards (Council Leader)

Present for item 4 below:-
Councillor Peredur Jenkins (Cabinet Member for Resources)
Dilwyn Williams (Corporate Director)
Meinir Owen (Corporate Projects Manager)

Present for item 6 below:-
Councillor John Wynn Jones (Cabinet Member for the Economy)
Janet Roberts (Senior Delivery and Support Manager)
Ann Roberts (Assistant Performance Improvement Officer - Scrutiny)

Apologies: Councillors Trefor Edwards and Michael Sol Owen.

The Chairman was welcomed back following recent surgery and he was wished a full and speedy recovery.

The Chairman noted, as a result of a member's concern regarding the situation involving the Chief Executive's request for early retirement, that an informal question and answer session had been arranged at the end of this meeting with the Council Leader, the Head of Finance Department and the Head of Human Resources Department present to answer any questions from members.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

No declarations of personal interest were received from any members present.

2. MINUTES

The Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee held on 16 January, 2104 as a true record.

3. RURAL AGENDA SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION REPORT Cabinet Member: Councillor Dyfed Edwards

Submitted – the final draft report of the investigation.

The Chairman thanked members of the Investigation Group and the Member Support and Scrutiny Manager for preparing and submitting the report.

The Chairman of the Investigation Group established the context.

The Member Support and Scrutiny Manager thanked the Communications, Research and Change Management Units for their substantial input into the work. He explained that this was a snapshot of ordinary people's opinion regarding the services planned and those provided for them in Gwynedd and that the report showed that in general people realised the difficulties faced in terms of planning services in the context of the current economic climate and that to some extent they were ready to consider changes and how to deal with changes. It was also clear, after speaking with people that there were concerns and there was a need for the Council to be aware of those concerns and to deal with them in a considerate way and introduce change over time and to include residents in all the discussions.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer their observations. During the discussion the following main matters were highlighted:-

- (1) It was noted that only six of the 49 GPs in Gwynedd had joined the North Wales Out of Hours GP Service and the Health Board had stated that if every doctor was willing to take one slot, then there would be a full service across the county.
- (2) It was noted that people constantly mentioned the lack of doctors in Dwyfor and that nearly all surgeries from Penrhyndeudraeth to Llŷn were short of doctors.
- (3) It was suggested that the danger of listening to verbal evidence was that those who shouted the loudest and those who were the best at expressing themselves were the ones that were heard. Although it could not be disputed that there were huge problems in Llŷn, many in the Porthmadog area also had difficulties in accessing the out of hours GP service. In response, the Member Support and Scrutiny Manager noted that it was acknowledged that the report was restrictive in terms of identifying experiences and a member added that the purpose of focus groups was to identify problems so that a way forward could be considered.
- (4) It was suggested that one of the most important findings of the investigation was that it was neither practical nor sustainable to provide all Council services in the traditional manner, and holding a constructive and thoughtful dialogue with the Third Sector and communities in Gwynedd was essential if quality bilingual services were to be maintained across the county.
- (5) The importance of collaboration with the community councils was emphasised and reference was made to the Penllyn Project as a successful example of this. It was noted that a similar scheme was ongoing in Dyffryn Ogwen and to some extent this came from the community councils rather than this Council and there was room to consider how the Council supported and encouraged community councils to collaborate and how some services could be transferred. It was noted that it would be interesting to follow up the Penllyn Pilot. Certainly there would be lessons to learn from that scheme and the Council could encourage other areas to proceed in a similar way if it benefitted rural areas. The Chairman noted that there were several pilot schemes which could be considered. Use was being made of village halls for bringing services closer to the communities and there was a new role for community councils; there was a need to review public transport and look outside the box in several different fields, including public transport in extremely rural areas where it had already been acknowledged that it was not possible for the Council to sustain the service at its existing level. To achieve this, perhaps there would be a need to devolve some responsibilities through the discretion of the Council Leader and it was enquired whether a champion should be allocated to the rural agenda field or at

least that the Cabinet should consider placing this field in the hands of one of its members. It would be desirable to see a pilot scheme similar to what had been suggested and it was wished that discussions could be held with community councils etc. however, it could not be seen how this was possible without creating a mechanism to enable it to happen.

- (6) It was suggested that the whole of Gwynedd was rural but it was not possible for people in some communities to have access to services without having transport. Those who owned a car and had been able to attend the focus groups were more willing to accept the situation but the aim was to get the services to those people who were in real need. Those people did not have a good Wi-fi connection and, therefore, it was not possible for them to have access to on-line services.
- (7) It was noted that the main recommendations of the report were very important but it was questioned how they could they be implemented. E.g. the Welsh Government would have to be persuaded before the recommendations in paragraphs 15.2 and 15.3 could be implemented.
- (8) It was noted that there would have to be a meeting with the Government if the councils were merged and the number of councillors was reduced. This would give more power to local councils and the council below the county council would have to maintain services.
- (9) It was noted that the report, as acknowledged, was incomplete. It raised more questions than it answered at the moment and it was the first step towards examining in detail those issues that had been discussed thus far. It mentioned a future role for the community councils but it did not elaborate on this and at the moment the report was suggestive at best. It was emphasised that this was not a criticism as it was not possible to complete more work than what was being achieved but there were questions to be answered regarding access to services, the role of public transport, the role of community councils bringing the services closer to the communities along with several other questions also. It had to be accepted that further more detailed work was necessary, especially bearing in mind the need for financial balance as a consequence of the substantial savings the Council had to find during the next four years. Consideration had to be given to how to bring the taxpayers closer to the services whilst at the same time possibly cutting those services. There was a dual role here as access to services and the savings were linked together and there was a need to consider where the Council was going with this important report.
- (10) Concern was expressed regarding the decision to close more post offices. It was noted that the Dolgellau Post Office would be the only Post Office in Meirionnydd and although some post office services would be available in local shops, it would not be possible, for example, to tax vehicles or check passport forms without going to Dolgellau or to do this online.

In response to some of the above observations, the Council Leader noted:-

- (1) He did not believe that sufficient attention had been given to the rural agenda in the past and he was eager to highlight this field so that the Cabinet could take action.
- (2) He would discuss with officers to ascertain what method was needed to bring the best resources together, including possibly people from outside the Council, in order to drive the work forward with the emphasis on achievement.
- (3) Then, a decision could be taken on the national policy issues that the Council wished to influence and subsequently the practical day-to-day issues that the Council itself could address.
- (4) In addition, consideration should be given to whether there was a need to establish a system which profiled the effect on the rural areas.

- (5) He would be going through the report in detail with the panel that had been established to examine this field and would produce and share a detailed work programme with this committee.

To summarise, the Chairman of the Investigation Group noted that the intention of the Penllyn Pilot was to create another rural council but it would not be possible to move forward further on this because it was not possible to receive more work from the Council. He added that he would advise every community council to pursue this as it brought the services closer to the people.

RESOLVED to accept the final draft report of the Rural Agenda Scrutiny Investigation and to submit the recommendations along with the observations of the committee to the Council Leader, and to request him to move the agenda forward in the interest of the residents and to provide a progress report to this committee in due course.

4. COLLABORATION / THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICES
Cabinet Member: Councillor Dyfed Edwards

Submitted – the report of the Head of Strategic and Improvement Department, offering an initial rough assessment of some of the main messages and recommendations in the Williams report, as they could affect the Council and suggesting a possible response that the Council could consider in due course should the recommendations of the Commission report be implemented.

The Council Leader established the context and provided an update of the situation along with his opinion on how things were likely to develop.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer their observations. During the discussion the following main matters were highlighted:-

- (1) It was noted that should it be a requirement for councils to merge, it would make sense linguistically and geographically and in other ways, for this Council to unite with Anglesey Council and it was suggested that an invitation should be extended to Anglesey Council to have a joint discussion with this Council.
- (2) It was suggested that this Council had more in common with Conwy Council, e.g. coastal/rural issues.
- (3) It was noted that if this Council did not wish to merge with another council, then it should state this clearly.
- (4) It was emphasised that the full Council should have an opportunity to discuss this matter in detail and a formal request was made to the Council Leader to convey this message to the Cabinet. The Council Leader agreed to do so and he noted that the basis of the discussion in the Council would be the contents of the Williams Commission report.
- (5) It was agreed that everyone should have an opportunity to voice their opinion but it was emphasised that members should not deceive themselves into thinking that Gwynedd would remain as it was.
- (6) Concern was expressed that should this Council battle to remain as it was, then the Welsh Government would take away all the services and establish one large council for the whole of north Wales.

The Member Support and Scrutiny Manager suggested that consideration could be given in this committee's Annual Workshop on 5 June to establishing a working group to examine the matter in more detail.

RESOLVED to give consideration in the Annual Workshop to establishing a working group to examine the matter in more detail and also to hold a full discussion in the Council.

5. THE SAVINGS PROGRAMME

Cabinet Member: Councillor Peredur Jenkins

Submitted – the report of the Cabinet Member for Resources, outlining the process for finding the efficiency / demand management savings element of addressing the funding gap and noting the targets per department to be recommended to the Cabinet together with the process to follow thereafter.

The Cabinet Member established the context and the Corporate Director explained how the target basis was reached for each department.

The basis of the targets were scrutinised and observations were offered on the proposed process of dealing with the proposals per department. During the discussion the following main points were highlighted:-

- (1) It was noted that the suggested target for the Highways and Municipal Department was unbelievable considering the recent inclement weather and the condition of the county's roads. In response, the Corporate Director explained that at the moment they were only setting the target. After the departments had submitted their proposals, there would be a process of scrutinising those proposals and that scrutiny process would highlight any concerns to the Cabinet. He noted also that if efficiency savings could not be secured, then the Council would be in a worse position later on.
- (2) The proposal to examine the management tiers was welcomed as this was very important from the perspective of the savings and also in terms of staff morale.
- (3) Concern was expressed regarding efficiency savings in the children services in the fields of Education and Social Services and specifically in the field of special educational needs and it was suggested that this would have a disproportionate effect on the most vulnerable in society. In response, the Corporate Director noted that other councils in the family already spent over £3m less than Gwynedd in this field and one reason for that was that this Council did not place the appropriate intervention in the appropriate place. He noted also that if the opportunity to save £3m was put aside, the £3m would have to be cut from some another service. He emphasised also that no mention was made here of cuts but rather efficiency savings and it was not expected for those savings to have a direct impact on residents.
- (4) It was suggested that sometimes money could be saved by looking outside the box, e.g. the Council could save money by running residential care homes or extra care schemes in partnership with the private sector.
- (5) It was emphasised that spending a little more could lead to substantial savings in the long term. In this respect, reference was made to the poor tarmacking work undertaken in Dolgellau and Barmouth and it was suggested that the Council had made an error of choosing the lowest tenderer in order to save money.
- (6) It was noted that the proposed figures sounded excellent on paper but it was suggested that the Council had been working very ineffectually over the past few years if it was in a position to find £21m of efficiency savings overnight and there were big questions to be asked of the heads. It was also noted that if the initial budget of a department was higher than the budgets of other departments, the 1% savings which needed to be found were also higher and it was important to use some flexibility rather than deciding on a specific figure and to insist rigidly that departments find cuts that were completely unrealistic. In response, the Corporate

Director noted that if proposals for savings were unacceptable by the members then there would have to be flexibility but it was important to take advantage of every possible opportunity.

- (7) It was suggested that there was a danger for managers to defend the people they knew and with whom they worked on a daily basis rather than those individuals working out in the field and it was enquired whether it was proposed to intervene if a manager did not ensure fairness to all the workforce. In response, the Corporate Director noted that the Gwynedd Way would highlight and re-define the relationship between front line staff and managers.
- (8) It was noted that as well as examining costs, thought should be given to Best Value and the opportunity should be used to think more smartly rather than reorganising the administrative method as was happening with Systems Thinking. In response, the Corporate Director noted that one of the foundations of the Gwynedd Way was that value should be managed rather than managing costs.
- (9) It was noted that next year would be crucially important in terms of future planning and officers were requested to consider commissioning, or at least to discuss the possibilities with the third sector and other organisations.

RESOLVED to submit the observations of the committee verbally to the Cabinet on 1 April.

**6. SUSTAINABLE PROCUREMENT SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION REPORT
Cabinet Member: Councillor John Wynn Jones**

Submitted – the final draft report of the investigation.

The context was established by the Cabinet Member for the Economy and he thanked members of the investigation and officers for their commitment to the work.

The Chairman of the Investigation Group thanked the members and the Lead Officer and the Support Officer for their work. He explained that the investigation had gone somewhat further than the brief in identifying relevant issues which were key in terms of the quality of procurement in general but which influenced sustainable procurement arrangements. Consequently, additional recommendations were submitted for the attention of the Cabinet Member although they were not included in the original brief of the investigation. He asked the committee to accept the report and for the Cabinet Member to accept the recommendations and to provide members with an update in due course.

The Head of Strategic and Improvement Department noted that he was very pleased with the work and he thanked the members for the effort that had gone into it.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer their observations. During the discussion the following main matters were highlighted:-

- (1) It was noted that the investigation had highlighted weaknesses and deficiencies in the existing procurement process and it was suggested that the group should be kept in existence in case there would be a need for its resurrection in future to re-establish the work of examining the policy after the receipt of a progress report from the Cabinet Member.
- (2) In response to an enquiry regarding the vacant seat on the group, the Head of Strategic and Improvement Department noted that it would be difficult to bring a new person in at this stage as the existing members had been operating throughout the investigation and by now understood the field.

To summarise, the Chairman of the Investigation Group noted that everyone had enjoyed participating in the investigation and that this field was a priority in the Strategic Plan. The vision in the economic field was to improve and increase the opportunities for Gwynedd residents to live, work and succeed locally and one of the priorities of the field was to strengthen the resilience of businesses and to keep the benefits local. He was confident that the recommendations of the group would contribute towards the wider work which was happening and he welcomed the suggestion that the investigation group should undertake more work and assist with this field.

RESOLVED

- (a) To accept the final draft report of the Sustainable Procurement Scrutiny Investigation and to submit the recommendations to the Cabinet Member for the Economy and to request that he provides a progress report to the committee in due course.**
- (b) To keep the Investigation Group in existence in case there will be a need for it to be resurrected in future to re-establish the work of examining the policy as a consequence of the receipt of the progress report from the Cabinet Member.**

At the end of the meeting, the Chairman thanked members for their contributions and their support given to him during his term as chairman.

The meeting commenced at 10.00am and concluded at 12.25pm.