
DWYFOR AREA COMMITTEE, 12-12-11

Present: Councillor Robert J. Wright (Chairman);

Councillors: Stephen Churchman, Margaret Griffith, Alwyn Gruffydd, John Gwilym Jones, W. Penri Jones, Glyn Roberts, Guto Rhys Tomos, Owain Williams and R. H. Wyn Williams.

Also present: Dilys Phillips (Head of Democracy and Legal Department), Aled Davies (Head of Regulatory Department), Gwenan Parry (Head of Customer Care Department), Alwyn Evans Jones (Head of Human Resources Department), Dr Gwynne Jones (Chief Executive – Cynnal), and Ioan Hughes (Committee Officer).

Chair: Because of an illness, the Chairman of the Committee noted that he did not wish to chair this meeting. In the absence of the Vice-chairman, it was resolved to disregard the Standing Orders and elect the former chair, Councillor Margaret Griffith, to chair the meeting.

Condolences: Reference was made to the sudden death of Councillor Trefor Edwards's son and condolences were extended to the entire family in their bereavement.

In addition, Councillor Margaret Griffith referred to the recent disaster that had occurred off the Llŷn coastline where six Russian mariners had died. She extended condolences to their families and paid tribute to members of the local lifeboats who had ventured out in terrible weather to offer assistance.

In response, Councillor Robert J. Wright, who had been a part of the rescue effort as the helmsman of Pwllheli Lifeboat, said that the work of each member of the lifeboat crews was to be admired and he thanked them for their efforts.

He added that a letter from Councillor Liz Saville Roberts had been published in the local press and he gave thanks for the comments made in it and for the support of the residents of Llŷn in general.

Apologies:- Councillors Simon Glyn, Selwyn Griffiths, Llinos Merks, Peter Read, Liz Saville Roberts, Ieuan Roberts and Sion Selwyn Roberts.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

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

2. MINUTES

The Chairman signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee, held on 19 September 2011, as a true record.

3. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE REGULATORY DEPARTMENT

- i) Submitted – the report of the Head of Regulatory Department, outlining the Department's activities in 2010/11 and the main objectives for 2011/12.

- ii) Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations. It was noted:
- that various complaints had been received following a recent reorganisation to the Council's Planning Committee service;
 - that there was concern that local members were losing the opportunity to discuss planning applications with planning officers at times;
 - that members were concerned about the procedure of submitting applications at meetings and the difficulties experienced when attempting to contact the service;
 - that there was concern and discontent regarding the failure to respond to the telephone calls made by members of the public.
- iii) In response to the comments, the Head of Department noted that the situation had been monitored for a period of six months. As a result, he noted that the information available about the service in terms of the enquiries made etc. was better than it had ever been.

He added that approximately 90% to 95% of the changes were working effectively. Following the monitoring period, a further review had been undertaken with some changes being altered. These would be run for a period of between 8 and 10 weeks and thus far, it had been seen that the minor changes had been successful.

The Head of Department noted further that meetings had been held between agents and Community Councils in order to facilitate and strengthen the procedure.

He added that members' views on applications should be based on the features of the application, rather than on the views of officers. However, efforts were made to ensure that all information was available to members in electronic format at all times. In addition, there was a programme in the pipeline to ensure that an officer was available to train members on how to obtain the information off the system.

He noted that efforts were being made to respond to the public's calls within three days. He added that some communication issues with the service had been considered as part of the latest changes.

He added that a planning officer visited sites and looked at the relevant planning issues when applications were received. Photographs would be taken by the officers during the visit, and only these would be submitted before the Committee in order to enable it to make objective decisions.

In response to further enquiries, the Head of Department noted that every planning report took all comments received into consideration, with any difference in opinion being reflected fairly. He confirmed that not all letters received were included with the programme and that this was part of the change that had been agreed with members.

Reference was made in the report to the staff's desire and eagerness to participate in the process of transforming the services provided so that the Council could provide them more effectively, despite the fact that this could lead to job losses within the individual services and teams.

A member was eager to reiterate this praise.

- iv) A member expressed concern in terms of consulting on the Joint Local Development Plan with Anglesey. The member noted that there was a need to complete the work by 13 January and was of the opinion that the timetable was too tight.

In response, the Head of Department noted that the timetable had been agreed and that the initial phase of the consultation was the matter in question at present.

RESOLVED to accept the report for information.

4. ANNUAL REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

- i) Submitted – the report of the Head of Human Resources Department, providing an overview of the Department's performance in 2010/11 and the Department's main issues for 2011/12.
- ii) In response to an enquiry, the Head of Department noted that a fair, balanced and confidential process was operational within the Council for dealing with bullying. He added that very few cases had arisen; however, difficult situations could arise and there was a need to respond sensitively to each case.
- iii) A member referred to steps being taken at times when jobs within the Council were lost.

The Head of Department explained that a comprehensive programme had been established in order to give every possible assistance to those who lost their jobs. This included close links with job centres and other agencies, and the Head of Department emphasised that every effort was being made to relocate workers within the Council.

As a result of relocation, necessary training was provided and assistance was received from the Welsh Government in order to do so.

- iv) In response to an enquiry, the Head of Department noted that establishing the Occupational Health Unit had been beneficial. He added that the Plan created an opportunity to approach workers in various fields and give them basic health tests.

As a result of this, and as a consequence of the project to reduce general absenteeism and manual handling training, a reduction had been seen in the Council's absenteeism numbers this year. The Head of Department added that the aim was to ensure further improvement so that Gwynedd's statistics would be the best in Wales.

The Head of Department noted that Gwynedd Council had succeeded to gain the Gold Level of the National Health Standard introduced by the Welsh Government.

RESOLVED to accept the report for information.

5. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE CUSTOMER CARE DEPARTMENT

- i) Submitted – the report of the Head of Customer Care Department, outlining the duties of the seven business units that were part of the Department, namely:

Property, Information Technology, Communication, Customer Care, Libraries and Information, Information Management and Emergency Planning.

- ii) Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer observations and in response to an enquiry, the Head of Department noted that four editions of the Council's newsletter, 'Newyddion Gwynedd', had been published annually. She added that more advertisements were being received by now and that this made a substantial contribution towards the costs of each edition – this was one of the savings that had been accepted by the Council.
- iii) In terms of the Department's budget, it was noted that the revenue budget was £2.2 million and that the Department, as every other Council department, had a series of targets to realise savings under the £16 million Strategy; the programme of efficiency projects and corporate savings.
- iv) In response to an enquiry regarding the Library Service, the Head of Department explained that Gwynedd Council was positioned 17th out of the 22 Welsh local authorities in terms of the use made of libraries and that the need to improve was obvious.

She added that the total use made of the libraries was very similar this year compared to last year. However, there had been a 5% reduction in the number of library visits, and an increase in the number of people who used the resources online. The Head of Department emphasised that more should be encouraged to visit the libraries and take full advantage of the activities and resources in them.

A member asked whether or not services such as the 'Kindle' scheme, that made it possible to download books, could be affecting Gwynedd libraries. In response, the Head of Department referred to a service that enabled library members to download adult and children Audio Books. In addition, discussions were being held nationally regarding offering e-books through libraries.

She explained that it was not possible to use the 'Kindle' scheme in public libraries in Britain at present because of international contractual problems.

- v) In response to an enquiry, the Head of Department outlined the work done in connection with emergency planning. She noted that two exercises had been held for Council senior officers and that they had been beneficial.

RESOLVED to accept the report for information.

6. ANNUAL REPORT ON THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

- i) Submitted by Dr Gwynne Jones (Chief Executive – Cynnal) – the report of the Head of Education Department.
- ii) The members were guided through the report and specific attention was given to the main relevant points.
- iii) He noted further that:-
 - Gwynedd's performance in Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 was good, but that the higher levels required attention
 - improvements with some core subjects in Key Stage 3 reflected the efforts made by schools

- Gwynedd's performance in Key Stage 3 was generally good, but that the higher levels required attention
- iv) It was explained that additional information had been received since preparing the report in connection with Gwynedd's performance in Key Stage 4. As a result of this, it was confirmed that Gwynedd's positions were as follows:

Level 1 Threshold - 4
Level 2 Threshold - 8
Wider points score - 1
Core Subjects Indicator – 5
Level 2+ Threshold - 6

Therefore, it was seen that Gwynedd's performance, across all schools, in Key Stage 4 was generally good.

- v) Members were given an opportunity to submit any observations and ask questions and reference was made to the procedure of inspection grades.

In response to the enquiry, reference was made to the reviewing framework and it was noted that any weakness in a 'quality indicator' could lead to follow-up monitoring carried out by the authority, although the results in each key question, the improvement projections and current performance were good.

- vi) It was explained that the numbers noted in connection to obtaining free school meals was based on those who were entitled to receive a free lunch, rather than those who actually took advantage of the free lunch. It was confirmed that using a meals card was a possibility in order to avoid any stigma that could exist.

He confirmed that some had trialled a food card scheme and that the response had been positive. However, he noted that two issues should be considered, namely the cost of establishing the scheme, and the difficulties that could arise should pupils lose the card. He suggested that completely different equipment could be available in the long term.

- vii) In response to an enquiry, information was submitted regarding the 'banding' process, outlining the way in which key indicators can be used in order to place schools in 'bands' varying from the best standard, namely 'band 1', to the lowest standard, namely 'band 5'.

Dr Gwynne Jones noted that the 'banding' procedure introduced the previous week was based on a year's work only. He was of the opinion that it would be fairer to study trends over a period of three years.

In response to a further enquiry, he noted that it was premature to link 'banding' with the size of schools. Reference was also made to the gap that existed between the performances of the Welsh schools and the schools of England and Scotland. Although improvements could be seen in Gwynedd, a member noted that this gap was increasing.

In response, Dr Gwynne Jones noted that the aim in Gwynedd was to improve standards regularly so that it could be ensured that every pupil in every school reached his/her full potential, and that this had not been achieved thus far.

He noted further that changes that could be beneficial, should the procedure receive more money, included many things such as having more teachers, more resources, as well as resources that would ensure that teachers obtained access to opportunities to develop professionally throughout their careers.

RESOLVED to accept the report for information.

7. ANNUAL REPORT OF THE DEMOCRACY AND LEGAL DEPARTMENT

- i) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democracy and Legal Department, referring to some of the work that the Department had been responsible for during the year gone by. In addition, some specific developments that needed to be dealt with during the next financial year were noted.

In looking forward, the Head of Department noted that the Department would focus much of its time and resources on ensuring a smooth transition to the new governance arrangements following the elections in May 2012.

- ii) Members were given an opportunity to make observations and ask questions, and in response to an enquiry, the Head of Department noted that an information pack had been prepared for prospective applicants in order to ensure that they understood the expectations and demands of being a councillor before putting their names forward.

She added that the decision to proceed to produce the information pack had been made as a result of a discussion held with the political groups in the Business Groups, and in response to comments made by new members that had come into the Council in 2008.

Thus far, approximately 130 packs had been distributed and a positive response had been received. The Head of Department added that further consideration could be given to the value of the packs by comparing, as best as one could, the number of people who received packs against the number of people who put their names forward for the election.

The members noted that the guidance included in the pack was valuable.

- iii) In terms of savings, a member noted that one of his fellow councillors had suggested that the procedure of printing bilingual reports for meetings could be avoided by providing reports according to members' choice.

In response, the Head of Department noted that a strong suggestion would be submitted to the new Council in May 2012 regarding presenting all reports electronically and to avoid printing entirely. A report would be submitted to the Board prior to May 2012 dealing with this, with some members to trial the equipment required.

RESOLVED to accept the report for information.

8. REVIEW OF THE POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2011

- i) Submitted – the report of the Head of Democracy and Legal Department, explaining that it was required for the Council to review each polling district and polling place

every four years. The first had been held in 2007 and the 2011 Review had been held between September and October.

- ii) Schedules had been submitted noting the observations received during the consultation, along with the Returning Officer's response. Also, recommendations had been received in relation to changing the procedure, where relevant.
- iii) Within the recommendations, reference was made to the possibility of closing three polling stations, because of the number of electors in the Polling Districts, namely:
 - the Vestry of Soar Chapel, Bryncir in the Dolbenmaen/Bryncir Polling District, and move the register to Garn Dolbenmaen – 86 electors;
 - Canolfan Prenteg in the Dolbenmaen/Prenteg Polling District, and move the register to Tremadog – 93 electors;
 - Bethania Chapel, Pistyll in the Pistyll Polling District, and move the register to Llithfaen – 120 electors.
- iv) An amendment had been made to the written report and it had been noted in the section on practical outcomes that the Prenteg residents would travel approximately 2 miles to Tremadog, should the Polling Station in Canolfan Prenteg close, rather than the 'Bryncir' residents as had been noted.
- v) A member noted that he supported the observations made by Dolbenmaen Community Council, which objected to the closure of Prenteg Polling Station and move the register to Tremadog as this would mean going outside the community of Dolbenmaen.

The member added that the election was only held once every four years and that the financial saving to the Council would be minimal as a result of closing a polling station. In relation to closing Prenteg Station in particular, he said that a situation could arise whereby the residents of Prenteg would have to travel to the station in Tremadog, although the election was not being held for that community.

The member noted that there were good facilities in Canolfan Prenteg and that they should be used and to facilitate democracy as a result.

- vi) In response, the Head of Democracy and Legal Department noted that the need to retain polling stations within the community could be used as a strong argument in favour of retaining the Prenteg station.
- vii) In terms of Bryncir station, another member noted that a number of electors travelled to vote already and that moving to Garn Dolbenmaen would not cause extreme difficulties.
- (viii) In response to enquiries, the Head of Department confirmed that a public notice of the review had been published but that information regarding the recommendations had not been advertised formally to the public, except for through the community councils and local members. However, the agenda of this meeting included all of the recommendations and they had been included on the Council's website.

She added that electors would receive information regarding any decision to close a polling station and that they would be offered a postal vote.

- ix) Another member referred to the recommendation to close Pistyll polling station and he noted that the journey to Llithfaen could cause considerable difficulty, in particular for the elderly. He added that this was a dispersed area, and that some electors would have to travel approximately three and a half miles to Llithfaen, rather than the two and a half miles noted in the report.
- x) A member gave thanks for the work done to rectify the inconsistencies that existed in relation to polling places in the Bryncroes ward (Botwnnog). He suggested further that Canolfan Llangwnnadi, which had now been renovated, could be used.
- xi) In response, the Head of Democracy and Legal Department noted that using Canolfan Llangwnnadi would mean creating a new station. She explained that a parliamentary review was in question here, rather than the local electoral procedure.

RESOLVED:

- a) To recommend to the Council that the Bryncir polling station should be closed, as only 86 electors are on the register, and for the register to be moved to Garn Dolbenmaen.**
- b) Not to recommend to the Council that the Prenteg polling station should be closed, noting mainly that moving the register to Tremadog would mean that the electors would have to travel outside their community to vote.**
- c) Not to recommend to the Council that the Pistyll polling station should be closed, noting mainly that travelling to Llithfaen would be difficult for many, in particular for the elderly.**

The meeting commenced at 5.15pm and concluded at 7.15pm.