
Communities Scrutiny Committee 25 February 2021

Attendance:

COUNCILLORS: Stephen Churchman, Glyn Daniels, Elwyn Edwards, Simon Glyn, Annwen Hughes, Berwyn Parry Jones, Elwyn Jones, Dafydd Owen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Elfed Roberts, Angela Russell, Mike Stevens and Owain Williams

Officers present:

Bethan Adams (Scrutiny Advisor), Lowri Haf Evans and Natalie Jones (Democracy Services Officers).

Also in attendance:

Present for item 5:

Councillor Gareth Griffith (Cabinet Member – Environment), Dafydd Wyn Williams (Head of Environment Department), Wyn Williams (Countryside Manager).

Present for item 6:

Councillor Gareth Griffith (Cabinet Member for the Environment), Dafydd Wyn Williams (Head of Environment Department), Gareth Jones (Assistant Head of Environment), Heledd Jones (Team Leader – Joint Planning Policy Unit, Anglesey and Gwynedd).

Present for item 7:

Councillor Gareth Griffith (Cabinet Member for the Environment), Dafydd Wyn Williams (Head of Environment Department), Gareth Jones (Assistant Head of Environment).

Sincere condolences were extended to the family of Gwenan Parry, the former head of customer care at the Council.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies was received from Councillors Kevin Morris Jones, Linda Morgan, Aled Wyn Jones and Gethin Williams.

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillors Berwyn Parry Jones and Owain Williams declared an interest in Item 6, and noted that they were members of the Joint Planning Policy Committee.

The members were of the opinion that they were prejudicial interests, and they withdrew from the meeting during the discussions on the item.

3. URGENT ITEMS

None to note.

4. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous meeting of this committee, held on 10 December 2020, as a true record.

5. RIGHTS OF WAY ACTION PLAN WORK PROGRAMME

Submitted - the report of the Countryside Manager, highlighting the work that had been in progress. He reiterated that the aim of the plan was to ensure that accessible and safe access was available for people to use in the countryside, green spaces and along the coast. The Committee's opinion was sought regarding the content of the latest review.

An overview of the three main headings incorporated in the plan was provided;

- 1) Maintain and manage the network - it was noted that different types of users needed to be addressed; however, priority was given to paths in categories 1 and 2.
- 2) The definitive map and statement - it was explained that this could be referred to should a case or dispute arise regarding the status or existence of a path.
- 3) Assess and meet the needs of users - It was noted that there had been an increased demand for multi-use paths during lockdown, as more people stayed local. It was explained that the *lonydd glas* allowed for this type of use to an extent.

It was explained that a marked difference when comparing with the previous plan was the absence of detailed work programme. Instead, it was noted that annual or two-yearly work programmes would be prepared. It was noted that the plan tied in with the policies of the Council, Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales.

Before opening the discussion up to the committee, the members were asked to consider whether the report conveyed, in their opinion, the aspirations and requirements of the people of Gwynedd, considering accessible countryside access.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by Members:-

- The members gave thanks for the draft report and the discussion was commenced by enquiring what methods had been used to assess accessibility for disabled people as there was so many diverse needs. In addition, it was asked whether disability organisations had been consulted as part of the plan.
- What steps were intended to be taken to update the information in terms of the condition of the network? Attention was given to the possibility of grading the accessibility of the different paths, in order for residents to plan using appropriate paths that met their needs.
- A discussion was held on whether there was a risk of losing paths in lower categories that did not receive regular funding such as categories 1 or 2.
- It was noted that some landowners refused to accept that there was a public footpath on their land. This was reiterated and it was noted that barriers such as fences disrupted some paths as a result of this.
- A discussion was held on the possibility of clear signage in order to show the right way for walkers or users, as some paths were vague.
- The committee's attention was drawn to the condition of the path near Pistyll Church.

- Reference was made to the importance of the following report, emphasising that everyone benefited from the paths.
- It was explained that some towns or communities had many paths to maintain and an enquiry was made about who funded these.

In response to the comments, the Countryside Manager noted the following points:

- The committee was reassured that a consultation had already been held in respect of accessibility for people with disabilities. This was reiterated, noting that the Council's Disability Officer had collaborated with the department.
- It was acknowledged that it was difficult to meet everyone's needs and assess each path; however, reference was made to the common principle of reducing barriers and this was done as much as possible.
- It was noted that one of the objectives and actions was to develop basic knowledge about the condition of the network.
- In response to concerns regarding the loss of paths, it was noted that the lowest categories included paths that were not in use; however, legally, they had not been lost. It was reiterated that the process of surrendering the occupancy of a path was long.
- In relation to the path near Pistyll Church, it was noted that the relevant service would be informed of this.
- With regards to maintenance within communities and towns, it was noted that the Council contributed towards this and that it was possible to apply for external grants. It was reiterated that liaison officers were working to identify local grants that could be used to maintain paths.

RESOLVED

- To accept the draft plan and note the observations received during the meeting and incorporate them in the document for public consultation.
- That the final version is submitted before the committee following the consultation period.

6. SUPPLEMENTARY PLANNING GUIDANCE: TOURIST ATTRACTIONS AND ACCOMMODATION

The Team Leader, Joint Planning Policy Unit, presented the report with the aim of raising awareness about the supplementary planning guidance. The committee was asked to provide feedback before the report was submitted to the Joint Planning Policy Committee for approval to adopt or not.

The contents were reported upon and then attention was drawn to Appendix 2, namely a comprehensive draft version of the Supplementary Planning Guidance that had already been submitted to the Scrutiny and Partnership Committee, Isle of Anglesey Council.

During the discussion, the following observations were submitted by members:-

- It was questioned whether the new policy allowed sites for static caravans as well as touring units
- Concern was expressed regarding over-tourism as was seen last year following the easing of restrictions.
- It was reiterated that a very high number of caravan sites existed in Gwynedd already.

In response to the members' observations, it was noted:

- That the policy in question permitted new touring caravans as well as new static caravans, provided that the static sites were not located within an AONB or Special Landscape Area. It was noted that the policies in relation to caravan sites would be the subject of the process of reviewing the Joint Local Development Plan.
- In relation to the concerns of over-tourism, assurance was given that this would be revisited.
- There were many examples where applications had been refused if they were contrary to relevant plans, and there was scope to refuse developments that did not comply with relevant policies.
- That there were major changes afoot on a national level regarding planning and that this would be considered when reviewing the plan.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and to note the observations.

7. PUBLIC PROTECTION SERVICE - WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC

The report of the Head of the Environment Department was presented, highlighting the different aspects that the public protection service had been dealing with over the past period.

It was reiterated that the service's profile had been highlighted as they had been working recently on the front-line by contact tracing and in relation to COVID-19 regulation compliance.

One concern for the service in moving forward was explained, namely the provision of normal service, i.e. food hygiene inspections as places reopened, as well as the current requirements relating to the pandemic.

It was added that three additional officers had been appointed to share the burden of work as the demands on the service grew. It was reiterated that the new officers would be developed and trained for the purpose of retaining them as Environmental Health Officers in the future, to strengthen the service.

During the discussion, the following observations were made by Members:-

- Members gave thanks for the report and thanked the whole department for their very important work during the COVID-19 period.
- It was reiterated that cases of COVID-19 had increased in the Bala area for example, and that tracing officers had worked tirelessly in order to contact everyone involved.
- It was asked how the department dealt with residents that had started food businesses from their homes during the pandemic.
- The news that three new members had been appointed to the department was welcomed and it was noted that this was a good move for the future.
- Members gave thanks for all e-mail updates provided on the public protection situation and it was reiterated that this report outlined the additional work that was being done.
- It was asked whether the service was confident that it would be able to cope with its workload when normal duties returned.

In response to the above observations, the following was noted:-

- It was explained that the department was supporting the residents who had established food businesses from their homes during lockdown. However, everyone did not contact the department to register and it was noted that this was essential so that the department could ensure health and safety standards.
- It was reiterated that the department's purpose was to support and engage, and not to punish and enforce.
- It was noted that the service would be under pressure should inspections recommence at the usual scale, on top of the COVID-19 duties.
- It was acknowledged that the department's officers worked long hours and that this was now a long-term situation, and not a temporary one as initially anticipated.
- It was noted that support from the Council and Welsh Government to appoint additional staff was to be welcomed as this reduced pressure on officers.
- In relation to the COVID-19 situation, it was noted that the numbers were a bit stubborn within the County, and that clusters had emerged recently.

In addition to the responses, the Head of Environment Department noted that risks had been highlighted over the past twelve months, and that high-risk elements of work had continued. He reiterated that officers had had to continue dealing with serious health and welfare matters, e.g. matters relating to animal welfare. In addition, a reminder was given that Brexit-related issues had continued, including supporting businesses with exports, in particular food supply companies.

On the whole, a challenging period was anticipated in coping with the phased reopening of the economy.

RESOLVED

To accept the contents of the report and to note the observations.

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 12.15pm