

Committee	COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
Date	22 April 2021
Title	The Council's Public Protection Services staffing resources - ensuring capacity and resilience now and in the future
Cabinet Member	Councillor Gareth W Griffith
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Purpose	The Scrutiny Committee is asked to accept the report and make any observations regarding the need to ensure sufficient capacity and expertise within the Public Protection Services, in order to provide resilience for the protection of the health and well-being of Gwynedd's communities in the future.

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 At a Communities Scrutiny Committee meeting outlining 'The work of the Public Protection Services during the pandemic' (Appendix 1) held on 25 February 2021, the Cabinet Member and Head of Department noted their concern around coping with the pandemic workload once the demand for normal services re-established itself. In addition, a workshop was held on 10 September 2020 with Cabinet Members, and the matters that had arisen were reported to a meeting of the Cabinet held on 15 September 2020, where it was agreed that the Boards or Departments would be asked to give attention to the relevant matters. One of the matters that arose and required attention from the Environment Department and then the Leadership Team, referred to the field of Public Health, where it was noted:

“The lockdown and the period that followed have highlighted a great desire by our residents to ensure that we address public health matters. The demand has been significantly higher than the resource we have to satisfy it. Looking at these matters through the eyes of our residents, the aspiration is not unreasonable. Unfortunately, a decade of financial hardship has meant that we no longer have the resilience resources. Consideration will need to be given as to how to close the circle.”

- 1.2 This report includes the Department's response to the matter above, and looks at the situation in terms of the Department's Public Protection Services capacity, the possible steps to respond to the short-term and medium-term needs, and relevant matters that will require consideration.

2. BACKGROUND OF CAPACITY MATTERS

- 2.1 The Protection Services have seen significant staff cuts over the past decade, with the number of staff having reduced from around 63 (including support resource) during 2011/12 to 43 (including support resource) by this point, with those cuts including abolishing of the Senior Public Protection Manager post. During this period the Services, which are statutory, front-line and fall under priority 1, have moved from seven units with seven managers to three Public Protection Services with three Managers for the following areas:

- Pollution Control and Licensing Service (12 officers including a Manager)
- Trading Standards and Animal Health / Animal Feed Services (13 officers including a Manager)
- Food, Health and Safety Service (duties including investigation of infectious disease cases) (14 officers including a Manager)

2.2 At present, four officers support the work of the above Services.

2.3 The Services have striven to mitigate the effects of the cuts by increasing the expertise of officers, which has facilitated opportunities to work across the three services. Prior to the pandemic, despite challenges in terms of the Services' resilience and performance, it was at most times possible to maintain a basic level of service that was acceptable to residents and businesses.

2.4 In light of the pandemic, Public Protection duties involving infectious diseases have clearly become one of the Council's main priorities, and therefore a new Service has been created to undertake the relevant work, namely:

- The Test, Trace and Protect Service - Covid, which currently employs over 100 officers.

2.5 In light of the pandemic, the importance of the role of the Public Protection Services has become more apparent in terms of protecting the health of our communities, as well as advising and supporting the businesses of the County and the expectation that we use our enforcement powers in light of allegations of breaching the Coronavirus regulations.

2.6 The majority of the duties with regard to enforcing new Coronavirus regulations have been implemented by Public Protection officers; however, there is a need for stricter enforcement and visual presence in our towns. The work also includes responding to and investigating positive cases of the infection following on from the work of the Test, Trace and Protect Services, as well as advising other Council departments (e.g. Education, Adults), Bangor University and the Colleges.

2.7 It is noted that the above work is in addition to the usual day-to-day work, and it is difficult to provide a timetable of how long this will continue, or what exactly the implications may be in terms of the Public Protection Services' short-term and long-term capacity.

3. POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

3.1 Based on the evidence available, it is believed that there are three steps that could be taken to contribute to mitigating the lack of short-term capacity, and in an attempt to plan for the long-term resilience of the Public Protection Services, namely:

STEP 1 - THE CURRENT SITUATION (NOW - SHORT-TERM)

3.2 Since the start of the pandemic and prior to establishing the Test, Trace and Protect Services, the three PP Services (Pollution Control and Licensing / Trading Standards and Animal Health and Feed / Food, Health and Safety) have gradually been moving away from the usual day-to-day business duties, in order to respond to additional issues relating specifically to the coronavirus restrictions.

- 3.3 As the restrictions ease and as schools, colleges and the university re-open, and as cases of the infection increase in the area, most of the usual day-to-day business is restricted to urgent matters or completely halted for a time, with this being recorded in the corporate decisions log. By now, the majority of the three services' staff resources are used to address the pandemic directly, working closely with the Test, Trace and Protect Service, with the work being split generally into:
- Advising businesses such as licensed properties, caravan parks, supermarkets and all sorts of other businesses regarding coronavirus regulations.
 - The above includes proactive work that involves 'patrol' visits to towns, along with the police, to advise businesses (this can only be undertaken infrequently due to capacity)
 - Reactive work to investigate complaints around failures to comply with the relevant regulations.
 - Advising Council departments, schools, colleges, the university and residential homes.
 - Dealing with related cases of Covid within communities, workplaces, care establishments and educational establishments.
- 3.4 We have been able to improve the resilience of the Public Protection services (temporarily) by taking advantage of grant money from the Welsh Government Hardship Fund [regional Hardship Fund]. The funding and grant are mainly used to employ three (FTE) Public Protection Enforcement / Engagement Officers (Covid-19) for each of the six Councils in North Wales for a period of 12-15 months. The idea here is to facilitate the groundwork, ensuring an increased visual presence out in our towns and villages, advising businesses, observing and reporting. In addition, as it has proven difficult from experience to recruit officers to the Public Protection Services due to qualification and experience requirements etc., the idea is that recruiting at a lower level would be easier, with training requirements that can be implemented sooner.
- 3.5 It is noted that Conwy Council has evaluated the post as GS4 level, and the job description is attached for information. The three officers have now started in their roles as 'Covid Community Engagement Officers', and the initial feedback from the communities has been highly positive.
- 3.6 It is believed that what is needed is three posts at this level as permanent posts, acknowledging that this is a long-term investment in the interests of the Services' resilience. It is therefore noted that the posts should be seen as a development opportunity for prospective applicants, with the initial posts starting at GS4, but moving up to S3 (Public Protection Enforcement Officer salary grade) with relevant training.
- 3.7 These are currently temporary positions; the Cabinet has committed an additional budget for the grant to extend the period of the posts until 1 April 2022.
- 3.8 We also receive temporary support from Health Officers from the Housing and Property Department, but this cannot become a permanent arrangement.

STEP 2 - SHORT-TERM - MEDIUM-TERM

- 3.9 Much of our Environmental Health officers' time is spent dealing with complex Covid cases. We are currently influencing at a regional level in an attempt to improve the expertise of the tracing officers, so that less is required of our environmental health officers.

3.10 Also, and as the three 'Covid Community Engagement Officers' have proven so successful, the Department is looking for sources of funding to employ three further 'Covid Community Engagement Officers' to train as future technicians or Environmental Health or Trading Standards Officers.

3.11 It will be necessary to review the structure of the three Public Protection services to also include consideration of the Test, Trace and Protect Services during 2021/22, aiming to implement a new and robust structure for the future by the end of March 2022. It is believed that consideration should be given to the following when looking at a new structure:

1. The requirements of the work relating to Covid-19 and the day-to-day business work.
2. How can we take advantage of the expertise that has been developed within the Test, Trace and Protect Services when planning ahead to respond to Covid-19 and to create resilience in the Public Protection Services.
3. A resource at a higher managerial level to facilitate arrangements for dealing with the range of contentious / high priority matters (such as Public Protection matters) that arise in the Department
4. The creation of six team leader posts within the three Public Protection Services, without increasing the staff capacity.
5. The need for three additional Public Protection Enforcement Officers (one for each area), who will work across the Services' work areas (it is possible that there will be opportunities here again to recruit from the Test, Trace and Protect Services).
6. Consideration to establish four permanent Public Protection Services for the future.

5. SALARY SCALES

5.1 We are very fortunate of the quality of Environmental Health and Trading Standards officers and technicians we have. Having said this, there is a concern regarding our ability to retain officers with such expertise who are also fluent Welsh-speakers. Two key threats face us, namely:

- The salaries of nearby Counties for corresponding posts are higher, which can attract our staff who have expertise. See table 1 below that compares the range of health and trading standards officers across North Wales councils.

Table 1.

Authority	Environmental Health Officer salary	Trading Standards Officer salary
GWYNEDD	£32,910 - £34,728	£32,910 - £34,728
ANGLESEY	£33,782- £37,890	£33,782- £37,890
CONWY	£37890 - £40,876	£33782 - £36922
DENBIGHSHIRE	£32,234 - £35,745	£32,234 - £35,745
FLINTSHIRE	£35,745 - £38,890	£32,910 - £34,728
WREXHAM	£33,782 - £40,876	£33,782 - £40,876

- There will be a demand for officers with the same expertise in Anglesey, to deal with Tolls and Exports as a result of Brexit

6. MATTERS TO BE CONSIDERED

- 6.1 It is emphasised again that recruitment has been challenging from recent experience, and even if all goes according to schedule, there will still be a need for continuous training for appointed officers. There is therefore a need to acknowledge that there is no quick solution, and that this will be something that will happen over time; that will help with the short-term / medium-term situation but that will also contribute to future resilience - where there will be a need to review the Services' structure in 2021/22.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1 The Scrutiny Committee is asked to accept the report and make any observations regarding the need to ensure sufficient capacity and expertise within the Public Protection Services, in order to provide resilience for the protection of the health and well-being of Gwynedd's communities in the future.