
Communities Scrutiny Committee 10 December 2020

Attendance:

COUNCILLORS: Stephen Churchman, Glyn Daniels, Elwyn Edwards, Simon Glyn, Annwen Hughes, Aled Wyn Jones, Berwyn Parry Jones, Elwyn Jones, Kevin Morris Jones, Dafydd Owen, Edgar Wyn Owen, Elfed Roberts (Chair), Angela Russell, Mike Stevens, Gethin Glyn Williams, Gruffydd Williams and Owain Williams

Officers present:

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

Present for item 5:

Dilwyn Williams (Chief Executive / Member of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board) and Nonn Hughes (Manager of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board)

Present for item 6:

Councillor Gareth Griffith (Cabinet Member for the Environment), Dafydd Wyn Williams (Head of Environment Department), Ceri Hughes Thomas (Parking and Street Works Manager) and Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance Department)

Present for item 7:

Councillor Gareth Griffith (Cabinet Member for the Environment), Councillor Craig ab Iago (Cabinet Member for Housing and Property), Gareth Jones (Environment Assistant Head), Heledd Jones (Team Leader – Joint Planning Policy Unit – Gwynedd and Anglesey) and Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance Department)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillor Linda Morgan

2. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillors Aled W Jones, Annwen Hughes, Kevin M Jones, Angela Russell, Gethin G Williams and Elwyn Jones in item 7 on the agenda as they owned or were a relation to someone close who owned holiday accommodation

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 22 October 2020, as a true record.

5. Governance Structure and Delivery Arrangements of the Gwynedd and Anglesey Public Services Board

A report was submitted outlining the governance arrangements of the Public Services Board (PSB). The contents of the report were expanded upon and a brief update was provided on the developments within the priority fields along with the work of the sub-groups responsible for those fields. Since March 2020, in light of the covid-19 pandemic, it was explained that public bodies had had to adjust to respond to the health crisis by changing their way of working and communicating with others. Reference was made to a workshop held in September 2020 to discuss the Board's role in the recovery of communities from the pandemic.

As a result of the workshop's findings the work streams of the existing sub-groups were revised together with their work programmes, and milestones were agreed. It was also agreed to undertake further research in some areas (financial poverty and youth unemployment) to ascertain the latest situation. The findings of this research would be presented to the Public Services Board on 16 December 2020.

Another finding of the workshop was that a number of the partners responded to the wellbeing needs of our communities as individual organisations. It was explained that the PSB noted that they wanted to avoid work duplication, and they were investigating how they could operate without duplicating the work undertaken by individual partners in order to add value to the current plans. One way to avoid work duplication was that the Board from time to time invites other partners to give presentations on their work such as the Skills Partnership and the Community Safety Partnership.

Members expressed their thanks for the report.

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

- If the Board's work was to be scrutinised then information was needed regarding measures, targets, data, successes
- Why were the Police not part of the Board?
- There was a lack of houses available to buy locally
- The countryside was suffering with services moving or closing down in communities
- The ethos of Housing Associations was to buy local housing rather than build housing for local people – it was necessary to focus on the element of re-building to protect the Welsh language and to ensure that any funding received e.g. Council Tax Premium for second homes would be invested in those areas that suffer from the impact

In response to an observation that the Welsh Government had not anticipated the need to contribute to the costs of coastal maintenance in response to the increase in use / visitors as a result of the pandemic, it was suggested that the Government's mindset needed to adapt to understand that some coastal issues were beyond Local Authority strategies. It was highlighted that Gwynedd had already had to deal with additional costs to maintain infrastructure due to the increase in use.

It was added that the Future Generations Commissioner noted that public bodies had to focus on how their decisions would have a long-term impact, working together to prevent problems from happening and to recognise that no individual public body can respond to the major challenges. The need to discuss the visitors' structure was agreed and it was noted that a working group had been established to look at the current lack of provision together with trying to find a system for sustainable tourism.

In response to a comment about getting Gwynedd Council to lead on housing matters rather than the Chief Executive of a Commercial Housing Company, it was noted that Gwynedd Council's Housing and Property Department would present a Housing Action Plan to the Cabinet on 15 December outlining suitable plans to deliver the Council's vision to secure suitable housing for the County's residents. The Housing and Property Department will collaborate with Housing Associations to complete specific plans to push the plan forward. It was added that the work of the Housing Sub-group was to establish an innovative programme to build new, affordable housing in the County e.g. building low carbon housing, or 'pre-constructed housing' in Wales. It was emphasised that the Sub-group's work was to look at new opportunities or construction methods with the Gwynedd Housing Strategy and the Gwynedd Housing Action Plan firmly in the hands of Gwynedd Council.

In response to a comment that there was no poverty sub-group, although it had been identified as a priority area, it was noted that the Public Services Board wished to look at poverty but work duplication was a concern. It was added that the intention was to seek arrangements to identify where the gaps were and to maximise what can be done to tackle poverty. Members were reminded that further research was being conducted to ascertain the latest situation and to submit a report to the Board on 16 December 2020.

RESOLVED

To accept the report and to note the observations.

6. Update – Parking Review

The Head of Environment Department presented a report giving an overview of its contents. The main purpose of the report was noted namely that the current strategy, adopted in 2015, would end in 2021. The committee was reminded that a Parking Task Group had been established to consider the need to increase income, along with the new challenges and opportunities that have arisen since the last parking strategy was established in February 2015.

It was reported that the task group had two main challenges namely to increase income to the target of £400,000 and secondly to achieve this without having an excessive impact on Gwynedd residents. It was explained that there had been several changes in parking practices over the last few years and these included;

- More tourists and as a result a greater demand for parking spaces.
- More electric cars were being bought and therefore there was an opportunity to install car charging points.
- Increased use of contactless payments, this highlighted the need to upgrade the pay machines in the car parks.
- An increase in motorhomes parking in inappropriate places.

The above points were expanded upon and the need was noted to offer a provision for card payments side by side with cash payments. It was noted that a provision for payment over the telephone had been established, however, this depended on a mobile phone and a sufficient signal to make the payments. However, it appeared that offering two options would facilitate raising more future income as it was possible for people without cash to use the car parks.

The concerns that had recently been highlighted were identified regarding motorhomes and their increase as restrictions had prevented foreign travel. It was explained that this was not an easy matter to resolve and the problem had existed for some years by now. It was noted that solutions such as, creating by-laws, increasing the number of enforcement officers and also adapting car parks to facilitate motorhome vehicles by

charging acceptable fees for the service.

Reference was made to the parking task group's recommendation to raise fees by 10% in the car parks as a way of increasing income. It was added that the task group had identified that fees should not be charged for parking for the disabled in disabled bays and therefore this would continue free of charge.

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

- Concern was expressed regarding motorhomes parking in places without facilities and in areas of scientific interest and of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). It was noted that there was evidence of users disposing of sewage waste in public places.
- The suggestion was made that we should press for the creation of by-laws to protect staying places in order that motorhomes do not park there.
- It was noted that local caravan businesses needed support and therefore the Council should not invest in offering services for these vehicles in car parks.
- Some members felt that the annual pass of £140 was high for some to pay as one sum, as it was not possible to pay in monthly instalments, however, it was welcomed that it was possible to buy a 6 months pass for half the cost.
- Some members noted that motorhomes were a valuable resource as they were self-contained now and included water supplies and waste facilities. It was suggested that a fee should be charged that was comparative to campsites for people to have an opportunity to park in towns and use shops and local services.
- Concerns were raised regarding parking in some villages, with the increase in holiday homes e.g. Airbnb, where parking spaces were occupied by tourists.

In response to the members' observations, the Head of the Environment Department agreed that the situation with motorhomes had been a concern for a while, however, he noted that it was a long process to create by-laws to prevent these vehicles from parking. It was noted that it was an idea to conduct a political conversation on the next steps.

In reference to the annual pass, it was noted that the possibility of paying monthly was impractical as it was not possible to ensure that payments continued once a pass had been issued to the residents. It was highlighted that it was possible to buy a 6 month pass in an effort to reduce the cost in a different way.

The Parking and Street Works Manager explained the parking fees structures and noted that the parking enforcement team was self-funding with income from fees and fines. As the income had been higher than the costs of employing the team, it may be shown that there was a possibility to increase the size of the team, which was essential to cope with the parking challenges. As well as this, he noted that the surplus could be used to re-invest to improve car parks and to upgrade the machines.

RESOLVED

To accept the update and support the recommendation of the Task Group that pay and display fees be increased by 10%.

7. RESEARCH PAPER: MANAGING THE USE OF DWELLINGS AS HOLIDAY HOMES

The research commissioned by the Cabinet in July 2019 was presented on how to try and address how we could restrict the number of houses that can be used for holiday purposes by looking at measures implemented in other places, and how the planning legislation could be changed in order to implement these in Wales. A request was made for the Committee's observations on the work prior to reporting to the Cabinet on 15

December 2020.

Attention was drawn to the definition of 'holiday homes' for the purpose of the work, as;

- Short-term let holiday units: A residential house (C3 use class) that is not regularly occupied and is let periodically for holiday use on a commercial basis.
- Second homes: A residential house (C3 use class) that is used occasionally by its owner (but not as a main residence) in addition to other visitors for holiday use.

A detailed and meaningful presentation was given to the work and the six recommendations were discussed. It was noted that the recommendations gave options in terms of the possible mechanism that could be implemented in order to have control and reduce the impact of holiday accommodation on communities. It was explained that some recommendations would be discussed jointly and were matters for the Welsh Government to implement, while it was possible to implement others at a local level e.g. implement local planning policies effectively – further consideration may be given to this recommendation in the short term and when reviewing the Joint Local Development Plan.

Members expressed their thanks for the report.

The Cabinet Member for the Environment expressed his disappointment that Cardiff City was the only other Authority that had contributed to the research, however, other counties had shown an interest since the report had been released publicly. He added that one County had already presented notices of motion before their Council. He accepted that the Council faced a challenge as the Government did not have much interest in the current situation, but with an operational document supported by evidence it would be possible to act and respond to the challenge.

The Head of Housing and Property congratulated the team for their work and added that the evidence gathered would put an end to the Welsh Government's excuses for not taking action. Having considered the Housing Premium, Gwynedd Housing Action Plan together with the research, it was highlighted that there was specific evidence to set a direction to control the use.

The Cabinet Member for Housing and Property added that the research paper presented facts that were now a tool to challenge the Welsh Government – the use must be controlled.

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

- The report was welcomed – it was a good foundation to begin lobbying and was a golden opportunity to change the system and to take responsibility and control of the situation.
- The report addressed matters such as AirBnB, however, not enough was being made to change the Planning Act by setting thresholds for control – it was necessary to persuade the Welsh Government to change the Act.
- The statistics were alarming
- It was necessary to act and challenge the Government to make a difference
- More details regarding employment were required as well as the high house prices in some areas – this would highlight how the Welsh language was losing its foothold – the Welsh language strongholds were losing their Welsh character.
- There was a need to close the loopholes so that old regulatory arrangements could not be avoided – 'short let holiday units' could be targeted – the owner was likely to transfer back to the 'second home' category as a way of avoiding control
- There was a suggestion to adopt 'intervention' – creating two tiers *holiday* and *local* that will protect the local housing stock and drive prices
- Need to consider Land Transaction Tax – an opportunity to increase the premium

- Matters outside the planning field that can be implemented e.g. tourist tax
- Control was required over 'second homes' – there were no opportunities or homes available for young people
- Control was needed over house letting and AirBnB – to ensure standards for letting and tidiness
- Need to restrict the numbers of holiday homes

In response to a comment regarding seeking control over holiday homes and the side effects that stem from this, the Assistant Head of the Environment noted that the brief was limited to looking at the use of open market housing as holiday homes / second homes. He added that the work included detailed and factual information (submitted by a number of departments) that presented valuable local and national evidence. He highlighted that there were no easy solutions and referred to work undertaken in Scotland as a good example that had proven that it was possible to control short-term holiday use by changing planning legislation and licensing. He noted that some of the recommendations needed to be implemented jointly at a national level, while others were local matters where evidence could be used to adapt local policies. He accepted that the Land Transaction Act was also a tool that may be used.

In response to a comment regarding the Tourist Tax and the fact that it had not been included as a recommendation for the Cabinet to consider, it was highlighted that this work was led by the Economic Development Department and therefore had not been included as one of the main recommendations.

In response to a comment that 'second homes' should be considered within a compulsory licensing scheme, it was noted that this would be extremely difficult to control via the planning system compared to 'holiday accommodation' which was commercial use and people coming and going where it could be demonstrated that there was change of use. As the control of second homes was difficult, since it was not possible to prove change of use, it was noted that the recommendation in terms of planning and licensing legislation followed the control of short-term holiday accommodation and sought to get an accurate picture of the situation at ground level and at the expense of this, in the future it would be possible to consider controlling this via local planning policies.

In response to the comment that the control of second homes was difficult, it was suggested that a challenge should be given to the Cabinet to consider setting a different category. Once the category was included it would be possible to control this.

RESOLVED

- **To accept the contents of the report.**
- **To thank officers for presenting evidence and detailed and useful information which may be used to try to convince Welsh Government to change its planning policies.**

The meeting commenced at 10.30am and concluded at 2.15pm.