

ITEM 6 – QUESTIONS

(A) Questions from Members of the Public

(1) Question from Mr Paul D.Gill (*address provided in accordance with the requirements of the Constitution*)

Why is the Council imposing an increase in the Council Tax Premium in an area which is very dependent on the tourist industry and tourist spending locally without independent research and a report thereon to the Council on the effect of such a policy on the local economy bearing in mind that the imposition of the increase will reduce local tourist expenditure putting local jobs and businesses in jeopardy especially at a time of high inflation and energy bills?

Response – Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas

As explained in the report to be presented to this meeting later today, in empowering councils to charge a Premium on Council Tax for second homes and long-term empty dwellings, the Welsh Government has published statutory guidance for the administration of the Premium, namely the *Guidance on the Implementation of the Council Tax Premiums on Long-Term Empty Homes and Second Homes in Wales*.

Paragraphs 20 to 22 of the Statutory Guidance outline the kind of factors that can be helpful for a local authority to consider when proposing the introduction of a Premium. Each time Cabinet and the full Council considers the Premium it considers this guidance.

As the Statutory Guidance sets out, the discretion given to local authorities to charge a premium is intended to be a tool to help local authorities to bring long-term empty homes back into use to provide safe, secure and affordable homes, and support local authorities in increasing the supply of affordable housing and enhancing the sustainability of local communities.

Since the Council's first decision back in 2016 that it would raise a Premium from April 2018, the housing situation within Gwynedd has taken priority. This Council has consistently stated that the Premium aims to support housing, and the Housing Action Plan's spending commitment is evidence of this.

The premium is a sincere attempt of trying to strike a fair balance between the impact of second homes and empty properties on our communities and maintaining the visitor economy. Through the Housing Action Plan, the Council is increasing the amount of social housing being built each year, building tens of temporary accommodation units ourselves and helping the homeless gain private tenancies. Despite this, due to the significant increase in homeless submissions, we are unable to do this quickly enough.

In making its recommendation to the Council, the Cabinet is well aware of the importance of the tourism industry. On the other hand, we must have sustainable tourism and that will be the subject of a separate study in due course. But most of all, we believe that the basis of a sound economy is an economy where the people of Gwynedd have homes and contribute to the local economy. We can't ignore a situation where it is estimated that 1,400 individuals will have presented themselves as homeless by the end of this year –

double the number presenting before Covid-19. As a Council we will be accommodating over 600 people in temporary accommodation this year, where the figure was around 200 before the Covid-19 period. This is not the foundation of a robust, sustainable economy.

Raising and increasing the premium is not an easy matter and Gwynedd Council has never claimed it is a simple choice. Members are required to weigh a number of factors before reaching a decision today, including the impact of the premium on the visitor economy. This is one of the messages coming from the outcome of the public consultation and which is addressed in the studies that are referenced in the comprehensive report members will consider today.

(B) Questions from Elected Members

(1) Question from Councillor Delyth Lloyd Griffiths

Precisely what percentage of the food that is used by the Council in schools, care settings and other centres, is grown or processed in Gwynedd? Since there is a need to protect the local food chain because of current global costs and problems, I ask the Cabinet Member to ensure that all of the food purchased is sourced locally or processed locally. Accepting that the Council buys a high percentage of food from local distributors, can I have a guarantee that the food originates from Gwynedd or nearby counties?

Response – Cabinet Member for Corporate Support, Councillor Menna Jones

1. The Council held a tendering process in autumn 2019 to establish contracts for supplying and distributing food to the Schools and Residential Homes of Cyngor Gwynedd.
2. As part of the work to encourage small providers to compete, the contract was split into food categories and geographical areas within Gwynedd. In addition, early engagement was carried out with the market (18 months prior to the tender being published) and one-to-one tendering support was provided through Business Wales.
3. Following this, we can see that 71% of the produce we buy is distributed by companies who are based in Gwynedd. Following efforts by our wholesalers to source local and Welsh produce wherever possible, we see that 100% of the cheese we buy is produced in Gwynedd, and we source 40% of the potatoes we need from Gwynedd. 100% of the Beef, 80% of the Lamb and 100% of the Milk originates from Wales.
4. In terms of the source of all food that is supplied by our wholesalers, it is not possible to provide this information to the level of detail requested by the Member at present. This is because of the substantial range of ingredients and foods that are supplied and also the nature of the supply chain.
5. It must also be acknowledged that buying produce from Gwynedd is difficult, and the main barriers to this include:
 - The produce is not available locally i.e. the climate and landscape in Gwynedd and Wales limit what can be produced.

- Local producers cannot provide what is needed in the required quantities, or the price is not competitive.
 - With regard to meat specifically, in order for the slaughter-houses to agree to provide the resource to guarantee that the meat comes from Gwynedd, we would be required to buy large amounts and pay a substantial premium for the meat.
 - The majority of milk from Gwynedd farms goes to South Caernarfon Creameries to make cheese and other dairy products, they do not sell milk.
 - The supply chain for many of the produce required is international and not local.
 - It must also be recognised that we cannot insist that the produce must originate from Gwynedd as this is contrary to national legal regulations.
6. To try and increase the proportion of produce from Gwynedd and Wales, the Council:
- works with and through our wholesalers with organisations such as the NFU, Young Farmers, Larder Cymru and others to raise awareness of opportunities that are relevant to the public sector.
 - reviews the menu in schools to see whether changes can be made which would promote more Welsh produce.
 - continuously reviews our purchasing arrangements in order to give local suppliers the best chance to compete in the market.
7. The Council will re-tender the Food Contract in the autumn of 2023, and we will continue to support the local market in order to encourage local suppliers to compete and win contracts.

(2) Question from Councillor Richard Glyn Roberts

What arrangements have been made to prepare a *thorough* assessment of the linguistic impact of increasing the council tax premium, in line with paragraph 10.5 of the Gwynedd Language Policy, and in particular the impact on 'the numbers or percentage of Welsh speakers in communities'?

Response – Cabinet Member for Finance, Councillor Ioan Thomas

My colleagues will be aware that they need to consider the report on the Council Tax Premium later this afternoon, in item 8 on the meeting agenda.

For context, the report that will be presented to you extends to 30 pages, contains three appendices, and has links to a number of studies that have been conducted looking at the situation of second homes and empty properties. Some of these studies have been carried out by external bodies or individuals, others have been carried out in-house by the Council. Taken together these studies consider the impact of the premium on local communities, as well as the impact of second homes and empty properties on these communities. Therefore, there is clear evidence in the report presented that the impact of the premium, second homes and empty properties on the language has been addressed at every stage. The assessments of all these documents have received the attention of Cabinet in considering the recommendation to be put before the Council, and these will be expected to be addressed by the full Council today in reaching a decision on the Premium rate for 2023/24.

It should be noted that not all of the studies referred to in the report reach the same conclusion about the impact of different policies on the language, but we take note of the risks highlighted in them all, particularly those relating to the Welsh language. Therefore, no separate academic study has been commissioned while preparing the report.

I emphasise that consideration of the messages of these studies, and the risks highlighted in them to the Welsh language and to our communities, is a key part of Cabinet's consideration not to recommend a premium above 150% on second homes at this time, although the Act allows for a higher premium to be charged.

I also draw your attention to the public consultation held during October which specifically sought respondents' views on their comments on the impact of the Premium on the Welsh Language. Overall, respondents thought that raising the Premium would not have an impact on the language, but more thought the Premium had a positive impact than those who thought it had a negative impact.

Of course, the questions in the consultation referred specifically to the payment of the Premium, but consideration must also be given to the impact of what will be done with the extra money being collected. The Council has a Housing Action Plan in place, which is specifically intended to introduce measures to strengthen Gwynedd's communities and make the Housing Strategy a reality. Stable, sustainable communities alongside other measures will undoubtedly be a step in our vision to strengthen the use of Welsh in our communities.

The first decision to charge a premium on second homes and long-term empty properties was made back in 2016, and when considering the situation annually since then, attention has been paid to the impact of the premium on our communities. The Equality Impact Assessment being presented with today's report reminds us that a number of characteristics and aspects as well as socio-economic impact need to be considered when reaching a policy decision, as well as the impact on the Language.