
CORPORATE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 20/10/16

Present: Councillor Jason Humphreys (Chair);
Councillor W. Roy Owen (Vice-chair).

Councillors:- Anwen J. Davies, Lesley Day, Elwyn Edwards, Gweno Glyn, Aled Wyn Jones, Charles W. Jones, June Marshall, Michael Sol Owen, Eirwyn Williams, Gethin Glyn Williams, John Wyn Williams and R.H. Wyn Williams.

Officers present: Vera Jones (Democratic Services Manager) and Eirian Roberts (Member Support and Scrutiny Officer).

Present for item 3 below:-

Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn (Deputy Leader)
Councillor Peredur Jenkins (Cabinet Member for Resources)
Councillor Mandy Williams-Davies (Cabinet Member for the Economy and Community)

Present for item 4 below:-

Councillor Mandy Williams-Davies (Cabinet Member for the Economy and Community)
Aled Davies (Head of Adults, Health and Well-being Department)
Geraint George (Special Projects Leader)
Arwel E. Jones (Senior Manager Corporate Support)
Arwel Evans (Corporate Procurement Manager)
Nia Pritchard Griffith (Category Specialist)
Huw Griffiths (Business Liaison Co-ordinator)
Colin Morris (Business Support Manager)

Present for item 5 below:-

Dafydd Edwards (Head of Finance Department)
Dewi Morgan (Revenue and Risk Senior Manager)

Apologies: Councillors Trevor Edwards and Hefin Underwood.

1. DECLARATION OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor Gethin Glyn Williams declared a personal interest in item 7 on the agenda - Council Tax Premium on Long-Term Empty Homes and Second Homes, as close members of his family owned holiday homes.

The member was of the opinion that this was a prejudicial interest, and he withdrew from the meeting during the discussion on the item.

2. MINUTES

The Chair signed the minutes of the previous committee meeting held on 16 June 2016, as a true record.

3. OVERVIEW OF GWYNEDD COUNCIL'S PERFORMANCE 2015/16

Submitted - the Leader's report which provided an overview of the Council's performance thus far in 2015/16 in the fields of Effective and Efficient Council and Financial Planning, as well as the Keeping the Benefits Local Project.

The three relevant Cabinet Members were invited to expand individually on the different projects that were part of their portfolios, and they also responded to questions / observations from the members.

The Chair summarised the main conclusions of the discussion as follows:-

- More information should be received from the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Leisure regarding what took place in terms of engaging with children and young people (if at all).
- It was recommended that the Engagement Team considered using different engagement methods rather than constantly using the same people.
- The scrutinisers looked forward to the pilot with the new scrutiny performance arrangements.
- It was suggested that perhaps a progress report on EDRMS should be requested, i.e. in terms of whether more information was being shared, more space released to avoid duplication and more financial savings realised.

4. REPORT ON THE PROGRESS OF THE KEEPING THE BENEFITS LOCAL STRATEGIC PLAN

Submitted - the report of the Corporate Procurement Manager on the progress of the Keeping the Benefits Local Strategic Plan following a request from this committee to receive an update on the progress of implementing new arrangements for procurement.

The Cabinet Member was invited to say a few words at the start before the committee considered the report per sub-heading, namely:-

- A. Category Management - People Category
- B. Category Management across the Council
- C. Keeping the Benefits Local

The Cabinet Member and officers expanded on the written responses in the report, and also responded to further questions / observations from the members. During the discussion:-

- It was noted that there was room to raise awareness with other agencies of the work that was being undertaken in terms of direct payments so that they could assist (e.g. Age Cymru).
- It was noted that scrutinisers supported and recommended that the University's observations should be built upon in order to maintain and build relationships with companies that had not been successful with tenders so that they could learn lessons and prepare better for the future.
- Work undertaken with 'major companies' to identify the possibilities of 'sub-contracting' to smaller companies locally was appreciated as this was a way of employing locally with major companies taking the financial risk.

The Chair summarised the main conclusions of the discussion as follows:-

- Although responsibilities had been shared across the Council in the field of category management and that everyone had 'bought into' this principle, further scrutiny would be required within about 6-9 months to ascertain whether serious responsibility was taken at the implementation stage.
- It was questioned whether local companies sufficiently prepared in advance, and whether local companies had enough time to prepare. In light of this, there was a need to monitor the situation to see whether a live contracts programme was being maintained, updated and shared. Again, this would be reviewed within 6-9 months of establishing the new category management teams.
- It was appreciated that category management would improve the quality of upcoming work and that this would be bound into future contracts as there was more expertise in writing contracts within the Council. However, there was a need to keep an eye on what was really taking place with this in order to see whether quality existed at grass roots' level. Specifically, it should be enquired within a reasonable time whether a reduction was seen in the number of contracts which had problems that needed to be resolved as tendering arrangements were weak.

5. COUNCIL TAX PREMIUM ON LONG-TERM EMPTY HOMES AND SECOND HOMES

Submitted - the report of the Head of Finance Department giving the committee an opportunity to consider the benefits and risks of raising a Council Tax premium on long-term empty homes and second homes.

As the public consultation would remain open until 4 November, it was explained that it was therefore very difficult to fully scrutinise the matter at this meeting. Due to this, it was arranged to scrutinise the matter further on 21 November, whether it would be in the form of a Scrutiny Workshop or a special meeting of the committee.

Members were given an opportunity to ask questions and offer their observations. During the discussion:-

- It was recommended that the Cabinet needed to consider how best to use the additional funding that would be collected if the premium was raised. It was accepted that the new Council's hands should not be tied and that the democratic process needed to happen with the new Council, especially in light of the fact that we did not know what the Council's financial position would be by 2017/18, but consideration should be given to earmarking some of the money to:-
 - Assist the owners of empty houses to repair property so that they could bring them back into use as residences.
 - Consider investing in posts in order to ensure income tax for the Council by strengthening the Council's inspection arrangements to verify the validity of statements from owners of properties that were not second homes or empty any more.

- It was noted that raising the premium on a gradual basis every year should be considered (e.g. 25% in year 1, 50% in year 2, etc. and that it was not too much of a 'shock' and so that a smaller number considered transferring to the business rates.
- The opinion was expressed that the percentage should not be too high, in case too many would be forced to transfer to the business rates system, and so that there would be an opportunity during the first year / years to see what impact it had in other authorities that had already introduced a premium, and to adapt as we proceeded.
- To the contrary, it was suggested that a higher premium should be raised from the start as there would be 'compensation' if some would move to the non-domestic rates system.

RESOLVED to reconvene the Holiday Homes and Taxes Scrutiny Investigation Group on the morning of 21 November to fully scrutinise the matter following receipt of the results of the public consultation and to submit recommendations to the Cabinet on 22 November.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 12.50 pm

CHAIRMAN