

COMMUNITY AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Friday, 13 November 2020

PRESENT: Councillor F. Akhtar (Chair)

Councillors:

C.A. Davies, W.R.A. Davies, H.L. Davies, D.C. Evans, R.E. Evans, S.J.G. Gilasbey, B.W. Jones, H.I. Jones, S. Matthews, H.B. Shepardson, D. Thomas and G.B. Thomas

Also in attendance:

Councillor C.A. Campbell, Executive Board Member for Communities and Rural Affairs
E. Dole, Leader of the Council

H.A.L. Evans, Executive Board Member for Environment

L.D. Evans, Executive Board Member for Housing

P. Hughes-Griffiths, Executive Board Member for Culture, Sport and Tourism

L.M. Stephens, Deputy Leader of the Council and Leader of the Independent Group

The following Officers were in attendance:

J. Jones, Head of Regeneration

I. Jones, Head of Leisure

J. Fearn, Head of Property

J. Morgan, Head of Homes & Safer Communities

L. Quelch, Head of Planning

J. Davies, Senior Cultural Services Manager

A. Thomas, Group Accountant

N Thomas, Senior Outdoor Recreation Manager

J. Willis, Housing Services Manager (Advice & Options)

S. Rees, Simultaneous Translator

J. Corner, Technical Officer

M. Evans Thomas, Principal Democratic Services Officer

K. Thomas, Democratic Services Officer

R. Lloyd, Democratic Services Officer

J. Owen, Democratic Services Officer

Virtual Meeting - . - 10.00 am - 12.30 pm

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies for absence

Condolences were paid to those members of the Community and Regeneration Scrutiny who had recently suffered family bereavements.

2. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR FOR THE 2020/21 MUNICIPAL YEAR

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that Councillor F. Akhtar be appointed Chair of the Committee for the 2020/21 Municipal Year.

3. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTERESTS INCLUDING ANY PARTY WHIPS ISSUED IN RELATION TO ANY AGENDA ITEM

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

The following declaration of interest was made

Councillor	Minute Number	Nature of Interest
J. Gilasbey	10 – Community and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme	Executive Board Forward Work Programme

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS (NONE RECEIVED)

No public questions had been received.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT SERVICES COVERED BY THE COMMUNITY & REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

The Committee received a report presented by the Executive Board Member – Deputy Leader (with responsibility for Planning Services), the Executive Board Member for Housing and the Executive Board Member for Environment on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on those Council Services provided by the Environment Department falling within the remit of the Community and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee i.e: Planning Services and Property. Whilst assessing the impact of the pandemic on those services, the reports also helped to inform on how they could be reset and further improve their future delivery.

The report was divided into two separate elements covering Planning Services and Property and reflected on the impact of Covid-19 from a service user, staff and Council perspective and related to the following service areas:

Planning Services

- Planning Policy
- Minerals and Waste (Excluding the enforcement section)
- Development Management & Built Heritage (excluding the enforcement section)
- Building Control
- Street Naming and Numbering

Property

- New Homes
- Repairs and Maintenance

The Deputy Leader of the Council referred to the development of the Council's Revised Local Development Plan (LDP) and reported that, due to the pandemic, the consultation on the Deposit Version which, although in March 2020 had been impacted by the Covid Outbreak. The last two weeks were affected in that access to libraries was suspended. As a result a further three week consultation was undertaken which commenced on the 2nd October 2020. She also referred to the legislation regarding the "drop dead" provisions for the current LDP and reported the Welsh Government had, the previous day, accepted the Council's revised Delivery Agreement which meant the existing LDP would remain in operation pending adoption of the new plan in July 2022.

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- Reference was made to the suspension of site visits by the Development Control and Building Control sections during the pandemic and to whether a decision had been made on their resumption.

The Deputy Leader advised that whilst any site visits undertaken would, at present, require to be assessed on a case by case basis, proposals were gradually being resumed, subject to any Covid-19 restrictions in force, to minimise the potential for a further backlog.

- In response to a question, it was confirmed the Welsh Government had not relaxed the requirement for local planning authorities to determine certain classes of planning applications within an eight week period during the pandemic. However, the service was endeavouring to determine applications as quickly as was possible and where it became evident determination would be delayed, discussions regarding an extension of time were undertaken with applicants on an individual basis.
- Reference was made to the current backlog of planning applications awaiting determination. Whilst it was accepted every effort was being made to address that position, which included the Planning Committee sitting every two weeks, clarification was sought on when it was anticipated they would be addressed.

The Committee was advised that additional resources had been commissioned to tackle the backlog of outstanding applications and every effort was being made to address the situation as quickly as was possible.

- Reference was made to the financial impact of Covid-19 on the Planning Division's income stream and to how that would affect its ability to achieve a positive budget.

The Executive Board Member confirmed income had reduced by approximately a third in Quarter 1 of the current financial year but that some degree of a bounce back had occurred in quarter 2 via a combination of fees received in Q1, not registered until Q2, together with new applications received. Regarding the impact on the division's overall budget, the Head of planning advised that an imminent introduction of a fee increase would assist in achieving a more favourable budget position.

- Reference was made to the resumption of the Council's new build programme and to the difficulties encountered in sourcing some building materials. Clarification was sought on what impact those difficulties may have on project delivery timescales.

The Committee was advised that whilst some difficulties had been encountered within the supply chain, it was envisaged those would be short term. However, they could, potentially, result in increased development costs. Notwithstanding those difficulties, it was confirmed the council's new build schemes were progressing, as detailed within the report.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the reports be received.

6. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOMES AND SAFER COMMUNITIES

The Committee received a report presented by the Executive Board Member for Housing on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Housing services from a

service user, staff and Council perspective whilst providing clear information on actions taken, informing the implications for future service delivery and any key lessons learnt. The report focussed on key delivery issues and future developments in the following service areas:

- Strategic Housing Delivery and Investment;
- Advice and Tenancy Support;
- Sheltered Housing and;
- Engagement and Partnerships

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- In response to a question it was confirmed no notification had been received from the the Welsh Government of any extension beyond March 2021 of its scheme to re-imburse local authorities increased costs incurred from meeting their legal obligations to house homeless persons. Whilst it was hoped the scheme would continue beyond that date, if it were to not continue, there would be financial implications for other service areas within Housing and Safer Communities.
- Reference was made to rent arrears having increased from £1.5m in October 2019 to £1.8m in October 2020 and to whether that was recoverable and, if not, what were the potential consequences.

The Executive Board member reminded the Committee that there would always be an element of rent arrears within the Council as tenants paid in arrears. This was the same with all local authorities and whilst Carmarthenshire was better placed than some other authorities careful management of arrears was key. Within Carmarthenshire, those measures included for example early intervention where the potential for arrears to accrue was identified, assisting new tenants in managing their budgets, identifying potential eligible benefits and the establishment of a prevention fund to encourage tenants to pay a little extra every month to reduce their arrears.

The Head of Homes and Safer Communities advised that the Authority had anticipated the pandemic could result in increased levels of arrears and would be re-assessing the bad debt and arrears provision within its Business Plan. However, early indications were that the Business Plan was not being affected. Additionally, by way of assisting tenants, the Authority had amended its enforcement procedures and was now providing 6 months' notice thereof whereas previously enforcement had commenced after one month's notice.

- Reference was made to the measures introduced during the first wave of the pandemic to address the increase in homelessness across the U.K. and to the current position where homelessness was now on the rise. Clarification was sought on what measures were being introduced to address the position within Carmarthenshire.

The Executive Board Member assured the Committee that the Council's position had not changed since the pandemic's onset in March and every effort was being made to address homelessness within the county in compliance with legal requirements. Currently, the authority was catering for 119 homeless persons, 18 of whom were within family groups and 101

were single persons. Of those, 30 were in bed and breakfast and 89 in temporary accommodation. The Authority was also examining its housing supply and as new schemes were developed, provision would have to be made for single persons which, could include the creation of small blocks to accommodate for example up to four persons

The Head of Homes and Safer Communities confirmed that providing for the homelessness was a challenge for the authority and that its work over the next 6-12 months would be focussing on providing a range of accommodation to meet their needs.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

7. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CARMARTHENSHIRE'S LEISURE SERVICES

The Committee received a report, presented by the Executive Board Member for Culture, Sport and Tourism on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Leisure Services highlighting the changes and challenges faced whilst providing an update on the status of each service area, reflecting on pre-covid actions before highlighting future challenges facing this customer facing and income generating service

Section 2 within the report highlighted the impact of Covid on Leisure services and detailing those that had:-

- Continued to operate throughout the pandemic;
- Closed during the initial lock-down;
- Re-started;
- Remained closed

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- In response to a question on the library 'click and collect' service it was confirmed that statistics on the participation rates could be conveyed to the committee members
- In response to a question on the impact of the pandemic on the touring caravan site within the Pembrey Country Park it was confirmed that whilst income streams had been impacted, the subsequent relaxation of lock down rules and the 'staycation' phenomenon within the tourism industry the park, and other coastal areas within the County, had never been busier. That was evident with income figures in August being higher than in previous years.

With specific regard to the operation of the Pembrey Caravan Site, the Committee was apprised of the measures introduced to facilitate its re-opening together with the continual need for re-assessment of those measures to ensure its safe operation and compliance with new rules introduced as part of the pandemic. It was hoped the park's financial operation would bounce back during the 2021/22 season.

- In response to questions on the three site visits undertaken by the Committee in 2019, the Committee was advised that with regard to Y Gât in St Clears, it was anticipated that an agreement would shortly be reached with the Town Council over its future operation. A scheme had been

devised for the refurbishment of the St Clears Leisure Centre. However, the financing thereof would have to be assessed against other competing schemes within the Council's capital programme. A report on the Pendine Outdoor Education Centre was scheduled for the Committee's December meeting.

- Reference was made to the current position with theatres throughout the county remaining closed and information sought on the provision of live theatre events via the digital medium. It was confirmed the Council had facilitated/provided a number of performances digitally and work was progressing on further developing and promoting that provision over the coming months.
- In response to a question on the future protection of theatres, the Head of Leisure advised that the position in Carmarthenshire was different to other local authority areas in that the principal theatres were owned and operated by the Council. Whilst the theatres had remained closed and staff furloughed, the council was able to claim for loss of income as a result of their enforced closure. It was hoped that a relaxation of the Covid rules coupled with the possibility of a vaccine being rolled out in the near future could see some resumption of services in the new year. It was further hoped to provide a near normal service by the end of the 2021/22 financial year, however that would prove challenging.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

8. COVID-19 UPDATE REPORT FOR REGENERATION.

The Committee received a report, presented by the Leader of the Council (with responsibility for Regeneration), on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Carmarthenshire's economy and businesses and identifying what was important in the short, medium and long term in order to provide the assistance they most required. The report highlighted the measures undertaken by the Council in the initial emergency response together with the measures introduced/being introduced as part of the Council's Recovery Strategy

The following issues were raised on the report:-

- In response to a question on the Councils' 'Ten Towns' initiative, it was confirmed consultations thereon would be commence shortly via virtual digital platforms and the Council would be updated as the scheme progressed.
- In response to a question on the promotion of Cyngor Sir Gar, it was confirmed that would be undertaken via a variety of media platforms in accordance with the Councils' communications plan.
- Reference was made to the financial costs of the pandemic for the authority and how that could impact on its capital programme. The Leader of the Council confirmed that whilst there would be an impact, the programme was currently being evaluated and re-prioritised with an emphasis on Economic Development and Recovery.
- In response to a question on unemployment rates for the 50+ age group, the Committee was assured the Council's recovery programmes would address job opportunities for all age groups.
- Reference was made to the provision of new skills/upskilling, particularly with regard to digital skills for the older workforce and what measures were being introduced to cater for their need.

The Leader of the Council advised that one of the major themes of the Swansea Bay City Deal Programme was the Skills and Talent Initiative currently being developed, on which the Council was leading, with the ethos being on re-skilling and upskilling which would help improve workforce skills across the region. The City Bay Joint Committee had also recently signed off on the Council's Pentre Awel Scheme for submission to the Welsh and U.K. Government for approval. If endorsed, that would create approximately 2,000 jobs over the next five years across all age groups in the city bay region. The Council's Capital Programme also targeted job creation as a major theme.

The Head of Regeneration advised that the Skills and Talent Initiative recognised the need to address skills and training needs on a regional basis in partnerships, and the Council would be working with Coleg Sir Gar in that respect. Whilst it was appreciated people's digital skills varied, the Council would also shortly be re-introducing employability staff within its hubs on Tuesdays and Thursdays to assist people, by appointment, to access digital information.

He further advised that 'localism' played a major role in assisting with economic recovery and the Council was examining its procurement processes to see how the local economy could best benefit in providing it with goods and services. It had been estimated that if the council increased its spend on local goods and services by 10% that would equate to £30m spend leading to an increase in local job opportunities

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

9. COMMUNITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - ANNUAL REPORT 2019/20

The Committee received for consideration its Annual Report on the work undertaken during the 2019/20 municipal year. It was noted that the report had been prepared in accordance with Article 6.2 of the Council's Constitution and provided an overview of the work programme and key issues addressed, whilst also incorporating any issues referred to, or from, the Executive Board, Task and Finish reviews and development sessions.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the report be received.

10. COMMUNITY AND REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2020/21

(NOTE: Councillor J Gilasbey had earlier declared an interest in this item)

The Committee, in accordance with Article 6.2 of the Council's constitution considered its draft 2020/21 Forward Work Programme detailing issues and reports to be considered during the course of the municipal year in respect of the period November 2020- April 2021.

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the draft 2020/21 Forward Work Programme be endorsed.

11. TO SIGN AS A CORRECT RECORD THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON THE 5TH FEBRUARY, 2020

UNANIMOUSLY RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on the 5th February, 2020 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE