

COMMUNITY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
8 MARCH 2017

Minutes of the meeting of the Community and Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Committee of Flintshire County Council held in the Delyn Committee Room, County Hall, Mold on Wednesday, 8 March 2017

PRESENT: Councillor Ron Hampson (Chairman)

Councillors: David Cox, Paul Cunningham, Rosetta Dolphin, Ian Dunbar, George Hardcastle, Ray Hughes, Hilary Isherwood, Sara Parker, Mike Reece, Gareth Roberts, David Roney and Owen Thomas

SUBSTITUTES: Councillors: Andy Dunbobbin (for Ron Davies) and Paul Shotton (for Peter Curtis)

APOLOGIES: Councillors Veronica Gay and Nancy Matthews (call-in signatories)

ALSO PRESENT:

Councillors: Richard Jones, Mike Peers and Dave Mackie (as initiators of the call-in who were not Members of the Committee)

Councillors: Haydn Bateman, Marion Bateman and Richard Lloyd (as observers)

CONTRIBUTORS: Councillor Aaron Shotton, Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance; Councillor Bernie Attridge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Environment; Councillor Derek Butler, Cabinet Member for Economic Development; Councillor Helen Brown, Cabinet Member for Housing; Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise); Service Manager (Enterprise & Regeneration); Service Manager (Customer Support); and Capital Works Team Manager

Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation) and Transportation Manager (for minute number 53)

Benefits Manager (for minute number 55)

IN ATTENDANCE: Democratic Services Manager, Community & Enterprise Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator and Committee Officer

51. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None were received.

52. CONSIDERATION OF A MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE PURSUANT TO THE CALL-IN ARRANGEMENTS

The Democratic Services Manager gave an overview of the procedure for the call-in of a Cabinet decision as detailed in the supporting document. The Cabinet decision on the Deeside Plan of 14 February 2017 had been called in by Councillors Mike Peers, Richard Jones, Veronica Gay, Owen Thomas, Gareth Roberts, Dave

Mackie, Nancy Matthews and Hilary Isherwood. Copies of the Cabinet report, Record of Decision and Call-in Notice were included with the agenda.

53. DEESIDE PLAN

On behalf of the call-in signatories, Councillors Mike Peers, Richard Jones and Dave Mackie were invited to address the Committee first.

Whilst Councillor Peers understood the focus on employment, economic growth and improved traffic infrastructure in Deeside, he pointed out that other elements on housing, high street regeneration, leisure etc were needed in other towns and communities in the county. He asked how the Deeside Plan would integrate with the Local Development Plan (LDP) where elements such as housing and leisure should be addressed and said that the lack of land supply for residential development should form part of the growth spatial options within the LDP. He felt there should have been much wider consultation on the Plan allowing for full debate across the Council and the county, including an impact assessment on other communities. He also stated that the Plan lacked any evidence of funding and resources needed to achieve its objectives, pointing out that some of the Council's reserves had already been set aside to support the 2017/18 budget. For these reasons and to comply with the Council's pre-election protocol on major consultations, he felt that the item should be deferred until after the Election to allow for proper consultation.

In acknowledging Deeside as Flintshire's employment hub, Councillor Richard Jones felt that a Flintshire Plan was more appropriate to spread investment across the county, especially in view of the Council's funding per capita and the fact that Deeside had already benefited from Vibrant & Viable Places (VVP) funding. He also cited the lack of detail on funding for the 30 year Plan, which would be to the detriment of other communities where improved education, transport, leisure and environment was also important. He said that the lack of consultation outside the Deeside area meant that the effect on other communities could not be determined, which was crucial.

Councillor Dave Mackie referred to the recommendation to make a case for the A494/A55 improvements to facilitate delivery of the Deeside Plan. He said that the decision on that route affected other areas and should have been included in the consultation.

In response, Councillor Aaron Shotton gave a reminder of the county's established approach to town centre partnerships; each providing an opportunity for its local Members to identify priorities and shape future strategies for their respective areas. He said there was no expectation for town centres to consult widely on priorities within their own masterplans, as was the case with the Deeside Plan which would be monitored by the Deeside partnership. In support of the Plan, he stated the importance of the Deeside Industrial Park as an employment site of regional significance, contributing to the work of the Mersey Dee Alliance and North Wales Economic Ambition Board centred on economic growth and transport infrastructure. He spoke about the aims within the Plan in seeking to address the recognised concentration of areas of deprivation in Deeside along with low levels of self-employment and lack of qualified workers. He said that the whole of Flintshire would benefit from the improved transport links in the Deeside Plan as well as the proposed metro system in North East

Wales. In response to the concerns raised, he pointed out that there was currently no adopted LDP and that the Deeside Plan contained only a factual statement on the A494/A55 improvement options with no recommended preferred route. Consultation on the Plan had included two drop-in sessions and consideration by the Deeside Forum which was open to businesses across Flintshire.

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) explained that the Deeside Plan was a vision for local priorities - the same approach used for town masterplans - and that resources would be identified as opportunities arose. She also advised that the VVP funding had been allocated from Welsh Government (WG) based on the eligibility criteria.

The Service Manager (Enterprise & Regeneration) pointed out that funding to improve the transport infrastructure would involve WG resources rather than those of the Council. The key objectives of the Plan on economic growth, employment and transport were all long-term processes and therefore timely decisions and planning were needed to avoid losing out on future opportunities.

Councillor Derek Butler said that Deeside's contribution to the region was recognised with integration of the Plan to the Northern Powerhouse, Mersey Dee Alliance and regional growth plan. He pointed out that previous workshops on the development of the Deeside Plan had given an opportunity to discuss the impact on other areas.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood, who was one of the call-in signatories, sought more information on the funding and impact assessment. Councillor Aaron Shotton clarified that the Deeside Plan was a strategy document and that achievement of its aims required separate decisions at the appropriate time, as was the case with town masterplans. Approval of the Plan at this stage would place the Council in a better position to access time-limited funding as those opportunities arose, highlighting VVP as an example where 40% of the Council's funding bid had been approved.

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) clarified that endorsement of the Plan's objectives would usefully add weight to the UK Government and WG in terms of their funding priorities.

Councillor Paul Shotton spoke about the regional benefits of the Plan and thanked officers for their work.

Councillor Rosetta Dolphin gave a reminder of her request for a workshop on regeneration, which was a new area for the Committee, and pointed out that there were other industrial areas in Flintshire such as Flint, Bagillt and Mostyn. She felt unable to support the Plan at this present time unless to do so would jeopardise any funding opportunities. In response, the Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that the North Wales growth deal was at a critical stage with the WG and UK Government due to consider proposals by July whilst an announcement on the economic growth ambitions of Cheshire West and Warrington were expected in May, all of which the Deeside Plan fed in to.

As another of the call-in signatories, Councillor Gareth Roberts acknowledged support for Deeside as an industrial base but disagreed with the comparison made between the Deeside Plan and town masterplans.

The Chief Officer (Streetscene & Transportation) clarified that both options for the A494/A55 had been considered as part of the Deeside Plan to ensure viability of the transport network. He agreed to provide all Members with details of the WG consultation process when released on 13 March 2017, and gave a reminder that the preferred route would be determined by WG.

Councillor Ian Dunbar stated that he was satisfied with the responses to the questions and concerns raised, pointing out the extent of consultation detailed in the Record of Decision. He welcomed the benefits of the Plan to the whole of the county and in supporting the growth vision.

Councillor Peers noted that the consultation list excluded all Council Members.

Councillor Owen Thomas, who had also signed the call-in notice, said there had been insufficient consultation especially given the time taken to develop the Plan. He said there was no mention of industry in other areas, such as Mostyn Docks, and called for a further review.

Councillor Aaron Shotton emphasised that this was a strategy document developed in consultation with businesses, setting out aims for the newly elected Council to influence regional decisions.

In response to comments from the Chairman, Councillor Butler said that funding was at stake, pending forthcoming decisions by WG and UK Government.

In summing up, Councillor Jones reaffirmed his reasons for the call-in as lack of consultation on the impact on the rest of the county and the suggestion for a Plan for the whole of Flintshire to reflect the strengths of other towns/communities in the county. This would ensure that they were considered and given a fair distribution of funding.

Councillor Peers said that the intention of the call-in was to seek further discussion. In response to the comments made, he pointed out that town masterplans did not extend to the 30 years in the Deeside Plan and he could not see the benefits for wider communities. He questioned its integration with the LDP and said that some of the objectives should be included in consultation on the LDP process.

Councillor Dolphin indicated her support for deferral of the matter unless this approach compromised funding streams. The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that the Plan offered opportunities to influence the proposed North East Wales metro system and the growth deals for North Wales and Cheshire/Warrington which were gathering pace. She said that issues such as these were included in the Deeside Plan and if unsupported by the Council, could raise issues on confidence when considered by WG and UK Government.

In summing up, Councillor Aaron Shotton drew comparison with town masterplans as locally developed strategies and priorities. He acknowledged some of

the concerns which had been raised but pointed out the opportunities to feed into regional decisions and funding.

To enable the Committee to reach a decision, the Democratic Services Manager detailed the four options available and the procedure for voting.

Councillor Andy Dunbobbin proposed Option 2 to accept but not endorse the explanations. This was seconded by Councillor Ian Dunbar and on being put to the vote, was carried.

RESOLVED:

That the explanations be accepted but not endorsed by the Committee.

Prior to the next item, the Committee adjourned for a 10 minute break.

54. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 23 January and 1 February 2017 were submitted.

RESOLVED:

That the minutes be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

55. WELFARE REFORM UPDATE - UNIVERSAL CREDIT ROLL OUT

The Benefits Manager introduced a report on the main changes to the benefit system for those in work and out of work, together with actions being taken to support households affected by the rollout of Universal Credit (UC) full service from April 2017. She gave a presentation covering the following areas:

- impact of pre-2015 reforms
- impact of the 2015 budgets
- the lower Benefit Cap affecting 5 times as many households
- number of households showing level of impact in 2016
- analysis of households with high impact
- high impact by ward
- UC impact
- 2020 scenario
- Flintshire vs national average

Since November 2016, a significant increase was reported in the number of households affected by the reduction in the Benefit ceiling. Although support was being given to some families through Discretionary Housing Payments, Members' assistance was sought in helping the team to continue efforts to engage with others most at risk. A number of key changes from April 2017 included the introduction of digital claim processing as well as alternative payment arrangements and in-work conditionality which were viewed as significant challenges. Whilst a range of support and proactive approaches were being implemented by the Council to mitigate effects, there were

growing concerns about the increasing number of people affected negatively. The Benefits Manager agreed to provide the Committee with the list of households with high impact, broken down by ward.

The Chief Officer (Community & Enterprise) said that many claimants may not be aware that even minor changes in circumstances would instigate an end to their transitional protection.

Following concerns from Councillor Rosetta Dolphin, the Chief Officer referred to a range of support including practical digital help available in Flintshire Connects and libraries. However, the significant increased demand for help, particularly for vulnerable residents, meant there was greater reliance on a wider network of support involving third sector organisations. A detailed analysis of the implications and anticipated risks to homelessness services would be brought to Cabinet.

Councillor Hilary Isherwood referred to the availability of additional support in the voluntary sector.

Councillor Paul Shotton commended the work of the team in helping residents. The Benefits Manager reaffirmed the Council's commitment in seeking to mitigate, where possible, the impacts of reforms set by the UK Government. Officers were also working to raise awareness of real-life scenarios facing claimants. More detailed information would be given at the forthcoming workshop to highlight the issue amongst Members and seek their help in engaging with residents. As requested by Councillor Dolphin, a copy of the letter to be sent to tenants would be shared with all Members to help their understanding of the UC changes.

Councillor David Cox asked about the Council's capacity to continue its support. The Benefits Manager described welfare reforms as an organisational issue, affecting not just the Benefits team. Discussions with the voluntary/third sector were continuing and Members' help was needed in spreading the message to the public about the issue and signposting to support available. Training given to officers was centred on understanding customers' journeys and identifying those most at risk. Whilst this was a proactive approach, there was inevitably a degree of reactivity as the full impact of reforms was not yet known.

Councillor Helen Brown reminded Members that Discretionary Housing Payments were only awarded in emergency cases and were not a long-term solution. She pointed out that the risks on welfare reforms were not necessarily confined to rent arrears and could lead to domestic and personal issues.

Councillor Aaron Shotton said that the mitigation of welfare reform impacts were a key part of the Council's Improvement Plan and that significant spend had been allocated to date to support claimants. Whilst the Council had taken an early proactive approach, continued engagement with the Department of Work & Pensions was vital to identify additional resources moving forward. Councillor Shotton took the opportunity to commend Paul Neave for his excellent work and knowledge on this matter and to wish him well on his appointment as Head of Advisory Services for Welsh Government.

In highlighting the importance of supporting the most vulnerable residents, particularly those with mental health issues, Councillor Ian Dunbar proposed a joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee in the new Council term. Following agreement by the Committee, the Facilitator agreed to add this suggestion to the Forward Work Programme.

In praising the Council's approach, Councillor Paul Cunningham said that the DWP and UK Government must also take responsibility for spreading awareness amongst residents as part of their duty of care in introducing welfare reforms.

RESOLVED:

- (a) That the impact that ongoing Welfare Reforms will have on Flintshire residents and the actions being taken to support residents where possible, be noted; and
- (b) That a joint meeting with the Social & Health Care Overview & Scrutiny Committee be included in the Forward Work Programme for 2017/18.

56. QUARTER 3 IMPROVEMENT PLAN 2016/17

The Committee received the regular update report to consider progress towards the delivery of the impacts set out in the 2016/17 Improvement Plan, focussing on the areas of under and good performance relevant to the Committee during Quarter 3.

Housing

The Service Manager (Customer Support) highlighted the effect of the triage approach in helping to manage 53% of residents' enquiries at the first point of contact. Although the target on the prevention of homelessness had been achieved, the outcomes of some longer-term cases (due to new legislation) would be reported in Quarter 4.

The Service Manager (Enterprise & Regeneration) advised that the Council was allocating additional resources and working with the Welsh Government (WG) to help achieve the target on the completion of loans for private sector home improvements.

The Capital Works Team Manager thanked the Committee for its support on the delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) where the majority of targets had been exceeded. Following positive progress on kitchen, bathroom and heating upgrades, the focus was shifting to external projects such as roof replacements and environmental workstreams.

Councillor David Cox requested the number of empty homes in the county and called for changes in legislation to address those standing vacant over a prolonged period. The Service Manager (Enterprise & Regeneration) agreed to provide a separate response. He spoke about various incentives aimed at bringing empty properties back into use including the Council's policy on Council Tax for empty homes.

On behalf of the tenants, Councillor Paul Shotton thanked the team for their work on the transformation of Pen-y-Lan Court in Connah's Quay. On the WHQS, he

was advised that no significant changes had been made to the six year plans previously shared with Members.

In response to praise from Councillor Ian Dunbar on the Council’s WHQS programme, the Capital Works Team Manager said that progress was continually improving. Councillor Helen Brown gave a reminder that the commitments given to tenants in the Housing Choices document were being exceeded.

In response to remarks from Councillors George Hardcastle and Ray Hughes, it was explained that discussions on garage sites at previous Member workshops were being used to identify appropriate sites for development within the Strategic Housing and Regeneration Programme. An update on the programme would be shared at a later stage.

Councillor Ray Hughes thanked the officer team for their assistance on a property adaptation for a disabled resident. He referred to the significant cost implications of converting bathrooms to wetrooms, pointing out that they could be used by able-bodied residents. The Capital Works Team Manager explained that the sheltered housing review was ongoing and he spoke about the complexities involved in balancing individual needs whilst maximising the limited funding.

Poverty

The Service Manager (Customer Support) reported that the co-location of the Welfare Rights team and Citizen Advice Service was proving beneficial in supporting residents to better manage their financial commitments. However, the absence of a key Council officer during the period had resulted in additional support from the Citizen Advice Service and this would be reflected in the Quarter 4 position.

As this was the last meeting of the Committee before the Election, Councillor George Hardcastle thanked the Chairman, the Chief Officer and her teams for their contributions. The Chairman also expressed his gratitude to all concerned.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted.

57. MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC AND PRESS IN ATTENDANCE

There was one member of the press and one member of the public in attendance.

(The meeting started at 10am and ended at 12.50pm)

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Chairman