



REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD AT PENALLTA HOUSE, YSTRAD MYNACH ON
TUESDAY, 13TH DECEMBER 2016 AT 5.30 P.M.

PRESENT:

Councillor D.T. Davies - Chair

Councillors:

M. Adams, C.J. Cuss, C. Elsbury, L. Harding, S. Kent, P. Marsden, M.J. Prew, Mrs E. Stenner

Cabinet Members:

N. George (Community and Leisure Services), T.J. Williams (Highways, Transportation and Engineering)

Together with:

C. Harry (Corporate Director - Communities), T. Stephens (Interim Head of Planning), M.S. Williams (Head of Community and Leisure Services), M. Headington (Acting Parks Manager), P. Rossiter (Energy and Water Officer), C. Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services), J. Williams (Solicitor) and R. Barrett (Committee Services Officer)

Also present:

Councillor C.J. Gordon

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Mrs E.M. Aldworth, J. Bevan, R.W. Gough, Mrs A. Leonard, Mrs D. Price and Cabinet Member K. James (Regeneration, Planning and Sustainable Development).

2. COUNCILLOR LEONARD

The Chair congratulated Councillor Arianna Leonard on her recent wedding and Members wished her health and happiness for the future.

3. COUNCILLOR BLACKMAN

The Chair announced that Councillor Mrs Anne Blackman had recently resigned from the Scrutiny Committee. Members requested that their appreciation to Councillor Blackman for her valued contribution to the work of the Committee be placed on record.

4. COUNCILLOR JAMES

In noting that Councillor Ken James (Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning and Sustainable Development) was currently unwell, Members asked that their best wishes for a speedy recovery be sent to him.

5. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest received at the commencement or during the course of the meeting.

6. MINUTES - 1ST NOVEMBER 2016

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 1st November 2016 (minute nos. 1 - 12) be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

A Member requested an update on the inspection schedule relating to drains and gullies as detailed in Minute No. 10 (Highway Asset Management Plan Endorsement), and it was confirmed that arrangements are in hand for this information to be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee.

7. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

There had been no matters referred to the Scrutiny Committee in accordance with the call-in procedure.

8. REPORT OF THE CABINET MEMBERS

The Scrutiny Committee received verbal reports from Councillors T.J. Williams and N. George and noted the contents of the report from Councillor K. James, which had been circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.

Councillor T.J. Williams (Cabinet Member for Highways, Transportation and Engineering) informed Members that the procurement exercise for the next Wales and Borders Rail Franchise and the South Wales Metro is progressing well. Welsh Government are currently assessing the bids and an announcement is expected in the next few weeks. The Scrutiny Committee were updated on Canal works at the historic Pontywaun aquaduct, and the Cabinet Member also outlined the work that have been undertaken to address the recent inclement weather as part of the Authority's Winter Maintenance Service Plan, including the development of strategic Highway Operations manuals which had been endorsed by Cabinet and Council.

Discussion took place regarding CADW and other funding sources in relation to the restoration of the Canal aquaduct at Pontywaun and it was agreed that a breakdown of funding would be circulated to Members.

Councillor N. George (Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services) referred to the report to be considered later that evening in relation to charges for waste collection containers. He urged the Committee to consider the issue very carefully in light of the financial climate and explained that should Members be minded to change the current charging policy, there would be a need to substitute this saving with alternative measures. The Cabinet Member also referred to the Management of Trees report due to be considered at the meeting and explained that the tree strategy proposed within the report will address a number of issues relating to the Authority's tree stock.

Members also noted the contents of the report circulated in advance of the meeting from Councillor K. James (Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Planning and Sustainable Development) which provided an update on developments within Town Centre Management, Urban Renewal, Destination and Events, Business Strategy and Funding, and Community Regeneration. Members discussed the recent Christmas Market weekends held across the county borough and were pleased to note the positive feedback arising from these events. Members were also encouraged to visit the annual Bargoed Ice Rink event taking place from 14th December to 18th December 2016.

9. REGENERATION AND ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Cath Forbes-Thompson (Interim Head of Democratic Services) presented the report, which outlined details of the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP).

Members were advised that the FWP includes all reports identified at the Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 1st November 2016 and outlines the reports planned for the period December 2016 to April 2017. Members were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet Work Programme as appended to the report and to suggest any changes prior to it being finalised and published on the Council's website.

It was noted that the next CCBC Car Parks Task and Finish Group has been scheduled for 16th January 2017 and therefore the Scrutiny Committee would be updated at their next meeting on 14th February 2017 regarding the status of the Car Parking Review report (currently scheduled for 28th March 2017). Members were also advised that arrangements are in hand to invite the Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent and the Chief Constable to a future Scrutiny Committee meeting to discuss parking enforcement matters.

Following discussion on its contents, it was agreed that the Forward Work Programme as appended to the report be approved and published.

10. CABINET REPORTS

None of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda had been called forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following reports.

11. THE MANAGEMENT OF TREES

The report sought the views of the Scrutiny Committee on the current tree management arrangements, the formal adoption of a tree strategy and a further review of resources (staff and budget) linked to this function.

It was explained that the management of trees on land that the Council is responsible for (approximately 260,000 trees) incorporates reactive works (responding to service requests), proactive inspections (scheduled safety inspections of tree stock) and arboricultural comments in relation to planning applications. The Authority currently employs one fully qualified Arboricultural Officer and a dedicated/trained tree maintenance team within the Parks Service. The number of service requests in relation to trees is increasing year on year, which has been largely attributed to a changing climate that can adversely affect trees.

Officers summarised the proactive tree inspection regime currently being undertaken by Council staff. Further details were contained within the report, which also highlighted weaknesses in the current regime where inspections are not being proactively undertaken. The report also outlined the minimum recommendations for proactive inspections (based on best practice guidelines from the National Tree Safety Group) if Members were minded to recommend the formal adoption of a draft tree strategy.

In addition to seeking the views of Members on current tree management arrangements and the draft tree strategy, the report also recommended that a review of the tree management budget be undertaken by Parks and other appropriate service areas, with a view to allocating sufficient and appropriate funding (circa £100K per annum) to this area. This will enable the Authority to arrange appropriate inspections and remedial works and could be achieved by the realignment of existing budgets. Upon completion of the review, a further report would be prepared for consideration by the Scrutiny Committee on how the strategy can be best delivered (prior to its presentation to Cabinet). To ensure the Authority complies with legal responsibilities, the report also proposed that consideration be given to establishing additional resources within the section to deal with inspections and subsequent maintenance work.

During the course of the ensuing debate, a Member queried whether additional funding would remove the inspection backlog and assist in the maintenance of proposed inspection timelines. Officers explained that all schools across the county borough have recently been inspected (utilising funding from Insurance/Risk Management and Education) and that responsibility for resultant works remains with the school, along with any cyclical inspections going forward. Officers confirmed that the management of tree maintenance in schools is monitored by the Council's Corporate Health and Safety Team. A Member queried what would happen to all the sites that have not been inspected, if the new strategy were to be approved. Officers explained that should the new policy be approved, inspections would commence from a 'zero base', and going forward these would be in line with the frequencies outlined within the draft strategy.

In response to a Member's query, Officers confirmed that a budget currently exists to utilise a private contractor where necessary for the inspection of trees. Discussion also took place regarding the limited staffing resources available to deal with tree maintenance issues and Members expressed a need for other organisations to improve their accountability in relation to the management of trees.

Having given due consideration to the report, Members noted its contents, including the current tree management arrangements and the proposed draft tree strategy. Members endorsed the review of the current tree management budget, including the exploration of additional resources, which will be the subject of a further report to the Scrutiny Committee and thereafter Cabinet.

12. ANNUAL PERFORMANCE REPORT - PLANNING

Consideration was given to the report, which advised Members of the contents of the Annual Performance Report (APR) for the Planning Service within the Planning and Regeneration Division, which encompasses the Development Management and the Strategic Development Plan Groups within the Council.

Officers explained that as a result of the 'Positive Planning' consultation in December 2013, Welsh Government proposed that stakeholders in the planning service should prepare an annual report to discuss how their organisation had performed against key indicators, identify what it had done well so that this can be shared with others, and what steps might be taken to address areas of performance in need of improvement. A draft version of the Council's APR, (a copy of which was appended to the Officer's report) was submitted at the end of October 2016.

Members were referred to the results of a customer satisfaction survey conducted by the Council in 2015-16 and included in the APR, which assessed the views of people that had received a planning application decision during the year. In general, the percentage of respondents who positively agreed with statements about the Planning Service were on a par with Wales as a whole. Stakeholder forums are being arranged with local applicants and agents to discuss the survey findings, and the Council will also participate in regional forums with national developers and agents. Where possible, changes/procedures will be introduced in response to these discussions in order to address and improve customer satisfaction levels.

The Scrutiny Committee noted a number of key findings within the APR detailing the Council's performance in 2015-16, covering the five key aspects of planning service delivery (plan-making, efficiency, quality, engagement and enforcement). Overall, 66% of all planning applications were determined within the required timescales (below the 80% Welsh target). However, significant improvements were made to this performance in the last two quarters of 2015-16, and performance currently stands at 95% (July to September 2016), with the majority of applications determined within 64 days. 247 enforcement cases were investigated in 2015-16, equating to 1.4 per 1000 population, and over the same period, 237 cases were resolved, taking on average 239 days to resolve each case. Both indicators are lower than the all-Wales average and the Council is currently reviewing its enforcement procedures to improve the time taken to resolve such cases.

In summary, the APR shows that there are areas for improvement in terms of the perception of the development management service by the public, but also that efficiency measures have been introduced, which are already delivering improvements. The main actions to address these areas include better targeting and monitoring of specific indicators and improved communication with relevant planning parties. Members were pleased to note the significant increase in planning applications determined within the required timescales, which had been achieved via a number of avenues, including weekly team meetings to identify more complex applications.

A Member referred to the Authority's shortage of a current housing land supply and Officers outlined the background to how the methodology was originally calculated and the circumstances which have led to this supply becoming diminished. Members were reminded that a Strategic Development Plan for the Cardiff Capital Region is being progressed, which will address the shortfall in the 5-year housing land supply through proactive action.

Following consideration and discussion, Members noted the contents of the report and the findings of the Annual Performance Report.

13. CHARGES FOR REPLACEMENT WASTE COLLECTION CONTAINERS

The report updated Members on the impact of the charging regime for replacement domestic waste containers and outlined options for future consideration. The report was prepared following a Member's request at the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee meeting of 28th June 2016.

It was explained that on 25th February 2015, as part of the Council's budget setting process and Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) strategy, Members decided to introduce a charge for all replacement domestic waste containers (excluding food waste caddies and those containers damaged by collection staff). Details of the current charging policy implemented on 1st April 2015 were contained within the report.

The MTFP saving associated with the charges totalled £60,000 and this was consequently removed from the waste strategy and operations budget. This saving has been met by a combination of income (£35,000 - £40,000 per annum) and a reduction in the number of bins issued (£30,000 - £35,000). Members noted the significant reduction in waste container requests as a result of the changes (from 10,403 in 2013/14 down to 1,721 in 2016/17 to date). The report also included examples of charging schemes across other local authorities.

Members were asked to consider whether they wished to retain the current charges (**Option 1**), re-introduce free replacement containers (**Option 2**) or offer reduced rate replacement containers (**Option 3**). It was suggested that if Members were minded to change the current charging policy, then they make a specific recommendation to Cabinet for this to be considered as part of the 2017/18 budget and MTFP process.

It was reiterated to Members that a change in the current charging policy would lead to the loss of income combined with an increase in costs and would require a review of the savings needed from the service as part of the MTFP process going forward. Examples of alternative savings that could be introduced to offset the £60,000 budget re-instatement were contained within the report, together with details of the potential staff costs arising from a change to the current charging policy.

Councillor Colin Gordon, who had made the original report request to the Scrutiny Committee, was then invited to the table to offer his comments on the matter. He thanked Members for considering his request and explained that he was seeking a review of the policy in view of the hardship that replacement waste container charges can occasionally cause to residents. He gave an example in his ward of where multiple containers have been stolen from one street at the same time or had been subject to arson damage, and outlined the distress of some elderly or vulnerable constituents who have to pay for a replacement. He appealed to the Scrutiny Committee to examine the policy to determine whether an alternative to the charges can be offered in certain circumstances.

During the course of the ensuing debate, Members acknowledged the impact that the current charging policy can have on some residents and expressed the need to seek a way forward whilst continuing to deliver savings. A Member queried whether affected residents could be given the option to pay the replacement charge in instalments as part of their council tax payments but Officers explained that this would not be a viable option due to the additional administrative costs involved.

In response to Members' queries, Officers explained that Community and Leisure Services currently hold a limited stock of second-hand waste containers that have been recovered or returned to them. Discussion took place on the feasibility of recycling or refurbishing this stock and offering these containers to residents at a lesser charge.

Having considered and discussed the report fully, it was moved and seconded that Option 1 (retain the current charges) be supported. By a show of hand (and in noting there were 2 against, this was agreed by the majority present.

Arising from the course of the debate, Members unanimously agreed that the option of issuing second-hand containers at a lower price be explored (recognising the fact that this stock may be limited and once exhausted then this may no longer be an option). Given the tight timescales before the 2017/18 budget is considered by Cabinet and Council in February 2017, it was agreed that the Chair would meet with the Cabinet Member for Community and Leisure Services and relevant Officers to agree a way forward, which would be circulated to the Scrutiny Committee Members in January 2017 for consultation.

RESOLVED that the current charging policy for replacement waste collection containers be retained and the option of issuing second-hand containers at a lower price be explored further by relevant Members and Officers.

14. WELLBEING OBJECTIVE: CARBON MANAGEMENT – REDUCE OUR CARBON FOOTPRINT (SIX MONTH PROGRESS UPDATE) – 2016/17

Consideration was given to the report, which highlighted key progress against Wellbeing Objective IO4 – Carbon Management: Reduce Our Carbon Footprint for the period April 2016 to September 2016.

Members were reminded that the Local Government Measure 2009 requires all local authorities in Wales to set and publish a set of Improvement Objectives. Additionally the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places new requirements on the Council to meet the seven national well-being goals ushered in by this legislation. At the beginning of 2016/17, it was recommended that progress of the Wellbeing Objective: Carbon Management: Reduce our carbon footprint would be reported to the Regeneration and Environment Scrutiny Committee for regular performance monitoring.

In line with the Carbon Reduction Strategy the Wellbeing Objective focuses on 4 priorities to reduce emissions: Good Housekeeping, Invest to Save, Design and Asset Management, and Renewable Technology. Officers outlined the key achievements and progress made across this Objective at the six-month point, with details of the actions taken against each of these priorities outlined in the report and the appended scorecard.

Through the various actions outlined in the report, a positive improvement is evident in raising awareness and training activity as part of Good Housekeeping practice. The Authority continues to target key individuals in schools and reasonable progress has been made across all areas. Council staff have also been engaged via media formats and free Welsh Water home audits. It is believed that targets on the 'Invest to Save' scheme by the end of quarter 4 will be out-performed due to the strong advances made in the first 2 quarters, with Ty Penallta being a significant project that will introduce LED lighting to the building.

The progress made to date this year has already resulted in carbon, cost, and energy savings. Guidance has been issued to highlight the importance of heating and lighting smaller sections of buildings for non-occasional use, which assist in the prevention of excessive consumption, and several medium-scale solar PV installations have been identified for the Authority to consider.

Officers explained that consideration is being given to the use of green energy for future generations, including the use of electric vehicle charging points, and solar panels to all schools. Future reports on this matter will be brought back to the Scrutiny Committee. In view of the key progress made to date, Officers proposed that the Objective be judged as 'partly successful' at the six-month point.

In noting the progress made to date, Members welcomed the introduction of LED lighting at Penallta House and the use of new technology in achieving this Wellbeing Objective. Reference was made to two indicators that had not been achieved in the first six months (monthly school email advice and Carbon Group meetings). Officers explained that this was due to staff shortages and a need for workload prioritisation but that this should improve for the final two quarters.

Following consideration of the report, Members noted its contents and the progress made to date in meeting the actions set out in the action plan, and unanimously agreed with the Officer's judgement of "partially successful" against the Improvement Objective at the six-month point.

The meeting closed at 7.04 p.m.

Approved as a correct record and subject to any amendments or corrections agreed and recorded in the minutes of the meeting held on 14th February 2017, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR