



ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES OF THE MULTI-LOCATIONAL MEETING HELD IN PENALLTA HOUSE
AND VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS ON TUESDAY, 7TH FEBRUARY 2023 AT 5.30 P.M.**

PRESENT:

Councillor D.T. Davies MBE - Chair
Councillor A. Hussey - Vice-Chair

Councillors:

M. A. Adams, R. Chapman, C.J. Cuss, N. Dix, C. Elsbury, M. Evans, A. Gair, S. Kent,
D.W.R. Preece, H. Pritchard, S. Williams, C. Wright.

Cabinet Members:

Councillors C. Morgan (Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces)

Together with:

M.S. Williams (Corporate Director for Economy and Environment), R. Hartshorn (Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services), M. Headington (Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager), J. Davies (Parks and Countryside Operations Manager), M. Jacques (Scrutiny Officer), S. Hughes (Committee Services Officer), J. Lloyd (Committee Services Officer), R. Barrett (Minute Taker)

RECORDING, FILMING AND VOTING ARRANGEMENTS

The Chair reminded those present that the meeting was being live-streamed and recorded and would be made available following the meeting via the Council's website – [Click Here to View](#) Members were advised that voting on decisions would be taken via Microsoft Forms.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors A. Leonard and J.E. Roberts.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

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

3. MINUTES – 6TH DECEMBER 2022

It was moved and seconded that the minutes of the meeting held on 6th December 2022 be approved as a correct record and by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation

(and in noting there were 12 for, 0 against and 2 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee held on 6th December 2022 (minute nos. 1 – 7) be approved as a correct record.

4. CALL-IN PROCEDURE

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

5. ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME

Mark Jacques (Scrutiny Officer) presented the report, which outlined details of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme (FWP) for the period February 2023 to March 2023.

Members were asked to consider the FWP alongside the Cabinet work programme and suggest any changes prior to publication on the Council's website. The Scrutiny Committee noted the details of the reports scheduled for forthcoming meetings, with it noted that a request had been received to reschedule the Decarbonisation Action Plan report (originally listed for 21st March 2023) to the subsequent meeting on 2nd May 2023.

It was moved and seconded that the report recommendation with the inclusion of the aforementioned change be approved. By way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 13 for, 0 against and 0 abstentions) this was unanimously agreed.

RESOLVED that subject to the Decarbonisation Action Plan report being rescheduled to 2nd May 2023, the Forward Work Programme as appended to the meeting papers be published on the Council's website.

6. CABINET REPORTS

It was confirmed that there had been no requests for any of the Cabinet reports listed on the agenda to be brought forward for discussion at the meeting.

REPORTS OF OFFICERS

Consideration was given to the following report.

7. GRASS CUTTING REGIMES

The Cabinet Member for Waste, Leisure and Green Spaces presented the report, which sought the views of the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee, prior to a further report being presented to Cabinet in relation to grass cutting regimes across the county borough and proposals to enhance and promote biodiversity.

During the national lockdown in March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many services across the Council were paused, including grass cutting regimes, and both the

national and local lockdowns forced residents to interact with their surroundings in a new way, with the local environment and other public open space becoming a source of appreciation and benefitting residents' physical and mental wellbeing. In Summer 2021, a consultation exercise was undertaken with local members to identify suitable areas within their respective wards which could be allowed to flourish during Summer 2022. These spaces were marked with either a wooden plaque or a stencil on the ground thanking residents for allowing the dedicated areas to grow into eco-friendly spaces and allowed to produce abundant flowers, pollen seed and habitat for local wildlife. The outcome of the consultation exercise along with a list of areas was reported to the Environment and Sustainability Scrutiny Committee on 26th October 2021 and subsequently Cabinet.

On 24th October 2022, an all-Member Seminar took place which included three detailed presentations, one in relation to the council's Biodiversity Duty, the second relating to the Gwent-wide 'Nature isn't Neat' project, which is part of the Gwent Green Grid partnership and a third which provided an update on progress made during the 2022 growing season.

Members were referred to the potential savings of £59k identified as a result of implementing the proposals contained within the report and were asked to note the views of consultees reflected in the report, together with the commendation from Welsh naturalist and TV personality Iolo Williams. The Cabinet Member also thanked Officers and Members for their hard work in the preparation of this report, together with those Members who have participated in the process by providing their valuable feedback.

The Scrutiny Committee discussed the report and a Member highlighted areas he had previously suggested within his ward which could be allowed to revert to nature, but had been advised would not be suitable under the new regime. Mr Mike Headington (Green Spaces and Transport Services Manager) asked the Member to contact him following the meeting with details of the sites in question so that they could be re-examined for consideration under the new proposals. A query was received around the collection of left-over grass cuttings following mowing activities, and Mr Headington gave assurances that such areas would be left in a tidy manner following each cut.

Clarification was sought on the practicalities of ground maintenance at the sites identified in Appendix 1 arising from the proposed grass-cutting regimes, particularly at Blackwood Showfield and Wattsville Lower Football Pitch, with concerns raised that dog walker access around the periphery of these areas might be impeded. Mr Jonathan Davies (Parks and Countryside Operations Manager) provided assurances that adequate space around these sports fields would be maintained for people to exercise their dogs.

Discussion took place regarding the "Nature Isn't Neat" initiative and some Members referenced negative feedback received during the consultation process. Mr Headington explained that the Council will ensure that areas are cut around the edges and kept tidy, and that signage would be put in place to advise residents of the new scheme and to avoid these areas feeling neglected. Mr Mark Williams (Corporate Director Economy and Environment) also acknowledged that not all residents would approve of the new grass-cutting proposals and highlighted the challenge of pleasing all residents in terms of grass cutting, but he hoped that a happy medium had been reached with the sites within the report which had been identified following consultation.

In response to a query regarding the arrangements for collecting free wild-flower seeds, it was confirmed that these could be collected from the Parks office in Ty Bargoed. A Member asked if advice could be given upon collection regarding the sowing of seeds and if consideration needed to be given to biodiversity considerations to make sure they are distributed in the appropriate areas. Mr Rob Hartshorn (Head of Public Protection, Community and Leisure Services) confirmed that the Council had followed the advice of their ecologists and that all seeds were carefully sourced and indigenous to the UK. One Member asked if there was any scope for community involvement in the management of

the rewilding sites that had been identified in the report and Mr Headington confirmed that such opportunities existed and would be encouraged. In response to a comment around responsible and appropriate scattering of seeds, it was confirmed that such advice would be offered to Members and residents when the seed packs are collected.

A Member asked if consideration had been given to the possibility of allowing natural surroundings to develop without the need for any intervention, and Mr Hartshorn confirmed that this was the overall aspiration of the new approach, with the Council moving away from formal grass-cutting regimes and with an emphasis on minimal maintenance. Another Member was pleased to see that areas within his ward had been included in the list of areas identified to flourish during the 2023 growing season, having made several requests in this regard, and he requested that his thanks to everyone involved in the preparation of the report and its proposals be recorded.

Following consideration of the report and having noted its comments, it was moved and seconded that the following recommendations be forwarded to Cabinet for approval, and by way of Microsoft Forms and verbal confirmation (and in noting there were 13 for, 1 against and 0 abstentions) this was agreed by the majority present.

RECOMMENDED to Cabinet that :-

- (i) the approach adopted during the 2021/22 cutting season be adopted as the standard going forward in relation to the Council's highway verges and by-pass routes where mowing is kept to a minimum, in accordance with Traffic Wales guidance;
- (ii) the Council shows a commitment to the UK wide 'No Mow May' campaign and formal grass cutting does not commence until June with the exception of designated areas to include: visibility splays and sight lines on highways; margins and access on footways/cycle routes; sports grounds; urban areas such as housing estates, municipal parks, older person accommodation, cemeteries; play/recreational public open spaces, which are maintained at the current cutting frequencies;
- (iii) Cabinet endorse the initial list of areas nominated by both relevant officers and local members within their respective wards as set out in Appendix 1 of the report which could be allowed to flourish during the summer period;
- (iv) the Authority continues to provide wild flower seed packs to community groups on request as set out in Paragraph 5.11 of the report.

The meeting closed at 5.59 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 21st March 2023, they were signed by the Chair.

CHAIR