



To/
Councillor David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery and Performance

BY EMAIL

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Overview & Scrutiny

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4th October 2019

Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Performance Panel from the meeting on 25th September 2019. The letter concerns the Natural Environment Overview the Panel received.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

On the 25th September 2019 the Panel met to discuss the Terms of Reference of the new Natural Environment Performance Panel and the Overview of current Council commitments in relation to this. The discussion focussed mainly on activity over the last 3 years, but we are aware that Swansea Council has been doing work in relation to this for the last 50-60 years.

The Panel are grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. The Panel do have some thoughts and observations to share with you.

We were told that 80% of Swansea is green space and is extremely diverse with over 50% of the County having significant ecological value. Although there is protection for the environment via a range of site designations and legislation, biodiversity loss and species extinction is a challenge and a risk and more awareness raising is needed.

Recent legislation such as the Resilient Wales Goal in the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 requires specific actions by bodies and biodiversity should be embedded in all policies so it is everyone's business. As a Council we need to submit a Section 6 plan and submit a plan on progress to Welsh Government every 3 years.

We feel as a Council we are amongst leaders in relation to natural environment maintenance and enhancement. There is a Working with Nature objective within the Public Services Board Well-being Plan and we have a new biodiversity Corporate Priority in the Corporate Plan. However, much of the work which is required and desired cannot be undertaken due to resource restrictions.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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We heard how recognition of ecosystem services and their role (e.g. trees as flood defence) is rising, along with the benefits of green spaces on well-being, both physically and mentally. It was pleasing to hear that your team is working on a green infrastructure strategy which looks at nature based solutions going forward, we would be grateful to be able to contribute to this at the appropriate time. However, time is of the essence and current Council owned land needs to be immediately managed appropriately and sustainably to ensure there is no biodiversity loss in the interim. For example, connectivity between sites is imperative and allows wildlife to move whenever required and needs to be incorporated into all current physical planning. This Council owns a lot of land throughout Swansea such as parks, education sites, cemeteries etc and it is vital that the most is made of these sites in relation to biodiversity.

We discussed farm land and although it was recognised that some farmland does not hold masses of biodiversity, its contribution to nature must not be underestimated. Hedgerows, trees and the value of peat and its role in carbon absorption should be valued. We were glad to hear the team agree with this and the same applies to common land. You told us that where developments impact farmland, as many natural features as possible are maintained. We feel all green space is beneficial to people and nature.

We were told how the Nature Conservation Team have been mapping land use with use of data from the University and South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre (SEWBREC) which collates, manages and disseminates biodiversity information. The team have also been ward mapping to identify areas of ecological significance in each ward and will be increasing this as resources allow. We feel this is very important as each ward member should be aware of what is important in their ward so they are better placed to maintain and enhance it.

The issue of planning came up as there is some concern that this may be contributing to biodiversity loss. We were assured that the Nature Conservation Team work very closely with the Planning Services and the Planning Service are passionate about this issue and do whatever they can to maintain and enhance biodiversity within the planning guidelines. Some issues arise outside of the planning process, sometimes prior or post planning permission. For example, tree preservation orders are ignored or land cleared before or after surveys.

The real problem here it seems, is a lack of capacity relating to enforcement not a lack of will. This resource issue is not just limited to staffing levels within the Council and other relevant agencies, but the lack of consequence within the legislation. We need additional support to enforce the rights of nature under planning ecology enforcement. We will be writing to the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs to lobby for stronger enforcement and more severe penalties for damaging biodiversity or contributing to its loss. We will also be including in the letter the problem of lack of funding. We as a Council are passionate about these issues but cannot do it alone. Welsh Government need to provide funding for us to do the work we are so keen to do.

You told us of the new Townhill Campus project as an example of a successful green development where as many trees as possible were maintained. We are pleased to hear that policy is turning into action with demonstrable outcomes. This momentum needs to continue and increase. There needs to be a complete culture shift relating to how we think about the environment. All staff need to look for opportunities to improve green spaces and be environmentally friendly wherever possible.

This led onto a discussion around Section 106 agreements and their use. These should be used to enhance biodiversity and there needs to be a discussion about the suitability of the amounts requested. You said you are available for discussions on this issue.

We heard that Community Councils can play a significant role in ecology enhancement. Many are already leaders in relation to nature conservation, but some may not have the specific knowledge around what they can do to help. We must support Community Councils and all community engagement such as volunteers to assist us in this task. The issue of training was raised and you suggested that internal training which will be developed for staff, could be offered externally so everyone can benefit from this knowledge and we can create a Swansea wide approach to biodiversity enhancement. This sounds encouraging, but again there is a resource issue over who can develop and deliver this training.

It was interesting to hear that some churches have now signed up to be 'Eco-Churches' and we are interested to see how this progresses. We do feel that more recycling bins could be placed around Swansea to assist with the issue of litter. Leading on from this, we discussed littering and schools and a concern that if young people are not looking after their local environment it will be hard for them to care about their global environment. We will contact the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning and Skills to raise the issue.

We were told about the draft green infrastructure policy which has been developed along with Natural Resources Wales and a leading consultant. We are pleased that this is being taken seriously and understand that consultation and engagement with the public will play a large part in this and this is most welcome. We look forward to seeing how green infrastructure develops in the Swansea and hope Swansea continues to be a leader in relation to this with a vibrant and biodiversity filled City Centre.

You made the point in the meeting that environment issues should not be limited to the Nature Conservation Team. We completely agree with this and services including but not limited to Events, Procurement, Highways, Housing, Education and Estates all have vital and major parts to play in relation to biodiversity maintenance and enhancement. Not only is the team too small to cope with the volume of work required, the issue of nature conservation should be built into very basic policies of all teams with no monitoring by the Nature Conservation Team required – like safeguarding and as stated previously, biodiversity is everyone's business.

We were told about a joint project with Natural Resources Wales 'Our Nature, Our Future' and we are pleased that this kind of collaborative work is being undertaken. Sharing knowledge and best practice is the best way to achieve outcomes in relation to nature. However, it does raise the question of wider and more formal collaborative work. Could there be a regional approach to biodiversity? There are many areas of Council work which are scrutinised, advised on or developed at a regional level such as education, regeneration and even transport. It would seem that a regional panel/body looking at collaborative ways to improve biodiversity across South West Wales could share skills, knowledge and resource.

You discussed the next steps which included raising awareness internally and externally, securing additional resources and developing plans and reports. We need to move past the ongoing conflict of ecological value vs financial value and see them as the same thing. We need to deal with internal resistance to change in relation to this if we are to succeed and have all Directors embed this thinking in their plans. Despite some part time temporary external grant funding for a Planning Ecologist, there is still no money from the Council for this role or the Section 6 Officer role. We hope this changes considering the Council have declared a climate emergency.

The Panel will continue to look at issues relevant to the natural environment throughout the year and welcome you to attend any meeting to contribute to the discussion and ideas which arise. The Panel do feel strongly that the issue of biodiversity loss is an emergency and should be treated as such. There can no longer be an economic priority over ecology and we hope to see swift and substantial progress on the issue in the immediate future.

Any thoughts you have are welcome but could you respond to the following query by 25th October 2019.

1. Could there be a regional approach to biodiversity? There are many areas of Council work which are scrutinised, advised on or developed at a regional level such as education, regeneration and even transport. It would seem that a regional panel/body looking at collaborative ways to improve biodiversity across South West Wales could share skills, knowledge and resources.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Jones

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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