



## Report of the Cabinet Member for Delivery & Operations

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 1 September 2020

### Impact Report: Scrutiny Inquiry into Natural Environment

<b>Purpose:</b>	To help the Scrutiny Panel to assess the impact of the scrutiny inquiry report into Natural Environment
<b>Content:</b>	<p>This report deals with three questions related to the impact of the inquiry:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. What has changed since the report was presented to Cabinet?</li><li>2. Have the agreed recommendations been implemented?</li><li>3. What has been the impact of the scrutiny inquiry?</li></ol>
<b>Councillors are being asked to:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consider the contents of the report</li><li>• Reach conclusions about the impact of the inquiry</li></ul>
<b>Lead Councillor:</b>	Councillor David Hopkins, Cabinet Member for Delivery & Operations
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	Paul Meller
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<b>Finance Officer:</b>	Aimee Dyer
<b>Access to Services Officer:</b>	Rhian Miller

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report was due to be considered at the Panel meeting originally scheduled for 31<sup>st</sup> March 2020. It focuses on progress over the period 2019/20 and is therefore largely unaffected by recent events. Covid-19 has however delayed the award of certain grants for 20/21. This in turn has affected the implementation of those recommendations set out in the Action Plan which were reliant upon the appointment of specific grant-funded project officers.

- 1.2 The Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Panel undertook an in-depth inquiry during 2018/19 and presented its final report with conclusions and recommendation to Cabinet on 21 March 2019. The Inquiry looked at what Swansea Council should do to maintain and enhance its natural environment and biodiversity, and, in so doing, promote the resilience of eco-systems? This final scrutiny report is attached at **Appendix A**.
- 1.3 Cabinet made a decision on the Scrutiny recommendations at its meeting on 18 July 2019. The Cabinet Member response and original action plan agreed by Cabinet are attached at **Appendix B**.
- 1.4 The reporting timeline of the inquiry was as follows:

Commenced	26 Mar 2018
Agreed by the Scrutiny Programme Committee	11 Feb 2019
Presented to Cabinet	21 Mar 2019
Cabinet Response agreed	18 July 2019

- 1.5 The final stage of the Scrutiny Inquiry process is the follow up. It is at this point that usually the original Panel reconvenes in order to assess the impact of the work. With the establishment of a Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel following the inquiry, the Panel is now dealing with the follow up.
- 1.6 The purpose of this report is to assist the Panel as it seeks to answer the following three questions, each of which will be dealt with as follows:
- What has changed since the report was presented to Cabinet?
  - Have the agreed recommendations been implemented?
  - What has been the impact of the scrutiny inquiry?

## **2. What has changed since the report was presented to Cabinet?**

- 2.1 Since the Inquiry concluded the following changes have taken place (N.B. italics indicate changes as a direct result of the Inquiry):
- The Council's first Section 6 Biodiversity Duty Monitoring Report was submitted to Welsh Government in Dec 2019. It provided an overview of the key biodiversity duty actions and initiatives that the Council has undertaken over the last 2-3 years. Work has now commenced on the Council's Section 6 Action Plan for 2020-22.
  - The biodiversity duty actions listed under the Corporate Objective for Maintaining and Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity form the basis of the Council's Section 6 Action Plan. *This has been expanded to incorporate the recommendations of the Scrutiny Inquiry*
  - Since the adoption of the new Corporate Objective for Biodiversity, there has been a requirement for the preparation of quarterly and annual progress reports relating to delivery of the steps/actions set out under this Objective, and the associated Performance Indicators as part of the

Council's business planning and monitoring processes. The first annual report was submitted to Council in December 2019.

- *To promote engagement in, and shared responsibility for, delivering the new Corporate Biodiversity Objective, a Corporate Biodiversity Working Group was set up in August 2019 up to help review, monitor and report on progress in delivering the steps /actions listed under the Objective.*
- In June 2019 Swansea Council agreed a Notice of Motion declaring a climate emergency and has committed to a number of actions to work towards reducing the Council's carbon footprint. A Climate Emergency Action Plan is in the process of being drafted and in Feb 2020 the terms of reference of the Corporate Biodiversity Working Group were broadened to include climate change and sustainable development.
- *A Scrutiny Performance Panel for the Natural Environment and Biodiversity was established in Sept 2019 to follow up on the Inquiry, provide ongoing scrutiny of the Council's progress in meeting the requirements of the legislation and its new Corporate Biodiversity Objective.*
- In collaboration with NRW a draft Swansea Central Area Green Infrastructure Strategy and Green Factor Tool has been prepared and consulted upon. The Strategy seeks to create, connect and improve areas of green space making the city more biodiverse and resilient to the impacts of climate change. Key aims are improving the multi-functionality, ecological resilience and connectivity of urban green spaces; helping to improve the health and well-being of both people and wildlife; and also improving prosperity by encouraging visitors to stay longer and enjoy the city centre.
- From April 2020 all Service Plans are required to demonstrate how the respective Service areas are contributing to meeting the Council's Corporate Biodiversity objective.
- *Biodiversity clauses are now included in service level agreement, licences, leases, etc.*

### **3. Have the agreed recommendations been implemented?**

3.1 In responding to the Inquiry an action plan was drawn up showing what steps would be taken to implement all of the scrutiny recommendations agreed by Cabinet.

3.2 The table at **Appendix C** shows an updated action plan showing progress against each recommendation and specifically:

- the Cabinet decision in respect of each recommendation
- the action taken since the Cabinet response on 18 July 2019 / action outstanding and clearly marked as COMPLETE / INCOMPLETE together with any relevant explanatory statements
- the responsible officer(s)
- timescales involved

#### **4. What has been the impact of the scrutiny inquiry?**

- 4.1 Many of the recommended actions of the Scrutiny Inquiry were already planned in one form or another in order to meet the Council's Biodiversity Duty. For example, the statutory requirement to produce a Section 6 Action Plan and appointment of specific project officers, whilst activities relating to improving public awareness of biodiversity issues/opportunities, providing training sessions, working with volunteers, etc are embedded in officer duties.
- 4.2 The Inquiry has helped focus on specific tasks/projects that could be carried out in the short/medium term (quick wins). However, a significant number of recommendations relate to tasks that will remain ongoing in the future long after the current time/grant limited projects have been completed. Dealing with natural environment matters is not a task and finish process but a continually evolving lifelong obligation.
- 4.3 Additional actions that have been achieved or are planned to be achieved as a direct result of the Inquiry recommendations include the establishment of a Corporate Biodiversity Working Group to help embed biodiversity duties across the Council, inserting biodiversity clauses in agreements, and the establishment of various monitoring/scrutiny mechanisms.
- 4.4. However, by far the most significant impact of the Scrutiny Inquiry has been the increased profile it has given to natural resources and biodiversity as well as the work of the Natural Environment Section both across the Council and with external stakeholders. The Inquiry's endorsement of the planned and future work of the Section has empowered officers and put them in a much stronger position to deliver projects/improvements and identify finance in support of the biodiversity agenda.
- 4.5 Costs are now increasingly being shared across services; planning ecology work is to be carried out in house subject to resource availability; and contributions to the SEWBREC agreement have been negotiated. Biodiversity matters are now discussed across all service areas from the outset of projects, proposals and events, whereas previously they would have been an after-thought or possibly not considered at all.
- 4.6. Finally, funding from grants and other sources has been used to employ an additional part-time Planning Ecologist for a temporary period of 2 years. They have been in post since December 2019 and extended their hours in April 2020 to take on the part time role of the Local Nature Partnership Officer.

#### **5. Legal Implications**

- 5.1 The Council must comply with the statutory obligations for biodiversity and natural resource management contained in the Well Being of Future Generations Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 as detailed in this report.

## **6. Financial Implications**

6.1 There are no specific financial implications raised by this report.

## **7. Equality & Engagement Implications**

7.1 There are no specific equality and engagement implications raised by this report.

**Background papers:** None

### **Appendices:**

**Appendix A** – Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Report:  
<https://swansea.gov.uk/scrutinyreportslibrary>

**Appendix B** – Cabinet Report – Response to Environment Scrutiny Inquiry (18 July 2019)  
<https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=124&MId=8501&Ver=4&LLL=0>

**Appendix C** – Updated Action Plan on Implementation of Agreed Scrutiny Recommendation