



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment
Enhancement & Infrastructure
Management**

**Councillor David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery &
Operations**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

*Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:*

*Direct Line:
Linell Uniongyrochol:*

*e-Mail
e-Bost:*

*Our Ref
Ein Cyf:*

*Your Ref
Eich Cyf:*

*Date
Dyddiad:*

Scrutiny

01792 637257

scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

NE/2019-20/5

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Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Panel on 1 September 2020. It is regarding COVID-19 impacts, issues, and environmental lessons; and the recent train derailment at Llangennech and pollution risk.

Dear Councillor,

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 1 September

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting on 1 September 2020 to discuss service specific impacts of COVID-19 and environmental lessons. We also thank lead officers for their input to support the session, answering questions, and their contribution to the debate.

We are writing to you both, as relevant Cabinet Members, to reflect on the discussion, share the views of the Panel, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response.

Being our first Panel for many months due to the pandemic, we wanted to hear from you about the experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and effects on relevant service areas, specific impacts on the natural environment & biodiversity, as well as environmental lessons and opportunities. For example, we have seen:

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- reduced air pollution from vehicular traffic;
- public reconnection with nature / wildlife;
- more active travel such as walking and cycling;
- increased use of parks and open spaces (valuable to improving mental health & wellbeing); and;
- less cutting and weed management in parks and roadside verges etc.

The Panel is concerned that any positives / gains are not lost, and that the experiences help to inform Council actions on biodiversity, habitats and climate change.

It was useful to discuss this with both of you as main cabinet members; although we would maintain that, the maintenance and enhancement of the natural environment and biodiversity ought to be everyone's responsibility.

We heard from you and officers that:

- There have been some beneficial impacts on the environment from the COVID-19 experience, mainly resulting from the lockdown of society with reduced activity, less travel, more use of outdoor spaces. Unsurprisingly that has meant reduced levels of air pollution, however like other benefits, whilst there has been a difference, it is uncertain whether these will be long lasting as society reopens, recovers, and returns to levels that are more 'normal'. We are yet to find out what the new 'normal' level is as the pandemic continues, and is difficult to forecast. Whilst there may be less travel, significant reductions in public transport usage may actually be contributing to more car usage.
- COVID-19 has highlighted the value of local green spaces and we have seen a greater appreciation of parks, gardens, and places for walking and cycling for people's health and wellbeing. The Council wants to invest in green spaces, and the relevant Policy Development Committee could do some work on this to help us achieve a greener environment.
- The pandemic has impacted service delivery and resources within the Council. A reduction in parks maintenance, grass cutting, and weed management has been welcomed by many as helping to support nature and increase biodiversity, but criticised by others who expect the Council to cut back on over-growth and keep things neat and tidy. From a highways point of view, safety is paramount, and cutting would be necessary; however there may be other areas which could be left to develop naturally. However, it is a challenge to reconcile the differing public views, and would need careful consideration and perhaps specific community consultation. It is also hard to measure the impact of what has happened in the last six months.

- The use of glyphosate to control weeds remains the most cost-effective method of treatment, given the mileage of footways in the city and county; however, usage is kept to a minimum with spraying only on hard surfaces. Alternatives have been looked at. Community action is welcomed if people wish to take responsibility locally; however, any method other than spraying is very labour intensive and not financially viable. Any clear desire from individuals or communities to opt out of spraying would also be considered.
- There has been a significant increase in the number of cycle users, with some of our most popular cycle paths seeing around a six-fold increase in volume. Again, whilst we may see more regular users, it remains to be seen whether the high levels of usage seen will be sustained in the long-term as individuals return to cars and public transport. However, the growth in cycling has to be supported and facilitated.
- Despite the temporary suspension of bulky waste collection, there has not been a particular problem or increase in fly tipping during the lockdown. Where it does occur, it may not be on Council land. If it is not on Council land it is not the Council's responsibility to clear the waste, which is something that not all members of the public realise. You acknowledged this sort of fly tipping can be a particular problem in more rural areas. All waste collection services are currently operating as normal.

Main points from our discussion and views:

- The Panel accepts there may be differences in public opinion about cutting back or leaving areas to naturally grow and mature, but given the Council's stated priorities the public should be informed so that there is better understanding about how this will enhance the natural environment, habitats, and biodiversity. There are many examples of positive action taken by governments concerning our health, wellbeing and safety, despite opposition in some quarters e.g. seatbelts, plastic bag charges, and smoking bans. The Council has to take a firm view and maintain its position if we are to see a real difference being made in support of nature. Clearly where there is a highway safety issue then we accept the need to remove overgrowth, and where weed growth is perhaps unsightly, and is perceived to give a poor image of our city to visitors at key entrance points, or could be presenting a flood risk, e.g. weeds in gutters.
- The Council may need to undertake specific consultation and engagement with residents to both raise awareness of our environment and biodiversity objectives as well as gathering views that will help us to balance actions, and inform the Council's policy direction about future weed and verge management.
- Our own Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry highlights the view that we may have gone too far with cutting and spraying and must redress the balance in favour of the natural world; to learn to live with, not control, nature. What we do is not just a matter for those involved in parks management and maintenance or highways maintenance, but requires a clear policy direction from the Council, that educates our communities

about why this is so important but also brings people along with it through co-production.

- As well as having general aims to green the city, the Council should be looking at access and fairness across the city and county so that all communities, including our most deprived areas, have quality green spaces to enjoy. The period of lockdown has highlighted the need for green spaces to be available and accessible to all parts of the community.
- There are examples where other Welsh Councils e.g. Monmouthshire, appear to be doing more in support of the natural environment and biodiversity. We should be looking at policy making in other parts of Wales (and beyond) to see what can be achieved in Swansea that we are not already doing to meet our Section 6 biodiversity duty and wider objectives. We would also encourage the Council to engage with organisations such as Plantlife who can provide expert information and advice that could help us develop a more nature-friendly approach to our management of green spaces in our parks and gardens and roadside verges, and reap the benefits. We have had direct contact from others, including the West Glamorgan Branch of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust who urge us to reduce mowing regimes as it can make a big difference to pollinators, and increase wildlife-rich habitats, striking a better balance within parks and open spaces for sport and recreation and for nature. Members reflected on their own experiences, including seeing an increase in local wildlife with birds, insects and hedgehogs becoming common sightings during lockdown; but since grass mowing has recommenced these sightings have reduced.
- The Council's wildflower planting programme draws much interest but is perhaps misunderstood. We recognise that it involves deliberate cultivation, treatment, and planting; and are not just areas left to flower naturally. We felt that the Council could explore opportunities for more natural meadows, which did emerge during lockdown with the suspension of mowing / cutting, as opposed to deliberately treated & cultivated wildflower areas, as well as further reduce the use of herbicides.
- Whilst more cycle usage is welcome, again we asked whether there was a clear policy direction. Members reflected on issues from cyclists and walkers competing for the same space, and the behaviour of some cyclists that deters walkers who fear for their safety. There should be signs and better protocols for cyclists to adhere to, ensuring the safety of less mobile pedestrians such as elderly members of the public or children playing. You undertook to look into our query on whether there was a specific speed limit on our cycleways, including the foreshore.
- We will continue discussion on weed management, and the use of glyphosate, at a future Panel meeting given our concerns about its impact on human health and wildlife. Engagement with areas where there is a Community Council, which may have the budget, may also help the Council to arrive at alternative weed management solutions. For example, Mumbles Community Council has recently employed a Natural Environment Engagement Officer.

Pollution Risk – Train Derailment at Llangennech and Diesel Spillage

We were able to ask about the emerging situation with the train derailment at Llangennech, fire and extent of diesel spillage into the Loughor Estuary and environmental / ecological impact. As you know, it is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and home to many species of birds and other wildlife.

We noted that it is too early to comment as assessments were still being carried out by relevant lead agencies, such as Natural Resources Wales, Public Health Wales, and our own lead pollution control officer. It would be appreciated if you were able to provide any more information about this incident and impact.

Your Response

In your response, we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically address the following recommendations:

- The Panel would encourage you to reflect on current practice, and consider developing new policy in relation to parks / grass cutting, weed and verge management, informed by necessary research, consultation and community engagement, including practice elsewhere that would help to deliver Council aims and objectives in relation to the nature conservation and biodiversity. A small joint working group of members, including a member of the Panel, and officers may be a good way forward, which engages relevant organisations such as Plantlife.
- We would also ask you to consider how the gains over the last six months during the pandemic – the increased level of human engagement with the natural environment evidenced - could be maintained and enhanced.

Please provide your joint response to this and any other comments about our letter by 26 October. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Panel meeting.

Finally, the Panel will shortly be developing its work plan for the coming year and we will be in touch to invite you to future Panel meetings. The Scrutiny Programme Committee has agreed, in principle, to increase the frequency of the Natural Environment Performance Panel from quarterly to meeting every two months. This is a reflection of the growing seriousness of issues around biodiversity and climate change and their importance, as well as recognition of the Council's corporate well-being objective on maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity. Additional Panel time will enable better monitoring of Council performance against objectives, targets and action plans, and the role it is playing, as well as examine specific natural environmental issues.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR PETER JONES

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

✉ cllr.peter.jones@swansea.gov.uk