



**To/
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/2019-20/6

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Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Panel on 1 September 2020. It is regarding the follow up on the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Recommendations and impact.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel – 1 September

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting on 1 September 2020 to present progress with the implementation of scrutiny recommendations following the in-depth inquiry on the Natural Environment. We also thank lead officers for their input to support the session, answering questions, and their contribution to the debate.

Usually this would have been followed up by the Inquiry Panel itself, which of course I convened, but it was appropriate for this new Performance Panel to take responsibility for this activity. We invited along any councillor who had participated in the inquiry but were not members of the Panel to contribute to the follow up.

We thank you and officers, in particular Paul Meller (Strategic Planning and Natural Environment Manager), for providing the written report to help the Panel assess the impact of the scrutiny inquiry report and providing a progress statement against each of the agreed recommendations, since Cabinet agreed its response back in July 2019. We know that of the 20 inquiry recommendations made, 18 were agreed, 2 of those in part.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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GUILDHALL, SWANSEA, SA1 4PE / NEUADD Y DDINAS, ABERTAWE, SA1 4PE

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

We were pleased to note from your report specific contributions to change as a direct result of the inquiry:

- Inquiry recommendations incorporated within corporate actions plans to further the Corporate Objective for Maintaining and Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity.
- Corporate Biodiversity Working Group set up in August 2019 to help review, monitor and report on progress in delivering the steps / actions listed under the Corporate Biodiversity Objective, and help embed biodiversity duties across the Council.
- Establishment of a dedicated Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel.
- Biodiversity clauses now included in service level agreement, licences, leases, etc.

We recognised that many of the recommended actions of the Scrutiny Inquiry were already part of thinking in order to meet the Council's Biodiversity Duty, but welcomed your description of the specific impact of the scrutiny inquiry:

- Helping to focus on specific tasks / projects that could be carried out in the short/medium term (as quick wins).
- Most significantly, inquiry has given increased profile 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.
- 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 (South East Wales Biodiversity Records Centre) 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.
- 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.

The updated action plan progress report appeared to show:

- 8 recommendations as complete (Recommendations 1,3,5,8,10,15,16,19)
- 3 as partly complete (Recommendations 2,7,11)
- 7 as incomplete, with a number of these noted as work that is essentially ongoing (Recommendations 4,6,9,14,17,18,20)

We also heard from you and officers that:

- There is much sharper focus on the natural environment, resources, and biodiversity and the scrutiny report has been a catalyst for change. This is an issue for everyone.
- The follow up report 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 2020/21. 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. This includes work on: biodiversity ward mapping of existing biodiversity and green infrastructure assets and ecosystem service provision; establishing an environmental link governor within school governing bodies; and the employment of a dedicated outdoor learning officer to work with schools. We note this work is dependent on the appointment of project officers but could we not progress the appointment of environmental link school governors, without waiting for the ward mapping exercise?
- Over half of the scrutiny inquiry recommendations have been implemented and many of the recommendations represent work that will be ongoing and aimed at long-term improvement.
- Biodiversity advice is now mainly in-house rather than outsourced as previously.
- There is optimism about securing grant funding necessary to take forward outstanding work.
- The Council's first Section 6 Biodiversity Duty Monitoring Report was submitted to the Welsh Government earlier this year.
- A council-wide Climate Emergency Action Plan is being developed
- The Council's regeneration activities in the city centre incorporates the development of green infrastructure and other environmental benefits.

Main points from our discussion and views:

- We are happy to hear about the impact that the scrutiny inquiry has had, helping to push the natural environment up the agenda, and face up to the challenges.
- We hope that the Council can move forward with the recruitment of a Section 6 Biodiversity Officer. We note that a Job Description has been prepared in anticipation of funding becoming available at some future date. I would welcome a meeting with yourself and relevant officers to discuss how this could be progressed.

- We note that budget was identified to enable the appointment of a part-time temporary Planning Ecologist in December, and would support the conversion of that post as permanent, crucial to our nature conservation aims.
- Relevant to inquiry recommendations 4 and 5, we welcome the delivery of biodiversity training events for councillors, officers, and the public, as appropriate.
- We hope that inquiry recommendation 9, asking for an assessment of verges where mowing and spraying could be stopped, can be taken forward. Arising from our discussion on COVID-19 impacts and environmental lessons and opportunities, which we have written to you and the Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management separately on, we would like to see a member of the Panel, together with relevant Cabinet Members, officers, and other stakeholders come together to discuss a new approach to grass and weed cutting in Council-owned parks, gardens, and road-side verges that will enhance the natural environment and biodiversity.
- Relating to inquiry recommendation 16, in which we asked that the Council continues to nurture good working relationships with relevant external agencies, we note the absence of RSPB Cymru and Plantlife in the list of organisations shown in the action plan and would suggest their inclusion in our network.
- When the relevant project officer(s) is appointed, we would encourage greater collaboration between the Council and Community Councils, who also do good work to manage and protect the natural environment, so that there is a sharing of learning and expertise, and co-ordinated efforts to improve community engagement.
- Our work with schools on biodiversity should also include a focus on litter and the damage it can do to the environment. However, we accept that littering is not confined to children. We noted Council activities around anti-litter promotional campaigns and litter enforcement.
- The establishment of a Corporate Biodiversity Working Group is a positive step; however, it would help to have greater visibility of the work of the Group. The Panel would be happy to receive a regular report on progress to see the impact and difference it is making.
- The Council needs to carefully consider how any decisions to develop on green spaces are consistent with its commitments to the natural environment and biodiversity.

In conclusion, the Panel agreed that good progress has been made with the implementation of recommendations, and we were happy to conclude formal monitoring of the inquiry report. However, we will, as necessary, pick up on any specific issues of concern through the Panel's ongoing monitoring activities.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any further comments, but we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

However, as noted above, the Panel would welcome any news on developments with grant funding and the appointment of projects officers, Section 6 Biodiversity Officer, and Planning Ecologist. We would also ask you to consider arrangements for the future reporting of progress on the Corporate Biodiversity Working Group to this Panel.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR PETER JONES

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

✉ cllr.peter.jones@swansea.gov.uk