

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel Update

1. Remit of the Panel

The Panel is responsible for the ongoing monitoring of performance in relation to the natural environment. The Panel will monitor delivery of the Council's work, commitments and implementation of agreed plans, and assess progress.

2. Introduction

The development of this Panel followed a Scrutiny Inquiry, which looked at how the Council manages the natural environment in Swansea, together with the introduction of a new Corporate Priority of Maintaining and Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity. This also links with the Climate Emergency, declared by the Council in June 2019.

This is the first update report from this Panel, since it was established by the Committee in July 2019. The Panel met for the first time in September 2019, therefore this report tells the story so far, in terms of Panel activities and achievements, rather than just looking back at work carried out during the current municipal year.

The Panel has been focused on contributing to the ongoing development and enhancement of Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity, acting as a critical friend for the Cabinet, and helping to ensure accountability for performance. The introduction of the Panel ensures there is an ongoing conversation between scrutiny and the executive on performance.

3. Key Activities

The Panel was set up initially to meet on a quarterly basis. Because of the growing importance and urgency around the health of our natural world and the serious impacts of climate change, the Committee increased the frequency of Panel meetings in November 2020 to every two months. Additional Panel time will enable better monitoring of Council performance against objectives, targets and action plans, and the role that it is playing, as well as examining specific natural environmental issues. Unfortunately, the pandemic impacted on our ability to meet in 2020, given pressure on resources as the Council has responded to the crisis.

The Panel has held five meetings since inception in September 2019. The issues covered were as follows:

Meeting date	Main Topic
25 September 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Natural Environment Overview
22 October 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Gull Nuisance – Discussion on Public Concerns

16 December 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weed Management • Air Pollution Control
1 September 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion on COVID-19 Service Specific Impacts / Environmental Lessons • Follow Up – Implementation of Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Recommendations • Local Flood Risk Management – Annual Update
22 March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nature Conservation Projects Update

4. Achievements / Impact

The Panel has been developing its role, forming an awareness and understanding of the key issues, Council commitments under the natural environment, including Welsh government legislation, and the plans, initiatives and projects that are in place. In this regard, the Panel has developed a working relationship with relevant Cabinet Members and engaged with the key officers, both at a strategic and at an operational level, on specific areas of interest and concern. The Panel has helped to raise the profile of, and attention to, the natural environment and biodiversity, and is keeping a watching brief on a range of issues.

The Panel has written to relevant Cabinet Member(s) following each meeting with key findings, and its views and recommendations arising from discussions, including some of the following matters:

- The Panel followed up on action on the implementation of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry recommendations with relevant Cabinet Members and officers, which helped it to assess the impact of scrutiny. In conclusion, the Panel agreed that good progress had been made with the implementation of recommendations and were happy to conclude formal monitoring of the inquiry report. However, the Panel will, as necessary, pick up on any specific issues of concern through its ongoing monitoring activities. The Panel was particularly pleased to see progress made on one of the issues highlighted by the Scrutiny Inquiry: recruitment for a new Section 6 Duty Biodiversity Officer and new Planning Ecologist is underway.
- The Panel has asked questions about the Council's use of glyphosate for weed and verge management, given public health concerns and concerns about this chemical treatment on biodiversity. We have been engaging with Cabinet Member(s) about reducing our use of glyphosate – though were pleased to hear that it was being used sparingly - and continuing exploration of alternatives e.g. more organic / natural / integrated / mechanical methods to manage weeds. The Cabinet Member has also been asked to consider different approaches to weed and verge management including stopping or reducing cutting that will enhance the natural environment and biodiversity, something that the Panel will be following up on.
- The Panel has asked about current air pollution monitoring, in particular the measured levels of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) where available (including around schools), and measures in hand / planned to reduce levels further. We also

discussed the issue of contracted vehicles (coaches / taxis etc.) parked outside schools with engines left running and the impact of this on children's health, not to mention the numbers of parents / carers doing likewise in their cars. The Scrutiny Programme Committee has also raised this with the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills.

- The Panel is annually reviewing and monitoring progress against Local Flood Risk Management plans and actions. We have discussed activities and achievements, issues / challenges, and reflected on experience. It is clear that flooding is becoming more prevalent in Swansea, with global heating a contributing factor. Flood incidents over the past few years have been exceptionally high and demanding, putting a strain on the service. The Panel recognises the scale of the problem and challenge and has highlighted that decision-makers (local and national) will need to meet this through better resources to tackle and manage flood risk and measures that will prevent flooding, particularly where it is a common occurrence. The Panel will be asking what longer-term planning and steps can be taken to counter the likely flood consequences of climate change.
- Following referral by the Scrutiny Programme Committee, the Panel was able to deal with a public request for scrutiny in relation to concerns about persistent gull nuisance in Swansea, the feeding of gulls, and detrimental effect on residents' well-being and health and safety within their communities. The Panel approached the topic as one that has potential impact across the whole of Swansea given the nature of the problem outlined, and considered a range of perspectives on the issue, including the Council's position, and views from the RSPB. As such, the Panel identified solutions that may be appropriate that could address the problem and have wider benefit for Swansea protecting both the natural environment and health and well-being of citizens, including actions to discourage public feeding and improved food waste storage and disposal.
- The Panel asked 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. 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 and more use of outdoor spaces. Unsurprisingly, this 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. Nevertheless, 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.
- Most recently, the Panel held a discussion on the work of the Council's Nature Conservation Team. We were provided with a Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure Action Log that showed current and planned work focused on the

actions under the Corporate Plan Natural Resources and Biodiversity Objective and work arising out of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry recommendations. We praised the Team's efforts but responsibility for the natural environment is not limited to the work of the Council's Nature Conservation Team. All services have a part to play. The Panel has talked about the importance of seeing the natural environment and biodiversity as everyone's business and raising awareness accordingly. Panel members were keen to see greater promotion of the work the Council is doing in delivering the Corporate Section 6 Biodiversity Duty (under the Environment Wales Act 2016) and encouraged Cabinet members to look at ways to improve communications to raise awareness around this work.

- The Panel is seeking to establish a regular dialogue with Cabinet Members and officers, specifically about the Council's overall progress in delivering the corporate priority on maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources & biodiversity, and accounting for performance against targets and other measures identified.

5. Future Work

The Panel is keen to ensure focus on the right things so that its work can make a difference. The Panel agreed a fresh work plan in March, following consultation with relevant councillor and officer leads. The Panel is also keen to engage more widely with external organisations and the public so that the Panel can benefit from a range of perspectives on Council action and performance and help inform improvement.

Forthcoming Topics	
19 May 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Change Action Plan consultation feedback • Climate Emergency Declaration – Council Action Plan Progress
29 June 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air Quality Management
31 August 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Flood Risk Management • Ash Dieback update • <i>TBC</i>: Monitoring Delivery of Corporate Priority – Maintaining & Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources & Biodiversity – Progress
12 October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Water Pollution (including marine biodiversity)
12 January 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>TBC</i>: Management of Green Space / Weed & Verge Management

6. Action for the Scrutiny Programme Committee

None