

Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel Update

1. Remit of the Panel

The Panel is responsible for 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 its responsibilities in relation to the natural environment in Swansea, including statutory requirements under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, and subsequent 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, and the recent declaration by the Council in November 2021 of a Nature Emergency.

This is the second update report from this Panel, since established by the Committee in July 2019. 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.

As part of its work, the Panel has welcomed guest speakers from Swansea University and Natural Resources Wales (NRW), who have contributed to discussions and provided information in conjunction with Swansea Council teams.

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 impact of climate change, the Panel now meets every two months. These additional Panel meetings have enabled better monitoring of Council performance against objectives, targets and action plans.

The Panel has held four meetings since the last update to SPC in May 2021. The issues covered are outlined as follows:

Meeting date (2021)	Main Topic
19 May	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Climate Change Action Plan consultation feedback• Climate Emergency Declaration – Council Action Plan Progress

29 June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Air Quality Management
26 August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ash Dieback
6 October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Flood Risk Management • Water Pollution

4. Achievements / Impact

The Panel has been developing its role as a Performance Panel, developing awareness and understanding of the key issues, Council commitments under the natural environment, and the plans, initiatives and projects that are in place. The Panel has developed a 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:

Climate Change Action Plan:

- We raised queries over car battery use and sustainability. It was explained to us that once batteries deplete to 80% efficiency they are no longer used as car batteries but may be utilised as storage capacity elsewhere.
- We raised queries over the availability of generic charging points for electric vehicles (EV).
- The Panel took the opportunity to ask about the policies relating to the Local Development Plan (LDP) and the subsequent increase in traffic/air pollution as a result of an increase in house building.

Air Quality Management:

- We heard that traffic flow data is collected and analysed, to help understand air quality measurements across Swansea. The Panel queried whether data is collected at specific times, such as dates of major events. Officers explained to us that, although not currently a focus, the capability exists to look into specific days/events and the effect of higher density traffic on localised pollution measurements.
- Panel Members raised the issue of engine idling at school collection points and concerns that children are subject to concentrated exposure during these times. Panel Members suggested that bus operators are encouraged to install monitoring technology to measure engine idling times, a

suggestion taken on board as a possibility for inclusion within the next tender process.

- Officers highlighted that there remains much scope to engage schools and young pupils in Green Infrastructure projects, acknowledging the need for engagement of children at a young age, helping to shift traditional behaviours. Members also elaborated on the need to better educate the public regarding consequences of certain behaviours and the impact of such on air pollution.

Ash Dieback:

- The Panel queried what measures the Council has taken to ensure awareness of this disease amongst private landowners.
- Members raised queries surrounding lack of signage and permanent information boards in areas where a larger percentage of woodland is affected. Members suggested more permanent signage after works are completed to better inform the public about Ash Dieback management. Officers took this suggestion on board and undertook to provide better signs and information boards where applicable.
- Members queried the extent of research being done into possible genetic resistance to the disease that has been found in some individual Ash trees.

Local Flood Risk Management:

- Members commented on recent use of environmental budget allowances within individual wards to procure gully teams on an ad-hoc basis, suggesting that this become a wider practice when needed.
- Members questioned the latest update on the Coastal Risk Management Programme in relation to the Mumbles flood defence wall. It was explained to us that public perception appears to be supportive, and that there is a general acceptance that this scheme is needed. We heard that circa £12million will be invested from Welsh Government and that evidence suggests flood risk will be reduced for over 120 properties.
- The Panel queried the Development Advice Maps in relation to Technical Advice Note 15 (TAN 15). Officers explained that the Council would need to provide defence around certain City Centre sites, with the additional requirement to take account of surface run-off risk.

Water Pollution:

- Members queried the current designation of the sea bathing season duration (May-September) and whether the duration of this season should be extended. Officers highlighted that this seasonal period was designated under statutory regulations.

- We discussed the River Tawe water quality situation, recently highlighted in the media, which had come about via sewage discharges entering the river further upstream.
- The Panel also discussed other recent media coverage relating to discharge into beaches during emergency discharge events.
- The Panel raised the issue of residential front gardens being converted into hard standings, thereby contributing to surface water run-off during episodes of intense and prolonged heavy rainfall. Such episodes are likely to increase in frequency as a consequence of climate change.
- Members raised concerns more generally over urban areas and surface water run-off, citing the Sandfields area as an example. Officers also highlighted that this particular area receives run-off from higher ground; they explained that good gully maintenance would help alleviate this issue.
- Panel Members commented on the excellent working relationship between NRW and Swansea Council and praised the teams involved in this collaborative area of work.

5. Future Work

The Panel is keen to ensure focus on the right things so that its work can make a difference. The Panel is also keen to engage more widely with external organisations and the public so that it can benefit from a range of perspectives on Council action and performance and help inform advice on improvement.

Forthcoming Topics	
12 January 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management of Green Space / Weed & Verge Management
15 March 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update from Nature Conservation Team (TBC) • Climate & Nature Action Plan (TBC)

6. Action for the Scrutiny Programme Committee

None