



To:
Councillor David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery and
Operations

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BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations, relating to discussion on the Council's Nature Conservation activities.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

The Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel met on 22 March to discuss progress with the work and main project activity managed by the Nature Conservation Team. We are grateful to Paul Meller, Natural Environment Manager, and Deborah Hill, Nature Conservation Team Leader, who attended to present information about current and planned projects and respond to the Panel's questions.

The context for the discussion included the recent WWF 'Living Planet [report 2020](#)' and 'State of Nature 2019' partnership [report](#), detailing significant levels of wildlife species population declines since 1970. The principal drivers of such declines had included climate change, urbanisation, air and soil pollution, intensification of agriculture, and the use of plant and insect chemical pesticides. Moreover, according to the 'State of Nature' report the public sector spend on biodiversity had fallen by 42% of GDP since 2008/09.

We specifically considered a Biodiversity and Green Infrastructure Action Log provided to the Panel to aid our awareness and understanding of the various activities, which related to actions under the Corporate Plan priority for Natural Resources and Biodiversity and work arising out of the Natural Environment

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Scrutiny Inquiry recommendations. It was noted that these activities / projects were in addition to day-to-day work such as advising on statutory duties and providing guidance on planning applications and other routine activities.

Main points from our discussion:

Climate Change Programme Board

We noted that the Action Log provided to the Panel was under the umbrella of a Climate Change Programme Board. It was explained to the Panel that this was an officer-led strategic Working Group, with representatives from across the Council, which meets on a bi-monthly basis to facilitate, co-ordinate, deliver and monitor the steps in the Corporate Plan Objective for Maintaining and Enhancing Swansea's Natural Resources and Biodiversity, and the Council's Climate Action. We were interested in learning more about the role and work of the Climate Change Programme Board, for example interface with councillors and the Council's decision-making process. We will be focusing on Climate Change action at the Panel's next meeting on 19 May so could learn more then.

Corporate Section 6 Biodiversity Duty Action Plan

We noted that the Council's first 3 year Section 6 Duty monitoring report was submitted to Welsh Government in December 2019, and heard that preparation of the next Section 6 Corporate Biodiversity Duty Action Plan is underway. Panel Members were keen to see greater promotion of the work the Council is doing in delivering this Duty, so would encourage you to look at ways to improve communications to raise awareness around this work.

Green Infrastructure

We heard that work on the Swansea Central Area Green Infrastructure Strategy is now complete, and was approved by Cabinet in February 2021. Officers explained that much research and consultation went into the preparation of the Strategy, which aims to embed biodiverse green infrastructure into new developments. We noted that work is planned on a county wide strategy with a target date of completion by March 2022.

Development of a Tree Policy

We were interested in progress being made with the development of a Council Tree Policy, something the Panel felt would also generate a lot of public interest. We heard that the aim was to fully update and formalise a tree policy to maintain and expand tree cover; raise awareness of the value of trees; ensure risks from trees are adequately managed; conserve trees of value and ensure that the Council meets its biodiversity duties in respect of trees. Officers explained that this would be a strategy about dealing with trees on council owned land, not privately owned land.

Officers explained that a draft is under preparation, and this work has been impacted upon by the publication of new national legislation, adoption of the Local Development Plan and Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG). We understand that a draft will be considered by Policy Development Committee around May / June 2021, prior to wider consultation through 2021. The Panel stressed the importance of effective public consultation and engagement to inform the policy and queried how wide this consultation will be and for how long. We understood that the consultation process may take six to eight weeks, engaging with stakeholders and the public; after which the Policy would be finalised for adoption, although it was unclear where it may need to be reported to for approval.

We talked generally about the issue of tree felling and the number of mature trees being cleared across Swansea. We noted that records are kept of numbers of trees planted and those felled in totality, across all categories of reason (such as disease and development). Officers pointed out that trees / scrub sometimes need to be removed to maintain other priority habitats, such as grassland, heathlands and to control succession to woodland or to remove non-native species. Officers highlighted that at each stage of tree growth the ecosystem services provided by trees generally increase, for example, increased size and canopy cover absorbs more air pollution, produces more oxygen, absorbs more water and provides more shade as well as habitat and food for wildlife. Native trees have greater value for biodiversity.

Members raised some concern over what notice is given by other organisations when felling trees – an example was given of CADW removing trees at Loughor Castle. Officers explained that it would be usual for the Council to receive notification and it would of course be difficult to record total numbers of trees felled if other organisations do not provide notification. This led onto discussions over communications / notifications to residents and how better to raise awareness in general when trees are being felled, or planted. Officers explained that consultation with local communities is undertaken wherever possible. Panel members raised the point that councillors also have a role in explaining and sharing information with residents.

The Panel is planning to discuss the issue of Ash dieback around August 2021. It may be opportune to receive an update on progress with the development of the Tree Policy at the same meeting.

Appointment of New Posts

The Panel was pleased that progress has been made, with recruitment process underway for a new Section 6 Duty Biodiversity Officer and new Planning Ecologist. We hope that the search is successful. Scrutiny councillors, in the report of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry, highlighted the need for such posts.

It was also pleasing to hear that the boost in resources will help support the development and delivery of biodiversity training. Officers explained that biodiversity training has started already, in pilot form with existing staff, focusing on climate and nature recovery. Panel members were keen to benefit from applicable training when available.

Welsh Government Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being Scheme Grant Funding (ENRaW)

The Panel heard that the Council was awaiting confirmation of ENRaW grant that will help deliver green infrastructure programmes and biodiversity enhancements. We were pleased to note that if approved it will also provide funding for: a part time Green Infrastructure Officer; a part time Coed Cymru Officer; a full time Communities and Nature Officer; and, a part time wildlife volunteer co-ordinator to develop and support opportunities for environmental volunteering. This increase in resources would be very welcome.

Wildflower Meadow Planting and Management Initiatives

We discussed wildflower planting and heard that officers have identified strategic pollinator corridors to target for new planting. Grants from Welsh Government have enabled the Nature Conservation Team and Parks to purchase 'cut and collect' machinery to support the ecological management of wildflower meadows / verges. We noted that an assessment of the verges in Swansea that can stop being mowed and sprayed is to be undertaken by Parks. Panel members raised concerns about continued use of glyphosate, which will be a topic for future Panel discussion. The Panel would be following up to see what changes have been made, in the Council's approach to cutting and spraying, to support biodiversity. We discussed issues around communication between the Council and residents, and the importance of letting the public know about deliberate no-mow areas to increase biodiversity and improving public understanding.

Promoting and Supporting Community Biodiversity Projects / Initiatives

We heard about the work in relation to supporting community biodiversity projects. Officers highlighted that the impact of lockdown, resulting from the pandemic, has been remarkable on general appreciation of green areas and open spaces. We heard that the volume of requests for information / help has increased dramatically this year. Whilst we heard that considerable support for, and collaboration with, community groups and other partners has been maintained and increased over the past year, it was clear that more resources are needed for this work, but officers were hopeful that ENRaW Scheme grant funding will provide additional capacity, enabling greater engagement with local communities to encourage volunteering and to support them taking action to enhance and maintain and enjoy their local greenspaces and wildlife sites.

School Biodiversity Awareness

We discussed the recommendation originating from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry regarding school awareness activities. We note the commitment to deliver and provide support for school biodiversity awareness activities and practical initiatives and opportunities for schoolchildren to access and learn about their natural environment. The Panel recognised that work was dependent on grant funding for a project officer to take this forward. We re-stated the importance of school governing bodies identifying an environmental 'champion' that can support these aims.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised, but in this instance, a formal written response is not required.

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the hard work and efforts of the Nature Conservation Team, covering a broad range of issues, particularly during the last year of lockdown. We greatly valued the input and engagement of the officers at this meeting, but look forward to discussion with yourself in due course at a future Panel meeting.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR PETER JONES

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

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