



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Performance Panel - Natural Environment**

Remotely via Microsoft Teams

Wednesday, 12 January 2022 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor P K Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)

E W Fitzgerald
M H Jones
C Richards
W G Thomas

Councillor(s)

S J Gallagher
H Lawson
B J Rowlands

Councillor(s)

O G James
H M Morris
M Sherwood

Other Attendees

Mark Thomas

Cabinet Member - Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management

Officer(s)

Mark Barbour
Emily Davies
Jeremy Davies
Chris Howell

Biodiversity Officer
Scrutiny Officer
Group Leader Parks and Cleansing
Head of Waste Management

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): J A Hale, I E Mann and L J Tyler-Lloyd

67 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

68 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

In accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, no declarations of Whipped Votes or Party Whips were declared.

69 Minutes of Previous Meeting(s)

The minutes of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting, held on 6 October 2021, were agreed as an accurate record.

70 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

71 Management of Green Space / Weed & Verge Management

The Panel received an overview from Cllr Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management. Officers also attended to aid discussions and answer questions.

Discussion focussed on:

- Increasing Biodiversity through management programmes.
- Reduce reliance and use of glyphosate throughout Council services.
- The Highways department is the biggest user of glyphosate, not the Parks department (although some use on Japanese Knotweed).
- The Highways department manage weeds on roads, therefore responsibly falls outside of the Parks department.
- Current programme is run on a 3-year contract with an external company, completing work via machine operation. This has been the most effective and efficient method to date.
- Members raised concerns that some cul-de-sacs were being missed by contractors.
- The Panel heard that the contractors can be asked to return and re-spray should the service in a particular area not be satisfactory.
- Contract renewal is underway, having regard to any other applicable methods available, to minimise glyphosate use.
- Council trials of new technologies / treatments have not yet resulted in a more effective programme.
- It was explained that in 2021 the programme faced a setback due to rain / storms. Weeds became difficult to manage and complaints were received regarding overgrown weeds.
- The Highways department has extra budget allowance to create a team, focusing on hotspot areas.
- The Panel are aware of risks and aspects of concern relating to the use of glyphosate. Members acknowledged that there are few other effective options to manage weeds along the highways network.
- Cllr Thomas reiterated that Glyphosate is a fully-licensed product and the Council is not using un-safe products.
- Members discussed the consequences of weeds left to damage walls and pavements, including the potential for community members to take part in weeding programmes.
- Members raised the option of wards opting out of weed-spraying, citing the example of 'Uplands Living Streets', a group interested in reduced glyphosate treatment.
- The Panel heard that, although individual houses cannot opt out, wards or streets could opt out of the weed spraying programme.
- The Panel heard that, in terms of improving biodiversity, there will be some areas of grass that are left to grow longer.

- Members queried how to report unidentifiable weeds/plants to the Council. Officers advised a photo record could be submitted, or use of external identification apps. Officers undertook to provide links to such apps for information.
- Panel Members raised some concerns over potential sale of green space areas to members of the public.
- Members cited Lougher castle as an example of green space being successfully left to meadow, encouraging wildflower growth.
- It was highlighted that wildflower growth is promoted via nutrient-reduced soil. Grass cuttings left on the land is therefore counter-productive to wildflower growth.
- The removal of grass cuttings (from wildflower sites) has required specialist equipment. Welsh Government funding has recently enabled the purchase of specialist 'cut and collect' machinery.
- Members commented on the grass cuttings left following verge-cutting and the nutrients being left to aid future growth, noting the cuttings can also sometimes contribute to gully blockages.
- Officers explained that the time/costs spent in collecting general grass-cuttings would not likely be effective in making a significant difference to the number of cuts.
- The report highlighted the challenges faced, such as large-scale grass removal.
- The Panel heard that areas left to meadow were sometimes viewed by the public as having been unattended. Members understood that communication needs to be improved to ensure the public understand where/why certain areas become managed meadows.
- Members suggested that temporary signage be erected at meadow sites to better inform the public.
- Members raised concerns over the city entrance points and the first impressions for visitors.
- Members commented favourably on the steps taken in Singleton Park to improve biodiversity.
- Members queried whether grant funding would be available to provide plants/trees for local areas.
- Officers explained that two part-time posts were being funded to work within ward areas to support biodiversity, habitat creation and general wildflower management.
- Members were pleased to hear that a biodiversity officer had been appointed since this recommendation by the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Panel, however, raised concerns over the part-time nature of this post, given demands. Members agreed that a long-term commitment to funding a full-time post would be beneficial.
- Members raised queries over the 'Draft Questions for Consultation', suggesting alternative phrasing of questions to accommodate broader answers.

AGREED that the Panel write to the Cabinet Member with its views and recommendations.

The Panel discussed prospective topics for forthcoming meetings.

- Update from Nature Conservation Team (March)
- Members suggested inclusion of the topic Planning Enforcement (biodiversity) in future work plans.

73 Letter(s)

The Panel received the correspondence sent following the meeting of the Panel held on 6 October 2021.

The meeting ended at 11.45 am

Chair



To:
Cllr Mark Thomas,
Cabinet Member for Environment
Enhancement & Infrastructure
Management

BY EMAIL

Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:

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Overview & Scrutiny

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28th January 2022

Summary: This is a letter from the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement and Infrastructure Management. The letter concerns the meeting held on 12th January 2022 and the updates received regarding Green Space / Weed and Verge Management.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

The Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel met on January 12th to discuss the topic of Green Space / Weed and Verge Management. We were grateful to yourself and to officers for attending to aid discussions and answer questions.

The Panel received an overview of the issues of Council weed management and the management of green open space, including the aims of increasing Biodiversity through management programmes and the reduced use of glyphosate throughout Council services.

Weed Management

You explained to us that the Highways department is the biggest user of glyphosate, as opposed to the Parks department, although we understand that regular use manages areas of Japanese Knotweed. We heard that the Highways department are responsible for managing weeds on the road network, therefore responsibly falls outside of the Parks department.

It was also explained to us that the current management programme is run on a three-year contract with an external company. We understand that, to date, this has been the most effective and efficient method of weed management. Panel Members did raise concerns that some cul-de-sacs were being missed by contractors, and acknowledged the system in place to ask contractors to return and re-spray should the service in a particular area not be satisfactory.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE

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I dderbyn yr wybodaeth hon mewn fformat arall neu yn Gymraeg, cysylltwch â'r person uchod
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We heard that in 2021, the programme faced a significant setback due to rain and adverse weather conditions. Weeds became difficult to manage and complaints were received regarding overgrown weeds.

You explained to us that the Highways department now has extra budget allowance to create a dedicated team, focusing on hotspot areas for weed management and control.

The Panel raised some concerns over the City's entrance points and the first impressions for visitors where overgrown weeds may be viewed as unattended or neglected.

The Panel expressed concern regarding glyphosate use and risk posed both to human health and to the well-being of some insect and bird species, especially in relation to weed control on roadside verges. Members acknowledged that there are currently few other effective options to manage weeds along the highways network. We understood that Council trials of new technologies / treatments have not yet resulted in a more effective programme. You did reiterate that glyphosate is a fully-licensed product and the Council is not using un-safe products in the weed control programme.

Panel Members discussed the current option of wards opting out of weed-spraying, citing the example of 'Uplands Living Streets', a group interested in reduced glyphosate treatment. You explained to the Panel that, although individual houses could not opt out, wards or streets could opt out of the weed spraying programme.

Management of Green Space

The Panel heard that, in terms of improving biodiversity, there will be some areas of grass that are left to grow longer. The Panel heard that such areas left to meadow were sometimes viewed by the public as having been unattended. Members understood that communication needs to be improved to ensure the public understand where/why certain areas become managed meadows. Members suggested that temporary signage be erected at meadow sites to better inform the public.

The Panel cited Lougher castle as an example of green space being successfully left to meadow, encouraging wildflower growth. Officers highlighted that wildflower growth is promoted via nutrient-reduced soil, and that grass cuttings left on the land are therefore counter-productive to wildflower growth.

Officers explained to us that the removal of grass cuttings (from wildflower sites) has required specialist equipment. We heard that Welsh Government funding has recently enabled the purchase of specialist 'cut and collect' machinery, which is successfully helping to manage this aspect of the programme.

Panel Members did comment on grass cuttings left following verge-cutting, and the nutrients being left to aid future growth - observing that the cuttings can also sometimes contribute to gully blockages. Officers explained that the time/costs spent in collecting general grass-cuttings would not likely be effective in making a significant difference to the number of cuts.

Panel Members raised some concerns over potential sale of green space areas to members of the public. We would be interested to hear more about this aspect of our discussion, and the process in place for sale of such sites to the public.

The report presented to us highlighted the challenges faced, for example large-scale grass removal.

The report also outlined the 'Draft Questions for Consultation', about which Members raised queries regarding wording, suggesting alternative phrasing of questions to accommodate broader answers.

Resources

Panel Members queried whether grant funding would be available to support this area of work within individual wards, including to provide plants/tress for local areas.

Officers explained to us that two part-time posts were being funded to work within ward areas to support biodiversity, habitat creation and general wildflower management.

We were pleased to hear that a Biodiversity Officer has now been appointed, since this recommendation by the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Panel; however, we raised concerns over the part-time nature of this post. Members agreed that a long-term commitment to funding a full-time post would be beneficial.

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter but, in this instance, we require no formal written response.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Peter Jones

Convener, Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel

✉ cllr.peter.jones@swansea.gov.uk