



City and County of Swansea

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

Remotely via Microsoft Teams

Tuesday, 15 March 2022 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor P K Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
E W Fitzgerald
H Lawson
B J Rowlands

Councillor(s)
S J Gallagher
I E Mann
W G Thomas

Councillor(s)
O G James
C Richards
L J Tyler-Lloyd

Officer(s)

Deb Hill
Paul Meller
Kathryn Jones
Mark Barber
Michelle Roberts

Nature Conservation Team Leader
Natural Environment Section Manager
Planning Ecologist
Section 6 Duty Biodiversity Officer
Scrutiny Officer

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): M H Jones and M Sherwood

74 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

None

75 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips

None

76 Minutes of Previous Meeting(s)

The minutes of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Performance Panel meeting, held on 12 January 2022, were agreed as an accurate record.

77 Public Question Time

There were no public questions.

78 Nature Conservation Team - Project Updates

The Panel received an update on the main project work currently identified as actions for delivery by the Council's Nature Conservation Team under the Corporate

Plan Natural Resources and Biodiversity Objective and also arising out of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry Recommendations. An Action Log was attached to the report provided and this highlighted the relevant progress made since last reported to Panel in March 2021.

The following issues were raised by the Panel in relation to individual actions within the log:

Action 2 - Prepare Corporate Section 6 Biodiversity Duty Action Plan

Panel recognised that this is a major piece of work and were pleased to hear the action plan to 2023 is now being developed. They asked about Councillor involvement in the development of this plan and were informed that this would be most welcome and would follow as part of the Councillor training in the new Council term.

Action 3 - Preparation of Swansea Local Nature Recovery Action Plan

The Panel heard that this has been delayed due not having a full-time biodiversity officer, now this person is in post things are progressing and an action plan will be developed by the end of the year.

Action 5 - Prepare a County wide GI Strategy

The Strategy has been on hold due to the ability to consult with the public being critical to developing this plan. Work has begun again and public engagement should start in the summer.

Under this item the Panel raised the issue of monitoring of compliance and the enforcement of green infrastructure aspects of planning applications. The Panel felt that this is currently insufficient and how it can be improved needs to be considered. The Panel heard that ideally legislation would change to enable the Council to be informed when infrastructure projects start so they are able to start monitoring, rather than finding out after the project has started. The Panel recognised that monitoring compliance and enforcement is resource intensive. The Panel would like Cabinet to consider how this can be solved, one suggestion included projects requiring green infrastructure sign off at the end of a project to ensure developers have satisfied the requirements. The Panel would like this to be scheduled for further discussion at one of their meetings early in the new municipal year.

Action 6 and 7 - Develop and adopt a Council tree policy, and prepare and adopt Trees and Development Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG)

The Panel were pleased to hear about this policy but highlighted the importance of being mindful of where trees are planted. They heard that one of the pieces of work being completed is 'the right trees planted in the right place for the right reason' and that there are many things to consider when tree planting, so an assessment is done to decide what type of tree is most appropriate at a particular spot.

The Panel suggested that this information be made available on the Council's website and shared with Community Councils etc. The Panel heard that the webpages are being developed and will be launched shortly.

Action 10 - Develop and deliver biodiversity training for Council staff, elected Members and PSB Members

The Panel welcomed the programme of ongoing training and emphasised the importance of Councillor training at the beginning of the new Council Term. The Panel heard that Welsh Government are also developing Wales wide training for elected members, so this will form part of the programme moving forward.

The Panel recommended that the basics of biodiversity and climate change form part of the new Councillor Induction Training.

Action 12 and 13 – Recruit new Planning Ecologist and Section 6 Duty Biodiversity Officer

The Panel were pleased to meet the new Planning Ecologist and Section 6 Duty Biodiversity Officer and look forward to hearing more about their progress in due course.

Action 15 - Co-ordinate and deliver the Local Places for Nature Grant programme (2020-2023)

The Panel heard that grants over and above those mentioned in the report have been and will be received. In total over ½ million pounds of grant monies have been received including from Welsh Government and Natural Resources Wales in 2021/2022.

There has been over 1 million pounds of grants approved for the coming year, the Panel heard from officers that this is fantastic but would add to the already considerable workload. The Panel recognise that it does take a large amount of time and resources to spend and deliver on these grants but welcome this as a good problem.

Action 18 - Plan, support and deliver new tree / woodland/hedgerow/orchard planting initiatives

The Panel recognised that this is becoming more important as we move forward and that assessment of the number of trees planted was necessary but also emphasised the importance of monitoring the number of trees being removed, so we can understand our overall tree stock and therefore make a carbon assessment regularly.

Action 23 - 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 heard that staff capacity and the pandemic has stopped this from proceeding but now we have the new posts in place, progress will be made over the coming year.

79 Panel Review of the Year 2021-22

As this is the final meeting of this municipal year, the Panel was invited to reflect on the year's scrutiny work, experience and effectiveness. Any ideas that will improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny of Natural Environment, and scrutiny generally was asked for.

Have things worked well?

The Panel felt that there have been real positives from their work, that it had been productive, that it had allowed people to raise issues of environmental concern and that it had been interesting and informative.

Has the Panel's work focused on the right things?

The Panel believed that they have focused on the right things and has dealt with fundamental issues of biodiversity and impacts of climate change. They would like to see further work done in the new municipal year on enforcement of green infrastructure/biodiversity aspects of planning applications

What, if anything, could be done better?

The different roles of Policy Development Committees and of Scrutiny was raised and the Panel felt that many areas of policy development and scrutiny can overlap when it comes to the Natural Environment. Although they felt that this was not necessarily a bad thing and it is good that ideas for improvement are forthcoming from whatever source.

The Convener thanked the Panel members and Council Officers for their support in the work of this Panel over the past two years.

Officers in attendance thanked Cllr Jones for the support he has given to enabling nature recovery through his work as chair of the Natural Environment Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel thanked the Convener for his enthusiasm for the subject and his good leadership of the Panel.

80 Letter(s)

The Panel received the correspondence sent following the meeting of the Panel held on 12 January 2022.

The meeting ended at 12.05 pm

Chair