



City and County of Swansea

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

Committee Room 1 - Civic Centre, Swansea

Wednesday, 29 August 2018 at 2.00 pm

Present: Councillor P K Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
E W Fitzgerald
Y V Jardine
S Pritchard

Councillor(s)
L S Gibbard
J W Jones
M Thomas

Councillor(s)
P R Hood-Williams
I E Mann

Co-opted Member(s)

Co-opted Member(s)

Co-opted Member(s)

Other Attendees

Mark Thomas

Cabinet Member - Environment & Infrastructure Management

Officer(s)

Geoff Bacon

Head of Property Services

Deb Hill

Bethan Hopkins

Scrutiny Officer

Paul Meller

Strategic Planning and Natural Environment Manager

Tim Orrell

Country Connection Project Officer

Penny Gruffydd

Sustainable Policy Officer

Sion Brackenbury

Coed Cymru Officer

Judith Oakley

Planning Ecologist

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s):

Co-opted Member(s):

Other Attendees:

1 Apologies for Absence

- None

2 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

- None

3 Notes

- Approved

4 Public Questions

- None

5 Question and Answer Session - Corporate Property Services and Corporate Building Services

- Outlined the aim and objectives of the inquiry
- Brief overview of the meeting with the planning department
Head of Corporate Property Services – Q&A
- There are occasions when land is not disposed of due to ecological reasons
- Due diligence means that land has ecology surveys done at the start and this will establish how marketable it is or whether to retain it
- Only then will the land go on the disposal list
- Land is given a value differently depending on whether that land is for sale or for lease
- Tree Protection Orders don't tend to be put on Council land
- Environmental factors are considered and then a financial estimate is developed by the team
- There is a direct conflict between income maximisation and environmental issues which is a fundamental issue
- Policy determines this conflict and an outcome comes from negotiation
- Any statutory restriction will override any Council policy
- Debates arise over environmental mitigation
- There isn't a lot of contact with external agencies such as NRW unless necessary. Generally any issues go through the Nature Conservation Team
- External ecology surveys are sometimes undertaken on potential sites but the cost of undertaking these investigations needs to be offset by any income – it has to be financially viable
- There is emerging work which has a greater emphasis on ecosystems and the benefits of land such as flood and carbon alleviation – this means that land may be much more valuable than first thought
- Could there be potential for long term income rather than selling assets and only having one lot of money from the land
- The external data and surveys which are done are shared with ecology
- The land availability for development is very small – most of the land in Swansea will never be developed
- Generating income from a piece of land would be great but it takes staff to manage it and departments do not have the resources
- Someone needs to manage land with income generating projects and all land needs a co-ordinated approach
- Corporate Property Services do not manage any enforcement on the land. Enforcement is only monitored through other departments such as planning (if subject to planning) and other ecological enforcement
- People are prepared to take the risk and financial penalty for damaging land and species if it makes profit/ensures land development

- There are not enough resources for legitimate enforcement
- Local Councillors have a big role to play in reporting issues which require enforcement, if there is enough publicity it should deter people from doing them
- There is potential overage (clawback of money) if a developer expands the site they are issued and builds more properties making the land more valuable retrospectively
- Is the pre-application process fit for purpose and considering connectivity and other environmental issues – there may be potential to tighten this process up
- The right people need to be involved early on to ensure that everyone is engaged in the process properly
- There could be potential to invest in the land which has value (the land which is marked for sale) and create long term income from it
- There are resource issues in all teams to manage problems and create opportunities
- Promotion and management of land costs money and this is at the other end of the aims of the service – to increase immediate income

Corporate Building Services

- The team link in with the Nature Conservation where they need to
- No building/premise manager is able to circumvent laws and link in with ecologists regarding bats etc when they need to
- The team are very keen on recycling and maintaining the natural environment
- The apprentices (in particular) are showing great initiative with recycling and reusing and are looking for opportunities to increase benefits to nature
- Would like to see a 'top down' approach to the issue of biodiversity and ensure the message is really filtered through the organisation in the same way that other important messages have
- The service would like 'tool box' talks on the issues and would welcome training and information which allows them to contribute to the issue
- Ecology surveys are done at 'trigger points' e.g. roof work not for example annually
- Each premise manager would welcome opportunities to enhance the wildlife of their premise and there could be training/top tips issued to each one
- There is no lack of desire to contribute to this important issue and ensure that the environment is maintained for future generations
- Again a lack of enforcement and deterrent is a big issue as people know there is no negative impact on them
- It would be really beneficial to have this as a corporate objective so that the status of the issue can be raised and the message stronger throughout the organisation

Discussion

- There can be confusion around over who manages pieces of land both for the public and internally
- There is a piece of work being undertaken at the moment to try and make this easier and the responsibility and management of the land is clearer
- There is no lack of will to pay regard and contribute to the enhancement of biodiversity
- Much of the restrictions come from a lack of resources
- There are also success stories and a lot of positive work

- The Council cannot police all sites and they rely on ward members and householders to contact the Council with any issues they see
- The council lease 50+ fields for grazing mainly via short term Farm Business Tenancies that are often based on old guidelines/legislation that could bring the council and the tenant into conflict with current WG legislation.
- There is no baseline data of what habitats and species are present which is needed to ensure the correct grazing regime is set up and inappropriate works e.g. over/under grazing, re seeding, turf removal are prevented.
- The grazing sites need to be surveyed to ensure the correct grazing and management regime is set up.
- Grazing is a valuable site management tool as it is an income generator, reduces costs of contractors and machinery and stops the need for use of herbicides.
- Income from existing grazing agreements can be used to pay for the surveys
- Looking at adding biodiversity as a Corporate objective
- Biodiversity and environmental issues needs to be embedded in all services and employees
- This starts from the top down and it is starting to happen
- The issue has substantial public support

The meeting ended at 3.40 pm

Chair