



City and County of Swansea

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

Committee Room 5 - Guildhall, Swansea

Tuesday, 24 April 2018 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor P K Jones (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
L S Gibbard
S Pritchard

Councillor(s)
Y V Jardine

Councillor(s)
I E Mann

Other Attendees

Mary Sherwood

Cabinet Member - Future Generations

Officer(s)

Deb Hill

Nature Conservation Team Leader

Bethan Hopkins

Scrutiny Officer

Paul Meller

Strategic Planning and Natural Environment Manager

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): P R Hood-Williams and J W Jones

1 Apologies

2 Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests

- All Councillors who have a membership of an organisation with an interest in the natural environment have been asked to fill in a interests form after advice from legal. Advised that these would be personal interests at most.

3 Service Policy Briefing

- The Nature Conservation Team has outgoings which are more than double the amount of its annual budget.
- The department relies heavily on grants to make up the shortfall to fund staff and projects. Applying for grants is very time consuming and monitoring and administering them is also time consuming and takes staff away from their primary role and leaves the Team in a very vulnerable position.

- Restrictions on time means that the good work which is currently being undertaken by staff is often not promoted and advertised so there is little awareness of the positive actions achieved.
- There are potential legal implications if there is a failure to comply with statutory duties. Intervention by Welsh Government, Natural Resources Wales and the police are possible along with judicial review or European infraction. There could also be significant financial and political implications.
- The team encourage and promote volunteering which provides extra help with site management works but also needs staff time to supervise and support ongoing involvement. Volunteers cannot, however, provide a substitute for the expert/professional advice and input that is required on a daily basis, e.g. providing consultation responses on planning applications, policy guidance, etc.
- The City Centre development is a huge opportunity to create a Green City and we shouldn't let this pass.
- This is a once in a generation chance to be at the forefront of urban green infrastructure development, to create a 'Natureful' City' excel and be a pilot for urban Sustainable Management of Natural Resources (SMNR).
- A discussion took place around ward members contributing some of their ward money to these activities and having activity in their wards as a result. Nature Conservation Team to prepare and submit a proposal.

4 The Environment Act and an Overview of Swansea Biodiversity

- We have a duty as a public body to comply with section 6 of the Environment Act.
- Best practice would be if section 6 of the Environment Act is an integral part of the business planning and policy of Swansea Council.
- The obligation is best coming from a senior level so it cannot be lost and so each department has biodiversity objectives embedded into their Service Plans.
- Swansea has extremely diverse biodiversity and we are very lucky to have this. Further details of Swansea's Biodiversity Resource (Priority Habitats and Species) can be found in the Local Swansea Biodiversity Action Plan.
- Approximately 50% of the County's area is of significant ecological value and of this 22% is protected through International and/or National designations. (e.g. SAC, SSSI)
- Connectivity between green spaces is so important as this helps support ecological resilience.
- Swansea Council owns a lot of land in Swansea and this is both a huge opportunity, but also a big responsibility to maintain and manage ecologically important sites. Biodiversity is sometimes viewed as an obstacle rather than an asset.
- It is essential that we understand how reliant we are on ecosystems for provisions, regulation and culture.
- The ecological value in financial terms has to be offset against any sale/development value.

- Being able to map sites properly means information up front available for people (e.g. Planning Services).
- SINCs (Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation) are areas which support habitats and species of principal importance for biodiversity conservation in Wales (as listed under section 7 of the Environment Wales Act). A site which meets the SINC criteria (as set out in the All Wales Guidance) is afforded a degree of protection under the Environment Wales Act whether identified on the LDP constraints map or not.
- Losing any link SINC sites jeopardises and harms the connectivity of other designated sites and therefore reduces the resilience of ecosystems.
- Swansea could do better at monitoring biodiversity data but resources are very limited.
- There is a unique opportunity here to influence policies post BREXIT and reimagine how some sites/activities could work to be more beneficial for biodiversity e.g. common land.
- There are many opportunities ahead of us during this transition period
- Undermanagement of sites means that they deteriorate and we do not safeguard them from problems which end up costing more in the long run.
- Working with nature needs to be a headline objective in the Corporate Plan and this way, it will have more influence and more people would take the obligation seriously.

5 Discussion

The meeting ended at 12.00 pm

Chair