

**Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny
Committee**

**(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft
Teams)**

Members Present:

19 April 2024

Chairperson: Councillor S.Pursey

Vice Chairperson: Councillor T.Bowen

Councillors: C.James, L.Williams, W.Carpenter, A.Dacey,
N.Goldup-John, R.W.Wood and J.Jones

**Officers In
Attendance** D.Griffiths, C.Plowman, M.Roberts, J.Stevens,
S.Brennan, S.Griffiths, Harvey, C.Howard,
A.James, A.Phillips, G.Slyman, B.Suddell and
R.Turner and T.Rees

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors J.Hurley and S.Jones

Observers Councillor Peter D.Richards

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair noted that the Members of the Scrutiny Committee had agreed to scrutinise the following items from the Scrutiny and Cabinet Board agendas:

Scrutiny Agenda

- Item 4: Update on the implementation of measures in the Waste Strategy Action Plan

Cabinet Board Agenda

- Item 6: Shared Prosperity Funded (SPF) Business Anchor Project - Enhance Business Support for Growth and Innovation – Update
- Item 8: Neath Port Talbot Local Area Energy Plan

- Item 14: Proposed Disposal of Residential Development land at Blaenbaglan.
- Item 15: Proposed Renewal of the Lease to the Council of the Public Library on the first floor of Aberavon Shopping Centre, Port Talbot.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Nathan Goldup-John declared a non-prejudicial interest in Item 8 Neath Port Talbot Local Area Energy Plan as he works for Transport for Wales.

3. **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

This item was omitted due to a clerical error.

4. **Update on the implementation of measures in the Waste Strategy Action Plan (to follow)**

The Chair thanked officers for putting together the update report, which members had felt was comprehensive and complimented the report.

Members noted that on page 33 of the report it listed the fine for not meeting the waste target set by Welsh Government as £200 per ton over the target. Members felt that it may be best to reword it based on an estimate of the total amount by percentage over the target, as it may have more impact.

Members felt that questions 1 and 2 in the questionnaire are very similar and could be amalgamated for ease of understanding and increasing engagement.

Officers noted that the figure for each 1% has been worked out and they could take that on board, officers also accepted the idea of amalgamating the two questions when they finalise the questions put forward in the consultation.

Members suggested that the frequency of the collections question was not necessary, due to the leader of the council stating that this wouldn't be changing to three weekly collections.

In relation to charging for green waste, members were concerned that it would create a negative effect on the environment as people may

burn the waste themselves or start to put in with normal waste or even dump it.

Members also enquired how many councils have paid a fine to Welsh Government so far.

Officers clarified that they can't comment on any political statements and that they are quite clear that in April 2023 there was a formal decision to carry out a consultation and this part of the action plan is to fulfil that decision taken in April 2023.

In relation to green waste, officers said they would explore in the consultation what would happen to green waste as well as plastic waste. Officers advised that the recycling and refuse vehicles are up for renewal and this is the appropriate time to consider the types of vehicles they need to purchase so they have the right ones for the next 7-9 years.

Members were advised that some councils have had fines from Welsh Government, but officers didn't have the detail of whether they had paid.

Members advised that they don't think there is any way of monitoring how much garden waste might be incinerated by the public or put into the normal waste. Officers advised members that the cabinet members were present, and they were sure the feedback from Scrutiny members would be considered along with everything that comes in from the public consultation.

Officers were asked about the absorbent hygiene product waste as the feedback from the public to members was that the boxes are too small and asked if this suitability of the boxes would be reviewed.

Officers confirmed the size can be reviewed and that unfortunately, the feedback given to residents as to what the purpose of the bins were, was perhaps not as good as it should have been. Members were advised that the idea is that these bins are not a storage bin but are an easy access bin whilst the bag is open to put nappies in until the bag is closed. Officers will be updating the website so this can be signposted to the public.

Members asked if there any plans for storage bins as well as open bag bins?

Officers indicated that in response to feedback they received earlier in the initial pilot, the public wanted a bin that meant they didn't need

to open and close bags several times in a day to put the nappies in. Members were advised that at this time officers are not proposing to provide other bins.

Members believed during the 'Task and Finish group on the waste strategy' that the intention of the boxes wasn't for keeping the bags open but as a storage bin. Members felt that the communication on this may have been an issue to the public and members.

The Cabinet Member for Streetscene advised that he would take the feedback away with officers and consider things alongside the public consultation responses.

Officers advised that a concern in terms of collections is to not put too much extra time into the collection process and if the public must have another bin that is bigger in terms of storage, then it is more tempting to put the bin out for collection. That would add lots of time when you consider that the bin would need to be taken from the property to the refuse truck and back again.

Officers received the suggestion that on the questions that are asking why people aren't recycling members felt it would be quite helpful to put something in around the availability of recycling equipment.

Members also suggested that a question would be helpful around food waste bags and receptacles to understand whether that is something the council should focus on improving that or whether it isn't a barrier to recycling.

Members gave feedback on their resident's experience of ordering food waste bags and that if a resident phones in to the helpline, they get told delivery is 18 days but if they come to members, they seem to be able to get them out basically the next day or the day after.

Officers advised that corporate colleagues are helping with the questionnaire, and they will speak to them about how they can work in something about equipment availability that will test if there are some obstructions to people taking part because of the delivery of equipment.

Officers explained that the 18 days quoted is classified as a maximum of 18 days to send out the bags. Officers were previously purchasing 400,000 food bags per order. Officers are now ordering 1,000,000 bags at a time and with regards to the food bins they have employed an additional delivery driver, and they now deliver an

additional 5000 items on top of what they did last year. Officers felt they were a victim of their own success because the public are clamouring for these items as recycling is increasing.

Members were pleased to note a decrease in broken equipment and noted this is likely because the crews are starting to take more time now in putting the boxes back.

The Cabinet member for Streetscene advised that when the consultation is concluded and at such time, they will have a look at the feedback. He explained that he has taken on board what members have said today particularly around nappy storage and food bags and that it will be interesting to see what residents across the county have got to say during the consultation.

The report was noted.

5. **Update on the implementation of measures in the Waste Strategy Action Plan - Reports**

The report was noted.

6. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

Item 6: Shared Prosperity Funded (SPF) Business Anchor Project - Enhance Business Support for Growth and Innovation – Update

The Chair noted that members appreciated the level of detail and information that was presented in the report and despite the detail it wasn't overly long, which was something members appreciated.

Members asked about page 44 of the report where it relates to the sustainability of the jobs. Members noted that the report expressed concern that once the funding for the project ceases, that people may leave and with it a lot of experience will be lost. Members wondered if there were any prospects for future funding or any thoughts about how to avoid losing staff.

Officers explained that towards the end of a scheme, staff start looking for other employment as they have no guarantee of future employment, and the authority ends up losing some very good staff and experience. The Chief executive has emphasised the need to make sure that officers can get things in place to retain all the staff needed.

Members were advised sometimes a buffer is needed to be able to keep the staff because otherwise another long recruitment process would need to happen thereafter.

The authority missed the first part of the scheme in terms of having the resources needed to start delivering because they are still at recruitment phase because of the gap between the end of a fund and the beginning of another. Officers are hopeful that they will put something together to make sure that all the staff that they need to retain will stay.

Officers commented that the age profile of staff means that succession planning is going to be an issue as well as losing some young people who could possibly start a career in this field but uncertainty around the funding and how long they will be able to keep them.

Officers have expressed their concerns to UK Government regarding the uncertainty of the bidding process. Officers advised that the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) has been very good for the authority, but they really need SPF two to be announced sometime before SPF one comes to an end because that continuity would give officers a much longer delivery. Members were informed that SPF has allowed flexibility with the funding to react to things that are happening, for e.g. The Tata steel situation and has allowed officers to start doing some work with some of the companies they know are going to be impacted within the supply chain.

Officers stated that having continuity would be huge and have expressed that to the UK Government and whilst they are very sympathetic there's no clear direction that they will continue to do it at this stage.

Officers confirmed that the current end date for the project was March, and the major concern is that they have got a lot of momentum with the grant scheme, but it looks like they will have to close it down in December this year unless an announcement of an extension comes, the indications from UK Gov in informal discussions is that the current round of SPF can't extend delivery periods. Officers don't know about round two of SPF and that's what they are hoping for.

Members were advised that with the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) not a lot of money has been allocated across the UK. Officers believe that the Government are more sympathetic on the LUF bids potential because they are capital based rather than revenue based like the SPF and they may, depending on what happens in the in the spending review in the autumn allow the authority to extend that. If that's not extended than the

government runs the risk of having a lot of half or three quarter, finished projects when it comes to an end with local authorities being unable to pay for any additional spend on it.

The Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Economic Growth advised members that he went to the Industrial Alliance AGM who are lobbying the UK government, and they intimated that it was potentially looking good that the UK Government might continue with the SPF for another year regardless of what party wins at the general election.

The Cabinet member advised that he has seen the work of the business team and attended event with the knowledge as a business holder. He explained that he had sat in on some of the courses and felt they will be excellent. The Cabinet member commented that the new people that have been brought in who have been learning off the vast experience of the people that sadly might be lost is priceless.

The report was noted.

Item 8: Neath Port Talbot Local Area Energy Plan

Members noted that within the report section relating to community energy systems there was no mention of hydroelectric energy, and they asked if it was something that had been considered and rejected or not considered at all.

Members also raised concerned with the reliance on Air Source heat pump conversions in the report. Members raised the issue that many homes in Neath Port Talbot are still not on the gas grid and rely on oil or coal. These house types tend to be more complicated for installing an air source heat pump. This is down to implications in terms of improving the heating system, insulation, and lack of cavity walls in some properties. Members were concerned that these issues mean that Air Heat Source Pumps would be prohibitively expensive, and a lot of these costs are going to fall on the householder.

In relation to hydroelectric power officers advised that in terms of the community energy systems nothing is necessarily off the table. If it works, then anything is worth consideration.

Officers explained that regarding air source heat pumps, that in the energy industry and renewables industry particularly, things are changing rapidly in

terms of the quality of the types of products that are now being produced and the efficiency of them as well as the cost of them. In many areas the cost comes down as they become more mainstream.

Officers highlighted the importance of making sure there is a focus on skills and training and to make sure that competent people who are doing good jobs out there to install these technologies because that's the best way to promote them and sell it to others is by people having good experiences with it.

Officers advised that the Homes as Power Stations initiative as part of the Swansea Bay City Deal is looking at the different types of housing and the different types of kit that's on the market that can move towards net zero.

The Cabinet Member Climate Change and Economic Growth gave members an overview on the range of what the authority is doing. On micro generation, he advised that there are 2 schemes for hydroelectric going through Resource Wales licencing and once they are up and running and achieved it would give an example to others and perhaps, we can promote it more.

Members were informed that there is a single turbine in Kenfig Industrial Estate which is powering some of the industrial site there.

The cabinet member advised that the authority is cutting edge in what it is doing with some of the buildings, and they will have another few great examples when Tai Tarian put up their two projects which are funded partly by SPF fund hubs and so they're going to be examples of cutting-edge renewables and are similar to Rhos Afan which is again starting off that's going to be energy positive or carbon neutral.

The cabinet member gave an example of skills and training in Neath College with their Green Academy which is up and running which is reactive to what training is needed and has some courses coming up on solar installation and heat pump installation. The Cabinet members explained that skills and training are very important. The Cabinet member advised that there is funding in the Homes as Power Stations scheme for training as well.

The Cabinet member also highlighted that there is a progressive document in the sense that if the UK government decides to go down the hydrogen route, then the document will be adapted as things change.

Members noted that skills and training is important and that in relation to heat pumps the authority area has got a lot of people who have the skills to install them but it's the technical specifying of them where there is a skills gap. They noted that it is a UK wide problem.

The Cabinet member advised that at a recent business event they met an expert in building systems management, who's now been put in touch with Neath College. Systems management is a big part of how renewables are run and where they are run. The Cabinet member advised that this is an example of the beauty of the network and business events where an expert has now been put in touch with Neath college to hopefully do courses for things like that there.

Members expressed the view that the Welsh Government needs to look about how active travel and sustainable transport in rural areas is enabled and that active travel is part of public transport and community transport.

Members expressed support for the idea of lobbying on rural areas funding for active travel but had some concerns with expanding resource, trying to extend the Active Travel Act for leisure and recreation because they are two separate things. Members weren't sure that the authority was going to get anywhere on that point because the Active Travel Act is about purposeful journeys, not leisure and recreation.

Officers advised that they sit on the All-Wales Active Travel Board and had raised concerns around the current active travel legislation on behalf of the southwest region including the provision and funding for active travel routes in rural communities. Officers feel that the existing active Travel plan has identified key conurbations within the authority and officers have found that where they would have a desire to put in roots in the rural areas, these don't make the cut in terms of priorities and Welsh governments funding in terms of 'bang for buck' and outcomes.

Officers advised that they continue to lobby around the guidelines and there might be some reviews taking place to try and get a mechanism where active travel can be supported in rural communities. Officers explained that the principles around leisure activity is something officers have challenged in the past.

The Chair informed officers that they have political support from members in looking at defined settlements as defined in the act and how they've been identified.

The report was noted.

7. **Urgent Items**

There was none.

8. **Access to Meetings**

That pursuant to Section 100A(4) and (5) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded for the following items of business which involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 4 of Schedule 12A to the above Act.

9. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny of Private Item/s**

Item 14: Proposed Disposal of Residential Development land at Blaenbaglan.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendations to Cabinet Board.

Item 15: Proposed Renewal of the Lease to the Council of the Public Library on the first floor of Aberavon Shopping Centre, Port Talbot.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendations to Cabinet Board.

CHAIRPERSON