

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

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

Members Present:

20 September 2024

Chairperson: Councillor S.Pursey

Vice Chairperson: Councillor T.Bowen

Councillors: C.James, L.Williams, R.Davies, R.W.Wood,
J.Jones, G.Rice, B.Woolford and H.C.Clarke

**Officers In
Attendance** D.Griffiths, N.Pearce, M.Roberts and A.Thomas

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors W.F.Griffiths and S.Jones

1. **Chair's Announcements**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

Declarations of interest were received from –

Cllr N Goldup-John Item 3(a) Personal – works for Transport for
Wales and a member of NPT Links.

Cllr S Pursey Item 3(a) Personal – member of NPT Links.

3. **To Consider items from the Cabinet Forward Work Programme**

Members considered items from the Cabinet Forward Work
Programme.

(a) **The Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 - Neath Port Talbot Active
Travel Delivery Plan (2024 - 2029)**

The chair welcomed a member of the public to the meeting and noted that person had submitted a request to ask a question too late for the required timescales. Democratic Services had offered them an opportunity to ask the question at the cabinet meeting instead when this report is being considered. The chair advised that the member of the public had accepted that option.

The chair gave members a background on the report and explained that it had previously been due to be presented to the cabinet board and the scrutiny committee in the previous civic year but there were concerns raised during a chairs briefing around the report. The chair credited officers for taking on board the concerns and officers had convened a meeting of cabinet members, interested councillors and others, to discuss this matter. The chair noted that as a result, the report is vastly improved from the original draft.

Members were unhappy that there are no timescales in the report and felt that to measure the effectiveness of the strategy, time scales are required to see if the authority is on track to achieve the targets. Members also wanted to see in the report what grants the authority has previously applied for so that they can compare and measure against those.

Members commented that there didn't seem to be any measurable outcomes and asked that more detail be included.

Members noted that the routes need maintenance and foliage cutting back to remain accessible and they felt that the street scene budget and the highways budget needs to be flexible and work together as it's a job that crosses over both departments.

Members were also concerned that the report date range was from 2024- 2029 but over half of 2024 had already passed and felt that had meant most of this year had been missed.

The Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning, Transport and Connectivity Cllr Wyndham Griffiths gave a response to the questions and stated that the report does cover 2024- 2029 and would have come earlier in the year but as the chair noted earlier there had been another meeting with interested counsellors to expand on what was wanted in the plan and that is why it's coming back to members now.

The Cabinet member advised that the delivery improvements are subject to grant funding as the authority does not have an active travel budget and without the certainty of funding, officers are

uncomfortable setting exact timetables for delivery. Members were advised that the authority had applied for £13 million in grants and £152,000 of grant aid and of that they had received £6,000,573. The cabinet member advised that the authority has got roughly half of all the monies applied for.

The Cabinet member noted that there is no specific budget for maintenance and that aside from the grant funding, the authority only gets the capital costs, but any maintenance has got to come out of the Streetscene and council's budget.

The Cabinet member advised that the authority need to try and educate Transport for Wales and Welsh Government that as well as grant funds authorities need the improvement monies as well. Officers advised that they have been lobbying Welsh Government ministers about the issue of maintenance around active travel and that it has been a bone of contention ever since the active travel guidance came into being.

Members were informed that the Welsh Local Government Association and Cabinet members from across Wales met with the Cabinet Secretary for Transport recently and this was part of that discussion. Members were informed that the Welsh Government have gone away to consider if they can provide some revenue contributions going forward to contribute to the upkeep. No decision has been made and officers noted that Welsh Government are looking at their overall budget position with a pending autumn Statement.

In relation to ambition to apply for grants, members were advised that the bids are prioritised in line with guidance from Transport for Wales officers, in relation to the their priorities on what is best placed to receive grants. Officers explained however only about 50% of projects ever get funded from the whole Welsh pot. This means that in terms of planning, officers can only deal with in year schemes.

Officers confirmed that they have lobbied for longer term grant awards over a two or three-year period to give certainty so they can plan accordingly. Officers are constrained by the approval process and grants being made on an annual basis.

Members commented that some of the roads and pathways that lead to active travel routes in Sandfields are poor, and they asked if any

work had been done on how the pathways are going to be linked into the active travel routes as some of these paths are in a poor state.

Officers advised they are looking at a Sandfields master plan and that is ongoing, officers have done a feasibility report looking at all the routes that have been identified in the active travel network map to come up with solutions for improving those this financial year. Members were informed that officers are taking forward the design of three routes, (Scarlett Avenue, Princess Margaret Way and Victoria Road) and the others then will follow in subsequent years. Officers will be bidding for funding for the construction for those routes.

Officers also explained that in terms of maintenance of routes leading to the active travel routes, it is something that officers need to consider as part of the wider Highway Asset Management Plan and all the routes and pavements are inspected by network management. This is a robust and rigorous survey regime that determines the standard and condition of those highways in terms of road users.

Officers also explained that they must revise the highway asset management plan, and that review work is ongoing with a report to come back in the future where they will set the new inspection regime for the cycleways as well.

Members comments about condition of routes were accepted by officers but they advised that they have got some severe challenges in terms of the maintenance budgets and have raised their concerns for several years.

Officers stated that despite the challenges they try their best to maintain not just the cycling routes, but the safe walking routes to school as well, to an adequate standard.

The chair noted that members had scrutinised the highways Asset Management Plan previously and one of the points raised then was around how the authority are prioritising walking and cycling within that maintenance budget.

The chair advised that it is one thing to lobby the Government for additional funding, but there is funding that the authority is using now to maintain highway infrastructure. The chair asked how officers are prioritising that in accordance with national policy and priorities.

Members felt that the asset management plans need to capture and acknowledge that from a safety point of view there needs to be a higher standard for a cyclist than a driver on some of those roads because there are active travel routes on roads that aren't necessarily a cycle path but will be a quiet street or road designated for cycling.

The chair noted some of those comments were taken back when the asset management plan was scrutinised.

Members suggested that the best way to see what the condition of the roads linking into the active travel routes is to cycle them on a bike without suspension, members felt that this shows easily if they're in good enough condition to link into the path.

Members asked when the Highways Asset Management plan report is due.

Members noted that the gritting policy is being reviewed and that now low priority is given to footpaths and cycle paths and that it is also something that should be looked at in the light of the other policy changes.

The cabinet member advised that in relation to gritting, budget constraints mean it's not possible to grit all the roads, footpaths or on the highway. Presently the authority grits less than 40% of the highway network because of the constraints.

Members were advised that the routes are set out in the winter maintenance plan and that has been approved by members and this is a part of the gritting policy and is in the active travel delivery plan. The Cabinet member noted that everyone would like to get more gritters out, but it is unaffordable.

Members asked if there was any engagement with local employers both from the point of view of customers getting to the businesses premises but also their employees commuting there to via active travel.

Members felt it is important to join up different policies because the council is an employer. Members asked if there is anything that the council can do to make it easier for council employees to get to work without driving. Members used an example of a relative who applied for apprenticeships advertised with Neath Port Talbot Council (NPT) at Neath Civic centre which all stipulated that applicants must be at the building by 8:30am. This is not something that the applicant could

do from their location unless they drove, as busses wouldn't arrive in time, and it was too far to walk or cycle.

The cabinet member advised that the issue of promoting and encouraging active travel has been raised by officers to Transport for Wales. Members were advised that this is a pan-Wales issue and not solely an NPT one.

The cabinet member explained that active travel funding applications were funded for promotional schemes, not to promote a change in mode of transport. The cabinet member advised that there is a piece of regional work going on as part of the Metro project which is working with businesses to encourage and facilitate active travel and NPT is working with the health board, universities and private business within Swansea Bay on the healthy travel charter. Members were advised that NPT has recently been awarded healthy travel charter status and this has been achieved with no dedicated budget from NPT.

The cabinet member felt that they are trying to cover all the points members had raised, but as more things come to light, the team will endeavour to follow up on those suggestions.

Officers advised that in relation to the Swansea Bay Healthy Travel charter, it was a significant piece of work being done by the road safety team, but it was a corporate approach to raising awareness about different travel modes and about active and healthy travel. Officers were really pleased to have achieved the healthy travel charter status and reiterated that they are working closely with the health board, local businesses and Swansea University. That forum meets regularly with businesses in the area to promote the points that members had mentioned.

In relation to the issue of an applicant not being able to apply for the apprenticeship due to lack of bus options in the morning, officers felt that it is a little bit disappointing that the council couldn't have been a bit more flexible because the HR policies do allow for flexible working where the authority can offer it. Such as the possibility of people starting earlier in the morning or later so that they can have access to transport. Officers felt that it was something they should raise as a wider corporate policy issue.

Officers advised that within their own division, they do try to accommodate, family friendly access to work and travel and start and finish times as long as they can deliver the core services, and they

felt that there is good flexibility around those working arrangements unless it is a very stringent post that requires staff to be on a desk or do a task at a specific time. Wherever possible the council would work to try and accommodate an individual's needs, officers said they will take that back to HR.

Members advised that the personnel committee had, had a discussion around HR policy and how that integrates with transport policy and active travel, particularly around the fact that there are often incentives to employees to drive to work such as offering discounted car parking, but not discounted bus travel.

Members felt that there are a few areas where the authority is making decisions that try and attract employees and to retain staff, but sometimes the authority has been losing sight of some of the wider policy context, members felt that taking these things into account across the organisation was important.

The chair noted that if officers are going to have those conversations with HR about flexibility of start times etc that they should also be generally talking around that issue of how compliant and consistent the authority is being on that approach to transport policy across the organisation.

The chair accepted that that there are limited budgets for gritting and maintenance and the authority can't maintain everything or grit all the roads to the condition they want to but felt that it is about prioritising and applying those priorities in the context of local and national policy.

The chair asked how confident the officers are that they are making those decisions in a way that prioritises people that walk and cycle and wasn't convinced that the council we're doing that now, while understanding that the choices are harder to make in the context of a small budget.

Members noted that the authority has had £6.5 million pounds so far and asked how officers will be prioritising the cycle routes because members are aware that the council is going out to consultation on a few of the routes and asked if this money being put aside for these.

Officers advised that the £6.5 million pounds is for schemes that they have already looked at in the past. Transport for Wales have developed a prioritisation tool which has looked at all the routes on

the active travel network map and that is what officers will be using to prioritise routes going forward.

Members noted that it will be one of the first delivery plans in Wales that will be adopted and congratulated officers for leading the way on it.

Members asked if the document will be going out to public consultation.

Members noted that in Section 8 of the report it covers monitoring of the paths and the cycle ways but it doesn't cover on how well the authority is dealing with delivering the schemes. Members felt that it would be beneficial that they annually review the document or at least have a periodic review of how well the authority is doing it and to be able to assess it.

Officers advised that they have undertaken stakeholder engagement but haven't undertaken public engagement and weren't intending on doing that unless members felt that it was required. This was predominantly because public consultation on the active travel network map that's already in place has already been undertaken.

In relation to updating the report annually, officers advised that it is a tremendous amount of work to update the report, and they were going to do it every five years, however, they do bring a report to cabinet, and it will provide an update on progress. Officers advised that they already do bring a report to Cabinet with the next one due on the 23rd of October meeting and will be bringing it every year. Members felt that the format of that report will probably need to change to reflect what's been put into the delivery plan and if that happens, then that would be a good way for scrutiny to keep track of progress against delivery and to hold cabinet members to account and to make it much clearer to track progress an direction.

The chair welcomed the document and noted that the committee had lots of discussions around active travel over a long period of time including in this committees' predecessors and he felt that there was a definite lack of clarity collectively over what was trying to be achieved. The chair felt that the report does capture the scale of the ambition and some specific projects and directions of travel that the authority wants to go in.

Members highlighted that on page 53 there was an ambitious programme of works listed and members advised that they were very aware that it would take good political leadership to push through these schemes and ensure that this is an actual delivery plan and asked the Cabinet member what he will be doing to ensure that there is an increased roll out of walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure in NPT so that people can get around the community freely without the need or expense of having to have a private car.

The Cabinet member advised that as he was the cabinet member responsible for Active Travel, he was supportive of the aspirations of the Wales Transport Strategy and the Active Travel Act to encourage a change of travel patterns to contribute to the decarbonisation of the area. He will support officers in the development and delivery of schemes in line with the Active Travel Delivery Plan subject to securing grant funding. He advised that he discusses funding applications with officers to ensure that they meet the aspirations of the Active Travel Delivery Plan.

Members were advised that the transport grant funding appears to be under review, which in the future is likely to require the endorsement of the Corporate Joint Committee to ensure that the projects align with the ambitions of the emerging Regional Transport Plan at local level.

The cabinet member informed members that at local level, support is needed from all councillors as improvements affect individual wards. The cabinet member advised that it is not just his aspirations of what goes forward in this active travel plan but the aspirations of everyone. He noted that it is down to him as a cabinet member to liaise with the officers to make sure that the authority is following the active travel plan and improving on it when, possible.

The cabinet member noted that currently the active travel plan grant is a standalone grant but there are possible plans that Welsh government are looking to bring that together with the safe routes to schools and the transport plan. This could mean that instead of having a pot of money just for active travel to apply for, it will be within the context of a few other things, and he can see it would be harder to get grant funding that way.

The cabinet member advised that it was down to everyone to get the message out there to change the minds of people in which way they want to travel, whether it be wheeling, cycling, walking or via public transport.

The cabinet member stated that one of the biggest things NPT have got to do is to get the public transport network right first and everything else will follow. The cabinet member stated that he would put all his efforts into talking to and helping the officers as much as he can and hopefully as this very good scrutiny committee, they will continue to ask the right questions.

Members noted that active travel is going to be having a bigger pot of money that the council can bid for, and they look forward to the cabinet member pushing forward the active travel case.

The chair noted that in other counties who have delivered more schemes that these types of schemes can be contentious and can sometimes be unpopular with certain parts of the community, especially if there is reallocating of road space or changing parking arrangements.

The chair stated that the greatest change and benefit in terms of active travel delivery comes when brave decisions are made that maybe upset a small group of people to provide a much wider benefit.

The chair noted that if the authority is really going to deliver against this plan well, then they will have to take some decisions that might not necessarily be politically popular, but will be beneficial in the short, medium and long term in communities.

The chair stated that if as a cabinet member he was willing to do that then he would have a lot of support and respect from the scrutiny committee who really believe in the walking, cycling, Wheeling, healthy travelling agenda. The chair advised the cabinet member that he thinks that's what the committee is hoping to see a drive to get to those schemes that will make a really big difference.

The Cabinet member agreed with the chairs point and used the example of the Aberavon master plan, explaining that the authority will drive it forward but felt that it needs local members to get involved with the officers and cabinet as it can't be done on their own. The cabinet member referenced the active travel plan meeting in Cimla being held soon in the Scout Hall and requested that local members come with officers and cabinet members when the officers are presenting it.

The Cabinet member felt that while the cabinet and officers can make the brave decisions it is equally important that the local members must be with them.

The chair noted that officers engage with local members who may have some concerns although they may not all necessarily have as much of an understanding of the benefits of Active travel as it is still an abstract concept to a lot of Council members and in the wider community.

The chair stated that the cabinet member, showing leadership and showing enthusiasm and drive, can bring the members along with him because the decision comes from the cabinet and it's not a local member decision to implement these schemes, but the chair advised that it is much better if local members are on board and can articulate the benefits to communities.

Members highlighted that while cycling is often discussed they wanted to emphasise the walking element of Active travel because that is the biggest benefit and reminded the committee that they all have footways in their communities that are inaccessible, too narrow, or with footways with no drop kerbs, the chair highlighted that this pot of funding is what fixes those issues and that if that means the authority widens the footpaths and takes away some car parking spaces the benefit is significant because most people will feel and see the biggest impact.

Members had a question about the continuous improvement and the feedback around walking and cycling infrastructure. Members felt it was important that a mechanism to continually get feedback and make sure it gets to the right places can be critical to a whole route. Members noted that the authority has reporting mechanisms and contact forms but stated that certain things do fall through the net and don't get picked up.

Members felt that making sure that the existing routes are not just maintained well, but also improved and developed is as important as developing future routes.

Members noted that some existing routes that pass the criteria but from a cycling point of view there are slight amendments that could be made to make them better.

Members noted that they have in the past brought forward suggestions for the work programme that have been funded out of the capital allocation and not the active travel grants and asked for officer's views on how the authority is making sure that all parts of the council are delivering highway improvements that infrastructure work by working in the same direction.

Members also asked if officers are compiling a list of or putting together a package of schemes when suggestions are made into the active travel team to make sure that things don't get lost. The chair noted that there is access to grant funding now to deliver some of those accessibility improvements and wanted to know if officers are making sure that all parts of the council really understand it and feed that information?

Officers advised that they have got hundreds of future routes on the active travel network map, which they would like to bring up to the standard as set out in the active travel guidance. Officers advised that they are aware of faults on some of the existing routes and officers have got a lot of correspondence going back and forth with network management where they receive complaints and where officers can help, they do try to help.

Officers explained that they had removed many barriers on some of the existing routes over recent years. Officers informed members that they put in lighting in Taibach this year because of some comments that were raised.

In relation to the grant they also have the Village Road scheme in Aberavon, which was supposed to be capital funded but officers managed to secure a grant for it. Officers explained that where there is a possibility that they can get grant funding instead of spending the council's budget, they try to do that by working across departments.

Members were advised that Active Travel officers are now a consultee as part of the planning applications. Which means that if an application comes in for a larger development, they do consult with officers, and they will provide feedback from an active travel perspective.

Officers explained that they also design with Active Travel Act guidance in mind on all highway schemes and there is a piece of work to be done on it as it's not perfect.

Officers advised that they will have a discussion with the digital services team to see if they can do something with the website and the mapping data so that if there is something that the public want to flag as a concern, officers will see how that can get an auto generated message to them.

Officers noted the issue around the personnel committee and felt that it should be a one council approach to large strategic plans and Active travel is a key part within the corporate plan. Officers felt that it's important that everybody gets that understanding and commitment and enthusiasm to make it happen.

Officers advised that they fear for the budget in the future and noted that councillors feel there should be a bigger pot of funding, however the message from Welsh Government to Officers is that there's going to be less money available for capital works.

Officers assured members that the work that they have been doing over the last year particularly around the Sandfields area and Cimla, is making good inroads and they are hoping to see the capital come to deliver those projects.

Members were advised that although there has been a bit of a dip, they hope that they are going to have an increased amount of grant approvals going forward which would make a difference to the communities in those local areas.

Members were keen for local members to get engaged and making sure that everybody knows about active travel via and All Member seminar on the active travel plan and to invite Transport for Wales and other organisations to speak.

Officers advised they will have a discussion with Democratic Services about how they can structure that and bring a presentation forward as a full member seminar and agreed that bringing in all stakeholders, such as Sustrans and colleagues in Transport for Wales and the groups that members participate on within the community as well.

Following scrutiny, members supported the recommendation outlined in the draft Cabinet report.

4. **To consider items from the Scrutiny Committee Work Programme.**

The Members of the Committee noted the Forward Work Programme.

5. **Performance Monitoring**

There were no performance monitoring items for consideration.

6. **Selection of Items for Future Scrutiny**

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

7. **Urgent Items**

There was none.

CHAIRPERSON