

## Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee

(Remotely via Teams)

**Members Present:**

**25 February 2022**

**Chairperson:** Councillor S.K.Hunt

**Vice Chairperson:** Councillor R.L.Taylor

**Councillors:** C.J.Jones, H.N.James, S.M.Penry, S.Pursey,  
N.T.Hunt, J.Evans and S.A.Knoyle

**Officers In Attendance** C.Morris, S.Brennan, A.Collins, C.Davies,  
T.Davies and C.May

**Cabinet Invitees:** Councillors L.Jones and A.Wingrave

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1. **Welcome and Roll Call**

The Chair welcomed those present and a roll call was taken.

2. **Chairs Announcements**

The Chair noted which items the Committee had decided to scrutinise from the Cabinet Board agenda.

3. **Declarations of interest**

There were none.

4. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes from the meetings held on 3 December 2021 and 14 January 2022 were approved.

5. **Global Centre of Rail Excellence - Progress Update**

The Committee received an update, as requested by Members of the Scrutiny Committee, regarding the progress of bringing forward the development of the Global Centre of Rail Excellence (GCRE).

It was explained to Members that Planning Committee had conditionally approved a planning application for the construction of a world-class rail testing facility at the head of the Dulais and Tawe Valleys on 27 July 2021. The project represented a capital investment of circa £157m with the potential creation of up to 200 jobs.

The presenting officer gave Members a brief timeline, detailing each scheduled phase, as outlined in the report. It was noted that they were currently in phase 1a of the project, where a project delivery group was now well-established and were meeting on a fortnightly basis.

Members' queried how the project could be extended further, to maximise the potential impact and investment, as there were currently limited links from the valleys to Neath, Port Talbot and Swansea. It was further noted that Transport for Wales would benefit from this and it felt like a golden opportunity which should not be missed to improve these links, for both freight and passengers trains. The officers agreed as there were significant opportunities and benefits that could come from this project, and noted the continued development expansion of the rail infrastructure was supported by Future Wales, the National Development Plan for the Welsh Government. It was explained that if there were to be future considerations for expansion and for the use of the line to be for passengers also, a suitable business case would need to be developed. It was thought that this one significant development could act as a catalyst for future projects, such as the regional metro and other sustainable travel solutions.

Members asked how, as a Council, Neath Port Talbot could support the Swansea Bay and Western Valleys Metro proposals and to ensure it was on the Welsh Government and the U.K. Governments' agendas. It was further asked what more could the Council do to better integrate the valleys with the towns and cities. The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Sustainable Development reassured the Committee that she was encouraging the proposed transport link improvements regularly and these were being discussed at the Regeneration Board. The officers added that the Strategic Development Plan and the Regional Transport Strategy would need to be brought forward in the next few years, where elements would be discussed at a more strategic level. In addition to this, the review of the Local Development Plan was coming forward, which would be

steered by the new administration, with the aim of adoption by 2025-26.

Officers noted the Member's request to ensure Glynneath and Neath Valley were considered in future discussions regarding the improvement of transport links.

The Chair agreed with the comments made by the Committee and echoed that it was an exciting project with lots of opportunities. He noted concern, however, for the jobs that would be provided once the project had been implemented; his concern was that the jobs would not be opened for local people. It was suggested that, as the project would take five years to develop, that there was a discussion on training and development opportunities in the community. The Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Sustainable Development confirmed that the Regeneration Group had begun liaising with the local colleges regarding this.

Following scrutiny, the Committee noted the report.

## 6. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

The Committee chose to scrutinise the following Cabinet Board items:

### Economic Recovery Plans

The Committee considered the report which sought approval of the South West Wales Regional Economic Delivery Plan (REDP), the Welsh Government's Regional Economic Framework (REF), and the Council's own Economic Recovery Plan (ERP). It was explained that there had been significant change in the past few years, and Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic had caused major issues within the economies, therefore these documents needed refreshing.

The Committee were informed of a number of changes to the three plans, which were appended to the Cabinet Board report, and the key areas the plans intend to deliver. The officer summarised these, and noted that these plans outlined how the economy could grow over the next ten years.

Members of the Committee questioned whether the council was considering the pooling of resources regionally to deliver any of the aspirations outlined in the regional plan. In response, the officer present explained that it would be dependent on funding; however,

Neath Port Talbot had worked extremely well with colleagues across South West Wales. An example was given in regards to supporting innovation in low carbon growth, such as developing the supply chain within the renewables industry, and how this would require the involvement of companies from across the region.

Members queried about how the plans linked in to the Local Development Plan (LDP), particularly in regards to economic development, and how it could feed in to the planning policy. The officers confirmed that the aspirations for the LDP were currently being set out and the plans would feed into these, and it was crucial to ensure the LDP fit within the national and regional strategies.

In response to questions regarding the town centres first approach, the officers explained that it was a funding approach from Welsh Government, where they focuses on the bigger town centre, which tended to be the coastal belt for Neath Port Talbot. It was noted that there was currently a piece of work underway focusing on tertiary town centres, which would be followed by the three bigger town centres, to ensure full advantage of funding was being made.

The Committee expressed concern for the retention of local residents and students, due to the lack of jobs. The officers confirmed that there was a big emphasis on training and skills currently, which would be addressed across the region and within Neath Port Talbot. There was an urgent need to upscale local young people to prepare them for future jobs, and it was noted that half the jobs within the region would require a minimum qualification of NVQ level 4 within the next five years.

In response to queries regarding the rising house and energy prices, it was noted that rising energy costs were affecting businesses across the whole of the U.K, and across Europe, but the key focus needed to be on decarbonisation. Officers confirmed that they would be working with local businesses to ensure they were in the best place to decarbonise and to, if possible, become self-sufficient. It was also confirmed that the part of the LDP review would be to reassess the housing need, particularly in relation to affordable housing, following the advice and guidance issued from the Welsh Government on the need for local planning authorities to allocate sites for 100% affordable housing.

Committee Members raised concern for the rise in second homeownership within Neath Port Talbot, noting the affects this has

had in areas such as Pembrokeshire, and asked officers if there were any plans in place to prevent the spread of second homes and properties being rented through AirBnB. It was confirmed that there were not any policies in place currently, as there had not been an issue with this in Neath Port Talbot, however Welsh Government had recently conducted a consultation on second homes and holiday lets to seek views on whether the Welsh Government should introduce primary legislation to amend the use class order, resulting in planning permission needed to be acquired to utilise a property as a second home.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

### South West Wales Regional Energy Strategy

The Committee considered a report which sought approval of the South West Wales regional energy strategy so far as it related to Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council. The overall objective of the regional strategy was to develop a strategic pathway for identifying key interventions to deliver on the South West Wales region's ambitions for decarbonising its energy system. It would ensure that the region maximises the economic benefits from the transition to a low carbon economy enabling the region to achieve the correct trajectory for achieving net zero in 2050.

Members were informed that there were four themes outlined within the report, these being:

- Housing, led by Neath Port Talbot;
- Commercial, led by Carmarthen;
- Renewables, led by Pembrokeshire; and
- Transport, led by Swansea.

Committee Members stated that the strategy should be used as a material consideration in the determination of Developments of national significance (DNS) applications by Welsh Government. The officers agreed and were requested to find out more information regarding this and feedback to Members. It was also noted that the local planning authority would submit a local impact report for each DNS application, and within the submission reference could be made to regional documents.

The officers present agreed to arrange a meeting with Members of the Committee and a representative from the Welsh Government's energy service to discuss the energy market in more detail.

In response to Members, it was confirmed that support of the South West Wales Energy Core Group had been received from partners and from Welsh Government, and the energy situation was being taken incredibly seriously. As part of the report, homes as power stations (HAPS) scheme had been looked into, which was an effective route to secure local renewable ownership. It was noted that the main aim would be to ensure the nation was as self-sufficient as possible and to not be so reliant on energy supplies from other countries. Neath Port Talbot generated more renewables than most areas, and it was important to take advantage of these and generate local power to serve the local communities.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

#### Waterfall Country Park and Ride Evaluation

The Committee considered a report which provided an evaluation of the Waterfall Country Park and Ride Pilot scheme which was delivered between July 2021 and September 2021. It was noted that the report sought to establish whether the Waterfall Country Park and Ride Pilot should continue to be funded for a further two summer seasons in order to attempt to ease parking pressures at Pontneddfechan whilst a permanent solution is further scoped out. The Chair explained to the Committee that the officers were recommending Option 2, outlined in the report, to extend the pilot for a further two seasons.

Members were informed that the local area continued to be exceptionally popular, which was positive in many ways, but it was important to ensure the correct infrastructure was in place to meet this demand. Whilst a long-term solution was sought, a park and ride scheme was implemented, which the assistance from Welsh Government, for the last summer period. The report included data collected regarding the park and ride scheme, and set out the proposal to continue it for a further two year period to trial the scheme.

Members of the Committee noted their support for continuing the scheme and collecting more data on it, and to monitor the use of

public transport as the pandemic restrictions begin to ease. It was noted by officers that there had been higher levels of domestic tourism during the last two years, and it would be interesting to see how this changes going forward. The scheme was currently being subsidised for these initial periods, but ideally they would become self-sufficient going forward.

The access to the park and ride was queried by Members, and an extension down the Valley towards Neath was requested; there were a high number of residents in Neath who visit Pontneddfechan regular, and a bus would be well used and would reduce the car use and parking in the area. The officer agreed to feed this back, and assured that as the shuttle bus ran frequently, it should coincide with all the public transport links to Glynneath.

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal, and of Option Two as outlined in the recommendations, to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

7. **Forward Work Programme 2021/22**

The work programme for Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee was noted.

8. **Urgent items**

There were none.

9. **Access to Meetings**

**RESOLVED:** 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.

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

**Waterfall Country Options Appraisal**

The Committee considered the report, which sought endorsement from Members for the adoption of two possible options for the delivery of a permanent visitor parking solution.

Following the officers introduction of the report, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

### Burrows Yard

The Committee considered the report which sought Members approval to remove from the proposed sale contract, the requirement that the purchaser must find a suitable operator for its existing store within 12 months of a satisfactory planning permission on the Burrows Yard site, as detailed within the private circulated report

Following scrutiny, the Committee was supportive of the proposal to be considered by the Cabinet Board.

**CHAIRPERSON**