

Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee

(Remotely via Teams)

Members Present:

17 September 2021

Chairperson: Councillor S.K.Hunt

Vice Chairperson: Councillor R.L.Taylor

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

Officers In Attendance: S.Brennan, C.Plowman, N.Headon, C.Jones, C.Millis, A.Spooner-Cleverly, N.Bray and K.Jones

Invitees: Councillors A.Wingrave, L.Jones and D.Lewis

1. Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2021 were approved.

2. Update on the Audit Wales Neath Port Talbot Action Plan

Officers informed Members of the updated Regeneration Action Plan following an examination undertaken by Audit Wales.

Members were pleased that Officers had taken on board a lot of the suggestions that were made by Audit Wales. It was noted that the comments relating to communications were reassuring; if the Council continued to make progress with the recommendations detailed in the action plan, future projects could be benefited and it could provide the public with confidence in what the Council was trying to achieve. The importance of Community Benefits was also raised; it was reassuring that the Council had acknowledge a better way of dealing with this matter, and that Officers will be involved at an early stage for each project going forward. It was mentioned that this was beneficial in order for the public to be aware of the direct benefit from a project.

Officers acknowledged that there were always improvements that could be made to various elements of services; some of the barriers to this could be related to systems, resources or a combination of the both. It was stated that the milestone planner that was completed with the Media Team had been reinvigorated, in order for them to have a much better idea of what projects were coming up; Officers were hopeful that this will solve some of the issues that arise.

Following the discussion, it was agreed that the Head of Property and Regeneration would provide a report to the Committee on the subject of Community Benefits.

Members asked if there were any further updates on the Welsh Government formula for flood areas. It was confirmed that the position statement was the same as previously reported to the Committee, and that there were still a lot of issues relating to flood zones across the County Borough; the flood maps were known to change, land could be taken off the flood zone list or added onto the list, and the reasoning behind this could often be difficult for people to understand. However, it was mentioned that the information on flood areas was improving year on year, and was becoming more robust which will help the Council to make the best possible decisions in regards to the utilisation of land. Officers highlighted that the County Borough had some challenging areas with flood mitigation, and in terms of taking developments forward was an expensive process and was a risk, as the desired results may not be achieved at the end of the process.

It was asked if there was a process in which the Authority could challenge the decisions that Natural Resource Wales (NRW) make in regards to flood land. Officers confirmed that NRW could only be challenged on a case by case basis, as it would need to be proven that the development in question was not going to put anybody else into detriment; this was a difficult and long process, which would involve a lot of consultancy work by external specialists. It was stated that flooding issues were becoming more prevalent, and NRW were doing their best with the resources at hand, in order to understand where the impacts will be. Members were informed that when the Council provides its data on flow rates etc., NRW will look at the data and may need to change their model slightly; therefore, their model will always be a constantly changing status, which was concerning for developers as it would add to the risk element.

Officers were asked if there was an update on the progress of obtaining monies from the Levelling Up Fund. It was confirmed that there had been no further news on the Levelling Up Fund or the Community Renewal Fund; if the Council were to be successful in obtaining monies from this fund, they had a spend profile in place for the rest of the year. Officers mentioned that a lot of organisations who had been part of the bidding process, have had to change their spending profile completely due to timescales and not having confirmation of monies. It was hoped that the Council would have heard if it was successful or not during the summer period, however Officers still had no indication of when they would be receiving the decision; this caused an issue for the Council as it would be difficult to get the spend out by the end of the financial year, which was March 2022. Officers confirmed that they needed to start making decisions imminently, as work needed to be completed on the projects; however, due to not having indication on whether the Council had been successful or not, the challenge will be having to conduct the work at a risk and potentially not be able to re-claim some of the costings.

A discussion took place in relation to the Shared Prosperity Fund; in regards to this, Members highlighted that it would be beneficial to collaborate with Local Members for the town centre areas. It was stated that the Shared Prosperity Fund would follow on from the Levelling Up Fund; it was hoped that the timescales given for this would be better than the previous, in order for Officers to submit bids effectively. Members were informed that Officers had already started working on project ideas to discuss with Members in the near future; this will be beneficial as Members will have seen some of the projects that Officers were hoping to submit, prior to the event.

It was queried whether there was an indication as to what the priorities were going to be for the Shared Prosperity Fund. Officers mentioned that the UK Government had stated they had been inundated with bids for the Levelling Up Fund, which was why the decision was delayed; this was an indication that there wasn't going to be a sufficient amount of money available due to the number of bids that had been submitted.

The Committee noted the report.

3. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

The Committee chose to scrutinise the following Cabinet Board items:

Lease of 5-6 London Road, Neath to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner

The Committee receive a report in relation to a new lease of 5-6 London Road in Neath, which would enable the continued delivery of substance misuse intervention services.

The circulated report referenced that it was not known if the perpetrators of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) used the services at the property in question; it was asked if there were any plans to monitor this going forward. It was stated that the ASB in Neath Town Centre could not be directly linked to all of those who used the services at London Road. Assurances were provided that a lot of work was being carried out, in terms of enforcement and support, to ensure that it was known who the perpetrators of ASB were and to ensure that where possible, these individuals gain access to support services; reference was made to the Street Vulnerability Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (SV MARAC), and Members were informed that regular meetings were taking place between colleagues at an operational level. It was mentioned that South Wales Police had provided information on the known perpetrators of ASB to a core group of individuals, and Officers have suggested that a 'deep dive' be conducted into these cases to identify factors such as, were they getting the help they needed or do they needed further encouragement.

It was asked if there was a correlation between the facility at London Road and the ASB in Neath town centre. Officers recognised that there was an ASB issue within the County Borough, however the blame could not be put on all of those who attend this particular facility; if the support services were not in place, the ASB issues would be much worse. It was mentioned that the services were in place to help individuals improve and stabilise their lives, and to prevent them offending, re-offending and/or stop them from being exploited. Members were informed that the Area Planning Board (APB) was embarking on a major transformation project which will be looking at the delivery of substance misuse services across the region and how they can be improved; part of this work will including identifying if services were in the right place and if they were configured in the right way. It was added that the location of these services was important as needed to be in areas in which people access them.

Members asked why the property was noted to be leased at a peppercorn rent. It was highlighted that the building was purchased and refurbished with the Welsh Government Substance Misuse Action Fund (SMAF) capital, and the pay back for this was that the property would be listed as peppercorn rent.

It was mentioned that there would be individuals who will never engage with the support services, however it was important for the Council to make the process easier for those who could potentially engage; some examples of work that had been completed to help individuals with this included assertive outreach and the establishment of the rapid access prescription service.

Concerns were raised in regards to the facility being in close proximity of Victoria Gardens, and that there had been reports of individuals going into this area to use substances; it was important to try and ensure that the issue of substance misuse and ASB did not affect those who were living within the community. It was highlighted that wherever this type of facility was located, there would always be an area in which groups of individuals will meet and choose to behave in a certain way.

A further discussion took place in regards to substance misuse. It was clarified that substance misuse included both drug and alcohol abuse; they went hand in hand, although individuals made different decisions depending on whether they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Officers stated that there was a need to target individuals who were abusing vulnerable people, as well as victims themselves.

It was highlighted that early intervention was key, however it was understood that resourcing was an issue; Officers reassured the Committee that the correct agencies were in place in order to combat and address the issues at hand. It was noted that the current approach from South Wales Police was to undertake enforcement, but also look at how they can encourage people to receive the support that they need.

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

Rural Development Plan 2014 – 2020

Members were provided with an update and overview of the Rural Development Plan (RDP) 2014-2020, which included detail on what

had been achieved in Neath Port Talbot during the current Programme.

It was evident that some of the most recent projects seemed to be meeting objectives better than some of the earlier projects did; it was queried what had driven this shift in the later projects.

Officers stated that at the beginning of the process there was more money available; people would submit their ideas and the team would fund some of it with a robust system in place. Following the midterm evaluation in 2020, it was noted that a more focused approach was set with trying to align this work with the Councils Corporate Plan and poverty elements; this was in line with the Local Development Strategy (LDS) to ensure that some of the corporate ideas were achieved. Members were informed that the midterm evaluation provided the opportunity for Officers to make changes, taking on board any issues that had previously arisen, due to eligibility, or a misunderstanding of what could be achieved in this process; a lot of engagement work was completed to provide people with a better understanding of the process, and to try and get more people to engage who previously hadn't, and to try to change the mind-set of what people thought that the programme was about. It was added that the programme had been extended to March 2022 in order to utilise the under spend; the outbreak of the pandemic had impacted on factors such as timescales.

Members asked if there was any monies left for additional projects to be progressed, before the programme ended in 2022. It was explained that the circulated report stated that there had been 14 new projects within the past 12 months, however this had recently changed to 16; therefore the money was reducing. Officers confirmed that there was currently £81k left, however there was one project that was with the Local Action Group (LAG) for a decision to be made, and another project that was imminently going to be put to the LAG; these projects were both worth £64k in total, therefore if they were approved there would be around £17k left. It was mentioned that there was no guarantee that they would be approved, and as such the remaining amount may fluctuate. Officers were still working with individuals who were bringing forward ideas; this process will be on a first come first served basis for remaining funds.

A discussion took place in regards to future funding opportunities and how the Council was going to make the most opportunities that may come forward. It was highlighted that the LAG had various individuals

who were involved in the group including business people, the third sector and Local Members; it was noted to be a very good network for the rural areas, and Officers would hope to see this continue or at least to retain the contacts. In relation to future funding, it was stated that Officers were discussing this regionally with Welsh Government, in order to identify the next steps and processes; Officers were keen to identify what was happening next with the new funding.

The importance of lobbying was raised, particularly for areas which had high poverty and deprivation; the money from this programme was well used in the areas which experienced this. It was asked if the lobbying will continue and if there was a chance for this programme to be extended further. Officers confirmed that there was a possibility for an extension to 2024; there were opportunities provided to extend further, but only with the money that each Local Authority had left. It was noted that the Council did ask for an extension, however there was not sufficient funds for further projects; the Council was able to re-profile the funds to be able to have the extra year or so in place (up to March 2022). Members were informed that there was a gap between the funding that was available now and the new funding coming into place; therefore it was important for Officers to find out what Welsh Government were planning.

Members explained that the complexity of achieving funding sometimes affected community groups, and meant that a lot of great project ideas wouldn't be achieved due to the difficulty of going through the process. With regards to supporting the community, it was explained that the RDP was a first step and was supposed to be innovative and creative, therefore excellent for supporting community groups; there were also facilitators that work with the groups to help progress the project.

The Committee discussed the issues around match funding; Officers recognised the difficulties with this and had reported their concerns to Welsh Government. It was mentioned that where possible, volunteers time could be used instead of using physical money, as it was a pressure for match funding to be provided.

It was mentioned that some of the projects that were listed in the circulated report could require maintenance; it was asked if the cost of maintenance was built in to the programme or if there would be financial support available. Officers confirmed that an exit strategy and sustainability element was built into the application process, therefore bidders would need to think about the future of the project.

It was stated that there was no set money for maintenance of projects, however the team help projects to identify further funding if needed.

Members asked if applications were still being accepted and if there was a closing date. It was highlighted that the team were still currently accepting bids and would welcome any ideas to be brought forward; one reasoning for this was due to the fact that it was not guaranteed that the LAG would accept the projects that had been submitted. In regards to timelines, it was mentioned that the programme was set to finish in March 2022, however Officers needed a few months allocated for closure and administration; at the moment projects needed to be finished around December/January time, which was a tight timeline to get the projects up and running.

It was queried if the Election in May 2022 would have any impact on the progress of the programme; if any Local Members, involved in projects, were not re-elected. Officers confirmed that this would not affect the process as the money would need to be committed to projects in December, which was before the Election takes place.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

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

Members noted the Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Forward Work Programme for 2021/22.

It was highlighted that the Committee had their Forward Work Programme Workshop scheduled for Tuesday 21 September.

CHAIRPERSON