

# ENVIRONMENT AND HIGHWAYS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

(Committee Rooms A/B - Neath Civic Centre)

**Members Present:**

**29 October 2015**

**Chairperson:** Councillor I.D.Williams

**Vice Chairperson:** Councillor A.J.Siddley

**Councillors:** D.W.Davies, Mrs.R.Davies, S.K.Hunt and E.E.Jones

**Officers In Attendance** Mrs.N.Pearce, M.Roberts, D.Griffiths, Ms.J.Smith, C.Morris, H.Hasan and Ms.C.Gadd

**Cabinet Invitees:** Councillors E.V.Latham and A.N.Woolcock

---

## 1. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FROM MEMBER**

The following Member made declarations of interest at the commencement of the meeting.

Councillor Mrs.R.Davies: Reports of the Head of Legal Services regarding the following alleged public footpaths: Glan Yr Afon Rd to Footpath No. 194, Ystalyfera, Hodgson's Rd to Footpath No. 194, Ystalyfera, Hodgson's Rd to the 'Weir', Ystalyfera, and the diversion of footpath No 237, Ystalyfera. Also in regards to the proposed diversion of alleged public footpath, Ystalyfera. An interest was also declared in relation to the report of Head of Engineering and Transport regarding proposed prohibition of waiting at any time order – Church Road/New Street, Godre'r Graig, as she is the ward Member for Godre'rgrraig.

2. **MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND HIGHWAYS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD ON 17 SEPTEMBER 2015**

Noted by the Committee.

3. **SCRUTINY FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME 2015/16**

The Forward Work Programme was noted by the Committee.

4. **DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT AND POLLUTION CONTROL**

The Committee received the report card for the Development Management and Pollution Control team, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that the report card had been presented to the Economic and Community Regeneration Scrutiny, as the service area crosses over the remit of the two committees. This Committee would be considering the pollution control and land contamination element. It was highlighted that the section had undergone a restructure which resulted in pollution control being integrated into Development Management for the time being. However, there could be a further restructure in the future.

It was noted that the team's duties include managing the Council's air quality monitoring and permitting systems, maintaining industry and public air quality alert systems and providing contaminated land advice to other departments. It was highlighted that in April the Amber Threshold for Short Term Action Plan was reached due to the number of PM exceedances in certain areas. A multi-agency approach had been taken in exploring contributory causes and possible mitigation. This included a traffic management solution being introduced in Pontardawe town centre which had been successful. It was noted that there had also been a slight reduction in the levels at Victoria Gardens in Neath, however, the levels still remained close to the maximum threshold.

Members were informed of the 2014/15 Air Aware pilot, which alerted residents who suffered from medical conditions when air quality was poor. The results showed that the demand for primary care actually increased for those involved in the project rather than decreased, as it made residents more concerned about their health. As a consequence the project had been closed down. It did, however,

provide some useful information, such as perceived reasons for health problems.

In regards to the Land Contamination Strategy Members were informed that there was more proactive action going forward in providing an in house advice service to other sections. It was highlighted that this was a cheaper option than relying on external consultants. It was noted that currently two sites were monitored in terms of nickel emissions. One site had reduced significantly and was now well within the Air Quality Objective limits, however, further work continued to be undertaken with the other site.

Members queried in relation to the Forward Financial Plan savings whether the in house advice service was deliverable with the reduced staff capacity. Officers informed them that there were significant budget pressures across the Service and areas had been identified where income could be generated and the Service would strive to deliver them. It was highlighted that the Special Budget meeting of the Committee would cover budget proposals in more detail.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

## 5. **PLANNING POLICY**

The Committee received the report card for the Planning Policy Unit, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that the Unit had been restructured recently and now comprised of the Planning Policy team, Countryside and Wildlife team and the Planning Service Technical Support Team. It was noted that the Planning Policy Unit reported to the Economic and Community Regeneration Scrutiny Committee as well as this Committee.

It was highlighted that the teams had been responsible for several initiatives including meeting the statutory duties in regards to the Local Development Plan (LDP), delivering upon requirements of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013, walking and cycling strategy and scheme development, the public rights of way network and providing advice on all aspects of biodiversity conservation and woodland management. It was noted that the Service was having increasing difficulties meeting the statutory requirements with increased demand for services and downsized teams. It was noted that where possible the Service looked to secure external funding. Members queried what

stage the LDP was at and they were informed that it was close to being finalised and it would hopefully be adopted in January 2016.

Members queried whether in the Active Travel (Wales) Map the Swansea and Neath Canals could be included, as they were an important facility for tourists and residents. Officers informed them that they did not form part of the Map as it was only commuter routes that were eligible and not recreational routes. However, the routes were acknowledged as part of the LDP work.

Members highlighted that not all rights of way were being maintained and it was not possible to keep them up to standard with current financial restraints. They suggested that where possible external funding options should be sought. Officers informed them that external funding possibilities were considered and where possible used to improve networks. However, a lot of external funding was not applicable for revenue projects. It was highlighted that the previous Forward Financial Plan had approved that rights of way would only be maintained rather than improved. Officers recognised that currently the Service was reactive rather than proactive in this area and that it would be an ongoing issue. It was noted that there were some agreements with community councils who receive funding from the Council to maintain rights of way in their wards. Members suggested that perhaps community councils or other community groups could access funding that was not available to the Council and officers could assist with this.

It was noted that the sickness figures for Planning Policy were slightly higher than the Council average and this was due to one member of staff being on long term sick, who was now back to work.

It was highlighted that changes to planning laws meant that delegated planning applications that did not meet timescales would result in planning fees being refunded and it was requested that all Members responded promptly to any consultation.

Following scrutiny it was agreed that the report be noted.

## 6. **ENGINEERING UNIT REPORT CARD**

The Committee received the report card for the Engineering Services Unit, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that the Engineering Services were multi-disciplinary in house services responsible for civil engineering schemes, traffic section and undertakes work for the South Wales Trunk Road Agency and other agencies. It was noted that the team had won a number of awards, such as the UK National Constructing Excellence Award for collaborative working.

It was highlighted that there had been a reduction in staffing numbers, with seven senior staff taking voluntary redundancy or early retirement. This had meant that a change management exercise had been undertaken to try and maintain service delivery. It was noted that it was getting harder to deliver services with fewer staff.

It was highlighted that there had been a rise in sickness absence but it was still below the corporate average. Members expressed concern that sickness absence had increased in the section. Officers explained that there had been three members of staff off on long term sickness. One member of staff had retired due to ill health and all sickness absence was being managed through the correct procedures.

Members noted that the Service had received one complaint last year and more information on the complaint was requested. It was explained that it was traffic related and it had not been upheld.

Members queried what work was being undertaken on the Pontrhydyfen Aqueduct. Officers explained that the arches of the bridge were being strengthened, as there had been arch separation. Members were invited in to meet the team for a fuller explanation. In relation to the facilitated the transfer for the Pelenna mine water treatment systems to the Coal Authority Members asked if there had been any recourse to the Council and it was confirmed that there had not been.

Following scrutiny, it was agreed that the report be noted.

## 7. PRE-SCRUTINY

The Committee scrutinised the following matters:

### Cabinet Board Proposals

#### (i) Draft Road Safety Strategy 2015-2020

The Committee received the report on the draft Road Safety Strategy 2015-2020 requesting permission to go out for consultation, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that the Strategy outlined the Council's statutory responsibilities under the Road Traffic Act 1988, whilst evaluating performance against Welsh Governments targets. It also included an in depth analysis of the challenges faced from an all Wales perspective, with a proposed delivery model of interventions for Neath Port Talbot over the next five years. Members highlighted that the report included a lot of data and information and was a good report. Officers recognised that the previous Strategy was not as detailed and this up to date draft strategy contained more detail.

It was noted that the draft Strategy would be subject to external consultation utilising the public facing consultation portal 'Objective', as well as consultation with Members and partners. The final version of the Strategy would be brought back to the Committee in January 2016 to be commended to Council for adoption. There would be no financial implication as the Strategy pulls together the streams of work that were already being undertaken.

Members were pleased to see that the Strategy included ambitious targets. It was commented that schemes, such as the Drive for Life, were very good. It was also noted that the team undertook some excellent work in accident avoidance.

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

(ii) Grit Bin Three Year Review

The Committee received the report on the three year review of Grit Bin Policy in Neath Port Talbot, as detailed within the circulated report.

Members were informed that in 2012 a task and finish scrutiny group reviewed grit bin provision in the County Borough and the policy was developed from the work of this group. The Environment and Highways Cabinet Board agreed the policy and that it would be reviewed after three years. It was highlighted that as part of a subsequent review of gritting routes there had been a small increase in the number of grit bins due to the changes to the routes.

Officers noted that due to budget pressures it was recommended that the existing policy be continued subject to review in a further three years.

Members highlighted that there was a spelling error for one of the locations of the grit bins on page 118 of the Cabinet Board reports: "Pontardawe, Lon y Coed/Gwrydd Goed Junction" to be amended to "Pontardawe, Lon y Coed/Gwyrddgoed Junction".

Members asked for officer advice outside the meeting on the placement of grit bins in Resolven.

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

**CHAIRPERSON**