

Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee

(Remotely via Microsoft Teams)

Members Present:

5 February 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.Purseley and N.T.Hunt

Officers In Attendance: N.Pearce, C.Morris, S.Brennan, C.Jones, C.Plowman, N.Headon, E.Barrett, K.Davies and M.Shaw

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors A.Wingrave, L.Jones and C.Clement-Williams

1. **Chairs Announcements**

The Committee was informed of a change to the following report on the Cabinet Board Agenda:

- Agenda Item 7 - Proposal to extend the current service provided by the Primary Substance Abuse Liaison team (PSALT)

Following the update, Members were happy with the changes, therefore chose not to scrutinise the report.

2. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the following meetings were approved:

- 4 December 2020
- 23 December 2020

3. **Tourism Update**

Members received an update on the impact of Covid-19 on the Tourism sector within Neath Port Talbot and the current and forthcoming activities of the Council's Tourism Team.

Officers highlighted the significant negative impact that the outbreak of the pandemic had on the Tourism sector; the report detailed figures which showed a drop in the number of visitors (63.5%) and a decrease in economy (66.4%). It was noted that the data did not represent the full 12 months of 2020, and further lockdowns that were announced towards the end of the year will further impact this data.

Moving forward, one of the main focuses was stated to be looking into how the Tourism sector could be helped in order to recover from Covid-19; the past 12 months Officers had kept in touch with the tourism providers.

Members were informed that the business teams had supported all businesses across the sector, particularly the Tourism sector, to ensure that they were able to access all the financial support made available by UK and Welsh Government and any other grant support. It was noted that the accommodation approval process of key workers also had to be managed by the sector, as hotels were closed down for certain periods; the approval process allowed access to those who had a valid reason for being in the area, those who were key workers and those who needed accommodation at short notice.

It was mentioned that throughout the pandemic, Officers had a lot of collaboration with public sector partners, particularly with Visit Wales, and there had been liaison with organisations including Brecon Beacons National Park to ensure areas, such as the waterfalls, were being managed in the best way possible; these meetings and communications were continuing.

Officers provided an update on some of the Tourism sectors ongoing projects, which included:

- Vale of Neath Hub at Resolven Canal Car Park - the refurbishment of the former toilet block facility in Resolven had now been completed and the new occupier would be in place shortly;
- Afan Forest Park Visitor Centre Valleys Regional Park Gateway – the Council had gained funding to do a range of work including upgrading some existing facilities around the toilets

and showers, adding in an additional car parking area, providing electric hook up points for camper vans, creating a digital information point for visitors, putting in extra lighting and building a children's playground;

- Gnoll Park Master Plan – the development plan had been completed, and as stated in the circulated report the Tourism Team will now be working alongside colleagues at Gnoll Country Park to deliver the proposals;
- Destination Marketing – this campaign, to launch the new Neath Port Talbot place brand, was going to be a key piece of work going forward. It was mentioned that the launch date had been delayed due to the pandemic;
- Other – signage had been delivered at Aberavon Seafront, as well as the outdoor gym.

Members expressed their interest in being involved in the new Destination Management Plan at an early stage in order to feed into the review and renewal of the plan; it was also asked if at some point Members could have a preview of the new website. Officers confirmed that the Committee would have involvement with this work going forward, as previously agreed, including taking part in various workshops; due to Covid-19, the progress on the destination marketing had slowed down, as the Council was not yet able to launch the new plan and Officers were at a stage where they had to help the industry through the pandemic.

It was asked, that once the pandemic was over, if the Committee could look back on the Tourism industry and how Covid-19 had affected it overall. It was mentioned that an exercise in relation to this would be carried out post Covid-19; the primary source of data for this would be the STEAM statistics, which was a model used to measure consistently over the past 10+ years. Officers confirmed that they could also look into qualitative data. Members were informed that currently, no businesses had failed due to the pressures of the pandemic, and were still surviving in the current climate.

Officers were asked if they had been receiving support from Visit Wales throughout the pandemic, to which it was confirmed that the Council had good working relationships with the organisation and were pleased with what had been achieved working with them so far.

Members queried whether the Committee could visit some of businesses that had been affected by Covid-19 when they re-opened.

Officers mentioned that this could be arranged and that it would be a good way to show support.

It was stated that the lockdown periods had helped residents rediscover what Neath Port Talbot had to offer and that it was important, once restrictions were lifted, to ensure that non-local individuals discovered this as well through promoting the County Borough. Officers highlighted that the links between the tourism offer, sales within the County Borough and showing wider aspects of the area and what it had to offer were all important for underpinning the economic development offer; this was critical when attracting inward investment and selling buildings, land or properties to individuals. It was mentioned that changes had been made in terms of the way individuals could operate, and this was something that would continue; for example there were new ways of working, through systems such as Microsoft Teams, which allowed people to work from home, therefore provided them with the opportunity to live in different areas. It was added that this could potentially sell the County Borough to individuals and boost the economy in certain areas.

In relation to the outdoor gym at Aberavon Seafront, it was asked whether there was scope for more to be added throughout the County. Officers confirmed they would be monitoring the use of the gym at the seafront, and if it was well received could look into replicating them in various other spaces.

Members asked if Officers were aware of any organisations, particularly larger tourism organisations that had applied for the economic resilience fund. It was noted that Officers weren't able to comment on individual cases in terms of the grant funding and there were some which didn't qualify, however they were aware that the majority had been well received and the team had worked well in getting tourism money out to various different sectors. Members were informed that the economic resilience fund was just one type in a wide range of different pots of funding that businesses could apply for; there were also a number of factors that determined whether a business would be eligible for funding. It was mentioned that the reason there was so much focus on providing advice to businesses, was to help them navigate through the different options of funding and the steps they would need to go through in order to achieve funding. Officers added that there was a very small number of businesses in the County Borough who still hadn't received any

funding support; these were the smaller self-catering operators who didn't currently meet the criteria.

A discussion took place in relation to plans for when restrictions were lifted as there were some concerns with the potential of the County having a lot of visitors when this happened and some residents had previously complained about the amount of people that were visiting certain areas. Officers explained that this was one of the reasons why they had held back with the marketing proposals, and that it would be confusing for individuals if the Council was to send out mix messages persuading people to visit the area, whilst also telling them they couldn't visit the area. It was noted that conversations had taken place with Brecon Beacons National Park in relation to the waterfalls, as the Council was not promoting them, however there were large numbers of people turning up to them; whilst the Council or partner organisations, such as Visit Wales, weren't carrying out any marketing campaigns due to these factors, posts of the places on social media were encouraging people to visit and this was causing issues with the residents as they were unhappy with the number of tourists. It was stated that this was very difficult to manage and obtain the right balance, as the Council had no impact on the people sharing the posts on social media; however, Officers were working with partners to try and manage the messages that were being put out to the public.

It was queried whether Officers were aware of any shortages on skills or labour workers. It was confirmed that Officers weren't currently aware of any shortages, although there would have been individuals who had left the industry; these sectors tend to be quite transient, with people entering and leaving frequently as this was the way in which the economy worked. The Committee was informed that it was difficult to predict shortages at a time in which businesses were letting go of staff rather than looking for them; however, there had always been a labour shortage in terms of chefs and service staff in the hospitality sector. It was added that this provided an opportunity for the tourism and hospitality sector, post Covid-19, to try and help recruit individuals into these jobs.

In regards to plans for events and festivals, Members were informed that that the Authority was not at the stage to take on events; however decisions would need to be made soon in regards to some of the larger scale events that the County holds every year, for example Neath Fair and Neath Food and Drink Festival; the

reasoning for this was due to the approaching critical stage of getting a planning process in place, which takes around 4-5 months to complete. Officers highlighted that when the Tourism Team was established, they were allocated a sum of money for an event fund as part of their budget; the intention was to launch this with the new destination management plan, as it could potentially help with the recovery of events and festivals when it was appropriate to hold them. It was noted that Officers did not want to commit money to an event that could potentially be cancelled, or on the other hand put time and money into an event that would not be well attended, as people may not feel comfortable attending due to the amount of people these events involve and the close proximity of people; Officers confirmed that the situation would be monitored very closely.

The Committee received a brief update in relation to the Active Travel Plan; a full report would be provided at the next meeting of the Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee which will detail where the money had been spent and how the active travel agenda was progressing. In terms of the active travel maps, Members were made aware that the integrated network map was in place, and had a mixture between short, medium and long term routes, some of which were aspirational; when the initial map was prepared, a conscious decision was made to put in a lot of aspirational routes in order to link better with the valley communities which were dispersed throughout the community. Subsequently, it was highlighted that Officers had put in bids to Welsh Government to seek funding to deliver those schemes, however to date had not been successful in obtaining these particular bids; Welsh Government were currently trying to acquire the numerical advantage of having schemes within the main centres of Neath, Port Talbot and Pontardawe as the population in the valley communities wasn't sufficient enough to demonstrate value for money being spent on those routes. Members were informed that the map was being reviewed again this year, and there had been more guidance issued which Officers hoped would provide more flexibility in what routes Local Councillors could put forward; when going through this process, it could provide a basis for more successful schemes particularly in the valley areas. It was added that Officers were looking to expand the network for recreational routes and that the Welsh Transport Strategy was being reconsidered to consider the rural offer. Officers explained that an initial consultation had been carried out on the active travel maps, which received a good response; as the schemes

come forward as part of the mapping process, Local Councillors will be involved.

Members highlighted that they were encouraging their communities to use the LEADER grant and asked if there was a way to simplify or change the process for receiving funding going forward, in order for the community groups, charities and other organisations to be able to use the funding to effectively deliver in the communities. Officers were aware that the application process had been simplified on the understanding that small community groups were finding the process difficult; funding under a certain threshold was now a very short application process and there were officers in post in the team to provide support with filling out the application and the project delivery.

Following Scrutiny, the report was noted.

4. **Consultation on 2021/22 Budget Proposals**

An overview was received on the Planning and Public Protection and Property and Regeneration draft budget proposals 2021/2022, as detailed in the circulated report.

Members were informed that there were no proposed cuts in budgets for the Planning and Public Protection and Property and Regeneration divisions in 2021/22.

The report captured that there was a budget pressure of £30k on Planning and Public Protection; Officers provided detail on the particular pressures which included:

- Asset Sponsorship Management Service – this scheme had been in place for some time and provided the opportunity for local companies to sponsor Council assets and promote their businesses. It was anticipated that the income generated from this service would be significantly affected given the financial impact of the pandemic on businesses and their ability to sponsor assets; the identified pressure of £15k in 2021/22 reflected the anticipated gap in income generation below the target threshold;
- Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being Grant (ENRaW) – Welsh Government was continuing to assess funding commitments and priorities, and as a consequence of this the Countryside and Wildlife team were yet to receive confirmation of whether they had been successful in a significant grant

award associated with the South West Wales 'Connecting Green Infrastructure' Project. The initial grant application amounted to a budget of £2.42 million over 3 years, of which £981k was direct spend for the Council. A lot of the project delivery and staff were dependant on grant funding generally; the identified pressure of £15k in 2021/22 reflected the fixed staff costs to be funded from the unconfirmed ENRaW Grant;

- Local Development Plan – there wasn't a pressure identified for the next financial year in regards to the LDP, primarily due to the delays in the former commencement of the LDP process, therefore there was currently enough funding within the LDP reserve to meet the projected spend for next year. There was a £100k pressure identified in 2022/23 however, which provided for the ongoing commitment to cover the costs of LDP preparation.

The following risks to be carried forward for the Planning and Public Protection division were highlighted (these risks were not currently reflected in the pressures):

- Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) Service and Covid Enforcement Officer Workforce – the current position was that the TTP workforce was fully funded by Welsh Government until 31 March 2021, and partially funded for the duration of the first quarter of 2021/22. The Covid Enforcement Workforce was noted to only be fully funded until 31 March 2021; this workforce was currently funded out of the Local Authority Hardship Fund, and Officers had received confirmation that this particular funding stream would not be extended into 2021/22. Officers were currently in conversation with Welsh Government in order to confirm what their expectations were of the TTP Service and the Covid Enforcement Workforce going into next year;
- Environmental Health and Trading Standards Backlog of 'Business as Usual' Work – Officers across the service had been deployed to the front line of the Council's wider response to the pandemic; as a consequence of this, there was now a backlog of 'business as usual' work. The circulated report provided examples of where the backlog of work had developed, and moving forward there was a need to look at how the Council deploys resources in order to address the backlog.

In regards to Property and Regeneration, it was noted that a budget pressure of £549K was identified which made allowances for the following:

- Decarbonisation Measures including staffing and maintenance of recharging points for electric vehicles – as part of the Decarbonisation and Renewable Energy (DARE) Strategy, the Council will be looking at a plan that moves the Council forward to becoming carbon neutral; a number of Electrical Vehicle (EV) charging points had been installed to service the EV fleet that was increasing in size. There were also plans to introduce EV charging points into the community for public use; a piece of work was being completed in which Neath Port Talbot and the rest of South West Wales would be linked with a new strategy. There was an identified pressure of £50K in 2021/22 which would increase to £100K for future financial years to deal with this expansion and the maintenance of the EV infrastructure;
- Reduction in Rental income base budget due to ongoing impact of Covid – there were a number of Council owned properties including industrial units, retail premises and offices, in which were granted rent-free periods due to the impact of the pandemic to ensure they could continue to operate going forward. A provision of £250K was made in the budget for the 2021/22 and £100K for 2022/23 which would cover the reduction of income as a consequence of the rent-free periods and the number of likely rental ‘voids’ as businesses were unable to continue in occupation and new tenants were more difficult to find;
- National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR) increase re Former Crown Building – the refurbishment was soon to be finished and a handover was due to be completed in the next few weeks; as soon as the building was returned, the Council would then be liable for NNDR. A provision of £79K was set in the budget which would cover the interim period;
- Additional Town Centre Officers – the Council currently operated with one individual who looked after all of the town centres in the County; this was identified to be a challenge and therefore an additional two Officers were proposed to be appointed for additional support in carrying out the work, including addressing issues that arise during the day. As it would still be challenging for three Officers to manage all the town centres, they would be closely liaising with other areas of

the Council such as traffic enforcement and streetcare, partners such as the Police and business within the areas to provide a visible town centre presence;

- Regeneration, Economic Development and Business Support additional capacity – the staff numbers within these areas had reduced significantly over the past years, and the volume and complexity of work had increased; therefore it was proposed to provide additional support in terms of staff resources to deliver the existing programmes (including the City Deal), to continue to successfully bid for future funding, and to enable NPT to seek to lead on regional programmes.

The Committee were informed of some of the risks to be carried forward for the Property and Regeneration division:

- Business Support and Economic Development – whilst the additional £100k outlined in the report would provide additional capacity in the service, it was unlikely that it would be sufficient to deal with the complex challenges presented and moving forward with progression, additional support may be required in those areas;
- Decarbonisation – if the Council was to meet the target of being carbon neutral by 2030, additional revenue support and major capital investment was needed.

In relation to the decarbonisation measures, Members asked for information on the progress of preparing the strategy and plan for the infrastructure. Officers explained that this was one of the projects within the supporting innovation low carbon growth programme within the City Deal, which was focused on leading EV across the South West Wales region; an EV strategy group was set up for the region, and Officers had recently linked in with this group to help deliver on the project. It was mentioned that Officers had also been in communication with a company who carried out work on this in Dundee, which had one of the best infrastructures in the UK. Members were informed that there was still a lot of work to be done, however good progress was being made; the Council would be working on its own strategy, as well as linking in with the regional strategy. In terms of timescales, it was noted that the regional EV strategy was going to be taken for decision in due course, and if accepted, that decision would provide the funding for the region; the outcome of this will then determine the Councils plan and strategy to

ensure that it doesn't conflict with the regions. It was stated that it would take around 6 months to move this project forward into a reasonable position; in the meantime, the Council was making progress for example, identifying where the EV charging points could be installed.

Officers were asked if the Councils fleet had been expanded, to which it was confirmed that the amount of vehicles in the fleet had increase; they were working well and staff were happy to drive them. It was added that the amount of vans in the fleet would soon to be increased and introduced within the next few months; Officers were in the process of putting the infrastructure in place in order to expand the fleet further, as there needed to be a sufficient amount of chargers in place to do this.

It was queried if the town centre Officers, as part of their role, would be looking to improve the cultural aspects of the town centres. Members were informed that their role was going to be focused on the day to day management; however, if over a period of time spare capacity was identified, then additional tasks could be added to the role where appropriate. It was stated that the Officers would be assisting with festivals and events when they were running again; their role in this could potentially be expanded in the future. Officers highlighted that running events in town centres was difficult due to the need to bring in generators, therefore electrical pop up points had been introduced in Neath, Port Talbot, Pontardawe and Glynneath in order for events to happen easily, especially smaller events.

Officers clarified that the term 'replacement LDP', which was used within the circulated report, was used in the context that the current LDP will remain in place until the new LDP was adopted. It was added that Officers would be looking into the performance of the LDP, and there would likely be some areas in which it underperformed, and this would then be the focus in terms of the review process; there will also be parts of the LDP that perform adequately and sufficiently well.

Further discussion took place in relation to the ENRaW grant, which as previously mentioned, Officers hadn't received confirmation if the Countryside and Wildlife Team had been successful in achieving that grant. Members were informed that this particular grant and others, were being considered by the Welsh Government Investment Panel the week commencing 22 February 2021, therefore Officers should have a better idea of the Councils position by then. It was noted that

the initial grant was submitted for £2.4mil over 3 years, however it would now affectively become a two year spend as this grant would not go beyond the end of 2022/23 financial year; as a consequence to this, the budget and projects will need to be re-profiled.

Following Scrutiny of the budget details contained within the report, Members were reminded that their comments from this meeting would form part of the formal consultation response for the budget 2021/22. They were asked that if they had any other proposals for budget savings, not included within the attached report, that they approach Officers for their consideration.

CHAIRPERSON