

Regeneration and Sustainable Development Scrutiny Committee

(Remotely via Teams)

Members Present:

22 October 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 C.Morris, S.Brennan, .J.Davies, N.Headon, A. Collins, C.Roach and C.Davies

Invitees: Councillors D.Jones, L.Jones and S.Jones

1. **Chairs Announcements**

The Committee was informed of an error in the following report on the Cabinet Board Agenda:

- Agenda Item 8 – Key Performance Indicators 2019/2020 – Quarter 1 (1 April 2021 – 30 June 2021)

It was noted that the title of the report should read '*Key Performance Indicators 2020/2021 – Quarter 1 (1 April 2021 – 30 June 2021)*'

Following the update, Members noted the error.

2. **Declarations of interest**

The following Members made a declaration of interest:

Cllr. S. Rahaman -

Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 – Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he owns a local business within the County

- Borough which received grant support.
- Cllr. S. Pursey - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is a Trustee of Taibach Community Library which has received grant support.
- Cllr. S. Knoyle - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is the Director of Glynneath RFC Limited and also has a local business within the County Borough which has received grant support.
- Cllr. R. Taylor - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as she is a Trustee of Taibach Community Library which has received grant support.
- Cllr. D. Cawsey - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is a Trustee and Non-executive Director of various charities and organisations that received grant support.
- Cllr. S. Hunt - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is a member and Chairman of various charities and organisations that received grant support.
- Cllr. H. James - Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local

Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is Chair of the Neath Port Authority which received grant support.

Cllr. N. Hunt -

Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he owns a local business within the County Borough which received grant support.

Cllr. C. Jones -

Re. Cabinet Board Agenda Item 7 - Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present, as he is an official at Alltwn RFC and owns a local business within the County Borough which received grant support.

3. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2021 were approved.

4. **Report on Community Benefits**

Members were provided with a report on outputs and results from the delivery of community benefits through the construction phase of Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School.

It was stated that all of the Councils construction projects were linked to the South Wales Contractors Regional Framework; and all had contractual community benefits within the construction projects. It was mentioned that they were based around targeted recruitment and training; for example taking on local unemployed people, providing work experience opportunities, taking on local apprenticeships using the local supply chain and supporting community initiatives.

Officers explained that they decided to use Cefn Saeson Comprehensive School as an example because despite the pandemic, they had overachieved on all of their targets; apart from the school engagement target which was difficult to achieve due to

the pandemic. It was highlighted that this target was hoped to be achieved by the end of next year.

A discussion took place in regards to the sustainability of the projects. It was noted that the Council part funded the shared apprenticeship scheme, which has enabled work experience and shared apprenticeships to be completed; this has provided individuals with opportunities to obtain local jobs as they had been upskilled and trained to do so. Members were informed that long term unemployed individuals had been taken on via the Workways and Communities for Work Project; the contractor had also worked with local social enterprises including Women's Aid social enterprise arm, Thrive, and given them employment opportunities.

The Committee noted the report.

5. **Rhondda Tunnel Society Presentation**

It was confirmed that the Rhondda Tunnel Society Presentation would be deferred to a future meeting of the Committee due to unforeseen circumstances.

6. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

Commercial Property Grant: 23 Church Place, Neath, SA11 3LL

The Committee received a report regarding the proposal to part fund improvements to the external appearance of the commercial property 23 Church Place, Neath, SA11 3LL.

It was explained that this grant would physically enhance the character of Church Place and the Neath Conservation Area, as the existing rendering was in poor condition and had become a safety hazard to pedestrians due to the rendering crumbling and falling to the street. Officers added that the grant would be used to re-render the Old Market Street and side elevations of the building.

Reference was made to the target areas of the Commercial Property Grant; one of which was specific commercial centres. It was confirmed that the grant could be offered to various commercial centres across the whole of the County Borough; however they had to be in a significant visual area. Members were informed that the idea of the Commercial Property Grant was to improve the streetscene, therefore the buildings that were very visible to the public.

Members queried what the finish of the building was going to look like, and highlighted the importance of the visual appearance of Neath Conservation Area. Officers confirmed that they will liaise with colleagues in the Planning Service to ensure that the new rendering fitted in with the conservation area.

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

Covid-19 Grant Support for Local Businesses from March 2020 to Present

(Cllr. S.Rahaman, Cllr. N.Hunt, Cllr. S.Knoyle and Cllr. C.Jones re-affirmed their interest at this point and withdrew from the meeting)

An update report was provided to Members on the activities of the Economic Development Service in processing Covid-19 financial assistance to local businesses from March 2020 to August 2021.

It was noted that in March 2020, the UK Government announced that the Country would be entering a lockdown; following this Welsh Government announced that they would be using a non-domestic rate system to deliver emergency grant payments to businesses across Wales. Officers confirmed that at that time, to qualify for grant support, business needed to either be in receipt of small business rates relief, be operating within the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors or be a registered charity or community sports club; initially these grants were in the region of £10k and £25k, and the level of support was dependant on the rateable value of their property.

Members were informed that it quickly became apparent that there was going to be a huge demand on services, in terms of providing advice and guidance to local businesses to help them access the relevant support; in response to this, three members of the Economic Development Team were immediately assigned to support the Business Rates Team. It was stated that this enabled the Business Rates Team to concentrate on processing the grants and providing payments to businesses as efficiently as possible; the Economic Development Team focused on fielding all of the queries that were coming in, which was quite substantial at the time. It was added that throughout the first three months of the lockdown, the Teams were able to provide a supportive and practical service to help local businesses through the difficult period.

Officers outlined some examples of issues that arose during this time, which they had to overcome; such as many premises weren't on the

on the Council's business rating listing, some landlords hadn't registered their premises as multiple occupancy and some units had been split and business rates hadn't been informed of the change. It was added that many of the local businesses that were claiming small business rates relief didn't inform business rates that there was a change of ownership; this resulted in a significant amount of work that needed to be completed in order to get the business premises registered with the valuation office, which wasn't an easy task at the time due to the valuation offices across Wales being inundated with the same issues. The Committee was informed that a lot of businesses struggled to apply for the grants with the online application forms, therefore Officers had to provide support with this to get them through the process.

It was stated that, on a daily basis, there was a lot of information that was being released from UK and Welsh Governments regarding the various programmes of support; as well as trying to field all the calls and enquiries, the Teams also had to make sure they were up to date with the latest information including the eligibility of the various schemes.

Reference was made to the self-employed income support scheme, which was highlighted to be one of the key schemes due to a lot of the businesses being registered as self-employed; these businesses weren't necessarily able to access the other grants, therefore this support scheme was essential for them.

In the first three months, it was highlighted that the Economic Development Team helped more than 850 local businesses apply for the grant funding; they dealt with over 3,500 emails in addition to many telephone calls, and they supported the registration of 400 new premises onto the Council's business rating system. It was mentioned that in those first three months, £40million worth of grants were delivered and over 3,000 local businesses were supported.

The Committee was informed that over the following 14 months, the Economic Development Team went on to deliver a further nine rounds of grants on behalf of Welsh Government, which came at various points in time; the first scheme delivered supported new business starts. It was added that they also delivered three rounds of the freelancer fund which provided support to businesses and individuals working within the arts, heritage and creative sectors; as well as delivering six rounds of discretionary funding which provided support to micro businesses impacted by the various lockdowns.

Overall during this period, it was noted that the Team processed 1,700 applications to the value of £2.4million; these were significantly small scale grants which varied between £1.5k and £2.5k. However, it was stated that these grants were of major importance to enable many of those businesses to survive.

Officers made reference to the quotes from local business, which were included in the circulated report, which showed their appreciation for the support they received.

It was noted that delivering these grants was important for the Teams as it helped them engage more with the foundational economy; the small businesses that service local needs. Officers highlighted that this element would be important going forward; especially as many of the businesses weren't likely to have linked with the Council previously. It was confirmed that Officers now had a better understanding of these businesses including their operations and what support they will require moving forward with recovery from the pandemic.

A discussion took place in regards to lessons learned and plans going forward; over the past 18 months it had been particularly difficult for many businesses, however some had adapted well by remodelling their operations, introducing new services and actively finding new ways to generate income. It was stated that many of the changes that businesses have had to make will become permanent, and Officers anticipated that the demand for investment funding will grow considerably over the coming years. Members were informed that Cabinet had recently agreed to additional internal funding of £260k to support local businesses recovery from the pandemic, and those seeking to make investments to promote growth going forward; a briefing note had been prepared for Members, outlining the proposed application and assessment process for distributing that fund. In addition to this, it was noted that Welsh Government had also asked Economic Development Departments across Wales to deliver a business recovery grant on their behalf; which highlights that they were moving away from emergency funding, and going into the business recovery phase. It was confirmed that currently the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) were leading on the discussions with all 22 Local Authorities, and Officers hoped to be made aware of exactly how much funding will be allocated to Neath Port Talbot in the coming weeks; it had been agreed that any additional Welsh Government funding would be integrated into the existing business grant support schemes. Officers hoped that the

Council would be in a position to start promoting and delivering the Welsh Government funds the first week in November, before launching the Councils own Neath Port Talbot growth and investment fund in January 2022.

Members highlighted the processes of the business recovery grant, and asked if this was setting the scene for future funding; whether Councils were going to be used to deliver grants like this in the future. It was noted that at the start of the pandemic, Welsh Government had quickly realised the value of the Economic Development Teams across all Local Authorities; in particular their ability and the range of contacts that they had. It was stated that Welsh Government had expressed going forward that they wanted to continue working with Local Authorities in regards to this, as they had realised that their model did not have the capacity to deliver these sorts of grants. Officers mentioned that the working relationship between the Council and Welsh Government, throughout the pandemic had been positive; they had been very supportive. It was added that there was potential for more UK Government involvement in this moving forward, which meant that Local Authorities would need to further learn and adapt.

Following on from this, it was queried whether there would be sufficient capacity and support within the Teams to continue with this work if it becomes the 'normal' process going forward. Officers highlighted that it was very clear throughout the pandemic that whilst the Teams performed very well, the circumstances of the work weren't sustainable; Officers were working weekends and extremely long days, and the service relied on the good will of the Teams to do this. Officers recognised that there was a need to look forward into the recovery of the pandemic and beyond, and look at how the Teams could be effectively resourced; the economy was going to change, and it was important to understand what was needed to support businesses to survive and thrive.

The Committee thanked the Teams for their hard work throughout these difficult times.

Following scrutiny, the report was noted.

(Cllr. S.Rahaman, Cllr. N.Hunt, Cllr. S.Knoyle and Cllr. C.Jones re-joined the meeting from this point onwards)

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

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

8. **Urgent items**

Because of the need to deal now with the matters contained in Minute No. 11 below, the Chairperson agreed that these could be raised at today's meeting as urgent items pursuant to Statutory Instrument No.2290 (as amended).

Reason for Urgency:

Due to the time element.

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**

The Committee scrutinised the following private Cabinet Board item:

Proposed acquisition of Land and Domestic Garage at the Junction of A48 and Water Street, Margam for the proposed Footpath/Cycleway Scheme linking Eglwys Nunydd and St David's Park, Margam

Members were provided with a report regarding the proposed acquisition of Land and Domestic Garage at the Junction of A48 and Water Street, Margam for the proposed Footpath/Cycleway Scheme linking Eglwys Nunydd and St David's Park, Margam.

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

11. **Proposed Disposal of Land at Harbourside to NPT College together with the proposed Acquisition of Land at Fabian Way from Welsh Government**

Members were provided with a report which detailed the proposed disposal of Land at Harbourside to NPT College together with the proposed Acquisition of Land at Fabian Way from Welsh Government.

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

CHAIRPERSON