

**Environment, Regeneration and Streetscene Services Scrutiny
Committee**

**(Multi-Location Meeting - Council Chamber, Port Talbot & Microsoft
Teams)**

Members Present:

14 September 2023

Chairperson: Councillor S.Pursey

Vice Chairperson: Councillor T.Bowen

Councillors: W.Carpenter, R.Davies, N.Goldup-John,
C.James, S.Grimshaw, S.M.Penry, L.Williams
and S.E.Freeguard

**Officers In
Attendance** D.Griffiths, C.Morris, N.Pearce, C.Plowman,
M.Roberts, A.Thomas, J.Stevens, T.Rees and
L.Beynon and T.Rees

Cabinet Invitees: Councillors W.F.Griffiths, J.Hurley and S.Jones

1. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

The Chair noted that the Members of the Scrutiny Committee had agreed to scrutinise the following items from the Cabinet Board agenda:

- Item 7. Amendment to Byelaw prohibiting cycling at Neath Memorial Gates and along the path between the bottom pond and Cimla Crescent
- Item 8. Public Space Protection Orders - Aberavon Seafront
- Item 9. Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP) - Revised Delivery Agreement (DA)
- Item 10. Parking Review 2023

2. Declarations of Interest

There were none.

3. **Pre-Decision Scrutiny**

Amendment to Byelaw prohibiting cycling at Neath Memorial Gates and along the path between the bottom pond and Cimla Crescent

Members were concerned about the danger of any irresponsible cyclists cycling fast down the hill through the gates. Members wanted to know if it was possible to open the two side gates so they would have to unseat to pass.

Members questioned whether the gates would be open during important anniversaries of remembrance such as battle of Britain or the armistice.

Officers advised that this was a procedural report to consult on the removal of the prohibition of cycling. To comply with Active Travel guidelines, officers would need to have the main gates open. Officers advised they wouldn't get support if cyclists had to dismount at the gates. Officers advised that for remembrance services officers would suspend the order and put in road closures to facilitate the events. If the gates were to remain open, after the services, wreaths would be placed in a way that won't cause an obstruction to the cyclists.

Members wanted to keep in mind that it is a memorial and to keep people safe.

Officers advised that it may be possible for additional signage to be considered to make people aware of the need to respect the memorials when cycling past and to be careful.

The Chair felt that it was a good point about being respectful of the memorials and to reflect that in the consultation members of the public would appreciate that.

Members asked if there was a separate part of the path dedicated to cyclists.

Officers advised that the route is designed in principle, and officers will consult further what the proposals will be. There may be parts that are a shared path, and they may be able to achieve segregated cycling and walking paths in other areas. This will be consulted at the detailed design stage.

Officers explained that this is only a small part of the Active Travel route.

Members asked how routes are identified and prioritised. Members didn't think this was an obvious priority in comparison to other routes elsewhere.

Officers advised that the adopted network route for the authority has identified 500 routes. There is no clear guidance now from Welsh Government or TFW on how to prioritise these. There are currently, High, low and medium priority routes. Officers are waiting on a software tool that is going to help local authorities prioritise the schemes further.

Officers explained that they will then try to deliver these based on the re-assessed prioritisation of routes with a view to secure grants to deliver those. Some schemes will come forward at different stages as some routes may require the purchase of land from private parties and there may also be consultation with statutory consultees as well.

Following scrutiny, members were supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

Public Space Protection Orders PSPO- Aberavon Seafront

Officers introduced the report as circulated to members.

Members expressed support for renewing the order and felt the previous prohibitions had worked to keep the seafront safer. Members asked officers to consider the early or late use of the beach for people who may wish to walk their dogs prior to/after work.

Members agreed that they have had similar feedback from residents and dog walkers about the timing and that the PSPO's sometimes prevent responsible dog owners who are considerate about picking up the dog mess to walk their dogs at the earlier or later times.

The Chair stated he would have liked to have seen this addressed as a specific question in the consultation but accepted there was a section in it where feedback on any issue could be included. Officers advised that they have done research with other coastal authorities, and those authorities have noted that they have found it hard to manage in relation to enforcement. Officers said there are two issues, having the dog off the lead and fouling. Officers are aware

that the majority of dog owners are considerate and pick up dog waste after them but those that don't cause a health risk. Officers noted the report today is only requesting permission for consultation.

Following scrutiny, members were supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

Replacement Local Development Plan (RLDP) - Revised Delivery Agreement (DA)

Ceri Morris introduced the report and explained that while it was disappointing to have to bring forward the report, it is the right approach to reset the clock on the RLDP timetable. Officers said they have been in contact with Welsh Government (WG) and they are understanding of the challenges and support the approach. Officers therefore don't think there will be issues with WG approving this.

Members asked what will be done differently this time round so there is an improved outcome? They noted that on page 70 there are several constraints like contamination, flood risk, infrastructure etc that won't change. Members wanted to know what solutions officers are looking at? Members also wanted to know what is being done differently to get more or different submissions for candidate sites?

Officers advised that the revised timetable would provide an extra year for plan preparation. The majority of work that has been done to date will remain relevant which means that officers can focus on looking at the solutions.

The authority under delivered in housing delivery, only built 100 units in 2021-22 and 100 units in 2022-23 with the growth levels they were looking at building 277, so the revised timetable will enable the under delivery in the early years of the new plan to be resolved.

Officers explained that they will do another call for candidate sites and welcome suggestions for candidate sites from members. Members were advised that there is an urban capacity study that officers are looking at, in all communities for past planning applications that haven't been implemented yet.

Officers have undertaken a sub-regional analysis with Swansea and will be talking to them and Powys to see if the growth and land needed is aligned. Officers will also look at what the Freeport implications will mean to the county borough.

Officers will need to look at commuter patterns and working from home and working with Transport for Wales regarding infrastructure issues. The Strategic Impact Assessment and phone data will help officers analyse this. Officers also advised of the need to consider the impact of the Metro and are working with Transport for Wales in that respect.

The extra time allows officers to explore large sites like Coed Darcy to discuss with landowners and developers on how to move these strategic sites forward.

Members were glad to hear the approach but felt some of it sounds like altering the definition of the numbers rather than the land that is available. Speaking to the big sites where there are issues is important and that the TFW infrastructure discussions is good to try tackle the issues around infrastructure and the transport to the valleys is crucial as an alternative to people using their cars.

Officers advised that in terms of the candidate site process, they have discussed with Welsh Government officials about looking at how they can review the threshold of evidence needed by those submitting sites. This has turned people off submitting sites, so they are looking at trying to reduce the burden at this early stage to try get more submissions in for review.

Nicola Pearce Director of environment explained that there are lots of exciting economic development opportunities coming into NPT so this will help developers' peace of mind in having a market for their product such as the Freeport opportunity and valley community sites and projects were unknown when they last went out for candidate sites.

Members asked what impact the RLDP delay would have on the Corporate joint committee subcommittee on planning.

Officers explained that they are separate processes given that they are two different tiers of development plan. Whilst there are also delays with bringing forward the Strategic Development Plan (SDP), because of the resource issue situation, Welsh Government has a stance that local planning authorities must not stop the preparation of the Local Development Plans (LDP). While LDPs and SDPs need to be in conformity with one another, they are separate processes.

A lot of the joint work that has been undertaken across the region, the broader and local issues are being looked at on a joint basis. The work not only supports the individual LDPs but also will provide the building blocks for the SDP. With a total of three tiers of development plan in Wales, you will always have challenges in aligning them all, particularly the timescales for preparation.

Following scrutiny, members were supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

Parking Review 2023

The Chair advised that the committee has undertaken a significant amount of scrutiny on these proposals both in the task and finish group with those recommendations produced and at the previous meeting of the Scrutiny committee. Members raised significant concerns about the impact of the proposals on businesses, residents, and disabled people and extent of consultation. The Chair reminded members that cabinet members deferred the decision in the July meeting. The chair reminded the members and the public that the decision will be made by the cabinet members not by the scrutiny committee. The chair advised that the report is substantially the same as the one in July but acknowledged some of the concerns of the committee on disability. The chair welcomed the updated Impact assessment but noted no changes to proposals had been made on that.

Members expressed concerns that many points raised last time had not been addressed. Members were concerned about the parking charges and the request that the committee try raise funds through the charges. Members stated that VIVA Port Talbot have been working hard on revitalising the town centre. Members felt that the legal minimum consultation wasn't appropriate for this level of change for businesses in the area and members were disappointed that no change had been made on that. Members also expressed shocked that the report doesn't show an impact on disabled people.

Officers advised that there will be 2 statutory consultations, one for the tariff charges for off-street car parks and the other for strategy consultation on any amendments to on street regulatory traffic orders. Officers advised that consultees would have an opportunity to respond to. Any objections received will need to be reported back to scrutiny and cabinet board for consideration.

Members were advised the town centre free Christmas parking days, were a discretionary option from the council to offer those. Town centre managers will conduct consultation with traders directly on what days they would like to select for the free 5-day parking offer and how they would like to align those dates with any events they have across the year.

Officers explained that they have made an amendment to the IIA. Officers advised that they are not saying that it doesn't affect disabled visitors, but that it may affect them, and having taken advice from the equalities officer they were satisfied that it reflected the officers position contained within the IIA.

Local members advised that they were disappointed with the parking review and its recommendations. Members felt that the council and VIVA Port Talbot have worked hard to increase footfall and they felt that this report will have a negative effect on footfall. Members accepted that there were budget pressures but were concerned that the proposal didn't justify the wider impact on Port Talbot and against increases in charges.

Members expressed the view that the same support needs to be given to the beach and town centre area traders as developers looking to build in the area.

Members felt that the changes will create an increase in Blue Badge applications.

Members read out a statement from the Chair of VIVA Port Talbot board.

Members spoke on behalf of the traders of Neath and urged officers to be careful of causing an issue for people who would want to drop in quickly for something from the town but may get put off, the low tariff for the first hour would help this.

Members explained that traders don't feel that they have been properly consulted as this will affect them greatly. Christmas revenue sees traders in Neath through January, and they are not sure that the free parking in January will offset that. Members appealed to cabinet on behalf of the traders of Neath to re-think this and encourage footfall into the towns.

The Cabinet member for Economic Growth advised that he did contact VIVA PT to get their views because of comments from the

last meeting but didn't receive a response as of that meeting, however he had listened to the statement read out. He would like to get close to communities in all the authority's town centres so they can get feedback prior to putting forward changes.

Members raised the effect on disabled people and highlighted in previous scrutiny that because of their disablement they may be constrained to specific times of accessing services taking away of the free 1hour spot is going to severely affect them. and disproportionately affected as most disabled people are on benefits or a fixed income.

Members urged officers to think again about removing the free hour due to the impact on disabled people, people with mental health issues. Members advised that businesses on the seafront have made representations about the fact that any changes that prevent customers stopping off to quickly pick up something from them. Members also raised that some of the charges were over the 5-10% fees and charge rises stipulated by the current administration had previously suggested.

Officers made a general response to the issues raised. They understood that it was a difficult time for an increase in charges for people to afford, but due to the significant budget problem officers are having to raise charges as they have no alternative in order to do so. Officers said that they are looking at ways to increase income and reduce costs so they can still provide the level of service the authority is currently providing if not a better level of service.

Officers highlighted that the vast majority of the proposals in the report were supported and that there has been a long period where there was no charging for car parking and was only after a hard decision when austerity hit that charging was brought in to enable the authority to maintain carparks.

Members were advised that there are significant maintenance backlogs because of the lack of funds available but people will pay for services if it is of good quality. Officers explained that some of the carparks are not maintained to the standard officers would like and there is a report being done on parking provision across the County Borough. This is looking at use and demand and if there is any potential to downsizing the number of carparks in NPT and using some of these for alternative purposes.

Members were informed that there are lots of pieces of work that will inform income generation opportunities and how the town centres and other destinations can be supported going forward to increase footfall and attractiveness of them. Officers highlighted Place Plans that are being developed for the town centres and some of the district centres to identify what regeneration opportunities could be looked into further and secure funding to make them more attractive and bring more people to the town centres.

Members were advised that work on viability and vitality of town centres is being done in relation to the Local Development Plan. Officers are aware that some of the town centres are significant in size and there are several vacant properties and residential properties appearing within town centres. Officers looking at the size and position of town centres to concentrate activities within a smaller area to increase vitality as part of the LDP.

Officers explained that there is a small-Town Centre team which is being restructured and the terms of reference and priorities of them being looked at as well. The teamwork with the traders and the BID in Port Talbot to try and identify what events or activities bring people into the town centres and what has been effective previously through analysis.

Members were advised that funding had been secured to undertake a seafront strategy to see what would need to be undertaken to make it more attractive to visitors and for people to stay longer and spend money in the businesses and facilities in the area.

It was explained to members that there was lots being done to improve attractiveness as an attraction but they can't afford to manage the carparks on the income currently generated and they need to increase the income in order to invest back into those facilities that they want to maintain in the long term.

Officers noted that some councils may operate free parking, but it is only Llanelli town centre who operate an alternative offer to Neath Port Talbot and the charges have been benchmarked against other authorities.

Members were advised that the Authority is also a payer towards the BID and not all BID payers are against the charges. Officers highlighted to members that it was the BID who suggested the idea of

having days that the free parking is spread out through the year and BID wanted more freedom in when the free parking days would be.

Officers advised that in the recommendations in the echelon parking at the Seafront, while it is time limited. Blue Badge holders would be exempt the time limit and the charge. If members of the public are eligible for a Blue Badge they should be encouraged to do so.

The chair highlighted that when the task and finish was undertaken, the decision to raise income had already been taken and the task and finish group worked within that when they came up with their recommendations in order to try and make the best of the situation. The committee members do not necessarily support or were happy with the principle of the parking charges but accepted it was inevitable in sense of the budget.

Officers advised that they accept that and as officers they also didn't want to be in the position to put the fees up either but the circumstances mean that it is a necessary requirement to maintain these facilities and as officers they also use these services and would affect them also.

Officers thanked the scrutiny committee as a lot of positive feedback came out of that process and there are work streams that will continue to be taken forward as a result. Even though the budget had been set, even with these proposals they will be £25,000 short and there has also been other financial pressures. The financial predicament for the council will be challenging now and in the future.

Members were concerned that the occupancy of car parks wasn't where it should be and to maintain and develop the car parks to a higher standard costs money and questioned if this the right course of action? Members also highlighted that there are other towns in Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) that do have free parking in most towns.

Members understood the pressures and need to increase revenue but felt that this was not the best way. Members also raised that VIVA Port Talbot had not been consulted at all before the review had been completed. Members advised that after last Christmas traders wanted free parking sooner than Christmas and if officers think about more free parking days that might help. They expressed the view that 5 days would not be sufficient.

Members felt that Neath has one of the best multi story car parks in Wales and if as an authority they want to see car parks of that standard and maintain others and bring it up to that standard also then charges would need to increase as it costs a large amount in maintenance and cleaning.

Members felt that other authorities were charging far more than Neath Port Talbot.

The Cabinet member explained that the biggest increase in footfall was in regeneration in Neath. Boots had recorded record figures when they opened. The commitment is being shown by the regeneration team with places planning and town centre managers. Getting footfall up is improving the town centres and he is speaking to property owners in Queen Street to move things forward and as a commitment to try improving and increase footfall.

Officers highlighted that there are free car parks still in NPT just like RCT and that in comparison Swansea have removed all free car parking as part of delivering a balanced budget. Officers advised that they haven't gone that far in proposals but do have to make difficult decisions of increasing charges and imposing charges in other areas where they aren't currently in place. The effectiveness and impact of these decisions will be reviewed within 6 months of it being implemented to have the opportunity to amend anything not working.

In relation to Christmas parking, they took VIVA Port Talbot's comments on board about more flexibility on free parking days and not concentrate them all to Christmas lead up and after. Officers will be consulting with VIVA, Neath and Pontardawe town council's and the traders via town centre managers. That consultation will be undertaken as part of this process.

The Chair advised that he understood where VIVA Port Talbot were coming from in terms of flexibility, but the report was reducing 17 days down to 5 and VIVA were probably not intending on that reduction in free parking days when they asked for flexibility.

Following scrutiny, a recorded vote was proposed and seconded and agreed.

The recommendation as outlined on pages 206 - 209 of the Cabinet report was proposed and seconded.

For: Cllrs T.Bowen, W.Carpenter, R.Davies, N.Goldup-John.

Against: Cllrs S.Pursey, S.Freeguard, S.Penry, C.James,
S.Grimshaw, L.Williams.

Members were not supportive of the recommendations to be considered by Cabinet Board.

4. **Urgent Items**

There was none.

5. **Access to Meetings**

Members decided not to scrutinise any private items.

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

Members decided not to scrutinise any private items.

CHAIRPERSON