

**COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT**

**REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE  
REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SUBJECT: REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 23RD  
JANUARY, 2020**

**REPORT OF:**

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**PRESENT: COUNCILLOR L. PARSONS (CHAIR)**

Councillors M. Cross  
M. Day  
H. McCarthy  
M. Moore  
J. C. Morgan  
K. Pritchard  
K. Rowson  
B. Willis

**WITH:** Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services  
Head of Regeneration  
Service Manager – Development & Estates  
Business and Regeneration Manager  
Scrutiny Officer

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<b><u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u></b>  It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<b><u>APOLOGIES</u></b>  Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P. Edwards, J. Hill, J. Millard and M. Holland.	

No. 3	<p><b><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></b></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><b><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></b></p> <p>The minutes of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 were submitted.</p> <p>Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously,</p> <p>AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><b><u>ACTION SHEET - 9TH DECEMBER 2019</u></b></p> <p>The action sheet arising from the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 9<sup>th</sup> December, 2019 was submitted, whereupon:</p> <p><b><u>Action Sheet – 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 – Leisure and Culture Service Review</u></b></p> <p>A Member expressed his disappointment that the Chair of Community Services Scrutiny Committee had declined the request to allow all Scrutiny Members to participate in the discussion relating to the Leisure and Culture Service Review at the Committee's meeting in February 2020.</p> <p>It was noted that at the time that the original proposal to establish the Leisure Trust had been presented, a meeting of the relevant Scrutiny Committee had been opened up to all Scrutiny Members to discuss the proposal (with only those Members appointed to the Committee allowed to vote on the proposal).</p> <p>The Member continued by pointing out that a Working Group had undertaken a considerable amount of work over the last 12 – 18 months in respect of this issue and that it was unfortunate that as the Members of the Working Group were not Members of the Community Services Committee, they would be unable to participate or provided with the opportunity to provide feedback to the newly established Task and Finish Group on the work undertaken to date.</p>	

It was noted that the Wales Audit Office had commented previously that the review of Leisure Services lacked timely and meaningful Scrutiny Member involvement.

The Member concluded by reiterating his disappointment that the request for a Joint Scrutiny Committee had been declined and suggested that even if the Members of the original Working Group were not invited to the Committee at the very least, the Chair - Councillor P. Edwards should be invited to attend that meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer suggested that a proposal be made to the Chair of the Community Services Scrutiny Committee i.e. that Councillor P. Edwards (Chair of the Working Group) be invited to the February Committee to participate in the discussion in respect of the Leisure and Culture Services Review.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services confirmed that the work undertaken by the Working Group had been incorporated within the final Leisure and Culture Services Review report.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the action sheet be noted.

No. 6

**REGENERATION      WORKFORCE      SICKNESS      ABSENCE**  
**PERFORMANCE**

Consideration was given to the joint report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services and the Head of Organisational Development.

The Corporate Director of Regeneration & Community Services presented the report which provided Members with the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the sickness absence performance and the proposed actions for improvement for the directorate.

The Corporate Director advised that this was the first report of this nature that had been presented to Committee (each department would be producing a similar report to be presented to their respective Committees) and it was acknowledged that the report was 'work in progress' as further work needed to be undertaken with colleagues in Organisational Development to shape and focus the report to ensure that the statistics and information contained therein related to the Regeneration Service only. It was noted that

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currently information relating to the Community Services Service had also been included within the report.

The Corporate Director spoke in detail to the report and highlighted points contained therein. He emphasised that the vast majority of Council employees had excellent attendance levels as data indicated that 2463 employees had attended work every day during the period from April to March 2019 with the Council having an attendance level of 94.3%. It was the front line service areas that experienced higher levels of absence.

As a Directorate, sickness absenteeism was discussed at every monthly management meeting. An independent review of the top ten absences had been undertaken which had confirmed that managers were adhering to and applying the Attendance Management Policy.

The Corporate Director continued by stating that whilst there was evidence of managerial action in managing sickness the Regeneration Service acknowledged that better use of the iTrent system was required as at present only 16.48% of return to work meetings were recorded on the iTrent system. It was noted that not every department had access to this system, particularly front line managers and whilst return to work meetings were being held, they could not always necessarily be recorded. Therefore, work was required to improve this position.

Members were then given the opportunity to raise comments/questions in respect of the report.

**Attendance Levels** - a Member referred to the fact that the vast majority of Council employees had excellent attendance levels as the data indicated that 2463 employees attended work every day and said that this was to be commended. He asked whether these members of staff were commended for their excellent attendance levels.

The Corporate Director acknowledged this valid point and agreed that excellent attendance levels should be celebrated and undertook to pursue this matter at both the departmental management meeting and with Corporate Leadership Team.

**Chronic Sickness** – in reply to question relating to ‘chronic sickness’, the Corporate Director confirmed that this was largely

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attributed to stress. It was reported that the Council was currently rolling out mental health training for managers in order to better equip them to have appropriate discussions with individuals. It was noted that mental health and stress was a major issue across all organisations.

**iTrent System** – concern was expressed that not all managers had access to this system in order to record sickness information and said that this issue needed to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Report Content** – a Member commended and congratulated officers on the report and said it was beneficial that detailed costings had been supplied.

However, concern was expressed that as the graphs had not been printed in colour Members were unable to decipher this information clearly.

**Mental Health** – a Member referred to the number (46) employees who had lost working days due to mental health illness and as the Council had a duty of care to employees enquired whether there was a procedure in place via occupational health to assist staff suffering with problems of stress and anxiety.

The Corporate Director advised that the Council had increased its training programme in respect of mental health for its managers and this training also highlighted potential ‘triggers’ that could lead to such absences. He pointed out that most staff who were suffering with this condition wanted to attend work and the occupational health advisors needed to be reminded of this. The approach taken needed to be both sympathetic to the business need and the individual.

**Musculoskeletal & Injuries and Work/Non Work Related Mental Health** - a request was made that further information be provided in future reports in relation to Musculoskeletal & Injuries and Work/Non Work Related Mental Health.

**Attendance Management Strategies** – a Member asked that further information be supplied in respect of the strategies that were being implemented in order to reduce sickness absence.

The Corporate Director undertook to pursue this matter.

Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously that,

The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the sickness absence performance information and proposed arrangements to improve attendance rates within the Regeneration and Community Services Directorate had been scrutinised and further areas for improvement in order to drive forward performance improvement had been identified.

**No. 7**

**TRANSPORT STRATEGY**

Consideration was given to report of the Head of Regeneration.

The Head of Regeneration presented this initial report which sought Members views on the content and scope of the proposed transport strategy for Blaenau Gwent. The officer explained that further projects in relation of Metro Plus was on the cusp of being developed and the regional transport work with neighbouring authorities would shortly be drawing to a conclusion. Therefore, it was now the opportune time to develop a local strategy for the next 5 years.

The Head of Regeneration, thereupon, spoke in detail to the following paragraphs in the report which outlined:

**Paragraph 2.2** – the scope of the strategy and the elements which should be included.

**Paragraph 2.3** – the main strategic recommendations that needed to be considered around developing a long term vision for the strategy that commits to long-term planning.

**Paragraph 2.4** – operational improvements and new opportunities that could be explored and utilised.

It was noted that relevant stakeholders would also be consulted as part of the process. The Head of Regeneration emphasised that the strategy would not only relate to connectivity for trains but would also include buses, taxis and community transport – i.e. various vehicular movements and the areas/services that required improved access e.g. links were needed to the Rassau and Tafarnaubach Industrial Estates, G.P. surgeries. Discussions would also have to take place with third party organisations e.g. GAVO in order to plug any gaps in the network.

The Head of Regeneration concluded by requesting that discussions primarily focus around paragraph 2.2 i.e. the scope of the strategy and elements that should be included.

Members, thereupon, commented as follows:

- The importance of links to transport people to work.
- Transport links were required to care homes as a matter of urgency as people living in these care settings felt isolated specific mention was made to Red Rose Nursing Home where the nearest bus service was located outside the hospital.
- The provision of bus routes should be a priority.

The Head of Regeneration advised that on occasions commercial bus routes were not available, therefore, alternative forms of transport and options needed to be investigated, for example GAVO 'book a bus' for specialist journeys that not were not necessarily commercially viable. There were a number of digital sites available that provided information on the different forms of transport that were available but this needed to made easier for people to use.

- A Member expressed his concern regarding the digital aspect of booking a service and said that some older people did not have access to and use IT facilities.

Another Member suggested that enquiries be made with local bus companies to ask whether they could change their routes to include care homes as there should be direct bus routes provided to these facilities.

The Head of Regeneration undertook to pursue this matter with the Transport Section.

- A proactive approach should be taken to obtain data from subsidised transport companies.
- As young people undertaking apprenticeships had difficulty accessing job placements, particularly due to access and cost whether there was a system available whereby older persons could voluntarily give up their bus pass to a young person undertaking an apprenticeship in order to provide an

opportunity for them to access their placement.

The Head of Regeneration said that she hoped that this initiative could be encouraged. Rassau and Tafarnaubach Industrial Estates were classed as 'Business Improvement Districts' and all these initiatives would be examined for people and young people to access work easier including 'book a bus' for people who worked shifts.

- A Member expressed his concern that the lack of public transport was affecting recruitment (especially of young people) for businesses located within the Heads of the Valleys corridor.

He continued by referring to the report contained in the Information Pack 'Cardiff City Regional Transport Authority' and the work being undertaken as part of these arrangements and said that as this related to the Transport Strategy a precise of this report should have been provided to Members.

He expressed his concern that the information report was portraying that the main project was the Abertillery spur for the railway. However, a comprehensive plan should be provided for the whole of the County Borough which should include the provision of a light railway from Llanhilleth to Brynmawr, connectivity within the County Borough from east to west and west to east. Also connectivity to and from Abergavenny to Hirwaen and transportation to and from the industrial estates. The Member concluded by suggesting that a Task and Finish Group be established to undertake a piece of work in respect of the transport provision as there numerous ideas that could be captured together with the local knowledge of Members.

The Chair advised that a meeting of the Town Centre Task and Finish Group was due to commence imminently and the issue of transport could be included as part of that agenda. However, subsequently if it was felt that there was a need for an individual Task and Finish Group in relation to transport this would be reported to the next Committee meeting.

The Head of Regeneration advised the report contained in the information pack was a precise of the Regional Transport Authority



meetings that had taken place.

- A Member said that in preparing the Local Transport Strategy in addition to the requirements of the County Borough, officers should also take into account the work and projects that other local authorities were pursuing.
- The Ebbw Valley Railway was re-opened in 2008 and at that time it was intended that there be an Abertillery to Newport line. However, as time had now moved on a Member wondered whether this would now do the town more harm than good. He enquired whether officers had looked at the consequences if an Abertillery spur was provided?

The Head of Regeneration advised that a report would be produced by experts who would assess elements such as the socio economic and environmental aspects of the scheme.

With regard to Abertillery there was a need to make the town a vibrant place where people wanted to live and encourage people to make use of lower rents outside of Cardiff and also to attract businesses.

- A Member suggested that further work should be undertaken to promote the area and suggested that tourism officers could provide leaflets at Cardiff Central Station in order to promote the benefits of Blaenau Gwent. It was also suggested that a tourist information point be provided at the highest point on the Heads of the Valleys and information be provided at Bryn Bach Park as this was located close to the Heads of the Valleys.
- Another Member said that the reintroduction of the railway line had been a great success and had exceeded all expectations. However, he expressed his concern regarding the cost implications of providing an extra mile of railway track to Abertillery and hoped that this would not be detrimental to the overall strategy – there was, therefore, a need to look at the bigger picture.

He continued by referring to the regeneration of Tredegar Town Centre and that its profile had been raised by a Ministerial visit that had been held that day to the town and in particular to the TA Centre. He commended the officers

	<p>involved in the regeneration projects and requested that officers pass on congratulations and appreciation to Nick Landers and his team for the work undertaken.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Concern was expressed that there was no transport link within the Tredegar valley and asked whether work could be undertaken in conjunction with Caerphilly Council to provide a rail link to Bryn Bach Park.</li> <li>➤ A suggestion was made that investigations take place into whether people who was in receipt of concessionary travel cards could also benefit using alternative forms of transport such as taxis.</li> </ul> <p>The Head of Regeneration reported that Transport for Wales were introducing a digitised system for tickets which should make route planning easier.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Reference was made to the three old tunnels that linked Sirhowy to Ebbw Vale and that one tunnel entrance was located behind the car park at the Works Site and suggested that this history and artefacts could be incorporated as part of the strategy.</li> </ul> <p>The Corporate Director said that transport was currently a major topic nationally and one of the main reasons this strategy was required was in order that the Council could bid for funding to provide affordable and local connectivity throughout the County Borough.</p> <p>Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously that,</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the Local Transport Strategy be started in 2020 following the publication of the direction for local rail travel and tied in with the Wales Transport Strategy and future CCR Transport Strategy.</p>	
<p><b>No. 8</b></p>	<p><b><u>TECH VALLEYS</u></b></p> <p>The report of the Corporate Director of Regeneration &amp; Community Services was submitted for consideration.</p> <p>Members were advised that Welsh Government announced the</p>	

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Tech Valleys programme in the summer of 2017 and this was a £100 million Welsh Government commitment over ten years to create 1,500 sustainable jobs focused on Blaenau Gwent and hinterland. In 2027 the South Wales Valleys and Blaenau Gwent in particular, would be a globally recognised centre for development for new technologies, to support cutting edge industry.

As part of the wider review of the governance of the Enterprise Zone programme in Wales, Welsh Government had decided to wind up the Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone Board and in respect of Blaenau Gwent introduced the Tech Valleys Advisory Group – the role of which was outlined in paragraph 2.3 of the report.

Councillor H. McCarthy, B.A. (Hons) left the meeting at this juncture.

The Corporate Director, thereupon, gave details of the projects totalling in the region of £18.5m that had been included as part of the programme (outlined in paragraph 2.6 of the report) and in addition, details of two further business cases outlined in paragraph 2.7.

At this juncture, Members commented as follows:

- It was pleasing to hear details of all the projected ideas and said that inward investment was paramount for the authority succeeding and improve people's perception and it was hoped that this would come to fruition.
- Industry in Schools (STEM) – it was hoped that this pilot project could be rolled out to all schools in order to provide equal opportunity and delivery for all pupils in the County Borough.

The Chair advised that the Cardiff City Region Director had spoken at length at a recent meeting regarding STEM and that every authority had been sent an invite for schools to go to Sandhurst STEM Training but that no positive responses had been received from Blaenau Gwent. This had been discussed with the Executive Member.

The Corporate Director confirmed that the original bid that had been submitted required a pilot to be undertaken in the first instance and subsequently, this would be rolled out to all schools

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	<p>throughout the County Borough.</p> <p>Upon a vote being taken it was unanimously that,</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and Option 1 be endorsed, namely that the work of the Tech Valleys Programme be noted.</p>	
<b>No. 9</b>	<p><b><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME - 5TH MARCH 2020</u></b></p> <p>Consideration was given to the Forward Work Programme for the meeting scheduled to be held on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.</p> <p>Members were advised that the Information Item – ‘Annual Monitoring of the Regeneration Business Plan’ had been withdrawn.</p> <p>The following items would be presented to the April Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Destination Management Report.</li> <li>➤ Report relating to the establishment of a Task and Finish Group relating to Public Transport.</li> </ul> <p>Bi-annually an update be provided in respect of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Cardiff Capital Region City Deal Joint Overview and Scrutiny Committee.</li> </ul> <p>Member Briefings be convened in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Tech Valleys.</li> <li>➤ Cardiff Capital Region City Deal.</li> </ul> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and the following items be submitted to the scheduled meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 2020:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Review of Asset Management Disposal Policy</li> <li>➤ Targeted Regeneration Funding (TRI) Update</li> <li>➤ Employment and Skills Plan</li> <li>➤ Crowd Funding</li> </ul>	