

DCOUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

**SUBJECT: REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 6TH
JANUARY, 2021**

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HILL (CHAIR)

Councillors G. A. Davies (Vice-Chair)
M. Cross
M. Cook
H. McCarthy
K. Hayden
S. Healy
W. Hodgins
J. C. Morgan
J. P. Morgan
B. Willis

**WITH: Head of Regeneration & Development
Service Manager Business & Regeneration
Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer/Advisor**

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<u>APOLOGIES</u> Apology for absence was received from Councillor L. Parsons.	

No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>No declarations of interest or dispensations were reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd December, 2020 were submitted.</p> <p><i><u>Visit to Turkish Glass Factory</u></i></p> <p>A Member referred to page 19 of the minutes and sought advice on whether the Chair should have declared an interest as he had taken part in the visit, and therefore not taken part in the voting process.</p> <p>The Scrutiny Officer/Advisor reported that legal advice had been provided which stated that Members were only required to declare an interest when a report on the agenda was being discussed. As the Forward Work Programme was only listing items for consideration at the next meeting the Chair was not required to declare an interest.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>ACTION SHEET - 2ND DECEMBER 2020</u></p> <p>The Action Sheet arising from the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd December, 2020 was submitted, whereupon:</p> <p><i><u>Destination Management Plan</u></i></p> <p>A Member expressed concern that the Blaenau Gwent Guide had been printed and circulated prior to it being considered by Members.</p> <p>Another Member asked when the Destination Management Plan would be resubmitted to Scrutiny for consideration, and the Chair undertook to investigate.</p>	

Forward Work Programme (Use of Consultants in relation to the Regeneration portfolio – cost of consultants and the benefits / outcomes of using external consultants over the last 2 years)

A Member referred to the report scheduled for submission on the 10th February, 2021 regarding the cost of consultancy fees over the last 2 years, and said this should be extended further to include consultancy fees over the last 5 years.

Another Member agreed and said this would provide a more comprehensive overview.

A Member said the reason for requesting this information was in response to figures reported to Council covering the last 2 years. He said Officers had done a lot of work to compile the information and extending this further would only put added pressure on Officers.

A discussion ensued when the Head of Regeneration & Development said Officers had already done the work based on a 2 year period. The information had been put together and the report was currently going through relevant process prior to submission to Committee on the 10th February, 2021. The Officer said extending this to cover the last 5 years would involve a significant amount of additional work.

A Member said he did not understand why an extension had been requested when 2 years had been agreed by the Scrutiny Committee, and the work had already been done by Officers.

Another Member agreed and said the Committee should continue with the 2 year period, particularly in light of the Officer's comment. However, following consideration of the report, if any additional information was required then a further report could be requested at that time.

The Chair said taking into account the Officer's comments the Committee would continue with the report covering the last 2 years.

Forward Work Programme (Tech Valley progress and spend)

The Head of Regeneration & Development reported that the special meeting may be a joint meeting with Welsh Government as they were responsible for managing many of the projects.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the Action Sheet be noted.

No. 6 **PROGRESS REPORT - TARGETED REGENERATION INVESTMENT PROGRAMME AND TOWN CENTRE REPAYABLE FUNDING SCHEME**

Consideration was given to report of the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities.

The Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities presented the report which provided an update on the current position with the Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) Programme and Town Centre Repayable Funding Scheme, and followed the report presented to the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee on 5th March, 2020. The TRI programme was established in 2018 and was originally intended to be a three-year programme (2018-2021). For the initial three-year phase of the TRI programme a capital budget of £100million funding was made available in Wales, with allocations of the funding dependent upon the quality of the projects, regional significance and approval of the National Panel. TRI funding would not be automatically apportioned equally across each of the ten Local Authorities. Allocation for the South East Wales region was £44million.

The Team Manager confirmed that the report submitted on the 5th March, 2020 stated that a proposal for additional £5 million capital funding from Valleys Task Force to extend the Cardiff Capital Region TRI Thematic Project in Valleys Taskforce areas had been

successful. However, it had since been advised that this funding would no longer be forthcoming from Valleys Taskforce, but there would be scope to include the projects put forward for this funding within the existing TRI Thematic Programme.

The Officer then went through the report and highlighted points contained therein. She pointed out that as at the 7th December, 2020 a total of 91 Expressions of Interest had been received, and 4 applications have been progressed to the stage of delivery at a total cost of £44,731. In terms of the low number of enquiries progressed to delivery, there were a number of reasons for this, namely:

- The funding cannot be used to fund works already completed before the grant was made available or a funding approval was in place;
- The funding can only be utilised for businesses located within one of the Town Centres (Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Brynmawr, Abertillery and Blaina); and
- The funding can only be used for external measures to support business recovery (outdoor seating, canopies).

The Officer also reported that funding had been secured to develop a Placemaking plan for Tredegar. However, this would be subject to procurement over December with the commission commencing in January 2021. The plan would be delivered using the same approach as the Ebbw Vale Placemaking Plan.

A Member asked whether the Loan repayments were being received regularly, and what action could be taken if payments were missed.

The Officer said if the applicant had opted for monthly payment via direct debit and a payment was missed, they would be contacted immediately and given an opportunity to catch up. However, if payments continued to be missed our normal debt collection procedures would be commenced. The Officer also explained that one of the conditions of the initial loan agreement was a legal

charge on the property to prevent them from selling without the Authority's permission/agreement, and this would allow us to go through the appropriate legal channels to reclaim the funding. The Officer said this was a lengthy process but fortunately to date it had not been necessary.

A Member said he was pleased with the report, and said when funding was awarded within Tredegar Town Centre an Advisory Group was established which included Traders, Ward Members, the Town Council, and Coalfields Regeneration Trust. He said this approach had proved very successful and there was an excellent working relationship within the Town Centre, and he would be happy to discuss this with Officers.

The Officer said she was aware of the excellent work that had been done, and said it may be beneficial for the Member to attend a Town Centre Task & Finish Group to discuss the approach taken in Tredegar.

Another Member asked whether it would be possible to have a list of projects that had received money, and the Officer undertook to circulate this information to Members.

A Member then referred to section 2.3 of the report which outlined funding available for commercial building and residential enhancements within the town centres, and expressed concern that this may lead to the loss commercial premises.

The Officer explained that whilst these were two separate grants, there would be some schemes that would have ground floor commercial enhancement, along with the upper floor residential enhancement. However, retention of the ground floor for commercial purposes was encouraged as much as possible, particularly in town centres.

The Head of Regeneration & Development said the provision of housing within town centres was governed by our Development Plans which outlined the requirements for our town centres in

terms of ensuring sufficient housing to encourage footfall, but also providing enough commercial space to remain a town centre. Each application would be considered on its merits, however, if an application was received for a conversion of a commercial premises in the middle of the town centre it would likely be refused.

A Member then referred to section 2.23 of the report and asked how Eugene Cross Park would feature within the plans as it was subject to a Community Asset Transfer.

The Officer said it would not detract from the CAT, but would look at the overall picture in terms of increasing footfall within the town centre, and creating improved links from Eugene Cross Park to the town centre to encourage people to visit when attending games etc.

A Member referred to the Placemaking Plans proposed for Ebbw Vale and Tredegar and expressed concern that consultants had been appointed over a number of years to develop various plans that never came to fruition.

The Head of Regeneration & Development explained that a substantial amount of work was required in order to obtain funding from Welsh Government for future projects, and it was necessary to engage with Consultants to secure these projects as they provided an additional expertise and resource for the Regeneration Team. She said the Team was limited, and the fact that regeneration was still going on within Blaenau Gwent with buildings being brought back into use in the current climate was testament to their excellent work.

In relation to the Member's comments, the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities explained that the action plan set out the key projects and how they would be achieved, and confirmed that Welsh Government would be monitoring progress of the projects.

A Member referred to the key strategic sites detailed at section 2.23 of the report, and asked what was intended for the Ebbw Vale Railway Station. Also in terms of access from the Works site to the town centre, he said improved management of the funicular railway was needed and it should be operated on weekends.

In response the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities said further development of the Ebbw Vale Railway Station would be considered as part of the plan in terms of making it a focal point for the area, and also improved pedestrian links from the Works site to the town centre. In relation to the funicular railway operating on weekends, the Officer said the budget was restricted but if greater demand could be generated through improved links and future developments on the Works site, then longer opening hours could be considered in the future.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the information contained therein be noted.

No. 7 **EMPLOYMENT PARK, LIME AVENUE – PROGRESS UPDATE REPORT**

Consideration was given to report of the Service Manager Business & Regeneration.

The Service Manager Business & Regeneration presented the report which provided an update on the Employment Park at Lime Avenue, Works Site, Ebbw Vale. The Officer spoke to the report and highlighted the current position of the project as detailed at section 2.4 onwards.

A Member asked whether European funding was guaranteed in light of Brexit, and was there was a deadline to spend the monies.

In response the Officer explained that the funding had been secured and underwritten by Welsh Government. The target date for delivery of the scheme was the end of 2022 and work was progressing with WG and Coalfields Regeneration Trust to ensure this was achieved.

The Member referred to section 2.7 of the report and asked whether there was opportunity following completion of the scheme for the Council to work with CRT on commercial activity etc. and benefit from any revenue generated from the scheme.

The Officer said the Council owned the freehold, however, as the land reclamation was funded by WG any receipt from capital or revenue income would go back to WG. In terms of the scheme itself, CRT was contributing substantial funding and any income generated would be retained by them. However, the Council had a very positive relationship with CRT having worked on other projects, and would continue to work with them on any potential opportunities that may arise following delivery of the scheme.

A Member said the benefits of the scheme would be job opportunities and training, and also the expertise of CRT in securing any potential investment opportunities. He also enquired regarding the contribution from each party involved in the scheme.

The Officer explained that relevant contributions would depend on the final cost. However, in relation to the £2.58m WEFO funding this would be split 50/50 by WG and CRT.

In response to a question raised, the Officer confirmed that CRT would be maintaining the site on completion of the scheme. However, the Authority would work closely with them in terms of marketing etc. to ensure that any activities complement the work of Blaenau Gwent Regeneration in relation to skills training and support for businesses.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the content of the report be noted (Option 1).

No. 8

BUS EMERGENCY SCHEME (BES)

Consideration was given to report of the Head of Regeneration & Development.

The Head of Regeneration & Development presented the report which provided an overview on progress of the Bus Emergency Scheme (BES) Phase 2 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to enter into longer term arrangements to make the bus services more sustainable across Wales.

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, LA's, Transport for Wales, Welsh Government and Operators have worked together to ensure bus services are continued, despite the fact that many are not being utilised. The BES2 agreement would develop longer term arrangements with Operators, and WG would like this in place, and signed off by each LA by the end of January 2021. As well as responding to Covid, the BES2 would provide a building block for future improvements to our public transport, and also formalise WG commitment to support Operators in recovering from the Covid pandemic in terms of loss of fare box revenue and additional costs incurred as a result of Covid. Under the agreement Operators would be required to provide bus services to meet local needs. The end date for BES2 was 31st July, 2022 and this should be enough time for revenue to recover.

The BES2 agreement would provide a legal basis for funding the costs associated with the impact of Covid, including the loss of fare box, duplication of buses to take account of social distancing or providing alternative services where operators give them up and the services are still needed. This would apply to services that were commercial pre-Covid and to tendered services.

The Officer went through the report and highlighted points contained therein.

A Member asked what plans were in place for the provision of a bus route to the new Grange Hospital.

In response the Officer confirmed that discussions were ongoing with the local Health Board, in terms of how the transport could be adopted to enable people to access the Hospital, not just from Blaenau Gwent but also a number of other LA's. The BES2 report

was about funding and regional agreement to work on further improvements to the bus system.

Another Member also agreed that a bus route was needed for the Grange Hospital, but also redesigning bus routes to ensure quick and easy access to industrial estates for people to get to work.

The Officer confirmed that this was part of a separate project being currently being considered, working with the third sector and DWP on initiatives to get people to work. The BES2 arrangements would also include collaborative development of regional Reference Networks by LA's, Operators, WG and TFW and these would reflect local, regional and national priorities and help guide investment in bus services for the future, and under the BES2 LA's would have influence over development of the Reference Network.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and Blaenau Gwent endorse the content of the report and support the BES2 arrangements as part of a regional and Wales approach (Option 1).

No. 9

FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME - 10TH FEBRUARY 2021

The Forward Work Programme for the meeting scheduled to be held on the 10th February, 2021 was submitted.

A Member requested an update on the 'Truck Shop', Tredegar, and also said consideration should be given to an access road linking Bridge Street Industrial Estate and Tredegar Business Park (ViTCC site).

The Head of Regeneration & Development undertook to liaise with the Service Manager Development & Estates regarding an update.

In relation to a link road between Bridge Street Industrial Estate and Tredegar Business Park, the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities said this could be considered as part of the TRI Programme and the Placemaking Plan for Tredegar.

Another Member referred to the recent announcement that TVR would be commencing work at the Rassau Industrial Estate this

month, and requested information on timescales etc.

The Head of Regeneration & Development confirmed that a report would be presented to Members as soon as possible.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted.
