

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

**SUBJECT: SPECIAL REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
28TH APRIL, 2021**

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HILL (CHAIR)

Councillors G.A. Davies
M. Cook
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
S. Healy
W. Hodgins
H. McCarthy
J.C. Morgan
L Parsons
K. Rowson
B. Willis
L. Winnett (*substituting for M. Cross*)

AND: Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services
Head of Regeneration & Development
Service Manager Business & Regeneration
Service Manager Development & Estates
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>	

	Apologies for absence were reported for Councillors M. Cross and J.P. Morgan.	
No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>The following declaration of interest was reported:</p> <p>Councillor W. Hodgins – Item No 6 Cardiff Capital Region City Deal Performance Review 2020/21 Q4</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 24th March, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>ACTION SHEET – 24TH MARCH, 2021</u></p> <p>The Action Sheet arising from the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 24th March, 2021 was submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Action Sheet be noted.</p>	
No. 6	<p><u>CARDIFF CAPITAL REGION CITY DEAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW 2020/21 Q4</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to report of the Managing Director.</p> <p>The Head of Regeneration & Development presented the performance review of the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal (CCRCD) for quarter 4, against projects relating to investment in Blaenau Gwent during the last few months. The report highlighted the key programmes of work in Blaenau Gwent, and progress of the programme against key targets identified within the CCR Business Plan for 2020/21.</p> <p>The Officer went through the report and highlighted the key points contained therein.</p>	

A Member referred to section 2.15 of the report and asked whether taxi companies had been contacted, and if so whether any interest had been shown in taking up the opportunity to trial an electric taxi.

In response the Officer confirmed that the taxis had been delivered in the last few weeks. However, she undertook to check whether the Council's Taxi Licensing Team had circulated correspondence to taxi companies.

The Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities confirmed that a number of virtual engagement events had been arranged, and the Licensing Team were contacting taxi drivers in the area. Also as part of wider promotion, the launch of the new taxi scheme would coincide with the launch of the new Merthyr Bus Station and taxi rank improvements, at the end of May 2021.

Another Member referred to the rail link improvements, and the £70m loan, and said the report implied that some of the money had already been spent. She understood it was intended to have discussions with other LA's regarding a potential contribution. She also stated that a rail link from Brynmawr to Pontypool would be more beneficial for the residents of Blaenau Gwent, providing a link to Cwmbran and Newport, and she asked whether any progress had been made in relation to this.

The Head of Regeneration & Development explained that the £70m was separate funding split between each LA to undertake additional projects, alongside the railway renewal. In terms of a rail link between Brynmawr and Pontypool, the Officer did not have any information, but referred the Committee to section 2.16 of the report which stated that services to both Cardiff and Newport were currently being tested in detail, so there would be a link to Newport in the future.

A Member said section 2.6 stated that the design work for Abertillery was coming from CCR funding. However, he asked who would be funding the work for the increased service to Ebbw Vale, and whether this would come from the £70m loan.

The Officer explained that the £70m loan was for line improvement works. The works currently ongoing on the network, i.e. Crumlin improvements, were not part of the £70m, however, some of the design work was part of the CCR funding. The £70m was for specific work on the Ebbw Valley line to increase the service to 2 trains per hour initially, and then linking to Welsh Government's announcement that the Heads of the Valleys should have 4 trains per hour.

In response the Member requested a breakdown of the different funding streams. He also asked whether other LA's had been approached to contribute to the £70m loan.

The Officer explained that the loan repayments would be based on users of the railway.

The Member asked who would be responsible for any shortfall in funding should passenger numbers not meet the loan repayments.

The Officer was unable to respond as it was not part of the report, and the Member asked that this be noted as an action point, and also his request for a breakdown of the funding.

Another Member referred to section 2.16 of the report and asked that Members be consulted on the locations of the electric vehicle charging points within their wards. He also suggested that the possibility of installing charging points on one floor of Ebbw Vale Multi Storey Car Park and potential income generation be explored, and also that they be factored into the Council's Destination Management Plan.

In response the Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities said the locations were identified as part of previous studies undertaken, but confirmed that Ward Members would be advised of the locations. However, if Members had any additional suggested locations, these could be put on the reserve list should additional funding become available in the future.

In terms of income generation, the Officer said this would be nominal due to the management and maintenance

requirements of the charging points, but it could be looked at in the future. She also confirmed that the locations of the charging points would be factored into the Destination Management Plan where appropriate.

The Member then referred to section 2.25 of the report, namely the CCR Energy Strategy, and asked whether there could be funding implications for the Council in terms of having to match fund some grants.

In response the Team Leader said this had not yet been determined. The Council had put forward its projects and funding was being explored, however, it was unlikely to be any more of a match funding requirement than if the Council was to take forward the prospectus.

Another Member requested details of the proposed improvements to the Ebbw Valley line, and asked whether they included a second platform at Llanhilleth, and also whether the link to Newport was guaranteed.

The Head of Regeneration & Development confirmed that the ongoing design work at Llanhilleth was being undertaken by Transport for Wales. In terms of the link to Newport, whilst this could not be guaranteed, the infrastructure was in place to be developed and TFW was currently looking at this and the scheduling.

The Member said a more detailed report would be beneficial for Members, and he also supported his colleague's comments regarding a Brynmawr link. He said Members needed to know what Blaenau Gwent could expect from City Deal and the Metro.

In response the Chair pointed out that a Brynmawr link was not part of City Deal, however, progress of the Ebbw Valley line improvements would be included in the Scrutiny FWP moving forward.

Another Member said this was a positive report, particularly the Housing Strategy, and also the 'green' strategies. He referred to the excellent work of the previous 'Green Team' forum and suggested that this be re-established moving forward.

A discussion ensued when the Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities confirmed that a report on the Hydro would be included in the FWP. She also reported that funding had been secured through the Rural Development Programme to look at Cwm and Llanhilleth in the first instance, and initial investigations were nearing completion. A number of sites had also been identified as part of the second phase, and consultants would be looking at micro-hydro opportunities for those sites.

In response to the Member's comment regarding the Green Team, the Head of Regeneration & Development said if re-established the forum could filter into the work around the De-carbonisation Plan.

Another Member referred to the Energy Strategy and asked whether any timescales had been set.

In response, the Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities said no detailed timescales had been set, but undertook to look into the matter.

Another Member referred to the proposed new industrial units at Ashvale, Tredegar, in particular the entrance to the site opposite a primary school, and the Head of Regeneration & Development confirmed that Highways were looking at this.

A further brief discussion ensued regarding the electric taxi scheme, when a Member asked whether an affordable repayment plan would be considered.

The Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities confirmed that incentives for the scheme were being considered by City Deal, including a finance package, and this would be communicated to taxi drivers as part of the engagement exercise.

Another Member said a Members Briefing on the Ebbw Valley Railway link would be beneficial for Members, and suggested that Transport for Wales be invited to attend.

	<p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the content of the CCRCD report be noted.</p>	
No. 7	<p><u>GOVTECH CATALYST CHALLENGE</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to report of the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities.</p> <p>The Team Manager presented the report which provided an update on progress of the GovTech Catalyst project, which was a £20m fund from Government Digital Services, UK Government to work with suppliers to solve public sector problems using innovative digital technology.</p> <p>The Council’s Regeneration Department put forward a number of project ideas to GovTech Catalyst team and in 2018, Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council (BGCBC) was invited to form a collaboration to work on this with Durham County Council (DCC) to work on a project entitled “Intelligent data to transform local council service delivery”. The project would look at how existing assets, like the Council’s vehicles, could be utilised to support and improve how we deliver our services.</p> <p>The Officer went through the report and highlighted points contained therein.</p> <p>In response to a question raised by a Member, the Team Leader confirmed that the technology could be deployed on any vehicle, including the Council’s recycling and refuse vehicles.</p> <p>A brief discussion ensued when the Officer confirmed that there would be opportunity to tweak the technology in the future to address other issues.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the progress of the project be noted, and a further report on the outcome of the project be provided.</p>	
No. 8	<p><u>LIME AVENUE BUSINESS PARK AND BOXWORKS PROGRESS UPDATE</u></p>	

Consideration was given to report of the Principal Project Officer Regeneration Opportunities

The Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities presented the report which provided a progress update on both the Lime Avenue Business Unit and Boxworks schemes on the former Works site.

The Officer spoke to the report and highlighted points contained therein.

A Member asked whether the Council could claim back the overspend from the Covid Relief Fund, and also whether the Council was guaranteed to recoup the monies spent during the 15 year life span of the units.

The Service Manager Business & Regeneration confirmed that the Council was working closely with Welsh Government on both projects, and all options were being explored in terms of the overspend.

A Member said 'take-up' of all of the Council's units should be included on the Scrutiny's FWP, as she had received complaints regarding the condition of some units and the increase in rental.

The Chair confirmed that the Council's industrial units portfolio was included on the FWP.

The Team Leader explained that when the developments for both projects were put forward, a demand analysis was undertaken of the locality in terms of the units already in place, the level of interest and where we could meet the demand. The Boxworks units was a different provision to anything else in the Borough, and from the demand analysis we anticipate demand based on enquiries that we have received and been unable to meet.

The Officer referred to the 'Employment Park' report on the previous agenda and confirmed that as part of that work the demand analysis was revisited, and there was evidence showing a demand for smaller units like the Boxworks.

Another Member asked whether any rental costs etc. had been established, and whether there would be any time limit on rental of the units.

The Service Manager Business & Regeneration said in terms of the length of rental it was important to offer flexibility. Options had been developed around a 6 month licence arrangement, and an extended option, and an increase in demand was anticipated as a result of the change in working arrangements due to the Covid pandemic.

In terms of rental costs etc. he said this was based on market rate assessments and would cover ongoing costs for the units.

A brief discussion ensued when the Service Manager said a flexible provision was intended for the box units to enable small start-up businesses to rent on a short term basis, but also to develop a sequence and provide support to enable those businesses as they grow and need more space, to relocate to larger existing units within the Borough.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and;

- i. Noted progress made to date with both the Lime Avenue Business Unit and Boxworks schemes, with final completion anticipated to be in June 2021; and
- ii. Noted that a detailed closure report would be presented to Scrutiny later this year, also incorporating findings from the Wavehill consultancy report, which was a condition of the WEFO funding.