

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL

**SUBJECT: SPECIAL REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
- 15TH JULY, 2021**

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HILL (CHAIR)

Councillors G.A. Davies
M. Cross
G.L. Davies
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
S. Healy
W. Hodgins
J.C. Morgan
L. Parsons
G. Paulsen
K. Rowson
T. Smith (*sub for B. Willis*)
S. Thomas (*sub for H. McCarthy*)

AND: Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services
Head of Regeneration
Owen Ashton
Press and Communications Officer
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>	

	<p>The following apologies for absence were received:-</p> <p>Councillor H. McCarthy Councillor B. Willis</p>	
<p>No. 3</p>	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>No declarations of interest or dispensations were reported.</p>	
	<p><u>EBBW VALLEY RAILWAY</u></p> <p>Having regard to the views expressed by the Proper Officer regarding the public interest test, that on balance the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information and that the report should be exempt.</p> <p>RESOLVED that the public be excluded whilst this item of business is transacted as it is likely there would be a disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 14 of Part 1, Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended).</p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services.</p> <p>A Member noted that although the report had been deemed exempt some information was already in the press. The Member acknowledged the reason for the exemption, however he felt that due to the matters being considered and in the interest of the public the information should not be of an exempt nature. It was important that the Council was open and transparent with such transactions and the Member disagreed with the report being exempt.</p> <p>The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services advised that the original report presented to Council was exempt and could not comment on how the information was in the public domain. The report considered a commercial arrangement and contractual details held between individual parties which were confidential.</p>	

A further concern was raised that there was no legal representative at the meeting and it was paramount when considering such matters that a legal officer be in attendance.

The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services spoke to the report which gave details of the loan agreement, risks identified and the contracting arrangements and the agreement of responsibilities between Welsh Government, Transport for Wales (Rail), Transport for Wales and the Council.

At this juncture the Chair invited questions from the Scrutiny Members.

A Member referred to the costings detailed in the report and the Corporate Director confirmed that any monies required to support alternative funding would be provided by Welsh Government.

The Member referred to the initial report presented to Council in March 2021 and advised that concerns had been raised in relation to the alternative funding which could fall back on Blaenau Gwent tax payers and noted that this had now been addressed. The Corporate Director advised that any alternative monies would now be met by Welsh Government.

Concerns were raised as Members had not been presented with the full analysis of passenger usage and if the revenue made from the additional trains would be sufficient to warrant the scheme. It was felt that if this scheme failed it would be a reputational risk to the Council and a Member proposed that the full analysis be presented to Members.

The Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services advised that there would be no risk to the Council as the scheme was being funded by Welsh Government and Transport for Wales. The Corporate Director noted that there was a national risk following COVID-19 around the resilience of public transport. The agile working arrangements taken forward by many organisations would see passengers accessing travel at different times.

The Corporate Director advised that going forward both Welsh Government and Transport for Wales were comfortable with the scheme and any risks had been taken away from the Local Authority. The Welsh Government was aware that the Ebbw Valley Rail Line had less frequency than other lines and investment was needed to bring this up to the standard of other valleys.

In response to concern raised in relation to the lack of information presented, the Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services advised that all the necessary information, to make a decision was contained in the report. In terms of passenger numbers, this data would not make a difference to the Authority as Welsh Government were content with the data and it was Welsh Government's intention to invest in public transport and address carbon footprint, therefore from an officer perspective, the Corporate Director confirmed there was no issues.

Further concerns were raised in the differing information presented from March and the lack of monies now reported for the Abertillery spur. It was felt that due to this significant change it was important that all documentation be presented to ascertain how these decisions were reached.

Another Member felt that all the relevant safeguards had been taken forward by the Authority and welcomed the improved rail service and connectivity to Newport. The Member appreciated concerns raised in relation to monies to be used for the scheme, however he was confident that no burden would be placed on Blaenau Gwent.

In relation to the Abertillery spur, the Corporate Director Regeneration and Community Services stated that there had been no change in the intention for Abertillery. It was hoped, as detailed in the March report that this would be delivered if the monies were available.

Members reiterated concerns that it was important for the full document be presented as issues had been raised with previous projects where not all the information had been presented to Members. A Member noted the lack of passengers on trains and felt that it would be a struggle to fill a further 4 trains and therefore the data should be presented to provide Member with these assurances.

Another Member welcomed the opportunity to improve public transport which would enhance the communities of Blaenau Gwent. The Member reiterated the officer's comments and stated that there was no risk to the Blaenau Gwent tax payers. Another Member concurred with the comments raised and noted that the monies had been guaranteed in writing by Welsh Government.

A further Member felt that this opportunity should be welcomed as it would improve public transport in and out of the Borough.

The Member agreed that the scheme improved public transport for the communities of Blaenau Gwent, however, the Member felt it was important that the evidence on how the decision was reached be available for scrutiny by Members.

Another Member noted that the scheme was welcomed by all Members and therefore there should be no issue if all documentation was presented.

The Chair referred to the options for consideration and an amendment to the options was proposed

At this juncture, Option 3 was proposed:-

The report be deferred in such a time that the full documentation could be presented to Members in order to fully scrutinise.

This alternative proposal was seconded.

A recorded vote was, therefore, requested.

In Favour of the proposed Option 3 – Councillors P. Edwards, M. Cross, K. Hayden, S. Thomas, J.C. Morgan, T. Smith

Against the proposed Option 3 – Councillors J. Hill, G.A. Davies, G.L. Davies, S. Healy, W. Hodgins, G. Paulsen, L. Parsons, K. Rowson

The vote on the proposal was not carried.

The Chair thereupon proposed Option 1 (preferred option).

This proposal was seconded.

A recorded vote was, therefore, requested.

Against Option 1 (preferred option) – Councillors P. Edwards, M. Cross, K. Hayden, S. Thomas, J.C. Morgan, T. Smith

In favour Option 1 (preferred option) – Councillors J. Hill, G.A. Davies, G.L. Davies, S. Healy, W. Hodgins, G. Paulsen, L. Parsons, K. Rowson

The vote on Option 1 (preferred option) was carried.

Councillor M. Cook was not permitted to take part in the vote as he had left the meeting prior to Option 3 being proposed.

The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the foregoing, that the report which contained information relating to the financial/business affairs of persons other than the Authority be accepted and Option 1 as detailed in the report be approved.