

COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

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

**SUBJECT: REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
15TH SEPTEMBER, 2021**

REPORT OF: DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR J. HILL (CHAIR)

Councillors G.A. Davies

M. Cook

P. Edwards

K. Hayden

J. Holt (*substituting for S. Healy*)

W. Hodgins

J.C. Morgan

H. McCarthy

G. Paulsen

K. Rowson

L. Winnett (*substituting for M. Cross*)

B. Willis

**AND: Managing Director
Corporate Director Regeneration & Community
Services**

Service Manager Business & Regeneration
Team Manager, Regeneration Opportunities
Team Manager, Connected Communities
Policy Officer
Marketing & 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.	

<p>No. 2</p>	<p><u>APOLOGIES</u></p> <p>Apologies for absence were reported for Councillors S. Healy and M. Cross.</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>No. 4</p>	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Special Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 9th June, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 5</p>	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 30th June, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
<p>No. 6</p>	<p><u>ACTION SHEET – 30TH JUNE, 2021</u></p> <p>The Action Sheet arising from the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 30th June, 2021 was submitted.</p> <p><i><u>Electric Vehicle Charging Points</u></i></p> <p>In response to a question raised by a Member the Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities confirmed that the Council had received two electric taxi vehicles. Arrangements for management of the vehicles was currently being developed, and once this was in place the vehicles would be ready for use. The Officer undertook to inform Members when the taxis were in operation.</p> <p><i><u>Community Municipal Investment</u></i></p>	

	<p>In response to a question raised the Officer confirmed that the administration fee was a one-off amount.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the Action Sheet be noted.</p>	
No. 7	<p><u>REGENERATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The minutes of the Special Regeneration Scrutiny Committee held on 15th July, 2021 were submitted.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 8	<p><u>PROGRESS UPDATE ON DECARONISATION PLAN</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Managing Director.</p> <p>The Managing Director presented the first progress report since adoption of the Council's Decarbonisation Plan and the declaration of a Climate Emergency on 24th September, 2020. The Plan sets out how we intend to deliver our commitment to the ambition of the Welsh Public Sector to achieve net Zero by 2030. It outlined how we could reduce our organisational emissions across nine transitions, and these were highlighted at section 2.3 of the report.</p> <p>The Managing Director said a lot of work had been done during the last year to try and embed decarbonisation into how we think and operate as an organisation, and the summary at section 2.4 of the report highlighted that whilst we are making good progress there was still a lot of work to be done.</p> <p>The Managing Director then went through the report and highlighted points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member asked whether there would be opportunity for financial support from WRAP to adapt our fleet and practices at our HWRC sites.</p> <p>The Managing Director said good work had been done over the last few years and the Council had been successful in</p>	

increasing its recycling rates and this was having a positive impact on the decarbonisation agenda; and was recognised by the Climate Change Citizens Assembly. In terms of next steps and decarbonising our fleet, the Managing Director pointed out that WRAP was a facilitator, so any potential funding would come from Welsh Government. She looked forward to publication of the Zero Wales Plan in the coming weeks, to see what financial support Welsh Government intended putting behind the Plan to help us achieve its targets.

The Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities confirmed that work had been done with Community Services to review our fleet, and an analysis had also been undertaken of vehicles / technology currently on the market that would be suitable for the Borough. She felt the Council were in a good position to present proposals and a business case when funding becomes available.

A Member said he was pleased with the progress made since the Plan was adopted by the Council, and felt the Council was being pro-active and commended everyone involved in the BG Climate Change Citizens Assembly. He asked how the Council intended to develop the recommendations made by the Citizens Assembly.

The Managing Director said the response and enthusiasm of Officers to be involved was excellent. The Council's response to the Assembly's recommendations would be reported in due course, and a special Wider CLT meeting was being convened to consider the recommendations and look at what we are currently doing and where more action was needed in response to what our residents are telling us. Work was also being done through the Public Services Board and collectively across the public sector in Blaenau Gwent, and she was confident that that work would provide good outcomes and actions for the future.

A Member referred to renewable energy technology, and pointed out that the approximate life span for a wind farm was 20 years. He asked what would happen to these sites when they are no longer in working order.

In response the Managing Director said this was all part of the decarbonisation journey, and work was being done to review procurement strategies to ensure that the carbon impact was taken into account when purchasing goods and services. In terms of wind farms, they were currently providing a valuable source of renewal energy for Wales, however, advances in technology may mean that renewal energy could be achieved in different ways.

A Member referred to the planning restrictions in place to protect listed buildings and the impact of this when trying to decarbonise these buildings.

The Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services said this was challenging, and it may be that legislation would have to change in the future to align with the climate change agenda. A pragmatic approach was taken in relation to any works undertaken on listed buildings without changing the character of the building, however, some buildings would not achieve carbon zero. Welsh Government have issued guidance around planning applications for listed buildings, and each site would be considered individually.

A Member asked whether it was intended to designate land within the Local Development Plans for tree planting to help reduce our carbon footprint, and also help to prevent flooding, and also whether peat bogs were being considered.

In response the Managing Director confirmed that this was being considered as part of the PSB response, with specific actions and work streams in relation to the environment.

In relation to peat bogs, the Corporate Director said these were an important resource in capturing carbon. There was some land within Blaenau Gwent that could become peat bogs, and moving forward it may be necessary to reconsider some of our previous land allocations within the Local Development Plan.

A Member asked how it was intended to relay the challenges of net Zero to the community.

	<p>The Managing Director said one of the positive outcomes from the Climate Change Citizens Assembly was that the community are up for the challenge. Part of our response to the Assembly is to harness that enthusiasm and work in partnership to identify actions moving forward.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and the Committee support presentation of the report to the Executive Committee. (Option 1)</p>	
<p>No. 9</p>	<p><u>REGENERATION & DEVELOPMENT PERFORMANCE REPORT</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to report of the Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services.</p> <p>The Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services presented the annual service activity report for the period April 2020 to July 2021. The Corporate Director went through the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.</p> <p>A Member referred to previous discussions in relation to the Audit of Commemoration that went through Welsh Government in November 2020, and asked when a report on this could be expected.</p> <p>In response the Corporate Director undertook to investigate.</p> <p>Another Member enquired as to the current percentage of rented properties against home ownership, and whether there was greater need for social housing or private housing within the Borough.</p> <p>The Corporate Director said balance was key in meeting the needs of the community and having the right mix of housing to meet those needs. In terms of the percentage of rented properties, he said this was approximately 30% including social landlords and private rented. He confirmed that the Housing Market Needs Assessment was used to identify trends and demands coming through, and there was currently a demand for people wanting to move to Blaenau Gwent, and also for people wanting to move-up the property ladder, which had resulted in interest from private housing</p>	

developers, however, it was important not to lose sight of the needs of our existing community. He confirmed that the Housing Market Needs Assessment would be brought to Scrutiny in due course to ensure we have the right balance and understanding of future demand.

The Team Leader Connected Communities said moving forward a more blended approach to new housing developments would be encouraged i.e. a mix of social rented and intermediate products, and also low cost home ownership.

Another Member asked how many long term empty properties there were currently in the Borough.

The Corporate Director said this figure was currently in the region of 800-900 vacant properties. There were a number of initiatives to reduce this figure, i.e. reduced empty property discount, and there was also a very active grant and loan programme in place to bring empty properties back into use. In 2019/20 56 properties were brought back into use, however, this number was less during 2021 due to the redeployment of staff in response to the Covid pandemic. However, there were less properties vacant for a period of 6 months which meant the work being done in this area was proving beneficial.

A Member expressed concern regarding the impact of the rental increase of the Council's business units, which had resulted in some businesses leaving the Borough. She also felt that the new Box Works units had not been sufficiently advertised.

In response the Corporate Director said Members would be aware that as part of the Council's plans to become a more commercial organisation and to manage our units more effectively a service charge was introduced for our business units. Whilst this resulted in an increase in rental for occupiers, they were now getting an improved service. He said the retention of businesses in the Borough was paramount, and while many of our business units were designed for 'start-ups', it was expected they would move on to larger units as they grow, and the Council was focussed on ensuring that we have that ladder of

accommodation for businesses, but also taking a business-like approach in the management of our units.

In relation to the Box Works site the Corporate Director explained that the Council had yet to take possession of the units from the contractor and this was anticipated to take place during the next week. He was optimistic that demand would increase significantly over the coming weeks.

Another Member referred to the refurbishment of Trinity Chapel and expressed concern that the relocation of the Library to the building, along with the plans for a community shop and café in the former library building would draw people away from the Town Centre. He also looked forward to the refurbishment of Monwel and asked whether it was possible bring the scheme forward.

In relation to the Monwel site the Corporate Director said it was intended that the scheme would be completed and open for students in September 2022. This was a tight timescale due to the significant remodelling to reach the high aspirations for the site.

In terms of the proposals for the former Abertillery Library, he said the community shop and café was more of an ancillary facility for people accessing the training centre.

A Member said the report was evidence of the good work being undertaken within the Department. However, he said it lacked detail in relation to employability, in terms of the number of people employed locally and also initiatives in place within the Borough to get people into work. He said there were a number of projects through the voluntary sector and partners and their work in supporting the Borough and employment opportunities should be highlighted in the report moving forward.

The Corporate Director agreed that this should be included moving forward.

A Member reported that the bridge over Cwmcelyn Pond was in need of repair, and asked that it be included on the Forward Work Programme for the relevant Scrutiny

Committee as it provided a vital link to areas within the community.

The Member also expressed concern that the electric vehicle charging point in Blaina was not being used.

In response the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities said it was important to have every area within the Borough included within the project. The locations were based on forecast usage, and usage across most of the charging points was good. However, more work would be done to promote the provision, but it may be that electric vehicle ownership was lower in Blaina and other locations were more prominent and in busier locations.

Another Member referred back to the refurbishment of Trinity Chapel and said a further consultation exercise was needed. He was aware that many residents were against the proposals to move the library provision from a purpose built premises and undertake extensive renovations of Trinity Chapel in order to relocate the library. He also referred to the community supermarket and pointed out that the plans for the building, under the previous administration, would have provided an excellent resource during the Covid pandemic but the building had now stood empty for 4 years.

In response the Corporate Director said the scheme for Trinity Chapel had been agreed and was progressing along with significant investment from Coalfields Regeneration Trust to bring back the building into a meaningful use.

A discussion ensued a Member said the project and was an excellent opportunity for Abertillery. Another Member expressed concern that the refurbishment costs seemed to be escalating, and asked regarding the current costs of the project.

The Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities said she was unable to provide the figure as the tender review process was currently underway. However, the Covid pandemic had impacted on the figures due to an increase in building and construction costs due to the lack of materials available. The full costs of refurbishment would be available in the next few weeks.

The Member asked that this be highlighted as an action point.

Another Member referred to the rail link to Abertillery and disagreed that the link and increased frequency of trains would increase footfall in the town centre. He also said that increased frequency of trains did not guarantee more passengers, and expressed concern that in years to come the Ebbw Valley railway would become unviable.

The Corporate Director reported that when undertaking original work to justify reopening of the railway, passenger numbers were estimated at 400k per annum, however, following reopening the numbers exceeded 700k. Our forecast also assumed travel from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff, however, there was a huge number of journeys within the Valley which were not in the original forecast. He said increased frequency would make travel within the Borough easier for people accessing jobs and visiting family etc, and provide a strong public transport hub at the edge of town.

Another Member referred to the public consultation exercise undertaken on Llanhilleth Pithead Baths and the fact that the public were against the proposed use of the site for housing. He asked whether an alternative proposal was intended, and whether the Council would be in a position to purchase the land without the proposed housing.

In response the Corporate Director said this report highlighted progress on projects. He said feedback from the consultation on the Pithead Baths would be considered to understand the nature of those concerns, and how best to deal with them.

The Service Manager Business & Regeneration confirmed that a number of consultations exercises were planned to continue this work which was fundamental to the development of the site, to achieve a deliverable scheme to improve the area.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted as provided. (Option 2).

No. 10

INVESTMENT IN MICRO-HYDRO INVESTMENT

Consideration was given report of the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities.

The Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities presented the report which provided an update on progress of the Micro-Hydro Feasibility Study for Cwm and Llanhilleth wards, and sought support for the next steps for this part of the Project.

A Member said he was disappointed that the project would not be progressed and asked whether it was possible for a trial to be undertaken in one location in the Borough.

In response the Team Leader Regeneration Opportunities said it was a good scheme, however, due to the costs of the technology and grid costs at the present time the scheme would not offer the financial returns that the Council would expect. However, if any community groups etc secured funding the feasibility studies could be offered and the Council could work to support those organisations.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and that the Council choose not to take these schemes forward for further investigation and development. The projects be closed from the current point and would only be revisited should costs significantly reduce or new technologies become available. (Option 1)

No. 11

PARTNERSHIP DELIVERY APPROACH – TOWN CENTRES

Consideration was given report of the Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities.

The Team Manager Regeneration Opportunities presented the report which sought support for the formulation of Town Centre Advisory Boards across the Town Centres of Abertillery, Brynmawr and Ebbw Vale to support a partnership delivery approach for future project delivery. A Member expressed concern that Blaina had been omitted from the report.

In response the Officer explained that Blaina had been omitted due to current resources within the Team. However, it was intended to establish a Town Centre Advisory Board for Blaina in the future and the Officer undertook to amend the report to include Blaina prior to the report being submitted to the Executive Committee.

A discussion ensued regarding representation on the Advisory Boards and the importance of everyone working towards the best outcomes and improvements for their towns.

The Committee AGREED to recommend, subject to the addition of Blaina, that the report be accepted; and

- Members support and recommend approval by the Executive Committee for the formation of a series of Advisory Boards for the Town Centres of Abertillery, Brynmawr and Ebbw Vale based upon the Tredegar Advisory Board approach, and acknowledge the draft Terms of Reference (**Appendix One**). The Advisory Board shall act as a consultative body to oversee development and delivery of Town Centre Strategies and Plans.
- Each shall start with a small membership identified by members of the Town Centres Task and Finish Group alongside Officers. The membership can then be expanded and developed further as discussions develop. (Option 1)

No. 12 FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 3RD NOVEMBER, 2021

Consideration was given to the Forward Work Programme for the meeting of the Regeneration Scrutiny Committee scheduled for 3rd November, 2021.

It was reported that the Tredegar Placemaking Plan report would be moved to the December meeting.

The Committee AGREED, subject to the foregoing, that the report be accepted and the Forward Work Programme for 3rd November, 2021 be approved.

