

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

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To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Open Spaces Report

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report outlines the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy and Action Plans since adoption by the Council in June 2016. The Strategy identifies areas of need and improvement within Priority Open Spaces to help address the shortfalls.
- 1.2 The report sets out what has been achieved in improving both the use of open spaces and the range of amenities to be found there. It provides a background and context to the challenges ahead.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 That a summary of the Annual Monitoring Report is reported to Scrutiny as part of the annual work programme.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

National Context

- 3.1 Open spaces which are well-designed and maintained make a significant contribution to the quality of life. In recognition of this, the Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy was prepared in order to provide a long term framework to protect and develop a network of high-quality open spaces that deliver a range of social, economic and environmental benefits. The Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy was

prepared in line with national planning policy (PPW, Edition 8, 2016) and Technical Advice Note (TAN) 16: Sport, Recreation and Open Space (2009).

Council Vision

3.2 To strengthen Merthyr Tydfil's position as the regional centre for the heads of the Valleys, and be a place to be proud of where:

- a) People learn and develop skills to fulfil their ambitions
- b) People live, work, have a safe, healthy and fulfilled life
- c) People visit, enjoy and return

Open Space Strategy Objectives

- To improve the health and wellbeing of local communities within Merthyr Tydfil through increased opportunities for residents to improve their physical and mental health with better access to open space.
- To raise the profile of Merthyr Tydfil through improvements and pride in open space, therefore improving the external perception of the area for inward investment.
- To improve the natural environment and biodiversity through increased habitat area and opportunities for species movement.
- To develop a network of green infrastructure where there is connectivity between different types of good quality open spaces which together enable the delivery of multiple benefits.

4.0 WHERE WE WERE

4.1 There were a total of 139 open spaces identified within the Strategy; of these 21 spaces are identified as priority open spaces. It is these priority open spaces that are the focus of attention and used as a measure to gauge the degree of improvements.

4.2 The Quality Assessment that was made of open spaces took guidance from the Green Flag programme. The eight criteria used to assess how open spaces are performing satisfactorily are:

- A Welcoming Place
- Healthy; Safe and Secure
- Well Maintained and Clean
- Environmental Management
- Biodiversity, Landscape and Heritage
- Community Involvement
- Marketing and Communication
- Management

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

5.1 We are facing a dilemma with regards to the management of greenspace. The problems are not entirely related to budgetary constraints but also decisions being made both now and in the past over priorities over resources:

- The Authority owns a large land bank, as a consequence of being an inheritor of land relating to former industry and demolitions, land can be liability.

- The issue of necessary resources and liabilities will not go away.
- The Authority faces a horticultural skills shortage among Parks staff.
- Planning and Countryside staff are not managers of greenspace; they are technical advisors and facilitators for change and engagement with communities.
- Planning and Countryside has no reliable financial resource to fund improvements to open space.
- Under the Draft Deposit LDP Local Nature Reserves are being created on a number of open spaces in each ward.

5.2 The approach to successfully manage greenspace is to follow the principles of Green Flag. However under the Environment and Sustainable Development Grant (Local Environment Quality) and (Natural Resource Management) only minor improvements are able to be made. The grant has been available in small sums to improve open space 2016-17 and 2017-18, after which there will be no more external resources available for these Priority Open Spaces

5.3 The approach to the Priority Open Spaces is as follows:

Welcoming Space

A welcoming place is one that invites and draws people into it. This means creating a space which, through its visual appearance, range of facilities, standards of maintenance and ease of access, makes people feel that they are in a cared-for place.

2016-2017 - 5 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 4 No spaces saw significant improvement.

The external funding awarded to Gellideg Foundation Group for Gellideg Fields ended in 2017 and the project officer post was terminated. No single person to direct the management of this space. This space had achieved the Green Flag Community Award in 2016-2017 but was not re-entered the following year.

VERDICT: Generally an overall improvement

Healthy Safe and Secure

This criteria considers how well managers understand their users' needs, encouraging them to enjoy healthy activities using appropriate, safe-to-use facilities and activities, and to feel personally safe and secure.

2016-2017 - 5 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and one space saw significant improvement.

For the same reasons given above Gellideg Fields fell just below the standard.

VERDICT: Situation broadly unchanged

Well Maintained and Clean

For aesthetic as well as health and safety reasons, issues of cleanliness and maintenance must be addressed, in particular:

- litter and other waste management issues must be adequately dealt with;
- grounds, buildings, equipment and other features must be well maintained;
- policies on litter, vandalism and maintenance should be in place, in practice, and regularly reviewed.

2016-2017 - 7 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 6 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 2 No spaces saw improvements.

For the same reasons given above Gellideg Fields fell just below the standard.

VERDICT: Slight improvement

Sustainability (Environmental Management)

To ensure that the way the site is managed has a positive impact on the environment, locally and globally, both now and for the future. Where choices can be made for future procurement, landscaping or buildings, they should aim to minimise energy and resource consumption and waste, and design in benefits to the local and global environment. Policies should seek to eliminate the use of peat and chemicals to control pests and as fertilisers. Horticultural and arboricultural decisions should reflect an understanding of the impacts of climate change.

2016-2017 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 3 No spaces saw significant improvements

VERDICT: Generally an overall improvement

Biodiversity, Landscape and Heritage

Attention should be paid to the appropriate management and conservation of natural features, wildlife and flora; landscape features; and buildings and structures. Their particular character and requirements should be identified and appropriate management strategies put in place to conserve and enhance them.

2016-2017 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 5 No spaces saw significant improvements

VERDICT: Generally an overall improvement

Community Involvement

- understands the community it seeks to serve;
- actively and appropriately involves members of the community in making decisions about the site's development;
- provides opportunities for active participation in site projects; and

- ensures that there is appropriate provision of recreational facilities and activities for all sectors of the community

2016-2017 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 4 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 5 No spaces saw significant

For the same reasons given above Gellideg Fields fell just below the standard although an additional site met the standard and 2No additional spaces saw signs of improvement 2 No spaces saw signs of decline

VERDICT: Generally an overall improvement

Marketing and Communication

Seeks to examine the ways that managers understand the key benefits of the site and how they use this information to promote it appropriately. They should understand who the main user groups are, could be or should be, and use a fitting range of interpretation and engagement techniques to communicate with them. This basis ensures that appropriate facilities, events and activities can be offered and most effectively promoted, and forms a solid foundation for development now and in the future.

2016-2017 - 3 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria

2017-2018 - 2 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and 1No space improved, for the same reasons given above Gellideg Fields fell well below the standard

VERDICT: Generally a slight decline

Management

Evaluates how well the management plan is implemented on site

2016-2017 - 3 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and had a valid management plan.

2017-2018 - 2 No Priority Open Spaces met the criteria and had a management plan 2No space improved, for the same reasons given above Gellideg Fields fell well below the standard

VERDICT: Slight improvement

Open Space Name	Community Group Established	Green Flag Awarded
Nant Llwynog	yes	no
Trelewis Park	no	no
Gellideg Fields	yes	no
Ifor Tip And Pant Hollow	no	no
Dowlais Park	yes	yes
Edward Street Pant	no	no

Honeysuckle Close	yes	no
Rear Prince Charles Hospital	no	no
Aberfan Park	no	no
Aberfan Playground and Sports Pitch	no	no
Mount Pleasant	no	no
Cyfarthfa Park	yes	yes
Greenie Galon Uchaf Road	no	no
Haydyn Terrace	no	no
Pentrebach Recreation Ground	no	no
Troedyrhiw Park	no	no
Alexandra Terrace	no	no
The Incline	no	no
Parc Taf Bargoed	yes	yes
The Hollies	no	no
Well Street	no	no
Maple Crescent Trefechan	no	no

6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE

- 6.1 In setting a target for improving the quality of Open Spaces it would be appropriate for each Priority Open Space to have achieved the Green Flag Award or the Green Flag Community Award.
- 6.2 The Green Flag Community Award is less demanding than that of the Green Flag Award and is a more realistic and sustainable proposition. It does however require the formation of a constituted community group to make the application.
- 6.3 Currently out of the 21 Priority Open Spaces; 6 currently have either 'Friends of Groups' or community groups associated with them. Of these spaces 3 have recently achieved the Green Flag award.
- 6.4 All community green spaces are eligible to enter, as long as they are freely accessible to all and unlocked as much as possible. The community group must have a lease or written permission from the landowner to manage the site if they are not the owners. The possibility of increasing the number of constituted community groups will depend not only on willingness among the local population but also on professional advice, encouragement and support from the Local Authority and other voluntary sector organisations. Means to achieve this such as Community Asset Transfer schemes require a corporate approach which is well thought out and works in a realistic, responsible and reliable manner.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- 7.1 Currently there is no funding available from the Council for open space improvements. In the current financial year external Welsh Government ESD (Environment and Sustainable Development Grant) are limited and can only achieve limited results. The situation relating to external funding sources will deteriorate as funding becomes unavailable (see Environment Act, Community and Grant funding Scrutiny Report). There will be no guaranteed external funding available for open

space from April 2019 and without funding Planning and Countryside staff will not be able to deliver future improvements; but will continue to offer technical advice on open space management, the co-operation and good will of external organisations will have to be relied upon for delivery..

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

A Prosperous Wales

There is a clear focus on providing sufficient skills and training in order that community groups and volunteers can most effectively deliver change within their communities. The consequences of this include upskilling and thus increasing the capacity for prosperity for groups and individuals whilst contributing towards reducing the needs for services.

A Resilient Wales

In order to effectively direct resources and efforts to where they are required, the projects will focus on actions and targets identified with the Merthyr Tydfil Biodiversity Action Plan (MTBAP), in turn contributing to the Wales and UK BAP. A second focus will be to support projects across Council functions implemented the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Resilience Duty under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016: a Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Plan is currently being produced and resources will complement this Plan.

Protecting and improving Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), as required under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) contributes to the delivery of Merthyr Tydfil Biodiversity Action Plan via a range of tasks/projects which lend themselves to community and volunteer participation such as woodland management, hedge laying, dry stone walling, invasive species management, wildflower seeding and nectar rich species planting. This will be complemented by managing Section 7 Habitats and Species of Principal Importance for the purpose of maintaining and enhancing biodiversity in Wales (Environment Act 2016) at a range of scales from local through to landscape scale considering eco-connectivity, with Merthyr Tydfil Biodiversity Partnership and implemented by local communities and volunteers.

A Healthier Wales

Community involvement, protection and enhancement of public places within MTCBC Open Spaces Strategy will encourage increased use of the outdoors for health and recreation both from participants in improvements and users of the spaces. Community involvement, protection and enhancement of public places within MTCBC Open Spaces Strategy will encourage an increased use of the outdoors for health and recreation, particularly in an area of significant preventative public health issues. Local Health Board PSB inclusion of Open Spaces/Environment demonstrates strategic health relevance and importance. Open Spaces are currently being directly referenced and aspire to be more widely used by the Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Trust (MLT) when making grant funding bids to increase health through physical exercise. When projects are planned there is always consideration of what

and how actions can reduce poor air quality, excessive noise and localised flood risk (caused by being unable to deliver the outcomes in this application, e.g. fly-tipping causing flooding issues by blocking culverts in waterways).

A more equal Wales

Most environment quality actions take place in recognised “deprived” communities where resilience is weakest as this is where most of the problems seem to arise. Provision of community and volunteering opportunities (including training), predominantly in the working week will favour local residents not in education or employment. Targeting sectors of the population, particularly those at risk and/or responsible for others will further target and cascade greater participation. Groups targeted will include Social Services (children and adult), Foster Carers, Mental Health organisations, Barnardos, Housing Associations. Provision of jobs, training and skills across a diverse range of the population.

A Wales of cohesive communities

The focus on supporting communities to identify and participate in resolving their own priority issues whilst providing information and projects focussed on strategic, evidence based needs (collaborative place-based working) will certainly increase cohesive communities in comparison to not providing this opportunity. Furthermore, from prior applications it is evidenced that there are “role model communities” which other areas aspire to emulate in terms of participating in improving local environment quality; some of these “more advanced” groups have helped new groups set up and implement projects in neighbouring communities.

A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language

The projects encourage people to visit and enjoy the culture and natural heritage of Merthyr Tydfil.

A globally responsive Wales

The approaches identified help to start on the long-term path to becoming globally responsible across socio-economic, environmental, health and education themes. Recycling/appropriate disposal of community collected materials using local markets and closed loop methods to optimise ecological and carbon footprint reductions demonstrates a collaborative and sustainable approach to improving local environment quality.

Five ways of working: Long-term; Integration; Involvement; Collaboration; Prevention

Long-term approaches are being developed it is not possible to implement long-term approaches efficiently or effectively with resources of unknown quantity and period. There is strong integration of the outcomes within these projects with other strategic goals and objectives within and across statutory/public sector.

In some respects the above integration point partially demonstrates involvement but the main strength is the level and type of involvement of local communities and volunteers across most actions, particularly providing tailored support where projects are mutually beneficial.

The aspect of collaboration is weak as there has been little contribution from some other Departments but this is more detailed within the Merthyr Tydfil Nature Recovery Action Plan for Environment (Wales) Act 2016 compliance.

It is considered that locally the most effective and efficient way for prevention is to encourage and support community and volunteer participation engendering a sense of ownership over public spaces and the wider environment resulting in an aspect of rapid reporting, self-policing and independent determination.

A good example of a project meeting many of the above principles and goals is a Green Infrastructure Plan which aspires to use existing data and evidence to spatially map existing infrastructure in order to focus future resources on projects with multiple benefits; e.g. biodiversity, flooding, air pollution, health. The information can be presented online, accessible to all persons and organisations in any format and can be updated in real time. Communities and volunteers can contribute to actions which can be uploaded on to the website instantly and show how they are benefitting the wider environment by operating locally. Other organisations and departments can use this as a strategic planning tool. There is the capacity to use the platform as an educational resource.

Cherylee Evans
Chief Officer Neighbourhood Services & Planning

Councillor Kevin Gibbs
Cabinet member for Neighbourhood Services, Planning and Countryside

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy	June 2016	Planning and Countryside Office Unit 5
Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy Action Plans	June 2016	Triangle Business Park Pentrebach Merthyr Tydfil CF48 4TQ
Merthyr Tydfil Open Space Strategy Monitoring Report	March 2018	
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		No