

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE REPORT

Date Written	19 March 2021
Report Author	Judith Jones
Service Area	Neighbourhood Services, Planning and Countryside
Committee Date	12 April 2021

To: Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen

Neighbourhood Services Corporate Self-Evaluation 2020-2021

1.0 SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 Self-evaluation is a useful process that is rigorous and enables Chief Officers, Heads of Service and officers to be critically reflective about outcomes, service provision and leadership and management.
- 1.2 This report focuses on the completion of the self-evaluation undertaken by the Chief Officer: Neighbourhood Services and her teams. The response directly relates to the Environmental Wellbeing theme laid down in the Council's Corporate Plan: Focus on the Future.
- 1.3 This report and the background papers highlight the key findings of the self-evaluation activity; outline areas of good practice along with areas for development; and identifies the priorities for improvement which will be developed into a Business Improvement Plan.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION(S)

- 2.1 Scrutiny Committee Members to provide officers feedback on the content of the report developed through completion of the self-evaluation process.

3.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Self-evaluation is a business process that is rigorous and enables organisations to be critically reflective about outcomes, service provision and leadership and management. In 2013/14, the Council introduced a self-evaluation process which was completed by officers at Head of Service level.
- 3.2 From using lessons learned over previous years, the format of the challenge of self-evaluation was developed (e.g.) self-evaluation was undertaken on a service-level basis; with challenge being offered a Performance Board consisting the Chief Executive, Directorate Lead; Portfolio Member and the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee to which the service reported. The key outcome of the process was to identify areas of good practice; along with priorities for improvement.
- 3.3 In 2019, a refocus exercise was undertaken to ensure the self-evaluation documents continued to meet the organisation's needs (e.g.) offered officers completing the forms opportunity to outline the current service position; highlight any good practice; note areas for development and to identify the services' priorities for improvement. The documents were organised in the form of 3 key questions:
- Outcomes;
 - Provision and Service Delivery; and
 - Leadership and management.
- 3.4 Following consideration of the updated documents by the Council's Corporate Management Team (CMT); the new format was approved for re-introduction in May 2019.
- 3.5 As part of the process cycle supporting the delivery of the self-evaluation process, it was proposed that completed questions should be presented before the sector-specific scrutiny committee which normally scrutinises the outputs/outcomes for the relevant service area. This was seen as an opportunity for Committee Members to review and explore facets of the wide range of activities for which Chief Officers were accountable; whilst for services, it was seen as an opportunity for details of their services to be brought before scrutiny to outline positive practice and achievements along with any challenges faced and areas for development.
- 3.6 Committee Members are asked to review the content of the completed questions and consider performance, areas of good practice, areas for development and, perhaps most importantly, the services' priorities for improvement for the coming year. Scrutineers' feedback will be used when considering how these priorities will be progressed.

4.0 WHERE WE WERE

- 4.1 In 2018/19 the outcomes for Neighbourhood Services & Planning were considered to be adequate. There were some evidenced examples of good outcomes for the community in Development Control, Building Control and Waste, however on the whole, due to the year on year reduction in resources and budgets for the other front line services along with the Engineering department, the outcomes for the community were considered to be adequate in that the services were provided but limited and were often re-active rather than pro-active due to limited resources.

- 4.2 In 2018/19 Provision & Service Delivery for Neighbourhood Services were adequate. On the whole it was felt that engagement with support services was adequate, on the basis that there was room for improvement that would enable services to operate more efficiently but it was an acceptable level of service. Leadership & Management was considered to be adequate, with strengths outweighing weaknesses.

5.0 WHERE WE ARE NOW

5.1 Judgement: Adequate

- 5.2 Since the previous Self Evaluation was carried out, the services within Neighbourhood Services have had to respond to two catastrophic events, namely Storm Dennis and the Covid 19 pandemic; the information contained in the Background Papers details how services have responded. Needless to say, it is commendable that services have continued to operate their day-to-day business ensuring the public of Merthyr Tydfil continued to be served whilst also responding to the devastation caused by Storm Dennis as well as the challenges presented by the pandemic. Without the commitment of Neighbourhood Services staff, the rate of rebuilding and the recovery efforts would have been severely compromised.
- 5.3 Outcomes, Provision & Service Delivery and Leadership & Management for Neighbourhood Services are considered to be Adequate. The background papers that form part of this report include the combined response of Service Managers to each of the 3 questions. The following is a brief summary of the evaluated service areas, highlighting why/how the overall judgement was arrived at.
- 5.4 Staff are continually looking for ways to improve their services and are conscious of the need for progress. This is a particular focus in Waste, where ambitious recycling targets set by WG require continuous implementation of new initiatives and new ways of working in order to meet those targets. Similarly Parks and Grounds Maintenance needed to change and improve the way they work to comply with the requirements of the Environment Act, examples of this include cutting less grass and managing our open spaces differently in order to realise biodiversity benefits.
- 5.4 Notable improvements have been made in energy and carbon management with Council adopting its first Carbon Management Plan in 2019.
- 5.5 Planning plays a key role in delivering the Councils priorities. Effective communication between officers and members and internal departments is essential to fulfilling the overall vision. During 2019/20 the 1st replacement LDP was adopted by Full Council, in line with the WG Delivery Agreement. Merthyr Tydfil was again the best performing local planning authority in Wales in terms of determining applications.
- 5.6 The Building Regulations service provides same day inspections where requested, it strives to investigate all dangerous structures reports within 24hrs. The Building Regulation function of Building Control is cost neutral. The retention rate of clients remains high in a fiercely competitive market. The service has good, close working practices and processes across departments with Development Control, Property, Regeneration, Estates and Environmental Health and frequently carries out joint

enforcement visits with Planning Enforcement and Environmental Health Officers. It has a 'report it' form online allowing the public to report dangerous structures and unauthorised work. One of the three members of staff is fluent in Welsh.

- 5.7 The Highways service continues to operate on the basis of a Highways Network Plan and Winter Maintenance Plan that provide guidelines that demonstrates accountability for why and how the Council carries out its highways maintenance provision and details the processes for dealing with adverse weather conditions; these help to defend third party claims. During 2019/20, Council approved a proposal to bring the gully cleansing operation back in house.
- 5.8 The Waste Management service has contracts in place to maximise recycling, composting and preparation for reuse; these include regional contracts for certain materials that ensure value for money. We have opened a Re-use shop at Unit 20. High levels of recycling, composting and preparation for reuse are being achieved in line with Welsh Government recycling targets. Having our own Waste transfer station allows us to treat material and sustain the best possible market price for our recycling. It also allows us to store high volumes of tonnages so in instances of haulage failure it does not impact on the residents of Merthyr Tydfil. We have previously been recognised nationally by receiving an award for our baled aluminium cans.
- 5.9 A weekly recycling service and fortnightly refuse service is provided for the residents of Merthyr Tydfil in order to maximise recycling; information and advice is available to residents on sustainable waste management through various channels such as Events, Door knocking campaigns, Website, Social media and enforcement. We hold monthly recycling performance meetings for all Neighbourhood Services departments to report on how they have and will contribute to the recycling targets.
- 5.10 We also provide a seasonal free of charge fortnightly garden waste collection and a free clinical waste collection, along with assisted collections and additional capacity bins on application. Two Household waste and Recycling Centres allow residents of the County Borough to recycle their bulky waste, and a kerbside bulky waste collection service is available for a reasonable charge.
- 5.11 The Street Cleansing service recycles at source which positively benefits the Authorities recycling targets. Recycled waste is collected from community groups and volunteers. Efforts are made to recycle as much of the fly-tipping collected as possible. Materials collected are separated into different streams and recycled through our CA sites, reducing the waste going to landfill which also helps towards our recycling targets. The service performs above the Welsh average for highways inspected of a high or acceptable standard.

- 5.12 The service continues to partner with Keep Wales Tidy carrying out various community environmental projects, and regular LEQ projects with Councillors and works collaboratively with Community Safety, the Police, Public Health and Trading Standards.
- 5.13 The Fly Tipping service attends partnership working groups with NRW, FtAW, SWP, South Wales Fire and Rescue, private partners and neighbouring local authorities. The number of complaints decreased from the number received in the previous year.
- 5.14 The Parks & Grounds Maintenance department currently manages and maintains the County Boroughs main parks and the bulk of the public open space. This includes Five main parks, 55 fixed play areas, 25 playing fields and associated buildings. These spaces are highly valued by communities, providing visitor hubs and centres from which health and educational activities can take place. They provide important habitats and connectivity corridors. It is intrinsically linked to the Councils Corporate Strategy.
- 5.15 Green flag management plans are in place for Cyfarthfa, Thomastown, Taff Bargoed parks and Aberfan cemetery. Friends of Cyfarthfa Park and Taff Bargoed park groups are actively involved in park issues, and community groups are supported to enable them to realise their aspirations.
- 5.16 Grass cutting frequencies have been reduced throughout the County Borough which has received a mixed public reaction. However, this has major benefits for pollinators and biodiversity and plays a part in the council's Biodiversity recovery plan. (A resilient Wales, A globally responsible Wales). Closer links with the Countryside section has enabled us to look at how we currently maintain areas and how we can adapt to new ways of working in the future. Maintenance in the future will pay more attention to the Council's long term aims with regard to biodiversity and the Environment Act.
- 5.17 The service works alongside highways on the winter maintenance plan by using two grounds maintenance tractors to supplement the gritter lorries in hard to access streets. All green waste and logs are recycled.
- 5.18 The Engineering department covers a number of service areas; Structures, Highways Development Control, Land Drainage, Flood Risk Management, Sustainable Drainage Approval Body, Traffic Management and Road Safety.
- 5.19 The Engineering and Traffic department currently manages and maintains Council assets in accordance with relevant legislation and codes of practice. The department also carries out the design, project management and site supervision of engineering projects for each service area and also provides these functions for other departments within the Council. The service is currently developing flood risk management plans.

- 5.20 During 2020 the department was involved in the delivery of numerous contracts ranging in value from just under £1k to £350k. The drainage section is collaboratively working with another local authority and internal stakeholders, providing a design service to ensure compliance with Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. The service continues to be a member of the County Surveyors Society Wales Engineering Services Benchmarking and has three welsh speakers (out of ten staff).
- 5.21 Due to the high risk to public safety all reports received regarding dangerous or defective highway structures are investigated within 4 hours. All complaints received regarding road safety issues are investigated within 24 hours. The department provides a structural design service and assesses structural calculations for other departments within the council in accordance with relevant codes of practice. Road safety training is provided to schools within Merthyr Tydfil.
- 5.22 Neighbourhood Services front line managers meet on a weekly basis to discuss sharing of resources, horizon scanning and to provide an understanding of the pressures other departments are under. Monthly meetings are held with the Chief Officer, Neighbourhood Services managers, and the HR Operational Manager.

6.0 WHERE WE WANT TO BE

- We want to continue implementing the replacement LDP to guide development within the County Borough up to 2031.
- We want the MTFP to reflect the 2,200 new houses to be built in the County Borough by 2030, in front line services budgets that will be required to serve the new houses.
- We want to retrieve more recycling from the wheeled bin
- We want to increase participation, set out and capture rate for kerbside dry recycling and food waste.
- We want to increase recycling from internal services
- We want to improve communication on recycling to residents of the County Borough
- We want a behavioural change officer
- We want to increase the trade recycling customer base
- We want to implement a trade marketing strategy
- We want to review road sweeping routes to become more efficient and react to the needs of the public.
- We want to intervene earlier with Regen/planning to ensure maintenance costs & resources of developments are appropriate for future requirements.
- We want to progress with Refit Cymru to reduce energy use and therefore CO2 production in more buildings
- We want all buildings to have automatic meter reading for utilities.
- We want to continue to develop the Nature Recovery Plan in accordance with Section 6 of the Environment Act 2016, ensuring that all departments are clear on their responsibility to contribute.

- We want to develop a replacement playground programme to address much of the play equipment that is 20+ years old.
- We want Councillors and residents to understand the environmental benefits of reduced grass cutting frequency and to implement a communication strategy to deal with the public's concerns about lack of maintenance.
- We want to continue identifying asset transfer opportunities for community groups to take over council owned assets.
- We want to utilise Corporate Communications to better communicate the work of Neighbourhood Services to the public.
- We want the staff recruited to the Engineering department to be trained to carry out their roles effectively.
- We want the measures identified in the Flood Risk Management plans and required works implemented, so that we see a reduction in the number of properties at risk from surface water flooding throughout the County Borough.
- We want to meet inspection frequencies in relation to highway structures, reservoirs, and disused waste tips.

7.0 WHAT WE NEED TO DO NEXT

- Improve the electronic delivery of the Building Control service, enabling customers to engage more easily.
- Produce clear understandable communication via websites, social media and provide staff and councillor training in relation to the reduced grass cutting regime and ways of working in accordance with the principles of the Environment Act 2016.
- In order to extract as much recyclable material as possible from the wheeled bins we need to continue to operate WRAP's Keeping up with the Joneses campaign.
- We need to work with Corporate Communications to better publicise the work of Neighbourhood Services.
- We need to produce a Net Zero Carbon plan to map how we will meet the WG target.
- Continue to implement the works identified in the Flood Risk Management Plan.
- We need to develop a playground replacement strategy, identifying necessary improvements.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO WELLBEING OBJECTIVES

- 8.1 The corporate self-evaluation process is based around the services/activities delivered and should reflect the contribution made in relation to the four wellbeing objectives set down by the Council in focus in the Corporate Wellbeing Plan.

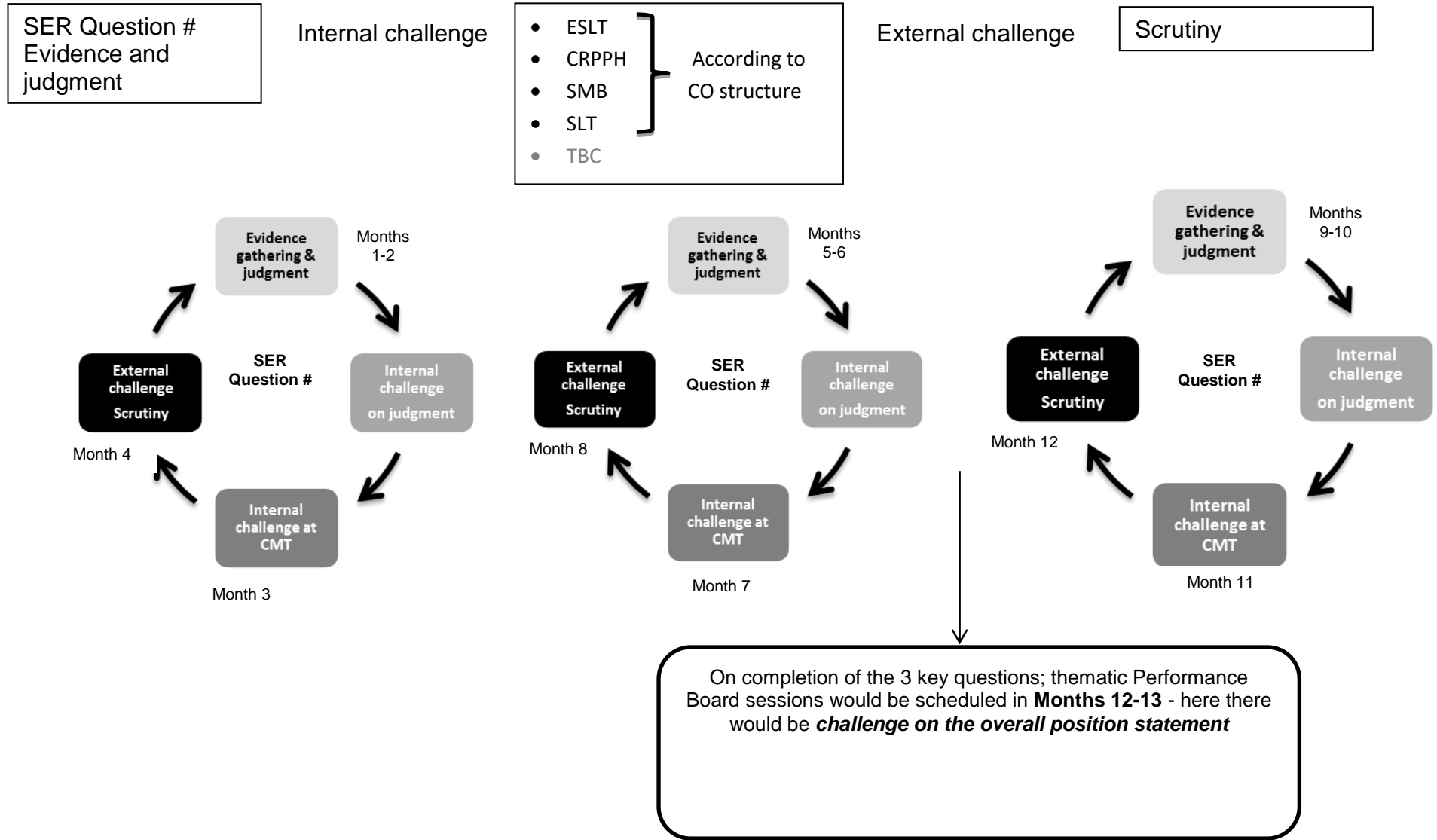
- 8.2 This report specifically links to the Environmental Wellbeing objective within the Council's Corporate Wellbeing Plan: **Communities protect, enhance and promote our environment and countryside.**
- 8.3 Through completion of other self-evaluation responses; we will also be able to demonstrate our team's contribution to support progress against the following objectives:
- People are empowered to live independently within their communities, where they are safe and enjoy good physical and mental health; and
 - People feel supported to develop the skills required to meet the needs of businesses, with a developing, safe infrastructure that establishes Merthyr Tydfil as an attractive destination.

JUDITH JONES
CHIEF OFFICER PLANNING &
NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

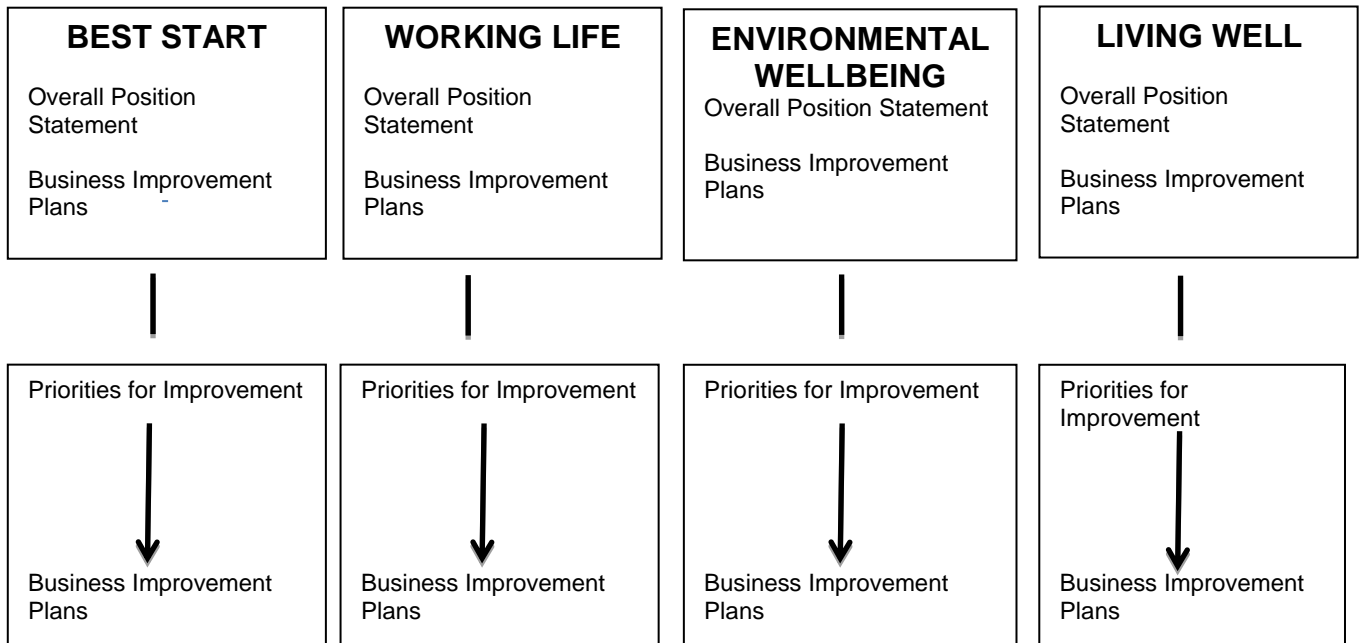
COUNCILLOR DAVID HUGHES
CABINET MEMBER FOR PLANNING &
NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES

BACKGROUND PAPERS		
Title of Document(s)	Document(s) Date	Document Location
List the Background documents which have been relied on in preparing the report. E.g. previous minutes of relevant committees	Self Evaluation Master Copy Questions 1,2 & 3	
Does the report contain any issue that may impact the Council's Constitution?		

Self-Evaluation Process Cycle: 4 months x 3



Performance Board



Analysis of commonalities → Report to CMT to identify support needed to drive improvement

