

Minutes from the thirty-sixth meeting of the Cross Party Group on Waterways

Media Briefing Room, Senedd, Cardiff Bay

Wednesday 19 March 2014

6.10pm

AMs Present

Nick Ramsay AM (Chair) (Welsh Conservatives, Monmouth) – for part of meeting

Present

Cllr Bob Wellington – Leader Torfaen County Council

Christina Harrhy - Chief Officer for Neighbourhood Services, Torfaen County Borough Council

Andrew Stumpf – Head of Wales Glandŵr Cymru - the Canal & River Trust in Wales

Mark Lang – Chair Glandŵr Cymru

Bernard Illman – Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

Tim Harris - Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

Peter Cole – Capital Region Tourism

Phil Hughes – Fourteen Locks Canal Centre

Tom Maloney – Fourteen Locks Canal Centre

Gwyn Lewis – Ramblers Cymru

Mair Bevan – Ramblers Cymru

Martin Davies – Swansea Canal Society

David Henry – Swansea Canal Society

Dr Ruth Hall – Member Glandŵr Cymru All Wales Partnership

Richard Owen - Teifi Fishery Owners Group

John Griffith – Independent supporter

Rob Frowen – Newport City Council, Economic Development Manager

Donna Coyle – Member Glandŵr Cymru All Wales Partnership

Jane Lorimer – Director, Sustrans Cymru

Carole Jacob – Torfaen Friends of the Earth

Pamela James – Torfaen Friends of the Earth

Brian Hancock – Independent supporter

Wyn Mitchell – Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

Cap. Roger Francis – Chairman, Monmouthshire, Brecon & Abergavenny Canals Trust

Stephen Rowson – Canal Historian

Chris Yewlett - Cardiff University School of City and Regional Planning

Gareth Hughes – Neath Canal Trust

Chris Charters - British Outdoor Professionals Association

Dr Julia Fallon – Cardiff Metropolitan University

Matthew Francis – Grayling

Rebecca Holmes - Grayling

The meeting commenced at 6.10pm

Item 1: Presentation by Cllr Bob Wellington, Leader of Torfaen County Council

Bob Wellington outlined Torfaen's vision for growth and the importance of Vibrant and Viable Places funding as well as £40m of private sector investment. This can be used as a platform for further funding. Canal restoration isn't just about heritage, its about providing employment for young people and the opportunity to learn new skills and gain qualifications through NVQs. Supporting young people into work has further benefits on people's lives. There are huge economic and social benefits to be gained from restoring the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal.

Item 2: Presentation by Christina Harray, Chief Officer for Neighbourhood Services, Torfaen County Council

Christina Harray spoke about Torfaen's ambition to take full advantage of town centre and canal-side regeneration using Vibrant and Viable Places funding. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal is an iconic asset and also part of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. This is embedded in the City Region concept. Christina explained the historic and current significance of Torfaen's heritage. Displayed a map of Torfaen, demonstrating their plan to 'up-skill' the northern area and facilitate the distribution of these skills to the rest of the region. There are plans to use tourism as an economic driver and to link tourist destinations. The canal is an opportunity to bring in inward investment through tourism and more long term regeneration. This then brings in employment and skills. In Cwmbran it is the intention that the new canal quarter will provide the heartbeat for the wider area. Torfaen plans to use the Vibrant and Viable places funding to achieve 'narrow but deep' effects, primarily job creation. This funding must be spent in two years. Christina went on to explain the Key Performance Indicator's for the programme which can only be achieved through collaboration and partnerships.

Christina explained the bidding process for Vibrant and Viable places funding and the importance of European funding to the project. She explained that Torfaen County Borough Council, have had to revise their original funding allocations down due to a smaller allocation of funding than the original bid. She gave more detail on the plans for Pontypool and canal-side regeneration, adding that the canal-side plots of land will require major private sector investment. European funding is anticipated to help bring the canal into the centre of Pontypool and make the physical link with Cwmbran, including cycle-paths and footpaths.

There was an acknowledgement of a need to properly scope and provide evidence of the benefits that the canal's regeneration would bring about but the canal is embedded in the Local Development Plan. The Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal Partnership works very well and is restoring the canal at Ty Coch. There is an aspiration to complete "the loop" with a cycle route link from the Crumlin Arm incorporating Cwmcarn Forest.

The V & VP project aims to create 674 jobs in total through the Vibrant and Viable places funding.

The Cwmbran canal side quarter will be a good place for a hotel, with the area primarily being given over to leisure and cultural pursuits rather than retail. There may be issues around the acquisition of land on the canal-side industrial estate and the relocation of businesses and there is only have a short time frame in which to do this. 25% of match funding still has to be found; difficult when Local Authorities are downsizing, but there are hopes to attract a committed developer to build the canal-side housing.

Nick Ramsay (Chair): Welcomed the Cwmbran development and offered his support for the council's plans.

Item 3: Discussion session

Brian Hancock asked Christina to talk about the partnership between the Canal and River Trust and Torfaen council.

Christina Harrhy noted that the canal is owned by Torfaen County Borough Council but their Chief Executive is a Council member of the Canal and River Trust. Christina is also a Member of the Glandŵr Cymru All Wales Partnership. The council therefore has very good links with the Canal and River Trust and will work in close partnership with them.

Cap. Roger Francis congratulated Christina on the presentation and the funding achieved. He emphasised the positive news around canals at the moment, including BBC's Countryfile placing a stone into a lock wall on the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal. In a recent Brecon Beacons National Park visitor survey the canal was identified as the most popular and visited attraction in the Park.

Christina Harrhy confirmed that Torfaen County Borough Council has very good working relationships indeed with the National Park.

Jane Lorimer noted that under the revised allocations for Cwmbran she was disappointed to see that significant portions of funding for walking and cycling will be cut.

Christina Harrhy explained that walking and cycling is pivotal for connectivity in the area. They are looking to lever in funding from other budgets such as Transport and European funding too.

Cllr Bob Wellington explained that his aspirations are not just for the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal to Newport but also the canal to Crumlin. He added that people come to Wales from all over Europe to mountain bike and this is a key area. Assembly Members don't necessarily realise what great opportunities we have in South East Wales for this and other pursuits.

Cllr Wellington added that in a month or two, he would be calling a meeting, and inviting all the Assembly Members and Members of Parliament for Newport, Caerphilly, Monmouth and Torfaen, in order to to emphasise the importance of this region and it's potential. The Minister for Economy, Science and Transport specifically included tourism in her plans for the City Regions, and he noted the importance of lobbying the Minister and Assembly Members and MPs to get them on board. This is very important from a City region perspective.

Mark Lang asked Christina where she you hoped the jobs would be created under the scheme.

Christina Harrhy noted that mostly these will be in construction when the new housing is built and the canal is re-opened.

Cllr Wellington hoped that the scheme would replicate the successes of canal-based regeneration schemes in Manchester, Birmingham, and Scotland.

Christina Harrhy noted that the canal-side development would not only lead to jobs in the leisure industry but that there is also hope that there will be a digital cluster of tech companies coming into Cwmbran.

Mark Lang added that canal development will also keep skills local to the area.

Martin Davies noted that the aspirations for Torfaen are what he also hopes to achieve through integrating the canals around Swansea. However, without Vibrant and Viable Places funding, what can be expected from local government in that area?

Christina Harrhy suggested that Torfaen is fortunate to have this funding but the Swansea City Region might also be used as an opportunity for leveraging in investment.

Rob Frowen urged Martin Davies to speak to his local authorities. He explained that Newport City Council often meets with stakeholders and little persuasion is needed. Collaboration between authorities might be an option.

Martin Davies explained that his local authority is only just waking up to the fact that it has a canal in its possession. He hopes to bring canoes back onto the canal shortly and emphasised the health benefits it brings.

Cllr Wellington stressed that it is important to fight against canals being piped or concreted over or in other ways prevented from being restored in the future.

Martin Davies expressed concerns that protection from development was going to be revoked.

Andrew Stumpf explained that other canals have had this problem but have successfully challenged it. He cited the Bedford Milton Keynes Waterway in particular but also the Hereford and Gloucester Canal.

Christina Harrhy reiterated that Rob Frowen advised getting in touch with local councils, as these projects only get off the ground with persistent and good leadership.

Martin Davies added that Swansea Council are much better than Neath Port Talbot.

Gareth Hughes noted that 11 out of 19 locks have been restored on the Neath Canal. The Neath Canal Trust begged the council to set up these kinds of partnerships two years ago but received no reply. These canals are privately owned and their owners are interested in other things than regeneration. Local authorities need to take the lead on this, he argued.

Cllr Wellington added that he would raise the matter with other council leaders through local government channels.

Andrew Stumpf suggested that the project needs to be presented in a language and with supporting evidence that chime with the audience. Evidence is beneficial in backing up the project vision.

Gareth Hughes confirmed that there are feasibility studies.

Peter Cole noted that there is plenty of activity going on around canals, rather than in them. Leadership and partnership are therefore crucial to maximising the potential which this activity brings.

Bernard Illman welcomed Cllr Wellington's comments on organising a meeting to get Assembly Members on board. Site visits would be a bonus, he added.

Cllr Wellington explained the changing landscape of local government with the City Regions and William's Commission recommendations. Canal regeneration has to be integrated within the City Regions concept.

Carole Jacobs added that the city region project gives hope to others who are struggling.

Cllr Wellington added that the Minister for Economy, Science and Transport specifically requested that tourism be a key part of the City Regions so we need to hold them to that.

Christina Harrhy noted also that the next round of European funding is all about economic growth and that local authorities must collaborate on this. Projects must be iconic.

Brian Hancock added that he is proud that this is the oldest running Cross Party Group. When he was an Assembly Member he called for a Canal and Waterway strategy and this development is what can finally be achieved.

Julia Fallon asked what risks and uncertainties Christina had about Torfaen's regeneration plans.

Christina Harrhy explained how the procurement process will be key.

Julia Fallon asked if there would be a few developers involved.

Christina Harrhy noted that it is as yet early days and at this point Torfaen CBC doesn't know.

Andrew Stumpf suggested that there could well be a number of individual house builders coming forward within any one development.

Christina Harrhy added that a number of house builders have been supportive.

Julia Fallon enquired as to the level of public support for these developments.

Cllr Wellington responded that the level of support is enormous. Bringing the canal into the town centre is an opportunity to create a cultural centre in Cwmbran. This is not only about boats, it's about job creation.

Rob Frowen noted the success of the National Trailboat Festival in Newport which itself attracted 15,000 visitors. Most of these didn't even know the canal was there.

Christina Harrhy stressed that communication is key.

Item 4: Any Other Business

Andrew Stumpf noted that the winter storms caused significant damage with landslips on both the Llangollen and Monmouthshire and Brecon canals. The most serious is on the Mon and Brecon Canal at Llanfoist but three quarters of the canal remains open. The towpath is also open and diverted around the work site. Repairs are already underway with the aim of getting both canals fully open as quickly as practicable. Repairing both slips will cost around £1.5m. Canal & River Trust is working with hire boat operators to minimise disruption to their businesses.

Chris Charters raised the issue about canoe access to the waterways. BOPA have been negotiating amicable access agreements with other water users and so far have got

concessionary agreements in several areas. Problems are caused where fishermen want quiet water and kayakers want white water. He distributed some literature about the organisations work.

Date of Next Meeting: 11th June