

MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE ECONOMY, RESIDENTS, COMMUNITIES AND GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE HELD AT BY TEAMS ON MONDAY, 14 SEPTEMBER 2020

PRESENT: County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)
County Councillors K W Curry, J Gibson-Watt, G Jones, I McIntosh, J Pugh, D Selby and L Skilton

Cabinet Portfolio Holders In Attendance: R Powell (Portfolio Holder for Young People and Culture), H Hulme (Portfolio Holder for Environment) and M R Harris (Leader)

Officers: Nigel Brinn (Corporate Director - Economy and Environment) and Wyn Richards (Scrutiny Manager and Head of Democratic Services)

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| 1. APOLOGIES |
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An apology for absence was received from County Councillor D Evans and from Portfolio Holders County Councillors P Davies (due to other Council business) and G Breeze.

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| 2. DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST |
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There were no disclosures of interest by Members relating to items to be considered at the meeting.

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| 3. DECLARATION OF PARTY WHIPS |
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The Committee did not receive any disclosures of prohibited party whips which a Member has been given in relation to the meeting in accordance with Section 78(3) of the Local Government Measure 2011.

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| 4. GENERAL CENTRE FOR RAIL EXCELLENCE (GCRE) |
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The Chair welcomed Arthur Emyr (Welsh Government), Damian Barry (Arup), Philip Harrison (Arup) and Hannah Dineen (Grasshopper Communications) to the meeting.

Documents Considered:

- Presentation

Issues Discussed:

- This is a very important project for the Council, with Powys County council being a joint venture partner with Welsh Government and Neath Port Talbot Council. The site is within Powys, with the infrastructure for the rail head being in Neath Port Talbot County.
- This is a project brought to Welsh Government by the rail industry. The Director of Economic Infrastructure at Welsh Government Chairs the Project Board overseeing this project, and Nigel Brinn, Corporate Director Economy and Environment is the Council's representative on the project board. A strategic outline case was published in June 2018. Welsh Government also engaged Arup as its advisor for the project.

- An Industry Evaluation Board considered the site and determined that it was suited for the intended purpose. An outline business case was submitted to the UK Government in July 2020 together with a request for £30 million worth of support. One of the current challenges is securing UK Government support for the project at present due to the comprehensive spending review. Welsh Government has asked the UK Government for a policy decision that this is the UK's preferred site. There is potential competition to the project with an alternative site in North Lincolnshire through a project led by Siemens.
- The GCRE site has good road access, there are also scheduled monuments, powerlines and a tramroad to accommodate as well as residential settlements close to the site in addition to the proximity to the National Park which have had to be considered in the engineering design for the project. To note that this is a major planning application and therefore requires an Environmental Impact Assessment application.
- There has been consultation with the rail industry and rail academic and other institutions for over two years in relation to the eventual track loop configuration. This is not only an engineering, testing, maintenance and validation project but also provides the opportunity for research and development, learning and training.
- Early engagement with stakeholders commenced in 2019. Pre-application consultation would commence on 17th September and run until 14th October, 2020. In addition letters will be sent to around 9,500 local residents and businesses notifying them of the consultation.
- The UK currently does not have such a high quality facility as proposed for GCRE at present with private and public organisations currently use test facilities in Europe and the USA. The facility will also allow open market access to allow competition and innovation. Rail projects within Wales and elsewhere are creating a need for this facility. This is a long term project and could be a catalyst for additional economic development on site, in the area and indeed across the South West Wales Region as a whole providing economic benefits as well as opportunities for job creation.
- It is anticipated that the project could be fully operational by 2025 and it is considered very much a "shovel ready" project. The earthworks consent has been granted by the Planning Committees from both Powys and Neath Port Talbot Councils. Phase 1 of the project could be operational by the Autumn of 2023, with Phases 2 and 3 operational by 2024 and 2025 respectively.

- Questions:

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| <p>There is an opportunity here for Powys and turning around the legacy issues in the upper Swansea Valley. With the Siemens rival project which is not so well developed, and Welsh Government seeking the policy statement from UK Government, what are the risks and challenges and what is the timeline for the policy statement. What representations are Powys making to senior politicians such as</p> | <p>Another meeting has been arranged between the Welsh Government Minister and the Under-Secretary of state at UK Government. Officials from both governments have been discussing the matter as well, stressing the importance of a policy decision in the first instance, and Welsh Government has been trying to exert as much influence as possible on the importance of commencing the project as soon as</p> |
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| <p>the Secretary of State.</p> | <p>possible. Other stakeholders could also seek to influence this project as well. There are commercial and financial challenges to the project but these cannot be addressed until there is a clarity on policy for the site.</p> <p>Powys is making representations at every level in respect of the project. The Leader and Portfolio Holder are seeking meetings with UK Government Ministers and officials as well in respect of the project. There are other potential developments that could arise from the project which the council will need to consider in future such as leisure and tourism.</p> |
| <p>Are the commoners / graziers supportive of the project as the site does include a large area of common land.</p> | <p>This is a large common on site. Powys has taken a lead through its Countryside Services to develop a strategy for commoners which was shared with the project team. This is part of the consenting regime and will form an integral part of the Environmental Impact Assessment. Consultation and liaison has being undertaken with the commoners in relation to the earthworks application, and further consultation will be required for the GCRE project itself. There will be similar consultations regarding right of way and rights of access across the site. In terms of the leisure opportunity, in the outline business case, based on evidence of other facilities in Europe it is estimates that an average of 75 additional staff e.g. academics and support staff working on time limited projects, could be coming to this site, every year, and this will require accommodation to be provided which is not currently available in the area for this number of people in close proximity to the site.</p> |
| <p>In the presentation there are 7 universities from across the UK who had been engaged with the project to date, how focussed is the Council on harnessing that expertise and creating opportunities for young</p> | <p>The first priority for the Council is ensuring that the project goes ahead and that the facility is built. The Council will then need to work through the Mid Wales Regional Skills Partnership to work with</p> |

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| <p>people in Powys rather than moving away from the county. Is this already under consideration.</p> | <p>colleges such as Neath College and providing additional vocational opportunities locally. The Mid Wales Growth Deal can then add value to this project in terms of the skills agenda, energy efficiency agenda etc. Other things could be added to the project but the key is securing the project first. Welsh Government has already held discussions with Neath College and Coleg y Cymoedd as well as skills and training officials at Welsh Government.</p> |
| <p>In light of the 2 competing projects, is there space for two projects in the UK and what point does the Siemens project need to reach for the GCRE project to be not viable.</p> | <p>There is only room for one project in the UK. Welsh Government and partners have converted an idea that individual stakeholders across the industry had though worth pursuing into a formal proposal that in strategic policy terms has been accepted across UK Government. The case for a testing facility in the UK has been made compellingly, what it now needed is for GCRE to be the preferred site.</p> |

The Corporate Director – Economy and Environment advised the Committee that the team would welcome updating the Committee at a future date.

Outcomes:

- **Noted.**

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| 5. | SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME |
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The Committee noted that the next meetings of the Committee would be held as follows:

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| 19/10/20 | 10.00 – 12.00 | Q2 Performance Reports |
| 02/11/20 | 14.00 – 16.00 | Possible Pre-Decision Scrutiny items from Head of Digital Services |
| 07/12/20 | 10.00 – 12.00 | Possible Pre-Decision Scrutiny items from Head of Digital Services |

Potential items for consideration:

- Regulatory Services
- Recycling rates – what advantage is being taken of the increases in recycling rates and how can we maintain recycling rates.
- Economic Impact Study / Town Centre Focus Group
- County Farms

Update Information arising from previous meeting:

- Car Parking Charges review – second meeting to be held in September.

County Councillor M J Dorrance (Chair)