

STATE OF THE AREA DEBATE 2004

REPORT of the State of the Area Debate held on 31st March, 2004 at the Paget Rooms, Penarth.

Present at Paget Rooms, Penarth on 31st March, 2004:

Councillor A.G. Powell, Chairman, The Vale of Glamorgan Council
Councillor H.J.W. James, Leader
Councillor A.D. Hampton, Cabinet Member - Lifelong Learning (Education and Training)
Councillor G. Kemp, Cabinet Member - Human Resources and Equalities
Mr. B. Jeffreys, Director of Learning and Development
Mr. C. Fray, Head of Economic Development and Leisure
Mr. P. Halstead, Chief Executive Barry College
Mr. A. Dakin, Welsh Development Agency

Prior to the commencement of the State of the Area Debate, the Chairman welcomed all present. The debate would concentrate primarily on Economic Regeneration and Lifelong Learning matters, and the Chairman set out the format for the proceedings.

The Chairman then invited the Leader to give his opening address. The Leader also welcomed all present to the State of the Area Debate. It was hoped that the evening would build on the success of last year's Debate, which had been held in Barry. In response to comments received following last year's event, it had been decided that debates be held at 3 venues this year and that each Debate focus on specific areas to allow participants to debate those areas more fully.

The Leader referred to the Vale of Glamorgan Partnership, a body comprising representatives from such bodies as the Local Health Board, the Police, the WDA and the Council itself. The Vale of Glamorgan partnership was responsible for the preparation of the Community Strategy, which, in turn, assists the Council in the preparation of its Corporate Plan, which defined the Council's vision for the Vale as being a place:

- that is safe, clean and attractive, where individuals and communities have opportunities to improve their health, prosperity and wellbeing;
- where there is a strong sense of community in which local groups and individuals have the capacity and incentive to make an effective contribution to the future of the area;

The Leader provided a brief overview of some examples of how the Council had improved its performance in recent years:

- Each of the Council's Services had drawn up individual Service Plans which reflected the Corporate aims and priorities;
- A Cabinet system of decision-making had been introduced which had resulted in those decisions being publicised and implemented more quickly than before;

- Scrutiny Committees, chaired by members of opposition parties, had been established with a primary focus of improvement, and making recommendations to Cabinet regarding policy development;
- work has commenced to establish an E-Government strategy which would assist the public by, for example, facilitating the payment of bills, making complaints etc.;
- progress has been made on the establishment of a resource park;
- the Council is seeking to provide Private Finance Initiative funding for the provision of two new comprehensive schools;
- funding for the Education Service has been increased by £4 million;
- a budget of £140,000 has been allocated to be used in the prosecution of fly-tippers. The Leader asked the public to consider how such people could be caught;
- the District Auditor had recently commended the positive and enthusiastic approach of the Council to improvement.

The Chairman then set out the agenda for the evening's proceedings, and again the Leader of the Council, in place of the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration who was unavoidably absent, introduced the Economic Regeneration Debate.

Economic Regeneration

The Leader informed that a major function of the Council was economic regeneration. The main thrust of the Council's economic regeneration strategy related to the regeneration of brown field sites. Penarth Docks had been regenerated, and now Barry Waterfront was being regenerated. 77 hectares of land was being redeveloped in partnership with the WDA and ABP, including the construction of new retail sites. In addition, the Council was developing a new County Library in Barry Town Centre and was redeveloping the former holiday camp.

Penarth was not a priority for the WDA. As a result, the Council had to be opportunistic in its approach to regenerating the area. Nevertheless, the Leader pointed out a number of proposed projects such as the Penarth Headland Link and the refurbishment of the Pier Pavilion. In addition, consultations are taking place regarding the future of the Billybanks (to be called Penarth Heights).

The Leader then introduced Mr. Chris Fray, Head of Economic Development and Leisure who opened his presentation by describing the Council's Strategic Priorities, i.e:

- encouragement of inward investment and support for local business development;
- to encourage enterprise and business activity in the rural Vale;
- to develop and promote tourism;
- to develop a learning economy for training and employment;
- to secure sustainable improvements to learning and development.

Actions being undertaken in accordance with the Strategic Priorities included:

- redevelopment of Penarth Heights;
- redevelopment of the old Barry Town Hall;
- development of the potential for film and media production within the area;
- facilitating appropriate information services and provision of assistance for those considering investment in the Vale;
- upgrading of the local infrastructure and environment in established and new employment areas;
- rural enterprise;
- construction of Penarth Headland Link;
- refurbishment of Penarth Pier;
- extension of Barry Steam Railway;
- strategic highway investment to address traffic problems at Cogan Roundabout and Culverhouse Cross;
- re-opening of the Vale of Glamorgan Railway Line to passenger services;
- establishment of a learning faculty at Nell's Point;
- development of a Waterfront IT Skills Centre.

The following question and answer session then ensued:

<u>Question</u>	<u>Answer</u>
It is now proposed to close the Community Centre at the Billybanks as part of the redevelopment. Could not one be included within the redevelopment proposals?	As part of the development, the Council will secure an agreement with the developer for the enhancement of community facilities.
No reference has been made regarding a road link between the M4 and the Airport.	Last October, the Welsh Assembly Government published short/medium and long term proposals for the road link. The Council felt that the proposals did not meet its aspirations and the Council has commented accordingly.
The last strategic plan for Penarth expired two years ago. We now need a proper plan for the area.	Agreed, but before a strategy can be drawn up, the Council needs to be assured of funding.
What about the £50,000 spent on traffic developments in Penarth. Was the money wasted?	The pedestrianisation of Lower Glebe Street had been the subject of consultation but the area provided could have been better used..

<p>How effective is the Council's plans for cost control? The rate of Council Tax has increased by 200% in recent years, including an increase of 5% this year.</p>	<p>The Council Tax increase of 5.8% this year includes amounts over which the Council has no control. The Council makes every effort to control costs and reference was made to the comments of the District Auditor. Furthermore, the Council is instructed by the Welsh Assembly Government to carry out certain duties, but doesn't receive adequate funding. The fact that the increase in Council Tax this year was so low was quite an achievement.</p>
<p>There are great concerns concerning traffic problems arising from developments at Dinas Road and also at the traffic lights at the Merrie Harrier and at the roundabout.</p>	<p>The Council has a budget of £50,000 to study the traffic problems in the area and to suggest solutions. The Council is very aware of the problems being encountered at the Barons Court roundabout, caused as a result of developments in Cardiff (e.g. the IKEA store). Some money exists in the Council's budget for improvements at the roundabout and for alterations to the Merrie Harrier junction.</p>

Lifelong Learning

Councillor Hampton, Cabinet Member for Lifelong Learning (Education and Training), introduced the Lifelong Learning Debate.

This was one of the most important Services administered by the Council, and also the area where most of the Council's resources were concentrated.

The Council was proud of the achievements of its pupils, but also recognised the challenges facing it.

Councillor Hampton then introduced Mr. Bryan Jeffreys, Director of Learning and Development who opened his presentation by giving an overview of:

- the scale of the Service;
- the key areas;
- the priorities facing the Service;
- the challenges facing the Service;
- how the Council is maintaining and improving standards;
- how the Council manages its resources;
- access and inclusion issues.

The following question and answer session then ensued:

<u>Question</u>	<u>Answer</u>
Ysgol Pen-y-Garth is in a disgraceful state - the temporary classrooms have been there for 20 years. What is intended?	It is acknowledged that Ysgol Pen-y-Garth requires investment, but all schools have to bid for limited funds. The Welsh Assembly Government has determined that all schools have to be 'fit for purpose' by 2010, and the Council is optimistic that funds will be made available for this purpose.
For three years, the Council has been seeking to fund the refurbishment of St. Cyres - when will work commence?	This is a significant project, and has been the subject of much discussion. The problem is that no PFI funding was available, but the Council has now proposed an innovative solution. A report on this matter will be reported to the Council's Cabinet soon.
Why are schools not allowed to advertise their examination successes, particularly Stanwell Comprehensive.	We have no problem with schools publicising their academic results and we would encourage them to do so
I understand that a new school is to be built at Cogan.	A reserve plot of land is earmarked at the Cogan Farm development which, depending on pupil numbers and resources, will be used for educational provision. At present, demand for places can be met within existing provision.
Please describe the Welsh Language provision.	Welsh Medium education is a growth area. The Council established a new Welsh Medium Secondary School in Barry which provides an opportunity for pupils to continue their education through the medium of Welsh.
If the Vale is the envy of Wales regarding the provision of Youth Centres, how many Centres exist in Penarth?	<p>The Youth Service in the Vale faces an issue of quality versus quantity. In terms of quality, the Service is very good, but in terms of quantity, the available resources are stretched thinly.</p> <p>The need for a Youth Centre in Penarth is acknowledged, and the Council is currently explaining a range of options to enhance existing provision.</p>

<p>My grandson has Special Needs and attends a school in Cardiff. Why can't the Vale provide the necessary education?</p>	<p>The provision of Special Educational Needs education is a very important and difficult issue. The costs of such provision are very significant. The Vale concentrates on what it can do well and purchases other services from neighbouring authorities where appropriate.</p>
<p>My school's budget has increased by more than the Council's settlement figure. I realise that I have been very fortunate but I also realise that an increase for the Lifelong Learning Service means a decrease for another area of the Council's Services.</p>	<p>The Lifelong Learning Service spends the lion's share of resources. It is take out time[time] for the Welsh Assembly Government to honour its pledge to make schools 'fit for purpose' by 2010.</p> <p>Furthermore, there is a misunderstanding that the Vale spends the least in Wales on pupils. The Council allocates the second highest proportion of its budget to education compared with other Authorities in Wales. The Council delegates the greatest percentage to schools, yet schools receive the lowest per pupil funding in Wales. This shows that there must be a fairer method of distributing resources on an All Wales basis.</p>

At this point in the programme for the evening, the Chairman opened the floor for questions on any issues from the general public.

<u>Question</u>	<u>Answer</u>
<p>I am a Governor of Stanwell Comprehensive School and want to make the point that the staff of the school do an excellent job.</p>	<p>The work of the school is to be congratulated.</p>
<p>How does the Council work in partnership, for example, with Barry College - would it not be a good idea to use courses run by the College to benefit the work of the Council?</p>	<p>The Council works in close partnership with Barry College and other training providers.</p> <p>This issue has recently been discussed by the Council's Management Team – the idea is to create a pool of labour which will be of benefit to the Council and offer opportunities for local employment..</p>

<p>I have heard earlier this evening that the Council regrets that it has the lowest spending per pupil in Wales. Shouldn't we be proud that we delegate the second highest percentage of our education budget directly to the schools?</p>	<p>Yes, although the consequence is that the funding available to run the Education Service centrally is extremely limited.</p>
<p>Many residents in Penarth live in conservation areas and need to comply with planning regulations. Is there any help from national or local government to assist with these additional costs?</p>	<p>Obtaining funding to assist in the maintenance of buildings in conservation areas is very difficult.</p>
<p>Where can we see a modernised system of keeping our streets clean?</p>	<p>In June of last year, the Council undertook a survey which indicated that 86% of the residents in the Vale were satisfied with the work of the Council and 55% were satisfied with the cleaning of the streets. The position with regard to street cleaning will be reviewed. New staff have been employed to enforce litter enforcement regulations.</p>
<p>Could the Council provide a tree pruning service?</p>	<p>The Council is aware of the problems that can be caused by trees. Two or three years ago, the Council employed 3 people to be involved in the maintenance of trees, although we are aware that this is not enough. The Council will consider engaging private contractors.</p>
<p>I want to draw your attention to the state of the pavements in Fairfield Road caused by the roots of trees.</p>	
<p>What measures are in place to reduce substance misuse?</p>	<p>The Community Safety Partnership has responsibility for this. It has established a group which educates and trains school children in the dangers of substance abuse. The drugs problem in the Vale is no greater or less than anywhere else. Alcohol abuse is also a serious problem. The Police work with schools to address the problem.</p>
<p>I understand that the Penarth Heights development involves the construction of 450 residential units. Isn't this too high a density?</p>	<p>The Council is currently marketing the site, although the exact detail of the proposals has yet to be decided. There will probably be 350 residential units. A consultation exercise was recently undertaken on the proposals relating to</p>

	this significant brown field development.
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The Chairman drew the Debate to a conclusion by thanking the Panel Members and the audience for their contributions to what had been a most informative evening, and handed over to the Leader who, in summing up, noted that one key factor that had emerged was the need to develop a cohesive strategy for Penarth. The Leader gave a commitment that such a document will be produced.

The Leader concluded by hoping that the members of the audience had learnt much by taking part in the Debate. It was certainly true that he had learned much by listening to peoples' concerns.

The Debate concluded at 8.30pm.