

Matter which the Chairman has decided is urgent by reason of the need for Cabinet to consider the recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee prior to the commencement of the tourism season in 2016

Agenda Item No.

THE VALE OF GLAMORGAN COUNCIL

CABINET: 14TH MARCH, 2016

REFERENCE FROM SCRUTINY COMMITTEE (ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT):
8TH MARCH, 2016

“ BARRY ISLAND BEACH HUTS (REF) –

Cabinet had, on 22nd February, referred the report to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration. The report had been prepared in order to update the Cabinet on the policy and rental arrangements for the 24 beach huts located at Barry Island, to review a range of options for the future letting and management of the units and to advise on the lessons learnt from the first years use of the beach huts.

Previously a report had been considered by Cabinet 16th June, 2014 in respect of the rental policy and arrangements for the Barry Island Beach Huts following consideration by the Scrutiny Committee on 20th May, 2014. A copy of the current Beach Hut Policy was attached at Appendix A to the report which covered rental charges and seasonal operating hours. The Director of Environment and Housing advised that the beach huts had been available for rent since Easter 2015, with bookings being generally taken over the telephone via the Council's Contact Centre. There had been 233 bookings made for the beach huts from Easter 2015 to February 2016, generating £8,026 of income. A graph detailing the number of booking days from March 2015 to March 2016 was tabled at the meeting for Members' information.

Going forward the Director stated that there was a need to consider how the beach huts should be managed, with it being imperative that everyone continued to have the opportunity to rent a beach hut at an affordable rate with occupancy of the beach huts being maximised all year round. The report before Committee outlined a number of options for the management of the beach huts with the first option being to continue with the current Beach Hut Policy, the second to lease some or all of the beach huts either annually or for a longer period of time and a third option being to amend the current Beach Hut Policy to allow for the purchase of weekly, monthly and annual season tickets for some of the beach huts. A fourth option that was suggested for consideration, which could be implemented for the 2016 summer season, was to include the beach huts within the coastal concessions for Barry Island.

The Director, in his comments, advised that there was a need to consider whether local businesses would be willing to hold keys in order that day trippers could hire the beach huts on a daily basis with key access being more readily obtainable. The

possibility of introducing season tickets was also one aspect that could be considered. He also took the opportunity to inform Members that there had been very few complaints in respect of the beach huts from users. The Director also mentioned that he was aware of some comments having been made that the costs of hiring the beach huts were too high and that although these were anecdotal comments, further consideration would need to be given.

The Cabinet Member for Regeneration, having had portfolio responsibility for the beach huts when they were established, took the opportunity to advise that previous discussions with the Scrutiny Committee had identified that the beach huts were part of a wider plan as they brought colour and vitality to the eastern end of the promenade. A great amount of publicity had also been afforded to the beach huts over the previous 12 months, with pictures of the huts being distributed via the media and social media sites. In her view, this was an important aspect that needed to be borne in mind, as media coverage had further assisted with raising the profile of Barry Island. The Cabinet Member also stated other potential opportunities could be explored and referred to the potential usage by schools and the voluntary sector out of season, advising that there were some children in Barry who she was aware had actually never been to the seaside. She was of the opinion that although usage had been low, the beach huts had certainly raised the profile of Barry and their management had been a learning curve for the Council hence the decision to pilot the scheme on an initial basis.

In response, a Member of the Committee stated that it had indeed been a learning curve for the Council, and that there were lessons to learn from the pilot scheme but that after a year it was now important to assess and take on board any suggestions. The Member referred to the need to ensure that the hire of a beach hut was more readily available, with payments being able to be made via mobile phones etc., in light of the public's current use of technology, Wi-Fi was paramount. It was important that wherever possible, anyone wishing to hire a hut could do so via their mobile phone etc. The Member also raised concerns in respect of the lack of facilities (e.g. electricity and running water) in some of the beach huts. A business plan, in their opinion, was also essential and they concurred with other Members' views that co-operation with schools should be considered, including the further education sector.

Councillor N.P. Hodges, not a Member of the Committee, was granted permission to speak, and stated that he too believed the beach huts had become instantly recognisable and associated with Barry Island through publicity, but stated that the first year had been, in his opinion, very poor performance. He also advised that he would welcome the involvement of schools and again the ability to pay with cash was imperative. Local businesses could be asked to hold keys he suggested and that the Council should not wait for another year as such measures should be put in place immediately.

Other Members concurred with the suggestions that it was important that people could purchase the beach huts with cash in order that the Council can take in as much income as possible. The Council should consider reducing the hire prices and they were aware that many people visiting the Island had been of the view they could have been purchased on the spot. Technology was also essential as many people

used debit and credit cards more readily. A number of Members agreed that the Council should give itself another year with adequate thought being given to the management of the beach huts and the development of further publicity and marketing opportunities being made before passing over management to anyone else. In conclusion it was considered that more flexibility should be afforded to officers in the implementation of any policy.

The Chairman stated that the beach huts had been built as an integral part of the regeneration programme and, in her view, other opportunities should be explored including consideration of reducing the rental price of the huts, a different charging system, relaxing the policy for one year to allow schools to rent the facilities and for other organisations to also be allowed to use them. It was important that a new payment system be considered and work be undertaken with the Tourism Department to further promote and advertise the beach huts and possible management of them. Actively marketing the product she considered would reap rewards and was of the firm opinion that they should not be put out to concession.

All Members agreed that further marketing and publicity was essential to encourage usage and to capitalise on the positive way the beach huts at Barry Island were being portrayed.

Having fully considered the reference and report, it was subsequently

RECOMMENDED –

- (1) T H A T Cabinet further explore options 1, 2 and 3 as outlined within paragraphs 11, 12 and 13 of the report and that a more flexible approach be afforded to officers within the Beach Huts Policy.
- (2) T H A T option 4 (concession proposal) as outlined within paragraph 15 of the report be not pursued at this time.
- (3) T H A T the minutes of the meeting be referred to Cabinet for their consideration in order that a further report can be prepared having regard to the suggestions of the Scrutiny Committee contained therein and recommendations (1) and (2) above.

Reasons for recommendations

- (1) In order that options can be explored to determine the long term management and operation of the beach huts with a flexible approach being incorporated to allow officers to amend the policy as and when required having regard to service requirements.
- (2) The Committee consider that further exploration of other options needs to be addressed before a concession route is considered.
- (3) In order that Cabinet can be apprised of the views of the Scrutiny Committee in making its decision.”