



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment &
Infrastructure Management**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 11 February 2019. It is about the Natural Environment and Biodiversity, Waste Collection, Fly Tipping, Environmental Health, Highways & Infrastructure, Poverty Reduction, Burials & Cremations, Countryside Access, Marina, Foreshore and Beach Maintenance, Nuclear Waste Disposal and Houses in Multiple Occupation.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 11 February

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 11 February 2019 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Environment & Infrastructure Management.

We must acknowledge that you have been heavily engaged in scrutiny over the past year, including activities around Car Park Charges, Tethered Horses, Roads & Footway Maintenance, Local Flood Risk Management, Air & Noise Pollution, Environmental Enforcement, Natural Environment, and Recycling. This, however, should come as no surprise given you have one of the most public facing cabinet portfolios, and the future scrutiny work programme will no doubt continue to focus on such issues and other areas of responsibility.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your wide-ranging areas of responsibility.

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We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, and share the views of the Committee, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues are summarised below:

Natural Environment and Biodiversity

You referred to the Natural Environment Scrutiny Inquiry final report, which the Committee agreed for submission to Cabinet. We were pleased to hear that you were supportive of the findings of the inquiry and noted steps already taken, including the adoption by the Council of a new priority on maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity, to support the Council's work and collaboration with partners. You reported that the adoption of a Section 6 (Environment Act) Biodiversity Duty Action Plan was planned with the establishment of a Section 6 Working Group and funding for a section 6 Biodiversity Officer was being considered. In addition, the adoption of a corporate tree strategy was planned along with a City Centre Green Infrastructure Strategy and development of a Green Infrastructure Planning tool.

The Inquiry Report was presented by Councillor Peter Jones to Cabinet on 21 March and we look forward to seeing the formal Cabinet response.

Waste Collection

We asked about problems experienced this year, over the Christmas period, with regard to emptying of litter and dog bins. You responded that there had been staffing issues over the Christmas period which affected collections as household waste collections had been prioritised over this period. However you assured the Committee that lessons had been learnt and it was anticipated that the situation would not be repeated next Christmas.

The Committee felt there was a need for better communication with local councillors so that they are made aware of any disruption to waste collections in their area. Councillors would then be in a better position to respond to any queries from their constituents. You agreed to ensure that this is done in future.

You invited individual councillors to raise with you directly any issues in their areas regarding waste collections. We noted during discussion that collection crews have discovered that some dog owners are not depositing dog waste bags in the designated bin but on top of the bin or close to it. This resulted in others assuming a full bin and continuing to add to the pile of bags, which is unsightly as well as suggesting the Council has not been making collections. We understand that the recent Environmental Enforcement Scrutiny Working Group may have already suggested that you consider installation of sloping top bins.

Fly Tipping

You were asked about efforts and range of measures to tackle fly tipping, particularly 'hot spots'. The cost of regularly clearing fly tipping 'hot spots' was remarked upon and members asked whether an amnesty type scheme could make any difference. You undertook to provide us your thoughts in writing about this issue.

Environmental Health

We asked about the increase in the number of rats reported last year and whether this was a growing problem. You told us that it was linked to the unusually warm weather rather than any underlying issues. You added that there have been no cuts to the Pest Control workforce. Furthermore, you highlighted that we were still one of the few Authorities that did not charge local residents for this service, as you did not want to discourage reporting.

We recently questioned the Leader about the Council's Brexit preparedness and followed that up by asking you about the possible implications for your areas of responsibility. We were particularly interested in any impact on food standards and school meals. You confirmed that there would be no change to existing food safety checks and procedures in schools following Brexit.

Your written paper mentioned the collaborative study (with Swansea University and Vortex Internet of Things) on an Innovate UK government grant awarded project. The project will be looking at developing new low cost sensor technology, looking at collecting real-time localised City Centre based air quality, traffic and parking data. The Committee was concerned whether all privacy issues in relation to data collection had been considered in relation to the project. You talked about the benefits of the project but agreed to write to us on this.

Highways & Infrastructure

Questions were asked about the policy / process for dropped kerbs. Whilst there may be good access within the City Centre, enabled by numerous dropped kerbs, you were asked about dropped kerbs in our communities. Members related their local experiences and feedback from residents. Given there is an ageing population we asked whether there were plans to increase the amount of dropped kerbs to improve access for mobility scooters etc. You stated that there was no budget for dropped kerbs and were dependent on specific need. We heard that where road and pavement renewal or resurfacing work was being carried out dropped kerbs would be installed at the same time where there was a known need, in order to reduce costs. You suggested that Councillors submit requests in any case so that the service had a better picture of needs within the community.

With an ageing population, we need to be planning easy access across the city for all. We felt that consideration should be given to the installation of dropped kerbs at the planning application stage for all new builds. The Committee would appreciate your view on this and whether this is something you could take action on.

Poverty Reduction

We understood that all cabinet portfolios had reference to poverty reduction, and asked you to tell us about how your work, within the Environment & Infrastructure Management portfolio, was helping to effect this. You told the Committee that poverty reduction, and concern about the welfare of the poorer in society, was foremost in the Cabinet's thinking and cut across the work of the Council. You stated that regard to poverty reduction was made during budget setting, and guided decision-making over your areas of responsibility, particularly around possible charging for services.

Burials & Cremations

We discussed the Burials & Cremations service, in particular the ability to accommodate for and respect different cultural wishes. You were proud of the quality of service provided by the Council to all communities. With reference to helping families with costs, you mentioned there were different options available. We commended the service and gave credit to the staff.

Countryside Access

We understood you were responsible for the Countryside Access Team, which manages the public rights of way network of footpaths, bridleways and restricted byways, and works to promote, protect and improve the network for all residents and tourists. We asked whether any additional grants / funding could be explored in order to assist the small team. You were frank about the current budget pressures and service pressures, and difficulty increasing resources. You recognised that searching and applying for external funding sources was also reliant on available time and resources, but efforts would continue to ensure to source funding to improve the network.

Marina, Foreshore and Beach Maintenance

Your reported that options will be explored to determine appropriate means to deal with sand loss movement issues at Knab Rock causing problems for boat launching, and will be evaluated. The Committee queried the reason for the sand loss movement issues which you undertook to respond to.

Nuclear Waste Disposal

At the time of our meeting we learned, with some concern, of a public consultation event in Swansea about the possibility of nuclear waste storage potentially in Wales, and invited comment from you. We had felt that the consultation event, planned for 12 March ought to have Council representation. You had told us that the authority would be making a full response to the consultation in due course. Since our meeting the Council resolved at its meeting on 28 February to strongly oppose the proposal from Radioactive Waste Management to hold a consultation event in Swansea. We understand that the public consultation event was cancelled and was to be replaced with an online regional webinar, although it is not clear to us whether that has now happened.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

A question had also been received from a member of the public in relation to the scale of the University expansion and its negative impact on local communities and families from HMOs. You noted the concerns and we understood that your portfolio responsibilities in respect of HMOs were limited to enforcement around environmental issues such as waste, noise, safety and non-compliance with licensing conditions by landlords / tenants. You stressed that Swansea was a welcoming city to students, and whilst the Council was aware of negative experiences by some local residents it was unfair to lay blame on all students. We will raise this issue with relevant Cabinet Member(s) who may be best placed to comment, including Councillors Robert Francis-Davies and David Hopkins who we will meet in May.

Your Response

In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- ensure better communication with local councillors about any disruption to waste collections;
- share thoughts about possible future efforts to tackle fly tipping, particularly 'hot spots';
- clarify whether all privacy issues in relation to data collection have been considered in relation to the project looking at collecting real-time localised City Centre based air quality, traffic and parking data;
- take action regarding dropped kerbs; and
- explain why there have been sand loss movement issues at Knab Rock, causing problems for boat launching.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 23 April. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and invite you to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Jones

COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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