



**To/
Councillor Rob Stewart
Cabinet Member for Economy,
Finance & Strategy (Leader)**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2023-24/10

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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 16 January 2024. It reflects on the Q & A Session on the Leader's portfolio responsibilities as Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy. A formal written response is required by 18 March 2024.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Question & Answer Session

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 16 January 2024 and answering questions on your work as Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy.

The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility. We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance at the meeting, which focused on the key headlines and issues of interest and concern to the Committee. Your report focused on three key areas of significance: Financial Strategy, Recovery & Transformation, and Progress on Major Projects.

This letter reflects on what we gained from the information presented, questions, and discussion.

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Committee Views, including any outstanding issues / actions:

Copr Bay

You reported that the Council appointed Willmott Dixon in September 2023 as the new contractor for Copr Bay following the original contractor for the Copr Bay scheme (Buckingham Group Ltd) going into administration. We asked for an update on the unfinished / outstanding work, including more specific timescale as you reported it would be completed 'as soon as possible'. We asked in particular about the situation with the North Car Park. We noted that the St David's multi-storey car park would remain open until the new car park is operational. You explained that a survey has been undertaken to establish the works required, and prioritisation, in order to agree a completion plan with Willmott Dixon, with the aim of completing works before the end of this summer.

You also reported that talks to build a new hotel next to the arena are also ongoing. In another recent Scrutiny meeting on Tourism we heard that there is a shortage of hotels in Swansea, so this is a very important development. We asked for more information and the extent to which you were confident about the delivery of a hotel on the site. You stated that the Council is seeking a development partner to build a quality hotel and occupier to operate it, and have been discussing this matter with the Welsh Government with the aim of securing support, as an important part of the coastline. We look forward to positive news on this development, hopefully this year.

Developments in the Pipeline

As some Projects are coming to completion, we asked you for a forward look to things we can expect to see happening during 2024, including any new schemes.

We heard that the focus would remain on completing the outstanding projects, for example: 71/72 Kingsway with construction earmarked for completion in the coming months; the Palace Theatre planned to open in 2025, with modern workspace for young and growing businesses; and the restoration of the Albert Hall which will be a mixed-use scheme with creative and commercial facilities.

You talked about further opportunities in relation to the revamp of Castle Square taking place this year, and the development of a Community Hub, which will be called Y Storfa expected to open by 2025, as well as significant interest the Council is seeing from the private sector. You referred to private schemes concerning the former Burtons block, former Mamma Mia's building on Princess Way, and the McDonald's building on the corner of Castle Square, expected to result in further improvement.

You also spoke about the second phase of Copr Bay and progress in relation to working with regeneration partners Urban Splash on preparatory designs for both the Swansea Central North and Civic Centre development sites. This included ambitions for an Aquarium, a National Contemporary Gallery for Wales, and a potential new Public Sector Hub for the Council and partners following the planned move away from the Civic Centre. You expected that plans will come forward this year.

You also referred to the Skyline project, which would be a major new leisure destination at Kilvey Hill, and is now subject of a planning application.

The regeneration and development activities are encouraging, and Scrutiny will continue to monitor progress.

Y Storfa – Community Hub on Oxford St

You reported that our main contractor for the scheme – Kier Group Plc – is continuing with the demolition phase of the development while designs for the interior layouts are at the final stage. New brand guidance has been developed for known and prospective tenants and a presentation of this progress will feature on the hoarding surrounds in the coming weeks.

You will be aware of concerns in previous meetings expressed about the Archives Service and we are aware that plans have been modified over the past year to ensure that it meets required standards for accreditation. You assured the Committee that the building would be a state of the art facility, in an accessible central location, and large enough to accommodate the Archives Service. You felt that it could attract other Archive collections and potentially see a larger Archives presence in the City Centre, within the building or nearby, which is encouraging. As a member of the West Glamorgan Archives Committee, I can concur that it is more confident about the future of the Archives Service.

Swansea Arena

Swansea Arena has now been open nearly two years. We discussed visitor numbers and how successful the operation, which is run by Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), has been against the business plan.

Your reported that over 241,000 people enjoyed ticketed events, conferences, exhibitions, banquets, graduations and creative learning events at the arena up to March 2023, with over 183,000 tickets were sold for ticketed events there. Figures also show a 78.9% occupancy on ticketed shows for the 2022/2023 financial year, which exceeded a projection of 65% for the arena's first year of operation. You stated that Arena performance was ahead of its business plan, with more visitors than expected at this stage, which we were pleased to hear.

We know that that Arena is a multi-functional venue, with flexible space that can be tailored for different events, e.g. it can be rented out for graduation ceremonies, etc. **We queried the proportion of visitor numbers coming for conferences or similar events, where visitors have not necessarily had to purchase a ticket from ATG, compared to commercial performances where tickets are sold directly to customers. You undertook to provide us with an appropriate breakdown.**

City Centre Parking – Disabled Bay Provision

One of the Council's Policy Commitments is to commence a review of its disabled parking bay policy. Your most recent update to Council stated that a draft report is being prepared regarding the new policy, which will be taken to the relevant Service Transformation Committee. On this issue of disabled parking, we expressed concern which has been raised by residents, at the temporary loss of spaces currently being used as stores for developers working on site, e.g. on Park Street, and the impact this shortage is having on those wishing to visit the City Centre who need these spaces.

The Committee recommended you give consideration to this and look into possibly creating temporary additional spaces in the City Centre to mitigate things, for example on Pell Street and/or by the former Debenhams site.

You told the Committee that you were aware of the situation, and acknowledged that regeneration works can cause disruption. We heard that Highways officers have made visits to the City Centre to look at opportunities to relocate displaced disabled parking. Park Street, Pell Street and the rear of the Quadrant by the Mobility Hire were being examined to mitigate the loss of disabled parking spaces, looking at reconfiguring spaces to address the issue.

Biophilic Building

You reported that the 71/72 Kingsway development has helped attract major private sector investment into the area. This includes the innovative living building development led by Hacer Developments at Picton Yard that is also due for completion this year. We asked whether the development is still progressing as 'Picton Yard', in light of recent controversy about place names with links to Sir Thomas Picton. You told the Committee that a naming policy report was being submitted to Council to consider a formal mechanism for naming and re-naming. You stated that redevelopment brought opportunities to rebrand some areas of Swansea.

Blue Eden

You reported that land agreements are now in place between the Council with DST Innovations and Batri Ltd, and subject to planning approval, these agreements will lead to:

- The expansion of the Fabian Way park and ride site to create a green energy transport hub to potentially include a hydrogen manufacturing station for hydrogen-powered transport, electric vehicle charging points, and restaurants and flexible working areas.
- A new manufacturing facility on the former Morrissey site in SA1 to make high-tech batteries that would store the renewable energy generated by the project and for worldwide distribution.
- The expansion of approved solar farm plans at the former Tir John landfill site to create one of the UK's largest solar energy generating facilities.

We heard that DST Innovations is also continuing to make positive progress on all other elements of the overall project, include a tidal lagoon, a battery farm to store the renewable energy generated on site, a floating solar panel facility, an oceanic and climate change research centre, eco-homes anchored in the water, and a hyper-scale data centre. This is all very exciting.

The Committee noted that the plans were multi-faceted; a varied integrated energy project that was not solely about a Tidal Lagoon. Nevertheless, **we commented that given the time that any lagoon project utilising wave energy may take, ongoing advancements in energy technology will need to be considered that may shift current thinking with the need to be open to other innovative developments, that may avoid putting structures in the Bay if possible.**

Transformation Programme

We noted that Audit Wales provided feedback in October 2023 in relation to the Council's Transformation Programme. We followed up on the comment in the Audit Letter that 'in the initial meetings of the Transformation Delivery Board the challenge and scrutiny has largely been focused on process and not on outcomes and impact'. We acknowledged that overall feedback was positive about the Council's vision, and that this particular comment was made at a point in time. You assured the Committee that the Audit recommendations have been taken on board and the Transformation Delivery Board was focussed on outcomes and impact in relation to the delivery of the twelve programmes and priorities.

Other matters:

- A Committee Member took the opportunity to remind you about an outstanding response that was expected on EV Charging Points, arising from the last Council meeting (Councillor Questions), which you assured was being dealt with and would be circulated shortly.
- You were commended on the introduction of new software that has improved the way drainage surveys and mapping can be done. You were asked whether the Council's Drainage Teams were fully resourced, and confirmed that the service was fully staffed, and commented that there has been investment and an improvement in capacity and service, and paid thanks to their efforts in maintain our drainage system and dealing with emergencies, protecting the community from flooding.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any comments on any of the issues raised within. Specifically, we would be grateful for your response to the following:

- **Information on the proportion of visitor numbers coming for conferences or similar events, where visitors have not necessarily had to purchase a ticket from ATG, compared to commercial performances where tickets are sold directly to customers; and**
- **Action taken or planned (including timescale) to address the concerns regarding disabled parking provision in the City Centre.**

Please provide response to these, and any other comments about our letter by 18 March 2024. We will then publish both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We will plan a further portfolio Q & A with you for around January 2025 at which we can follow up on the matters within this letter, as necessary.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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