



To:
**Councillor David Hopkins,
Cabinet Member for Corporate
Services and Performance**

BY EMAIL

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22 April 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance concerning the meeting held on 9 April 2024 and the Audit Wales Report – “Cracks in the Foundations” Building Safety in Wales, the Annual Review of Wellbeing Objectives and the Q3 Performance Monitoring Report 2023/24. A response is required by 13 May.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

On the 9 April, the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel met to discuss the items in this letter. The Panel are grateful to you and relevant officers for attending to discuss and answer questions.

Audit Wales Report – “Cracks in the Foundations” Building Safety in Wales.

We found the findings in this report concerning and feel that the Grenfell tragedy in 2017 has highlighted the need for closer scrutiny of building regulations. We noted that this report was Wales wide and were pleased that the Council are beginning to take action on the recommendations raised. Your officer talked us through the four recommendations made to Local Authorities and the Councils plan to achieve those.

We asked several questions about succession planning and the competency requirements for registered building inspectors. We heard that the team contains one apprentice and two technicians who will be registered as Class 1 competency. There will be one officer on Class 3 with the remaining at various levels of Class 2. We asked about potential refusal or failure to undertake the competency evaluation, we heard that all but one officer have sat competency tests with results awaiting and with time to re sit if required before the regulations come in. We also asked if having only one officer with Class 3 competency causes a risk to the authority. Officers assured us that if this person was unavailable they would collaborate with other Local Authorities. We asked about the age profile of officers and were informed that while there is a larger percentage aged over 50, there are younger apprentices and technicians coming through which make up around a third of the team. It is a competitive market however

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you emphasised the long term plan of training and growth from within. We agreed that staff retention and succession will be important in the future.

Regarding financial management, officers informed us that auditors were satisfied with the way the Council is setting its fees and are in line with regulations. We asked if surpluses are put into an earmarked reserve and heard that discussions with the finance department are being held once profit is achieved, officers offered to provide more details on this in the letter.

Regarding opportunities to strengthen resilience through collaboration and regionalisation, meetings will be held with LABC Cymru and Welsh Government. We asked about building control for large developers and heard that they have a choice to use the Local Authority but don't do their own building control.

A number of questions arose which you have offered to provide in your response to this letter, they were, the number of female surveyors in the Council and their age profiles, an explanation of how the new responsibilities will be resourced and whether there is or will be a Member Champion for building control. We were also interested in what extra staffing might be needed to implement the three gateways listed in the report, officers stated that clarity from Welsh Government is required on this however fuller details on progress would be provided in the letter response.

We asked about the timescale on implementing the requirements of the new Act and heard that this is being worked on currently. When asked about fee setting compliance, officers reported that Audit Wales were satisfied with the Councils fee setting process and had no concerns in this area.

We inquired whether this report would result in a closer relationship with the planning department in Swansea. Officers felt they already work closely however to achieve the three gateway phases listed in the report this is likely to increase. We were interested in the responsibility of comparing work to original plans. We were informed this sits with planning however we were concerned that planning does not always have time to do these checks. We asked if the Council provide building inspection for any other Local Authorities and raised concerns regarding the challenges of competing in an open market. Officers informed us that the Council work with around 7 or 8 partners but that the market has contracted across the public and private sector.

Due to the wider concerns and scrutiny of building control we have requested that the annual report of Building Control is brought to this Panel and agree that an independent reserve will help secure this service going forward. You expressed your commitment to creating a more commercially viable service amidst the challenges including a ringfenced reserve to reinvest in the department.

Annual Review of Wellbeing Objectives

The officer explained to us that the purpose of the annual review process of well-being objectives is to check the objectives themselves remain fit for purpose, by looking for any changes to the evidence base used to determine the objectives taking place since March 2023. The review concluded that no changes to the objectives was needed, and so the Council's well-being objectives remain unchanged for the next financial

year. We asked about a reference to new evidence that supports the Local Economic Delivery Plan, the officer explained that a review was carried out on the evidence that was used to set the objectives originally and to see if any new evidence implied a change in the objectives, any new evidence collected did not identify a need to change the objective so any evidence collected was used only for that purpose.

Quarter 3 Performance Monitoring Report 2023/24

Regarding the third quarter performance monitoring report you commented that over 75% of the corporate plan steps, success measures and performance indicators are on track. You noted some challenges, particularly on workforce and social care and are trying to mitigate some of the risks. The officer highlighted that the newer report format aims to bring together the qualitative and the quantitative data in a more rounded way and includes corporate safeguarding risks. We asked for more explanation of increased risks and the officer explained the inherent risk score measures before control measures are applied and residual risk score is once the control measures have been applied.

We commented on the cost of living crisis risk which has increased since September back up to the inherent risk score and heard that this risk covers a range of issues including accommodation, homelessness and temporary accommodation. We asked for elaboration on the additional 60 plus units of temporary accommodation referenced in the report and you informed us that the Council is working with Pobl and Welsh Government to look at using a further accommodation other than bed and breakfast with further information to come on this soon.

We also asked when the “wild about your ward maps” will be available for Councillors which the report referenced are being developed which you have offered to ask about.

Your Response

We welcome your comments on any of the issues raised and request a formal response by 13 May regarding the following –

Audit Wales Report on Building Safety in Wales

- More details on discussion with finance regarding an earmarked reserve for building control.
- The number of female surveyors in the Council and their age profile.
- More details on how the new responsibilities will be resourced.
- Whether there is currently, or plans for a Member Champion for Building Control.
- Progress on plans to achieve the three gateways and what will be required in terms of staff.
- We also request that the building control annual report is brought to the Panel when available.

Quarter 3 Performance Monitoring report 2023/24

- Further information on the “wild about your ward” maps including timescale.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

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