



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Christine Richards,
Cabinet Member for Citizen,
Community Engagement, and
Democracy**

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2013-14/4

23 September 2013

Dear Councillor Richards,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 2 September

Thank you for your attendance at the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 2 September 2013 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Citizen, Community Engagement, and Democracy.

Acting as a 'critical-friend' the committee was able to explore your portfolio responsibilities and key issues, what you have done as cabinet member, what you hope to achieve, as well as future challenges.

You emphasised that your portfolio title, although long, described your main role in a nutshell i.e. to engage both externally with citizens and communities and internally with staff and all councillors. Clearly your work spans across all areas of the council and involves joint working with cabinet members and departments to focus on how the council interfaces with and reaches out to the public.

I thought it would be useful to write to you in order to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, and share the views of the committee.

Opening up council decision making to the public:

You talked about improvements recently agreed by Cabinet to give the public better access to council meetings, both through physical improvements to the civic centre council chamber for public attendance and investment in technology to enable web-casting of meetings. It was clear that you were committed to bringing the council closer to the people it served, and you felt that the modernisation of the council chamber was important to this.

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There has been some questions raised about the cost involved but you stressed that this had been carefully considered and apart from work of a specialist nature that was necessary all other improvements would be carried out by staff within the council.

Public petitions:

We learned that you have been working on improving the petitions process and how petitions can be dealt with more efficiently and effectively, particularly where requests are relatively straightforward. We were interested in whether you had statistics to support your view on the effectiveness of the current system. We agreed that a robust process will ensure that people have confidence in making requests to the council and feel that they will be listened to. We need to ensure that petitions are dealt with correctly, that the response of the authority is a considered one, and that people are happy with how they are treated, if not necessarily about the outcome. We must be open to petitioners.

The committee wondered whether there was a misconception amongst the public that petitions are the only way to raise issues and resolve problems with the council. Whilst petitions might appear to focus attention it should not be seen as the only option. We would suggest that you consider whether information needs to be circulated clarifying to citizens the various options available to raise an issue with the council – e.g. petitioning, contacting a local councillor, writing to a cabinet member / officer, engaging with scrutiny etc.

Public engagement:

You highlighted the importance of the forthcoming scrutiny inquiry into public engagement. You were frank in your admission that you needed help on this and welcomed scrutiny looking at this issue in-depth and suggesting ways to improve public engagement in council business / decision-making because this was a 'hard nut to crack'.

I am pleased to say the Inquiry Panel has been established and the first meeting to agreed terms of reference for the inquiry was held on 11 September. We envisage that the inquiry will review existing mechanisms and processes for public engagement and their effectiveness (usefulness / viability). It is vital that the authority maintains strong links with the people that we serve and represent and look at engagement as more than just giving out information.

One of the issues to be considered is that people need to be interested and motivated to engage and more often than not people engage on very local issues affecting their area as opposed to strategic matters. We look forward to presenting cabinet with the findings, conclusions and recommendations from this scrutiny inquiry, which should be completed around April 2014.

Local Service Board:

We were interested in your role in developing partnerships and the effectiveness of the Local Service Board (LSB). You explained that you were in the process of developing a plan to refocus the work of LSB and how it operates to ensure that is all about outcomes, and impact. We are in the process of developing scrutiny arrangements for the LSB.

Regionalisation / Collaboration:

Trying to engage the public in council business was difficult enough but engaging the people with regional collaborations will be much harder. It is important that regional collaboration takes place for the right reason and when such arrangements are established that scrutiny and public engagement is effective. You indicated that local councils have been under some pressure from the Welsh Government with regard to collaborative working and whilst we can see the benefits there are threats and risks that need to be managed. You agreed that scrutiny arrangements should be part of the overall package in changing arrangements and greater consideration given to the role of the elected member. We were already concerned at the apparent lack of member representation in the Western Bay Health & Social Care Programme and hope that this is one issue which you will look into.

Staff cooperation and development:

We were interested in what this responsibility meant in terms of your role as cabinet member. You talked about engaging with staff and stressing that they are the council's biggest resource and most valuable asset. We would like to know more about what you are doing in this area.

Customer service standards:

We noted that you have recently launched 'The Swansea Standard' which sets out how the City & County of Swansea will treat customers.

Democratic services:

You explained that your role also involved working with the Head of Democratic Services on issues such as establishing Member Champions for various issues / groups, Personal Development Reviews and training for Councillors.

The next 12 months:

Finally we asked about what you were hoping to achieve over the next 12 months. This would be something that the Committee would be interested to follow up at your next question session. You referred to the following:

- Local Service Board – restructuring and establishing a clear plan for tackling challenges and desired outcomes.
- Local Democracy Week – developing a structured programme of activities to engage young people (November / December 2013)
- Community and Town Council's Forum – reviewing and developing the Forum over the coming months
- Public Engagement – engaging with and acting upon the findings of the scrutiny inquiry to make improvements
- Pre-decision scrutiny – developing the relationship between executive and non-executive work plans, learning from experiences elsewhere. *(it was agreed that myself and the vice chair would have an ongoing discussion with you on this)*

Summary of issues for your attention:

- providing further information about how you have reviewed the effectiveness of the petitions process;*
- giving consideration to communication clarifying how the public can raise issues with the council, including petitions;*
- using your influence so that regional collaborative structures give consideration to member / public engagement and scrutiny at the outset;*
- providing further information about your role in 'staff cooperation and development'*

I look forward to your reply to our comments and response to issues raised. It would be helpful to receive your reply to this letter by 21 October so that it can be included in the agenda of the Committee meeting taking place on 28 October.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MIKE DAY

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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