



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

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

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2014-15/7

*Your Ref
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*Date
Dyddiad:*

21 January 2015

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Re: Cabinet Member Question Session – 24 November

Thank you for your attendance at the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 24 November 2014 and answering questions on your work as Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance & Strategy. Thank you also for your written report on headlines from your work which you had submitted ahead of the meeting to provide a focus for the session.

As you will know since that meeting Councillor Day has stood down from the Scrutiny Programme Committee and I am sending this letter as new chair on behalf of the committee. The committee is writing to you in order to reflect on what it learnt from the discussion, and share its views. The specific issues discussed are summarised below:

Budget

You talked about the continued reduction in funding which has resulted in a requirement for further saving of £22m this year. You stated that Cabinet Members were considering proposals for savings which will come forward in due course. It was clear that over the next 3 years £81m savings would need to be found. We understand that that the approach being taken was not to stop providing certain services but examine areas that may be delivered differently, and to look at council assets.

We are aware that you are interested in greater community involvement in the running of local services / facilities. The committee however was concerned about what support was available to potential community groups wanting to take on services. You confirmed that a toolkit was being produced that will

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assist interested parties, particularly in relation to accessing sources of funding. You assured the committee that the key was ensuring future resilience and due diligence of third sector and community organisations when the Council considers using different models of providing services. We also felt that good governance and financial controls would need to be evident within any proposed transfer of service to community / voluntary organisations or groups.

We also asked about the sale of capital assets and how you planned to use receipts. You stressed the importance of getting more from our assets and raising much needed funds to support the council budget and capital programme.

You talked about the need to review the use of buildings to ensure best use, given backlog of repairs necessary, and promoted the co-location of services to create 'hubs'. You highlighted that separate services do not necessarily require separate buildings. The aim would be to bring together services under one roof where possible, not least to benefit service users.

The committee was generally interested in how you and the Cabinet were planning to deal with short term funding challenges while ensuring long term sustainability. We were concerned about the extent to which long term thinking was influencing present work and decision-making.

City Region / City Centre

You highlighted the involvement of Sir Terry Matthews, the new chairman of the Swansea Bay City Region, as a positive driving force, bringing both his experience and business contacts to improve the region. You stated that he has emphasised the need for plans to be bold and well developed, and to be better prepared to take advantage of funding opportunities that do exist.

As an important part of the region you spoke about current work to focus on Swansea city centre redevelopment and regeneration. You felt that momentum was picking up and cited positive messages from Sir Terry Matthews about local plans. The recent establishment of a Development Advisory Group, comprised of a range of specialists in urban design, development and business (all giving up their time for free), has been charged with helping transform Swansea city centre into a thriving hub of commerce, culture and leisure. The committee was particularly interested in plans for business support and job creation.

You will be aware of the scrutiny report on Inward Investment which Cabinet considered recently. The importance of this topic was highlighted at the scrutiny work planning conference. The Scrutiny Panel, convened by Councillor Jeff Jones, which carried out this inquiry made a number of recommendations aiming to help encourage investment into the area, and appears to echo some of the points being made by Sir Terry Matthews.

Local Government Reorganisation

In light of recent comments made by Leighton Andrew, AM Minister for Public Services in Wales, we asked you for your views about the pressure for local government reorganisation. You stated that considering the challenges being faced by the authority, reorganisation of local authorities was inevitable. You told the committee that there was a preference for reorganisation based on the city region footprint, although there was a long way to go, including resolution of border issues and number of local representatives, funding etc.

Swansea Palace Theatre

Having invited suggestions from members of the public we asked about the current position with regard to the Swansea Palace Theatre, one of Swansea's historic buildings. There had been concern raised about its poor state of repair and condition and a call for the council to use its powers to protect the building from further decay and ensure its future survival.

You explained that some emergency work (£75k) has been carried out to secure, make safe and stabilise the building. However, significant investment would be required to bring the building back into use. The building was in private ownership and nothing further could be offered by the Council. Nevertheless you stated that negotiations about the building, although slow, were ongoing with the owner about a way forward and you remained hopeful that something can be done. You were quick to point out that the council could not spend more on the building and that there were also other buildings in the City & County of Swansea which needed attention, e.g. the Morrision Tabernacle.

Civic Centre Sale / Central Library

A further issue brought to our attention by a member of the public was in relation to the possible sale of the Civic Centre and plans for the Central Library should the building be sold. You told the committee that a city centre location would be found if required. You felt that this was a preferred location for a Central Library in any case, as there was a need to increase the density of people living and working in City Centre and increase footfall to make it more viable.

You informed the committee that the Civic Centre Site would be marketed just after Christmas with the appointment of developers before the summer 2015. Plans would be shared as they emerge. You stressed that the potential benefits from the sale of the Civic Centre outweighed any relocation costs of Council services, facilities and staff.

Areas for Scrutiny

You welcomed greater scrutiny involvement in the budget process and on plans for city centre regeneration. The Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel will be undertaking scrutiny of the budget. We look forward to future city centre proposals for scrutiny. We would encourage you to be proactive by building in scrutiny into future decision-making in relation to significant city centre plans.

We would be grateful for your comments on the issues raised in this letter. It would be helpful to receive your reply to this letter by 11 February so that it can be included in the agenda of a future committee meeting at the earliest opportunity.

We look forward to meeting you again to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Jones". The signature is written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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