



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor David Hopkins,
Cabinet Member for Housing &
Communities**

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2014-15/14

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*Date
Dyddiad:*

16 April 2015

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Housing & Communities following the meeting of the Committee on the 16th March 2015. It reflects on the question and answer session held with the Cabinet Member about their portfolio responsibilities, including affordable housing, homelessness, houses in multiple occupation, working with Registered Social Landlords, empty properties and the Right to Buy Scheme. It includes conclusions and proposals for the Cabinet Member.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 16 March

Thank you for your attendance at the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 16 March 2015, answering questions on your work and for submitting a written report ahead of the meeting. This report helped to provide a focus for the session and explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact, in relation to your areas of responsibility.

We recognised that you are a newly appointed Cabinet Member and it was good to have this initial meeting with you in order to understand your thinking and plans ahead. We noted the diverse range of services covered within your portfolio including council housing management and repair, preventing homelessness, housing advice, affordable housing, renewal area improvements, Disabled Facilities Grants and adaptations, Welsh Housing Quality Standard, standards in private rented housing, and community buildings and asset transfer.

You mentioned some of the challenges to services linked to financial pressures, welfare reforms, and key changes in legislation with the

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introduction of a new Housing Act for Wales which includes reform of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy system.

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

Affordable Housing

We asked you to give an update on progress with delivering additional affordable housing provision. You reported that since the Affordable Housing Scrutiny Inquiry completed its work and reported to Cabinet in 2013:

- Officers have looked at a number of models and one in particular is being assessed in detail;
- The Authority has successfully applied for extra resources that have become available from a range of Welsh Government Initiatives;
- Changes to the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy system coupled with the reform of the rent setting policy will provide additional resources for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) over the longer term, to invest in the existing stock as well as providing more affordable housing including the building of new Council housing;
- Detailed work has commenced to develop a strategy for making best use of these resources in terms of additional affordable housing and this study will aim to correlate available land supply with an updated assessment of needs to inform a programme of new build. The project will also appraise available funding options to support new Council housing and for making best use of HRA resources for more affordable housing generally; and
- In terms of actual development, this will need to tie in with the availability of funds. However, options for a pilot scheme for new Council housing to test viability and explore specification options is also being explored.

We noted that 37 new affordable housing units were delivered up to Quarter 3 this year, and that Registered Social Landlords were aiming to deliver 241 in 2014/15. We will continue to monitor progress in this area and hope that you will be able report further when we meet you next on the delivery of additional affordable housing units and the achievement against national / local targets.

Homelessness

We asked about your work in relation to the prevention of homelessness. You talked about the key role played by the Housing Options service and Tenancy Support Unit. You referred to the commitment to prioritise those in housing need, especially the homeless, and mentioned that an in house Social Lettings Agency, funded by Supporting People, was commissioned to increase the supply of good quality private rented accommodation to help meet housing need.

We noted achievement of targets in relation to the reducing the average number of working days between homeless presentation and discharge of duty for households found to be statutory homeless, and the average number of days all homeless families with children spent in Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

You reported that the new Housing (Wales) Act, which includes a new duty to take 'all reasonable steps' to prevent homelessness, presented some challenges. We noted that there will be a review of homelessness services to identify priorities for inclusion in supporting people operational plan.

We asked about your working with other agencies to address homelessness and you acknowledged this is really important and assured the committee that efforts were being made to utilise all available stock in Swansea, working closely with partners.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

The committee noted your responsibilities for improvement and maintenance of standards in the private rented housing sector. We raised some issues about the density of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in some areas and asked about how planning powers might be used to address this. We felt that the threshold for requiring planning permission was too high and suspected that only a change in the Use Class Order will allow the council to exercise greater control of HMOs.

We acknowledged your focus on the licensing of HMOs but would ask you to look at whether there is anything that the authority can do to control the number of HMOs, particular in areas where there is already a high density.

Joint Working with Registered Social Landlords

Further to work undertaken by scrutiny 14 months ago on the feasibility of the Council and its Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners developing a single housing waiting list, we were interested in how the relationship has developed with the RSLs in Swansea.

When our Scrutiny Working Group looked at this issue it was advised that there would be significant financial implications due to the need to harmonise IT systems between organisations and that the development of a single list and allocation criteria would draw significantly on staffing resources. It was also indicated that the RSLs were not supportive of the idea, with concerns about a more cumbersome letting process and higher costs. We noted that embarking on such a large scale project, especially when the RSLs had made clear their reluctance, would be a risky strategy to follow, and one which could be ill afforded in the current financial climate. We were interested to know whether any further dialogue has taken place with RSLs, and your view about this matter and relevant issues.

Nevertheless I am sure you will agree there is room for improvement and the Working Group did make a number of suggestions. For example, we would like to know if you have made progress in working with RSLs to develop a common method of accessing all social housing, and in terms of improving information sharing between the Council and RSLs.

We acknowledged examples you gave of positive joint working with RSLs such as the ADAPT project which has created a single register of suitable adapted properties with one application process for all housing providers.

Empty Properties

The committee asked you about work to bring empty and dilapidated properties back into use. You reported that Swansea has acted as a lead authority for the Western Bay region for the Houses to Homes empty homes loans scheme - 28 loans have been issued in Swansea to date to secure the reuse of 16 properties. You felt that the scheme allowed for substantial investment to be made by owners / landlords however there has been less interest than hoped.

The committee noted that there was limited scope for the authority to intervene unless a building was unsafe. You stated that the authority was doing everything it could and you were keen to work with Welsh Government to maximise any further grants that can help address the problem.

We felt it was very important to bring properties back into use particularly given the potential income generation through council tax etc, which should justify any resources invested in efforts to achieve this.

Right to Buy Scheme

We asked whether you could provide any update on the suspension of the Right to Buy Scheme from Welsh Government. You confirmed that the authority had applied in December 2014 and anticipated a response within 6 months. You stated that any applications that have been received since then have been placed on hold pending decision from the Welsh Government, but were optimistic of an answer soon. If there is any further information please let us know.

Your Response

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

- Our concern about the density of HMOs in some areas and whether there is anything that the authority can do to control numbers;
- Whether any further dialogue has taken place with RSLs about the feasibility of developing a single housing waiting list, and your view about this matter and relevant issues;
- How the suggestions made by the Scrutiny Working Group looking at the issue of a single waiting list have been acted upon; and
- Any further information about the suspension of the Right to Buy Scheme

Please provide your response by 7 May. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

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

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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