



**CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA**  
**DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE**

Councillor Mary Jones  
Chair  
Scrutiny Programme Committee

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DH/JW

7th May 2015

**If you require this or any other information in another format e.g. Braille, audio tape or a different language, please contact me**

Dear Councillor Jones

**CABINET MEMBER QUESTION SESSION – 16<sup>TH</sup> MARCH**

Thank you for your letter dated April 16<sup>th</sup>. I have addressed the issues you have raised in your letter in chronological order.

**High Concentration of HMOs**

During 2013, the Planning Service undertook research for the Council's HMO Working Group (consisting of Castle, Uplands, and St Thomas Councillors; local Welsh Assembly Members; Licensing and Planning Officers). The research:-

- Identified, profiled and mapped HMOs and highlighted areas with high concentrations using Licensing, Planning, Council Tax and Census information.
- Used Census, Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, House Condition Surveys, Education, Police, Environment Department and Car Parking information to gauge impacts of high HMO concentrations.
- Considered future needs from the Local Housing Market Assessment; the potential impacts of Welfare Reform; and the Universities' future accommodation strategies.
- Examined other Local Planning Authorities' approaches to HMOs.

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Using the findings of the research, politicians on the Working Group (Councillor Crouch and local Assembly Members) lobbied Carl Sargeant, who at the time was WG Minister for Housing and Regeneration to try and get him to agree to changing parts of the planning system in Wales to bring it in line with England where Authorities have far more powers regarding HMOs.

In August 2014, WG commissioned consultants to undertake research across Wales into the issue of high concentrations of HMOs. Officers from the Council took part in a focus group with the consultants in October 2014 and raised the issues that are being experienced in Swansea. In January 2015 Planning Officers took part in a regional stakeholder workshop to discuss the consultant's initial findings and suggested recommendations. Council Officers are currently awaiting the publication of a WG toolkit which will outline best practice for Councils to consider using with regard to planning policy and HMOs

In terms of future Planning Policy regarding HMOs in Swansea, the Local Development Plan (LDP) is expected to be placed on Deposit in Summer 2015 and will contain a policy on HMOs.

**Common Waiting Lists and Progress with Recommendations made by Scrutiny**

The Scrutiny Working Group made a number of suggestions regarding joint working with RSLs regarding applications for housing. Developments regarding these suggestions are outlined below.

**(1) Develop a common method of accessing the application process for all social housing** - A series of meetings between our Housing Options Service and the 3 main Housing Associations (HA's) in Swansea have taken place to discuss this issue. Developing a common method of applying for housing is challenging as all the housing providers have different methods of applying for housing and request different types of information. What has been agreed between the Council and HA's is that the HA's will complete a Housing Options referral form for those applications that contact them and have not previously applied to the Council directly. This will stop applicants needing to make multiple visits to different offices to supply the same or similar

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information. Details will be taken at source and the applicant contacted back. In the longer term, an on-line application form has been suggested as a method of improving the customer experience further. This requires further development and potentially some investment, but would replace the need for a referral form and would mean the HA's could complete the initial details on an application form and then forward to Housing Options. This is intended to reduce duplication within the process and make it easier and quicker for the customer to apply.

**(2) Progress the development of a common medical form between the council and RSLs** - Following discussion with the HA's, it has been established that each provider takes a different approach when looking at medical circumstances. Coastal HA for example do not require information from a medical professional and they would assess an application based on what information the applicant provides. What has been agreed, subject to applicant authorisation, is that is that each housing provider will forward any medical details they have in relation to an applicant in appropriate cases to other providers that the applicant wishes to seek housing from. This will reduce the need for the customer to incur expense in obtaining multiple medical certificates and will also speed up the process of any assessment of their application for housing.

**(3) Meet with the RSLs to discuss the issue of them closing their waiting lists** - Officers from Housing Options have met the HA's in respect of closing their waiting lists. There are no plans for the HA's to change their current process on closing lists. All have however agreed to update their websites on at least a weekly basis to ensure live information on what areas are able to be applied for is available to the customer. Coastal HA and Gwalia HA have this in place now and Family HA are in the process of updating their website to accommodate this information. All the HA's have also agreed to update Housing Options when reopening lists.

**(4) Review and improving the information that is provided to Councillors about the role of RSLs and their allocation criteria** - The HA's all publish their allocations policies publically and have up to date information about themselves and their roles on their websites. Currently quarterly meetings are held between Officers and Housing Options. Information from these meetings will be disseminated as required to ensure Councillors are kept informed of current housing allocations matters. The meetings ensure that information is shared between providers on a regular basis.

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Issues discussed include progress on nominations, changes to allocation policies, new-builds and other current initiatives.

**(5) Confirm that the information available on the Swansea Housing website is also available to applicants without access to the internet** - Customers can access information on the Swansea Housing Website without the need to access the internet. Various services are offered to the customer depending on their needs including, telephone based enquiries, home visits and supply of information at provider offices.

**Suspension of the Right to Buy**

The Authority submitted an application to the Welsh Government to suspend the Right to Buy in Swansea in 2014. Welsh Government Ministers considered the application and on March 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, the Leader of the Council received a letter from Lesley Griffiths AM agreeing to suspend the Right to Buy and the Right to Acquire (for Housing Association tenants) for 5 years. We are in the process of writing to all tenants to inform them of this. After the 5 years has elapsed, the Authority has the option of submitting a further suspension application to the Welsh Government.

Please let me know if you require any further information or further clarification regarding any points made in this letter.

Yours sincerely



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