



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA

Dinas A Sir Abertawe

BY EMAIL

Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for New Generation
Services

*Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:*

Scrutiny

*Direct Line:
Llinell
Uniongyrochol:*

01792 636292

*e-Mail
e-Bost:*

scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

*Our Ref
Ein Cyf:*

*Your Ref
Eich Cyf:*

*Date
Dyddiad:*

1st March 2016

Summary: This is a letter from the Welsh Housing Quality Standard Scrutiny Working Group to the Cabinet Member for New Generation Services, following the meeting of the Working Group on 5 February 2016. It is about the Council's progress towards achieving the WHQS by 2020.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

**Welsh Housing Quality Standard Scrutiny Working Group
3rd February 2016**

We wish to thank you and the officers, David Evans, Peter Williams and Andrew Shaw for attending our meeting and engaging in an interesting and productive discussion. This letter reflects on the main areas of our discussion and provides a summary of our views on the matter of the achievement of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) in Swansea.

Overall, we were very pleased to hear that the Council is on course to achieve the WHQS by 2020. The feeling amongst the Working Group is that feedback from tenants in our wards is very positive, notwithstanding that there will always be individual issues of concern that need to be addressed. We would like to offer our congratulations to officers on the work that has been done so far and the rapid acceleration of the investment programme.

It is clear to us that the Council has a good grasp on what is required to achieve the standard by 2020 and that the mechanisms are in place to ensure that progress is measured and reported accurately through a range of methods, including: the 5-yearly stock condition survey; use of the housing stock

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database; regular reporting to the Welsh Government; and the recently introduced WHQS Compliance Policy, which, we were pleased to hear, will provide an annual report on progress to Members.

We recognise that effective mechanisms are in place for communicating with tenants through the use of the Housing Improvements Team, the Tenants Consultative Panel, Tenants Groups, Open House and various surveys. However, we believe greater use of the Building Advisory Group mechanism, as set out in the Major Works Agreement, would be beneficial. We believe that is a tried and tested way to ensure that contractors working in a particular location are able to get to know the tenants and Members and can help to prevent problems escalating.

We discussed the amount of information that is available to tenants and Members regarding the future investment programme. Some concerns were raised regarding the level of information available on long term plans, to enable tenants and Members to understand where their properties/wards fall in the priority order. We were advised that more information could be provided to give an indication of where the programme will go next i.e. more information could be provided at an area level but not for individual properties. However, it is important to understand that this would just be indicative information and not cast in stone. Officers advised the long term plan is based on the needs identified by the Stock Condition Survey, and a detailed house by house programme is developed per financial year, as future years budgets cannot be guaranteed.

We therefore recommend that thought is given to how best to provide Members and tenants with an indication of where the investment programme will be rolled out over a longer timescale, with the necessary caveats regarding it being subject to change. We also believe that the work should be better publicised through use of "before and after" photos, both to Members and tenants.

We discussed the refurbishment of high rise blocks and were informed that the decision to refurbish instead of demolish the blocks was taken after careful scrutiny, including: the costs of demolition, the cost of relocating tenants, the lack of suitably sized accommodation and views of the tenants involved. It would be helpful if you could outline the steps that took place to inform this decision.

Recommendations

As a result of our consideration of the Council's progress towards achieving the WHQS, we recommend that you:

- Consider increasing the use of Building Advisory Groups (as set out in the Major Works Agreement), adapting them if necessary to suit the needs of the varying elements of the programme.
- Provide the Working Group and Members with Council housing in their Wards with details of the investment programme for forthcoming years

(when budgets have been agreed) and plans for future years for some of the major elements of the standard (i.e. wind and weatherproofing, re-roofing, Kitchens and Bathrooms etc.) as they apply to their ward.

- Provide tenants with broad details of investment plans for the forthcoming year and indications for future years
- Publicise the improvement works more effectively by taking “before and after” photos to demonstrate the significant improvements being made.
- Provide an outline of the steps taken to inform the decision to refurbish high rise blocks as part of the WHQS investment programme.

Your response

In your response we would appreciate your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful if you could specifically refer to the recommendations outlined. Please provide your response by 22/3/2016

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Terry Hennegan
Convener of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard Scrutiny Working Group