



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Homes and
Energy**

BY EMAIL

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Overview & Scrutiny

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29th March 2019

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Homes and Energy. This letter relates to the Welsh Housing Quality Standards and the accompanying Wales Office Audit Report.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

On the 20th March 2019 the Panel met to discuss the Welsh Housing Quality Standards and the accompanying Wales Office Audit Report.

The Panel are grateful to all officers who attended to provide information and answer questions.

The Panel do have some thoughts and observations to share with you.

We heard how the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) requires all social landlords to improve their housing stock to an acceptable level by December 2020. The Wales Audit Office (WAO) undertook a review to determine whether Swansea Council has effective arrangements in place to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by 31st December 2020.

It was explained that the WHQS have legal and regulatory obligations with 6 technical measures of components.

The WAO validated the Swansea Programme of work and said that the Council has a 'sound approach' to its strategy. It also stated that the Councils approach to the work is generally well integrated. We also heard that the team anticipated some of the recommendations which were made and have already got robust plans in place to address these and meet the standards by the deadline.

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We heard that overall £500m of capital investment has been made in council housing between 2002-2020 to raise standards for Council tenants with much of this work being done 'in house' by Council staff. With the WHQS being the legal benchmark for all social housing we heard how £230m has been spent between 2012 and 2018 alone. We heard how the WHQS fit into the Councils corporate priorities and wider agendas relating to health, well-being, poverty and public services.

It was explained that every 5 years the Council undertake independent validation of Council houses and produce reports on condition and what work should be planned going forward. Complimentary teams such as Corporate Building Services also feedback to the Housing Team if they see work which needs addressing. In-house surveyors then assess and prioritise the work which needs to be undertaken. In addition to this, we heard how the Council uses standard component life cycle timelines to plan work, for example, when new roofs will need replacing on properties. It is encouraging to hear that this sort of tracking exists in the department so quality can be maintained ongoing and upcoming work can be planned for appropriately. On top of this we heard how an external surveyor has been engaged to carry out independent house condition surveys for the Council to inform future repair programmes and validate WHQS works carried out to date.

We heard how Council houses were assessed (as at the end of January 2019) and that although many of the Council houses in Swansea have had upgrades and meet the standards there are some 'Acceptable Fails'. It was explained that these 'fails' could be properties which are still on the schedule of works still to do or may be houses where tenants have refused the work. We heard how tenants have the right to refuse the work being undertaken. The Panel are aware that many tenants are elderly or may have disabilities and do not want the disruption. We as a Panel understand this, as the disruption caused when refitting kitchens and bathrooms can be substantial and too much for some tenants to cope with. However, it was explained that in order to meet the standards, these houses will have work undertaken on them when they become vacant. We are glad to see that tenant's voices are being heard and their wishes being taken into account. We are also pleased that disruption payments are made to tenants who have work done as due to the inability to access their kitchens to cook and do laundry there will no doubt be an increase in their costs. It would be unfair for them to absorb these inevitable extra outgoings.

Green infrastructure and environmental issues rightly play a large part in housing and the Panel were keen to hear how gardens and green spaces are being addressed in the projects. It was explained that redoing gardens is one of the biggest challenges for the team. There is a commitment to install handrails to those gardens which have steps and manage issues around retaining walls along with mitigating risks and hazards in gardens generally. The Panel did raise some concerns that some tenants either cannot or will not maintain their gardens which can lead to a reduction in kerb appeal and generally reduce the overall quality of an area. We heard how Housing Officers in the District Housing Offices work with tenants to encourage them to maintain their gardens. This is done informally in most cases but tenancy conditions can be invoked where appropriate. We hope that this work

continues as many tenants maintain their properties beautifully. We heard that to encourage green spaces and contribute to the environment there are projects such as tree planting in Penderry to contribute to biodiversity and to enhance the area.

The issue of void properties was a concern for some Panel members but it was explained that the Housing Preparation Unit deals with voids as quickly as possible. The team did agree to look at how the wait times to redevelop voids can be decreased and you said that you were keen to make properties available as quickly as possible for those people waiting for a home.

We heard how the vast majority of tenants when asked said the improvement of their homes was beneficial – the Council's internal survey questionnaire was more detailed than WAO telephone survey and satisfaction levels generally measured higher. We heard how the outcome of satisfaction was in the mid-90th percentile. This is not a surprise as the Panel feel that the biggest improvement in public health has been down to the development of safe and secure housing so we are happy to hear that residents are pleased. We also heard how people with respiratory and heart conditions have a substantially lower chance of needing medical care if their housing is fit for purpose. Again this feeds into aims and objectives around health and well-being.

On top of the work which has been done, it was explained that there is a £118m budget left to deliver the remainder of the work under the WHQS by December 2020. We were told how the WHQS are the minimum standard the Council work to and where possible we go over and above these standards fitting sprinklers and other items where budgets allow.

The Panel were interested in renewable energy and asked about solar power projects for properties. You explained how historically money was available to do this kind of work but funding like this has since gone. However, you are very keen to continue to lobby on the issue of solar power along with exploring retrofitting properties under the 'Homes as Power Stations' work, in order to make cost neutral houses in relation to energy costs. The Panel feel this is a very worthwhile area of work and should continue to be explored.

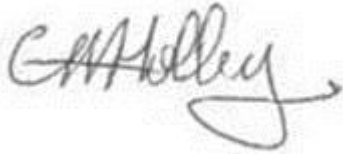
The Panel feels that an annual update to Scrutiny would be useful and sending your quarterly update report to the Panel for information would also be beneficial from a monitoring perspective.

Overall, the Panel felt that the report and presentation were informative and comprehensive. We were very impressed by the work which has been done by the team and specific thanks and recognition was made regarding the work done in West Cross. We would like to congratulate the team and you the Cabinet Member on the work you have achieved so far and look forward to the continued efforts to renew and maintain this Council's Housing stock.

Well done.

This letter does not seek a response but we welcome any thoughts and observations you may have.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CHolley', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Councillor Chris Holley
Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel
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