



**To/
Councillor Robert Francis-Davies
Cabinet Member for Investment,
Regeneration and Tourism**

*Please ask for:
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Dyddiad:*

Overview & Scrutiny

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30th July 2019

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Development and Regeneration Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration and Tourism following the meeting of the Panel on 17th July 2019. This letter concerns the Wales Audit Office Report on Local Government Services to Rural Communities and the associated Response and Action Plan.

Dear Councillor Francis-Davies,

We are grateful to officers for attending the meeting on 17th July 2019. The Panel received an in depth update and asked questions to which the officers responded.

We heard how the Wales Audit Office undertook a review into Local Government Services to Rural Communities and the team were asked how Swansea will respond to the challenges and recommendations. We were told that the Wales Audit Office sets high aims but Swansea Council will strive to meet them. We were told there are opportunities to look to other areas of Wales for best practice and for Councils to share knowledge and ideas which is very positive.

We heard how the team have ideas about what could be delivered in terms of rural community provision but there are limits relating to resources and the amount of funding available which often comes with restrictions. There needs to be some recognition of the scale of issues faced by rural communities such as transport, internet access and hidden poverty and the limit of what can be achieved within the funding amounts.

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We were told that the work of the Rural Development Partnership needs to connect more with Swansea wide initiatives and have stronger links with the Public Services Board and the work being done by it.

We heard how 60% of Swansea is rural with the rural areas being sparsely populated and the urban areas being densely populated, as a result balancing funding allocations can be difficult. There is a need to link urban areas with rural areas and make the most of local specialities such as food from rural areas, perhaps linking in with Swansea Market.

We were told that the Brexit outcome will impact the Rural Grant Programme but the programme will end in 2020 however there is no request in place to develop a new one. We do feel that this is not prudent as there should be preparatory plans in place which outlines the process whatever the Brexit outcome. We will be requesting this issue come back to the Panel after October so we can feed into it.

We heard that transport is still an ongoing issue in rural areas and we have asked to see the independent transport report which was externally commissioned to ensure we are up to date with current issues.

We were told that although there is a membership list in the Rural Development Partnership we felt some key partners are missing. We were advised that not everyone you work with is listed as a partner but the team work with many organisations and anyone who is relevant to the project even if they are not named. We are pleased that all relevant partners are included in your planning and discussions.

There was some discussion over the classification of wards as rural or urban. We would be grateful if you could provide the data and calculations used to determine these status. This can have impacts relating to the type of funding which is available to a specific ward.

Geography, settlement and sparsity all have an impact on how an area is defined as rural so we understand the formula can be complex. We were also told that if a ward group or member needed advice in relation to funding, the Economic Development and Funding Team will try and link them to a relevant funder. This is very encouraging and creates more opportunities for community improvement. However, we are aware that there are wards which 'fall between' funding allocations as they are not eligible for rural funding streams or funding streams which are linked to deprivation. Again we heard that the team will work with these wards to ensure they are linked with relevant funders.

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There has recently been a Boundary Commission Review which could potentially have an impact over how wards are classified. It follows that this could impact the kind of funding which is available to wards by changing their status. We will monitor this issue to see if wards do have new classifications.

One issue which repeatedly came up was the lack of sufficient Broadband in rural areas. You told us that this is not something the Council can resolve as it needs large scale infrastructure and investment from Welsh Government and the relevant Broadband provider. The Rural Economy Champion – Councillor Andrew Stevens highlighted this and made reference to the barriers faced by rural business who do not have sufficient internet access. The lack of internet can also limit peoples access to other online community activities and services such as comparison websites and consultation events. It can lead to more isolation and poverty in rural areas. The Panel are in agreement that this is a very important issue which needs to be highlighted with Welsh Government and we will write a letter to the relevant person emphasising our concerns. We were informed that other organisations such as the Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Group are also looking at this issue.

We raised a query over the issue of poverty within rural areas. We heard how this can sometimes be masked in general data which miss pockets of deprivation within wealthier communities. Again this creates some difficulty over allocation of resources as the wards would not qualify for any funding linked with deprivation.

Tourism and the Natural Environment have been topics of discussion within scrutiny recently so we were pleased to hear that the Council are trying to strike the balance between effective tourism and maintenance of biodiversity. We were told how green infrastructure is a priority across the Council and this is fundamental within policy decisions. This is very positive to hear as making the most of our natural resources with tourism and balancing this with biodiversity maintenance is so important.

We heard about communities running local services which can create a strong sense of community pride and there are examples of success, however do feel that this can create some difficulties and create obligations and pressures for residents. This links in with questions around where responsibilities lie. Some of the issues which the report identified seem to be outside of the capacity of local Councils such as grant programmes and digital connectivity so we hope that Welsh Government are looking at these issues to enhance rural communities.

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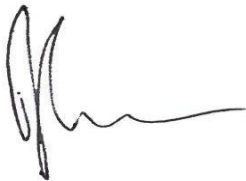
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In conclusion

1. We will follow up the impact of Brexit on the Rural Grant Programme after October 31st and invite you back to the Panel to discuss.
2. We will be writing to Welsh Government to encourage them to be proactive in relation to broadband and the infrastructure relating to this.
3. Can you please provide us with the data and calculations used to determine how wards are categorised as rural or urban?

Please can you respond to this letter by 20th August 2019.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Jeff Jones", written in a cursive style.

Councillor Jeff Jones
Convener, Development and Regeneration Performance Panel
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