



**To/
Councillor Rob Stewart
Cabinet Member for Economy,
Finance & Strategy (Leader)**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Leader & Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy following the meeting of the Committee on 14 July 2020. It is about the Council's COVID-19 response and recovery planning.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 14 July

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 14 July 2020 to update us and answer questions about the Council's COVID-19 response and recovery planning. We also thank the Chief Executive and Director of Place for their contribution to the discussion.

We asked you about the current COVID-19 position in terms of local public health; the key decisions made by Executive Control Group as part of emergency planning arrangements; developments with the Test, Trace & Protect service; recovery planning; and current challenges. Following on from our June meeting, we felt it important that the Committee have an opportunity, through constructive challenge, to influence and help shape the right recovery for Swansea.

This letter reflects on what we learnt from the discussion, shares the views of the Committee, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

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- Current COVID-19 Position – we heard that Swansea continues to have one of the lowest rates of positive cases for any large population centre, at 519.9 per 100,000 population. There is a very low number of currently confirmed cases in hospital, but of course await to see the impact on the infection rate as we emerge out of lockdown and re-open society. The Bay Field Hospital has now been used for antibody testing for Health, Welsh Ambulance Service Trust, and Education staff. The Community Testing Unit formed at the Liberty Stadium is providing significant testing capacity and mobile testing units established for care homes are working well. All care home residents and staff have been, and will continue to be, tested on a regular basis.

- Executive Control Group – we noted the range of key decisions taken by the Executive Control Group during the period of emergency. This includes decisions on: the building of a field hospital; provision of PPE; closure of Council offices and other public venues / services; redeployment of staff; mortuary provision; changes to social care; shielding of vulnerable people; the operation of childcare settings for key workers; delivery of free school meals; business rates / discretionary discounts to businesses; and the re-opening of services etc. You highlighted that consultation and regular briefings with political group leaders has helped to inform and communicate executive decision-making.

- Test, Trace & Protect Service – you told us that, in collaboration with the local health board, a number of TTP teams have been established and trained to provide this service. This currently involves around 50 members of staff, who were redeployed from their existing roles in order to get things up and running quickly, working in teams of around 12 people. The service is live, ready to act 7 days a week where there are new positive cases, and considered to be working well. However, currently numbers coming through the service are low, but we noted that spare resources have been able to assist with dealing with COVID-19 spikes in other parts of Wales. There is also close working with Neath Port Talbot Council so that resources can be shared if necessary to deal with any local spikes. As redeployed staff members return to their substantive posts recruitment in to the TTP service may become necessary, where we cannot fill internally. We heard that this is likely to be funded by the Welsh Government.

- Recovery Planning – we were informed that the Council is focused on tackling the challenges that have resulted from the pandemic and recovering, with a number of key strategic themes that will drive this work:
 - Health, Welfare and Community
 - Business and Economy
 - Future Council
 - Finance
 - Education, Skills, Prevention, Wellbeing and Safeguarding
 - Environment

We discussed the importance of the aligning the various strands into a single coherent recovery strategy. You told us that recovery planning and preparations were at around the same stage as most other Councils across Wales, with some recovery work already underway, for example with the safe re-opening of schools, revision to social care provision, and assistance to businesses to re-open safely. You also highlighted work that has never stopped that will contribute to recovery, such as the new Arena as well as things like our school rebuilding programme. You stated that thinking will be informed by reflection on the experience and learning, for example building on the positives such as the ability of the Council to function effectively in the future with a large degree of remote working.

With the re-opening of non-essential businesses, we noted that around 90% of businesses in the city centre had re-opened and 80% of Swansea Market traders, with an increase in footfall from the previous weeks, and larger stores reporting a good opening. On the hospitality sector, currently limited to outdoor service, three-quarters of businesses remain closed, however indoor reopening allowed from 3 August.

We discussed the potential for local recovery to support and help deliver the Welsh Government's national recovery plan, given its emphasis on 'building back better' through construction, and garner support and much needed investment for the numerous infrastructure projects / schemes in the pipeline here. You assured the Committee that the Council was pushing hard for investment, working closely with the Welsh Local Government Association, and were awaiting announcement from the Welsh Government on their recovery programme. However, it was noted that the Welsh Government were very disappointed with the consequential funding recently announced by the UK Government. We also recognised the potential consequences for Wales from Brexit and agreed that we should not be worse off. We asked you to keep us abreast of any developments and details in relation to the proposed UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which will replace EU Structural and Investment funding, given its significance for our future.

We asked about public transport provision and efforts to get service levels back up as people are returning to work and with shops and businesses re-opening. We noted that the main bus operator, First Cymru, was operating around 45% of the network and seeing around 20% of normal passenger numbers. The potential to increase service was there and was something that the Council was in dialogue with operators about. However, you told us that it was unlikely to back to anywhere near full capacity given that private companies take commercial decisions. It raised the question once again of the future of public transport and potential benefits of public ownership in order to serve communities better.

Following on from discussion in June about support for vulnerable people, the experience of asylum seekers was again raised with you. We discussed difficulties in accessing food support during the crisis due to their inability to pay for transport. You were urged to press lawmakers for a better deal for asylum seekers, e.g. free local bus travel.

- Council Finances – In terms of finances that will need to support our recovery we noted a reported healthy £18m underspend, against projected outturn in this year's Council budget, which is good news. You confirmed that the Council spending on the emergency field hospital had been recovered in full, as expected, from the Health Board. It was expected that COVID-19 related Council spending would also be recovered from the Welsh Government, which has effectively been about implementing national policy locally. However, the final picture would not be known until the end of the year, after all claims from the various pots of money have been submitted and approved, which is currently on ongoing process with periodic deadlines to meet. You clarified that some Council income was not lost, but deferred e.g. Council Tax payment holidays. We discussed the implications on investment income during this crisis, with the Council being a significant owner of property, particularly in the city centre. We also discussed the financial support you are providing for Swansea Market, which we fully endorse, and to Freedom Leisure Trust in order safeguard our leisure centres whilst closed, in a cost-effective way. Whilst we understood the relationship the Council has with Freedom Leisure, we did warn that this support, to what is a third party organisation, could set a precedent in terms of other organisations with furloughed staff asking for Council subsidy to help them to pay the 20% top up.
- Challenges – we noted current challenges as:
 - Health, Welfare and Community: Planning for future COVID-19 peaks, with the virus still present; Restarting services with transition back of staff who are currently redeployed to emergency work.
 - Business and Economy: Restarting to economy, and reacting to new Welsh Government announcements and planning ahead with teams across the Council working to make sure the right support is in place for businesses.
Future Council: Continuing the Council's transformation and modernisation, moving on from the Sustainable Swansea – Fit for the Future Programme; Returning to conventional governance processes, as the Council returns to a more 'normal' mode of operation, with Council and Committee meetings once again taking place in the Guildhall.
 - Finance: Financial planning, with regular submission of claims to Welsh Government (including recovery of lost income or other COVID-19 related expenditure), and awaiting approvals.

- Education, Skills, Prevention, Wellbeing and Safeguarding: School re-opening and transition to full-time return for pupils from 1 September, along with necessary transport and catering provision in place.

On the challenge of future COVID-19 peaks, we reflected on whether we really were at the point of recovery at all, as that would suggest that the crisis is now over and we can get on with re-building. The continued presence of the virus is of course a concern and may hamper what we may call recovery. Much rests on the emergence of an effective vaccine or treatment to end the crisis. The truth is that this is not a short-term crisis but may be with us for some time yet, and become an endemic health issue that we must learn as a society to live with. Are we prepared for this, for the years ahead? Are we thinking long term? It is feasible to think that the Council will need to keep on standby its emergency response in order that resources can be deployed to deal with future outbreaks. You assured us that the Council was not lost in short-term thinking. There is an element of both immediate recovery from lockdown and long-term recovery. You felt that the Council was better prepared to mobilise, and was even more resilient, to deal with a second wave or future outbreaks. We may also see the virus mutate causing milder forms of illness, and becoming less of a threat to society.

To conclude we look forward to continued discussion with you on the Council's recovery planning and have asked you to attend our next meeting on 25 August so we can discuss this in more detail. It would be helpful to explore with you the different recovery themes, priorities within each, and overview of status / progress in relation to activity and challenges.

We look forward to meeting you then to learn more about this work and share our views.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any further comments, however we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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