



**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 17 November 2020. It is about the Council's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Planning.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

### **Scrutiny Programme Committee – 17 November**

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 17 November 2020 to update us and answer questions about the Council's COVID-19 response and recovery planning.

We thank the Chief Executive for sharing with us the key developments over recent weeks, the current local COVID-19 situation, the outlook and challenges we face. The Committee also benefited from the Deputy Chief Executive talking about the recently agreed recovery and transformation plan, and contributions from the Director of Place.

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 Local Situation**

When the Committee last discussed the situation at the end of August the discussion was very much about remobilisation and recovery as the number of cases was relatively low. Since then we have of course seen a second wave of COVID-19 and obvious impacts, including significantly increased pressure on the Test, Trace & Protect service. We acknowledged the pressure on the organisation and adjustment to services to manage the firebreak, protect citizens, enforce rules and support businesses. We were told that the authority is coping but stretched dealing with COVID-19 and day-to-day business, not least flooding following recent downpours. The spread of coronavirus in Denmark following the COVID-19 mutation in mink was also a cause for concern and we heard how about the successful management of those who had travelled from Denmark into Swansea.

We noted that since being placed under local restrictions there has been a significant reduction in the rate of infection and the rate of positive tests, though it is too early to say if this is a long-term trend. At the time of our meeting, we heard that Swansea had a case per 100,000 ratio of 225 against the Wales average of 165 and a testing positivity rate of 16.4% against the Welsh average of 13.3%. The impact of the national firebreak lockdown was not yet clear, and we were warned of a challenging winter ahead. We were told of significant pressures on health and social care, needing the organisation to mobilise staff to provide back office and logistical support in Social Services so that key officers can focus on the front-line. The Council is working with health on an increase in care home testing.

The Committee was told that whilst not yet being needed, the Bay field hospital is ready to be operational to deal with any future surge, should there be an issue with capacity in our local hospitals, as we approach the winter. The situation was being closely monitored. The Committee asked about the impact on staffing in social care should the field hospital become necessary.

We were advised that in the run up to Christmas we will need to monitor closely the difficulties that city centres face in retail and hospitality sectors and the management of large numbers of people in public areas. One potential change talked about was the need for compulsory wearing of facemasks in crowded areas to ensure people stay safe – something being discussed with the Welsh Government, and the police and colleagues in Cardiff who face similar issues. It is important that the movement of people within the city centre, particularly in enclosed areas like the Quadrant and Swansea Market, is well organised and clearly signposted, to ensure safe distancing and more so as we approach the Christmas period.

We talked about the impact on retail, both from the pandemic and competition from online shopping, which is causing businesses, including Debenhams, to reassess their footprint and rental floorspace needs, despite the various measures of support being provided. One of the issues also being business rates, which is a matter for Welsh Government to address. The news this week that Debenhams has gone into liquidation, and the Arcadia Group has gone into administration is of course concerning for our city centre.

### **Positive Developments**

We welcomed the major developments around vaccines in recent weeks, with a further announcement, since our meeting, regarding the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. We noted that the Council is working closely with regional partners to meet the challenge of preparing for a rollout of a mass vaccination programme. We heard that the Bay field hospital and satellites in Gorseinon and Margam, could be utilised for this purpose, along with a mobile programme, but were awaiting advice and clarity about the national vaccination programme and rate of release to our region, to ensure a co-ordinated response. We understood that priority would likely be given to residents and staff in care homes, which alone will be a massive undertaking to organise and deliver, not least if there are issues around storage of vaccines. We noted that Swansea has a higher proportion of people in residential care, across Council facilities and the independent sector, than other cities. The news this week that the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine has been approved for use in the UK is a major development and we hope there can be rapid rollout in this area.

The continuing progress on regeneration and development, and delivery of the capital programme, was again highlighted to the Committee, despite the pandemic - something that our Scrutiny Panel is closely monitoring.

### **Recovery Planning**

Our papers included the recently agreed cabinet report on plans and initial priorities to support organisational, economic and social recovery and future transformation of the Council. We asked in particular about the different phases, status, and projected timelines:

- **Phase 1 - Remobilise** (short term): restarting and adapting a wide range of Council Services, at the same time as responding to COVID.
- **Phase 2 - Refocus** (short to medium term – up to May 2022): a strategic response to support the city to emerge and grow from the crisis delivering our corporate priorities. Effectively how we manage the interim period whilst COVID is still with us.
- **Phase 3 - Reshape** (long term – after May 2022 Council election): longer term City and County regeneration and development strategy, including a new Corporate Plan, Financial Plan, Workforce Strategy and Digital Strategy. Effectively the period effectively beyond COVID.

We also asked about the key recovery milestones, that will aid monitoring and assessment of progress. It would help us to understand what success looks like, as the plan is rolled out. It was highlighted to the Committee that the plan provides an overarching strategy and framework but detailed work will flow from the plan focussing on different recovery themes with specific objectives and milestones. This includes work, some of which has already started, around policy change, service transformation, workforce planning, tourism economy, community support, digital services, as well as focus on key services such as care services, education and learning, and the economy and environment. It was also stressed to us that given the current situation and uncertain outlook, the plan is flexible.

We also asked about the link between the plan and corporate priorities, for example how the 'natural environment' features within the overarching recovery and transformation strategy. We just wanted to make sure of due consideration being given to the Environment Act, and what we need to do in response to the Climate Emergency, in work to reshape the Council.

There was also recognition of Brexit, and how we cope with the immediate pressure and effects in parallel with COVID. Thank you for sharing with us after the meeting a Brexit exposure dashboard showing possible implications for Swansea, that is designed to help our planning our planning for EU exit. We are planning to hold and Q & A session with you at our January Committee meeting. As well as the latest on COVID, the Committee would like to discuss, amongst other things, the Council's Brexit preparedness, by which time things are hopefully clearer about the UK's Brexit deal or otherwise.

The Committee intends to follow up on progress with the recovery plan, as part of our ongoing discussion on the Council's COVID response and recovery. It would be helpful to have the detail referred to, that can show us the objectives, milestones and achievements against each of the key recovery themes. We agreed that it would be reasonable for a report back to the Committee, specifically on this, in six months.

### **Your Response**

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any 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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