



**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 Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 19 January 2021. It is about COVID-19, Brexit, Council Budget, Partnership / Regional Working, and City Centre Regeneration. A response is not required.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 19 January

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 19 January 2021 and answering questions on your work as Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy.

The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility. We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance at the Committee meeting, which focused on current key areas of local and national significance.

Overall, you reflected on an unprecedented last nine months and the numerous challenges faced by the Council and the people of Swansea during the pandemic. You praised the tireless work of Council staff, recognising in particular the support you have had from the Chief Executive and senior management team, as well as from Cabinet colleagues. Despite the pressures and the pain the pandemic has brought, you were positive and optimistic about the future.

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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.

COVID-19 Latest

When the Committee last discussed the COVID-19 situation with you in November, the discussion was about rising rates of infections, the impact of local restrictions and national firebreak, and a challenging winter ahead with concerns of a possible second wave of COVID-19 and obvious impacts. However, there was also hope with the development of vaccines. We now of course find ourselves in a further lockdown due to high rates of infection and pressures on health services, and the consequences of a new variant of the virus circulating in the UK. At the same time, the roll out of a mass vaccination programme is underway, following the approval of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccines.

The Committee asked about progress with the vaccination programme and the support the Council is providing to health partners to help deliver as many vaccinations as possible and as quickly as possible. At our meeting, we heard that close to 21,000 people in the priority groups in Swansea had now been vaccinated, utilising all available vaccines. We note that there are now three max vaccination centres: Bay field hospital (with capacity to administer 1500 vaccines per day); Margam Orangery (600 per day), and Canolfan Gorseinon Centre which has just opened (300 per day). In addition, all 49 GP surgeries across the Swansea Bay University Health Board area are now participating in the programme.

You reported good progress with the vaccination of care home residents and staff, and that overall things were on track to complete vaccination of the first four priority groups by mid-February. The Committee was pleased to hear of the progress made and supported all efforts to make sure the vaccine is delivered effectively in Swansea, and facilitated as much as possible by the Council. We are aware of recent concerns about the Welsh Government's handling of the rollout and distribution of vaccines, but hope we are now heading in the right direction.

Committee members did ask whether a local drive-through vaccination centre has been considered, that could benefit the overall effort. We understood that this has been ruled out at this stage, given the centres that have been established, all working to a high throughput, and taking into account specific requirements that need to be met.

The Committee also asked you about any reflection on the Council's local emergency planning arrangements and preparedness. You welcomed any review of that in due course as Swansea recovers, but were proud of the response and reflected on swift action taken at the start of the pandemic last March. For example, the realignment of Council services, the move to remote

working, the repurposing of schools as emergency settings, and the delivery of community support for the most vulnerable and other aid. We heard that Council preparations for a 'no-deal' Brexit had in fact made the Council more alert and ready in terms of emergency planning. A member not on the Committee had asked us to raise with you whether, in light of the current pandemic, a Joint Resilience Committee with Neath Port Talbot ought to be re-established, that better engages councillors in emergency planning. I think you argued that regional resilience structures were in place and operating effectively. You informed the Committee that there is a well-established South Wales Local Resilience Forum, made up of Local Authorities, emergency services and other responders, which help coordination and cooperation in the area.

Given the scale of the emergency, you pointed to the likelihood of national reviews or inquiries being undertaken at some point that will no doubt have lessons for the future. In addition to ongoing scrutiny, the Committee hopes that as part of the Council's recovery plan there is space and time for local reflection by Cabinet / Corporate Management Team.

Brexit

The Committee asked about latest assessments and projections regarding implications for Swansea in light of the deal agreed between the UK and EU at the end of December. You stated that it was still early days into the deal, but previous estimates commissioned by the WLGA on the economic impact, looking at best case and worse case scenarios, would suggest a significant financial hit estimated to be around £1.5bn for Wales. You felt the immediate impact was currently masked by the pandemic.

Committee members had previously shared with you concerns about the loss of EU funding and support to Swansea and the region, and the need to ensure a fair share of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund that we understood would replace it. There seems to be continued uncertainty around this funding for Wales and our area, and we asked whether you knew any more about this. Unfortunately, you did not, and shared our concern at the lack of detail and assurance for Wales about the future position, given promises that we would not be a penny worse off from what we would have expected from EU funding.

We briefly touched on a couple of other aspects of the EU exit and possible implications locally, including the disappointing end of our membership of the ERASMUS international education exchange programme, and the effect it may have on our twinning links with EU cities including Mannheim in Germany. You felt that our innovative Universities would find a way to find alternative ways to enable international exchanges and added that any opportunities to strengthen ties with Mannheim and other twin cities would be explored, in particular around turning those friendships into more active economic relationships. There was also some concern at the prospect of the

weakening of workers' rights following Brexit, which we would hope would be strongly opposed by this Council.

We can see that a report is scheduled for Council discussion in March on the implications for Swansea from the EU Exit Deal, which councillors look forward to seeing.

Council Budget

You told us about the unique challenges to finances faced during the pandemic and the need to flex the budget since it was agreed last March. With the unknown potential effects of Brexit, the massive disruption of COVID-19, and late decisions on budgets in London and Cardiff, the Committee asked about the Council's confidence in being able to set a sound budget for 2021/22.

Despite the challenges, you were confident of the Council's ability to set a balanced budget by March, in no small part due to the remarkable work of the Chief Finance Officer and finance staff. You were grateful for the Welsh Government's indicative budget settlement, which earmarks an uplift of around £22m for Swansea. One of the issues however was delay to the long-term Comprehensive Spending Review, which would help us to plan better.

We noted that Cabinet has now published its budget proposals paper, which is now out for public consultation. The budget will be subject to detailed scrutiny led by our Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel in February. Monitoring of the budget and outturn in the first quarter of 2021 will of course provide scrutiny with a clearer picture of council finances.

Partnership / Regional Working

The Committee asked about the continuing development of partnership and regional working, and opportunities to strengthen further, for example where there are still local arrangements in place such as the Public Services Board. You were asked whether it would be more effective and more focussed if there is greater coordination between the Swansea PSB, Neath Port-Talbot PSB and West Glamorgan Regional Partnership Board.

You assured the Committee that regional working is under constant review to ensure arrangements are streamlined and effective. Where necessary regional arrangements would be developed if there were a shared desire and commitment across organisations. For example, changes are afoot for the ERW regional school improvement consortium, with a likely move to the City Deal regional footprint. The advent of Corporate Joint Committees also requires us to reflect on regional arrangements, and whether existing structures are fit for purpose and have clear arrangements for accountability through scrutiny.

City Centre Regeneration

Committee members welcomed the news that almost 467 full-time equivalent jobs are to be created at the Swansea Arena, in a range of areas that ATG, are looking for, to help them operate the Arena. This is a great boost to the local economy, and we hope that many of the opportunities available will be recruited locally.

The demise of Debenhams is course a concern, both for the city centre and for those who have lost their job. Any opportunities arising from the Arena and associated development are going to be vital. You told the Committee that Swansea was leading the way in terms of jobs growth in Wales, and despite current challenges, there was a positive picture beyond COVID and Brexit.

You assured us that the Council will do all it can to support Debenhams locally but these were national decisions. Since our meeting, it has been confirmed that all stores will close permanently following a deal with the online fashion retailer, Boohoo, which will see the Debenhams relaunch as an on-line operation only.

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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