



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

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2020-21/6

06 April 2021

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Leader of the Council following the meeting of the Committee on 16 March 2021. It is about the Council's COVID-19 response and recovery plan. A response is not required.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 16 March

The Committee is monitoring and challenging Council action in relation to the COVID-19 response and recovery. Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 16 March 2021. The focus of the meeting was on receiving update on the latest position on how the Council is dealing with COVID-19, and hearing about progress with the Council's Recovery and Transformation Plan 'Swansea – Achieving Better Together'.

The Committee is grateful to the Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive for updating the Committee on the current situation and main headlines, and in terms of recovery telling us how things have developed since agreement of the plan by Cabinet last October, and in light of events how the plan is currently shaping.

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

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COVID-19 Latest

We were pleased to hear at the meeting about a steady decline in local case rates helped by continuing lockdown measures, with figures around 34 cases per 100,000 population. Although at the time of writing, we note that the case rate has increased again reminding us that we are not out of the woods.

The Committee was also pleased that the vaccination programme has been running at full pace and current figures indicate that in excess of 170,000 people across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot have received a first dose, with around a third of those having also received a second dose. We asked about the widely reported concerns on the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine and whether there may be an impact on vaccine take up.

It remains a subject of debate whether further peaks will be experienced later in 2021, and will be affected by a range of factors including the impact of vaccinations, decisions about lockdown and release, and the unpredictability regarding possible new variants of concern. There is a view that whilst infections may increase we may see fewer deaths and serious illness with less impact on our health and social care services, but that remains to be seen.

The phased lifting of restrictions has now seen the reopening of our primary schools and secondary schools for a number of year groups, bringing about what could be described as a greater sense of 'normality' despite ongoing restrictions. We note the Welsh Government's plan to further ease restrictions in the coming weeks.

Recovery and Transformation Plan 'Swansea – Achieving Better Together'.

The Recovery and Transformation Plan has replaced the Sustainable Swansea – Fit for the Future Strategy, which was the Council's long-term plan for transformation and change that had been in existence since 2013/14. The new Plan has been borne out of not only current circumstances and impact of the pandemic, but new challenges and opportunities arising from the new Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 as well as a changing national political landscape and economic uncertainty including from both COVID-19 and post-Brexit risks.

We noted that statutory guidance on the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 was awaited, which features a range of new developments. This includes: the introduction of a general power of competence; new regional working mechanisms (Corporate Joint Committees); new performance management arrangements (including self-assessment and peer review); commitments to ensuring greater public participation in local democracy; and reforms to electoral arrangements (extending the vote to 16 and 17-year-olds, and foreign citizens who are legally resident in Wales).

The Committee heard that the continued impact of COVID-19 and the Council's necessary response has had an impact on progress since agreement by Cabinet in October 2020. However, there has been an opportunity to review and streamline governance arrangements for the Plan and refine the scope of the five workstreams, which will focus on Care Services, Education & Learning, Economy & Environment, Community Support, and Future Workforce & Equalities. The programme has been aligned to existing groups and meetings to improve efficiency and effectiveness of delivery.

We noted that there is an Organisational Cross-Cutting & Transformation officer Steering Group at the heart of the structure. It was clarified that whilst workstreams and associated sub-groups will have various inputs and involve a range of people and partners, internal and external, this will feed into the usual process of decision-making by Cabinet where required (and be available for scrutiny), with strategic overview and direction from a member / officer Recovery, Reshaping & Budget Strategy Board, ensuring that proper governance is being observed and reporting to appropriate bodies. For example, work carried out under the Economy & Environment workstream to develop COVID economic recovery action plan was being considered by Cabinet in March.

The report presented to the Committee provided a project progress update and description of planned activities / decisions in relation to each workstream. It also showed how Medium Term Financial Plan delivery targets are on target to be delivered for the financial year 2021/22. Overall, we noted that the recovery phase is well underway and that the workstreams are in place and working through the actions associated with their agendas, and that reporting mechanisms and governance boards were also in place.

We acknowledged the responsibility of officers to deliver the agreed Plan, but asked about the role of councillors other than executive members. Although noting the interface with Scrutiny and Audit the Committee queried the involvement of councillors generally and opportunities to input into the recovery work to inform and influence outcomes. We were told that each workstream and individual projects, as work progresses, would include the involvement of councillors through Policy Development Committees and workshops for wider awareness and engagement.

We also asked about specific workstreams and sought clarification on the various groups / organisations that would be involved, e.g. reference to a 'Third Sector Liaison Group' under the Community Support workstream, and Climate Change Working Group under the Economy & Environment workstream. We also highlighted the need for clear linkages between workstreams, e.g. across care services and education where issues may overlap such as transforming mental health services and safeguarding and well-being. Some clarification was also sought about the involvement / engagement with Health across relevant workstreams. We heard there is a

clear commitment to collaborative working (internally and externally, with the public and private sector), something that the COVID experience has strengthened, building on already good relationships between social services and education, and with health, avoiding duplication and making the most of resources so there is a more coherent single system approach to recovery and transformation. We agreed that post-COVID this joint working must not be lost.

Finally, recognition was once again paid to the workforce, in all roles, that together have kept people safe, kept the work of the Council going, supported those in need, and who will deliver the recovery and transformation.

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.

We will of course return to the Recovery and Transformation Plan and will make arrangements for a progress report to the Committee later in the year, most likely around September 2021.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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