



**To/
Councillor Robert Francis-Davies
Cabinet Member for Investment,
Regeneration & Tourism
BY EMAIL**

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2021-22/3

30 September 2021

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 17 August 2021. It is about Tourism, Destination Management & Marketing and Business & City Promotion.

Dear Councillor Francis-Davies,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 17 August

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focussed on specific aspects of your wide-ranging cabinet portfolio, namely Tourism, Destination Management & Marketing and Business & City Promotion.

We wanted to gain a greater understanding of what these specific responsibilities entail, your priorities, resources, performance measures, key headlines / achievements and progress against objectives, and overall assessment (including how we compare with others, challenges / risks) and impact / difference made.

We thank you and officers for attending the meeting and providing a written report on these responsibilities and the Council's work. The Committee asked questions in order to explore this work and provide challenge on actions and performance in relation to these areas of responsibility, as well as future thinking.

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

Tourism

Your report focused on strategic priorities and performance during the pandemic. You highlighted the value of tourism to the local economy and the impact that the COVID-19 has had on the industry over the last 18 months. We heard about efforts to support the re-opening of the sector, as part of the Council's Economic Recovery Plan, following the easing of restrictions.

We acknowledged that it has been an unprecedented and extremely challenging time for Swansea, with restrictions on travel and the tourism, leisure, and hospitality industry. We recognised that it is a critical time for the sector and the Council is working to support recovery, given the importance of tourism to the local economy and employment. It was clear to see the commitment to improving things and maximising Swansea's potential as a tourist destination. We heard about extensive social media campaigning to market Swansea as a tourist destination and promote visits to Swansea – e.g. 'make Swansea Bay your Happy Place this year'. We noted numerous examples of recent positive press coverage in national / UK media of Swansea's tourism offer.

Following on from the previous Destination Management Plan, we noted that COVID-19 presented an opportunity to revisit strategic priorities for recovery, and you outlined the new Tourism Recovery Action Plan (TRAP) with three key priorities to better understand the market and how it has changed, support businesses, re-focus marketing, engage with customers, and welcome people back. The TRAP forms an integral part of Swansea Council's wider Economic Recovery Plan (approved by Cabinet in March 2021), which has provided for additional resources to enable enhanced media campaigns, accommodation improvement grants for businesses, and the waiving of marketing fees to support the private sector in promoting their businesses.

We talked about the fact that many people will be looking to holiday within the UK as 'staycations' become the main choice in current times, so there is an opportunity to attract new visitors particularly with the ability to reach large numbers through digital platforms. It was pleasing to hear initial indications are positive, looking at bookings and hotel occupancy. We also talked about extending the season as much as possible so that marketing continues into the autumn and winter period, and having a clear audience in mind. There is much to enjoy here all year round. We also pointed out that efforts to market and promote local tourism should not forget those closer to the area who may not be aware of what is on their 'doorstep'. We heard about the 'Doorstep Detectives' initiative with information and resources on the

visitswanseabay.com website challenging people to re-discover local attractions.

As well as focus on marketing, we noted that the vision for the Tourism Recovery Action Plan refers to delivering a high quality visitor experience in a pleasant, clean and well-maintained environment. This cannot be understated, as poor experiences will damage our tourism e.g. the state of public toilets around our beaches, litter and cleanliness of the area, overgrowth, traffic congestion, etc. These things can let us down, and effective cross-departmental team working is crucial to maintain the infrastructure and ensure the quality of the visitor experience.

We asked whether any consideration has been given to 'virtual tourism' whereby people can access places remotely and / or get additional web-based information when at a specific location. We heard that whilst this was not a feature of current plans there was awareness of this as a growth area, and something that the Council could look at a bit more closely, to exploit such technology as an aid to promoting Swansea. For example, virtual tours of museums, galleries, castles, parks to access remotely, and QR codes at destinations that would link to relevant additional information / local history and heritage to enhance to overall experience, as well as other Swansea 'stories', such as its copper history, and discovery of the 'Red Lady' of Paviland. We supported any progress that could be made with this technology.

We also asked you about the potential for attracting the cruise ship market, but noted access issues at Swansea Port. There had been some work done on this in the past about the development of cruise ships down the Irish Sea, in collaboration with Ireland – the Celtic Wave Project – but this project appears to have ceased. We noted that the City was able to accommodate smaller vessels currently but would welcome any possibility to receive visitors from cruise ships, and projects such as the Tidal Lagoon generated hope that this may become a reality in the future.

There was also mention within the Committee of a possible 'tourism tax' that the Welsh Government has mooted, inviting your thoughts on such a move, but noted there has not been any specific contact with the Council on this.

Follow up on Tourism Scrutiny Working Group

The Committee appreciated you providing an update on action following the Tourism Scrutiny Working Group, which reported to Cabinet during 2019.

When Cabinet made a decision on the scrutiny recommendations in November 2019, three of the recommendations were not agreed. We asked you to revisit in particular our recommendation seven relating to the promotion of eco-tourism, which suggested working with national and local environmental organisations to find ways to attract their memberships (not

insignificant numbers) to the area who perhaps may not be aware of Swansea's environmental tourism offer. There is good research that indicates a healthy percentage of nature and wildlife tourism. We felt it was worth a re-think from the Council's point of view to consider this growing market and find ways to promote it, perhaps by tapping into their existing communications with their members with targeted publicity materials. You told us that the Council has good relations, and works closely, with environmental groups; but it was indicated to the Committee that this was something that could be further explored, just as the Council targets travel writers and publications. We welcome action on improving our environmental messaging to attract visitors, potentially a quick win on the back of an increasing interest and concern in the climate, nature and biodiversity.

Furthermore, Committee Members flagged up the potential to promote eco-tourism and access to Penclawdd / North Gower, encouraging cycling from the railway station at Gowerton. We also welcomed any possible expansion of cycle hire facilities across Swansea. It would also be useful if there were accessible maps of our main footpaths for people to explore Swansea and enjoy a green holiday. You undertook to talk to officers about improving public information about that.

One of the recommendations also called for the development of a Gower off-road cycling network and cycling map for the area. We can see from the update that work has been carried out to develop and promote a network of bridleways as a way of enjoying the countryside by bike that will enable visitors to explore large areas of Gower AONB by bicycle. A map of routes is in the process of being prepared. We noted that the scheme has been limited due to legal issues with landowners but will still be extensive. More information about progress would be appreciated, including whether we were successful in obtaining grant funding to support this work.

Business & City Promotion

Your paper focused on work carried out within the Council's Planning & City Regeneration Service delivered through the Economic Development and External Funding team who undertake business engagement and inward investment, and the Development and Physical Regeneration team, dealing with business investment and city promotion within the scope of large development schemes.

One of our main points of concern was the availability of advice and support for business, whether about starting-up, council services, funding, learning and improvement, and how easy it was to access. We heard that there had been a reliance on signposting local businesses / individuals to the Welsh Government's Business Wales information, but a new dedicated resource within the Council had recently been established which would see the launch of new Business Swansea business advice web pages and contact details on the Council website. This was coupled with an increase in social media

activity to promote the service. We welcomed this news, and this was particularly useful for councillors to be able to signpost to.

We asked about progress with the Parc Felindre site in attracting new businesses. We heard that the last 18 months had been difficult but the economy was now improving and there has been renewed interest in the site with three live discussions with businesses currently ongoing. It was encouraging to hear about this interest, as the site is sizeable, offering good links to the motorway and should be an attractive proposition for companies big and small.

Focusing on the City Centre, we are well aware of the difficulties faced because of not only the pandemic, but also the impact of growth in on-line retail as well as competition from out of town retail parks. The loss of Debenhams, and other big names from our city centre is a concern and we asked about what we are doing as a Council in response. We know that this has affected other cities across the UK and heard that Swansea has not suffered as much as others have, but of course it remained a concern and focus for recovery.

You told us that Cabinet would be considering a City Centre Repurposing Strategy' report, which will identify key interventions and actions to make Swansea fit for the future. The ongoing major investment across the city, such as the Arena development, has improved Swansea's position and ability to retain and attract business and retail compared with other cities. We noted significant press and public relations work being done to promote the city and its story, and attract investment. We heard that work was ongoing with the owners of the Quadrant about the occupation of empty units and new lettings were due to come on board. We were also told that all of the commercial units outside of the Arena were under offer with good quality local businesses and with the Arena expected to generate 200 plus events per year from around year 3 onwards, this would mean significant footfall, and improve the night-time economy. We noted first year target of around 100 events.

A Swansea less reliant on national chain stores will make Swansea unique and add to its appeal. We acknowledged the importance of a mixed-use city centre in sustaining the city centre, as a place to live, work, shop and enjoy. You felt there was reason to be cautiously optimistic and confident that Swansea was better placed than other comparable cities to thrive post-pandemic. We were pleased to hear the positivity, although felt a solution to the significant unit vacated by Debenhams was urgently needed. The impact of student accommodation on the city centre was also discussed. We agreed that Swansea needed to be a distinctive multi-purpose city, not dependent on the big chain stores or only retail, and plans to improve the green infrastructure and city centre environment were important to that.

We also referred to the good news about the protected status given to Gower Salt Marsh Lamb, helping to put the area on the map, and asked about our work in the promotion of other distinctive local food and produce. We noted that the Economic Recovery Fund would support more work on this with relevant businesses.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome comments on any of the issue raised within. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically consider and respond to our call for further action on the recommendations of the Tourism Scrutiny Working Group, and points made in this letter.

Please provide your response to this and any other comments about our letter by 21 October. We will then publish both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Black', written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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