



To:
Cllr David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations

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Overview & Scrutiny

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8 December 2021

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Delivery and Operations, regarding the Planning Annual Performance Report 2019-21 / 2020-21.

Dear Cllr Hopkins,

On 16 November, the Panel met to discuss the Planning Annual Performance Report, which covered the periods 2019-21 and 2020-21. The Panel were grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion and to share the observations of the Panel. The discussions focused on the following areas:

Planning Annual Performance Report:

The Panel heard that the Annual Performance Report (APR) is produced each year to allow the Welsh Government to monitor performance against a specific set of indicators. Having regard to the pandemic disruptions and impact upon resources, the latest report spans the two-year period since 2019.

Officers explained to the Panel that, as a result of pandemic restrictions, working practices needed to be changed and adapted; for example site visits and risk assessments.

Officers outlined that the number of applications received since Q3 of 2021 has been significantly higher than previous years. There has also been increased pressure on officer workloads, and an increased number of complaints / enforcement issues.

It was explained to us that, under usual circumstances, comparison data has allowed Swansea Council to compare performance with other Local Authorities. Officers

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explained that the Welsh Government did not make the APR mandatory last year or this year, given pandemic pressures; although the Panel noted that the department has continued to meet the targets set by the Welsh Government.

Members queried why the Welsh Government had not required Annual Performance Reports to be submitted this year. Officers explained that workloads last year were too onerous across Local Authorities, and, additionally, a number of issues have arisen this year in terms of introduction of temporary legislation for businesses to deal with pandemic adaptations.

Staffing:

Panel Members raised queries relating to the Natural Environment and monitoring of planning enforcement in relation to ecological issues. Officers explained that there is currently no designated monitoring officer; complaints are submitted and dealt with as a whole team.

Members queried whether the Council had filled vacancies within the planning department. The Panel heard that the department is fully staffed as of November 2021, however, some officers are employed on temporary contracts.

Members noted the issue of staff recruitment / retention across the Council, commenting that the use of temporary contracts may not retain staff long-term.

Officers highlighted that receiving grant funding to secure additional staff is beneficial, however, the labour market is not always sufficient to meet demand and it can be difficult to recruit certain skill sets across the region. Officers explained that consideration will be given to developing Council staff via apprenticeships and in-house trainees.

Operations:

It was reported that in 2019-20, 74% of all enforcement cases were investigated within 84 days compared to 46% in 2017-18. However, the impacts of the pandemic meant that this figure dropped to 51% in 2020-21. Officers explained to us that the target of 84 days is set by the Welsh Government.

Members queried the generic email response that is sent from the Council currently, in relation to planning enquiries. Members raised concerns that this may inadvertently suggest to applicants that their application is not urgent. Members suggested the Council may consider re-phrasing this automated response.

The Panel raised queries about how a Land Charge may be attached to some parcels of land and not to others. Officers explained that when a formal enforcement notice is served, the charge appears as a Land Charge.

The Panel queried fees charged for pre-planning advice and continuity of such advice. Officers explained that an enquiry is dealt with by a case officer for a particular area; advice then being signed off by an Area Team Leader. If a particular case is referred

to the planning committee, the Area Team Leader will be present at the meeting.

Officers explained that a new complaints report has been instigated, which will be circulated to Members on a weekly basis advising of complaints received in each ward. We look forward to receiving a copy of this report.

Timescales:

It was explained to us that the Welsh Government monitors performance of local authorities, having regard to the percentage of applications processed within agreed timescales (normally eight weeks from when a valid application is submitted).

Officers explained to the Panel that, during processing, that timescale may change, if, for example, an incorrect certificate has been submitted. We heard that when correct documents are re-submitted the eight-week period begins again.

Officers commented that, occasionally, it is not possible to determine a case within the eight-week period. Officers explained to us that if an applicant decides to submit amendments, which would likely take the matter outside of agreed timescales, the Council would ask applicants to agree an extension of time as Council performance is measured against that agreed timescale.

We heard that Swansea Council provides a pre-application advice service so any issues can be dealt with before formal submission.

Your response:

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter but, in this instance, we require no formal written response.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

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