



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Homes, Energy
& Service Transformation**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Homes, Energy & Service Transformation following the meeting of the Committee on 13 April 2021. It is about progress with the delivery of the Council's Homelessness Strategy. A formal response is not required.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 13 April

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 April 2021, in which we considered progress with the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy 2018-22, since adoption by Cabinet in November 2018. This built upon your report and discussion at the Council meeting in March. We are also grateful for the contribution of lead officers to our discussion on progress, achievements and impact, as well as current issues and challenges.

Scrutiny was able to influence the development of the Strategy during 2018, through both our Homelessness Scrutiny Working Group, and the Committee's consideration of the draft Strategy prior to agreement. When the four-year strategy was agreed, no one could have predicted that we would soon experience a global pandemic and health crisis. The Committee wanted to explore how the new Strategy has delivered improvement to services, advice and support, both in preventing homelessness and dealing with it where it exists; and what impact the pandemic has had.

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This letter reflects on what we learnt from the discussion, shares comments and views of the Committee on progress with the delivery of the Homelessness Strategy at its mid-point stage, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

Key findings from our discussion:

- You reported good progress across the five key objectives that were set to meet the aims of the Strategy, with high levels of homelessness prevention being maintained, helped by what you felt to have been some of the best partnership working experienced, and some additional support to tackle homelessness during the pandemic. You also highlighted that pressures on homelessness and support services are expected to rise, along with increased demand for affordable and secure, social housing, however were confident that the Strategy remains robust and fit for purpose to deal with forthcoming challenges.
- The pandemic has affected some of the priorities and plans within the Homelessness Strategy agreed in 2018. However overall the pandemic has effectively accelerated plans to tackle homelessness with a level of urgency, which has seen the suspension of the 'Priority Need' test, seeing a dramatic fall in the number of rough sleepers since the start of the pandemic. However, this has meant an increase in the number of people placed in Bed & Breakfast (B&B) and other temporary accommodation, many of whom would not have normally qualified for assistance under existing homelessness legislation. Additional costs have covered by the Welsh Government's Emergency COVID Fund. We noted that it is possible that the Welsh Government will enact legislation to abolish the 'Priority Need' test. If this happens, there will be an impact on current policy around housing allocations and points system, and put pressure on resources. We noted that there are now around 2-3 rough sleepers compared to around 15-20 during 2019, but were concerned that numbers may rise as we come out of the pandemic.
- Given the unsuitability of B&B accommodation and pressures on the service, there is a need to increase the supply of one bed, permanent, affordable, accommodation. The Council successfully bid for £5.4m from the Welsh Government's Phase 2 Homelessness capital funding to increase the amount of one bed accommodation. This will be delivered in partnership with local Registered Social Landlords (Pobl, Family Housing and Coastal) through a number of schemes that will provide between 70 to 80 additional units of permanent accommodation, available for homeless people, during 2021. This funding will also help to provide additional support, with a particular focus on rapid rehousing, mental health and substance misuse. A review of temporary supported housing provision is also being carried that should help to shorten the time-period from temporary accommodation to permanent housing to break the cycle of homelessness.

- In reducing the number of people sleeping rough during the pandemic the Council has also been able to provide support to all people who required it, including those with no recourse to public funds. This is in line with national guidance that all homeless people are to be considered vulnerable during the pandemic and therefore in priority need. We were pleased to hear no one has been left behind.
- Included in a list of priorities for 2021/22 are on-going negotiations with the Home Office to agree staggered asylum seeker move on from Home Office accommodation following a positive decision on refugee status, in order to reduce strain on temporary accommodation and allow a planned approach to refugee move on. With Swansea being one of four dispersal areas in Wales, we were keen to see improvement to the way asylum seekers and refugees can be dealt with, in a joined-up way, given the issues they face.
- To support efforts in ensuring service users are at the centre of service deliver you have embedded a PIE approach (Psychologically Informed Environment) within the Homelessness Service, which has enabled services to be delivered in a trauma informed, person centred way. The Homelessness Service successfully bid to be part of pilot project training from Cymorth Cymru for staff. Staff from Housing Options, the Tenancy Support Unit and the Council's Rents Team have all received this training. We discussed the benefits of this approach, in the way we deal with and treat people and understand their situation, and look forward to hearing further about how it has made a difference.
- The Committee has previously been concerned about the impact of homelessness on children and young people, and / or being subject to constant moving, on their education. We sought some assurance that there is a joined up working across the Council, and with partners, and measures in place so that no one falls through the gaps in terms of education provision. You spoke about the development of a Youth Homelessness Charter, the particular support to care leavers, the focus on not placing families in B&B accommodation, looking at housing provision beyond one-bed units, the involvement of housing in social services case conferences, and efforts to avoid moving children around schools unnecessarily.
- When we discussed the draft Strategy in 2018, we welcomed the plan to carry out a feasibility study to look at developing a holistic "solutions centre" for services for rough sleepers, to improve facilities for those who are vulnerably housed and sleeping rough. We noted that the pandemic has led to a re-evaluation of what is required, along with the impact of other service developments being undertaken by Health and the voluntary sector in the city centre. We asked about current thinking on how this may be taken forward, and whether Council plans for a city-centre public hub may provide space for some sort of 'solutions centre', including the

housing options service, in addition to the development and expansion of the Ty Tom Jones temporary supported accommodation scheme. On Ty Tom Jones, you reported that the new project has shown success in adopting a rapid rehousing approach with improved engagement and outcomes, and funding identified from Housing Support Grant will enable the project to continue during 2021/22, and be increased by an additional four units bringing the total to 24. We were told that, in addition, all homeless households are currently placed in temporary accommodation, and services have been enhanced to ensure individualised support is available for all who require it. You felt that the expansion of Ty Tom Jones, with its focus on rapid rehousing, would provide the opportunity to look at increasing the amount of services that are delivered at this location. This could include space for drop-in services and facilities for those in less flexible accommodation such as B&B. Whilst you would consider potential for housing services and/or associated multi-agency support to be included in any community hub base in the city centre, you stressed the focus was on improving outreach. Thinking has very much moved away from developing a 'solutions centre', but you will continue to listen to service users to help inform future direction.

- It was good to hear that homelessness people, as a vulnerable group, have been prioritised for COVID vaccinations and you indicated that the roll-out has gone well, with special mobile units set up over a number of days. We understand that around 40% of those offered a vaccination have had one but further efforts are being made to improve upon this.

In conclusion, the Committee was very impressed with the work that has gone to deliver homelessness services and support, in the face of difficult challenges. We praise the hard work of all staff in responding to the challenges created by the pandemic, adapting to changing priorities, increased pressures and changes in service delivery, and working together to deal with homelessness. We thank those in housing services and all partners for their work. We noted there has been a shift in the public's perception of homelessness, with greater awareness of the problem, sympathy and willingness to support rough sleepers as a priority. We hope that continues to be the case.

Of course, how we move forward from the pandemic, and avoid a return to rough sleeping, is a big question, given expectations of an increase in the numbers of people who will require advice and assistance for homelessness and housing related support, along with increased demand for affordable and secure, social housing. It was clear that this would not be sustainable without continuity of additional funding, which we hope is forthcoming that will show a permanent, not temporary, national commitment to tackling homelessness. We do need a long-term solution to move away from reliance on B&B accommodation to more sustainable housing, and ability to focus on rapid rehousing to prevent further homelessness with wrap around multi-agency support.

We asked how sustainable the situation is for individuals who may have benefitted during the pandemic, but as we come out of lockdown, the additional support may no longer be available. There will also be people facing hardship with the ending of financial assistance schemes such as furlough and fall-out from the pandemic in terms of mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse that we will need to support.

You talked about strong partnership working. We noted that the focus on a Housing First approach has seen the integration of mental health support and outreach, funded by housing. However, the relationship with Health around mental health support provision and issues around future funding need to be monitored closely to ensure it is a collaborative effort, to avoid pressure and financial burden falling disproportionately on the housing service. Early intervention is going to be invaluable in helping people to sustain permanent housing, to prevent more complex problems and things reaching a point of crisis. You mentioned close working by housing with Health, not directly linked to the Homelessness Strategy, being developed around tackling substance misuse – something the Committee would be interested in hearing more about in due course. We felt that key to tackling homelessness and meeting the challenges identified, was sustaining the partnership working, particularly with our local Registered Social Landlords. We were pleased to hear that there has been increased flexibility in some forms of accommodation regarding pets, which we have known to be a barrier to accessing housing for many homeless people. You told the Committee that you were confident of continuing effective partnership working with Health and others.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any comments on anything within, however we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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