



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Service
Transformation**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2022-23/7

30 January 2023

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 December 2022. It is about Homelessness. A formal written response is required by 20 February.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 13 December Scrutiny of Homelessness

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focussed on a specific aspect of your cabinet portfolio responsibilities, namely homelessness. This has been an area of interest over the past few years, with Scrutiny Councillors taking the opportunity to influence the development of the Homelessness Strategy during 2018 and scrutinise its delivery. The last Committee session on 13 April 2021 considered progress in the delivery of that Strategy.

On this occasion the Committee was interested in how homelessness is being managed, as we emerge from the pandemic, and the support that is provided, what has changed over the last 18 months in that regard, current performance and trends, notable practice and outcomes, current pressures / challenges / risks, and the outlook and overall assessment of things.

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We thank you for attending the meeting and providing a written report covering this, and thank Steve Porter, Operations Manager – Community Housing Services, for taking us through the detail. The report helped us to understand progress and current activities in tackling homelessness, including proactive and preventative measures.

Your report set out how the Council is tackling homelessness, what the key priorities and objectives are through the introduction of a Housing Support Programme Strategy, and achievements. The report also provided an update on what impact the pandemic has had on homelessness and the current challenges that are currently being faced. The report looked at some of the reasons for homelessness and how the levels of demand have increased, particularly around the need for temporary accommodation through the Welsh Government's 'no-one left out approach' and showed some key trends:

- Swansea is currently experiencing the highest number of homelessness presentations, not expected to decrease in the short to medium term, with demand outstripping supply and a lack of suitable / affordable move-on options.
- Demand for social housing has rapidly increased since March 2016.
- Preventing homelessness is becoming more difficult at present due to a lack of permanent accommodation.
- The number of households in temporary accommodation is at the highest level on record.
- People are in temporary accommodation for longer with fewer options to move on.
- The private rented sector is becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate people in.
- Added issues such as the Ukrainian crisis, and current cost of living crisis is causing further pressures on the system.
- The greatest demand is for one bed accommodation.

You were keen to stress that that homelessness has increased across Wales, not just in Swansea, and referred to the Council's 'Always a Bed' pledge for anyone that needs one. We echoed your thanks to both Council staff and external partners who are working flat out to help people at their time of need, noting that much has been achieved in tackling homelessness, despite the challenging environment. This included:

- Since March 2020, moving 1,100 households from temporary accommodation into more suitable accommodation.
- Increasing permanent and temporary accommodation stock, including self-contained accommodation for both single persons and families. For example, the development of Bryn House, a new build site which combined 4 permanent flats with 4 'pods' used to provide temporary accommodation as an alternative to bed and breakfast.
- Increasing capacity at Ty Tom Jones – a model to move people out of homelessness by taking a rapid rehousing approach.

- Reducing evictions, managing issues including rent arrears to sustain tenancies, with targeted support.

The Committee was able to explore priorities / objectives, the delivery of this work and provide challenge on actions and performance, as well as future thinking. 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 - key issues are summarised below.

Homelessness Strategy

We noted that the Council's Homelessness Strategy, previously discussed by the Committee, has been incorporated within a new [Housing Support Programme Strategy and Action Plan](#) which sets out the single, strategic direction of the Local Authority for homelessness prevention and housing related support services for the next four years (2022 – 2026). It identifies that it's not just a Housing issue but one that requires a range of statutory partners, such as the Health Board, Social Care, Probation as well as and other third sector and not-for-profit organisations including Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), to cooperate to provide treatment and support for the most vulnerable people who are homeless to access and maintain a stable home.

We asked whether there been any revision to previously stated homelessness priorities in the new Strategy and/or refocussing considering experience over the year or so. We heard that the objectives have been carried forward but with an increased focus on rapid rehousing and increasing the number of properties.

In the previous Homelessness Strategy, you set out a number of areas for development, specifically: simplifying access to refuge accommodation and providing temporary supported accommodation for households experiencing domestic abuse; better working with the RSL sector; and improving outcomes for households with complex needs including mental health and learning disabilities. We asked about progress made with such issues. We noted that access to refuge accommodation remains difficult, essentially a 'one in / one out' situation at present. We heard praise for the major RSLs operating in Swansea, and their partnership working with the Council, with RSLs taking a flexible approach with how they have allocated properties and been supportive in meeting the increasing need of rising numbers in temporary accommodation. Mental health support also remains a difficult area generally, though improved provision at Ty Tom Jones, on Alexandra Road, with specialist support is making a difference, and increased resources in Housing First.

Causes of Homelessness

You reported that the reasons for homelessness have remained constant and the main reasons why people are homeless are:

- Relationship breakdown with family
- Relationship breakdown with partner (both violent and non-violent)
- Loss of private rented accommodation
- Leaving prison

We noted that more and more landlords are leaving the market and rents are very high, reducing affordable options in the private rented sector, resulting in a sharp rise in the number of people being asked to leave private rented accommodation, and less properties becoming available or having high rents. One of the reasons for the fall in supply may be landlords looking at more lucrative options such as Airbnb / holiday lets. Can you comment on the reasons for the reduction in the supply of affordable housing within the private rented sector?

We talked about ongoing initiatives to deal with the causes of homelessness, including prison leavers. We know there have been projects / schemes to help Councils support prison leavers into housing, but heard this remains a challenge locally, as they are currently not categorised as 'priority need'. You stated, however, there are good links with the Prison and relevant agencies such as Crisis UK to help prison leavers.

We also asked that any help available such as Mortgages Rescue Schemes (or similar in operation) and access to Social Housing Grant, be made more visible to the public as part of proactive efforts to prevent homelessness, particularly as the cost-of-living crisis bites further.

Homeless Presentations

The report provided to the Committee showed the total number of homeless presentations, and the graph clearly showed that it is increasing. In 2021/22, there were over 3,500 presentations compared to under 3,000 in 2011/12. We noted the greater concern that in the present year if the numbers continue to grow at the same rate there is likely to be well over 4,000 presentations. There is no evidence to suggest that the numbers are likely to subside anytime soon, and is being exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis.

We talked about the number of people sleeping rough. Currently the nightly average of people sleeping rough is 9 - approximately half of the rough sleeper numbers between 2017 – 2019. We noted reasons behind why some of those sleeping rough are doing so despite having a tenancy they could return to. It was noted that in recent years a relatively high number of those sleeping rough have come from out of the area, and heard that these cases can be difficult to deal with as there are often limited solutions.

We noted that the Housing First project will continue to be developed with resources being targeted through the Housing Support Grant to increase the number of people with complex needs being supported and housed via Housing First. We heard that currently around 25 people can be supported at any one time, with some resources being targeted at rough sleeping.

We were interested in comparative figures across Local Authorities regarding the numbers of rough sleepers. You undertook to provide relevant data, though indicated that as a city, Swansea and Cardiff will be comparatively higher than rural Council areas, and it should be noted that approaches to tackling homelessness, and facilities available, would vary across different authorities.

Temporary Accommodation

We know that during the pandemic the Welsh Government took a 'no-one left out approach' which meant that the 'priority need test' for homelessness was suspended. This placed enormous pressure on temporary accommodation. As we move out of the pandemic, whilst the 'priority need test' is now starting to be applied again, we heard that there is an expectation for Local Authorities across Wales to continue to support those currently in temporary accommodation until they can secure long term settled accommodation. Should the Welsh Government remove the priority need test it will have a big impact on homelessness numbers.

We noted there are currently 200 households in temporary accommodation, 75% of which are single persons and 25% of which are families. You reported that more families are having had to be placed into B&B and those families are spending a longer period in this form of accommodation. Whilst accepting B&B is there as a temporary solution, it is concerning that numbers are continuing to rise despite increasing the number of family sized temporary accommodation units in the last 2 years. We asked whether this trend likely to be reversed any time soon, as B&B accommodation is wholly unsuitable for children. We were told that B&B is only used as a last resort but in these challenging times use has been necessary, but every effort is made to keep families out of B&B. It was stated that there were only 2 families currently in B&B, both with older children.

Housing for Single Persons

It was noted in the report that there are many single homeless people needing accommodation. You stated that this is the area of greatest demand and being focussed on. We asked how many new 1-bedroom flats / self-contained properties are we building presently and how many have we got 'in stock'. We heard that there are around 1800 1 bed properties in stock, making up 20% of housing stock. The Council has acquired around 99 properties since 2018, 31 of which are 1-bedroom flats, and supply is being increased

further this year, with an additional 9 1-bed flats in the pipeline. We noted that the Council's More Homes Programme includes a percentage of 1-bed units as part of each development – currently 8 to 10 1-bed units within existing schemes, and a further 20 planned across the next 3 developments.

We asked about work being done to bring voids (empty Council properties) back into use. You reported approval of £229,108 funding to deliver kitchen and bathroom works to 34 major void properties which will increase capacity for the in-house team and enable void properties to be prepared for letting more quickly. We asked about the scope to convert properties to provide more single-person accommodation, as well as other investment in property – whether new build or acquisitions - to increase the amount of affordable housing. As part of that we asked whether more could be done given the number of private sector empty properties in the area, lobbying Welsh Government if necessary for more powers and resources, and look at prefabricated home options, if cost effective, which may provide a quicker solution to increasing stock.

We heard that the Council was struggling to keep up with demand but continues to lobby for more resources to help create extra housing capacity, for example from the Welsh Government's Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme launched in May 2022. Funding from this Programme has enabled work on the conversion of Eastside and Penlan District Housing Offices which should result in another 10 1-bed flats.

We noted that the challenge to increase the supply of social housing was a collective one, between Councils and RSLs, and developers and the Council will try to exert as much influence possible to increase affordable housing capacity.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within. Specifically, we would appreciate your response to the following, as described in the letter:

- a) Information on comparative figures across Local Authorities regarding the numbers of rough sleepers
- b) Ensuring that help available such as Mortgage Rescue Schemes (or similar in operation) and access to Social Housing Grant, is made more visible to the public as part of proactive efforts to prevent homelessness, particularly as the cost-of-living crisis bites further; and
- c) Comment on reasons for the reduction in the supply of affordable housing within the private rented sector

Please provide your response to these, and any other comments about our letter by 20 February. 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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