



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

**BY EMAIL**

cc Cabinet Members

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**SPC/2018-19/2**

**11 September 2018**

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 August 2018. It is about Housing, More Homes Delivery / Affordable Housing, Welsh Housing Quality Standard, Homelessness, Green Transport & Green Vehicle Adoption, and Energy.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

### **Cabinet Member Question Session – 13 August**

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 August 2018 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Homes & Energy.

We appreciate you providing a written paper, giving headlines from the portfolio, in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility.

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, share the views of the Committee, and, where necessary, raise any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues discussed are summarised below:

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU**

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## **Housing**

### Housing Options

The Committee asked whether the introduction of universal credit had affected those renting via registered social landlords or the private rented sector. We were interested in finding out, whether there has been any evidence of reluctance from landlords to accept referrals from Housing Options for rehousing. Regarding registered social landlords you confirmed that in the last year no-one had been refused housing due to Universal Credit / Welfare Reform. We heard that there is a good working relationship with partners, with clear processes and protocols in place working together to help tackle homelessness. Since the meeting we have received your written response concerning the experience with the private rented sector.

### Fire Safety

Following up on our discussion last year and the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower, the Committee asked about progress with the installation of sprinkler systems in our existing tower blocks. You confirmed that the sprinkler system retrofit had been finalised in Penlan, with work at Clyne Court in Sketty imminent. We were pleased to hear that 'in-house' staff had been trained resulting in the Authority being able to offer this service to private / external developers. Thank you for providing us with the up-to-date timetable for this programme of works, as requested.

With regard to external cladding, you assured us that rigorous external cladding safety testing had been carried out together with communal door and flat entrance door fire safety testing – all had passed with flying colours.

### Housing Commissioning Review

Thank you for sharing a copy of the scoping document for the planned Housing Commissioning Review. We heard that the Commissioning Review would encompass all housing services (including District Housing Offices) to determine the future shape and delivery of a modern and sustainable housing service. You invited comments about the scoping document following the meeting. I am sure individual committee members will provide any thoughts to you. Thank you for providing us with an outline timeline for the Commissioning Review. Councillors will be keen to know about opportunities for engagement in this Review.

## **More Homes Delivery / Affordable Housing**

You highlighted progress made with the delivery of the More Homes project, with the first homes opened at Colliers Way and preparations underway at Parc Yr Helyg.

We noted that in addition to the construction of new homes, the strategy also included the acquisition of existing properties in order to increase the supply of affordable homes. There was a discussion around the meaning of the term 'affordable housing' and achievability. We acknowledged there are many forms of affordable housing e.g. council houses, purchase via shared ownership, low rent or purchase price under market value, etc.

You told us that the Council is also working with partners and the private sector in order to increase the supply of affordable homes, and that following a Land Valuation and Viability Study, a number of sites for partnership development have been identified. You acknowledged comments that were made to you about the need for more affordable homes in other areas of Swansea, such as the North and West of Swansea, including Gower, not just the Eastside. You responded that all Housing Revenue Account land was on the table for development, taking into account Housing Needs Assessments, and subject to the Local Development Plan.

We asked about plans for Tudno Place & Heol Emrys, Penlan. You reported that consultants will be procured in the next six months to develop a masterplan for the area and that a consultation process with local residents was underway about the future of this estate. You indicated that all options for improvement were on the table, including the possibility of demolition and new build instead of refurbishment, however it was still very early in the process. You confirmed that tenants and ward members would be engaged in the consultation.

We noted that under the Welsh Government Houses into Homes and National Home Improvement Loans schemes, 49 empty properties had been brought back into use, creating an additional 85 units of accommodation. Furthermore, you stated that many empty Council owned homes had been brought up to Welsh Housing Quality Standard. We wanted to know the extent to which there were such empty properties in the private sector and how many empty properties remained – we can confirm receipt of your response following the meeting which was emailed to us.

### **Welsh Housing Quality Standard**

We were interested in the authority's progress in achieving the Welsh Government's target standard for social housing by 2020. You highlighted that there has been considerable work to improve our Council homes and that the Capital Programme delivered £47m of investment in 2017/18. We are aware that a review of Swansea's delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard has been undertaken by the Wales Audit Office and we look forward to its findings.

## **Homelessness**

You informed the Committee of the decision-making timetable for the Homelessness Strategy. We noted that it would be going to Cabinet for decision on 15 November (and to Council for information in December) and would be available for pre-decision scrutiny. We are pleased to hear that the review of the Strategy has taken into consideration feedback from the recent Scrutiny Working Group meetings in May / June.

We noted that public consultation on the Strategy will take place during September. The Committee is keen to discuss the Homelessness Strategy at the earliest opportunity and would appreciate your assistance to ensure our input in the process can be more meaningful. We will be in touch with you to discuss arrangements for further scrutiny.

## **Green Transport and Green Vehicle Adoption**

You highlighted that the development of a Green Fleet Policy was on your agenda for the next 12 months. It was important to you to improve air quality in Swansea through efforts such as increasing the number of zero carbon emission vehicles, and improving the infrastructure across the region (e.g. network of charging stations) in order to promote and encourage public use of electric and hydrogen vehicles and increase consumer confidence.

You stated there were now dedicated resources in place to take forward this work at a faster pace, and explore all green transport options, and were working in collaboration with Swansea University and other partners. We heard that the possibility of retro-fitting hydrogen cells in some of our fleet vehicles, such as our refuse vehicles, was being explored to further improve the corporate fleet and improve air quality.

## **Energy**

### **Energy Services Company (ESCO)**

You highlighted the proposed creation by the Council of a local energy services company to address the challenge of high gas and electric charges faced by Swansea residents and businesses, and tackle fuel poverty. You reported that the outcome of a feasibility study and public consultation will determine whether the venture goes ahead. You stated that early indications from consultation were positive. We asked about energy sources, and whether they would be fully renewable energy. We heard that the company might have to commence with fossil fuels with a view to moving to renewable, e.g. solar / wind or a mixture of fossil and renewable energy. You stressed that any decision to move forward would have to be based on a robust business case.

### Homes as Power Stations (City Deal project)

We discussed the Homes as Power Stations project, which aims to provide affordable, sustainable and energy efficient homes, through both building new homes and retrofitting existing homes with new technologies. We noted this would enable buildings to generate, store and release energy, and that this project will result in lower energy costs to householders, reduce energy demands from the grid and help tackle fuel poverty. We noted that private homes would be eligible to benefit.

We were particularly interested in the statement in your written report which told us that the project will make a difference to local businesses by kick starting a construction programme worth over £½ billion for an overall City Deal investment of £15 million (3% of the total programme value). It was not clear to us exactly how that figure has been arrived at and would appreciate some clarification.

There was discussion about energy sourcing and you stated that partnership discussions were ongoing with Swansea University in relation to photovoltaic systems and other systems / innovations, including ground source heating.

### Swansea Community Energy & Enterprise Scheme (SCEES)

We asked you about the Swansea Community Energy & Enterprise Scheme (SCEES). We understand this is a community-owned renewable energy company, initially established by the Council but now run independently by a group of local directors including yourself, to deliver community projects such as installing solar PV panels on schools. The Committee has observed that the Council's accounts show a purchase of 100,000 shares of SCEES and we asked about the purpose of this share purchase. You confirmed this was an investment in the Scheme, to help develop the Scheme, and would be repaid with interest.

### **Your Response**

In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. Thank you for providing a swift response to outstanding issues identified at the meeting, ahead of our letter to you. There is just one outstanding matter which we would like you to write to us about: Clarification about the figures quoted regarding the impact of the Homes as Power Stations City Deal Project.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 2 October. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and invite you to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Hennegan', written in a cursive style.

**COUNCILLOR TERRY HENNEGAN**

Vice-Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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