



**To:**  
**Cllr Andrew Stevens**  
**Cabinet Member for Business**  
**Improvement and Performance**

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**Overview & Scrutiny**

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**8<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

**BY EMAIL**

**Summary:** This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Business Improvement and Performance. The letter concerns the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and the Q1 Performance Monitoring Report 2020/21

Dear Councillor Stevens,

On the 20<sup>th</sup> January, the Panel met to discuss the Q1 Performance Monitoring Report 2020/21. The Panel are grateful to Richard Rowlands, Corporate Performance Manager, for attending to present the report. We also thank Adam Hill, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Resources for attendance at this meeting.

The Panel heard that Paragraph 2.1-2.6 (P61) of the report sets out the context and highlights the unprecedented nature of the pandemic and its impact. It was noted that the report itself is later than usual, due to suspension of reporting during March/June as focus and diversion of resources went elsewhere during the pandemic response.

Officers explained to the Panel that such reporting has again been suspended under the latest wave of the pandemic, and the subsequent pressures on staff and officer resources. The Panel understand that this is likely to be the only performance report this year, and, similarly, no targets have been set for 2020/21 due to the uncertainty of the pandemic situation.

The Panel heard, as reported on Page 72, a summary of the impact of the pandemic on safeguarding. The chart showed 52% of indicators improved or stayed the same as the comparable period last year.

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU**

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Officers explained that, as shown on Page 74 (AS11) more adults aged over 65 received support. This demonstrated an increase of 77% compared to the same period last year. Notable also was the increase in looked after children (Page 80, indicator CFS2).

The Panel heard that there had been fewer assessments of children completed within statutory guidelines, due to the impact on social services not being able to meet with families and complete assessments (Page 85, measure 24).

It was explained that Education remains a key priority. The Panel expressly noted the exceptional efforts of school/education staff, commenting that many schools remained open during difficult periods, and that the work done by all staff has been truly extraordinary. The Panel wished to express their admiration and respect for this continued hard work.

The Panel heard that under Economy and Infrastructure (Page 96) the majority of indicators improved or stayed the same as compared to the equivalent period last year.

The Panel discussed Page 99 (EP28) and that the (performance) percentage of planning applications had fallen by nearly 13% due to the impact of the pandemic. The Panel queried EC2, planning applications approval, and whether this was the correct context in which to report. Members raised concerns over reporting data from this perspective as it seemed that performance is being measured against the number of positive approvals. Members queried whether applications that were turned down would reflect negatively on the performance data. It was noted this data applied only in the context of planning applications with a major economic imperative.

Members heard that there had been an increase in longer processing times for Council Tax reduction claims and new housing benefit claims (Page 102/3), claims having increased as a consequence of the lockdown.

Officers explained how the report reflected changes in how the Council was responding to online requests. Page 108 (CUST2a) reported an 8% reduction in online payments and (CUST2b) shows large increases in the use of online processes, such as online recycling requests.

The Leader commented on how Council staff had embraced extra duties whilst maintaining high standards, helping to deliver services during very difficult times. The Panel also recognise this and are grateful for the continued efforts of staff across a broad range of services.

We note that current performance data will not provide the usual comparisons going forward, due to the continuing pandemic situation. We anticipate that due to the lack of current performance data, there will be no comparable data set for next year's performance indicators to be measured against. This is an issue the Panel will take into account during next year's discussions around this topic.

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter. We

would be grateful if you could please provide a written response to the following by 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021:

- 1) The Panel would like further information on the performance monitoring of major planning applications (with an economic imperative) that are approved. Councillors queried whether this was an appropriate way to measure such performance. We would welcome your views on this indicator and how this service might be better represented.

Yours sincerely,

**Councillor Chris Holley**

**Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel**

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**To:**  
**Cllr Rob Stewart**  
**Cabinet Member for Economy,**  
**Finance and Strategy**

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**8<sup>th</sup> February 2021**

## **BY EMAIL**

**Summary:** This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance and Strategy. The letter concerns the meeting held on 20<sup>th</sup> January 2021 and the Budget proposals and the Q2 Budget Monitoring Report 2020/21

Dear Councillor Stewart,

On the 20<sup>th</sup> January, the Panel met to discuss the Budget proposals and the Q2 Budget Monitoring Report 2020/21. The Panel are grateful for your attendance and input at this meeting. We also thank Ben Smith, Section 151 Officer / Chief Finance Officer, and Adam Hill, Deputy Chief Executive / Director of Resources for their attendance and contributions.

### Budget Proposals

The Panel heard about the new Swansea Achieving Better Together Transformation Strategy and Programme Framework; Members queried this change in strategy. Officers explained that we have come to the end of the 'Sustainable Swansea' programme and we need to adopt a slightly different plan now. We also heard that the new 'General Powers of Competence' will allow us to be ambitious in our strategies, inclusive of all partners and all stakeholders working together for a better Swansea.

It was pleasing to hear that, following the welcome uplift in funding received from the Welsh Government (£13m), it is envisaged that all directorates will receive an overall increase in cash budgets for next year of at least 3%.

The Chief Finance Officer drew the Panel's attention to *Table 1* – Indicative Investment and Savings Requirement for 2021/22 to 2025/26. We heard that *Table 1* has been

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formatted differently to accommodate figures, the focus on what is going in as much as what is going out.

We understand that, for the purposes of planning, assumptions have been made on Council Tax increases of up to 5%, although we heard that no decisions have been made on this yet. It was noted that there is no comprehensive spending review from UK Government, meaning it is difficult to plan accordingly. Officers and Members are keen for this to be refreshed by the Treasury so we can plan with confidence.

Officers explained that the settlement for Swansea of 3.94% is average, noting this as the second best settlement seen in 10 years from Welsh Government, providing for £13m of additional cash into the Council. You also stated that this year's budget is positive, considering the impacts of the pandemic.

It was pleasing to hear your updates on the Capital Programme and the largest ever schools investment. The Panel heard that new improved facilities are being built across the County and this is progressing at speed despite the pandemic.

We queried the planned savings in Social Services and how confident we can be in this forecast. Officers explained that our local response has been to open two additional facilities to expand capacity and recruit new staff. It is expected that the Council recovers the majority of these costs from Welsh Government. You reiterated that Covid-related costs are being kept separate from day to day social care costs, the Council being confident that these savings will be achieved and result in a balanced budget position (Covid-associated costs aside).

We understand that the Council is now pursuing Council Tax arrears, being mindful of the impact of all bills on households. You explained to us that the Council has deliberately not taken action to add further pressure; however, there is also a legal obligation to pursue such arrears. We also heard that a Council Tax shortfall of £4m is anticipated in the current year and the Council is pressing Welsh Government for some reimbursement.

It was explained that the Council is pursuing some recovery of costs from Welsh Government, relating to general income from parking. In *Place* directorate, a gap of up to £10m of income has not been realised. Officers are confident we will receive the majority of this back in recovered funds.

We raised concerns over any contingency plan if we do not recover costs. It was explained that general and earmarked reserves could be called upon, but the Council would be very reluctant not to pursue the full support from Welsh Government initially. Officers seemed confident we will recover these costs and most claims are currently rolling in successfully over a three-month period.

We heard that £100m has been received (Swansea) this year in business grants and reimbursement support. Members queried what Swansea's share of the regional funding is in reality. It was understood that wider budget reports in February will indicate more precise figures and the Panel would like further information on these figures in due course.

The Panel raised concerns over the short-term budget process. Members queried the public consultation process here. It was explained that the process is in line with requirements under public sector consultation and that there will be a general consultation in terms of how people view priorities. There are no new large-scale proposals that are not already in the public domain.

Members raised queries over the figures in *Table 1* relating to pension costs, as nothing is added in for the next two years. The Chief Finance Officer explained about the prudent work of the team and the fantastic investment return performance; subsequently avoiding millions of pounds worth of (cumulative) pressures. It was pleasing to hear that the current valuation certificate assures no increase in costs for 3 years.

#### Q2 Budget Monitoring 2020/21

We heard that the report went to Cabinet in December; a slightly later reporting cycle due to bidding for recovery funding from Welsh Government.

We heard that, as set out in S2.7, monies move back and forth from Welsh Government and not all grants are guaranteed; some money comes in later and subsequently there is an in-built 3-month delay. It was noted that Cardiff University is helping to track movements of monies.

Officers explained that Welsh Government, under devolved powers, has decided to allocate money differently in different areas. Swansea Council has had significant pledges of support. It was heard that this results in the most generous scheme of all four nations in the UK. You highlighted that Swansea Council does not administer all the support; some goes through other avenues, e.g. Business Wales, and that Local Government is only part of the bigger picture.

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the contents of this letter, however, on this occasion, no written response is required.

Yours sincerely,

**Councillor Chris Holley**

**Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel**

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