



**To/  
Councillor Rob Stewart  
Cabinet Member for Economy,  
Finance & Strategy (Leader)**

**BY EMAIL**

cc: Cabinet Members

*Please ask for:  
Gofynnwch am:*

*Direct Line:  
Linell Uniongyrochol:*

*e-Mail  
e-Bost:*

*Our Ref  
Ein Cyf:*

*Your Ref  
Eich Cyf:*

*Date  
Dyddiad:*

Scrutiny

01792 637257

scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

SPC/2019-20/18

28 September 2020

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Leader & Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy following the meeting of the Committee on 25 August 2020. It is about the Council's COVID-19 Recovery Planning, Care Homes, Test, Trace & Protect, City Economy, and Council Finances.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

### **Scrutiny Programme Committee – 25 August**

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 25 August 2020 to update us and answer questions about the Council's COVID-19 recovery planning. We thank the Chief Executive for leading the presentation of information and the Director of Place, and Deputy Chief Finance Officer for their contribution to the discussion.

Following on from our discussion in July, we wanted to know more detail about the Council's recovery plans, e.g. the different recovery themes and priorities, status / progress in relation to activity in each area, and current challenges.

This letter reflects on what we learnt from the discussion, shares the views of the Committee, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU**  
**SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE**  
GUILDHALL, SWANSEA, SA1 4PE / NEUADD Y DDINAS, ABERTAWE, SA1 4PE  
[www.swansea.gov.uk](http://www.swansea.gov.uk) / [www.abertawe.gov.uk](http://www.abertawe.gov.uk)

I dderbyn yr wybodaeth hon mewn fformat arall neu yn Gymraeg, cysylltwch â'r person uchod  
To receive this information in alternative format, or in Welsh please contact the above

## Recovery Planning

The Committee was informed that the Council's recovery plan is developing further with three distinct phases to it, each with a projected timeline:

- **Phase 1 - Remobilise** (short term – 4 months up to the end of Oct): restarting and adapting a wide range of Council Services.

This is about recommencing services and a return to business as usual where possible, and reassessment of current year budget. We noted that most services are operating, albeit under different circumstances (including remote working), with the exception of libraries and cultural services, sports and recreation and events. We noted that the experience of remote working, including feedback from staff, will inform future working.

- **Phase 2 - Reshape** (medium term – up to May 2022): a strategic response to support the city to emerge and grow from the crisis.

This is focussing on the financial impact of COVID and responding to the economic crisis, renewing our medium term financial plan. It is also about the future Council services operating model.

- **Phase 3 - Regenerate** (long term – after May 2022): longer term City and County regeneration and development strategy.

This is looking at a new Corporate Plan, revised Capital Programme Strategy, revised Business & Economic Development Strategy, Financial Plan, Workforce Strategy and Digital Strategy.

We noted expectations around Cabinet approving the recovery plan at the end of September / early October, however it was stressed to us that this was still work in progress, and some aspects such as financial implications were awaiting further information. The Plan would have a number of specific work streams flowing from it, with specific activities on Care Services, Education & Learning, Future Workforce, Equalities, Community Support, and the Economy & Environment. These are all areas that no doubt we will discuss in more detail, either in the Committee or in relevant Scrutiny Performance Panels.

We discussed the importance of collaboration with other partners and agencies and attracting investment to support recovery planning, making it easier for people to do business in the city, build back better and return to growth.

We recognised that with the pandemic not over any future spikes locally or second wave will affect the recovery plan and could extend the remobilisation phase. We acknowledged differences in scientific opinion about the outlook. You told us that the collaboration within our health and social care partnership, with Swansea Bay University Health Board, and Neath Port Talbot Council, was excellent, and all were ready to respond quickly to developments. At the time of writing Swansea is now subject to a local lockdown, so a matter of concern for all of us.

As the Council returns to business as usual, including the scaling back of arrangements for emergency food support for vulnerable people, including asylum seekers and refugees, we asked you to consider our ability to support these people and their ongoing needs as the pandemic continues. We wanted to draw attention in particular to asylum seekers as a group in need given issues around access to public funds, access to public transport etc. You recognised the problem and assured the Committee that, as a City of Sanctuary, Swansea would not let these people down, and would work with third sector partners to ensure that support is there for all groups.

### **Care Homes**

We discussed the regional response to COVID-19 focussed on care homes, and were grateful to the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care & Community Health Services and the Director of Social Services for presenting the report, which was commissioned by the West Glamorgan Regional Partnership. They explained the management of COVID-19 in care homes and safeguarding, the challenges (in particular the over reliance on symptomology, discharges from hospital into care homes, and the experience of asymptomatic transmission, in the early period), partnership decision-making based on government advice and guidance, and lessons learned that will help the partnership to deal with any future spikes in cases.

We have asked for figures about the spread of infection in care homes – number of cases and fatalities arising from COVID-19. We understood that various numbers and changes in recording and other variants provide different figures. The Director of Social Services explained some challenges around data including certainty of death because of COVID-19, and actual location of death – care home or hospital. It was indicated to us that there were 60 fatalities overall where there was certainty that they are linked to COVID-19 infection. However, he agreed to provide us with a range of data / statistics (all variety of factors) around the spread of COVID-19 in our care homes and impact / outcomes. We will obtain this from the Director. It was good to hear reassurances on safeguarding that no-one would be discharged to a care home from hospital without a negative COVID-19 test and that there is now routine testing of care home residents and staff, and at the time of our meeting low levels of infection reported.

## **Test, Trace & Protect Service**

We asked about the number of people involved in delivering the service and its effectiveness. You highlighted that arrangements in Wales differed from England, which has seen some criticism of the service there. We noted our service is a collaboration between the Council and public health with currently 4 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Clinical Leads, 12 FTE Contact Tracers, 32 FTE Contact Advisers, 5 FTE Environmental Health Officers. This was fewer staff than originally envisaged due to the relatively low current rates of infection, but ready to respond to any spikes both locally, and across the regions where capacity allows. In terms of measuring success current figures were approximately 90% of contacts traced within 24 hours (exceeding national target), but the number of cases were low. For example, we noted that in August there were 18 positive tests leading to 64 contacts being traced. The Director of People agreed to share with us available data relating to the TTP service, including testing statistics, which we would be happy to receive.

We also asked about local testing capacity and noted testing capacity as 540 per day, with only around 2-3% of actual tests carried out being found to be positive. The talk then was about plenty of capacity but since our meeting there are concerns about the rising rate of infection and it is apparent that testing capacity across the UK is struggling to meet demand. This is of course concerning as we know how critical testing is to limiting spread of the virus, and may impact our own ability to regularly test care home staff and residents and other key workers. An update on the local situation in your reply would be helpful. We raised the importance of clear communications and public awareness of testing and TTP, and processes to check compliance with self-isolation. The Committee was happy to hear indication of a good level of community buy-in to the process. We asked whether the TTP service is notified about those returning to the area from abroad and having to self-isolate.

## **City Economy**

We heard about a renewed vigour across our City Deal partnership to bolster the regional economy, recognising the impacts and challenges on different sectors, which were outlined to us including manufacturing, food, drink, retail and hospitality, tourism / culture and services, which have led to a slowdown in the economy and growth. We noted Council efforts and interventions to help the hospitality sector and schemes to help business, such as grants to improve provision of outdoor space, waiving of licensing fees and fast tracked licences as well as providing advice on re-opening safely. You also highlighted as a success the retention of Debenhams in the city centre, and other action that may have helped others to stay in business. In terms of footfall and commercial / retail recovery, you told the Committee that Swansea was leading the way in Wales outperforming Cardiff and Newport. This means survival for local businesses and job retention. Sadly, some businesses may struggle to recover from the crisis, despite the financial support provided by

government and the Council, with around £85m of business support provided by the Council during the pandemic including grants and rate relief. You felt the overall package of help was closer to £100m.

We noted that regeneration activity, which has not stopped, has become more important than ever. Something that we felt important to the local economy, we asked you about the extent to which local people and firms were employed in the City Centre regeneration, particularly the new arena development, and other projects, and their community benefits. In relation to the arena, we heard that around 40% of the contract value has been awarded to date with financial benefits distributed locally (circa £20m), to other parts of Wales (circa £17m), and outside of Wales (circa £19m). You were confident that further contract awards would see a greater share for local / regional companies. The Director of Place told us that around 50 individuals benefitting from apprenticeship opportunities have gone on to secure employment, and expected more opportunities to be available. The Committee was keen to know more about the geographical distribution of individuals benefitting from the Swansea Central Phase 1 development, through apprenticeships, to see how local the impact has been. The Director undertook to see if a breakdown can be provided to show how close to the development the opportunities have been created. On the Hafod-Morfa Copperworks / Penderyn Distillery project you referred to the appointment of local firm, John Weavers Contractors. In totality, you referred to significant local and regional benefit from the development and regeneration activity and investment, and economic boost to Swansea, through both employment and other spin-offs.

We also asked you about the Council's green infrastructure programme and plans to roll out works to other community areas in Swansea, like the improvements made to the Kingsway. You told us that it was part of Council plans to improve other retail centres through similar approaches, including tree planting etc.

Further to the discussion on regeneration, we know that the pandemic has affected and perhaps made a lasting impact on the way people work, with a rise in home / remote working. This leads to question marks about the future of office accommodation, which is a feature of our regeneration plans, and our reliance on increased footfall in the city centre from office workers, as well as students living there. A reduction in demand for office space and fewer students arriving in the city centre poses a potential risk to our regeneration plans and success, and we felt this needs consideration before the Council commits further. You assured the Committee that Swansea did not have an oversupply of quality office space, unlike other major cities, and were confident of unmet demand. You felt that whilst we may see continuation of remote working, it is likely to be as a part of people's work life not the whole. You stated that less commuting would not take away the demand for office space. Also, you told us the city was building, as part of the Phase 2 of Swansea Central, for the relocation of jobs away from London. You stressed that now was not the time to pause or stop work, to ensure Swansea comes

out of the pandemic in a relatively stronger position. Similarly, you argued that Swansea did not have an oversupply (unlike Cardiff) of purpose built student accommodation, and such developments, all of which represented private investment, were key to controlling HMO numbers. Nevertheless, we asked you to confirm the level of take up of city centre student accommodation, and actual demand, particularly as we suspected that rents would be higher in the city centre. You undertook to find out occupation rates from the private developers and share this information with us once the first term was over.

We also talked about the benefits of 'community hubs' that could incorporate flexible working space for staff, and you mentioned work the Council is already doing on this, including the pilot in Gorseinon incorporating library and housing services under one roof. Some members took the opportunity to ask you about the closure of some District Housing Offices as part of plans to modernise housing services.

### **Council Finances**

We checked with you again on progress in relation to support from the Welsh Government both with financial grants to aid recovery and with the reimbursement of council spending and loss of income. We noted there are also Council Tax arrears that will need following up in due course, which is affecting the budget. You talked about the necessary flexing of the Council budget to manage financial pressures, but spoke confidently about getting most, if not all, monies back regarding additional expenditure associated with COVID, and welcomed recent Welsh Government announcements about additional funding for local government. We noted that the corporate budget monitoring report for the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter would shortly set out the Council's financial position.

We were aware of a number of Councils in England reported to be in financial difficulty and predicted shortfall of funding due to COVID-19. You explained the different funding arrangements and income streams for Welsh Councils compared to England, and assumptions around recompense from the Welsh Government and fair distribution of funding for local government. All signs were positive about Welsh Government support for local councils. You stated that the outlook would be clearer in the Autumn. We look forward to the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review and news about the next budget settlement from the Welsh Government towards the end of this year.

## Your Response

In your response, we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to the following:

- Test, Trace & Protect (TTP) – in light of a rising number of cases, provide us with an update on the situation regarding local testing capacity and the effectiveness of the TTP Service, and confirm whether the TTP service is notified about those returning to the area from abroad and having to self-isolate; and
- Student Accommodation Developments - to confirm the level of take up of new city centre student accommodation.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 19 October. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

We will pick up on progress with recovery plan in due course, and once again the Committee would echo the praise of all our members of staff who have gone above and beyond during the last six months and continue to do so.

Yours sincerely,



**COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK**

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

✉ [cllr.peter.black@swansea.gov.uk](mailto:cllr.peter.black@swansea.gov.uk)