



To:
**Councillor David Hopkins,
Cabinet Member for Corporate
Services and Performance**

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1 July 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services and Performance concerning the meeting held on 11 June 2024 and the Audit Wales Reports Sustainable Development? – making best use of brownfield land and empty buildings and the Use of Performance Information: service user perspectives and outcomes. A response is required by 22 July.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

On the 11 June, the Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel met to discuss the items in this letter. The Panel are grateful to Audit Wales and Council officers for attending to discuss and answer questions.

Audit Wales Report – Sustainable development? – making best use of brownfield land and empty buildings

We note that this is a national report looking at how all Welsh councils are supporting and encouraging repurposing and regeneration of vacant properties and brownfield or previously developed sites into homes. Audit Wales explained their three recommendations for councils and also commented that brownfield development is a complex area. Council officers felt Swansea has been a leader in this area and have an ambitious and proactive approach to delivering regeneration of brownfield sites through cross departmental collaboration.

We asked if any law changes were required to intervene in regenerating brownfield sites. Audit Wales commented that there is a recommendation for Welsh Government to review relevant legislation but have mainly focused the report on where Councils can improve within the current framework.

We suggested the report could have recommended Welsh Government change its guidance on Local Development Plans (LDP) to support the systematic approach suggested in the report. Audit Wales commented that one of their recommendations did request Welsh Government revisit and consider the national picture of brownfield

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sites and also revisiting how they monitor progress against those sites, however whilst we note that Audit Wales cannot influence planning legislation, we felt that this specifically would be considered statutory guidance. We asked if Audit Wales had considered recommending that Welsh Government have their own company to build houses which provides training and apprenticeship opportunities however for Audit Wales this would be considered as influencing policy.

We raised concerns on the issues of bringing privately owned brownfield sites back into use and the additional costs compared to greenfield sites which can deter developers. We remain sceptical that brownfield sites would be chosen over greenfield sites. Council officers stated that there are processes in place and detailed analysis that identifies and weighs up site viability of each individual site and that there is still a need for greenfield sites. We asked if the Council had systems in place to maximise funding as this would be essential to for brownfield development. Officers said that systems are in place in the Council to maximise access to funding.

We noted that Swansea Council have a good record of regenerating brownfield sites, particularly the Penderyn Distillery, the Palace Theatre and the Albert Hall which have all been assisted by grant funding. We would have liked to have seen the audit report discuss additional costs, for instance if an archaeological discovery is made and how those are mitigated. Whilst councillors are encouraged to be part of the LDP process we felt a more proactive approach to councillor involvement could be taken by the Council and recommend that they approach and involve local councillors when identifying brownfield sites within wards.

Audit Wales Report - Use of Performance Information: service user perspectives and outcomes

We note that this report relates to how the Council uses performance information, understands the views of service users, the outcomes of the Council's activities and what information is shared with senior leaders to help them understand service user perspective. Audit Wales officers also reported that a national summary report of all 22 councils is to be published in July. Council officers stated that they have welcomed the report and consequently carried out a recent resident survey, are participating in a WLGA organised national resident survey and have included more qualitative information to supplement the quantitative measures.

We asked for more information on why Audit Wales felt information provided to senior leaders was "limited". We heard that the report was a summary and did not give the evidence behind this, however they did comment on examples in the Council where collected information was not always reaching senior leaders.

We felt that without consistency of performance measures, comparing data over time is much more difficult and would prefer making to changes measures less frequently. We also referenced the work of scrutiny within the area of performance which was not noted in the Audit Wales report.

Your Response

We welcome your comments on any of the issues and recommendations and request further information relating to brownfield sites via a formal response to be received by 22 July:

- More information on the processes and detailed analysis that identifies and weighs up site viability of each individual site.
- Details of the viable brownfield sites that have been identified to date, for future inclusion in the LDP.

Yours sincerely,



Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement, Regeneration and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

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