



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Service
Transformation (Deputy Leader)**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2024-25/3

24 October 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 17 September 2024. It is about the Council's work to tackle Homelessness. A formal written response is not required.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Scrutiny of Homelessness

We are writing to you following our recent Scrutiny session, which focussed on a specific aspect of your Cabinet portfolio responsibilities, namely Homelessness. This has been an area of Committee interest over the past few years, and follows on from our meeting on this topic in December 2022.

We thank you for attending the meeting, which I chaired on this occasion, and providing a further written report updating the Committee on the Council's work in relation to tackling Homelessness. We thank Steve Porter, Operations Manager – Community Housing Services, for his contributions, taking us through the detail, as well as the input of other officers in attendance. The comprehensive report helped us to understand the current situation, including key data on levels of homelessness and trends, current pressures on temporary accommodation, what emergency measures have been introduced and how the Council is looking to tackle these challenges going forward.

The Scrutiny session enabled the Committee to consider the Council's responsibilities, priorities, activities, achievements, impact, and improvement, and provide challenge on actions and performance, as well as helping to inform future thinking.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Your report showed that the number of homelessness presentations has continued to rise with 2023/24 reaching the highest ever levels, with no indication that there will be a marked decrease in the short to medium term. Demand for social housing has rapidly increased. There is a lack of affordable accommodation, and more people are presenting in crisis situations. Emergency measures have enabled the Council to continue to meet its statutory duties, but the rise in homelessness presentations and numbers requiring temporary accommodation is causing huge financial pressures on the Council. This is a situation being faced by Councils across the UK, with some declaring a 'homeless emergency' in their areas.

You highlighted to the Committee that the Council is continuing to work with, and strengthening relationships with, its partners to tackle the current homelessness crisis. We acknowledged that working with Health, Criminal Justice, Registered Social Landlords, private rented sector landlords, the Voluntary Sector and other key partners is essential in the prevention of homelessness.

The Committee wished to thank Officers within the Housing Service for their continued dedication to the service, and partners, working tirelessly to tackle homelessness. We accept that it is a huge challenge to manage the current situation and prevent homelessness, and must be difficult for staff. It was emphasised that tackling homelessness was not just about providing 4 walls and roof but about the wrap around support to help people sustain tenancies.

It was a very valuable and useful Scrutiny session, and 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.

Causes Of Homelessness

You reported that over the last 4 years we have seen a year-on-year increase in the number of presentations, peaking at just under 4,500 in 2023/24 – approx. 50% rise compared to 5 years ago. Although you indicated the main reasons for people presenting as homeless, we were curious about the figures for homeless presentations by specific reason. You did not have this breakdown to hand but said that quarterly reports were submitted by the Council to the Welsh Government with all the details. It was noted that these figures, in terms of breakdown by reason, have not changed significantly. However, your report did state that over the last 2 years there have been considerable increases in two areas, those leaving prison and those being granted refugee status. We can see that there is detailed information published by the Welsh Government on the StatsWales website:

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Housing/Homelessness/Statutory-Homelessness-Prevention-and-Relief>

Amongst the main reasons cited why households have presented as homeless includes leaving prison. In light of recent UK government announcements about the temporary prisoner Early Release Scheme (SDS40) to ease the pressure on the prison system, the Committee asked about the impact that this has had, or will have, on homelessness in the local area. We heard that the numbers of offenders leaving prison with no fixed abode has risen and this has been compounded by the Early Release Scheme that the Home Office introduced earlier this year. We were told that the impact has not yet been felt – it was too early to say – but that it was anticipated that the Scheme would have a negative impact on the number of people requiring temporary accommodation in 2024/2025. We heard that the Council was engaged in good communication with the Home Office on this.

Emergency Measures

You reported that due to the unprecedented levels of homelessness that Swansea has faced over the last few years, concerns have grown about the Council's ability to meet its statutory obligations. We noted that in December 2023 a raft of emergency measures were introduced to try and tackle these growing pressures and to try and ensure the Council was able to meet its statutory duties. These measures focussed on prioritising those in temporary accommodation, increasing the number of general need properties into the stock and temporarily redirecting resources into the homeless team to cope with the pressure.

We noted that an increased proportion of allocations to homeless households has impacted applicants and tenants wishing to transfer. Currently almost 80% of allocations are to homeless households. To mitigate this, officers are proactively signposting tenants to the national 'HomeSwapper' Scheme to increase their chance of a transfer and are in liaison with Registered Social Landlords to consider a partnership approach to increasing options for tenant mobility across all 4 social landlords. 'HomeSwapper' we understand is a free service which helps tenants helps people swap homes with other social housing tenants in Wales outside of the housing waiting list (so that it is easier and cheaper) and indirectly may help tackle homelessness.

It is good to hear of the success in moving on over 60 households from temporary accommodation, relating to the Ukrainian Crisis, with credit to the excellent partnership working between the Asylum Seeker & Refugee Team and Housing Options staff. Despite that success, we heard that the challenge remained more generally in so far as it was difficult to re-house any category of individual at the moment.

Temporary Accommodation

We noted that not everyone presenting as homeless ends up being homeless or ending up in temporary accommodation, but numbers of presentations have rapidly increased over a short period of time and there are currently more people in temporary accommodation, with a mix of independent units, supported housing and B&B being utilised. And those in temporary accommodation are there for longer because of a lack of move on options and/or appropriate levels of support available within the system. You reported that numbers are at highest levels on record. Your report stated that currently 50% of our temporary accommodation cohort are made up of ex-offenders and refugees.

We noted that the current use of B&B/Hotel accommodation is very high, despite its unsuitability for most people. Pre-2020 there were around 30 people in B&B, increasing to around 130 by the end of 2022 and at this time there are around 270, with numbers going up. All of this is very expensive. We noted that there has been no additional funding from Welsh Government; this financial burden is being met by the Council. From a Tourism standpoint the lack of available visitor accommodation is also a concern, as there is already a shortage of hotel spaces in Swansea.

We acknowledged that efforts were on-going to explore alternatives to B&B, and that reducing the numbers in B&B was a key priority and the Council was looking at a number of innovative solutions to tackle this. It was highlighted that in November 2023, Cabinet approved the recommendations of a report in respect of an opportunity for Housing Services to develop and operate a City Centre building as a Temporary Supported Accommodation Scheme. The scheme will deliver 68 rooms, all with en-suite bathrooms and communal kitchens, and will be managed by a staff team, providing scheme services, including support to residents, 24/7. Welsh Government funding has been secured to assist with the development of the scheme and ongoing scheme costs will be funded by revenue from rental income. In addition, Housing Support Grant funding has been committed to the scheme for 24/25. Development of the scheme is progressing, and it is anticipated that the scheme will open to residents in 2025.

Despite continued high numbers of households in temporary accommodation you highlighted that families and individuals are moving on into more settled and secure accommodation daily. We can see that the numbers of successful Move-Ons have actually doubled in the last 2 years. You reported that this can largely be attributed to the emergency measures that have been in place for the last 8 months.

Rough Sleeping

You reported that the nightly average of people sleeping rough is currently 9, approximately half of the rough sleeper numbers between 2017 – 2019. Recognising that this is complex area to tackle, it was good to hear that the numbers of rough sleepers has fallen over recent years. We praised the work of the Rough Sleeper Intervention Team and Housing First Team who play a major role in offering support and moving people on to more suitable accommodation as quickly as possible.

We noted that a number of people that are currently sleeping rough do have a tenancy they could return to, and it is also worth noting that in recent years a relatively high number of those sleeping rough have come from out of the area. These cases can be difficult to deal with as there are often limited solutions. Some will be experiencing issues around substance use and co-occurring mental health issues. Some of those sleeping rough in Swansea have come from outside of the area.

Welsh Government White Paper

We know from earlier discussions that the suspension of the 'priority need test' for homelessness during the pandemic has contributed to the rapid increase in homelessness numbers and placed enormous pressure on temporary accommodation. You reported that consultation on Welsh Government's White Paper on ending homelessness has now concluded and responses are currently being considered. It is clear that should the Welsh Government remove the priority need test altogether it will have a big impact on the number of people that need to be supported. We noted that no specific timescales have been given on when this legislation will be implemented but it can be expected by 2026. This in turn will mean that the Council will be unable to make any major changes to the Housing Allocations Policy.

Along with other Local Authorities and RSLs, we noted that there is a very real risk that the proposals will be unachievable without significant financial support from Welsh Government. You reported that a new Housing Allocations Policy will be taken to Cabinet for approval in 2025. Due to the current pressures on homelessness and the need to align with the White Paper proposals, minor amendments only will be made to the current Housing Allocations Policy, rather than introducing a full-scale new Allocations Policy. The new Policy will be compliant with housing legislation whilst ensuring allocations are prioritised to those who are vulnerable and in the most housing need.

It is clear that White Paper will place additional strain on Welsh Local Authorities in meeting statutory duties and we noted that you, as WLGA Spokesperson, were in on-going discussions with Ministers to attempt to shape the legislation in a way that would assist Councils in implementing new requirements.

Council Housing

We recognised the broader problem of the lack of suitable / affordable housing and noted the Council's efforts over a number of years to deliver more Council homes. As well as new builds, we noted there have been a number of acquisitions where properties have been repurposed / converted to provide further housing units to expand Council housing stock, e.g. the former Penlan District Housing Office and former Social Services buildings. Whilst this helps, the pace at which we can create more stock is far behind the demand for social housing and pressure to move people on from temporary accommodation, and lift enough people out of homelessness. We know that the private rented sector has become increasingly difficult to access, not least because of cost.

We asked about Council housing stock and availability of accommodation. We asked about the level of voids. We were told that there were currently 245 'normal' voids. 40 voids were undergoing major refurbishment works. You highlighted that with almost 14,000 properties in total the voids figures were low and the lowest for many years and you stated that the Council had been successful in developing a framework for external contractors and in securing Welsh Government funding that will help.

We discussed housing standards when properties are let, as there were some examples shared by councillors of people being housed with issues around the condition of properties. You assured the Committee that there were minimum standards required prior to letting properties and a process was in place to ensure all properties attained a certain standard prior to letting, and issues with properties are rare.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within, however, we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Yours sincerely,

COUNCILLOR MIKE WHITE

Vice-Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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