



CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA
DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE

**To/
Councillor Robert Francis-Davies
Cabinet Member for Enterprise,
Development & Regeneration**

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SPC/2015-16/10

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*Date
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24 May 2016

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development & Regeneration following the meeting of the Committee on 11 April 2016. It is about Cultural Services, Regeneration, Tourism / Special Events, Licensing and Planning.

Dear Councillor Francis-Davies,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 11 April

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 11 April 2016 answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development & Regeneration. We wanted to explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact, in relation to your areas of responsibility. Thank you for providing a paper that gave us the headlines from this cabinet portfolio. Thank you also for providing a separate report on Planning performance and effectiveness, as requested.

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:

Cultural Services

We acknowledged that as part of the wider Sustainable Swansea Fit for the Future programme, the whole of Cultural Services was taken through a Commissioning Review. Although some areas of efficiencies and in-house transformation have been identified you informed us that this process has resulted in market testing to invite interest from external parties that could sustain services, across the whole of the culture portfolio. Following questions

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you confirmed that this 'Prior Information Notice' also included the libraries service. Since our meeting there appears to be some confusion amongst councillors about this and we would be grateful if you could clarify the position with the library service, as there has to date not been a report to Cabinet on the outcomes from any commissioning review of the library service.

The committee expressed concern about the possible impact of cuts on cultural services such as museums and how the authority's vision and plans would be consistent with national objectives to protect heritage (Well-being of Future Generations Act). You stated that any interest in the culture portfolio would be carefully analysed, assessed and challenged. We suggested that you build in time for scrutiny of any proposed decisions arising from this process, which you appeared to be open to.

We noted that the Glyn Vivian Art Gallery refurbishment was complete however work on the pavements was now underway, with anticipated opening in the autumn.

Regeneration Projects

Vibrant & Viable Places

We asked about plans for the £8.3m Vibrant and Viable Places grant provided by the Welsh Government, and outcomes, including how job creation would be achieved. It was noted that the focus was on regeneration projects and creating the right infrastructure to attract investment and jobs e.g. creation of a technology hubs and office accommodation on the Kingsway. You undertook to provide us with more information on how this grant is being used – a financial breakdown would be helpful.

Wind Street Pedestrianisation

We discussed plans to move towards a more restaurant rather than pub culture, supported by an increase in the number of people living and working in the city centre that you felt should create more vibrancy and a better night time economy. We asked about how realistic these plans were, and whether it would push the 'pub culture' to another part of the centre. The increase in the number of students in Swansea, and impact on the city centre in general, was also discussed.

Mariner Street

You informed the committee that the Mariner Street mixed-use development was expected to go to Planning Committee in May, with the intention to be on site in June and the delivery of student accommodation ready for occupation within two years.

Business Improvement District (BID)

The continuation of the BID following recent renewal ballot was noted. You welcomed this decision and confirmed that you and the Leader would continue to sit on the BID Board, and talked about the benefits from the BID to the city centre and good working relationship with partners.

Tourism / Special Events

Although the quality of road races in Swansea was something to be proud of we asked about opportunities to expand upon running events in Swansea, for example by hosting a marathon. We asked whether any work has been done to look at the feasibility of such a race being delivered here in the future, to showcase our attractive waterfront city.

We also talked about the closure of the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) and need to consider more imaginative ways of providing information to visitors.

Licensing

We referred to the future review of conditions and criteria for taxi licensing and asked you to consider how the image of taxi drivers operating in Swansea could be improved, such as the introduction of a dress code. This is something which has been done in other cities. We noted that this was something which you felt the relevant Cabinet Advisory Committee could look at.

Planning

A request for scrutiny was made to the committee by councillors in relation to concerns about the current planning system and operation of the Planning Committee. We decided that in the first instance it would be helpful for you to bring a report to the committee on this before deciding on any further scrutiny.

Thank you for the report and to Phil Holmes, Head of Economic Regeneration & Planning and Ryan Thomas, Planning Control Manager for their assistance at our meeting.

We acknowledged that the Authority had undergone a significant change process during 2014-2015, partly as a result of budgetary pressures, criticism from Wales Audit Office about planning arrangements, and partly in response to Welsh Government proposals with the Planning (Wales) Act 2015. You told us that the Authority had adopted the Welsh Government good practice model for Committee structure and scheme of delegation.

We noted that performance framework statistics indicated significant progress was being made and showed improvement in the speed and quality of the decision making. We also noted various improvements have been made in efficiencies through the introduction of an electronic document management system, and restructure of planning teams, in response to budget cuts.

The main issues which we wanted to bring to your attention was, that:

- There is concern about the effectiveness of the new Planning Committee structure (introduced by Council in January 2015) and in particular the call-in procedure, which some consider is too onerous.
- Many Councillors are unhappy about the small size of the Committee and feel that they are not involved sufficiently in and lack confidence in, the current process.
- There is also concern at the lack of a review of the current arrangements which councillors have been expecting. Whilst acknowledging the rationale for changes there is a feeling that improvements could be made to current arrangements.

You maintained that it was better to have a small number of skilled councillors on a committee to speed up decision-making and ensure consistency, but that there were ways for other councillors as local members to be engaged in the process, without conflict of interest. We heard that the new pre-application consultation requirements (which come into force on 1 August) would focus on member engagement prior to formal applications being submitted. Further to this we were informed that a new Committee protocol would be presented to the Planning Committee in May for consideration, and further Welsh Government advice was expected which will clarify requirements in relation to issues such as call-in procedures. We noted that the Authority's current performance in relation to member made decisions against officer advice was in line with the Wales average.

You stressed that member engagement in Planning was not dependent on committee membership. Whilst decision making was a matter for the committee, all members have the opportunity to express opinions about applications and engage as they see fit. We did feel that information on important planning matters could be communicated to all councillors, and not just to those on the committee, to promote engagement.

We agreed that any further scrutiny of planning would be considered as part of the Annual Work Planning Conference discussions and a matter for the Committee to agree as it considers the scrutiny work programme for the year ahead.

Your Response

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

- further information in relation to the use of the Vibrant & Viable Places grant;
- scrutiny in relation to decisions on Cultural Services;
- clarification about the status of the Library Service in relation to commissioning review and inclusion in the 'Prior Information Notice';
- the introduction of a minimum standard of dress code for taxi drivers;
- improved communication with all councillors (not just the Planning Committee) on important planning matters, including seminars for all Councillors when new planning regulations are received; and
- you to ensure that a session providing feedback on last year's appeal decisions is arranged for the Planning Committee, to ensure learning from previous decisions.

Please provide your response by 14 June. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

We look forward to meeting you again to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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