



**CITY AND COUNTY OF SWANSEA**  
**DINAS A SIR ABERTAWE**

**To/  
Councillor Andrea Lewis  
Cabinet Member for Next  
Generation Services**

**BY EMAIL**

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Dyddiad:* 09 March 2017

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Next Generation Services following the meeting of the Committee on 13 February 2017. It is about More Council Homes Project, Welsh Housing Quality Standard, Corporate Apprenticeships & Trainees, Housing Voids, Disabled Facility Grants and Gypsy Traveller Site Provision.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

**Cabinet Member Question Session – 13 February**

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 February 2017 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Next Generation Services.

We wanted to explore priorities, actions, achievements and impact, in relation to your areas of responsibility. Thank you for providing a written paper, that gave some headlines from the cabinet portfolio, in support of your appearance.

Things you highlighted to the committee included developments in relation to:

- The More Council Homes Project and Progress – you referred to the upcoming viability study of housing land in the council's ownership that will help inform decisions on the number of units and delivery of further affordable housing. You talked about the need to procure a development partner to extend house building plans beyond the pilot projects.
- Progress and improvements in relation to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard Programme.

**OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU**

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- Commercial Services and their importance in supporting staff and departments in relation to income generation and efficiencies.
- Corporate Building and Property Services and your involvement in the Education Capital Programme.

These topics provided the focus for our meeting. 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:

### **More Council Homes Project**

We noted progress in relation to the first development at Milford Way. You confirmed that, despite some poor weather, all the foundations had been laid for housing units at the site and work had started on the construction on the first set of houses. You were pleased that this involved apprentices on site which is helping to develop local employment skills. We heard that the first key handover was anticipated to be in May 2017, and completion of the site by September.

We wanted you to confirm the costs involved in this project as ‘house builder’, in particular the unit costs per house. We understood that this will be the subject of a report to Cabinet in the near future, but would appreciate any information that can be provided to us ahead of that.

We discussed the house building capacity of the Council and the current and future involvement of external organisations. You were clear that the expansion of house building plans beyond the pilot projects was dependent on the procurement of a development partner. We noted that the experience and lessons learnt from the first pilot site will be reviewed to help determine future needs, and that your focus was on getting value for money. You also confirmed that work here is learning from the experiences of other local authorities involved in house building elsewhere, such as Flintshire County Council. Considering practice elsewhere the idea of setting up an arms-length development company was raised by committee members, and you were urged to look into this as part of options for the future.

We also asked about the process for the allocation of new homes. You confirmed that the process would be no different from the existing council housing points based priority waiting list. However you added that the new homes would be built to ‘passivhaus’ standards therefore would require prospective tenants to engage with this and enter into certain agreements if they are to live in this type of property.

## **Welsh Housing Quality Standard**

Thank you for providing us with progress on actions following the recent Scrutiny Working Group which looked at Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) Programme. The Group's recommendation focused in particular on improving engagement with tenants and local ward councillors.

You told us that:

- Councillors are now receiving letters with information on the WHQS programme prior to work commencement in wards and will receive information on the level of WHQS compliance.
- The tenant's handbook has been updated with a section on the WHQS.
- A plan outlining the ways in which we will communicate information relating to major works has been devised and will be implemented during 17/18.
- The tenant's magazine Open House contained a large feature article on WHQS including photos of the completed work and will be reporting the level of WHQS compliance each year.
- The Building Advisory Group which is attended by tenants meets from time to time to discuss capital works.
- The Council public website has been updated and now contains a section on the WHQS as well as the main planned repairs and improvements such as Wind and Weatherproofing, Re-roofing and Kitchen and Bathroom renewal across local areas in Swansea. The website will be reporting the level of WHQS compliance each year.
- The kitchen/ bathroom brochure will be reviewed in 17/18 and photos will be incorporated.
- Photographs of major schemes are taken before work is undertaken and once it is complete.

The committee welcomed these improvements, and committee members reflected on the experience in their local areas.

## **Corporate Apprenticeships & Trainees**

We asked about the apprenticeships offered by the Council and success rate in apprentices going on to become fully qualified / trained tradespeople, and gaining employment.

We heard that all apprentices are taken to full accreditation, of course subject to passing necessary courses, and that there was around a 95% success rate.

You told us that the Corporate Apprentice and Trainee Strategy is looking to extend the Beyond Bricks and Mortar initiative to ensure that members of our community, especially young people, are given opportunities of meaningful training and employment, helping to develop local skills.

## **Housing Voids**

We asked about the current number of void properties. You confirmed there were 242 voids, which you stated was just below target levels. You explained that some of this attributed to works that would usually be carried out whilst empty before letting to new tenants.

## **Disabled Facility Grants**

We referred to our previous meeting with you where we raised some concern about the time taken to deliver disabled facility grants. Your response letter showed that there has been an increase in the average number of days to complete a disabled facility grant between 2014/15 and 2015/16. The committee sought assurance about improving performance and reducing times.

We noted that the increase was in part due to the time taken with assessments by the Occupational Therapy (OT) service. We also noted the decision taken by housing in early 2016 to employ 2.5 OT staff in addition to the OTs based in Social Services which is expected to improve performance in 2016/17 and beyond. We will keep a watching brief on this.

## **Gypsy Traveller Site Provision**

Having completed a review of the gypsy traveller site search process to 2013 and making a number of recommendations to Cabinet on learning points to inform future work, we asked about developments with regard to the accommodation of gypsy travellers, and how the search for additional provision is being taken forward.

You informed the committee that land is allocated in the Deposit Local Development Plan (LDP) for an extension to the existing authorised Ty Gwyn site as well as for the creation of a new site nearby off Pantyblawd Rd. You added that a Flood Consequences Assessment is to be carried out prior to LDP Examination that will look at the flood mitigation measures to demonstrate that it is deliverable. You told us that the gypsy and traveller families have been fully consulted on and responded to the Deposit LDP proposals which will inform future site provision.

## 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 our request for you to:

- provide further information on costs relating to the more homes pilot projects; and
- ensure that the option of establishing an arms-length development company is considered in any further council house building.

Please provide your response by 30 March. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available committee meeting.

We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and hearing about achievements and impact in due course.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Jones

**COUNCILLOR MARY JONES**

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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