



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Housing,
Energy & Building Services**

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2017-18/3

13 September 2017

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Housing, Energy & Building Services following the meeting of the Committee on 14 August 2017. It is about Houses in Multiple Occupation, Homelessness, Anti-Social Behaviour, Council Housing / Building Fire Safety, More Homes Council Housing Building Project, Electric Vehicles, and Green Energy Schemes.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 14 August

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 14 August 2017 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Housing, Energy & Building Services.

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

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:

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Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

We discussed your responsibilities in relation to managing HMOs and recent actions to deal with landlords who fail to comply with regulations.

Thank you for providing a written update on progress and actions on the control of HMOs following the Scrutiny Working Group earlier this year.

We were pleased to see a member of the public attending the committee meeting and taking the opportunity to ask questions. A number of questions were put to you by Mr John Williams, on behalf of residents of Uplands and Brynmill relating to HMO licensing enforcement. He expressed concern about Council inactivity in dealing with breaches of licensing conditions and impact of poor management of HMOs on local residents. You undertook to provide a full written response to Mr Williams, and I am pleased that you have now done so.

We noted that the approach is always to deal with any issues, and engage with landlords and tenants, on an informal basis first, with prosecution being a matter of last resort. We talked about the benefits of obtaining a 'Declaration of Understanding' from licence holders / occupiers in relation to compliance with fire precautions, waste management, anti-social behaviour and management regulations. The recent successful prosecution of a HMO landlord, following serious breaches of regulations and licensing conditions in relation to fire safety, was discussed.

You accepted that there was room for improvement and we heard that you intend to work closely with local members, particularly in the HMO management area, to deal with issues. We noted that since taking on responsibility for HMOs in May your focus has been on the development of Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) in order to help manage / control HMOs numbers. We were aware that the draft SPG presented to the Planning Committee in July was not approved, as members asked for further work to be undertaken, and we asked you to clarify the timetable for a revised SPG to be reported back to the Planning Committee.

We also asked about the Rent Smart Wales service (hosted by Cardiff Council but run in partnership by the 22 Local Authorities in Wales) and queried the impact that this service and approach has had on the department, what additional staff were taken on to deal with it, and when staffing was last reviewed.

Homelessness Strategy

We were interested in progress with the development of a Homelessness Strategy. You explained the process and current position. We understood that public consultation responses had now been received and would be reported to the Poverty Reduction Policy Development & Delivery Committee for

discussion prior to further consultation with other relevant stakeholders. It was noted that Council approval was expected in autumn 2018. The committee requested pre-decision scrutiny on the strategy or earlier engagement to ensure opportunity to influence the draft strategy in good time.

Incidentally, you should be aware that we have agreed to establish a one-off Working Group on Homelessness (likely meeting late 2017) as councillors want to ask questions about the current position, services, and challenges. You will be invited to this meeting in due course.

Neighbourhood Support Units / Anti-Social Behaviour

The committee asked about effectiveness in dealing with anti-social behaviour and challenges. You stated that dealing with anti-social behaviour was one of the policy commitments and that you were reviewing current approaches and practice, particularly in dealing more effectively with issues before they reach an eviction stage. We agreed that prevention is key to avoiding homelessness, but acknowledged the ongoing challenge.

Council Housing / Building Fire Safety

The committee asked about implications / actions taken regarding safety of council housing and buildings following Grenfell Tower fire in London.

We were pleased to hear about the results of recent fire safety testing on cladding used in our high-rise buildings, passing UK Government tests. You told us that the whole fire safety system in place was deemed safe, and exceeded minimum standards. The committee was particularly impressed with the local response in the wake of the fire to provide assurance to residents, and credit to you for the handling of this matter and the officers involved in this effort.

We noted that sprinkler installation would also begin at the Council's high-rise blocks of flats in November, with priority given to blocks of flats which have had exterior cladding fitted, and work then continuing on a phased basis over the following months to install in all high-rise blocks. You confirmed that sprinklers are now also required to be included in any new builds.

Committee members were concerned about ensuring tenant awareness of the operation of a sprinkler system so that they are prepared for it. We also suggested the need for clarity about the position with insurance and liabilities, should there be any damage caused by malfunction. We asked you to look into engaging all councillors about the system for their awareness and welcomed any possibility of a demonstration of the system to councillors.

We asked for clarification about the possible issue / use of fire blankets in the Council's high-rise buildings for use by residents in small fire emergencies in their flats. You confirmed that these would not be issued to tenants due to advice from the Fire Service, and other issues around access, usage and maintenance. The advice to residents was to turn off the relevant source, e.g. hob and evacuate the property, and not to tackle the fire themselves which could put people at more risk.

More Homes Council House Building Project

Further to previous discussions about the development at Milford Way you told us that things were progressing well. It was clear that you were extremely proud of the project and you praised the work carried out by Corporate Building Services in delivering this.

We heard that properties would be allocated at the end of October in accordance with the housing waiting list. We again asked about costs, information which we keenly await, and were told that a report to Cabinet / Council was imminent.

Electric Vehicles

You mentioned plans to increase the council's electric vehicle fleet, taking it up to 40 vehicles (making it the largest such fleet in Wales), and efforts to promote public usage of electric vehicles.

Committee members felt this probably required an 'all Wales' approach to improve consumer confidence in making the switch to electric vehicles. Much of this will depend on extent and quality of the electric vehicle charging infrastructure. It would be useful to see a list of public charging points in the area, as clearly not everyone has the option to charge from home.

We also talked about the possibility of opening up charging points within the workplace to staff and others, and other solutions such as adapting street lighting columns to provide charging points, as is happening in London.

Green Energy Schemes

We asked for an update on plans for green energy schemes for the Council's housing stock. You told us that all options including biomass technology, in possible collaboration with other nearby Authorities such as Neath Port Talbot / Bridgend Councils, were being considered.

The committee asked about progress on developing a District Heating Scheme. We were told that options were still being considered about the best way to introduce this, taking into account opportunities from city centre redevelopment plans. You added that one of the City Deal projects concerns 'homes as power stations' to enable buildings to generate, store and release energy. You expected that there will be a pilot area within Swansea to develop this.

We noted that the Swansea Bay Tidal Lagoon was listed within your portfolio responsibilities. We asked whether you had any information about the decision-making on this project. You confirmed that a decision on the project was still with the UK Government. We talked about the benefits and the need for a positive outcome.

Your Response

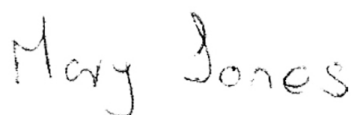
In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- confirm the timetable for a revised SPG in relation to HMOs to be reported back to the Planning Committee;
- tell us about the impact of the Rent Smart Wales service locally, including staffing;
- include a scrutiny stage within the process of developing a new Homelessness Strategy;
- consider our views about the installation of sprinkler systems (tenant / councillor engagement, and insurance / liability issues); and
- provide a list of public charging points for electric vehicles across Swansea.

Please provide your response by 4 October. 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,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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