



**To/
Councillor David Hopkins
Cabinet Member for Delivery**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 May 2019. It is about Houses in Multiple Occupation, Private Rented Sector Housing, Natural Environment & Biodiversity and Commercial Services.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 13 May

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 May 2019 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Delivery.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your wide-ranging areas of responsibility.

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, and share the views of the Committee, and highlight any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues are summarised below:

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HMOs

The Committee had received concerns from a member of the public about the focus and promotion of Swansea as a student city, the scale of university expansion, and detrimental impact on local communities and families from Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). We raised this with you as you have specific portfolio responsibility for HMOs.

You felt it was important to clarify that HMOs were not exclusively student occupied. We heard about the role you played in terms of licensing and planning process, looking at improving both quality of housing and safety and overall control of HMO levels, working with both landlords and tenants. You argued that there needed to be strategic focus on better accommodation and accessibility rather than on student numbers.

You highlighted the work of the Student Liaison Forum, which involved multi-agency working to discuss and help resolve any issues particular to students, including those that stem from accommodation such as noise / behaviour and waste management. You stated you would keep the issue in focus and stressed the need to integrate students into the city and felt that a lot of proactive work had taken place to improve the situation over a number of years. You added that Swansea would always be a welcoming city and should give our graduates reasons why they should remain in Swansea to work, not leave.

We were also able to hear from Councillor Francis-Davies at this meeting, whose responsibilities involved close working with universities. He pointed out that the increase in new developments of student accommodation in the city were needed and were all being delivered by the private sector, helping the local economy and would increase the vibrancy of the city centre, particular areas such as the top end of High Street. He also felt that Swansea was lucky to have two growing universities.

Private Rented Sector Housing

We were asked by a councillor to raise with you issues around the quality of private rented sector housing, in particular housing for refugees and asylum seekers, and the Council's efforts and its contact with landlords to ensure that all vulnerable tenants have at the very least dry, clean and mould free homes.

We had some information provided to us in advance of the meeting around the relationship between the Council and Home Office, and its contracted partner which provides and manages the temporary accommodation for asylum seekers across Wales. We were told that there are regular review, consultation and liaison meetings between all parties and this would include issues around property condition, and any such properties can be subject to local authority enforcement action as appropriate.

You pointed out difficulties that local councils have generally in tackling issues within the private rented sector but pledged to respond to any specific issues if councillors wished to raise them with you directly.

Natural Environment & Biodiversity

We noted that portfolio responsibility for Biodiversity is now with you – previously being under Cllr Mark Thomas' portfolio. We referred to the recent scrutiny inquiry into the Natural Environment, presented to Cabinet in March, which you would need to respond to. We are pleased to see that Cabinet is discussing the response on 18 July.

We referred to the Council's decision to designate maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity as a priority, and corporate well-being objective. We asked about the impact on, and how this would integrate with, Council planning policy. We also asked about resources available to ensure that planning conditions for environmental protection and enhancement with regard to site development are in place, sufficient, and enforced.

You stressed the commitment to the environment and told the Committee that you would continue the good work overseen by your cabinet colleague, Cllr Mark Thomas. On the specific questions raised, you undertook to provide a response in writing.

At the time of our meeting in May some members raised issue concerning tree removal along Orchard Street, something which had prompted a public petition of objection. We were unclear as to the reasons behind the tree removal, something which you promised to look into, however we can see there has been communication with residents over the plans, all part of improving the city centre green artery along the Kingsway and Orchard Street, with 170 new trees being planted. We understand that tree felling is about removing those which are unhealthy or where heaving roots are causing problems by cracking-up pavements or underground infrastructure. Some that have outgrown the location in which they were planted would also need to be replaced. There has been some concerns the tree removal was linked to the installation of 5G infrastructure but we understand this has been denied.

Commercial Services

We followed up on an issue raised with you during last year's Q & A session, concerning plans for the Mansion House. You reported back in June 2018 that:

- major works were foreseen at the Mansion House in order to turn it into a venue appropriate for commercial use, but that investment would need to be led by the private sector

- a tender process would allow the Council to verify what working with a partner could achieve before any final decisions are made, including business plan, costs and benefits.

You admitted that very little progress has been made, adding that preliminary discussion about private investment suggested that the costs of improvement works necessary may be prohibitive. However, you felt that efforts should continue this year to move things forward, so that the most can be made of the venue, as currently it was not fit (building condition and access) to be let for private use. It would be helpful if you could keep the Committee updated about this.

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 respond to:

- our questions about the relationship between the Council's commitment to natural resources and biodiversity and Council planning policy, and resources to ensure environmental protection and enhancement and enforcement of planning conditions; and
- our interest in any developments with the Mansion House.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 1 August. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

The next Q & A session with you is scheduled for 11 May 2020. We looking forward to following up on portfolio developments then.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Jones

COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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