



To:
Councillor Rob Stewart
Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member
for Economy and Strategy

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Date 08 October 2019
Dyddiad:

Summary: This is a letter from the Brexit Working Group to the Cabinet Member for Economy and Strategy following the meeting of the Working Group on 23 September 2019. It is about the Council's preparations for Brexit.

Dear Cllr Stewart

The Brexit Scrutiny Working Group met on 23 September 2019 to enable discussion and questions about Council preparedness for Brexit and resilience; how this is being discussed; what plans/contingencies are being put in place given possible impact, and relationship with Wales/UK Government etc. This letter provides you with feedback from that meeting.

We would like to thank you, Adam Hill and relevant officers for attending to present the report and answer questions. We appreciate your engagement and input.

Whilst the Working Group found the meeting informative and interesting, it did have some concerns and we would like to make the following comments.

- You informed us that with so much uncertainty, Swansea Council is as prepared as it can be and appears to have prepared more than any other Welsh Council. However, we have never experienced a 'no deal' Brexit in our lifetime and there is concern the Authority will not be able to cope if everything happens at once.
- We heard that the UK was expecting to leave the EU initially in March 2019 and the Authority prepared for that. We were concerned to hear that there are other issues to consider with a proposed Autumn Brexit compared to a Spring Brexit, for example, the farming calendar, the lead up to Christmas and Winter.
- We were informed that communication is very important. There is a need to ensure the public do not panic buy and stockpile (food, fuel, medicines).

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- We were concerned to hear that some groups may use Brexit as a means to promote their own issues and cause unrest.
- We heard that poverty, as a consequence of Brexit, is a major concern of the Authority.
- We discussed how Brexit could bring some advantages to the area in the future and there are opportunities we need to promote with local people and businesses. The port could be used to bring in food supplies as it was in the past. There is also an opportunity to promote 'buy local'.
- We commented that not everyone has access to a computer and the Council website to obtain information on Brexit. We were informed that members of the public who contact the Authority will be signposted to the right person to deal with their issue. Also many issues caused by Brexit will come to the Authority through the normal channels.
- We heard that small businesses are being helped to prepare by BID, which is supporting town centre businesses. The Chamber of Commerce is also helping to make businesses aware and the UK and Welsh Government websites have lots of information on how businesses should prepare. We also heard that businesses have to take some responsibility and do some thinking for themselves.
- We were concerned about fuel supply. We heard that this is a national issue and that the police and national government have contingency plans in place. If there are designated emergency fuel stations, the police and staff at fuel stations themselves would be expected to run them. However, if there is a traffic management issue then the Authority's highways department would get involved.
- We were informed that social media is an issue as no one knows what influence this will have.
- We were informed that £45,000 has been received by the Authority from Welsh Government to assist with planning for Brexit and that this has been used to cover some of the officer's time. We were also informed that you do not know if any more money will be received, but costs are being tracked including officers time. We commented that costs for food, fuel and social care could increase substantially and also need to be tracked.
- We heard that the Authority meets with Welsh Government and the national government on a monthly basis and that the WLGA meets on a monthly basis and the Leader of the Council is the chair of this group. We also heard that the Authority meets internally every two weeks and all information received from a multitude of sources is fed into this meeting. We were pleased to hear that the Authority is confident it is receiving all the information and intelligence that is available on a daily basis.
- We commented that the proposed date for Brexit is 31 October 2019, which is a Thursday and wanted to know if the day makes a difference. We were informed that it does not matter which day it is as the Authority will have its contingency plans in place and, as the date approaches, will meet daily.
- You stated that it is unknown what a further delay to Brexit would mean for preparations, that it depends on how long the delay is and what time of year. The Authority will not be able to continue preparing for this indefinitely as so much officer's time is involved.
- You informed us that it is in the weeks and months after Brexit that the impacts will start to emerge.

- We expressed our concern about university schemes. They attract a high proportion of European Union (EU) students and this would have a huge impact on the economy of Swansea. We heard that Swansea University has undertaken a piece of work to identify where students come from and have tried to mitigate the risks. However, the funding element is a concern, as current funding is only secured until 2022/23.
- We discussed how the EU is responsible for natural environment and habitat directives, which are all part of EU legislation. We heard that this will become part of UK /Welsh law after Brexit but we are concerned that the NE in terms of protections will be impacted and must not be overlooked. We discussed that dealing with the NE is an international issue and in terms of delivery becomes more difficult with Brexit.

Following the meeting, we discussed progress and made the following conclusions:

1. We found the briefing very informative and we are reassured that the Authority has done what it can to prepare for Brexit.
2. We are still concerned about what the Authority will do about any fuel crisis. This would have a huge impact on communities if it goes on for months. Our main concern is about the public being able to access transport for work etc, as well as emergency services. We are aware that there should not be a fuel shortage but if there is panic buying it could cause one.
3. We believe that Brexit could provide opportunities for local farmers and businesses and for the port in Swansea. Even if businesses only plan to use these as a temporary measure, they could decide it is a better alternative. We would like to see the Authority promote these opportunities.
4. We feel there is a need to be very cautious about the language the Authority puts out from forums etc. There is a need to ensure the right messages are getting out and this needs to be very carefully managed.
5. We are pleased that some monies have been received towards preparing from Brexit. However, this is a very small amount and we are concerned about how the Authority will be reimbursed for all the costs of managing and monitoring this. The Authority will need to look into all ways of getting this money back.
6. We would like to see the Authority publicise the good work it is doing in preparing for Brexit. We need to communicate the message that we are as prepared as we can be.
7. We will be recommending to the Scrutiny Programme Committee that a follow up meeting of this working group is held post Brexit.

Your Response

We hope you find this letter useful and informative. We are interested in hearing your thoughts about the issues raised and would ask that you respond to the points in our conclusions by 29 October 2019.

Yours sincerely

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