



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Homes &
Energy**

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 1 August 2019. It is about the Housing Commissioning Review.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Housing Commissioning Review – 1 August

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 1 August 2019 following our request to discuss progress with the Housing Commissioning Review. We appreciate the time given to us by lead officers, taking us through the process, findings to date, and emerging proposals.

We were pleased that you provided a written paper in advance of the meeting and welcomed the presentation, which helped us to get a sound understanding of what this review has been about and the likely future direction of the Housing Services. We realise that there are some big decisions ahead, which we noted would be subject to consultation in due course.

You stressed that the review is about improving and modernising the way the Council delivers the housing service and ensuring it is sustainable for the future. We noted that it was different from other commissioning reviews because it started with the standpoint that the service will stay in-house, as agreed by the Council tenants previously.

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We noted from your report to us, and presentation made by the Head of Service, Mark Wade:

- aims of the review
- service priorities
- stakeholder engagement
- headline review findings
- findings for specific services,
- sustainability of district housing offices
- conclusions; and
- steps that need to be taken to modernise

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, and to give our feedback on the initial findings of the Housing Commissioning Review, highlighting any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues are summarised below:

Sustainability of District Housing Offices (DHOs)

One of the issues that grabbed our attention was hearing that there are proposals to close three DHOs (Penlan, Eastside and West Cross), and possible co-location of another with the Library Service as part of the Services in the Community project.

The Committee was concerned about the impact this may have and asked how you envisaged the reduction of DHO presence would work in practice. You stressed to the Committee that this was not a reduction in service but a measure to help sustain the service to tenants. We heard that Housing Services would continue to be provided from the nearest housing offices, and Neighbourhood officers would make more home and estate visits. You added that housing advice / rent surgeries were proposed for local community buildings, for tenants who may not want a home visit. Tenants would still be able to pay their rent in local post offices, shops displaying the payzone sign, online, over the phone and by direct debit, or by calling into other District Housing Offices or the Civic Centre.

We also felt that the Housing Service needed to embrace mobile technology more. You added that the use of new technologies was being rolled out, e.g. enabling greater mobile / on-line access and more agile working, and officers can go out to tenants when needed, and tenants can pay rent via a number of different ways. We would expect to see an implementation plan for this roll-out.

We also asked you whether the closure of three DHOs would signal further closures down the line, but you were clear that there were no plans to reduce the DHO footprint further. Furthermore, we noted that the Penlan District Office building could still be used for back office purposes / agile working space.

We also asked about the impact on staff from the possible closures and were told that no reduction in staffing was envisaged, however, there may be some change to job roles.

Some concern was raised about the extent of consultation to date with local councillors who may be affected by proposals, and the Head of Service stated he would look into this, and ensure that there is engagement with all relevant councillors.

Impact of Universal Credit

We discussed the impact the introduction of Universal Credit has had on rent arrears and what is being done to address this, including the potential for more work with the Welfare Rights Team. You stated that Universal Credit is a challenge facing the service and impacts on the amount of Housing Revenue Account (HRA) income available to run services and invest in estates.

We noted that there is already a good relationship between Housing and the Welfare Rights Unit and you recognised the need to consider how closer working can be developed further. You stated that Housing do have a small number of rent officers dedicated to deal specifically with rent arrears as a result of Universal Credit, but it does take up a lot of officer time because cases are so complex. We noted that Housing has rolled out training on Universal Credit to all relevant operational officers.

We can see you have already recognised the need to increase resources and reconfigure the Rents Team in order to offer early support to tenants and minimise the overall impact of arrears on the HRA business plan and tenants themselves. We felt that the service had a case to employ more staff to work thorough the issues with tenants. We would expect that one of the outcomes of the Commissioning Review will be a clear strategy for increasing resources aimed at assisting tenants with the transition and reducing rent arrears.

Housing Management Costs

Your report showed that research has been undertaken in order to compare our housing management costs with other local authorities. We noted that comparison was difficult as many services are split across different portfolios, structured differently, have different demand issues, and do not operate a 24/7 landlord presence etc.

You referred to data from 11 stock holding local authorities for 18/19 HRA spend on management costs per property. Although we noted that out of the 11 authorities, Swansea was in the mid-range with an average cost per property of £1,146, the figure seems high. It would be helpful if your report can show a typical breakdown of our figure to help explain the costs involved.

Maintenance of Tenants' Gardens

We picked up on proposed changes in the help available for those that cannot tend their gardens. We noted that because of demand and resources the 'Tend and Mend' Service is only able to achieve one cut per year, instead of three. You reported that consideration is being given to altering existing criteria so that the service would be provided to those aged over 70 or with a qualifying disability, as well as exploring alternatives including a garden tool hire scheme and working with the Local Area Coordinators to identify any opportunities for community run initiatives.

You felt this should ensure the garden cutting scheme can continue to provide a service to those that need it whilst redirecting demand from those tenants who are able to carry out the work themselves or who may have family who can provide assistance.

The experience of Garden Tool Hire in Townhill between the DHO and the community run development trust (a social enterprise) could be explored and expanded to consider how such a model could support wider community needs. These could include garden and household maintenance at low cost, development of apprenticeship opportunities etc.

A suggestion was also made about the potential for gardens that people do not want to tend being made available to the community for community growing or community benefit.

Tenant Consultation and Stakeholder Engagement

We noted that there has already been a range of consultation and engagement activities as part of the Commissioning Review, but that there will be formal consultation with tenants on the review findings and recommendations that will be made to Cabinet later in the year.

We heard that in June, all tenants and leaseholders were invited to provide responses on the proposals to reduce the number of District Housing offices via written feedback slips, online, or by attending events in the local District Housing Offices. Whilst there was some concern by the Committee at the response rate (the number of responses totalled just under 150) we were reassured that more work was planned with tenants. You stressed that the Housing Service does listen and engage with tenants and is always striving to improve the service based on tenant views.

There are numerous references in your report to tenants and service users as customers. We felt it was important to recognise that many service users are our most vulnerable citizens whose only recourse may be to seek shelter from the council or go homeless. As such the term 'customer' may be something of a misnomer to describe the relationship between service users and the Council.

Whilst you stated that the service is always aiming for the highest satisfaction rates we felt that it would help to have clearly defined service user satisfaction rates across the Housing Service. We would encourage the service to be setting minimum targets for 'customer' satisfaction to further develop consultation & engagement and monitoring of performance.

There were some areas where survey respondents have expressed dissatisfaction in their responses. It would be helpful to be able provide breakdown or grouping of the areas of dissatisfaction (these could be service wide trends, attitudes, or discreet elements of the service such as furniture pack delivery) in order to improve reporting of 'customer' satisfaction and transparency. We recognise the vital work carried out by the Housing Service and services provided to some of the most vulnerable in society. We would encourage the service to provide clear evidence that they are aspiring to the highest operational standards, with safeguards and remedial action where standards can be improved.

Housing Application, Assessment and Waiting List

You reported that there is a need to overhaul the housing application, assessment and waiting list process as well as improving the way the customer can access this service including information on properties and estates online. This will help manage customer expectation of realistic housing options/likely waiting times, minimise the time a property remains empty, reduce an officer's time spent making abortive offers due to no contacts and the customer not really wanting the area they originally chose.

We recognised that reviewing this process will be a significant undertaking and noted that a points system would need to continue for those in greatest need, first priority being those presenting as homeless.

Introducing Charges

There was some concern about possible charges outlined in your report:

- Missed furniture pack delivery charge - we heard that you are considering charging for missed furniture pack deliveries for the furnished tenancy scheme, due to a high number of aborted deliveries as the tenant does not turn up at the allocated slot. This has a big impact on the number of deliveries completed in a day and staff time. However, this could be difficult for people who are already on low income and dealing with multiple issues. You explained that there is a high cost to the council of aborted deliveries of furniture pack and therefore a minimal charge could be made in advance, once one pre-arranged delivery has been missed. This should encourage those tenants to be there when the subsequent delivery is made. We were told that this was not about increasing income but encouraging people to be in when the delivery is made.

- TV Licences – you are considering phasing out of paying for TV licences for new sheltered housing tenants and reviewing the scheme for existing tenants. We noted that currently some tenants in sheltered housing do not fit the criterion to receive free TV licences in this accommodation and therefore require one of their own. You felt it was necessary for the Council to consider whether it should stop paying altogether.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any further comments however we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

We intend to carry out pre-decision scrutiny of your final report on the Housing Commissioning Review ahead of reporting to Cabinet, and will follow up on the points raised in this letter. We understand the report is currently scheduled for 21 November. Again, we would appreciate the chance to look at this report at the earliest opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Jones

COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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