



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

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Homes, Energy & Service Transformation following the meeting of the Committee on 18 November 2019. It is about a proposed cabinet decision on Housing Commissioning Review Findings.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Pre-decision Scrutiny of Cabinet Report: Housing Commissioning Review Findings

The Scrutiny Programme Committee met on 18 November to consider the report that you are presenting to Cabinet on 21 November, and give a view on the proposed decision.

We thank you and relevant officers for attending our meeting and engaging with scrutiny councillors on this matter prior to decision-making. We originally met on 1 August to consider progress with the Commissioning Review, emerging findings, and conclusions. Following that meeting we raised with you a number of issues and we heard from you at our meeting this week on developments since then. The Committee was pleased that these issues have been considered, and again shows the value of early scrutiny.

Your cabinet report concerns the need to work differently to deliver modern services, which are sustainable for the future and adapt to meet increasing demands and challenges. This includes customer access and the future of housing offices, ensuring staff have the right tools to carry out their roles in a more agile way, and ultimately delivering a front line housing service valued

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by tenants. We noted that much of the structure of the service has been in place for a number of years and the way in which service users wish to communicate with organisations and businesses is changing whilst at the same time, demands on services continue to increase.

We heard from you about service aims and priorities, and service specific findings and proposed improvements, which focused on:

- Maximising income
- Improving service user telephone and online access
- Improving operational systems / processes
- Reducing the District Housing Office (DHO) footprint from 9 to 6 area offices
- Co-locating 1 DHO within the Library Service in Gorseinon in 2020

You highlighted the intention to make specific improvements in relation to:

- Housing application, assessment and waiting list
- Empty properties / voids / lettings
- Prospective tenants
- Furnished tenancy scheme
- Sheltered service
- Anti-social behaviour
- Neighbourhood Support Unit
- Estate management / gardening scheme

In response to specific questions and issues raised by the Committee, we heard that:

- With regard to the proposed rationalisation of District Housing Offices, offices would only close once new ways of working described in the report were in place, and furthermore the intention is to hold regular 'pop-up' housing advice surgeries in community locations (e.g. community centres) affected by the closure of a DHO, as necessary. The intention is not for tenants to have to travel greater distances to access housing services, but benefit from greater opportunities for 1-2-1 discussion with Housing Officers (who will have the technology to be agile) in their communities, and a better service.
- The intention is to undertake formal consultation with tenants in January 2020 regarding the proposed change to the future model of the District Housing Office service, following this week's Cabinet decision, and to report findings of consultation to Cabinet in April 2020.
- There are plans to increase resources in the Rents Team in order to offer early support to tenants and minimise the impact of arrears on tenants and the Housing Revenue Account. It is clear that the introduction of Universal Credit means the Rents Team faces significant challenges to maximise income, and mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform. We noted that the

Rents Team will be reinforced with officers focussed on early targeted support, including specific provision in respect of welfare benefits.

- Comparison of Housing Management Costs with other Welsh Local Authorities is difficult, however available data shows Swansea is in the mid-range with an average cost per property of £1,146, with approximately 63% of this relating to employee costs. There was a query from the Committee about how each pound paid in rent was used by the Council, and you undertook to respond in writing showing a typical breakdown of where that money goes.
- Because of significant increases in demand affecting service provision, there will be a change in criteria for 'Tend and Mend' service so it will be for those aged over 70 or with a qualifying disability, to ensure the garden cutting scheme can continue to provide a valued service to those that need it the most. We noted that alternatives to direct delivery of garden cutting are also being explored, include a garden tool hire scheme, and working with Local Area Coordinators to identify any opportunities for community run initiatives.
- There will be work to modernise the housing application, assessment and waiting list process, as well as improving the way service users can access this service and information on properties and estates online. This will involve new technology and improving back office processes.
- The introduction of charges will help to maximise income. We discussed specific plans in relation to the furnished tenancy scheme to recoup resources for missed furniture pack deliveries, due to the number of aborted deliveries where the tenant does not turn up at the allocated slot. Your report shows that a charge of £20 re-delivery fee will be applied when the pre-arranged delivery is missed unless due to exceptional circumstances.
- There are no plans to cut the existing Warden Service at Sheltered Housing Complexes. It was clarified that complexes have designated, but not necessarily residential, wardens, and this has been the situation for a number of years to ensure the service is sustainable.
- The Review will put more resources into tackling anti-social behaviour (ASB). A larger ASB Support Team, dealing with high level ASB, would lead to a more consistent, measured and timely approach to effectively deal with ASB. The Committee recognised the challenge and difficulty in dealing with ASB but at the same time doing everything possible to help maintain tenancies to avoid eviction and homelessness, as well as addressing the impact on neighbours in terms of their feelings of well-being, safety and security. The Service will also explore the procurement of a Noise 'app' that will help complainants to provide evidence of noise problems, as a significant amount of ASB incidents are low level noise issues. We were aware that other Councils are already using such an 'app' and could be a 'quick win' for the Service to launch this soon.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomes the direction of travel proposed for the Housing Service, but would raise the following points as a 'critical friend' with Cabinet, which should be taken into account:

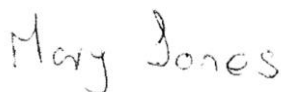
- Whilst the Commissioning Review identifies the changes and improvements necessary the detail about how this will be delivered, in relation to some aspects of the report, is not so clear and would benefit from visibility of an implementation plan. For example, around the move from bricks and mortar DHO Service to a more peripatetic approach by Housing Officers. In addition, it was not clear exactly how the Rents Team would be restructured and how resources would be used. The Committee would suggest that the Team will need specialists with a thorough understanding of the benefits system, which may have training implications for staff. We also felt that timescales for the roll-out of new technology are also needed.
- Whilst the introduction of new technology will help staff to deliver a modern service, Cabinet should not underestimate the investment that may be required to ensure service users can adapt to new ways of working. Levels of ICT literacy may be variable and the Council will need to consider additional support for tenants so they are equipped with necessary skills for increased on-line service.
- The Committee felt the report would have benefited from showing a clearer thread between service user satisfaction feedback and service improvement proposals. Whilst the report indicated levels of satisfaction it also referred to complaints but was not clear what type of issues were subject of complaint. Historical trends in service user feedback could have also been included, to evidence how future decisions are being informed by service user experience. You undertook to provide to us some details about the analysis of service complaints.

Please note that I will be unable to attend Cabinet on 21 November personally but have asked Councillor Chris Holley, who will be present for another item, to feedback the Committee's views as contained in this letter.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would ask you to write back by 11 December to confirm the decision of Cabinet and response to points raised, and provide the information requested in relation to service costs and the use of rents, and analysis of service complaints.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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