



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

**BY EMAIL**

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**Overview & Scrutiny**

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6 January 2020

**Summary:** This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Delivery and Performance. The letter concerns the Wales Audit Office Report and response on the effectiveness of local planning services in Wales and the Planning Annual Performance Report 2018/19.

Dear Councillor Hopkins,

On the 9 December 2019, the Panel met to discuss the Wales Audit Officer Report and Response on the effectiveness of local planning services in Wales and the Planning Annual Performance Report 2018/19. The Panel are grateful to you, Phil Holmes and Ian Davies for attending the meeting to discuss these reports.

**Wales Audit Office Report and response on the effectiveness of local planning services in Wales**

We heard that the Wales Audit Office report draws four main conclusions. Thank you for providing us with the detailed action plan designed to address the issues raised. In summary, you said:

1. Planning Authorities find it challenging to balance competing demands because of the complexities of the planning system  
*Council accepts this.*
2. Insufficient capacity and reducing capacity are eroding planning local authority resilience  
*Council concurs with this Planning has had to live within its means as with every other council department.*
3. Timeliness and quality of decision making varies widely and performance on managing applications is poor  
*Do not agree with this as performance has improved in Swansea and fair well on Welsh Government indicators (it was noted that the Wales Audit Office did not use the WG indicators to assess this)*

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4. Further work is required to deliver the wellbeing aspects of the Planning (Wales) Act and Planning Policy Wales.

*Swansea is ahead of the curve in relation to this because we have recently adopted the Local Development Plan with these aspects incorporated into it.*

We agreed that Audit reports are useful exercises and can assist services by deep diving into certain aspects but we felt that this did not do that on this occasion. We heard that this report was based on a small number of in-depth consultations with some local authorities and then via a questionnaire with the others, including Swansea. We heard that with most Audit reports, the inspectors come back to authorities to discuss the outcomes before they are published. This did not happen with this particular Audit, which we feel was an error, as Planning is a vital part of Council services and consultation prior to publication would benefitted all parties concerned. We did share your view that the Audit Report was not reflective of Planning in Swansea and that it does not show enough technical knowledge to make assessment useful. The Panel would like to see the Welsh Government's response to the report in due course.

In our discussion about the Planning Annual Report, we were pleased to hear that a lot of work is taking place around wellbeing and biodiversity. We took the opportunity to raise the issue of capacity in the Nature Conservation Team and its ability to be able to enforce ecological issues and regulations.

We are interested in any thoughts you may have on the issues contained in this letter but can we please have a formal written response to the following point by 27 January 2020.

1. What is being done in Swansea to ensure there is capacity to regulate and ensure ecological constraints are followed?

Yours sincerely,



**Councillor Chris Holley**  
**Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel**  
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