



**To/
Councillor Rob Stewart
Leader & Cabinet Member for
Economy & Strategy**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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SPC/2019-20/11

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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 January 2020. It is about Brexit, 5G Network Roll Out, Climate Emergency, National Park City Status, Foreshore Sites, Castle Square, Hafod Morfa Copperworks, Felindre Strategic Employment Site, and Student Accommodation.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 13 January

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 January 2020 and answering questions on your work as Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy & Strategy. We also thank the Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Resources, Adam Hill, for his support and contributions to the session.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance at the Committee meeting. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your 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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Brexit

We thanked you for your engagement in the Brexit Scrutiny Working Group held in September about the Council's preparedness, and followed up on that in light of recent developments. We asked you about implications following the General Election result, which has now brought certainty of UK exit from the EU on 31 January 2020 followed by a period of transition to 1 January 2021. There was also concern about the Government's Withdrawal Bill in relation to future environmental agreements and protections, and human rights.

We discussed:

- the current position and impact on the Council
- concern over loss of funding and support to Swansea and the region following exit from the EU – at risk of losing millions of pounds
- the need to ensure a fair share of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and continued uncertainty around funding
- discussions taking place at regional / national level on Brexit preparedness
- continued use and disadvantages of the UK government's five case business model and HM Treasury Green Book
- continued risk of a 'no-deal' Brexit in 2021
- progress on advice to Council employees regarding the EU settlement scheme

You stated that you have asked for a meeting with the Secretary of State for Wales with regard to problems with the HM Treasury Green Book and possible opportunity to revise the rules as it has disadvantaged areas like Swansea and hindered investment bids, for example, due to population numbers.

You provided assurance to the Committee about the Council's workforce, having identified any that may be affected by the EU settlement scheme and being pro-active with employees and their families, to prevent any negative impact.

It was clear that there are many unanswered questions around Brexit and the risk remains that Swansea and the region could suffer disproportionately following Brexit. We asked about opportunities for councillors to review and comment upon government proposals regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund. You undertook to share any such information with councillors, when published, for their awareness and comment.

You added that local government and national government in Wales had a clear set of priorities and demands around Brexit however UK government engagement in negotiating with Wales was not, at this point, clear.

5G Network Roll Out

We had noted from public consultation on the scrutiny work programme last May a number of responses from people with concerns about the roll-out of 5G network, and health concerns about the use of this technology. We took the opportunity to ask you about the Council's plans and position on this.

You acknowledged that there has been a recent increase in the number of public and councillor questions raised around 5G, however stressed that the safety of citizens is always going to be paramount when Swansea Council roll out new technologies and innovations. You referred to advice from Public Health England that there should be no consequences for public health from 5G signals.

You confirmed that Swansea Council has no specific fixed date around the implementation of 5G in Swansea, but highlighted the benefits of a faster and more reliable communications network, something that businesses needed to thrive in the 21st century. This included the potential to provide a new level of underlying connectivity to transform services within our city and help us become a smarter city, attracting jobs and investment, and delivering huge cost and time savings.

You assured the Committee that the Council will continue to work with the UK and the Welsh Governments to investigate the impacts of 5G technology and discuss our findings with all stakeholders, and would be open to further advice about the use of 5G.

There was some debate within the Committee about reported concerns around 5G and the likely proliferation of new 5G masts in residential areas, as the signal will have a limited range.

Climate Emergency

We wanted to know about progress since the Council declaration of a Climate Emergency in June 2019 and actions that will be taken. We underlined the responsibility accepted by the Council and its commitment to what is a challenging but important agenda. We were keen that this results in real action and delivery, and asked you for an update.

You assured the Committee that the declaration was not hollow and that a detailed and meaningful action plan was being developed, with a focus on achievements over the next decade. This would build upon activities and success in relation to developments of a green fleet, street lighting, energy efficient homes, solar panels in Schools, pension divestment in fossil fuel industry, and other Council initiatives.

You stated that you were hoping that current budget deliberations would support the delivery of actions that can be managed effectively. We noted that an action plan would be forthcoming with a clear cross-Council approach.

National Park City Status

Further to a question from the public gallery we asked about the Council's desire to gain National Park City status. We note that this is for urban areas which are connected with nature, e.g. green spaces, clean air, wildlife; with London being the world's first National Park City.

You told the Committee that this remains an aspiration for this Council, consistent with the Corporate Priority on the Natural Environment, Working with Nature Public Services Board objective, and other efforts to increase biodiversity and greening of the city centre. We asked you about the criteria and process involved. Whilst you stated that efforts were at an early stage in terms of understanding what it means, you told us you would share with us the process that you were following.

Foreshore Sites

Further to the Committee's recent consideration of the cabinet report on the possible development at a number of foreshore sites, we asked specifically about future plans for Langland. The Committee raised the issue of whether there was scope for the authority itself to develop the site, as a council regeneration project, rather than look to private development.

You stressed that it was not for the Council to pre-determine any outcomes about the site before inviting interest. In the search for the best all-round development you added that the Council would work with Mumbles Community Council in relation to its desire to develop the tennis courts at Langland.

Castle Square

You were asked about the latest plans for the development of Castle Square, and timescales. You reflected on a great deal of consultation and engagement with the public and stakeholders over recent years about the future of Castle Square, and need to re-purpose and re-invigorate the Square as a destination for visitors, with one or two commercial businesses. At the same time you acknowledged the importance of retaining the Square as a public space, and sought development that would bring back some charm to the Square, remove barriers, and give people a reason to visit. You added that linkage and integration with Wind Street was also important.

You confirmed that feasibility studies have been done and a development partner has been appointed to take development forward. We heard that the aspiration was for a detailed scheme to emerge by the end of 2020.

Hafod Morfa Copperworks

Your report referred to a new masterplan being prepared, refreshed in view of the Skyline project and leisure facility at Kilvey Hill, and river corridor. We were aware of previous masterplan and asked for the new masterplan to be shared. You stated that you expected that it would be ready to share in the coming weeks. We noted that it was anticipated that the works on the Powerhouse will commence in the second quarter of 2020. You mentioned that Skyline would be visiting again in February and that a Skyline board decision to proceed was expected in Quarter 2 of 2020. You were hopeful that a planning application would be submitted this year.

Felindre Strategic Employment Site

The Committee wanted to know about future plans for the Felindre Site and prospects in attracting further investment such as a manufacturing plant.

You mentioned that the French company DPD were now on site and added that uncertainty around Brexit over the last three years has made it difficult to secure manufacturing investment in the area. You confirmed that in conjunction with the Welsh Government the site was being marketed with hopes to secure further businesses. You reflected on the significant infrastructure works already carried out in preparing the Felindre Employment site and desired improvement to traffic and congestion at Motorway junctions 44-47 that would further improve the suitability of Felindre for businesses.

We talked about slow progress at the site and rumours around the site being used for housing given failure to attract businesses, and the fact that a Parkway Station near Felindre was being explored by the Welsh Government.

Student Accommodation

We referred to a reported drop in student number across Wales (2.2%) in 2019 and possible implications for Swansea given the numbers of student accommodation developments in progress in the City Centre, including the Mariner Street scheme. We were concerned about reaching a saturation point and potential for empty buildings.

You spoke about the benefits of such development, reiterating that these were market led private investments, and their positive effect on HMO numbers. There was some debate about this effect as it was felt that student development blocks would likely be more expensive and perhaps less attractive to some students who would prefer to live in a HMO for affordability.

We noted that there would be accommodation for 2000 students in the City centre over the next year, which would contribute to the vibrancy and provide economic boost to the City Centre, and help prevent increasing HMOs in community areas.

Whilst there may be a decline in parts of Wales, you stated that student number in Swansea were climbing though you acknowledged the rate of growth may have slowed down. However, you were confident that there was unmet demand for accommodation and assured the Committee that the situation on Swansea was unlike the issues faced in Cardiff.

There was some debate about affordability of new student accommodation, the impact of students in the City Centre, and contribution to the regeneration of the City Centre.

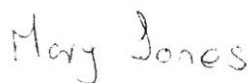
Your Response

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 refer to the following:

- Brexit – ensure that councillors are informed of developments with regard to the Shared Prosperity Fund and of any opportunities to comment on proposals;
- National Park City status – please confirm what process is being followed by the Council; and
- Hafod Morfa Copperworks – please share the new masterplan when available.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 17 February. We will then include both letters in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting. We will arrange to follow up on portfolio developments and invite you to a future Committee meeting in due course.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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