



**To/
Councillor Rob Stewart
Cabinet Member for Economy,
Finance & Strategy (Leader)**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Leader & Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy following the meeting of the Committee on 16 June 2020. It is about the Council response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dear Councillor Stewart,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 16 June

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 16 June 2020 to talk to us and answer questions about the Council response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We also thank the Chief Executive, Director of Place, Chief Finance Officer, and Emergency Planning lead officer for their contributions to the discussion.

There is of course nothing more important right now than this crisis and I felt it important that scrutiny is able to shine a light on the Council's handling of the crisis, the effects of the pandemic locally, and enable our contribution and perspective on the response to be considered.

Furthermore, I hope that, whatever structures are in place to strategically manage the crisis and develop recovery plans, you can integrate scrutiny with this work. We will of course involve ourselves as we see necessary; however welcome pro-active engagement by the management team with scrutiny to help the Council navigate its way forward.

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This letter reflects on what we learnt from the discussion, shares the views of the Committee, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response. As a recording of the meeting is available on-line it is not necessary for me to repeat everything here, but the main issues are summarised below.

The Committee wanted to take an overview of the Council response and was particularly interested in local experience, operational emergency response, decision-making, partnership working, key actions and impact, costs and resource / financial implications, and the outlook and challenges.

It has clearly been a difficult and challenging time for the Council, however we heard from you and officers at the meeting about the various actions taken and activities the Council has been involved in to deal with the effects of COVID-19 in Swansea. We were struck by how the Council has adapted and realigned services and the workforce to focus efforts on helping to save lives, protect and support the most vulnerable in society (including those shielding, people struggling financially, asylum seekers, refugees, and the homeless), and adhere to national restrictions. We were impressed by the work that has been done and placed on record our thanks and appreciation of everyone involved, not least our brilliant staff and those who have volunteered their time in every community.

Some notable findings from the discussion:

- The Spread of COVID-19 - Swansea has seen a lower rate of infection than similar population centres, reaching a peak in mid-April. The Bay Field Hospital has not yet needed to be utilised to treat COVID-19 patients but will be used for antibody testing, and remains available to support NHS capacity. We noted your offer of a visit for committee members to view the hospital. You supported the continued use of the field hospital beyond the initial 12-month period for whatever use required, as additional health capacity, given the investment and semi-permanent structure in place, subject to lease issues that would need to be resolved by the Welsh Government and Health Board.
- Emergency Management Arrangements - there is an Executive Control Group made up of senior Councillors and officers taking strategic decisions that interfaces with Cabinet, Corporate Management Team, and Group Leaders, and a Logistics Command Group overseeing the running of key services (including Social Care, Child Care Hubs, and Community Support), and taking operational decisions. Our local governance arrangements interface with the regional South Wales Local Resilience Forum, as well as with the Local Health Board / Public Health Wales, the Welsh Government and Welsh Local Government Association.
- Council Workforce - the majority of Council officers have been able to work from home, facilitated by the Council's agile working programme. Many officers have been re-deployed or job roles re-purposed in order to support the emergency operational response to COVID-19. The ability to hold remote meetings has been a great benefit. The Council will need to

consider the lessons learnt, positives and negatives, from new working arrangements and review existing home-working / agile-working policies to strengthen and facilitate this way of working where it is possible for staff to work away from the office. This should ensure organisation benefits as well as the health, well-being and safety of our workforce, wherever they work from in the future. We felt that issues around lone working and costs borne by staff from home working would need to be part of future discussion. We noted that there are robust risk assessment processes in place to ensure safe working, particular where members of staff may be returning to the civic offices. Workforce planning, and getting the Council's new approach to home-working right, is something of particular interest to the committee.

- Supporting the Vulnerable - there are well-established support networks for those in need, including food / medicine support and Local Area Coordinator provision extended across the whole of Swansea (using redeployed staff) to support people's health and well-being in this crisis. Reliance on the Council for support may continue or even increase beyond the immediate crisis because of the ending of national government support and the economy. We talked about the importance of support for asylum seekers and refugees, a group who are at particular risk and extremely vulnerable. We queried the predicament of those with 'no recourse to public funds' and access to Council and local support. We also discussed the expansion of social care and the extra efforts that have been made to tackle homelessness, and acknowledged difficulties, despite the availability of housing, in the case of a small number of 'hard to reach' people. We hoped that the Council could find a way to maintain and harness the tremendous number of volunteers that have helped our communities during the crisis and been a great asset.
- Council Finances - the Council's financial position is stable however, there is tight management and continued vigilance whilst the crisis is not over. We noted that the Council was expecting full cost recovery of the emergency build of the field hospital at Bay Studios by the end of June. Council spending on COVID-19 and delivery of national schemes (including business support) is supported by Welsh Government grant funding commitments, with claims being made monthly for reimbursement. We discussed issues around loss of service and tax income. We highlighted the value of tourism on the local economy as an important source of recovery that could be exploited further with the dip in international travel. Whilst there are no immediate concerns, it is too early to provide any long-term assessment about the impact of COVID-19. We will be scrutinising upcoming budget monitoring / outturn reports.
- Test, Trace & Protect Service - in partnership with the Health Board, the Council has established teams of officers, from within existing resources, to deliver the Test, Trace & Protect Service. However, recruitment to the service may become necessary as the programme continues and experiences more demand, and existing staff return to their designated jobs.

- Regeneration - work has continued at pace in the City Centre to drive an optimistic future for the city. The Swansea Bay City Region City Deal Programme is unaffected and remains on track.
- Natural Environment - there have been positive impacts on the natural environment and biodiversity. For example, less air pollution from reduced vehicle emissions / travel, reduced grass cutting / weed control, more active travel such as walking / cycling, increased usage of parks and open spaces, and contact with nature / wildlife, etc. We must learn lessons from the experience. We felt the challenge, as we come out of lockdown, would be to ensure these gains are not lost, and the Council's Climate Change Action Plan, as it is being finalised, should benefit from that experience.
- Recovery Planning - as the spread of the virus is coming under control and lockdown restrictions are beginning to ease, including re-opening of businesses, the Council is recovery planning. There is work in progress around business and the economy, workforce, and community support.

To conclude, the Committee praised the Council's leadership and handling of the crisis to date. However, we are keen for further involvement in the ongoing work, particularly around recovery planning, which we hope to be able to influence. This will be the focus of the next Committee meeting in July, and we have invited you and the Chief Executive to attend. We look forward to meeting you then and getting an update on the situation.

Finally, please note that Scrutiny Performance Panels will also begin to meet again, and I expect that these will take the opportunity to explore in greater depth service-specific matters and issues arising from COVID-19, engaging with the relevant Cabinet Members, Directors / Heads of Service.

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.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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