



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Climate Change
& Service Transformation
BY EMAIL**

cc: Cabinet Members

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Scrutiny

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SPC/2021-22/5

20 October 2021

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 14 September 2021. It is about Energy Policy (including Generation, Supply & District Heating).

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 14 September

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session, which focused on a specific aspect of your wide-ranging cabinet portfolio, namely Energy Policy.

We wanted to gain a greater understanding of what this meant in terms of specific responsibilities, your priorities, resources, performance measures, key headlines / achievements and progress against objectives, and overall assessment (including how we compare with others, challenges / risks) and impact / difference made.

We thank you and officers for attending the meeting and providing a comprehensive report on responsibilities and the Council's work. The Committee was impressed with, and encouraged by, the activities shown in the report. You spoke highly of the efforts of officers not only on energy but also on the wider corporate priorities on climate change and nature, clearly linked. The Committee asked questions in order to explore this work and provide challenge on actions and performance, as well as future thinking.

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This letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee, and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

Energy Policy (including Generation, Supply & District Heating)

Governance – Climate Change Group

Your report referred to the formation of a 'Climate Change Group' to take forward the Climate Change Strategy, within which Energy Strategy is a key component. We asked about the membership of this Group and whether this included councillors, who we thought to be essential participants.

You undertook to provide the Committee with a detailed Climate Change Governance Structure, clarifying that there was an officer-led Climate Change Programme Board, chaired by the Director of Place with officers from across the Council involved, and a councillor-led Climate Change Steering Group, which you chaired and involved cabinet / officer strategic leads.

Gas Supply

We noted that the Council has had a new gas supplier since April 2021, Total Gas & Power, and that the Council has registered interest in purchasing 'Green Gas', dependent on viability and cost impact. We asked for more information about what was meant by 'Green Gas', its difference from natural gas and the extent to which it is being used. It was explained that 'Green Gas' was biomethane produced from the recycling of natural waste, e.g. plant and organic waste. We queried whether its use would help the Council to offset its carbon emissions. Thank you for providing further information about 'Green Gas', which we received on 5 October.

There was some discussion about the use of 'Green Gas' and whether it might conflict with any movement towards use of hydrogen to heat council homes and other properties. We acknowledged that things were not straightforward when it came to future sources of energy. It was a constantly evolving area, and future decisions were dependent on how the grid evolved, and technological advancements. You told us that you were exploring all options, both for energy efficiency and cost. We noted that conversion to hydrogen power would require the widespread installation of plastic pipes to prevent leaks. Air source heating pumps, powered by electricity, was also one of the options.

We also talked about the development of hydrogen-powered vehicles and noted that there was a proposal led by Swansea University, for a hydrogen fuelling station on Fabian Way. The Council will need to look closely at this and benefits over electric vehicles for its fleet, such as the ability to achieve longer distances, and other advantages or disadvantages.

Tidal Lagoon

The Committee is aware that the development of a tidal lagoon has been talked about for a number of years, and there is a history of setbacks. We asked you about progress towards delivery of this project, and current position.

You told the Committee that the Council was very much committed to delivering the 'Dragon Energy Island' project and making it a reality. We heard that the Council has asked for government funding to develop an outline business case, and has continued to engage with the UK and Welsh Governments about proposals. The Council would need to procure a private sector partner in due course, subject to agreed business case. You stressed the importance of the development of a tidal lagoon, here and elsewhere, to a sustainable energy supply. We look forward to hearing more.

You stated that the Council would consider any opportunities to generate green energy and welcomed any input of ideas. We noted that there are already mini hydro turbines in the Dock area, and that the possibility of weirs in rivers was being looked at. Council efforts, large or small, in generating hydro power whether from rivers, streams or other waterways were welcomed.

Carbon Reduction

Amongst the key headline projects / carbon emission achievements, you referred to in your report you mentioned the Welsh Government supported Re:fit Low Carbon Programme to implement energy efficiency saving opportunities in non-domestic buildings. We asked you about the £1.3 million interest free loan that has been secured from Welsh Government Wales Funding Programme to deliver a Re:fit Cymru (Energy Efficiency) Phase 1 project. You told the Committee that the money would enable investment in buildings and energy savings enabling the repayment of monies. For example, we noted the money could be used to upgrade lighting to LED, improve building insulation and heating systems, installation of solar panels, etc. The Phase 1 project comprised over 18 buildings and was projected to save an estimated 379 tCO₂e every year. We noted that for Phase 2 (Carbon Reduction Retrofit) the Council was working towards developing a business case to implement energy conservation measures for Education Services / Schools.

Solar PV Farm

Your report referred to the Council working towards the development of a 3MW Ground Mounted Solar PV (photovoltaic) farm located on a capped waste land filled area at Tir John. We wanted to know more about this project and progress.

We noted that it is predicted over the asset lifespan (35 years) that 101,302,731 kWh of renewable energy will be generated equating 28,454 t/CO2. Part of this capital expenditure cost could be recovered, as it would create revenue for the Authority in the form of either Power Purchase Agreements or private wire connection. There is the potential opportunity of extending the Solar PV site in future years as current additional waste land is capped. You anticipated that the development would progress to planning application around January 2022.

Overall Assessment

The Committee talked about the overall scale of what the Council is doing and how the difference it makes could be enhanced, in the face of worrying projections about emissions and global warming. We recognised that much depends on the actions of UK, Welsh and international governments, but local action was nonetheless important, contributing to the sum of efforts. You felt that more could be done locally, but was dependent on greater resources, funding and delegated powers to increase the pace. In addition, it was not only the Council that needed to act locally, but also other sectors and communities – this was everyone's business. We noted that it remained a challenge to get all partners and businesses to commit to action to tackle climate change.

You emphasised how important it was for councillors, as community leaders, to promote the agenda in the community, educate and signpost people, e.g. supporting businesses to access grants etc. You also spoke about the need to engage young people in schools over the problems and solutions. We noted that unfortunately the pandemic had affected planned Council community engagement activities, although Swansea Environmental Forum has continued to be active and helpful.

Councillors recalled a previous subsidy to promote and encourage a switch to energy saving light bulbs, and asked whether there would be further gains from repeating this scheme. You were keen to explore any ways that would provide an incentive for people and businesses to save energy and would explore whether there was merit in doing similar again. You acknowledged that it was a popular scheme.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any comments on any of the issues raised within; however, we do not expect you to provide a formal response. You did undertake to provide the Committee with a detailed Climate Change Governance Structure. We would be happy for this to be emailed instead, as soon as possible.

We will revisit this topic within the scrutiny work programme in due course given its importance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Black', written in a cursive style.

COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK
Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee
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