



**To/
Councillor Mark Thomas
Cabinet Member for Environment
Services**

BY EMAIL

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SPC/2017-18/14

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member for Environment Services following the meeting of the Committee on 12 February 2018. It is about Highways and Transportation, Waste & Recycling, Pollution Control, Car Parks, Dog Fouling and Food Safety.

Dear Councillor Thomas,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 12 February

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 12 February 2018 and answering questions on your work as Cabinet Member for Environment Services.

We appreciate you providing a written paper, giving headlines from your portfolio, in support of your appearance. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your wide-ranging areas of responsibility.

We recognised that your responsibilities are areas of most importance to the general public. You highlighted however that it was becoming ever more challenging to meet expectations, particularly given budget cuts.

You provided a summary of activities and achievements in relation to:

- Highways and Transportation
- Waste, Parks and Cleansing
- Public Protection
- Pollution, Pest and Animal Control

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We acknowledged that you have had or were having a number of different contacts with scrutiny over the year, including relevant Commissioning Reviews, Recycling & Landfill performance, Car Park Charges, Tethered Horses, Roads & Footway Maintenance, Local Flood Risk Management. Therefore we tried not to cover areas already subject of scrutiny except where there were any outstanding matters to discuss.

We are writing to you to reflect on what we learnt from the discussion, share the views of the Committee, and, where necessary, raise any outstanding issues / actions for your response. The main issues discussed are summarised below:

Highways and Transportation

You talked about significant underfunding - meaning a backlog of highway maintenance estimated at around £130m. Despite this we noted that the condition of roads still ranked well compared with the rest of Wales (4th out of 22 authorities), and there have been awards received for the 48hr pothole initiative, and recognition for Highways Winter Maintenance and Street Lighting Services, which staff deserve a lot of credit for.

You mentioned hopes to secure additional funding this year that will go into road maintenance and subject to this being secured will draw up a scheme of priorities.

Some concern was brought to your attention about the quality of pothole repairs, against the speed at which they are being repaired. The Committee was concerned that repairs are properly made, as there have been an incidence of potholes being repaired then re-emerging soon after.

Waste & Recycling

You highlighted that Waste, Parks and Cleansing had recently merged as one area, with a single Head of Service, which allowed for greater movement of staff to critical areas when necessary, and increase service efficiency.

We noted that there has been a slight reduction in performance due to restrictions on wood recycling imposed by National Resources Wales. However you anticipated an overall recycling rate of around 62% for 2017/18, exceeding current statutory target.

We invite councillors not on the Committee to suggest questions and you were given notice of concerns raised about the following:

- Incidents of Fly tipping and cost to the Authority
- Rules regarding vehicle entry / acceptance of household waste at Civic Amenity Sites, and possible link between refusal of waste and fly tipping

- Information / Awareness Raising efforts to increase use of Civic Amenity Sites
- Policing / Enforcement to check if relevant businesses hold Waste Carrier Licenses

You stated that a fuller response to these issues would be put in writing however you provided a brief summary:

We heard from you that fly tipping is a difficult issue to tackle – difficult to police and identify offenders. You told the Committee that one of the issues was that the Council was not obliged to collect waste on private land. Where waste is causing concern it can also be difficult to identify or contact land owners. The other issue, particular a problem in areas such as Mawr, was that some fly tipping 'sites' are down ravines making access very problematic and hazardous for our officers. However, you talked about examples of joint working with the Fire Authority that takes place to help, where possible, access hard to reach areas.

You explained there are necessary rules at Civic Amenity Sites concerning vehicle types and size, not least to deter businesses from being able to use sites in the same way that the public can. You added that those households with larger vehicles, that otherwise might be refused, can apply online for a free permit to visit a Civic Amenity Site up to 12 times a year – though there were access issues at some sites that will not allow for certain vehicles to enter. The bottom line, you said, was to deter commercial vehicles to use the service without charge, hence the controls in place. You disagreed that any refusal of waste at Civic Amenity Sites was directly related to increased fly tipping.

We talked about the possibility of cameras at known fly tipping sites. You told us that whilst there has been some use of cameras it was not something that can be rolled out due to resources. Even with cameras you added that it can still be difficult to gain the necessary evidence that a court would require for successful prosecution. You acknowledged that fly tipping was annoying to the public but current legislation and rules made it difficult for Councils to stop it.

Pollution Control

We heard from you that, after delayed implementation, the Nowcaster system is now in operation (since October 2017). It is the first automatic continuous model forecasting air quality failures on the Swansea road network, automatically sending various messages out to the public. You acknowledged however that public awareness of this service could be improved.

We asked what actions would be taken if measured air pollution levels were deemed too high. You explained that the aim of the system was to encourage motorists to avoid certain areas if levels were high. You stated that the monitoring information is passed to the Welsh Government and members of the public can also sign up online for automatic alerts. Unfortunately the system was not a cure for pollution, but gave information that you said would help us to manage, and in the long-term design the problem away e.g. relief roads.

In view of environmental concerns (including from the World Health Organisation) we asked whether the Council was still using glyphosphate for weed control. You explained that the Council does use this product in line with EU guidance. You stated that there were lack of effective alternatives (you undertook to explain this in more detail in writing) and cited criticism from the public about weeds and lack of control. We talked about using alternate methods such as pulling or scraping weeds but you stated that this would be resource intensive and not cost effective. You were aware that this was a sensitive issue but assured us that the product (which is licensed for use to treat weeds) is applied in minimum strength, and is only used at kerbs / roadsides, maximum three times a year. You welcomed any contact from councillors who had any concerns about spraying in their area, including quality of service.

Car Parks

The Committee saw your response to the recent Car Park Charges Scrutiny Working Group's recommendations. One of the matters brought to your attention by the Working Group was about urgently finding a solution to the issues being experienced with ticket machines across Swansea. The Committee raised concern about progress given machines at Llangland and Caswell have been out of order for many months, resulting in lost income, and emphasised the need to put pressure on the contractors who provide the machines to resolve the problems identified. We were interested in whether there has been any breach of contact. You were clearly unhappy about the situation and assured the committee that you would be exploring the problem, and would update us on this.

Dog Fouling

We asked about the frequency in which dog mess bins are emptied – an issue that always seems to be of public concern. You stated that a review had been undertaken in recent years to identify areas of higher and lower usage, and would confirm current practice in writing. You urged Councillors to report bins that have not been emptied to the department. You told us that you were committed to getting environment services right, knowing much they mean to the general public, whether about dog mess or other waste collections, or street lighting.

Food Safety

We discussed your responsibilities in relation to food and safety and food hygiene standards. We noted performance measures for this service and did not understand the references within your report for a desire for food establishments to be 'broadly compliant' with standards. You accepted that this was not the best language to describe aims, but assured us that it was about 'meeting' standards.

Your Response

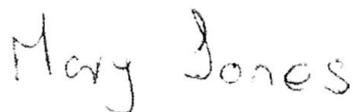
In your response we would welcome your comments on any of the issues raised in this letter. We would be grateful, however, if you could specifically refer to our request for you to:

- provide a fuller response to the questions put to you regarding fly tipping;
- explain the lack of alternatives to the use of glyphosphate for weed control;
- update us on resolving the problems with car park ticket machines; and
- tell us about current practice in relation to dealing with dog fouling

Please provide your response by 5 April. 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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