

Councillor Chris Holley
Convener
Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny
Performance Panel
BY EMAIL

Please ask for: Councillor Rob Stewart
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Our Ref: RS/CM
Your Ref:
Date: 12th February 2019

Dear Councillor Holley

Thank you for your letter dated 14th January 2019 and I would respond as follows.

1. Why is there a consistent issue of capital underspend – why is there capital slippage occurring?

There are range of reasons why there is slippage in various schemes. Some examples include;

- Delay in carrying out high rise works due to the deferred of works post Grenfell Tower
- Lack of capacity within the contracting sector for certain aspects of work e.g. HRA external improvements
- Significantly increasing capital programme for WHQS requiring lead in time for procurement and delivery e.g. Kitchens and Bathrooms
- The complex nature of regeneration projects, especially when dealing with multiple organisations and funding partners, often gives rise to programme delays which has a knock-on effect on spend.
- Construction project delivery is heavily regulated, in particular environmental projects which can require unforeseen detailed survey work, such as CADW, ecological or archaeological surveys which can be influenced by seasons, weather conditions and require 3rd party permissions.
- There are also lengthy timelines for 3rd party funding decisions that can mean council funding is allocated but can't be used until grants are confirmed from other sources and regulatory requirements satisfied, which all takes a long time.
- Delays in progressing schemes as the council awaits confirmation of Grant funding from Welsh Government, an example of this would be the "New Homes" schemes that provide energy efficient homes for the Innovative element of providing Green and Renewable energy. The council was successful and awarded £1.5 in October with the subsequent planning approve sought with the revised start date for both these schemes is now early March 2019 resulting in a significant slippage.

Despite the above, every attempt is made to accurately profile spend, eliminate and reduce programme slippage, and hence minimise capital spend slippage, wherever possible.

2. Why is the Housing Revenue Account underspent when there is a current issue with lack of house building and homelessness?

The HRA capital programme is allocated against specific projects some of which are referred to above which account for the underspends. Homelessness is funded from revenue which is being profiled to deliver the newly approved Homelessness Strategy recently agreed by Council.

3. Why are there such large underspends in “Place” in general

Please see response to Question 2 above

4. Regarding engagement of the public, do we use social media effectively to achieve meaningful feedback?

Social media is a major information and engagement tool for the Council. We have a number of accounts including Facebook, Twitter and image-sharing sites like Instagram and Flickr.

We utilise Facebook and Twitter the most because they are popular and are largely used by our main audiences. There are a number of corporate accounts, but also some which are service specific.

Examples of social media accounts in the Council:

Account	Social media	Number of followers
Swansea Council	Facebook	13,877
Swansea Council	Twitter	Over 46,800
Visit Swansea Bay	Facebook	75,000
Visit Swansea Bay	Twitter	Over 15,600
Recycle for Swansea	Facebook	3,049

It is an effective way to promote information and to get urgent messages out quickly when needed. These messages get shared between users rapidly which is often a far quicker and more effective way than using traditional media.

We also use it to promote services and help raise awareness of important issues such as increasing the uptake of recycling in Swansea. It allows us to speak directly to individuals and groups and also helps to make the Council seem friendlier and engaging.

It allows us to post videos and info graphics which can help simplify complex issues.

But social media is more than an information tool. The Council increasingly uses it to engage the public in a range of issues. It provides an alternative customer services channel for many users on daily issues such as missed bin collections where we can chat to service users directly and provide real-time information.

Linked to this, it's an increasingly important tool for protecting the Council's reputation because it allows staff to address issues and complaints in real time and before they escalate.

Quite often customers will initially post negative comments on social media, but by engaging them and providing useful, honest information they often become more positive and complimentary towards the council.

We monitor social media both quantitatively and qualitatively which means we consider the number of views, shares, likes, etc., as well as assessing the actual conversations/comments. We can assess the significance of a particular issue by the amount and nature of conversations taking place. This allows the Council to act and diffuse situations or address concerns.

The Council continues to develop its use of social media in areas such as income generation. For example, on one particular Facebook post last year which promoted hanging baskets, we received 273 referrals and £595 of sales in one day at no expense to the council.

We also use social media as a cost-effective, fully trackable advertising platform. We can assess the return on investment from advertising on social media platforms. When we post (which is free) we are talking to our existing followers, but advertising allows us to target specific groups and individuals who are not followers.

Some types of social media would not be appropriate or would be difficult to use in a service context e.g. Snapchat, and others have a younger audience so we are building up this platform, for instance, using Instagram to share images of the area, beaches and wildflower programme.

5. Could you consider including in the Annual Review of Well-being Objectives and Corporate Plan 2018/22;

Brexit Implications and the organisations included in the collaborative working

The Council has established a cross-departmental Brexit Steering Group, which I chair, to oversee the Council's response to Brexit; I also speak for the WLGA on Europe, which is helping Council's in Wales develop a consistent response to the challenges that we all face from Brexit.

The internal Steering Group has explored the implications from Brexit for the Council and has set out some ways in which it is mitigating the risks; the Council has shared

this with WAO in their recent call for evidence and self-assessment on how we are responding to Brexit.

The work of the Brexit Steering group will continue to inform how we manage the risks Brexit poses for the Council and our response will be regularly monitored and tracked by the Audit Committee.

Progress will be further described in the Council's 'Annual Review of Performance 2018/19', which will be published in October and will also include a relevant list of the organisations that we work with to help meet our priorities.

Any further and impending actions to manage Brexit identified by the steering group will be done through the Council's risk management arrangements and will also be included in the next Annual Review of Well-being Objectives and any refresh of the Corporate Plan.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'R' followed by a horizontal line and a small loop at the end.

COUNCILLOR ROB STEWART
LEADER & CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMY & STRATEGY