



**To/
Councillor Robert Francis-Davies
Cabinet Member for Investment,
Regeneration and Tourism**

BY EMAIL

*Please ask for:
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Overview & Scrutiny

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1st October 2019

Summary: This is a letter from the Service Improvement and Finance Performance Panel to the Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration and Tourism following the meeting of the Panel on 16th September 2019. The letter concerns the report on Archives.

Dear Councillor Francis-Davies,

On the 16th September 2019, the Panel met to discuss the Archives Service.

The Panel are grateful to all who attended to provide information and answer questions. The Panel do have some thoughts and observations to share with you.

We heard how archives is one of the few services which survived the beak up of West Glamorgan. We were told the Archive Service is based in Civic Centre in Swansea with a branch in Neath and the service comes under Cultural Services. We heard how there 2.5 miles of shelves of filing in the Civic Basement with some high value items and one collection recognised by UNESCO.

You told us that there is an advisory joint archive committee and the focus of the group is on the service which is very positive. We heard how the relationship with colleagues in Neath Port Talbot was very good and quarterly meetings take place to discuss any issues.

We were told that Archives is a hybrid of legal services and cultural services. It stores records of institutions such as magistrates court records and minutes but also individual items of historical or cultural significance. Because Archives are a records of fact, they are particularly important to maintain, and can be used for a range of research and queries such as boundary disputes.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

SWANSEA COUNCIL / CYNGOR ABERTAWE

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We heard how Welsh Government has requirements relating to Archive storage standards. The environment is essential and there must be protection against humidity, water damage and fire which are all risks. You explained how we have an ongoing relationship with the University to share some of the storage requirements. We were assured that the University and anywhere else who stores archives have to meet the same storage standards.

We asked about the capacity of the current Archive Service and were told that currently the storage space is 95% full and there is no capacity currently to accept a major collection. Many items which need archiving are now digitally stored such as Magistrates Court records but others cannot be made digital and we need to keep items of historical and cultural importance.

You told us how we have approximately the 15th busiest archive service in the UK and the busiest in Wales and although attendance figures are declining, user figures are maintaining as people access online services in line with the expansion of online information. This is very encouraging and shows the public continue to be interested in archives.

It was interesting to hear that half of the records within the Archive Service have been donated and it is important to note that we as a Council are the custodians of these works on behalf of the public. It was pleasing to hear that the service is very customer focused with very high satisfaction responses from the public which demonstrates the passion and knowledge of the team. We were told that the team undertakes outreach in schools, cascades information on social media and runs special events and portable exhibitions and publications. It is most impressive that one of these exhibitions was recognised by the National Assembly. It is encouraging that the team try and recognise issues of both local and national importance such as the post-war rebuild of Swansea and the suffragette movement. We look forward to seeing more of these inspiring works in the future.

We discussed the future prospects of the Archive Service and you told us that Civic Centre and its future are under ongoing review by Corporate Property. As a result, the future venues for the Archives Service is under constant consideration. We heard how a relocation would not necessarily be negative but the new venue would have to create sustainable storage and meet the correct requirements.

The future venue need not be in the City Centre but a purpose built building may be the only solution due to the strict physical requirements of the rooms (e.g. no mains water pipes can run over the top of the buildings). We also feel that the archives themselves and the team who support this service should be in the same building so members of the public can have support to access the resource. This also fits in with requirements under the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.

We are concerned about the pace at which the future of the Archives Service is being addressed. Although we were told about an officers working group which is continuously looking at potential options, we feel there should be a dedicated team of people looking at the issue. A plan and timescale needs to be put in place to deal with the relocation of the Archive Service and an established project board could

start to research and apply for external grant funding to support this. If a decision is made about Civic Centre, there may not be adequate time to find a suitable venue for archives and this may jeopardise the future of the service.

Could a working group be established now to explore funding applications and potential venues ahead of any decisions being made on the future of Civic Centre?

We would be grateful if you could respond to this letter by 22nd October 2019 and welcome any thoughts you may have.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CHolley', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Councillor Chris Holley

Convener, Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel

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