



**To/
Lesley Griffiths AM
Minister for Environment, Energy
and Rural Affairs**

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20th August 2019

BY EMAIL

Summary: This is a letter from the Development and Regeneration Scrutiny Performance Panel to the Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs following the meeting of the Panel on 17th July 2019. It concerns Broadband provision to rural areas and the successor to the current Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

Dear Ms. Griffiths,

I am writing on behalf of the Swansea Council Development and Regeneration Scrutiny Performance Panel.

The Panel is tasked with scrutinising work which falls under the theme of Development and Regeneration and part of that work includes reviewing reports developed by the Wales Audit Office and the resulting Action Plans and associated Response.

At a recent meeting the Panel looked at the Wales Audit Office Report 'Local Government Services to Rural Communities' and had the opportunity to ask questions of officers.

We wrote to the relevant Swansea Cabinet Member to highlight our thoughts and suggestions on the issues, which can be impacted internally. However we found there are some topics discussed which can only be influenced at a national level.

For background, Swansea is a semi-rural local authority with 36 electoral wards 8 of them being rural. The population of Swansea is concentrated within the urban areas with large parts of non-rural wards sparsely populated.

There is some debate over how wards are classified as urban or rural and how this in turn leads to access to funding for certain rural based projects.

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Although a number of discussion points came out of the report, there were two which the Panel agreed were paramount.

1. The lack of broadband and the associated infrastructure in rural areas.
2. Concern that no work has started on the successor to the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020.

The lack of broadband and the associated infrastructure in rural areas

The Panel feel this is a major issue which has been ongoing for some time. The concern is the lack of broadband and associated infrastructure in rural areas. This is not an issue which is specific to Swansea but is having an impact on the rural areas within Swansea.

The lack of broadband for any person will have a negative impact on their ability to access goods and services at competitive prices so can affect their financial choices. In addition to this, many services and community consultation exercises and groups are now online too. Again this means that people with poor or no internet access are excluded from these activities potentially causing isolation and restricted access to social integration.

Along with the already mentioned issues, many public services are making the move toward digitising their services – applications for waste collection, parking permits and even online payments are being widely promoted by public services. Not being able to have a usable internet connection will not allow some residents to access these services.

Concern that no work has started on the successor to the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

The current Rural Development Programme comes to an end in 2020, and currently no request which has been put forward to start on a successor plan for it. This causes us some concern as such an important issue needs to be considered in advance.

Whilst we are aware as a Panel that the outcome of Brexit will have an impact on funding and services, we still feel that there should be prior planning in place to ensure rural development issues stay a priority.

We would be grateful for your thoughts in relation to any of the above matters but could you please answer the following?

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1. What are your plans in relation to broadband in rural areas?
2. Can you please provide us with information regarding the end of the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 and your intentions after it finishes in 2020?

Although broadband may not lie with you as a main area of focus, we would be interested in your views within the context of the Rural Development Programme.

We have also written to Mr. Ken Skates AM, Minister for Economy and Transport regarding our concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Jeff Jones
Convener, Development and Regeneration Performance Panel
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