



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Homes, Energy
& Service Transformation**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 9 September 2019. It is about Green Vehicles, Green Energy, Homelessness, Empty Properties, Renting Homes / Tenancy Management and Housing Adaptions and Renewals.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 9 September

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 9 September 2019 and answering questions on your work as then Cabinet Member for Homes & Energy. We note since the meeting changes announced by the Leader of the Council to cabinet portfolios and your new Cabinet title (Homes, Energy & Service Transformation) and designation as Joint-Interim Deputy Leader. We wish you well in your new role.

We appreciate you providing a written paper in support of your appearance at September's Committee meeting. The Q & A session gave us an opportunity to explore priorities and achievements in relation to your areas of responsibility.

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

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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Green Vehicles

We spent some time during the session talking about the use of electric vehicles and charging infrastructure across Swansea.

One of the issues raised with you came from a member of the public and concerned whether the Council could allow employees to charge their vehicles in work given vehicle-charging points available in depots and offices which could be used by staff, with electricity usage paid for by the user, and therefore no financial loss for the Council. In your response, we noted some practical difficulties in being able to commit to this and allowing usage of fleet charging points. You indicated that issues around access and capacity for wider usage, including availability of car parking spaces, made this difficult to deliver. Nevertheless, you told us you would continue to explore the potential for workplace charging, taking into account ability to control parking spaces where parking provision is already limited. You also mentioned that the Council's move towards agile working for staff meant reducing the need for travelling to/from work and reducing the carbon footprint.

However, you were a clear advocate for electric vehicles and referred to the Council's expanding green fleet. We noted in your written paper that the Council has recently been successful with an award of £89,000 Welsh Government funding from the Local Transport Fund for the provision of publically accessible, electric vehicle charge points in a number of Council-owned parking interchanges across Swansea. You anticipated that each site will have a dual headed 7kW 'fast' charger installed. You added that Swansea Central Phase 1 and 2 works would include car parking with vehicle charging points, future-proofed to enable expansion, and pointed to increased coverage across the city over the next two years.

We asked whether this funding would be sufficient to increase the network, particularly in light of UK government targets for 2025/30. You conceded that this was just a starting point but were committed to having more charging pillars to give the public more confidence to choose electric. You told us that it was too early to state exactly how many charging points this funding would provide for, as there were many variables associated with location and grid connections. However, you stated that they would be strategically located. We noted the intention to issue Prior Information Notices to companies to respond to the Council with interest and proposals.

You clarified that whilst electric vehicle charging points would be provided, these would be at cost to the user. The Council could not afford to provide 'free' charging points, and had no funding to do so, and would need a revenue stream to pay for costs. However, you stated that this would be evaluated over time. We asked you about the anticipated revenue stream but you told us that it was too early to tell, but would be happy to follow this up with the Committee in due course when there is some clarity about charging options.

We discussed whether the Council was looking at charging points in car parks or on-street. You stated that discussions were still at an early stage, but the Council was interested in acting as a pilot for on-street charging points. You added that moving in that direction would need community engagement.

There was also some discussion about issues with electric vehicles in the winter months where there is extra drain on the battery when using heating / air con as well as motorway driving. You stated that more frequent re-charging would be necessary rather than the Council having to increase the number of vehicles in service. You stressed that with the pace of change in the electric vehicle industry and improvements to batteries and capacity we needed to be careful not to over-compensate and have too many charging points that may not be used.

We also discussed the development of hydrogen vehicles and the Council's position. We noted that the Fire Authority had a number of vehicles however were limited to a refuelling point at the Baglan Energy Park in Briton Ferry. You told us that you were involved in 'working group' discussions with partners and close interest paid to the potential of hydrogen vehicles and costs. There were also possibilities around retro-fitting vehicles and make them part-hydrogen e.g. with hydrogen fuel cell batteries. You felt that this technology lent itself to larger vehicles, e.g. refuse trucks, but there was concern about the lack of provision for hydrogen fuel. You felt this was a big issue for Welsh Government to address.

Green Energy

We asked you about activities following the Council's declaration of a Climate Emergency in June, which recognised the importance of delivering energy related and other actions in reducing carbon emissions, enhancing biodiversity, and securing a prosperous, low-carbon economy for our region.

We were interested to read in your paper that this includes exploring the potential for a solar farm. We pressed you for more details about plans for the solar farm, and acknowledged that there were a number of key steps in the process that needed to be cleared, including planning permission. You did indicate that there was potential for a 3MW (mega watt) Farm, possibly up to 10MW, and clarified that the solar farm would be located on brownfield Council land and would be wholly owned by the Council.

We asked about funding and you told the Committee that it would be based on borrowing but the farm would generate income. You stated that a financial model has been discussed with the S.151 Officer and proposals are considered positive because of the short payback period and guaranteed financial return. You reported that it was anticipated that a business case for a solar farm will be presented by the year end. We look forward to that. It was suggested that you explore other funding sources as well, as this sort of

environmental scheme may attract Welsh Government 'Invest to Save' funding.

We also asked about the re-fit programme to put renewable energy / energy efficient measures in Council owned buildings. We were interested in the potential savings / returns for the Council from this. You referred to the Homes as Power Stations (HAPS) City Deal Project, and although Neath Port Talbot Council was the lead Council, you told us that activities in Swansea were contributing to this project. For example, further Council housebuilding at Parc yr Helyg and Colliers Way was being developed as through the City Deal Homes as Power Stations (HAPS) strand, including use of solar panels, battery / energy storage, and ground source heat pumps. Also, there were plans for a retrofit 'HAPS' pilot of 6 bungalows in Craig Cefn Parc in partnership with the Welsh School of Architecture (WSA) to transform them into highly energy efficient modern homes creating sustainable energy savings for tenants. You added that there was potential in the future to retro-fit the wider existing Council housing stock, beyond delivery of the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

Homelessness

You were keen to report that in relation to homelessness prevention 75.4% of families were prevented from homelessness in 2018/19, which exceeded the target of 67% and had increased from 68.8% in 2017/18. Whilst we would want that figure to be 100% we recognised the challenges and complexities around homelessness.

We asked about progress with Council's adoption of the 'Housing First' model and approach to tackling homelessness, which you stated would mean accommodation and intensive support for the most entrenched rough sleepers in Swansea. You told us that there would be capacity to work with up to 20 individuals with an Intervention Team on hand to engage with these people and through multi-agency working help them to access housing and the support they need to help sustain it. You stated that the Council had a firm grip on the number of rough sleepers and told us that support for 20 would effectively mean being able to support all of those identified.

You were pleased to tell us that the Council has recently contracted The Wallich homelessness charity to take the lead in providing support and they were currently arranging to ensure all specialists were in place for the launch of the scheme. We also asked about the timetable for the implementation of 'Housing First' and review of the pilot to evaluate success. Whilst this was a pilot for Swansea, you pointed to success elsewhere from this approach, and stated that evaluation would be done over the next 3 years, to assess success and whether a further roll-out is needed, depending on funding. We hoped that it would eradicate long-term rough sleeping and reduce homelessness.

We asked about contributions, engagement and involvement from external parties. We wanted to know about the extent to which the local health board would be involved, as this was not just a Council issue. We wanted to know what dedicated resources would be provided by health and whether you were happy with their contribution. You assured the Committee that health were on board with this and will collaborate closely. You added that the Homelessness Strategy's aims and objectives aligned with the outcomes sought by Swansea Public Services Board. We suggested that the Council also involves others in the Third Sector, in particular Crisis, given their expertise in providing education, training and support for homeless people.

Although you undertook to keep the Committee informed of progress, you agreed to write to us with the planned start date for 'Housing First' (your paper indicated Autumn 2019?) and provide more details about the support that would be coming from the local health board. You also stated that dialogue will continue with relevant service providers, and that would include organisations such as Crisis, to discuss the housing first approach and its effectiveness, and co-ordination of support.

We asked about support for other vulnerable people in need, and you clarified that there were other avenues of support, including Housing Options, Tenancy Support Unit, Welfare Rights Team, and the Citizens Advice.

Empty Properties

You were keen to highlight that the target for bringing empty properties back into use improved by 3.3% from the previous year, with 100 properties brought back into use in 2018/19. You stressed that whilst it was important to build new homes, bringing existing properties back into supply also helped address housing needs.

We asked what steps should be taken if people are concerned about empty properties in their communities. You urged councillors to alert yourself and the Head of Service, Mark Wade, of any concerns and steps can be taken to contact the owners and encourage take up of Welsh Government funded Landlord Loans to bring them back into use. You reported that by the end of 2018/19, 60 empty properties had received Welsh Government funded Landlord loans, creating 104 units of accommodation.

We also discussed Council housing voids. You explained that the planned programme of upgrading properties in line with the Welsh Housing Quality Standard affected overall void figures. It is of course more beneficial to work on properties when they are vacant. However, you were pleased to inform the Committee that the number of voids has reduced in recent years, with 196 voids in 2018/19 compared to 241 in 2013/14.

Renting Homes / Tenancy Management

One of the challenges you identified for the year ahead was the implementation of the Renting Homes Act, which will change tenancies to occupation contracts that will be standardised across the whole of the rented sector in Wales. We noted that a commencement date and regulations were awaited and that formal consultation is not yet completed. However, you told us that initial preparations around the new occupation contracts were underway. You felt that it would be a complicated piece of work to re-issue all contracts, and there was some interest from Committee members about the exact terms of new contracts, and security for tenants.

There was also a debate around how the Council should deal with those who may be in breach of their tenancy. We talked about tenancy enforcement and circumstances in which the Council would seek eviction, e.g. rent arrears, significant anti-social behaviour, criminal activity, all of which required solid evidence. You told us that there were four evictions from anti-social behaviour during 2018. However, you stressed that given the need to avoid homelessness the Council did all it could to prevent evictions and try to address issues at an early stage in order to help sustain tenancies. Amongst initiatives to modernise housing services, you mentioned that the service was exploring a noise monitoring app that can help affected neighbours to collect evidence, as well as other technological opportunities that can help.

Housing Adaptions and Renewals

The Adult Services Scrutiny Performance Panel considered the Wales Audit Office's national report on Housing Adaptations in June and progress made in implementing recommendations. There was some concern from the Panel about waiting times for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) for Council tenants being marginally longer than for private sector housing, which we note you have already responded to the Panel about.

We noted that waiting times were reduced in 2018/19 for Disabled Facilities Grants to 235 days, compared to 340 days in 2015-16. In total, 367 Disabled Facilities Grants, 543 Council House Adaptations and 734 Minor Adaptation Grants were delivered. Future plans aim to further reduce waiting times and introduce best practice from the Welsh Audit Office Review.

Your paper to the Committee stated that a review of the DFG process was completed and a number of changes aimed at reducing waiting times have been implemented. This included a telephone based initial enquiry and screening process, which has helped ensure DFGs are offered within statutory timescales. The Committee was curious to know at what stage the Council was not able to meet statutory timescales, and you undertook to respond in writing.

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:

- write to us with the planned start date for 'Housing First' and provide more details about the support that would be coming from the local health board; and
- tell us at what stage the Council has not been able to meet statutory timescales for Disabled Facilities Grants.

Please provide the response to this and any other comments about our letter by 6 November. 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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