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Y Gweinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol  
Minister for Housing and Local Government



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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Mr Russell George AM  
Chair, Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee

SeneddEIS@assembly.wales

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Dear Russell

Thank you for your letter of 14 August. I'm grateful for both your interest in the commission and your views. Of course, I am sorry to hear that you have concerns about the commission.

### **Strategic direction and progress**

I understand your frustration if you were expecting a scoping paper within 3 months and have been disappointed. I'm conscious that the Chair had not been appointed when he appeared before you in June 2018. I cannot speak for the Chair but I wonder how thoroughly he had been able to plan at that time.

From my discussions with the Chair, I have always expected the first output of the commission to be an Annual Report in November. I think a year is a reasonable period for a new commission with a wide remit to produce its first report. Like you, I eagerly await publication in November.

As for further outputs, I have been led to expect that the commission will produce papers on particular topics in advance of a state of the nation report around Nov 2021. That would be in keeping with your committee's recommendation. I will ask for confirmation of that date.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

## **Transparency and public accessibility**

I recognise, as does the Chair, that transparency and public accessibility are vital to the successful operation of the commission. The Chair and commissioners have been actively engaging stakeholders and will continue to do so. The Chair and I also recognise that a good website is an important source of information for the public. I understand the commission had begun to make plans to improve its web content even before your hearing with the Chair on 11 July. I fully accept that the commission should provide more information through its website. I will ensure that the documents you suggest are published as soon as possible.

It is Welsh Government policy for advisory panels, such as the commission, to use the Welsh Government website for their online communications. As an example, the Commission on Justice in Wales has taken the same approach. This brings a significant cost saving to the public purse and I do not believe it compromises the independence of the commission.

## **Resources**

It is Welsh Government policy for advisory panels, such as the commission, to be supported by Welsh Government officials. Again, the Commission on Justice in Wales is resourced in the same way. All Welsh Government civil servants are bound by the requirements of the Welsh Government Civil Service Code to carry out their duties with objectivity, honesty, integrity and impartiality and, particularly, political impartiality, in whatever role they undertake. As a result, I have no concerns about the independence of officials supporting the commission or their managers. Welsh Government HR policies and processes apply to all civil servants and provide a means for officials to raise concerns if the need arises.

I agree that the commission must be adequately resourced. There have been delays in recruiting staff for the commission as a result of Brexit preparations and internal Welsh Government reorganisation but progress has now been made.

I also agree that the commission will require greater research capability to undertake its work programme. The commission needed some time to reflect on the nature of its requirements before resources could be provided. Now that the commission has had that opportunity I expect to reach agreement with the Chair about an appropriate level of resources.

## **Next Steps**

Thank you for reminding me that the committee previously recommended expanding the commission's remit to include the supply of land for strategically significant housing developments. Since you made that recommendation we have decided to establish a Public Sector Land Division within Welsh Government. This will help deliver the First Minister's clear objective to prioritise land assembly for public purpose to help meet housing demand and deliver wider government priorities. We are looking to develop a new approach where we are seeking to utilise public assets to deliver a wider range of public benefits encompassing activities right across our programme for government.

I do think the commission can make a contribution to the housing sector and I intend to expand its remit to include the following:

- the provision of strategic infrastructure necessary to support housing delivery;
- new methods of housing construction; and
- new models of financing and delivering homes.

We will review the scope and remit of the commission before the National Assembly election in 2021. I think that will be the appropriate time to consider whether or not the commission should be instituted on a statutory basis.

I have no doubt that the commission is taking seriously its responsibilities with regard to the Well-being of Future Generations Act. Long-term thinking, integration, involvement, collaboration and prevention will be vital to successful infrastructure planning.

I shall soon be advertising the role of Chair and my officials will be in touch to arrange a pre-appointment hearing for my preferred candidate. I look forward to receiving your thoughts.

This is an important commission with a challenging remit. I'm disappointed that the commission does not yet have your confidence but I am grateful to you for raising your concerns. I accept there have been teething problems but I am confident these can be overcome if we work together.

Yours sincerely



**Julie James AC/AM**

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