



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Programme Committee**

Multi-Location Meeting - Gloucester Room, Guildhall / MS

Teams

Tuesday, 13 February 2024 at 4.00 pm

Present: Councillor P M Black (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
E W Fitzgerald
W G Lewis
S Pritchard

Councillor(s)
V A Holland
P N May
T M White

Councillor(s)
M Jones
F D O'Brien

Statutory Co-opted Member(s)

Beth Allender Elizabeth Lee

Councillor Co-opted Member(s)

C A Holley L R Jones

Officer(s)

Rachael Davies	Head of HR & Service Centre
Sarah Lackenby	Head of Digital and Customer Services
Julian Morgans	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Michelle Roberts	Scrutiny Officer
Debbie Smith	Deputy Chief Legal Officer
Samantha Woon	Democratic Services Officer

Also present

Councillor Andrea Lewis – Cabinet Member for Service Transformation (Deputy Leader)

Councillor Sandra Joy – Lead Councillor making the Call In

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): None.

Statutory Co-opted Member(s): None

Councillor Co-opted Members: P R Hood-Williams, S M Jones and S E Keeton

74 **Disclosures of Personal & Prejudicial Interest.**

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

75 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips.

In accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, no declarations of Whipped Votes or Party Whips were declared.

76 Minutes.

Resolved that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Programme Committee held on 16 January 2024 be approved and signed as a correct record.

77 Public Question Time.

None.

78 Call In of Cabinet Decision - Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

The Chair referred to the report which stated that the Committee was required to consider the concerns raised in relation to the Cabinet report / decision made on 18 January, on the 'Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework' which had been 'Called In' by Councillors (lead Councillor, Sandra Joy).

Councillor Sandra Joy – Lead Councillor making the Call In, detailed the reasons for the Call in as follows:

“The reason for the Call In is because we believe that the Cabinet made this decision without being fully appraised of the concerns expressed by members of the Corporate Services and Financial Resilience STC in a minuted meeting on 12th December, when this policy draft was discussed. They were under the impression that this policy draft had been accepted in its entirety by this STC, and that is not the case. The Chair of the Corporate Services and Financial Resilience STC omitted to share with the Cabinet members the concerns that were raised.

During this STC meeting, significant concerns were raised about the timescales for processing applications for free school meals. This is noted as 28 working days, almost six weeks. (Other timescales for people experiencing hardship were also raised in the meeting, but we are focussing on the direct impact on vulnerable children.)

Please note that children who are eligible for free school meals are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They have no access to funds. Concern was expressed that such a child could potentially be in a position where they are unable to access any food during the day for up to six weeks.

The Council officer present informed the Committee that she would 'take that back to the Heads of Service' and 'feed back to you'. This did not happen until after the Cabinet had met and made their decision, so again they were not appraised of the concerns raised.

Obviously, supporting evidence that this was raised can be provided, both via the minutes of the meetings referred to here and the recordings of both meetings: the STC and the Cabinet meeting, as well as subsequent email exchanges with Council officers.

In summary, we believe that, the decision to adopt the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework without amendment is unsafe, in that we believe the Cabinet would have been unlikely to accept that any vulnerable child should be expected to go without food every day for almost six weeks whilst adults process the required paperwork”.

In response, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation stated that:

Whilst having been present at the Service Transformation Committee she wished to clarify some of the issues raised.

She provided assurance about the Council commitment and care for childrens' welfare and the access to free school meals.

She referred to the rationale behind the timescale of the Service Standard regarding Free School Meals and proposal to address the concerns raised following discussion with Officers. Unfortunately, in some cases, it was not possible to confirm eligibility without consulting the DWP, who can take up to 28 days to respond. The DWP timescales are outside of the control of the Council. However, if the Council were aware of a family's entitlement through different means (e.g. Council tax or Housing Benefit, and they provided evidence previously for qualifying benefits) the Council can confirm this and process the application within one or two days.

The proposed amendment of seven working days reflected action that was within the Council's control, once the Council is aware of a qualifying benefit. However, every effort is made to process applications as quickly as possible.

The Cabinet Member clarified that the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework was due to be implemented on the 1st of April and was always intended to be a 'living document' that will be updated/amended accordingly to improve our customer service, as reflected in the Cabinet decision on 18 January where delegated authority had been given to Directors and the relevant Cabinet Member(s) to make any minor amendments as appropriate.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation stated that she wished to give a level of assurance that the concerns raised would be taken on board prior to implementation on the 1 April 2024.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits provided a comprehensive overview of the process for determining eligibility and reiterated the comments made by the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation.

Committee questioning and discussions focussed on the following:

- Changes to Benefits Scheme (roll out of Universal Credit).

- Schools' responses to timescales for Free School Meals.
- Eligibility criteria in England and Wales.

The Chair thanked Councillor S Joy, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation and Officers for their input.

Resolved that the Chair write to the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation reflecting the Committee's decision to recommend the amendment to the Free School Meals Service Standard detailed in the response of the Chief Executive (Appendix 4) in which the timescale be amended to 7 working days (of receiving the confirmation).

79 Workforce Strategy Progress Report.

The Head of HR and Service Centre introduced the Workforce Strategy 2022-2027 which had been approved by Cabinet in October 2022 after a period of design and consultation with stakeholders. The strategy was available for viewing at Appendix A.

The strategy contained four key themes to drive the improvement of organisational culture over the lifespan of the five-year period, contributing to the Council's Corporate Plan, '*Successful and Sustainable Swansea*,' and the associated Corporate Transformation Plan for 2023-2028.

Following Cabinet's approval of the Workforce Strategy a Workforce and Organisational Development Transformation Programme Board was established in December 2022. The board was responsible for identifying appropriate transformation projects that would enable delivery of the strategy's objectives, agreeing the priority projects for implementation at any given point in the lifetime of the strategy and monitoring progress on a quarterly basis.

The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed the progress with the four specific transformation projects and the Workforce Strategy objectives identified for implementation during 2023/24.

Members noted that of the 23 objectives agreed for 2023/24 the summary RAG status list was:

- Complete – 4
- Green – 12
- Amber – 6
- Withdrawn - 1

Good progress had been made with addressing the objectives set out in the Workforce Strategy with 70% of them due to be complete by the end of the financial year. With one objective due to be withdrawn due to circumstances beyond the control of the Council and a further amber to be redrafted to meet directorate intentions, the remaining 5 amber objectives would be carried forward into the 2024/25 year along with newly selected goals remaining in the strategy.

Recruitment to the vacant HR&OD Manager post would enable greater capacity for delivery against the Workforce Strategy objectives and as the HR&OD service transformation embeds, focus on project work will increase as a result.

Committee questioning and discussions focussed on the following:

- A Workforce Fit for the Future – Recognising Performance – the Head of HR and Service Centre detailed the new approach/actions taken to deliver a culture of culture of 'high performance', with regular evaluation and feedback via Oracle.
- Workforce and Organisational Development Transformation – The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed the process involved in attaining 'Investors in People' accreditation. Due to costs of accreditation, it was deemed to be something that could be explored at a later date.
- Being an Employer of Choice – Recruitment & Retention – The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed progress and the type of research and information to inform improvement to Policy and the Council's approach to Recruitment & Selection.

The Chair thanked the Head of HR & Service Centre for her input and requested that a further update on the delivery of the Workforce Strategy to the Committee be scheduled in one year, focusing on the impact.

Resolved that the Chair write to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Performance reflecting discussion and sharing the views of the Committee.

80 Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature (Councillor Sara Keeton, Convener).

Councillor Sara Keeton provided the Committee with a progress report on the work / activities of the Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature be noted.

81 Membership of Scrutiny Panels and Working Groups.

Resolved that the membership of the Community Growing Scrutiny Working Group as reported, with Councillor Michael Locke as Convener, be agreed.

82 Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Chair presented the regular report on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2023/24 which the Committee is responsible for monitoring.

He highlighted that:

- the new Scrutiny Inquiry on Community Assets is now underway;
- a public request for Scrutiny had been received on the topic of 5G roll out and its impact, but following advice from the Chief Legal Officer the specific issues

raised were considered outside the scope of Scrutiny, so no action would be taken;

Following conclusion of the Scrutiny Training & Development Programme for Swansea Scrutiny Councillors, which was facilitated by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), a number of ideas have emerged from this process and self-assessment. These will be considered as part of a wider end of year review to inform Scrutiny Improvement Objectives and actions going forward.

He confirmed that the main items for the next Committee on 19 March comprised:

- Annual Complaints Report 2022/2023.
- Welsh Language Standards Annual Report 2022/2023.

83 Scrutiny Letters.

The Chair referred to the following letters, reflecting on recent Committee Scrutiny activity:

- Committee – Delivery of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities – Letter to Cabinet Member for Wellbeing.
- Committee – Scrutiny of Support for Business – Letter to Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration, Events & Tourism.

84 Date and Time of Upcoming Panel / Working Group Meetings.

The Chair referred to upcoming Panel/Working Group/Regional Scrutiny meetings, for awareness.

The meeting ended at 5.06 pm

Chair