

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea - April 2014

'Scrutiny enables councillors who are not in the cabinet to examine the quality and effectiveness of services and policies, hold decision makers to account, and make recommendations for improvement'

Calling for evidence

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

One of the new approaches adopted this year has been to issue a 'call for evidence' for in-depth scrutiny inquiries. These inquiries, which are expected to take up to six months, result in a final report being published with conclusions and recommendations, informed by the evidence gathered, that is presented to cabinet for decision.

Calls for evidence provide an opportunity for councillors not directly involved in the Inquiry Panel to either contribute evidence themselves or make sure that other interested people are aware of the opportunity to contribute. It is also a way of making sure that cabinet members can bring issues to the Panel's attention that may have a bearing on the conclusions that are ultimately drawn and recommendations made. Although Inquiry Panels will have a good idea about the people that they may want to speak to and invite to panel meetings, 'calls for evidence' are designed to ensure that the evidence base can be as wide ranging as possible and any individual or organisation interested in the topic can contribute views. It is also an important part of developing public engagement in the work of scrutiny. A 'call for evidence' will be issued at the start of inquiry once its terms of reference have been agreed by the Panel. This will outline the key question and lines of enquiry so that relevant persons can consider submission of evidence that could assist the scrutiny inquiry.

A new 'call for evidence' has just been issued by the Education Inclusion Scrutiny Inquiry Panel, led by Councillor Cheryl Philpott. The inquiry is asking why some children require education other than at school, and what can be done to improve their outcomes. Interested groups or individuals are encouraged to submit written evidence to the inquiry. The Panel will be pursuing a number of lines of inquiry including:

- How well does the EOTAS (education other than at school) service meet the needs and interests of its learners?*
- Is the current configuration of the service the correct one?*
- What are the barriers to further improvements in this service?*
- How can we improve the 'revolving door' ensuring children's reintegration back into school especially up to Key Stage 3*
- How can the Council and schools work better with partners in order to improve the outcomes for children on EOTAS pathways?*

Look out for future calls for evidence!

The waiting list for social housing

(Lead: Councillor Terry Hennegan)

Scrutiny councillors met with officers in February to explore the idea of introducing a single waiting list for social housing in Swansea that covers the Council and all Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). The meeting enabled discussion on the feasibility of this change and the relationship with the housing associations. The key issue for the councillors was to ensure the focus is on the outcome desired by housing applicants, which is a swift process of obtaining housing that meets their needs. The Scrutiny Working Group has now written to the Cabinet Member for Wellbeing and his response to a number of recommendations is awaited. More on this in the next edition!

Parks service in the spotlight

(Lead: Councillor John Newbury)

A Scrutiny Working Group looking at the Parks Service met recently to ask questions about service provision across Swansea including the upkeep of parks in local communities.

The Group praised the excellent work carried out by the service and agreed that the overall standard of the local parks and amenities in Swansea was good. Despite this there were some concerns about the impact of budget cuts to the service. The Group discussed some ideas to mitigate the effects of this including: the development and promotion of 'friends organisations'; opportunities to delegate responsibility for parks to such groups; and exploring alternative models of management.

The following further issues were also raised for consideration by the Cabinet Member for Place:

- *Finance and funding is a key issue for the upkeep of parks*
- *Dog fouling is still an issue in parks*
- *A solution for sand shifting still needs to be found*
- *Applications should be encouraged for Field in Trust Designation recognition, as well as Green Flag Success;*
- *City Centre business owners are unlikely to continue to contribute towards hanging baskets.*

The Cabinet Member for Place has responded positively to the Group's recommendations and taken the issues raised on board.

Scrutiny and school improvement

(Lead: Councillor Jennifer Raynor)

The Schools Performance Panel is continuing its work in providing ongoing challenge to school improvement. Since the last update in January the Panel have had a session with the Headteacher and Governors at Dunvant Primary School and met with the new Chief Education Officer, Arwyn Thomas, to discuss education strategy in relation to improving school standards and pupil attainment.

This is a new Panel which has only been in existence for one year and it is still developing its role. Panel Members intend to hold a session in April to evaluate the year to ensure the Panel is effective, and give thought to a plan for next year's work.

Who's looking at crime & disorder?

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

The Scrutiny Programme Committee also acts as the Council's Crime & Disorder Committee, which is a requirement under the Police & Justice Act 2006. The scrutiny of the local Community Safety Partnership, the Safer Swansea Partnership, forms a significant part of this role. The Committee has over the course of the year met with the Chief Superintendent (South Wales Police) and lead officer from the City and County of Swansea who act as co-chairs of the Partnership. It has questioned them on the work and performance of the Partnership, exploring what has been done, how well it has been done and what impact that has made, as well as discussing plans / challenges ahead. One of the issues discussed in detail this year has been the operation of PACT meetings and opportunities to improve community engagement.

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