

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea - May 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'

Scrutiny and sustainability – improving the impact

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

Scrutiny councillors recently got together to explore how the scrutiny function in Swansea can drive long term, preventative decision making through its work. A workshop was held in March to:

- *develop skills and knowledge on future trends*
- *have a better understanding of how to use sustainability principles to ensure services are 'fit for purpose'*
- *understand the potential impacts of the forthcoming Future Generations Bill*
- *understand how the scrutiny function can make a bigger impact by adopting sustainable development as a central organising principle*

There was specific discussion on long term trends, sustainable development and the role of scrutiny, current and future influences on scrutiny and learning from others. The development session was focussed on improving the impact of scrutiny in the context of the Future Generations Bill in particular. In terms of next steps a follow up event is expected in order to reflect on the workshop and difference made, but there were some immediate points that emerged:

- *need to feed in some of the 'future risks' issues into the work planning conference as possible inquiry topics*
- *need to develop a short checklist that ensures future risks / future generations issues can be considered as part of inquiry scoping*
- *look at having a 'people centred' inquiry that looks at the combined impact of a range of issues on a typical household*
- *explore the option of undertaking scrutiny as a one day 'commission' involving range of stakeholders and the public*
- *finally, if last year was about introducing new arrangements, this year about bedding them down, next year should be about ensuring impact*

The workshop was supported by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and run by PwC and Netherwood Sustainable Futures. This is part of a package of work that is being delivered as the City & County of Swansea is the pilot authority for the WLGA on Sustainable Development.

Are we scrutinising school improvement effectively?

(Lead: Councillor Jennifer Raynor)

The Schools Performance Scrutiny Panel are evaluating their year's work to start planning for the coming municipal year. They will look at what has gone well, what has not gone so well, and whether they are focussing on the right issues and identify learning points from the year. The purpose of this will be to continually improve how the Panel scrutinise the work education services in Swansea. The Panel's next step will be to start thinking about what the key issues might be over the coming twelve months to ensure they are making the most of the time they have to examine this subject.

The waiting list for social housing

(Lead: Councillor Terry Hennegan)

One of the scrutiny working groups held recently focussed on exploring the idea of introducing a single waiting list for social housing in Swansea that covers the Council and all Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). Following a meeting about the feasibility of this change it was accepted that it would not be desirable to push forward with the development of a single housing waiting list at this time however the focus should be on ensuring there can be as swift a process for housing applicants for obtaining housing that meets their needs. The Cabinet Member for Wellbeing has now provided a response to the views and recommendations made by the Working Group and has agreed that these will improve methods of accessing social housing for those that need it and also improve the information available to Councillors on the issue. This includes:

- making the development of a common method of accessing social housing in Swansea a priority for the Housing Service
- encouraging RSLs to ensure that council officers are informed in advance of when their waiting lists will be closed and also informed when they will be re-opened and for what period of time
- reviewing and improving the information that is provided to Councillors about the role of RSLs and their allocation criteria

Following up previous inquiry reports

Over the last year six Scrutiny Inquiry reports have been published and presented to Cabinet. After a scrutiny report is presented Cabinet is then required to formally respond to the recommendations made to it within three months. This would entail a report back to Cabinet from the relevant Cabinet Member(s) with a view on the recommendations to inform the cabinet decision, together with a draft action plan. Four of the six Inquiry Reports have been responded to, resulting in 86% of recommendations being fully accepted with a further 7% being accepted in part. Following up on this work is an important part of the scrutiny process - to check that actions agreed by cabinet have been carried out in response to scrutiny recommendations, and assess the impact made. Arrangements will be made for each of the Inquiry Panels to reconvene for the purpose of follow up and this is likely to happen between six and twelve months from the cabinet decision, whatever is the best time to evaluate the difference made. It is envisaged that Inquiry Panels will use the opportunity to follow up by not just receiving a progress report from the relevant cabinet member(s) but by engaging more widely with those involved in the inquiry and others to obtain a better picture of improvement.

And the survey says...

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

Around 60% of non-executive councillors completed the annual councillor scrutiny survey. The results were considered by the Scrutiny Programme Committee as part of its annual work programme review. Some of the headlines from the results are:

- 72% agreed that the scrutiny arrangements were working well
- 87% agreed that scrutiny works in a cross cutting fashion and not restricted to departmental silos
- 90% agreed that non-executive members have good opportunities to participate in scrutiny

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