

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea - July 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

Improving the impact of scrutiny

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

The Scrutiny Programme Committee has made improving the impact of scrutiny its priority for the year ahead and agreed a set of actions to support this.

The focus on outcomes and impact is appropriate given that new arrangements have bed down and a number of in-depth inquiries and other scrutiny activities have been carried out.

Based on 'characteristics of effective scrutiny' recently developed by the Wales Scrutiny Officers Network, a series of actions have been identified that the committee, panel conveners and scrutiny councillors can take in order to improve the impact of scrutiny.

The action plan focuses on:

- facilitating pre-decision scrutiny
- improving different stages of the Inquiry 'method'
- widening involvement in question setting by councillors and the public, and
- improving public engagement

The majority of actions relate to scrutiny inquiries as they provide the greatest opportunities for impact. Amongst these the committee will work to ensure that measurable outcomes are established at the outset of future inquiries, inquiries ask 'results based' questions, there is a constructive dialogue with Cabinet about inquiry reports and their impact, and that evidence of impact is communicated widely. Cabinet response reports and follow up reports have been revised accordingly.

The committee is interested in various approaches to measure and improve impact, such as Results Based Accountability and Return on Investment and will consider how learning from these methods can be applied to scrutiny in Swansea.

Welsh minister praises Swansea Scrutiny

There was praise for Swansea's scrutiny arrangements at the recent Welsh Local Government Association Annual Conference from Lesley Griffiths AM, Minister for Local Government and Government Business.

The Local Government Minister highlighted Swansea, along with Bridgend, as good examples of best practice for scrutiny in her speech about good governance delivered to representatives from all Welsh Councils.

She highlighted the need to share learning with others about the positive impact of good scrutiny and the negative impact of limited or poor scrutiny.

Cabinet responds to Attainment and Wellbeing inquiry recommendations

(Lead: Councillor Fiona Gordon)

Cabinet formally responded to the Attainment and Wellbeing Scrutiny Inquiry report on 1 July. The inquiry considered how schools, the Council and partners can improve wellbeing in Schools. Cabinet has welcomed the report and agreed all 12 recommendations made by Panel and actions to implement these. The Inquiry Panel will monitor these actions over the next year and report back to the Scrutiny Programme Committee its view about progress and the impact of the inquiry. The Panel's recommendations focussed on ensuring that schools recognised the link between emotional wellbeing and attainment and that children first and foremost need to feel happy, safe and secure in order to be prepared to learn in the classroom. Cabinet also recognised that a number of the recommendations related to school governors and acknowledged that a wider piece of work is required to explore issues around best practice and mandatory training requirements for school governors.

Financial scrutiny in challenging times

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Swansea councillors and officers attended the launch of a new guide for Welsh local authorities offering advice about how scrutiny can add value to financial planning and financial management.

The guide, produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny, highlights that scrutiny must be able to demonstrate it adds value to each stage of the financial process – the budget setting process itself, the determination of priorities among competing demands, the effective use of funding and how financial monitoring and control takes place are all key issues requiring effective challenge. It draws on existing good practice from Welsh and English local government to provide practical advice and ideas on how councils can ensure effective scrutiny and accountability of the use of public money.

The Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel will receive feedback from the launch and consider the guide to help inform its work.

The guide is available to download at: www.cfps.org.uk/publications

Protocol for co-option: involving the public

The Scrutiny Programme Committee has developed a protocol for co-option to ensure a consistent approach that should be adopted across Scrutiny Panels and Working Groups.

The protocol outlines the benefits of co-option and the thinking that should be undertaken to best inform any decisions about co-option. It is designed to give clarity to conveners and scrutiny councillors about what steps to take. It essentially highlights the importance of having a clear rationale, taking advice and ensuring that there are no potential conflicts of interest.

It is important to remember that there were different ways of engaging people in the work of scrutiny. The protocol emphasises that there should be a strong case for co-opting someone, who rather than giving evidence, would work alongside scrutiny members to carry out the scrutiny. The committee recognised the importance of advertising the work of scrutiny to ensure the public are aware of work and opportunities to get involved.

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