

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – September 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

How can we increase inward investment to Swansea and the City Region?

(Lead: Councillor Jeff Jones)

The Inward Investment Scrutiny Inquiry Panel completed its look at investment into Swansea and the City Region and presented its final report to Cabinet on 26 August. The Scrutiny Inquiry found that Swansea has many assets that could potentially encourage investment to the area, for example its natural beauty, superfast broadband, good transport links, relatively low property and rental costs, a ready labour force, and facilities for training, research and development through our Universities and colleges locally. However, it highlighted that work needs to be done to pro actively encourage investment and currently the resources to do so are limited, recognising that this could potentially be addressed through the new City Regions Strategy. The Panel believed that we need to do more work with other organisations and local business to increase our resource and skills base in order to have a wider reach.

The inquiry took place over a six month period and took evidence from a wide selection of interested parties, including a survey of staff, local business, other public sector organisations and councillors. The Panel spoke to the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and officers from the council, Swansea Bay Futures, Business Support Wales, South West Wales Chamber of Commerce, Swansea University and the General Manager from Sony UK.

The Panel has made a number of recommendations to Cabinet including:

- putting a clear mechanism in place with the new city regions strategy that will make it accountable to local politicians
- introducing a single point of contact for business / investment queries
- developing (via the city region) an effective support network including allocating resources to do pro active work around seeking inward investment (these 'resources' must be commercially aware)

The Panel's main expectations of the impact of this report is improvement in relation to:

- organisations working together
- developing a brand and selling Swansea and the region on a global stage.
- investment in the region from organisations that are going to bring the maximum benefit to Swansea

You can find a copy of this report in the scrutiny reports library on our website:

<http://www.swansea.gov.uk/index.cfm?articleid=37047>

Improving public engagement

(Lead: Councillor Joe Hale)

The Public Engagement Scrutiny Inquiry Panel is about to conclude its work. Its final report is expected to come before the Scrutiny Programme Committee at the end of September. The inquiry has been looking at how the council could improve the way it engages with the public, staff and external stakeholders. The report will detail key findings from evidence gathered and conclusions from this work, and recommendations for Cabinet. Following a presentation of the final report by the convener, Cllr Joe Hale, the Scrutiny Programme Committee will be asked to agree its submission to Cabinet for decision. More on this to follow!

Scrutiny Annual Report for 2013/14 and looking forward

(Lead: Councillor Mike Day)

Every year Council requires that an annual report is produced for the work of scrutiny for the previous municipal year. The Scrutiny Annual Report for 2013/14 will be presented to Council on 30 September. The report highlights the work carried out by scrutiny, shows how scrutiny has made a difference, and supports continuous improvement for the scrutiny function. You can find a copy in the reports library on our website.

Over the last 12 months scrutiny has gained greater national significance. Both the Welsh Government and the Wales Audit Office have pointed to a greater role for scrutiny if it can demonstrate effectiveness. The last year has been a year of bedding in for scrutiny in Swansea. The new system has now become established. While Scrutiny Performance Panels have been getting to grips with their work, and working groups have been dealing with one-off issues, the first in depth Scrutiny Inquiry Panels have been making their recommendations to Cabinet. Swansea's Scrutiny arrangements have also been receiving recognition from outside the Council. Looking forward our key theme for the year ahead is impact!

Working with Audit, Inspectors and Regulators

The recent Wales Audit Office Annual Improvement report makes a number of references to scrutiny. It recognised that the Council's scrutiny arrangements are becoming more established but one issue highlighted was about the public information available in advance of panel meetings. We have responded by publishing a monthly meetings list for scrutiny, including all panel and working group meetings. In addition, individual posts seeking public involvement are published on the scrutiny blog for specific meetings. Members of the public are invited to contact us to observe meetings or to receive more information on any of this informal work.

We look forward to the upcoming in-depth corporate governance review which will look further at the impact of the Council's scrutiny arrangements. The committee is also taking steps to consider the Auditor General for Wales' report called 'Good Scrutiny? Good Question!'. This national study makes a number of recommendations. The committee is meeting with Tim Buckle, from the Wales Audit Office, to consider the report in more detail, identify learning points and consider implications for scrutiny practice in Swansea. Amongst improvements identified the report calls for scrutiny to be aligned more closely with external audit, inspection and review.

Scrutiny Work Programme

The committee has adopted a new approach: with every piece of scrutiny work suggested for inquiry starting off as a 'working group' – an in-depth inquiry will only follow if the group agreed it was necessary and could suggest appropriate terms of reference to the committee. The 'working group' approach will involve a detailed presentation of the subject matter at the outset which will enable opinion and proposals to be submitted to cabinet member(s) at that point, with no further work needed, or help inform the focus of any inquiry. This should enable more focused and potentially quicker pieces of scrutiny. It will provide flexibility to deal with things in different ways rather than follow a rigid in-depth inquiry process, depending on the issue. It could also improve impact as the experience of recent working groups have shown more impact with a single hit than some of the in-depth pieces of work. The first 2 pieces of work that will follow this approach will be potential inquiries into: Transforming Adult Social Services; and Corporate Culture.

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