

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Championing Children’s Rights

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones, Fiona Gordon, Paxton Hood-Williams)

Scrutiny is championing children’s rights in Swansea.

Scrutiny Councillors have identified ways in which they can champion children’s rights in Swansea, and ask the right questions to assess the work of the Council in this area.

For relevant scrutiny activities questioning strategies are going to be tailored, based on the guiding principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the following were identified as useful questions:

- Is the work being scrutinised designed/planned in the best interests of children and young people?
- Does the work being scrutinised:
 - foster good relationships between different groups?
 - advance equality of opportunity between different groups?
 - eliminate/reduce discrimination and/or social exclusion and how does it do this?
- Does the work being scrutinised contain adequate provision to safeguard those involved?
- Does the work being scrutinised offer resources, skills and contributions necessary for the survival and full development of children and young people
- What consultation and engagement has been undertaken? Does it meet the National Participation Standards for Children and Young People?

This is in response to two key developments:

- Council agreement (September 2013) to embed the UNCRC within the Council’s policy framework; and
- the launch of a Children & Young People’s Rights Scheme by Cabinet (November 2014) which provided an overview of the arrangements in place to demonstrate ‘due regard’ to the UNCRC and consider the rights of the child in decision making processes.

A training session was also held in October to develop understanding of children’s rights and the policy context within which they sit in Swansea.

The Scrutiny Programme Committee recently monitored progress on the implementation of the Council’s Children & Young People’s Rights Scheme and recognised a lot of good work, but made a number of suggestions:

- Making a session on ‘Children’s Rights’ part of the councillor induction programme
- Clearer mapping of schools to show the level of engagement with the Rights Respecting School initiative.
- Close working with Governors (which include councillors) in encouraging those schools not already engaged in the Rights Respecting School Initiative, as well as supporting the rights of children and young people generally.
- More use of social media to develop the involvement and participation of children and young people.
- Promotion of the City & County of Swansea as ‘rights respecting’ in corporate branding.

Public Question Time introduced

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Public Question Time is now on the scrutiny agenda.

There is now more opportunity for the public to get involved in the work of scrutiny and participate in meetings. Scrutiny councillors are committed to getting more members of the public contributing in the work of scrutiny so that they can reflect their views.

Following a commitment to develop opportunities for public participation a 'Public Question Time' will be in the agenda of future Scrutiny Programme Committee meetings, starting with the meeting on 11 January 2016.

Public Question Time will operate in the same way that it operates at Council and Cabinet. In practice for the committee this means:

- Any member of the public present may put a question to the Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee and any Cabinet Member(s) present on matters included on the open part of the agenda.
- A 10 minute period will be allocated for Public Question Time
- No notice has to be given of a Public Question but any submitted in advance will receive priority within the allotted 10 minutes.

The introduction of a Public Question Time is one action to help deliver agreed priorities for scrutiny. Public Question Time is in addition to existing opportunities for the public to suggest questions to the committee for Cabinet Member Question & Answer Sessions, as well as make requests for scrutiny.

Developing a 'can do' culture

(Lead: Councillor Andrew Jones)

Cabinet has agreed to implement recommendations contained within a report on the council's corporate culture made by scrutiny councillors.

An in-depth inquiry on the Council's Corporate Culture found that there was no one overarching culture within the Council, rather a number of shared cultures that operated within the Council to bind us together as one organisation. The challenges faced by cuts to Council budgets and the implications of public sector re-organisation posed a serious threat to that notion of a shared culture. Therefore as Councillors, management and staff we had a shared responsibility to respond to these challenges by developing a "can do culture" that ensures the citizens of Swansea continue to receive the best Council service possible.

The evidence showed that there was a genuine will and enthusiasm from all involved to develop a "can do culture" throughout the Council. However this can only be achieved through the development of a clear shared vision that encourages innovation, values staff and puts in place mechanisms that empower and motivate all involved to deliver high quality services.

Cabinet agreed all 19 recommendations made by scrutiny and will draw up an action plan for taking them forward over the coming months. The Panel will reconvene during 2016 to monitor implementation of recommendation and assess the impact of this inquiry.

This topic was chosen for scrutiny because as a Council our corporate culture underpins everything we do, from how we engage with our citizens and provide services to how we treat our staff and how we grow and develop as an organisation. The Corporate Culture Scrutiny Inquiry Panel originally reported its findings and recommendations to Cabinet on 20 August. The Cabinet response was made on 15 October.

Shining a light on Mental Health

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Scrutiny is looking at a serious issue which has for too long been neglected – children’s mental health.

A new scrutiny inquiry has been agreed, looking at ways in which the council and its partners can reduce the demand for specialist child & adolescent mental health services. There is concern because the number of referrals into specialist child and adolescent mental health services has doubled in the last 4 years and resources are getting scarcer. Specialist Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services are commissioned by the Local Health Board.

The Panel’s work will lead to:

- Evidenced proposals that will lead to better access to child & adolescent mental health services
- Increased councillor understanding about how child and adolescent mental health services are delivered and the effectiveness of the services
- Greater public awareness of child and adolescent mental health services.

This will be carried out by a cross-party Panel of scrutiny councillors, but they need your help. A ‘call for evidence’ has been issued. Over the next few months the Panel will be seeking a range of perspectives into this area so that they can propose practical changes for improvement.

Interested groups or individuals are encouraged to submit written evidence to the inquiry by email to scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk. The Panel may contact you to discuss your evidence. All evidence that is submitted will usually be published as part of the inquiry, unless specifically requested otherwise.

Chair’s Roundup:

This is my second quarterly roundup of the work of [scrutiny](#).

Improving Social Services

Some good news! The Care & Social Services Inspectorate Wales (CSSIW) has recently praised our scrutiny of child & family services and adult services, noting “effective and well managed scrutiny arrangements”. This is recognition of the hard work of both the Child & Family Services and Transformation of Adult Social Services Scrutiny Panels, and their contribution to improving social services. The report said that our work programmes are clear, both panels’ scrutiny of performance by councillors is robust and challenging, there is evidence of member led policy development and challenge to decision making and we’re getting our message out there through social media and other means, to improve information about scrutiny activities. Amongst these positive comments inspectors noted close working with the executive and officers. These comments can be found in the recently published Performance Evaluation Report for 2014/15.

Developing the Relationship with Audit Committee

We have been looking at developing the relationship between the Scrutiny Programme Committee and the Audit Committee. The committee recently met with the Chair of the Audit Committee, Alan Thomas, who told us that he was pleased with the relationship between the two committees, coordination, and mechanisms for dialogue and raising issues. He was also pleased at being able to participate in the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference. He did not feel there were any concerns about duplication in work plans. He also remarked at the significant amount of scrutiny being undertaken and work completed, and praised the commitment of those scrutiny councillors involved and management of the overall work programme.

Scrutiny of Education through Regional Working

We have been working with the six councils participating in Education through Regional Working (ERW). ERW is the regional school improvement service and we have been meeting with colleagues across the region in order to coordinate scrutiny work across the region and ensure a consistent approach. A Scrutiny Councillor Group has been set up to support this. I am pleased that the Swansea Scrutiny Team is providing support for this group as the Council's contribution to ERW. The Group will meet for the first time in Swansea during March 2016.

Holding Cabinet Members to account.

Each month's Scrutiny Programme Committee meeting features a Q & A session with a Cabinet Member in order to hold them to account for their work. As I write we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member for Anti-Poverty in January and Cabinet Member for Adults and Vulnerable People in February. We have developed a programme for all Cabinet Members to come before the committee during the year. Acting as a 'critical friend' we question and challenge them on their priorities, actions, achievement and impact. We invite members of the public and all scrutiny councillors to contribute ideas to ensure the committee asks the right questions. A summary of each session and views of the committee are published in the form of letter to relevant Cabinet Members. Over the last few months we have put questions to the Cabinet Members for Education, Transformation & Performance, and the Leader / Cabinet Member for Finance & Strategy.

Working in different ways to look at some issues.

Adopting a more light-touch approach, some of the topics which we have looked at recently through one-off Working Groups have included Civic Events and Local Flood Risk Management, sharing our views and recommendations with relevant Cabinet Members. Others in the pipeline include a look at the issue of Tethered Horses, and progress in relation to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard.

Co-opting Scrutiny Performance Panel Conveners

The valuable contribution of Scrutiny Performance Panel Conveners has been recognised by their co-option to the Scrutiny Programme Committee. We recognised that they have developed knowledge and expertise about specific services and would add value to the work of committee when those areas are being discussed, with their contribution to questioning. I think there is also wider benefit to the work programme from co-option, enabling better co-ordination between the work of the Committee and Performance Panels.

Making the work of scrutiny more transparent and accessible.

Something really important to us is making the work of scrutiny more transparent and accessible. That's why we have created an on-line '[publications page](#)'. Here you can access all scrutiny agenda packs, reports and letters as well as responses from Cabinet Members. Filters enable easy access to publications by topic, publication type or meeting type. Publications linked to a specific piece of work can now be viewed in one place. This initiative follows a suggestion from Wales Audit Office during the recent corporate assessment.

We want to know if people have any issues of concern.

Even with a work programme established [requests for scrutiny](#) from all scrutiny councillors or members of the public can be made throughout the year. I will consider any issue raised and, with the committee's agreement, determine how best scrutiny can deal with it to make a difference.

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