

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

## Supporting school governors through challenging times

(Lead: Councillor Fiona Gordon)

If the relationship between head teachers and school governors is too cosy it may affect the quality of education in your school. This is one of the claims that was investigated by scrutiny.

A panel of councillors recognised and paid tribute to the valuable work carried out by the 1300 school governors in Swansea. This work is done on a voluntary basis for the benefit of the children in their schools. However, responding to claims that many governing bodies simply act as ‘cheerleaders’ for the head teacher, a number of measures have been proposed to improve the confidence of school governors. The main message in the report published is that school governors can make a real difference but only if they have the information, training and support that they need.

The question considered by the Panel was: How can the Council ensure that school governors provide effective challenge for their schools? The report, *A Very Challenging Role*, includes a number of recommendations for the Council’s Cabinet including:

- Clearer guidance for governors about their role and what they should expect
- A mechanism for matching new governors with the governing bodies that have a gap for their particular skills
- Better information for governors provided on websites
- Encourage businesses to give their staff time off to serve as school governors

The report also includes a number of good practice ideas for governing bodies such as:

- Encouraging governors to use independent sources of information such as the [My Local School](#) website
- Mentors to help new governors
- Involvement of children and staff in meetings
- Stronger links with community groups and projects
- Training for the whole governing body wherever possible

The report was presented to Cabinet in March and a decision on the recommendations is expected in April. The report was produced by a cross party panel of councillors and draws on the views of education experts, school inspectors and school governors themselves. Professor Catherine Farrell from the University of South Wales worked with the Panel as a special advisor. Three good practice schools also contributed evidence to the inquiry; Hafod Primary, Bishopston Comprehensive and Ysgol Bryn Tawe. Councillors visited these schools and observed their governors meetings to pick up good practice ideas.

Councillor Fiona Gordon, Convener for the Panel, said: The role of school governors has changed significantly over recent years, with governors playing an increasingly important part in the management of schools, and school improvement. In many schools, governing bodies have responded to this change, but in others, old ways of working need to be updated to ensure governors have the capacity to challenge schools sufficiently. Each governing body has a different dynamic, just as each school is unique, and this report aims to point out general principles of good practice which the Panel recommends that governors are encouraged to consider.

## Ensuring education for all

*(Lead: Councillor Cheryl Philpott)*

Schools should be doing more to keep children in mainstream education, and not in specialist units. This is one of the conclusions of a report looking at services for those children that are educated other than at school.

The Education Inclusion Scrutiny Inquiry concluded that there is a need for improvement in meeting the needs of this group of vulnerable children. It argued that there needs to be a greater emphasis on reintegration of young people back into school, and better communication between professionals. Scrutiny councillors also called for urgent improvements to the fabric and suitability of the buildings used to house those children being educated other than at school.

Cabinet has now accepted recommendations, which means action to improve the quality of education for these children. As a result of the scrutiny inquiry, work will be done to:

- Develop a Behaviour Plan and Strategy
- Encourage school head teachers to explore ways in which joint working could take place as part of this Plan, as well as part of the development of school to school support
- Develop clearly defined entry and exit plans in relation to reintegrating young people back in to school
- Train all EOTAS staff and external providers in UNCRC principles
- Develop a new 14-16 service for young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties as part of an EOTAS Pathways restructure
- Explore other sites for Pupil Referral Unit provision

Councillors working on the Inquiry Panel wanted to ensure that every child is fulfilling its full potential by being able to access education even if they are not able to attend mainstream school. Councillors were concerned at reports that pupil referral units had inconsistent practice and that they are too often seen as an afterthought both within local and national priorities.

Scrutiny Councillors spoke to a number of interested parties including for example Head teachers from Bishop Gore and Pentrehafod Comprehensive Schools and Clase Primary School, Careers Wales West, Youth Offending Service, Swansea Youth Service, and Social Services.

## Challenging spending

*(Lead: Councillor Chris Holley)*

The Council should do more to involve the public in difficult budget decisions.

A meeting of the Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel called the Leader of the Council, Councillor Rob Stewart, and Chief Accountant to give account for the budget proposals for 2016/17. The scrutiny process also enabled questions from members of the public.

Scrutiny councillors raised issues for the attention of Cabinet, which were presented by Councillor Chris Holley, convener. This included calling for:

- Improvements to budget consultation, such as the level of detail provided, to enable the public to make more informed decisions
- Public consultation on proposals arising from Commissioning Reviews about future service delivery

Questions were asked about the funding of leisure and cultural services, community asset and building transfer, fees and charges, new commercial approaches. The Panel expressed concern that continuing reductions to the Council's budget could feasibly lead to a long term position where there is no money available for anything other than statutory services.

## Meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard

*(Lead: Councillor Terry Hennegan)*

Council tenants are on course to benefit from improvements to the quality of their homes, such as new kitchens and bathrooms.

This is part of plans to deliver the Welsh Housing Quality Standard to all Council homes by 2020. It requires all social landlords to improve their housing stock to an acceptable level by 2020, to make sure that all homes are of good quality and suitable for the needs of existing and future residents.

A cross-party Scrutiny Working Group met to discuss progress with this important issue and was pleased with this news. Councillors stated that feedback from tenants in their wards was very positive and offered congratulations to officers on the work that has been done so far and the rapid acceleration of the investment programme. It was clear that the Council has a good grasp on what is required to achieve the standard by 2020 and that the mechanisms are in place to ensure that progress is measured and reported accurately. The Working Group wrote to the Cabinet Member for Next Generation Services, who has responsibility for Housing Services. Key points included:

- To expand existing ways of communicating with tenants through increased use of Building Advisory Groups – which are a tried and tested way to ensure that contractors working in an area are able to get to know the tenants and local councillors, and can help to prevent problems escalating.
- To increase the amount of information provided to tenants and councillors on long term plans, to enable them to understand where their properties / wards fall in the investment programme priorities.
- Take 'before and after' photos in order to publicise the improvement works.

## Chair's Roundup:

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

### Working on in-depth inquiries

We have been busy gathering evidence over the last few months on:

- Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services – an Inquiry Panel is looking at ways in which the council and its partners can reduce the demand for specialist child & adolescent mental health services.
- Building Sustainable Communities - an Inquiry Panel is focused on how the council can best support residents to run some services in their own communities.

These inquiries will report shortly their findings, conclusions and recommendations.

A new inquiry is expected to start in the next month with a focus on the council's priority and plans on tackling poverty.

### 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 Enterprise, Development & Regeneration in April and Cabinet Member for Environment & Transportation in May. We will develop a programme for all Cabinet Members to come before the committee during the coming 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 Next Generation Services, Adults & Vulnerable People, and Anti-Poverty.

## **Scrutinising proposed Cabinet decisions**

One of the ways in which scrutiny can hold the cabinet to account is to carry out pre-decision scrutiny. This means questioning Cabinet Members on proposals, e.g. rationale, potential impact / implications, options considered, consultation undertaken, and presenting views to Cabinet ahead of decisions. We usually reserve pre-decision scrutiny for matters taking into account strategic impact, public interest and financial implications. Over the last few months we have looked at proposals in relation to the disposal of former Penllergaer Civic Centre, the development of City Centre Sites, and the Review of Abergelli and The Beeches Day Services. A look at changes to the School Music Service Arrangements with Neath Port Talbot Council is also planned for April.

## **Working in different ways to look at some issues**

Adopting a more light-touch approach, one-off Working Groups are set up to look at some topics. However there is flexibility where further work is necessary. One of these has been the issue of Tethered Horses. This work has generated a lot of partner and public interest. The Working Group has been keen to ensure everyone who wishes to express a view is able to do so, and has gathered a range of evidence to help it make recommendations to relevant Cabinet Members. Conclusions will be drawn in relation to a petition that has been made to the Council to ban the tethering of horses on public land. This work is coming to a close.

## **Attracting Inward Investment**

Following our scrutiny inquiry major steps forward had been made in relation to inward investment in the Swansea Bay City Region. The inquiry provided focus for how Swansea and the wider City Regions should be promoted and presented to potential investors. Recommendations identified key elements of an effective process for establishing and operating inward investment response and support. The recommendations made have been put in place, including the creation of a regional marketing suite for inward investment inquiries based at the Swansea Bay University Campus, to provide a welcoming 'front of house' to potential investors.

## **Improving the Streetscene**

Another inquiry carried out has helped lead to a change in structure, with the cleansing service forming part of a new Waste Management and Parks Service. This should result in better working relationships between cleaning and waste services, and operational efficiencies. In response to another recommendation more information about our services to and one to one contact with commercial waste customers has led to an increase in separation of commercial food waste by over 10 tonnes a week.

## **Making the work of scrutiny more transparent and accessible**

Just a reminder about our on-line 'publications page' for easy access to all scrutiny agenda packs, reports and letters as well as responses from Cabinet Members. We know that it is important to make the work of scrutiny transparent and accessible.

## **Looking back and looking forward**

We have been inviting people to reflect on the past year of scrutiny and are collecting views about future work through our annual survey. The Scrutiny Programme Committee will look at the results and host the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference, which will take place on 12 May. All non-executive councillors are invited to participate in this. The work programme will try to balance community concerns with issues of importance to the council. We want to know if people have any issues of concern and will see how best scrutiny could deal with it to make a difference.

### **Connect with Scrutiny:**

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