

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2016/2017 (No. 1)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

‘Swansea’s dedication to open, transparent and innovative scrutiny’

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Swansea Scrutiny has been identified as amongst the best in the UK following recognition by the Municipal Journal, the leading information, intelligence and news resource about the UK’s local authorities.

The yearly [Municipal Journal Awards](#) (otherwise known as the ‘local government Oscars’) recognise and celebrate local government achievements. Swansea Council beat off competition from other local authorities to be shortlisted for the award for Excellence in Governance and Scrutiny. Swansea made the final six though unfortunately missed out on the top prize. That shouldn’t detract from the real achievement of being a finalist and pride in the strength of scrutiny arrangements here, and how we are making a difference. It shows how far we’ve come!

The shortlisting reflects the Council’s ‘agile’ approach to scrutiny work – less of the work is done in formal committees and more by flexible working groups. It has also attracted attention from other councils. This approach allows councillors to spend more time getting to grips with the most important issues and to respond quickly to issues of public concern. When Swansea Council introduced a single committee for scrutiny in November 2012 the idea was simple – to have a model that was member led, responsive, flexible and able to involve every backbench councillor according to their interests. The benefits of a single rather than multi committee system are well known but this idea has been developed and refined into an effective and distinctive approach. What makes the Swansea approach different are the five principles that underpin it:

1. The highest priority is holding the whole Cabinet to account through an ongoing public conversation
2. Every scrutiny councillor has the opportunity to contribute according to their interests
3. Be flexible with the work plan in the best interests of citizens
4. Simplicity is essential for engagement
5. Regular reflection on how to be more effective followed by improvements

In developing our agile model we have brought in a number of innovations that have helped to improve accountability, work planning and public engagement. Ultimately good scrutiny should make a difference for citizens and councillors – we believe our model does exactly that.

The Award Judging Panel had this to say about our award submission:

“Swansea’s dedication to open, transparent and innovative scrutiny supports councillors to work in flexible ways that are visible to the public and positively impact decisions and outcomes. The Council can, in the view of judges, clearly demonstrate how its approach to governance is adding value to way key services are planned and delivered.”

Councillor Mary Jones, Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee says:

“I am delighted that we have been shortlisted for this national award. It reflects the hard work that scrutiny councillors have been willing to put in to improve services and make a difference to their communities. This shortlisting also reflects the engagement of councillors across parties and their support for the system – it is a real team effort.”

Encouraging a can do culture from day one

(Lead: Councillor Andrew Jones)

The importance of having a can do attitude is being stressed to Council staff from the day they start a new job as part of their Council induction.

This is one of the steps being taken to develop and improve the culture of the Council following a report by scrutiny councillors. The report looked at staff engagement, bullying and harassment, employee behaviours and the staff suggestions scheme.

Some of the recommendations in the report included:

- Take steps to ensure new staff receive corporate induction within 1 month of starting work with the Council
- Embrace a wide range of innovation methods to bring about changes to the way that organisation works
- Ensure managers incorporate innovation into staff appraisals, 1-2-1s and team meetings
- Encourage Senior Managers to undertake 'back to the floor' type activities

Councillors recently met to consider what impact their report has had. They heard that significant work continues to be done to advance and embed the work of the Innovation Programme which is the focus for the Council's work on cultural change.

The [inquiry report](#) has enabled the programme to focus its efforts and resources in specific directions for example upskilling staff in innovation tools and techniques.

The follow up report from the Cabinet Member for Transformation & Performance highlighted that achieving and embedding a 'can do' corporate culture is an ongoing and long term process. His report also includes an [action plan](#) giving progress on recommendations implemented.

Councillors were pleased to hear that the inquiry had provided a focus for improvement in the area of corporate culture and will continue to be a checklist for future work.

The Wales Audit Office has also contacted us in order to feature this piece of scrutiny for sharing as best practice across Wales.

Raising concerns about lost trees

(Lead: Councillor David Cole)

Scrutiny councillors have raised concerns about trees not being replaced in Swansea.

Trees are an essential part of the urban landscape and the Council carries important work out to ensure that trees are protected and preserved.

Scrutiny councillors recently discussed the Council's responsibilities for preserving trees and the significant environmental benefits of urban trees.

In a [letter](#) to the Cabinet Member scrutiny councillors highlighted the importance of an effective tree preservation service. They also recommended that prosecutions for breaching tree preservation orders are publicised, that the parks service set up their own tree nursery and that Council departments replant trees that are removed during the course of their work.

The scrutiny annual report for 2015/16

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

A summary of the work of scrutiny during the last year is now available. Our annual report has been prepared and was presented to Council in July.

The [scrutiny annual report](#) is set out as a simple scorecard, which highlights a small number of key indicators to illustrate 4 performance questions, reflecting a 'results based' approach. The report shows:

- How much scrutiny we did
- How well we did it
- How much we affected the business of the Council
- The outcomes of scrutiny

Whilst the MJ Award shortlisting is the highlight of the year, a number of our performance indicators are showing improvement, such as: the number of meetings; the number of councillors involved; the number of Cabinet reports subjected to pre-decision scrutiny; the number of recommendations being accepted; and, the level of understanding amongst staff of the work of scrutiny.

The report is informed by results from an annual scrutiny survey and feedback from those involved, including external inspectors.

Chair's Roundup:

This is my first quarterly roundup of the work of [scrutiny](#) for 2016/17.

Choosing our priorities for 2016/17

We held our annual scrutiny work planning conference in May to help us to focus on the right things, and taking into account the ideas shared about future scrutiny activities the committee has agreed new work for the coming year. Councillors considered a range of inputs including:

- Review of last year's work plan
- The Council's corporate priorities (provided by Mike Hawes, Corporate Director for Resources)
- Suggestions and ideas from Cabinet, the public, staff, partners and from councillors (via survey)

The Scrutiny Programme Committee has agreed to arrange new potential in-depth inquiries into Partnerships & Collaboration, and Preparedness for School. There will also be one-off Working Groups on Planning, Roads & Highways Maintenance, Corporate Building Services and Digital Inclusion.

Scrutiny of Swansea Public Services Board

Following the move from Local Service Boards to Public Service Boards, in line with the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, the Committee has established a multi-agency Public Services Board Scrutiny Performance Panel to discharge its responsibility. Taking into account the requirements of the Act and Guidance, the Scrutiny Panel will be a body of 12 members, including six scrutiny councillors and six invited non-executives from local partner agencies. Following recruitment of external members the Scrutiny Panel meets for the first time on 28 September. Over the course of its work the Panel will be considering what difference the [Swansea Public Services Board](#) is making for citizens. The conclusions of the previous Local Service Board Scrutiny Panel are contained within a [letter](#) to the Chair of the Local Service Board, Cllr Rob Stewart.

New Adult Services Performance Panel

Another new Performance Panel has been set up following the conclusion of the work of the Transformation of Adult Social Services Panel. The Adult Services Scrutiny Performance Panel, will mirror the approach of the Child & Family Services Performance Panel to regularly review, monitor and challenge service performance. The convener of the Panel is Councillor Uta Clay.

Working on in-depth inquiries

Final reports on the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services and Building Sustainable Communities Inquiries are expected soon. These reports will come before the Committee before being presented to Cabinet for decision. The Tackling Poverty Inquiry has just started and will run until December.

Scrutiny of Commissioning Reviews

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 course of the year we are going to be looking at all Commissioning Review reports prior to Cabinet decision. These are significant decisions about the future of our services, under the backdrop of financial pressures and sustainability. The Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel kicked things off with a look at the Waste Management Commissioning Review in June.

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 Education in August and Cabinet Member for Anti-Poverty in September. 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. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet Members for Enterprise, Development & Regeneration, Environment & Transportation, Services for Children & Young People, and Wellbeing & Healthy City.

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. The work of the [Tethered Horses Working Group](#) has now come to a close. Generating a lot of partner and public interest, the Group has passed its recommendations to Councillor Mark Child, Cabinet Member for Wellbeing & Healthy City. It responds to a petition that was made to the Council to ban the tethering of horses on public land. The Working Group recognised arguments for and against, but in the common interest of horse welfare the way forward was a piloted implementation of a ban that combines enforcement and education. The Cabinet Member is planning to meet with all interested groups to work out the best way in which this can be achieved.

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.

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