

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

The best way to tackle poverty is to work with the people affected by poverty

(Lead: Councillor Sybil Crouch)

Scrutiny councillors have identified ways in which the Council can best tackle poverty in Swansea, having spent the last six months reviewing current approaches.

Amongst its significant findings the Scrutiny Inquiry found that:

- in developing (and delivering) a strategy it was vital that people experiencing poverty were not only involved, but involved in a powerful and meaningful way.
- involving people experiencing poverty should be more than a project and must be integral to the strategy.
- good practice elsewhere suggests benefits in adopting the Poverty Truth Commission model. The model focuses on relationships, and trains both people experiencing poverty and people in public life, and supports them to work together on joint projects around key themes based on issues raised by those experiencing poverty.

The Panel of Councillors believe that this model, adapted to fit Swansea’s circumstances, could not only provide a challenge and culture change but also be a flagship for the strategy – demonstrating the commitment to involve people experiencing poverty. Tackling Poverty is one of the Council’s top five priorities and the inquiry focussed on how the Council’s Tackling Poverty Strategy can be improved. The scrutiny inquiry report and recommendations will be presented to Cabinet on 16 March, who will then provide a response in the new few months.

The Panel Convener, Councillor Sybil Crouch, said:

‘Tackling Poverty is key to delivering the health and wellbeing of our citizens and of our city. We heard powerful testimony from people experiencing poverty and I am especially grateful to them for taking time to tell us what they face on a daily basis. I was moved by their testimony and by their courage in the face of complex problems. The Tackling Poverty Strategy lays considerable emphasis on the need to involve people experiencing poverty, without whom “there is no delivery”. The evidence we heard from the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission persuades us that this is a model which Swansea should follow and it is one of our principle recommendations that this should be actioned at the earliest opportunity. I hope that our recommendations will be accepted in the positive spirit in which they are made and that this important work will gain a renewed focus and impetus.’

Scrutiny has contributed to this vital debate by providing:

- Evidenced proposals that will lead to the strategy being more effective
- The views of people experiencing poverty
- The views of key stakeholders
- Consideration of the conclusions and recommendations from national reports and an assessment of the implications for Swansea
- Identification of good practice/research elsewhere and whether there is any learning for Swansea’s approach
- Increased councillor understanding about the Tackling Poverty Strategy
- Greater public awareness of the work of the Tackling Poverty Strategy

The full report is available on our publications page: www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutinypublications

Helping to redesign homecare services for older people

(Lead: Councillor Uta Clay)

Scrutiny councillors have made an impact on the delivery of social care at home.

The convener of the Panel which carried out the inquiry, Councillor Uta Clay, said: 'We were pleased to learn that the inquiry had provided useful research and evidence which helped inform the service design for the adult services model and delivery options for the three commissioning reviews. We were also pleased that the inquiry had improved awareness and understanding of a complex topic amongst officers and councillors and had helped to promote constructive debate within the commissioning review process.'

Councillors made a number of recommendations, agreed by Cabinet in 2015, and met recently to discuss progress with the implementation of actions and assess the impact made by this scrutiny inquiry.

The scrutiny report, called 'Building an Independence Service' focussed on how the Council and its partners can best support older people to remain in their own homes. The follow up of this inquiry revealed that all agreed recommendations have been actioned and completed.

The panel was pleased to hear that its work has made a positive contribution to:

- a re-design of the Adult Services Model
- a commissioning review of domiciliary care services for older people
- the re-structure of the adult Services Intake Team
- the Introduction and expansion of Local Area Co-ordination
- a better understanding of the underlying issues contributing to delays in sourcing packages of care

Ensuring the best facilities for children educated away from mainstream schools

(Lead: Councillor Cheryl Philpott)

The work of scrutiny councillors have helped to bring about service improvements for children that are educated other than at school (EOTAS) by:

- raising the profile of this service and issues
- improving understanding / awareness about EOTAS
- providing useful research / evidence, and
- making a positive impact on the service as a whole

Councillors met recently with the Cabinet Member for Education and relevant officers to follow up upon the impact of their scrutiny inquiry into Education Inclusion.

The convener of the inquiry, Councillor Cheryl Philpott said: 'The Panel found that good progress was being made in relation to the recommendations made in the inquiry report and that these have informed decision making and the recent overhaul of the entire education other than at school service. The Panel were particularly pleased to hear about progress in finding a more suitable building and location for EOTAS services, and were encouraged by the pending feasibility study for a potential new facility in Cockett.'

The Panel now look forward with optimism for children using EOTAS services and feel vulnerable children within the education system in Swansea will be much better served moving forward. Councillors were particularly pleased to hear the ambition for this service is not just to be good but to be excellent.

Scrutiny is making the news

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

It is pleasing to report that we have seen a growth in the amount of media coverage for the work of scrutiny this year. One of the identified improvement objectives for scrutiny is the need for more coverage in the media so that the public are more aware of our work. Because of this we are now monitoring the amount of media coverage received as part of performance measures for developing scrutiny.

We have seen media coverage from the South Wales Evening Post, BBC Wales online, Swansea Bay Radio for a range of scrutiny activities including discussions on:

- Gypsy & Traveller Site Provision
- Welsh Housing Quality Standard
- Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services
- School Reserves
- City Centre Regeneration
- Houses in Multiple Occupation
- Building Sustainable Communities / Community Action

Over the past years or so we have paid a lot of attention to the way we communicate, including developing a more 'news' writing style. The service has also been developing closer links with the Council's Communications Team in order learn about effective writing and attract more media attention. Scrutiny Dispatches has evolved over recent years so that it can provide readily useable content for the local press. We have also continued to blog on the big stories in scrutiny and use social media platforms such as Twitter to promote and share our work.

The media coverage seen over the last year is also a good indication of the amount of scrutiny topics which have been of public interest. It reflects well on what is aimed to be a balanced scrutiny work programme.

Chair's Roundup:

This is my third quarterly roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2016/17.

Gathering evidence

Another inquiry, going on over the last four months, has been looking at Children's Readiness for School (lead: Councillor Hazel Morris). The Panel has gathered a range of evidence and perspectives on this important issue, including a number of schools and early year's settings, which will inform conclusions and recommendations for improvement. A final report will be published in April 2017.

Questioning Cabinet Members

Each month's 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 Transformation & Performance in March. 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 Environment & Transformation, Adults & Vulnerable People, and the Leader / Cabinet Member for Finance & Strategy.

Examining Commissioning Reviews

One of the ways in which scrutiny hold the cabinet to account is to carry out pre-decision scrutiny. This means questioning Cabinet Members on proposals, taking into account strategic impact, public interest and financial implications, and presenting views and any concerns to Cabinet ahead of decisions. Amongst these are Commissioning Reviews where Cabinet is taking significant decisions about the future of our services, under the backdrop of financial pressures and sustainability. The Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel has dealt with a number of these reviews and most recently discussed the Parks & Cleansing Commissioning Review.

Picking up public concerns – HMOs

Following a public request for scrutiny we agreed to set up a Working Group to look at issues around Houses in Multiple Occupation. This work has now concluded. The Working Group heard from Cabinet Members, officers and members of the public and has made a number of recommendations in a letter to the relevant Cabinet Members. The scrutiny councillors involved in this work have called for clear controls over the density and spread of HMOs across the City and County of Swansea, most notably in Uplands and St Thomas given the proximity to university campuses. They also call for more resources to be directed to HMO enforcement activities. A response is expected soon.

Working in different ways to look at some issues – Digital Inclusion

Adopting a more light-touch approach, one-off Working Groups are set up to look at some topics. A Working Group has been set up to look at the issue of digital inclusion. A meeting has been arranged for 6 March for a discussion on plans, activities, achievements, impact, challenges, and overall assessment. Digital inclusion is an important issue for the Council, given that there is a move towards increasing digital contact and making more services on-line. There is concern about the risk of digital exclusion, and how the council is helping citizens to get on-line. The Working Group will be expected to ask the relevant Cabinet Member and officers about: the Council's strategy to ensure access to services for all; work to ensure that people are not being excluded from services once they become digital; and the quality of digital services.

Evaluating the year

One of the hallmarks of an effective scrutiny function is one that reflects on and learns from experience. For this reason, at this time of the year, we undertake our Annual Scrutiny Survey. We will be inviting all councillors, staff, partners and the public to tell us what they think about scrutiny in Swansea, as well as collect views about future work. The results of the survey help provide us with data to demonstrate how well we are doing and outcomes, and will be published in our Annual Report in the summer.

Planning future work

The work programme will try to balance community concerns with issues of importance to the council. Anyone living or working in Swansea can get in touch with us about matters of concern as scrutiny may be able to help. We will see how best scrutiny could deal with it to make a difference. We also have time set aside at every Scrutiny Programme Committee for a public question time, for questions to any Cabinet Members present about their work or to myself concerning the scrutiny work programme.

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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