

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2018/2019 (No. 2)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Helping to Shape the Council’s new Homelessness Strategy

(Lead: Councillors Peter Black / Mary Jones)

Scrutiny Councillors have contributed to the Council’s new Homelessness Strategy.

Homelessness has been a topic of significant interest and concern over the last year for scrutiny. Scrutiny councillors were able to influence the Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan for 2018-2022 through a series of meetings to discuss the issues, challenges, and plans. The Strategy, approved by Cabinet in November, took on board issues and suggestions made by scrutiny councillors. Scrutiny contributed initially through a cross-party Working Group, chaired by Councillor Peter Black, mid-2018 to look at the Council’s activities to manage homelessness, the current position, performance of relevant services and the challenges faced. This work benefitted from the involvement of a number of interested parties including: Swansea Homeless Sanctuary, Shelter Cymru, Crisis, Wallich Dinas Fechan, Caer Las, Zac’s Place, Matthew’s House, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board and the relevant Cabinet Member and officers from Swansea Council. This led to a number of issues being raised with Councillor Andrea Lewis, Cabinet Member for Homes & Energy.

The Scrutiny Programme Committee, chaired by Councillor Mary Jones, which oversees the Scrutiny Work Programme, then met early October to review a consultation draft of the Strategy and Action Plan to ensure that its views can be fully considered in drawing up the final document. This led to a detailed consultation response being submitted to the Cabinet Member including views including around:

- Service user involvement and co-production
- The development of pre-eviction protocols
- Use of the private rented sector / loss of rented accommodation
- Working with Registered Social Landlords to alleviate homelessness
- Barriers to accessing temporary accommodation
- Proposals / timescales for increased support for people with mental health / complex needs
- Plans for a holistic “solutions centre” for services for rough sleepers
- Support to children affected by parental homelessness
- Monitoring, evaluation and review of success / impact of the Strategy

The Committee also carried out ‘pre-decision scrutiny’ in November which enabled it to review the contents of the final Strategy and Action Plan ahead of Cabinet decision. Councillor Mary Jones said ‘I am pleased to see our impact on the final document, and shows the value of the early engagement of scrutiny in such important decisions. We particularly welcomed:

- Recognition of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and children’s voice, and plan to develop a separate Homelessness Charter for children and young people
- The revision of timescales for the development of a holistic ‘solutions centre’ and clarity about what will be achieved e.g. the feasibility study will be carried out within a period of six months
- That there will be an annual progress report on the delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan.’

The contribution made by scrutiny to improve the Strategy and Action Plan, which saw amendments being made to the consultation draft, was praised by the Cabinet Member for Homes & Energy, ahead of its approval by Cabinet on 15 November.

Reducing Air & Noise Pollution

(Lead: Councillor Joe Hale)

Scrutiny councillors have had their say about air and noise pollution in Swansea.

A Working Group has looked at the situation in Swansea and the effects, how pollution is measured and monitored, and efforts to tackle problems and reduce pollution. As a result of their views and issues raised with Councillor Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment and Infrastructure Management, action will include:

- Working with academic and health colleagues to complete specific air quality research projects aimed at engaging members of the public and achieving compliance with objective concentrations and reducing exposure to pollutants.
- Continued assessment of The Out of Hours Noise Control Service to seek efficiencies during times of austerity to enable continued delivery of this service.
- Looking at ways to reinvigorate the presentation of data on the Council's air pollution webpages and working with ICT service to redesign the site in order to engage the public in its content, including integrating the Nowcaster System within the site.
- The Air Quality Action Plan investigating pollution around schools and behaviour of parents when bringing their children to school to enable behavioural change and the reduction in pollutant concentrations.
- Working with colleagues in the School of Management and Life Science in Swansea University to investigate several themes around air quality and public health.

The views of the Working Group, which met in November 2018, and Cabinet Member response can be read in full here:

<https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=647&MId=8323&Ver=4&LLL=0>

Improving Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Scrutiny councillors have made a positive impact in efforts to improve Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Following an in-depth inquiry carried out in 2017, councillors involved in this work met in November 2018 to follow up on the implementation of inquiry recommendations and assess the difference made. The Inquiry Panel was pleased to hear about a greater focus on prevention, better joint working between local authorities and the ABMU Health Board and improved response to urgent cases. They also welcomed changes to some of ABMU's commissioning arrangements, simplified processes to access the service, and the greater involvement of parents and Third Sector representatives.

A number of people addressed the Panel on progress, including the Cabinet Member for Children Services (Early Years), Director of Social Services, Head of Child & Family Services, and representatives from the Local Health Board.

The Cabinet Member for Early Years has recognised the contribution made by the scrutiny inquiry in highlighting the issues and in the progress made to improve services.

Although pleased with progress the Panel recognised that there is a long way to go to implement all of the recommendations and achieving significant improvement. The Panel agreed that the Child & Family Services Scrutiny Performance Panel was best placed for continued monitoring of CAMHS. Read more here:

<https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=598&MId=8389&Ver=4&LLL=0>

Supporting the Natural Environment & Biodiversity

(Lead: Councillor Peter Jones)

The call from scrutiny councillors for the Council to give priority to the Natural Environment & Biodiversity has been answered.

The Council has recently adopted a sixth, and new, priority: Maintaining and enhancing Swansea's natural resources and biodiversity - so that we maintain and enhance biodiversity, reduce our carbon footprint, improve our knowledge and understanding of our natural environment and benefit health and well-being. Over the past year a Scrutiny Inquiry has been looking at what the Council should be doing to maintain, enhance and promote its natural environment and biodiversity, and in doing so promote the resilience of eco-systems. The Inquiry Panel will be publishing its final report shortly - more on that in the next edition. Both before and during this piece of in-depth scrutiny, which has shone a light on this topic, repeated calls (in different forums) were made for the Council to recognise the growing importance of the natural environment and biodiversity on well-being and future generations, something already recognised by the Public Services Board in its Well-being Plan and 'Working with Nature' objective. Councillor Peter Jones, convener of the Natural Environment Inquiry Panel, said: 'This is a scrutiny success - something we raised over a year ago. The decision by the Council is not only welcome but overdue, and supports our findings. Indeed the action taken pre-empts one of the recommendations that the Panel would certainly have made. I look forward to presenting the Panel's final report to Cabinet in the knowledge that the natural environment and biodiversity is now looked upon as a key priority, and our scrutiny report will offer our thoughts about how this priority can be delivered.'

Chair's Roundup:

This is my second roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2018/19, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Progressing our priorities for 2018/19

We have made good progress over the year so far. The work programme is dominated by our six Performance Panels, which meet on an ongoing and regular basis. This has ensured continued focus on in-depth monitoring performance and challenge concerning Adult Services, Child & Family Services, Schools, the Public Services Board, and Development & Regeneration. The Service Improvement & Finance Panel keeps an eye on performance & spending across the Council. We have two in-depth inquiries in progress. Our examination of the Natural Environment is almost complete and a final report, with conclusions and recommendations for Cabinet, will be presented soon. The inquiry into Equalities is currently evidence gathering, looking at how effectively the Council is meeting and embedding requirements under the law. Both of these inquiries have generated public interest, and it is pleasing that a number of people have responded to the 'call for evidence' and taken the opportunity to submit their views. Each Panel has also been proactive in seeking evidence from a wide range of sources, including people and groups involved or affected. We have arrangements in place to check on implementation of previous inquiry recommendations and assess the impact of our work. Because of good progress Councillors were able to conclude monitoring of the inquiries on Tackling Poverty and Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services. We also arrange Working Groups for a 'light-touch' look at issues and this has enabled scrutiny to look at, and make improvement recommendations, on the following: Hate Crime, Homelessness, Local Flood Risk Management, Air & Noise Pollution, Welfare Reform, and Environmental Enforcement.

Getting praise from inspectors

Recent reports by the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) have praised the work of scrutiny. The Council's Child & Family Services and Foster Swansea Service were the subject of external inspections, which have identified good practice with positive outcomes for children and young people. As well as positive findings about the service provided, the inspectors commented that there are robust scrutiny arrangements in place for accountability and challenge in these areas.

Improving scrutiny

I wrote previously about the process of improvement and development, with challenge provided by the Wales Audit Office (WAO) and the Committee identifying five scrutiny improvement objectives. I am happy to say that we have now agreed a Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan to address the WAO proposals for improvement and deliver our own objectives. This means action on: meeting development needs for scrutiny councillors; the relationship between scrutiny and the Council's Policy Development Committees; and better demonstrating the impact and outcomes of scrutiny. It also means a focus on getting more of our work formally reported to cabinet, earlier involvement in cabinet decision-making, improving councillor participation in scrutiny, strengthening the follow-up of recommendations, and getting more of our work in the media to raise awareness and public engagement in scrutiny. The Committee has previously identified the need to develop closer links with regulators and inspectors so that we can provide a more coordinated and effective challenge. The Scrutiny Work Programme will also now include consideration of relevant WAO reports. Scrutiny will expect assurance from Council leads about their response to WAO reports and provide challenge to monitor and ensure improvement.

Questioning Cabinet Members

The Committee continues to focus on holding cabinet members to account, through monthly Q & A sessions to discuss their work. Acting as a 'critical friend' we question and challenge them on their priorities, actions, achievements and impact. As I write we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration & Tourism in March. We invite 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 a letter to relevant Cabinet Members. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet Members for Care, Health & Ageing Well, Economy & Strategy (Leader), and Environment & Infrastructure Management.

Challenging proposed decisions

Pre-decision scrutiny enables us to question Cabinet Members on proposals and present views and any concerns to Cabinet ahead of decisions. Since September scrutiny has looked at reports on: Homelessness Strategy & Action Plan 2018-2022 (Nov); Swansea Central Phase 1 (Nov); proposed closure of Craigcefnparc School - report on Small School Review (Dec); and YGG Felindre - report on School Organisation Linked to the Welsh Education Strategic Plan (Dec).

Developing regional scrutiny

The regional Scrutiny Councillor Group continues to meet to consider progress with school improvement across the ERW (Education Through Regional Working) region. In January the Group met with the Chair of the ERW Joint Committee, Lead Chief Executive, and Lead Officer for ERW concerning the ERW Review and Reform Programme. Also, the new Joint Scrutiny Committee looking at the Swansea Bay City Deal Programme met for the first time on 20 November. The Chair and Vice-Chair of the Committee were confirmed as: Councillor Arwyn Woolcock (Neath Port Talbot) and Councillor Rob James (Carmarthenshire) respectively, for a two year period. The Committee held an extra meeting on 31 January for update on internal and external reviews of the City Deal Programme, and recent developments.

Making the work of scrutiny transparent and accessible

Scrutiny agenda packs are available on the Council's ['agenda and minutes' webpage](#). There you can also find scrutiny letters sent to cabinet members following meetings and responses. Our meetings are open to the public and anyone living or working in Swansea can [suggest a topic for scrutiny](#). There are also opportunities to suggest questions, and submit views. To keep an eye on what's going see the links below, subscribe to our newsletter, or even follow us on Twitter.

Councillor Mary Jones

Connect with Scrutiny:

Guildhall, Swansea. SA1 4PE (Tel. 01792 637732)

Web: www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutiny

Email: scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

Twitter: @swanseascrutiny

Blog: www.swanseascrutiny.co.uk