

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2019/2020 (No. 2)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Continuing to help improve cabinet decisions

“Pre-decision” scrutiny is an important practice where Scrutiny councillors look at a planned decision shortly before it is made by Cabinet. Scrutiny councillors bring a different perspective to the decision-making process than that provided by Cabinet members or officers, which can help decisions to be more robust.

Considering decisions before they are made provides an important means to influence and possibly improve them. It gives scrutiny councillors an opportunity to challenge, for example, how decision-makers have considered what risks might arise from the implementation of the decision and how those risks might be mitigated. Relevant Cabinet Members and officers will attend scrutiny to present and explain proposals and answer questions.

Recent pre-decision scrutiny activities in Swansea:

[Pre-decision scrutiny of Swansea Central Phase 1](#)

Scrutiny councillors on the Development & Regeneration Performance Panel undertook pre-decision scrutiny of the Swansea Central Phase 1 Final Delivery Report, which formed part of the Cabinet’s meeting on 21 November 2019.

A letter was sent to Cabinet to highlight views of the Panel and provide Cabinet with recommendations including:

- The Panel’s acknowledgment of the need for the regeneration of the city centre and welcoming the proposal of greening of the city centre, including the focus on promoting biodiversity.
- The Panel felt that the expenditure of public monies inevitability means that the tax payers of the city have a significant interest in the success of this project, as the effect on the council’s revenue account could mean resources being used for the borrowing and not for its core services.

[Pre-decision Scrutiny of Cabinet Report: Foreshore Sites – Public Consultation and Procurement Responses Summary and Next Steps](#)

The Scrutiny Programme Committee met on 8 January to consider the report of Councillor Robert Francis-Davies, listened to views of several local ward members and a number of members of the public. The chair of the Committee, Councillor Mary Jones, then presented the Committee’s views and recommendations on the proposed decision at the Cabinet meeting on 9 January, which included:

- Cabinet should ensure that Council / community ownership of each site is maintained for future generations, not sold off to private developers but leased, making full use of planning provisions and developer contributions in the provision of public facilities
- Cabinet should ensure that no development results in a reduction in current facilities / services such as new public toilet facilities being equal or greater than current provision at each site. The Committee added any development should add to and enhance public facilities and should not compromise the achievement of Blue Flag status.

Scrutiny meetings are open to the public and letters sent to Cabinet with recommendations from scrutiny councillors are published on the Council website.

Keeping a close eye on Education Services in Swansea

The Education Scrutiny Performance Panel provides an important role in reviewing the Authority's assessments of all school's performance to ensure that: pupils in Swansea are receiving high quality education; and the Authority is meeting its objectives in relation to improving school standards and pupil attainment.

(Lead: Councillor Lyndon Jones)

The Panel met in December to discuss progress made with Additional Educational Needs (ALN) Reform. Councillors considered a report outlining the ALN Strategy, progress over the last academic year, the projected pressures and the revised plan to mitigate these.

The local authority is facing unprecedented change in the area of ALN following the introduction of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 (ALNET Act 2018).

The Panel believe that there are two things that will be central to making successful progress: firstly appropriate funding; and, secondly good partnership / integrated working. Councillors on this panel expressed concern that the Welsh Government had expectations that the implementation of the Act will be cost neutral.

The Education Scrutiny Panel will continue to follow progress closely and will ask for regular updates, as the planning and implementation of this Act progresses.

Continuing to monitor and improve the Authority's Child & Family Services

Councillors on the Child & Family Services Scrutiny Performance Panel meet regularly to provide ongoing challenge to child and family social services performance, to ensure that good performance is maintained, and monitor service change and improvement across all areas of the service.

(Lead: Councillor Paxton Hood-Williams)

The Panel met in December 2019 to receive updates on the Western Bay Regional Adoption Service and the Corporate Parenting Board, and to discuss the latest Child and Family Services Performance Monitoring Report.

Cllr Paxton Hood-Williams has written to the Cabinet Members for Children Services to relay the views of the Panel, which included:

- The Panel being pleased to hear there have been improvements in performance in many areas over the last year since the new adoption manger has been in post.
- No performance data was provided in the Corporate Parenting Board update report and that in the previous report the Panel had been concerned about educational attainment for Looked After Children. The Panel will therefore look forward to the Annual Report, including performance data, which is due to be presented in the next municipal year.
- The retention policy has been approved to enable progression of staff through to senior social workers. The Panel heard that there has been a big drive towards targeted early work and early help hubs are in place. The Head of Service agreed to bring caseload information to each Panel meeting in future to reassure the Panel of this.

All letters sent to Cabinet Members from this Panel are published on the Council website, here you can also find responses received from the Cabinet Members for Children Services.

Ensuring the Council's budget, corporate and service improvement arrangements are effective and efficient

(Lead: Councillor Chris Holley)

Councillors on the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Panel met in December 2019 to discuss the Quarter 2 Budget Monitoring Report and the Mid-year Budget Statement.

The Panel's convenor, Councillor Chris Holley, has written to the Leader of the Council, Councillor Rob Stewart, to reflect on the Panel's meeting and to ask about:

- The detail on budget reductions relating to each Council Department and timescales for achieving them
- The confidence in Social Services and Education meeting their in year overspend, particularly in relation to care fees, by the end of the financial year.
- Clarification on the reasons for the increase in staff referrals to occupational health.

The Leader has since responded in a letter with details of the budget reductions as requested by the Panel and has stated feeling assured *'by the actions the Director of Social Services are taking that they will bar unforeseen circumstances manage to achieve a balanced service budget by year end'*. He added *'...with only one quarter to go I think the balance is in favour of social services living within budget for the year. A remarkable feat given the pressures all council social services departments are under across Wales.'*

The full response from Cllr Rob Stewart has been published and is available to read on the Council's website including the full letter sent to the Cabinet Member and all reports relating to each agenda item discussed at this meeting.



Chair's Round up

This is my second roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2019/20, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Progressing our priorities for 2019/20

We have made good progress over the year so far. The work programme is dominated by our Performance Panels, which meet on an ongoing and regular basis. This means monitoring corporate performance and finances, and challenging key services including education and social services, development & regeneration, and the natural environment. This work ensures there is an ongoing conversation between scrutiny and the executive on performance.

We have made a start with the planned in-depth inquiry into Procurement, with a clear idea about the focus of this work. We want to see what the Council is doing to ensure it procures locally, ethically, and greenly while being cost effective and transparent in its practices. However evidence gathering is currently on hold pending recruitment of Scrutiny Officer, following the departure of one of the Team members in October.

The Team have shuffled responsibilities and are working hard to ensure continuity to ongoing scrutiny activities in the meantime. Whilst we were able to deliver the one-off Working Group focussing on the Council's Brexit preparedness, the remaining topics in the work programme (Staff Health & Well-being, Road Safety, and Digital Inclusion) will be looked at when the Team are back up to full capacity. We will revisit Brexit in due course now that things are clearer about likely impacts.

Responding to Equalities scrutiny recommendations

Since the last edition, Cabinet has formally responded to the Equalities Scrutiny Inquiry recommendations. I am pleased that all 18 recommendations made by the Scrutiny Panel, led by Cllr. Louise Gibbard, were accepted and recognised as important to improving the way the Council meets and embeds requirements under the law. Leading by example, the Panel made sure that its final report was available in a number of different formats. Also, I am delighted that, as a first for scrutiny, a short video was produced, featuring both Cllr Gibbard, and Cllr Clive Lloyd as responding Cabinet Member, highlighting this work. This is available on the Council website. It is a step forward in our continued efforts to promote and raise public awareness of scrutiny. The Panel will reconvene later in the year to check on implementation of recommendations and impact of this work.

Following up on scrutiny of Regional Working

Because of good progress, councillors were able to conclude monitoring of the inquiry into Regional Working. A meeting in October with the Leader of the Council and Chief Executive, resulted in the Panel being pleased that the inquiry had helped to raise the profile of regional working and has informed and began to provide clarity on the Council's approach to regional collaboration. Since the inquiry concluded in 2018, there has been some movement in relation to regional working in Wales. This includes clearer details from Welsh Government on proposals for improved collaboration and the operation of Corporate Joint Committees.

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. We publish a summary of each session and views of the Committee in a letter to relevant Cabinet Members. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet Members for Care, Health & Ageing Well, Environment & Infrastructure Management, and Economy & Strategy (Leader). Looking ahead, our Q & A session in April will focus on the Better Communities cabinet portfolio.

Influencing decision-making on the Housing Commissioning Review

The Scrutiny Programme Committee held a special meeting in November 2019 to discuss the Housing Commissioning Review Findings, prior to Cabinet decision. This included proposed changes to the future model of the District Housing Office service. The Committee welcomed the direction of travel proposed for the Housing Service, but raised a number of points which should be taken into account by Cabinet, around the visibility of an implementation plan to take forward proposals, the introduction of new technology, and connection between service user feedback and improvements proposed.

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 for anyone to suggest questions, and submit views. To keep an eye on what is going see the links below, subscribe to our newsletter, or even follow us on Twitter.

Councillor Mary Jones

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