

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2020/2021

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Continuing to play a role in Regional Scrutiny

Decisions taken at a regional level have important implications for local citizens in Swansea and therefore scrutiny is vital to ensure any new decisions made through regional bodies and public service collaborations are held to account.

Swansea Bay City Deal

(Lead: Councillors Jan Curtice, Phil Downing, & Jeff Jones)

The Swansea Bay City Region covers the four local authority areas of Carmarthenshire, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire and Swansea. The Swansea Bay City Deal sets out an integrated, transformational approach to delivering the scale and nature of investment needed to support plans for growth in the Region.

The Swansea Bay City Region Joint Committee (SBCRJC) has been established to deliver the Swansea Bay City Deal.

Three members from each of the four local authorities form the Swansea Bay City Region Joint Scrutiny Committee which is in place to hold to account all decisions made by the SBCRJC, and monitor of the City Deal Programme

This Joint Scrutiny Committee meets every two months. At its last meeting held on 2 February 2021 the committee received verbal updates from Swansea University’s Pro-Vice Chancellor for Planning and Resources, Professor Steve Wilks on the Life Science & Well-being Campuses and from officers on the Swansea Bay City Deal Funding.

Members expressed disappointment that no written documentation had been received to accompany the Pentre Awel Project update which was also on the agenda for this meeting. Members deferred this item to a future meeting with a written update to accompany it.

The Chair of the Committee addressed overall concern about the lack of written updates being provided to the committee and stated that the Committee’s expectations going forward are that written information must accompany all agenda items so that the Committee can fully carry out its scrutiny function appropriately.

Update on the Life Science & Well-being Campuses:

The committee heard about this project which has a City Deal value of £15m, is projected to create 1100 jobs and add £150m to the GVA by 2031 and it encompasses two phases. Phase one is concerned with improving treatments and recovery so that people are able to return to their home environments at a much faster pace.

Phase 1 is fundamentally the City Deal funding which will provide support to invest at the Morriston Hospital site: refurbishment of the management centre, essentially linking clinical innovation and unlocking access to the Morriston Hospital site and the Sketty Lane site: this will include the development of a Sports Science & Well-being Technology Centre, the University is currently looking to identify potential partners to work in collaboration. Phase 1 will essentially unlock phase two.

Members queried the effect of COVID-19 on the University's financial position and heard from Professor Wilks that the University are in a '*fair and strong*' position from a financial perspective. He added that the University are still fully committed and are able to deliver the projects they have committed to and there has been no change or impact on the University's commitment to the deal, in light of the pandemic.

Members queried the current relevance of the nine projects within the City Deal and members specifically referred to the Digital Infrastructure project and if there would be a requirement for future funding requirements to amplify the project. Members queried if the project would still be relevant considering the digital age currently moving at a rapid pace due to the pressures posed by the pandemic. Professor Wilks was confident the project would respond and meet its relevant aims.

The Committee asked that a written update on the University's involvement with City Deal projects be provided.

Education Through Regional Working (ERW)

(Lead: Councillors Lyndon Jones & Peter Black)

ERW has been one of Wales' four consortia who work with schools to raise standards and provide a range of support, which includes professional development and intervention programmes. Swansea Council has been one of the six local authorities who signed up to this regional improvement service. Swansea was the host authority for the joint ERW Scrutiny Group meeting in March which then included Scrutiny Councillors from the five local authorities Swansea, Powys, Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The aim of this Joint Scrutiny Group has been to help ensure the best educational outcomes for children in the ERW region by supporting effective scrutiny to:

- Support consistent scrutiny across each council
- Share scrutiny good practice
- Encourage shared scrutiny approaches and avoid the duplication of scrutiny work
- Provide critical and objective challenge to ERW on topics of interest as required
- Contribute to the good and effective governance of ERW

Swansea had given notice to leave this consortium arrangement on 31 March 2020 by 1 April 2021, but the Education Scrutiny Performance Panel heard that a report has gone to Cabinet asking it to defer removal of Swansea from ERW to allow more time for the region to set up the arrangements for a new regional body that will commence from 1 September 2021. Swansea, Carmarthenshire, Powys and Pembrokeshire Councils have agreed to remain within the interim partnership until 31 August 2021. Discussions are continuing into which Councils will be included in the new arrangements post September 2021.

The Scrutiny Councillor Group asked what the governance arrangements of the new partnership will be and how scrutiny will fit into this new model, what its key objectives will be and how will success be measured. The Group was informed that new arrangements will be taken to each local authority's Cabinet for agreement and that these plans and the governance model will also be shared with scrutiny locally.

Continuing to monitor issues of public concern

Since the start of the pandemic there have been reports in the media and growing public concern over increases in domestic abuse cases across the UK, Wales included.

(Lead: Councillor Paxton Hood-Williams)

The Child & Family Services Scrutiny Panel focussed on the Wales Audit Office's (WAO) report: Tackling Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV).

The Panel heard from senior officers that at the start of the pandemic there was a discrepancy found between the media reporting of increases in domestic abuse cases and the reporting on the ground. The Service found a decrease in the number of referrals reported to the police and in referrals to the specialist sector. Officers explained that this suggested people were either not able to reach out and access support or felt that they could not for whatever reason.

The Panel heard that the Service focussed on a multi-media communications campaign and also took into account the effects of digital poverty. Funding was secured to distribute tablets, mobile phones and WI-FI dongles to ensure families affected by domestic abuse had the means to seek help.

The Panel expressed their gratitude to officers and staff across the Authority for their hard work in continuing to tackle VAWDASV during these difficult times.

The Panel heard that the Council has made good progress and met all five generic recommendations that came out the WAO report. The Panel was pleased to hear that Swansea's work around the Domestic Abuse Hub had a mention in the WAO report and was found to be an innovative way of working.

The Panel noted from the report, a funding gap for prevention work and queried if there is currently enough funding for the work that needs to be done. Officers explained that there has been additional funding but there is still a gap. The Panel noted that this funding is positive, however, it comes at a risk as the work is funded by grants that are uncertain going forward. Officers explained that this issue is often discussed with Welsh Government as it needs to be mainstreamed.

The Panel is eager to assist regarding mainstreaming of funding and have asked officers to provide further information on how this could be achieved.

The Panel has also asked if training can be put in place for all councillors, as school governors, to raise awareness.

Active Travel

(Lead: Councillor Peter Black)

Following a public request for scrutiny, with concerns about the implementation of Active Travel schemes and questions about the extent of public consultation carried out, the Scrutiny Programme Committee discussed this matter with the Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management, along with input from lead officers. The scrutiny session helped to shed light on and understand what consultation processes the Council utilises and why; and the Committee considered whether, in light of experience, that could be improved, and any wider learning points for the future.

As a result of this scrutiny the Cabinet Member has given his commitment to maintaining a public dialogue on all future Active Travel schemes, including local residents and community groups, as well as local councillors. He is making improvements to the information publically reported to Cabinet, including maps of routes proposed to be constructed in 2021/22. This will be supported by communications to raise awareness and provide opportunities for engagement on schemes under development.

Investigating the impact of the pandemic on health & wellbeing of staff

The Covid-19 pandemic has had great impacts on how we all work and live. The Workforce Scrutiny Working Group looked at the impact of the pandemic on the health & wellbeing of staff; how the Council is supporting this; issues around home working; staff sickness; staff turnover; use of agency staff and pressures.

(Lead: Councillor Cyril Anderson)

The Working Group (WG) received an update on the position the Authority was in before the pandemic regarding agile working and heard that overall it was 'good'.

The WG noted that the Health and Safety Team were able to put in place a large amount of support for the wellbeing of the workforce.

Staff stress and anxiety was discussed and the WG queried whether the Authority employs psychologists in the Wellbeing Team and if more could be employed. Officers confirmed 'Talking Therapists' are employed and that front line staff have found this service invaluable. The WG has requested clarification from Cabinet Members on the qualification of these 'Talking Therapists', if they are employed by the Authority and what their role is.

The WG has since heard back that they are BACP (British Association of Counselling & Psychotherapy) accredited and qualified in Counselling and Stress management and there are also two EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation & Reprocessing) specialists to treat PTSD (Posttraumatic stress disorder).

Regarding mental health help the WG requested clarification of the correct procedure for staff to follow, the services they can access for help and what happens after the initial contact has been made.

Response from Cabinet Members explained that Staff can self-refer or through a manager. They are triaged based on risk and then contacted by a counsellor. During Covid, front line staff have been prioritised for contact within 24hours. There is also support for managers and a range of on-line resources available to staff over the intranet. The WG was also informed that significant feedback from staff has been received and many have stated that they would not have remained in work without the support – over 90% of staff under the care of the service remain in work and do not go off sick.

The WG queried Trade Union (TU) engagement and insight and heard that meetings with Unions were held weekly during the height of the pandemic and are now held two-weekly. Issues raised were addressed at these meetings. The WG were pleased with this extensive engagement with the TUs and expressed that they wish to see this continue in the future. The WG was reassured in the response received from Cabinet Members that *'Trade Union engagement continues on a fortnightly basis to discuss emerging HR and health and safety points.'*

The WG expressed the wish to meet again in six months once the results of the second staff survey have been analysed and when there is a better understanding of what the future holds for the Authority and its workforce.

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

(Lead: Councillor Chris Holley)

The Service Improvement & Finance Panel discussed the Quarter 3 (Q3) Budget Monitoring report 2020-21, the Mid-Year Budget Statement 2020-21 and the Treasury Management Strategy Statement. The Panel heard that Capital financial requirements will go up by hundreds of millions of pounds, measured as a percentage of the revenue budget. Officers explained that in every scenario, they see budgets going up, although subject to complex interplays.

The Panel queried the general fund capital expenditure; why there is a huge difference in the original estimate / outturn. Officers explained that this is due to a direct consequence of building the Arena, fuelled by the field hospital expenditure. The Chief Finance Officer commented that this demonstrates the sheer amount of capital spend that is underway.

The Panel has since written to the Cabinet Member for Economy, Finance & Strategy and asked for detailed information about the expected increase in repayments relating to the general fund capital expenditure due to the increase in the borrowing requirements.

Considering work done to increase digital inclusion in Swansea

The Digital Inclusion Scrutiny Working group looked at the work done by the Authority to increase digital inclusion before and during the pandemic, the work already planned for 2021/22 and what the Authority has planned for the future, post COVID-19.

(Lead: Councillor Lesley Walton)

The Working Group (WG) discussed the Council's Digital Inclusion Strategy/Framework. The WG felt that it is important to look at how people are accessing council services now as opposed to pre-pandemic as they recognise the landscape has changed rapidly since the start of the COVID19 Pandemic.

The WG felt that since many more people are now online in some form, the strategy should be more focussed on equality and the title of digital 'equality' framework should be used rather than the term digital 'inclusion' as this would better reflect the strategy moving forward.

The WG agreed that the Digital Inclusion Strategic Framework (DISF) needs to be reviewed in light of new data emerging post pandemic and to reflect the natural demographic shift over the coming years. The WG was informed that a draft DISF had been developed pre Covid and will now be reviewed. The WG has requested to be contacted at the appropriate time to contribute to this piece of work.

The WG heard that a variety of methods of communication are used to reach Swansea residents, whether digitally included or excluded. The WG was particularly pleased to hear about the 'Chatbot' that went live during the pandemic to assist people when looking for information and signposting in relation to domestic violence. The WG felt this was a good example of how we can use our website to assist those who are most in need.

The WG heard that a new and improved council wide website is being developed. Proposed improvements include: good practice in accessibility and the use of plain English and Welsh language. The Web Manager is working with the Access to Services officer so views from different equality groups are sought. The new website is due to be delivered in the late summer, the WG have requested to be contacted at an appropriate time to provide feedback and thoughts on the new website's design.

The WG congratulated officers for the good work done so far and especially throughout the difficult times during the pandemic. Overall the WG agreed that the Council is on the right track with its Digital Inclusion Strategy and do recognise that the Council is keen to make the right improvements moving forward.

The WG expressed wishes to revisit this issue on an annual basis given its importance and the work that is continuing to be done by the Authority to improve in this area.



Chair's Round up

This is my roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2020/21, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Chairing Scrutiny

I was delighted to be elected Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee in June 2020 to lead the work of scrutiny in Swansea. Thanks, however, must go to the outgoing chair, Cllr. Mary Jones, who provided leadership since 2014 and achieved so much, overseeing numerous improvements to scrutiny process and practice here, with arrangements receiving regular praise from auditors and inspectors, helping to make Swansea Scrutiny well regarded by others.

Work planning

With the delayed start to the 2020/21 council year we decided to plan for the next 18 months, taking things up to May 2022. For the first time we held a remote Work Planning Conference, which took place in October, and it worked very well enabling more scrutiny councillors to participate than we have seen previously. Taking into account work already committed and feedback from the Conference, a work programme was agreed by the Committee. Always looking to improve the way we do things, we agreed to make some key changes:

- The Committee work plan moving away from routine monthly Cabinet Member Q & A sessions to a more targeted approach, creating space to examine specific issues of concern, and any gaps in the overall programme, for focussed discussion at Committee meetings.
- Incorporating scrutiny of the Public Services Board into the work of the Committee, removing the need for a standalone Performance Panel to carry out this work.
- Ensuring the Committee incorporates into its work plan specific follow up on any recommendations made to cabinet members by Scrutiny Working Groups.
- Changing the frequency of the Adult Services & Child & Family Services Performance Panels, aligning them both to a 6-weekly cycle, reflecting their equal importance.
- Increasing the frequency of the Natural Environment Performance Panel from quarterly to every two months, reflecting the growing seriousness of issues around biodiversity and climate change and their importance.

Aside from the work of the Committee and six Performance Panels, which meet on an ongoing basis, we included space in the Programme to look at Procurement, and Anti-Social Behaviour for in-depth inquiry, and Workforce, Digital Inclusion, Bus Services and Health City as one-off Working Groups.

Adapting the work of Scrutiny

Since the end of March 2020 meetings have been conducted on-line via Microsoft Teams. We were happy to learn we were the first Council in Wales to hold a remote scrutiny meeting!

The pandemic has of course caused some disruption to the delivery of the work programme, and work of scrutiny. Our activity has had to be flexible and responsive to organisational pressures as the Council has needed to focus its efforts on tackling the pandemic and dealing with the impact locally. We have, however, ensured focus on monitoring and challenging Council action in relation to the COVID-19 response and recovery. Within the Committee, there was continued discussion with the Leader of the Council and members of the Corporate Management Team on the local impact of the pandemic, dealing with the immediate issues / challenges, as well as short, medium and long term planning.

All Performance Panels have drilled down on the service specific experience and issues. The two Social Services Panel met jointly for a period to reduce the burden on work on the department. The work of other Panels had to adjust and re-focus accordingly, with meeting frequency also affected.

Questioning Cabinet Members

Although moving away from routine Q & A sessions at Committee, Cabinet Members have been held to account on an ongoing basis through meetings of the Committee, our six Performance Panels, and Working Groups, whether to discuss specific topics of concern, a range of service / policy issues, or whole service improvement. Acting as a 'critical friend', we have questioned and challenged them on their priorities, actions, achievements and impact. The Committee has continued to call in the Leader of the Council for questioning and at a meeting in January 2021, he was asked about COVID-19 Response & Recovery, Brexit implications and response, the Council Budget, Partnership / Regional Working, and City Centre Regeneration. We invite the public and all scrutiny councillors to contribute ideas to ensure the Committee asks the right questions. We have published a summary of each scrutiny session and views of scrutiny in a letter to relevant Cabinet Members, ensuring an ongoing conversation between scrutiny and the executive to advise and exert influence.

Following up on scrutiny of Equalities

The Equalities Inquiry Panel followed up on progress with implementation of scrutiny recommendations and impact of the inquiry that was published in 2019. The Panel had come up with ways in which the Council could embed requirements under the Equality Act 2010 (Public Sector Duty for Wales). Although some good progress was acknowledged by the Panel, it was felt necessary to arrange a further follow up meeting, which will take place around November 2021, and will allow the Panel to better consider and assess progress made and the impact of the inquiry, before formal monitoring is concluded.

Leading scrutiny activities

Thanks to all those councillors who have played a part in carrying out scrutiny, and particularly to those who have taken a lead over the past year:

Adult Services Performance Panel (Cllr Sue Jones); Child & Family Services Performance Panel (Cllr. Paxton Hood-Williams); Development & Regeneration Performance Panel (Cllr. Jeff Jones); Education Performance Panel & Equalities Inquiry Panel (Cllr. Lyndon Jones); Natural Environment Performance Panel (Cllr. Peter Jones); Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel (Cllr. Chris Holley); Digital Inclusion Working Group (Cllr. Lesley Walton); and the Workforce Working Group (Cllr. Cyril Anderson)

Annual Report published

We presented our Annual Report for 2019/20 to Council in March 2021. It reflected on the range of different activities carried out by scrutiny councillors during that year, to make sure the work of the Council is accountable and transparent, effective and efficient, and helps the Council to achieve its objectives and drive improvement, by questioning and providing challenge to decision makers. With the impact of the pandemic, last year and this year have been anything but business as usual but we have continued to work hard in both supporting and challenging the organisation, contributing to better services, policies, decisions, and a better Swansea.

Councillor Peter Black