

Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel Update

1. Remit of the Panel

The overarching purpose of the Panel is to ensure that the Council's budget, corporate and service improvement arrangements are effective and efficient. The Panel meets on a monthly basis.

2. Key Activities

Meetings have included a range of issues such as budget monitoring and annual performance reports as outlined in the table below.

Since the last update, in August 2021, meetings have resulted in a number of convener's letters to Cabinet Members. The issues covered were as follows:

Meeting	Topic(s)
20 th September 2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q1 Budget Monitoring Report – 2021/22 2. Peer Review & Self-Assessment (Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021)
19 th October 2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q1 2021/22 Performance Monitoring Report 2. Overview from Ben Smith: Understanding Financial Reporting (Reserves) 3. Review of Revenue Reserves
16 th November 2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mid-term Budget Statement 2. Planning Annual Performance Report 3. Pre-decision Scrutiny: Cabinet Report on Swansea Airport
15 th December 2021	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Recycling and Landfill - Annual Performance Monitoring 2. Potholes & Carriageways 3. Q2 Budget Monitoring 2021/22
18 th January 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q2 2021/22 Performance Monitoring Report 2. Budget Proposals 2022/23 – 2025/26

3. Achievements / Impact

Financial Monitoring

The Panel heard that within the Recovery Plan Service Transformation Programme, work continues to develop service delivery plans linked to savings targets and prioritisation of services.

Panel Members queried ongoing issues with Council Tax collection, referring to the £2M shortfall reported. Members questioned whether Welsh Government will meet this shortfall. Officers acknowledged this was an on-going issue, given the strain on people's finances and confirmed that Welsh Government continues to monitor this issue.

The Panel requested a statement regarding the energy price increases, and the effect on Swansea Council. Officers undertook to provide a briefing note, which has now been received with thanks.

Performance Monitoring

The Panel asked questions in order to explore this work and provide challenge on performance in relation to the relevant indicators.

The Panel heard that, overall, 81% of indicators have improved or stayed the same. We understood that the Council's response to the pandemic, whilst not necessarily reflected in the established performance indicators, has been extraordinary.

Panel Members queried some indicators and why they have improved in such adverse circumstances, asking how indicators are selected. Officers explained that the indicators help to measure priorities within the corporate plan and are selected specifically for that purpose.

Members raised their concerns over the general use of the term 'tackling poverty' as a descriptor, suggesting this term be reviewed in the near future. Members also queried how poverty is measured by Swansea Council and the standard definition used.

Peer Review & Self-Assessment (Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021)

The Panel received an overview of the guidance in Part 6 Performance and Governance provisions of the Local Government & Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Officers explained that the essence of Part 6 is to see local Councils as 'self-improving organisations through a system based on self-assessment and panel performance assessment'.

Panel Members commented on the nature of the process, challenging the role of Scrutiny in this, and Councillors in general. Officers explained that an external Panel will be assessing the Council as a whole, via the panel performance assessment. Officers also explained that scrutiny will have a clear and important role to play in this process.

Planning Department Performance

Panel Members queried why the Welsh Government had not required Annual Performance Reports to be submitted this year. Officers explained that workloads last year were too onerous across Local Authorities, and, additionally, a number of issues have arisen this year in terms of introduction of temporary legislation for businesses to deal with pandemic adaptations.

Panel Members queried whether the Council had filled vacancies within the planning department. The Panel heard that the department is fully staffed as of November 2021, however, some officers are employed on temporary contracts. Members noted the issue of staff recruitment / retention across the Council, commenting that the use of temporary contracts may not retain staff long-term.

The Panel held a detailed scrutiny discussion focused on the Planning Department, in addition to the Planning Annual Performance Report. Members felt that the investigation was very informative and helpful, suggesting that this should arise each year concurrently with the Annual Performance Report.

Swansea Airport

The Panel undertook pre-decision Scrutiny regarding the Update Management Report on Swansea Airport. Due to commercial sensitivities and the likely disclosure of exempt information (under Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, paragraphs 14 and 16), the report was heard in private session. Further reports will be available in due course.

Recycling and Landfill - Annual Performance Monitoring

It was reported to the Panel that the recycling target of 64% was achieved last year, despite the challenges of the Pandemic. Members noted this as an incredible effort by crews and praised the efforts by all staff involved.

The Panel heard that Swansea Council will move away from landfill operations, towards an Energy from Waste (EfW) facility. We understand that more details on this will follow in the New Year, pending finalisation of contracts. Panel Members queried the EfW scheme and whether there would be savings in landfill costs. Officers explained that EfW is a more costly process, however, by closing the landfill site the operational costs are reduced, thereby being more cost efficient going forward.

4. Future Work Programme

The meeting on 15 February is expected to be the Panel's final meeting of this municipal year, and Council Term:

Meeting	Topic(s)
15 th February 2022	1. Pre-Decision Scrutiny: Annual Council Budget 2. Sustainable Swansea