

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 February 2022, meetings resumed in September 2022 and the Panel has covered the following topics and for October and November items, sent 6 letters to Cabinet.

Meeting	Topic(s)
6 September 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Role of the Service Improvement and Finance Scrutiny Panel 2. Overview: Understanding Financial Reporting 3. Overview: Understanding Performance Monitoring
4 October 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q1 Budget Monitoring Report – 2022/23 2. Annual Performance Monitoring Report for 2021/2022
8 November 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review of Revenue Reserves 2. Annual Review of Performance 2021/2022 3. Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Performance Report 2021/22 4. Welsh Housing Quality Standards Annual Update 2021/22
6 December 2022	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Mid Term Budget Statement 2022/23 2. Quarter 1 2022/23 Performance Monitoring Report 3. Recycling and Landfill - Annual Performance Monitoring 2021/22 and Recycling of Business Waste Briefing 4. Audit Wales Report – “Making Equality Impact Assessments more than just a tick box exercise”

3. Achievements / Impact

Financial Monitoring

- The Panel expressed their concern on hearing that there is an anticipated draw on reserves of 20/25% from a total of £158m total reserves. Although the total reserves remains healthy, drawing down at this level is not sustainable.

- All functions and services are under pressure for price rises and inflation and the Panel discussed a number of strains being put on the budget.
- The Panel were informed that the Leader has announced at Council a pausing of the Economic Recovery Fund further to commitments already made, to provide some protection around the budget position.
- The Panel agreed that using cash backed reserves in the short term means borrowing can be avoided for as long as possible until a more stable and affordable position for external borrowing is achieved.
- Panel Members raised their concerns about rising material costs. The Council has benefited from fixed price deals and early borrowing in some cases and officers informed us that overall, capital expenditure is likely to be underspent.
- The Section 151 Officer gave the advice to Panel that the current Council needs to continue to prepare for significant change in service delivery that will inevitably impact on direct employment levels going forward.
- The Panel received a response from the Leader for further information on what measures are being taken to address overspends. The letter outlined the difficulty with finances in the current climate with a fuller picture expected in the third quarter now that December budget settlements have been announced.

Performance Monitoring

- The Panel were informed that the pandemic had a significant impact on all performance areas during 2021/22 and that 18 new safeguarding indicators were introduced as a result of new national Social Services Performance Framework.
- The Panel were pleased with progress made with ALN priorities which is a key priority along with wellbeing, mental health and the impact of poverty.
- It was noted that there has been a rise in fixed term exclusions, a 6% rise in NEETS and fewer apprenticeship opportunities but the Panel appreciated that Covid had been a major factor in this and in counter balance there is an increased number of those gaining employment through employability support and accredited qualifications through local authority support.
- The Panel were concerned that sickness absences had not been broken down to identify enforced absences, for instance those in Covid isolation. This has adversely affected the overall absence figure. The Panel requested that future absence breakdown better define and categorise absence to take this into account.
- The statements for special educational needs uses only a quantitative measure. The Panel will monitor to see what changes are made to the performance indicators regarding statements to see if the changes that are due include more quantitative measures.
- The Panel have asked for more information on the current call load of the contact centre, as with a drop in the number of online payments this may be having a knock on affect.
- The Convenor attended the Governance and Audit Committee in December to discuss the Annual Review of Performance 2021/22, share the Panels recommendations and take on board further recommendations from the Committee for further scrutiny.

Welsh Public Library Standards Annual Report 2021/22

- The Panel were impressed to hear that despite the temporary closure of library services during the pandemic, Swansea Libraries met all of the 12 core entitlements during this time and are meeting the obligations of the Public Libraries Act, and that as soon as was possible, access to free broadband and Wi-Fi in public libraries was provided to members of the public.
- The Panel were made aware that borrower numbers have reduced but Panel Members were reassured that libraries are looking to address those issues.
- Panel Members asked how individual libraries share best practice across library sites were assured that due to the challenge to learn, practice is shared regularly within the context of using each libraries strengths.
- Library Services stressed to the Panel that Swansea remains in the bottom quartile in libraries for qualified staff.

Welsh Housing Quality Standards Annual Update 2021/22

- The Panel were informed on the overall success officers have had in achieving WHQS with 70% of homes fully compliant.
- Panel members were alerted to the implementation of additions to WHQS due in April 2022. These new standards included decarbonisation, fire safety and property safety measures amongst others. This has the potential for a major financial challenge as delivering the new standards could cost in the region of £875m. £423m is currently set aside to meet the current standard but falls short of what will be required for new standards.
- The Panel asked about the time scales of the new standards and were told that the current consultation documents indicates 10 years, however due to Councils highlighting the difficulty financing the programme, there may be a revision of this target.
- The Panel wished to highlight that money spent on WHQS has come from revenue contributions and Welsh Government Funding, not council tax as this has been a misinterpretation in the past.

Recycling and Landfill - Annual Performance Monitoring 2021/22 and Recycling of Business Waste Briefing

- The Panel were informed that Swansea Council achieved 65.07% recycling which is an increase of 0.58% on the previous year. They were also made aware of the new Waste Strategy which sets out the Councils plan for achieving the Welsh Government statutory targets.
- The Panel were pleased to hear that from February the Council has moved way from landfill towards energy to waste which contributed to a jump in recycling performance from 65% to over 70% subject to validation.
- A number of questions were asked about the move to energy to waste and expressed disappointment that this could not be carried out more locally.
- Wood recycling is limited in Swansea which is a challenge for many residents however the Panel were informed this is due to wood recycling now requiring 2 bins therefore there are space limitations.
- The Panel wait to see how the imminent legislation from Welsh Government around mandatory recycling for all non-domestic premises, deposit return schemes and extended producer responsibility will impact the Council.

Audit Wales Report – “Making Equality Impact Assessments more than just a tick box exercise”

- The Panel recognised the importance in tackling inequality and echo the sentiments of the Audit Wales report that they should not become a tick box exercise.
- The Panel understood the challenges Swansea Council faces alongside all public bodies when carrying out Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) and in particular the lack of resources and absence of clear guidance.
- There was concern that the responsibility for monitoring Integrated Impact Assessments (IIAs) Swansea Councils integrated version of an EIA is with the officer responsible for the policy or decision which although understandable due to resources, does mean the monitoring process could be missed and the impact of a policy or decision on protected characteristics may not be monitored after the fact.
- The Panel suggested that if an officer completing the IIA ticks to say there will be no impact they should explain why there isn't an impact, not just explaining the impact when ticking yes. This would help to make sure this question is being answered accurately by officers.
- The Panel queried whether an IIA screening is required for information only reports. This is being looked at internally so the Panel wait to hear what comes from those discussions.
- The Consultation and Engagement Strategy is out for public consultation and the Panel would be keen to see that the impact measurements for this reflects all the protected characteristics when making these assessments.

4. Future Work Programme

The programme for the remainder of this municipal year is as follows:

Meeting	Topic(s)
17 January 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Budget Proposals 2023/24 – 2026/27 2. Q2 Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2022/23 3. Q2 Performance Monitoring Report 2022/23 4. Sustainable Swansea Update - Transformational delivery aspects
14 February 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Annual Budget and Medium-Term Financial Plan: Pre-Decision Scrutiny
14 March 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q3 Budget Monitoring 2022/23 2. Planning Annual Performance Report 2021/2022 3. Annual Complaints Report
18 April 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Q3 2022/23 Performance Monitoring Report 2. Annual Review of Well-being Objectives and Corporate Plan
9 May 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Progress update on the Local Government Use of Data Action Plan (delayed due to pandemic impacts / diversion of resources) - tbc

5. Action for the Scrutiny Programme Committee

None.