



**To/
Councillor Alyson Anthony, Cabinet
Member for Wellbeing**

BY EMAIL

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2023-24/8

02 February 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 19 December 2023. It is about the Delivery of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities. A formal written response is not required.

Dear Councillor Anthony,

Delivery of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities

We are writing to you following our Scrutiny session to monitor and challenge Council action in relation to Tackling Poverty, which is a standing annual item within the Committee work plan. We note that the Corporate Priority was updated this year in the Corporate Plan to add 'Enabling Communities', recognising that the strengths of individuals, communities and networks can be capitalised upon to help tackle poverty

We thank you, and officers, for attending the Committee meeting to present a detailed report on the delivery of the corporate priority, so we can comment on progress, achievements, and implementation of strategy, monitor improvement, and help inform future work / thinking.

A detailed report was submitted to the Committee which set out progress over the last 12 months in delivering the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities, and steps taken to meet objectives. The report presented evidence, insights and intelligence to demonstrate the contributions that have been made in support of this priority in the last twelve months,

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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together with relevant indicators / measures of progress, and targets. It covered current challenges, including the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, and the Council's response, as well as future plans.

The nine 'key steps' provided information on collective efforts across the Council, and activity and achievements in relation to: Strategic direction; Cost of Living; Tackling and preventing homelessness; Making more homes available; Improving people's prosperity; Focus on early intervention; Empowering communities; Keeping communities safe; and Building community assets. The Committee acknowledged there has been a lot of activity and good work.

This letter reflects on what we gained from the information presented, questions, and discussion.

Committee views, including any outstanding issues / actions:

Tackling Poverty Strategy

We followed up on progress with refreshing the Council's Tackling Poverty Strategy, which the Committee was told was being done during 2023.

We heard that some preparatory work has been carried out this year, and you stated that the refreshed Strategy was on course to be published by March 2024 subject to public consultation. **The Committee was keen for opportunity to comment on the draft Strategy, which we can agenda for a future meeting. Please let us know when this can be scheduled for.**

Performance Framework / Measuring Success

We asked about progress in developing a strategic Tackling Poverty Performance Framework to define how we align the objectives, indicators, measures, and outputs relating to tackling poverty, to outcomes - showing to what extent we are achieving, considering the input of resources.

We noted the Corporate Performance Indicators shown in the report that have relevance to Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities were telling us what you are measuring but it was less clear what this means in terms of impact. **The Committee was keen for greater clarity around what indicators mean in terms of impact on people and how this actually translates into reduced poverty. The Committee challenged you on identifying more outcome-focused measures as part of the Framework, so that we know we are better able to assess the Council's success in meeting stated targets for tackling poverty, and can see change.**

Some of the complexities of Tackling Poverty were noted, with challenges with regard to refreshing data, performance framework outcomes, providing lived experiences and developing different ways of presenting poverty. It was noted that some data exists however further work was required collating the more complex 'lived experience' data. We, however, noted a commitment to improving the Performance Framework and developing a robust suite of indicators alongside a refreshed Tackling Poverty Strategy. We look forward to seeing this.

Looking at 2023/24 Targets in the report provided, there was concern around Red RAG Status regarding Homelessness. You reported that this year has been a very challenging in terms of preventing homelessness, with the Council seeing an increase in both homeless presentations and the numbers of households applying on the Council's Waiting List. **We can see that work to agree a strategy to support homeless individuals is ongoing but delayed as a result of increased demand on homelessness services, and that this action has been rescheduled for 2024/25. We felt this needed to be given greater priority, more so than reviewing the Council's Housing Allocations Policy which is also work that has been pushed into the next year.**

Definition of Poverty

We found it interesting that the Minimum Income Standard according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for 2023 is considered to be £29,500 for a single person, to provide a minimum acceptable standard of living. As a recognised measure of poverty, it was remarked that this may place a significant percentage of people living in Swansea below that Minimum Income Standard. **You stated that whilst this was one measure, there was no single source of evidence that defined poverty. The definition of poverty was not merely related to income and broadening the definition was part of ongoing work. We welcomed a clearer definition of poverty.**

We discussed issues around poverty data and the various sources of data, including how the Welsh Index of Deprivation is used and whether there has been much change over time; and around what can be learned from the Audit Wales Data Dashboard national online tool which is designed to support decision making in Councils and improve how they target their work. **It was suggested that future reports to the Committee provide a clearer analysis and explanation of what all of this national data is telling us.**

Cost of Living

We followed up on the difference made by the various 'Cost of Living' grants for individuals and organisations, asking how we have monitored its effectiveness and the benefits to ensure it has helped those who needed it.

You reported that, in total, the Council has so far administered over £400,000 in tackling poverty grants to local people and organisations. Recently, a new Enabling Communities Grant was launched which saw the Council add up to £500,000 in available grants this financial year. Some of the key tackling poverty grants referred to included: Swansea Spaces (Warm Hubs Grant); Direct Food Support Grant; Period Dignity Grants; Holiday Food Fund; Fuel Support Scheme; and Energy Bills Support Schemes.

You assured the Committee that the Council had been monitoring the effectiveness and benefits of 'Cost of Living' grants for individuals and organisations, to ensure it has helped those who needed it. We were told that there has been a lot of positive feedback on the support provided and impact made.

We noted that since it launched in September 2022, the Council's Cost of Living help web page has had 112,545 views and continues to be updated with the most recent information and advice.

'Time for Change – Poverty in Wales' - Audit Wales Recommendations

We followed up on Council actions in response to the Audit Wales national report called 'Time for Change – Poverty in Wales', published in November 2022, which made eight key recommendations, and whether there was anything outstanding from this.

We acknowledged that the Audit report cited the work being carried out in Swansea as a good example, but nevertheless the Council has been addressing the recommendations, some of which it was noted were for the Welsh Government. We were told that an action plan had been developed, with the majority of recommendations delivered, helping to inform the new Tackling Poverty Strategy including the performance framework. We noted that discussion was ongoing with the Welsh Government with regard to improvements in the way that funding for tackling poverty programmes is administered and monitored.

One of the Audit recommendations asks 'Local Authorities to improve their understanding of lived experience of poverty through meaningful involvement and experience mapping, such as the use of Poverty Truth Commissions'. We know that this is something Swansea has already made significant progress on, having been one of the Scrutiny recommendations following a review of the Council's Tackling Poverty Strategy. The Swansea Poverty Truth Commission (SPTC) was officially launched in 2022 and we understand is the first and only commission of its kind in Wales, which brings together community, civic and business commissioners from across Swansea to put people with lived experience of poverty at the heart of policy and decision making.

Step 9 – Building Community Assets

We welcomed the development of a Volunteering Strategy referred to in the report, that will be co-ordinated by the Tackling Poverty Service. We note that it will be based on existing Council-led volunteering opportunities in departments like Social Services and Cultural Services, but would aim to enhance the potential of volunteering to support people and communities to reduce poverty and improve prosperity.

One example you provided, from Cultural Services, is that Swansea Museum offers placements and volunteering opportunities including school work experience. We inquired about how the Museum shared this information with Schools & Colleges, etc, for opportunities with Work Experience and Volunteering. We noted that currently schools make referrals, on a case-by-case basis, to Swansea Museum for opportunities with Work Experience and Volunteering. However, work is in progress to streamline the process across the Council, with the development of a Corporate Volunteering Strategy, that will allow the Council to be more proactive, and further developing the Council's relationship with the 3rd Sector.

Skills Development

We discussed the focus on improving the way we help people to develop their skills, qualifications and employment prospects so that they can find well-paid, meaningful jobs, ideally locally, and improve prospects for their future.

Equipping school children with the correct skills for the work place was high priority and you spoke about the Council's employability programme, with multiple projects underway across Swansea with dedicated officers, which is getting people into work. This also included support for ex-offenders, which has been successful.

Child Poverty

We remarked on the Welsh First Minister's comments, following his recent announcement that he will be stepping down from this role, expressing disappointment that more has not been done to tackle child poverty since devolution. We were interested in your views about what could have been done differently or is needed to make a bigger difference in the years ahead.

You stated that tackling Child Poverty and giving it priority, at all levels, was a political choice and, in your opinion some issues were less important. You felt that more can be done and a dedicated Minister with responsibility for Child Poverty would be a positive change for the future, and that the challenge required more innovative and creative solutions. You called for improvements nationally in relation to processes around grant funding to make it easier for Councils to administer, including timescales.

Committee Members felt that a great focus within Schools on finance and budgeting at an early age would help develop practical skills of children who will be the parents of the future. One good example was shared, having been a feature of a recent meeting of the Partneriaeth Regional Scrutiny Councillor Group, of the sort of 'poverty proofing' work going on in Birchgrove Comprehensive School, which the Head Teacher addressed the Scrutiny Group on.

Your Response

We thank all those involved, both within and outside of the Council, for their work and efforts to help people experiencing poverty and acknowledge this is a complex issue, impacting more and more people, that requires multi-agency response.

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome comments on any of the issues raised within. **Specifically, we would appreciate your assistance in facilitating the Committee's request to see and comment on the draft Tackling Poverty Strategy, which we can agenda for a future meeting. Please email scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk to advise when this can be scheduled for.**

In addition, we will make arrangements to re-visit work on Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities for December 2024. This will enable us to keep close watch regularly on progress, follow up on the issues we have raised, and enable Scrutiny views to influence action and improvement.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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