



City and County of Swansea

Minutes of the **Scrutiny Programme Committee**

Multi-Location Meeting - Gloucester Room, Guildhall / MS

Teams

Tuesday, 13 February 2024 at 4.00 pm

Present: Councillor P M Black (Chair) Presided

Councillor(s)
E W Fitzgerald
W G Lewis
S Pritchard

Councillor(s)
V A Holland
P N May
T M White

Councillor(s)
M Jones
F D O'Brien

Statutory Co-opted Member(s)

Beth Allender Elizabeth Lee

Councillor Co-opted Member(s)

C A Holley L R Jones

Officer(s)

Rachael Davies	Head of HR & Service Centre
Sarah Lackenby	Head of Digital and Customer Services
Julian Morgans	Head of Revenues & Benefits
Michelle Roberts	Scrutiny Officer
Debbie Smith	Deputy Chief Legal Officer
Samantha Woon	Democratic Services Officer

Also present

Councillor Andrea Lewis – Cabinet Member for Service Transformation (Deputy Leader)

Councillor Sandra Joy – Lead Councillor making the Call In

Apologies for Absence

Councillor(s): None.

Statutory Co-opted Member(s): None

Councillor Co-opted Members: P R Hood-Williams, S M Jones and S E Keeton

74 **Disclosures of Personal & Prejudicial Interest.**

In accordance with the Code of Conduct adopted by the City and County of Swansea, no interests were declared.

75 Prohibition of Whipped Votes and Declaration of Party Whips.

In accordance with the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, no declarations of Whipped Votes or Party Whips were declared.

76 Minutes.

Resolved that the Minutes of the Scrutiny Programme Committee held on 16 January 2024 be approved and signed as a correct record.

77 Public Question Time.

None.

78 Call In of Cabinet Decision - Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

The Chair referred to the report which stated that the Committee was required to consider the concerns raised in relation to the Cabinet report / decision made on 18 January, on the 'Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework' which had been 'Called In' by Councillors (lead Councillor, Sandra Joy).

Councillor Sandra Joy – Lead Councillor making the Call In, detailed the reasons for the Call in as follows:

"The reason for the Call In is because we believe that the Cabinet made this decision without being fully appraised of the concerns expressed by members of the Corporate Services and Financial Resilience STC in a minuted meeting on 12th December, when this policy draft was discussed. They were under the impression that this policy draft had been accepted in its entirety by this STC, and that is not the case. The Chair of the Corporate Services and Financial Resilience STC omitted to share with the Cabinet members the concerns that were raised.

During this STC meeting, significant concerns were raised about the timescales for processing applications for free school meals. This is noted as 28 working days, almost six weeks. (Other timescales for people experiencing hardship were also raised in the meeting, but we are focussing on the direct impact on vulnerable children.)

Please note that children who are eligible for free school meals are some of the most vulnerable people in our society. They have no access to funds. Concern was expressed that such a child could potentially be in a position where they are unable to access any food during the day for up to six weeks.

The Council officer present informed the Committee that she would 'take that back to the Heads of Service' and 'feed back to you'. This did not happen until after the Cabinet had met and made their decision, so again they were not appraised of the concerns raised.

Obviously, supporting evidence that this was raised can be provided, both via the minutes of the meetings referred to here and the recordings of both meetings: the STC and the Cabinet meeting, as well as subsequent email exchanges with Council officers.

In summary, we believe that, the decision to adopt the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework without amendment is unsafe, in that we believe the Cabinet would have been unlikely to accept that any vulnerable child should be expected to go without food every day for almost six weeks whilst adults process the required paperwork”.

In response, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation stated that:

Whilst having been present at the Service Transformation Committee she wished to clarify some of the issues raised.

She provided assurance about the Council commitment and care for childrens' welfare and the access to free school meals.

She referred to the rationale behind the timescale of the Service Standard regarding Free School Meals and proposal to address the concerns raised following discussion with Officers. Unfortunately, in some cases, it was not possible to confirm eligibility without consulting the DWP, who can take up to 28 days to respond. The DWP timescales are outside of the control of the Council. However, if the Council were aware of a family's entitlement through different means (e.g. Council tax or Housing Benefit, and they provided evidence previously for qualifying benefits) the Council can confirm this and process the application within one or two days.

The proposed amendment of seven working days reflected action that was within the Council's control, once the Council is aware of a qualifying benefit. However, every effort is made to process applications as quickly as possible.

The Cabinet Member clarified that the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework was due to be implemented on the 1st of April and was always intended to be a 'living document' that will be updated/amended accordingly to improve our customer service, as reflected in the Cabinet decision on 18 January where delegated authority had been given to Directors and the relevant Cabinet Member(s) to make any minor amendments as appropriate.

In conclusion, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation stated that she wished to give a level of assurance that the concerns raised would be taken on board prior to implementation on the 1 April 2024.

The Head of Revenues and Benefits provided a comprehensive overview of the process for determining eligibility and reiterated the comments made by the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation.

Committee questioning and discussions focussed on the following:

- Changes to Benefits Scheme (roll out of Universal Credit).

- Schools' responses to timescales for Free School Meals.
- Eligibility criteria in England and Wales.

The Chair thanked Councillor S Joy, the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation and Officers for their input.

Resolved that the Chair write to the Cabinet Member for Service Transformation reflecting the Committee's decision to recommend the amendment to the Free School Meals Service Standard detailed in the response of the Chief Executive (Appendix 4) in which the timescale be amended to 7 working days (of receiving the confirmation).

79 Workforce Strategy Progress Report.

The Head of HR and Service Centre introduced the Workforce Strategy 2022-2027 which had been approved by Cabinet in October 2022 after a period of design and consultation with stakeholders. The strategy was available for viewing at Appendix A.

The strategy contained four key themes to drive the improvement of organisational culture over the lifespan of the five-year period, contributing to the Council's Corporate Plan, '*Successful and Sustainable Swansea*,' and the associated Corporate Transformation Plan for 2023-2028.

Following Cabinet's approval of the Workforce Strategy a Workforce and Organisational Development Transformation Programme Board was established in December 2022. The board was responsible for identifying appropriate transformation projects that would enable delivery of the strategy's objectives, agreeing the priority projects for implementation at any given point in the lifetime of the strategy and monitoring progress on a quarterly basis.

The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed the progress with the four specific transformation projects and the Workforce Strategy objectives identified for implementation during 2023/24.

Members noted that of the 23 objectives agreed for 2023/24 the summary RAG status list was:

- Complete – 4
- Green – 12
- Amber – 6
- Withdrawn - 1

Good progress had been made with addressing the objectives set out in the Workforce Strategy with 70% of them due to be complete by the end of the financial year. With one objective due to be withdrawn due to circumstances beyond the control of the Council and a further amber to be redrafted to meet directorate intentions, the remaining 5 amber objectives would be carried forward into the 2024/25 year along with newly selected goals remaining in the strategy.

Recruitment to the vacant HR&OD Manager post would enable greater capacity for delivery against the Workforce Strategy objectives and as the HR&OD service transformation embeds, focus on project work will increase as a result.

Committee questioning and discussions focussed on the following:

- A Workforce Fit for the Future – Recognising Performance – the Head of HR and Service Centre detailed the new approach/actions taken to deliver a culture of culture of 'high performance', with regular evaluation and feedback via Oracle.
- Workforce and Organisational Development Transformation – The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed the process involved in attaining 'Investors in People' accreditation. Due to costs of accreditation, it was deemed to be something that could be explored at a later date.
- Being an Employer of Choice – Recruitment & Retention – The Head of HR & Service Centre detailed progress and the type of research and information to inform improvement to Policy and the Council's approach to Recruitment & Selection.

The Chair thanked the Head of HR & Service Centre for her input and requested that a further update on the delivery of the Workforce Strategy to the Committee be scheduled in one year, focusing on the impact.

Resolved that the Chair write to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Performance reflecting discussion and sharing the views of the Committee.

80 Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature (Councillor Sara Keeton, Convener).

Councillor Sara Keeton provided the Committee with a progress report on the work / activities of the Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature.

Resolved that the Scrutiny Performance Panel Progress Report: Climate Change & Nature be noted.

81 Membership of Scrutiny Panels and Working Groups.

Resolved that the membership of the Community Growing Scrutiny Working Group as reported, with Councillor Michael Locke as Convener, be agreed.

82 Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Chair presented the regular report on the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2023/24 which the Committee is responsible for monitoring.

He highlighted that:

- the new Scrutiny Inquiry on Community Assets is now underway;
- a public request for Scrutiny had been received on the topic of 5G roll out and its impact, but following advice from the Chief Legal Officer the specific issues

raised were considered outside the scope of Scrutiny, so no action would be taken;

Following conclusion of the Scrutiny Training & Development Programme for Swansea Scrutiny Councillors, which was facilitated by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), a number of ideas have emerged from this process and self-assessment. These will be considered as part of a wider end of year review to inform Scrutiny Improvement Objectives and actions going forward.

He confirmed that the main items for the next Committee on 19 March comprised:

- Annual Complaints Report 2022/2023.
- Welsh Language Standards Annual Report 2022/2023.

83 Scrutiny Letters.

The Chair referred to the following letters, reflecting on recent Committee Scrutiny activity:

- Committee – Delivery of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty & Enabling Communities – Letter to Cabinet Member for Wellbeing.
- Committee – Scrutiny of Support for Business – Letter to Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration, Events & Tourism.

84 Date and Time of Upcoming Panel / Working Group Meetings.

The Chair referred to upcoming Panel/Working Group/Regional Scrutiny meetings, for awareness.

The meeting ended at 5.06 pm



**To/
Councillor Andrea Lewis
Cabinet Member for Service
Transformation (Deputy Leader)**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

*Please ask for:
Gofynnwch am:*

*Direct Line:
Llinell Uniongyrochol:*

*e-Mail
e-Bost:*

*Our Ref
Ein Cyf:*

*Your Ref
Eich Cyf:*

*Date
Dyddiad:*

Scrutiny

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SPC/2023-24/10

20 February 2024

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Member following the meeting of the Committee on 13 February 2024. It is about the Call-in of Cabinet decision on 18 January 2024 which approved a Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

Dear Councillor Lewis,

Call in – Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework

Thank you for attending the Scrutiny Programme Committee on 13 February 2024 to assist the Committee's consideration of the Call In received on the Customer Charter and Service Standards Framework.

In accordance with Council procedure, the Committee was required to consider the concerns raised in relation to the Cabinet report / decision made on 18 January, which had been 'Called In' by Councillors (lead Councillor, Sandra Joy). The Committee noted that this was a report from the Chair of the Corporate Services & Financial Resilience Service Transformation Committee, having overseen the development of the Charter and Framework, presented to Cabinet for decision.

We heard from Councillor Joy on her concerns, which centred on the timescale of 28 working days that had been agreed for the processing of applications for Free School Meals, i.e. almost six calendar weeks, and adverse impact of the lengthy process on the children and their welfare, which she felt was not consistent with this Council's commitment to the UNCRC and

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU
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Tackling Poverty; and Cabinet not being aware of these concerns despite being raised in advance of decision.

The Committee benefited from a written note provided by the Chief Executive, which explained what the Council is able to do in terms of processing applications for Free School Meals, for the elements within its control, and indicated the intention to make a change to the Service Standards in response to the concern raised. We appreciated your response to the Call In and Committee questions, and the input and advice provided by lead officers, Sarah Lackenby, Head of Digital & Customer Services, and Julian Morgans, Head of Revenues & Benefits, which helped the Committee to better understand the process, and the issues that can arise that may delay confirmation of eligibility, and therefore processing times. We were pleased to hear within this that efforts have already been made to improve processes to maximise the take up of Free School Meals.

We heard why the 28 days timescale was originally set, as many applications for Free School Meals are made jointly with applications for Housing Benefit and/or Council Tax Reduction. Decisions on these can often depend on obtaining various pieces of supporting evidence from the applicant, the Department for Work & Pensions and HM Revenue & Customs, and so there is a 28 day timescale for those decisions to reflect that. It was noted that current actual processing times are around 19 days.

We were pleased to hear that applications for free school meals are looked at within 2 or 3 days of receipt and at that point the necessary checks are made with the Department of Education's eligibility checking service to check entitlement. We noted that where the necessary information is obtained from that service to confirm eligibility, or there is evidence already provided to the Council of the qualifying benefit(s), the Council will send an email to the parent / carer confirming entitlement to Free School Meals and also the data team in the Education Department who will update IT systems, so schools are aware. This usually being done the same day that confirmation is obtained, which is good to hear.

We were assured that in most cases, where there is already proof of qualifying benefit provided or where confirmation of eligibility is obtained from the eligibility checking service applications are processed within days, not weeks. However, we noted that where the eligibility checking service cannot provide immediate confirmation of entitlement, there may be delays which are outside the authority's control. For example, when a new claim for Universal Credit is made there will be at least 5 weeks before a decision on that qualifying benefit is made. Also, with the migration of Housing Benefit to Universal Credit more and more checks will need to be conducted with the eligibility checking service in the future and more applications will be subject to a longer wait for a decision.

In conclusion, we agreed with the Chief Executive’s advice regarding amending the Service Standard to include the elements that are only within the Council’s control, as an improvement on the existing Standard.

Committee Decision

Following our discussion, **the Committee recommended that the Cabinet decision regarding approval of the Customer Charter & Service Standards Framework be reconsidered, in light of the concern raised, and in line with the Chief Executive’s proposed way forward.**

The Committee therefore recommends that the Service Standard for Free School Meals be amended to the following:

Request	When you contact the Council to:	The Council’s Commitment to you:	Within the following timescales	Contact Details of this Service:
Education: Free School Meals (FSM)	Make a new application for FSM or tell us about a change in your household circumstances that might affect an existing award of FSM	If you have provided all the information we need and we have been able to obtain confirmation of your eligibility/non-eligibility from DWP/HMRC, we will tell you if you are entitled to FSM	7 working days (of receiving the confirmation)	Web: Free school meals - Swansea Email: freeschoolmeals@swansea.gov.uk Phone: 01792 635353

(Note - text marked in red indicates changes from the original)

The change to the above definition and response time will help to make the Council’s role and responsibility clearer to residents.

We noted that the Customer Charter and Services Standards Framework was intended to be implemented from 1 April 2024, and having been approved by Cabinet would nevertheless remain a ‘living’ document that would be subject to updates as deemed necessary at any time. We can see the Cabinet decision on 18 January delegated the Authority to Directors and the relevant Cabinet Member, to make any minor changes to the Standards as appropriate and always in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Corporate Services & Performance (Joint Deputy Leader of the Council) and yourself. As such, we

were advised that amendments could be made without reference back to a future Cabinet meeting.

Reference was also made in the meeting to approaches in other Council's in the UK suggesting that it is possible to further reduce processing timescales, so Cabinet Member(s) should commit to look at that to explore the potential for further improvement in the Service Standard and perhaps engage the Service Transformation Committee in this work.

Your Response

Although you indicated at the meeting support for and willingness to make the amendment shown above, having been involved in finding a way forward, **the Committee will be grateful if you could formally confirm that the Committee's recommendations will be accepted and actioned. We would be grateful for your response by 12 March 2024.**

A copy of this letter and your response letter will then be published in the agenda of the next available Committee meeting.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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