

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Parents of children with mental health issues at their wits’ end over services

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Scrutiny councillors have brought the concerns of parents to the fore in an inquiry into children’s mental health services. The inquiry heard how parents of children with mental health issues are often at their wits’ end about how to get help, with confusion about the role and scope of assessment and treatment services available.

The scrutiny inquiry focussed on how the Council can work with health and other partners to reduce demand for specialist child & adolescent mental health services, which are provided across the South and South West Wales region by the Health Board.

This piece of scrutiny has raised awareness and understanding of the problems in this area, and attracted a lot of media coverage. Councillor Mary Jones, who chaired the Inquiry Panel, said: ‘This has been a very difficult and emotive inquiry. Referrals to the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have doubled in the last four years, but we found confusion amongst professionals and parents about who was eligible for specialist help, what the criteria was, and how the referral process worked. We’ve heard some difficult stories. A lot of parents are at their wits end, which is extremely sad. We hope that our inquiry will help make things simpler so that children can receive the right assessment and treatment that is necessary, before things get worse. This need for mental health support services is set to continue to grow and to meet this demand it is clear that things need to be done differently; and decisions taken at the top about how resources are used need greater input from professionals and parents.’

The difference between mental health issues and mental illness was one that was adding to the confusion as the CAMHS Service is quite a small specialist service, and its purpose is not well understood. The danger, according the scrutiny report, was that many problems were going unnoticed and never referred for specialist help. The Panel felt there was a distinct gap in services for children and young people with mental health needs who were not diagnosed with an illness but who could benefit from help.

The scrutiny report, with its conclusions and recommendations, was presented to Cabinet on 20 October. The report makes 16 recommendations. Amongst the things that the report calls for is:

- clarification from CAMHS about the services it provides, referrals and eligibility, and for that to be clearly shared with other agencies
- a training programme for education staff in collaboration with CAMHS so that issues can be identified at an early stage
- parents and carers of affected children being involved in the planning of CAMHS services
- the creation of an access and information point for worried parents to give advice and screen new referrals
- monitoring of referral rates and waiting times for those eligible to receive help

Working with relevant partners, Cabinet is expected to respond to the recommendations in December. The Panel will follow up on action and the impact made from this work during 2017.

Volunteers need more support if communities are to take control

(Lead: Councillor Terry Hennegan)

Scrutiny councillors have listened carefully to views around getting communities to have more say and take control of local services. They have agreed that more needs to be done to recognise the work of volunteers and community groups and the vital difference they make to their communities.

Councillor Terry Hennegan, who chaired an Inquiry Panel, said: 'There was a consistent message from our evidence gathering that many community volunteers and community groups do not feel valued either by their communities or by the Council. The Panel felt that that recognition for the work of volunteers is important because it provides encouragement and it lets them know that they have the support and backing of the Council and the wider community.'

Focussing on the Council priority to build sustainable communities, the Scrutiny Inquiry shone a spotlight on work to promote and develop what is referred to as 'community action' and build capacity. Scrutiny Councillors looked at how this is being managed and have made recommendations to help this work, given the significant budget cuts that the Council is facing which will affect the ability to sustain certain services, for example in sports and leisure services.

The scrutiny report makes a number of recommendations to Cabinet, focused on how the Council can best support residents to run services in their own communities. Much of the emphasis is on communicating and working closely with residents, community groups and our third sector partners to ensure that services continue and are of good quality. In terms of supporting community groups and volunteers the Panel calls for:

- a campaign to promote the role of volunteers including celebrating and valuing the role and highlighting benefits of volunteering is undertaken.
- an annual Lord Mayor's Award for Community Work.
- peer to peer networks and mentoring programmes to help share expertise and support across community groups.

A response to the recommendations is expected in December and actions will be followed up by the Scrutiny Panel during 2017.

Showing how the culture at work is important to improvement

(Lead: Councillor Andrew Jones)

Our recent scrutiny inquiry on corporate culture has been picked up by the Wales Audit Office as a good practice example. On its 'good practice exchange' the Wales Audit Office has published a story applauding scrutiny in Swansea for tackling cultural change and identifying its importance to organisational improvement.

An in-depth inquiry was carried out last year focussing on how the council can develop and improve its culture. In the last edition of Dispatches we reported on the follow up and impact made by this scrutiny work. The Innovation Programme is the focus for the Council's work on cultural change, and Councillors were pleased to hear that the inquiry had provided a focus for improvement and will continue to be a checklist for future work.

The Wales Audit Office recognised that it is seen as a difficult issue to get to grips with, and praised the pro-active efforts of scrutiny to examine this and look for improvement, and add value to the Council's Innovation Programme. In their words: 'there are some eye-catching proposals that focus on the organisation's people. They cover the whole staff journey from corporate inductions, mainstreaming innovation into appraisals and developing personal skills to avoid buying in expertise....it's great to see that the council are looking at how they can move away from a blame culture'.

Chair's Roundup:

This is my second quarterly roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2016/17.

Gathering evidence

Focussing on some of the Council's priorities, in-depth inquiries are in progress looking at improving the Council's Tackling Poverty strategy (lead: Councillor Sybil Crouch), Children's Readiness for School (lead: Councillor Hazel Morris), and developing Partnerships and Collaboration (lead: Councillor June Burtonshaw). A number of different methods are being used to gather evidence for these inquiries, to take in a range of perspectives which will inform conclusions and recommendations for improvement. A scrutiny report on each of these topics will be published in early 2017.

Checking on performance

Child & Family Services (lead: Cllr Paxton Hood-Williams) – the Panel continues to monitor and challenge performance, as an area of high demand and high spend. With regular questions on the number of looked after children and reduction strategies, it is pleasing to see that numbers have fallen steadily over the last few months.

Adult Services (lead: Cllr Uta Clay) – this new Panel is only a few months old and is establishing a regime for regular monitoring of Adult Services.

Schools (lead: Cllr Fiona Gordon) – the Panel is focussed on school improvement and improving outcomes for children and young people. Recent meetings have included discussions with Cefn Hengoed Comprehensive School and Bryniago Welsh Medium Primary School about their improvement journeys. The Panel has also looked at how well schools are using tools and techniques for intervention, and identifying good practice.

Public Services Board (lead: Cllr Mary Jones) – there is a statutory duty on council's to scrutinise the work of Public Services Board in Swansea and the first meeting of this multi-agency Panel took place in September to discuss how it will consider what difference the Swansea Public Services Board is making for citizens.

Questioning Cabinet Members

Each month's Committee meeting features a Q & A session with a Cabinet Member in order to hold them to account for their work. As I write we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member for Environment & Transport in November, Cabinet Member for Adults & Vulnerable People in December, and the Leader in January. Acting as a 'critical friend' we question and challenge them on their priorities, actions, achievement and impact. We invite members of the public and all scrutiny councillors to contribute ideas to ensure the committee asks the right questions. A summary of each session and views of the committee are published in the form of letter to relevant Cabinet Members. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet Members for Education, Anti-Poverty & Communities, and Enterprise, Development & Regeneration.

Examining Commissioning Reviews

One of the ways in which scrutiny hold the cabinet to account is to carry out pre-decision scrutiny. This means questioning Cabinet Members on proposals, taking into account strategic impact, public interest and financial implications, and presenting views to Cabinet ahead of decisions. Amongst these are Commissioning Reviews where Cabinet is taking significant decisions about the future of our services, under the backdrop of financial pressures and sustainability. The Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel has looked at the Commissioning Reviews concerning Waste Management, and Corporate Building & Property Services. Some general concerns have been raised on the clarity of information provided on stakeholder involvement / consultation, and financial implications of selected options. These have been acknowledged by Cabinet Members for future reports. Next up are Highways & Transportation, and Parks & Cleansing.

Picking up public concerns

Following a public request for scrutiny we have agreed to set up a Working Group to look at issues around Houses in Multiple Occupation. An initial officer briefing is being planned for 25 November and then a further meeting that will enable the public to give views. Further information about this to follow. Anyone living or working in Swansea can get in touch with us about matters of concerns as scrutiny may be able to help. We also have time set aside at every Scrutiny Programme Committee for a public question time, for questions to any Cabinet Members present about their work or to myself concerning the scrutiny work programme.

Talking about public engagement, the [Swansea scrutiny blog](#) has been highlighted as a good example of public service journalism by [Chris Bolton](#), good practice manager at the Wales Audit Office. This is welcome recognition of scrutiny in Swansea and the steps being taken to increase media coverage and improve public engagement in our work. He highlights the importance of Councils working with the local press – to keep their communities informed and involved. We are now monitoring the amount of media coverage received as part of performance measures for developing scrutiny.

Working in different ways to look at some issues

Adopting a more light-touch approach, one-off Working Groups are set up to look at some topics. We followed up on the work of the Tree Preservation Scrutiny Working Group, which had made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development & Regeneration. Having discussed with the Cabinet Member, who welcomed this work, we were pleased with and encouraged by the progress that has been made, particularly by Council's Landscape Team. We welcomed the development of a Tree Policy, which will amongst other things cover the replanting of trees on Council land. We noted there were some recommendations still in progress, and amongst these the Cabinet Member confirmed that the implications of placing Tree Preservation Orders on Council land prior to sale was being discussed. There was concern amongst councillors that many trees have been lost through sale of council land because of the failure to protect trees.

Guiding Co-opted Members

We have developed guidance for co-opted members once they have joined Scrutiny Panels and Working Groups, adding to the previously agreed protocol for co-option. This helps to clarify responsibilities and expectations to help co-opted members make an effective contribution to the work of scrutiny. Mrs Beverley Phillips, Head Teacher of Blaenymaes Primary School has been co-opted by the Tackling Poverty Inquiry Panel, to assist the Panel with its work.

Coordinating with the work of the Audit Committee

We met with the Chair of the Audit Committee, Alan Thomas, in support of developing the relationship between scrutiny and the Audit Committee and coordination between respective work plans. He cited examples where the work of the Audit Committee and scrutiny has been complementary, with issues around school governance, and planning matters being picked up by scrutiny. He was clear about respective roles, and remarked on the capacity of scrutiny to look at issues in depth. Overall he was pleased with the relationship between the two committees, coordination, and mechanisms for dialogue and raising issues. He was also pleased to be involved in the Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference.

Making the work of scrutiny more transparent and accessible

Just a reminder about our on-line '[publications page](#)' for easy access to all scrutiny agenda packs, reports and letters as well as responses from Cabinet Members.

Connect with Scrutiny:

Gloucester Room, Guildhall, Swansea. SA1 4PE (Tel. 01792 637732)

Web: www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutiny

Twitter: [@swanseascrutiny](https://twitter.com/swanseascrutiny)

Email: scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

Bulletin Board: www.swanseascrutiny.co.uk