

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2017/2018 (No. 2)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Developing regional scrutiny

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Scrutiny Councillors in Swansea have helped blaze a trail for regional scrutiny by working with Councillors from five other Councils. Together they are looking at the work of the regional school improvement alliance, known as ERW (Education Through Regional Working).

The purpose of the ERW Scrutiny Councillor Group, which was set up in September 2015, is to help ensure the best educational outcomes for children in the region by supporting effective scrutiny to:

- support consistent scrutiny across the six councils
- share scrutiny good practice
- encourage shared scrutiny approaches and avoid the duplication of scrutiny work
- provide critical and objective challenge to ERW on topics of interest as required
- contribute to the good and effective governance of ERW

At present this involves two meetings per year and each Council in turn hosts and chairs the meeting. The Group last met on 9 March 2018, hosted by Carmarthenshire Council and discussed the educational outcomes across the region, the effects of poverty in rural wales and progress with the recently established ERW Review and Reform Programme Board. They also met with the Welsh Government Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams, about the future of regional working.

After each meeting the Councillor Group writes a letter to the ERW Joint Committee feeding back their views and recommendations. The ERW Joint Committee is made up of the six local authority Leaders and advised by ERW Board of Directors, external school improvement experts, Headteacher representatives and the Managing Director.

For example the Group has raised concern, and called for action, on:

- the current capacity of Challenge Advisors across the region and consistency of support
- progress being made with the ERW Review and Reform Programme to ensure more effective working for pupils across the region

Swansea is represented by the Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee, Councillor Mary Jones, and Convener of the Schools Performance Panel, Councillor Mo Sykes. Councillor Jones said: ‘The fact that more and more services are being delivered on a regional basis presents a challenge for future scrutiny. There is a need for those involved in carrying out scrutiny to match the regional working to ensure the accountability and transparency of regional bodies. The experience of ERW scrutiny has been positive and could provide a model for developing scrutiny of other bodies, such as the Western Bay Health & Social Care Programme.’

Swansea’s Scrutiny Team is providing the support for the Scrutiny Councillor Group as the Council’s contribution to ERW. Regional work will become an increasingly important feature of scrutiny over the next few years so it is good that Swansea’s provision of support for scrutiny of ERW has worked well and been well received. The ERW Managing Director, Betsan O’Connor, has praised the work of the Scrutiny Councillor Group stating that: “It is coordinated well and the feedback is good”

The next meeting will take place in September 2018 and will be hosted by Neath Port Talbot.

Improving the welfare of tethered horses

(Lead: Councillor Jeff Jones)

There has been a significant progress and improvement in the welfare of tethered horses since scrutiny councillors shone a spotlight on this issue in 2016.

Having arranged a follow up meeting in January with the Cabinet Member for Environment Services, Council officers, and representatives from the RSPCA and FOSH (Friends of Swansea Horses) councillors have found that the outcomes have been positive and constructive:

- hotspot areas have been identified and action taken to inform the public that horses are not permitted, and these locations are now monitored on a monthly basis. This resulted in a reduction in the number of horses being tethered across these areas by 60% since May 2016.
- there has been work on education and building closer relationships with horse owners
- the ideas and suggestions from the original Working Group in 2016 have resulted in a framework for dealing with tethered horses in a partnership approach with the RSPCA and the Hillside Animal Sanctuary.
- the relationship between the Council, RSPCA and Hillside remains strong and effective and there are clear procedures for dealing with tethered horses in Swansea.
- the Council and partners have established a 'Swansea Equine Forum' to maintain communication and improvement.
- Friends of Swansea Horses (FOSH) have now disbanded as they feel their aims have been achieved, which is excellent news.

This has been recognised as an example of successful partnership working. The Working Group received positive feedback and thanks from the RSPCA and FOSH for their support and raising awareness of the issue through scrutiny. The Convener of the Working Group, Councillor Jeff Jones also highlighted that the improvements seen were a team effort which could not have been achieved without all agencies involved. He said 'We are pleased there has been great progress but we need to keep this momentum going and continue to improve the conditions at which horses are kept in Swansea'

Challenging our schools

(Lead: Councillor Mo Sykes)

Scrutiny councillors have been talking directly to schools to assess and monitor performance.

The Schools Scrutiny Performance Panel provides ongoing challenge to schools performance in order to ensure that pupils in Swansea are receiving a high quality education and that they are meeting objectives to improve schools standards and pupil attainment. As well as discussing a range of education improvement issues that affect all schools, the Panel identifies a small number of schools each year to engage directly with, based on relevant performance data. The Panel has recently focused on Morrision Primary School. The Panel met the Headteacher and Chair of Governors, and Challenge Advisor, to look at their current performance and prospects for improvements. The Panel praised the work going on at Morrision Primary and commitment to driving improvement at the school following an Estyn rating of 'adequate' last year. The Panel concluded that there was now a much improved picture at the school. Overall, councillors were pleased to see a strong leadership team at the school emerging along with a supportive and challenging governing body.

Looking at different ways in which scrutiny can engage with schools the Panel also met with pupils, headteachers, Chair of Governors and the challenge advisors for Parklands Primary and Olchfa Comprehensive Schools. The Panel found out about the collaboration work they are doing, as pioneer schools, in relation to the New Curriculum for Wales. They were able to ask pupils how they feel the new curriculum is improving their learning. Councillors were impressed with both schools' commitment and drive in improving the outcomes of their pupils. They recognised that both schools have embraced this opportunity to shape new practice.

Reviewing car park charges

(Lead: Councillor Will Thomas)

Scrutiny councillors have raised debate about the management of car parks and charges.

The Working Group discussed a range of issues relating to car parks and charging, including: the effect of winter charges; effect of charges on tourism and city centre footfall; and, quality of provision. As well as speaking to the relevant Cabinet Member and officers, the Panel was able to hear views from a number of members of the public about matters relating to foreshore car parks. The convener of the Working Group, Councillor Will Thomas, said: 'Following our scrutiny meeting in November we wrote a letter to the Cabinet Member for Environment Services and we are pleased that his response confirms action will be taken against each of the scrutiny recommendations, including looking at options as to how winter charges in foreshore car parks could be reviewed. One of the options is to look at increasing summer charges to compensate for a reduction in winter charges'

The Working Group had also raised concerns about the problems associated with car parking ticket machines across our managed car parks. The Cabinet Member has confirmed that officers have been working with neighbouring authorities, through the British Parking Association, to develop a joint procurement opportunity, which will provide a number of benefits including greater purchasing power, better technical support from the chosen manufacturer, and greater emphasis for any contractor to perform as failure will affect future contracts from this region. It is expected that combined procurement and bargaining power will bring about an improvement in the service.

Chair's Roundup:

This is my second quarterly roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2017/18, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Progressing our priorities for 2017/18

We have made good progress over the year so far. The work programme is dominated by our six Performance Panels, which meet on an ongoing and regular basis. This has ensured a continued focus on monitoring performance of Adult Services, Child & Family Services, Schools, and the Public Services Board. The Service Improvement & Finance Panel keeps an eye on performance & spending across the Council. Our sixth and new Panel focussing on Development & Regeneration Panel is meeting quarterly. We have two in-depth inquiries in progress - our examination of Regional Working is almost complete and a final report will be published soon. Work on Swansea's Natural Environment has just started, and the Panel will be shortly agreeing the key question and focus for this inquiry which may take up to six months. We arrange Working Groups for a 'quick look' at issues and I am pleased that scrutiny has been able to look at the following issues so far: Emergency Planning & Resilience, Community Cohesion & Hate Crime, Car Park Charges, Tethered Horses, Roads & Footway Maintenance, Local Flood Risk Management, and Renewable Energy. All of this work leads to the views and recommendations for improvement, of scrutiny councillors, being sent to Cabinet Members. We also have arrangements in place to check on implementation of previous inquiry recommendations and assess the impact of our work. Because of good progress Councillors were able to conclude monitoring of the inquiries on School Governance and Building Sustainable Communities.

Questioning Cabinet Members

The committee continues to focus on holding cabinet members to account. Each monthly meeting features a Q & A session with a Cabinet Member to discuss their work. As I write we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member for Commercial Opportunities & Innovation in May. Acting as a 'critical friend' we question and challenge them on their priorities, actions, achievements and impact. We invite 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 a letter to relevant Cabinet Members. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet

Members for Future Generations, Culture, Tourism & Major Projects, and Environment Services.

Challenging proposed decisions

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 and any concerns to Cabinet ahead of decisions. Amongst these are Commissioning Reviews where Cabinet is taking significant decisions about the future of services, given financial pressures and importance of sustainability. In the last quarter scrutiny has looked at the Commissioning Reviews on Family Support (Child Disability) and Highways & Transportation, as well as Cabinet reports on the Council Budget, and the Transfer of Allotments to Management Associations.

Appointing Education Scrutiny Statutory Co-optees

We have a seat for parent governor representatives and church representatives on the Scrutiny Programme Committee who will be able to participate in scrutiny of education services. We have invited interest to fill vacant positions, and await the outcome. We look forward to their contribution to scrutiny.

Raising Awareness of Scrutiny

Whether members of staff have just started working for the Council or have many years of service there's a good chance that no one has ever explained what scrutiny is all about. We've recognised that we need to raise awareness amongst council staff. We have tried to bridge the gap by putting together a staff news story to explain the 'why', the 'how', and the 'what' of scrutiny and spread the message, and the feedback has been good. This could also be a good starting point for anyone, not just council officers, to learn about scrutiny.

Getting feedback

One of the hallmarks of an effective scrutiny function is one that reflects on and learns from experience. For this reason we have been busy over the last month carrying out our Annual Councillor Scrutiny Survey. We will be closely looking at the results to help guide future practice. Also, we are currently inviting feedback from senior members of staff, and will shortly be issuing a public survey. The surveys also help us to collect views about the focus of future scrutiny. Any topic suggestions received will be fed into the upcoming Scrutiny Work Planning Conference.

Awaiting the results of the audit of scrutiny

As well as survey findings we await with interest the view of the Wales Audit Office (WAO), who recently carried out a review of our scrutiny arrangements. Their review focussed on assessing how 'fit for the future' the Council's scrutiny function is, looking at the environment scrutiny is operating in, our practice, and its effectiveness. As well as desktop research, the WAO held a number of focus groups with Councillors, interviewed key officers, and observed meetings. We understand that WAO will issue a report but also are planning a shared learning seminar informed by findings not just here but across Wales.

Making the work of scrutiny more transparent and accessible

All scrutiny agenda packs are available on the Council's ['agenda and minutes' webpage](#). There you can also find all scrutiny letters sent to cabinet members following meetings and responses. All scrutiny meetings are open to the public and anyone living or working in Swansea can [suggest a topic for scrutiny](#). There are also opportunities to suggest questions, and submit views. If you would just like to keep an eye on what's going on we have webpages, a blog and a newsletter - you could even follow us on Twitter – links below.

Councillor Mary Jones

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