



## Report of the Chair

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 11 March 2019

### Scrutiny Letters

<b>Purpose:</b>	To ensure the Committee is aware of the scrutiny letters produced following various scrutiny activities, and to track responses to date.
<b>Content:</b>	The report includes a log of scrutiny letters produced this year, and provides a copy of correspondence between scrutiny and cabinet members where discussion is required.
<b>Councillors are being asked to:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Review the scrutiny letters and responses</li><li>• Make comments, observations and recommendations as necessary</li></ul>
<b>Lead Councillor:</b>	Councillor Mary Jones, Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee
<b>Lead Officer:</b>	Tracey Meredith, Chief Legal Officer
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<b>Legal Officer:</b>	Debbie Smith
<b>Finance Officer:</b>	Paul Cridland

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The production of scrutiny letters has become an established part of the way scrutiny operates in Swansea. Letters from the chair (or conveners) allow scrutiny to communicate directly and quickly with relevant cabinet members.
- 1.2 These letters are used to convey views and conclusions about particular issues discussed and provide the opportunity to raise concerns, ask for further information, and make recommendations. This enables scrutiny to engage with Cabinet Members on a regular and structured basis.

## 2. Reporting of Letters

- 2.1 All scrutiny letters, whether they are written by the Scrutiny Programme Committee or conveners of panels / working groups, are published to ensure visibility, of the outcomes from meetings, across the council and public.
- 2.2 The Scrutiny Programme Committee agenda also includes a copy of letters to/from Cabinet Members where specific discussion is required, e.g. letters relating to the Committee, Working Groups, and Inquiry Panel follow ups. Letters are included when cabinet member responses that were awaited are received or where a scrutiny letter did not require a response.
- 2.3 Where requested Cabinet Members are expected to respond in writing to scrutiny letters within 21 calendar days. The response should indicate what action (if any) they intend to take as a result of the views and recommendations made.
- 2.4 Letters relating to the work of Performance Panels are part of an ongoing dialogue with Cabinet Members and are therefore reported back and monitored by each Panel. The exception to this is the Public Services Board Scrutiny Performance Panel, whose letters will also be reported as this Committee is the designated committee for scrutinising Swansea Public Services Board (for the purposes of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015). However all Performance Panel conveners will provide a progress report to the committee, including summary of correspondence with Cabinet Members and outcomes.

## 3. Letters Log

- 3.1 This report contains a log of scrutiny letters produced to enable the committee to maintain an overview of letters activity over the year – see **Appendix 1**. The letters log also shows the average time taken by Cabinet Members to respond to scrutiny letters, and the percentage of letters responded to within timescale.
- 3.2 The following letter(s) are **attached** for discussion:

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Meeting Date</b>	<b>Correspondence</b>
a	Cabinet Member Q & A Session	10 Dec	Letter to / from Cabinet Member for Care, Health & Ageing Well
b	Cabinet Member Q & A Session	14 Jan	Letter to Leader / Cabinet Member for Economy & Strategy
c	Welfare Reform Working Group	14 Jan	Letter to / from Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People)

### 3.3 Key Points:

3.3.1 Welfare Reform Working Group - The Working Group met on 14 January to look at the impacts of Welfare Reform in Swansea and works / measures in place to support citizens and mitigate problems. It also received evidence from Citizen's Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot in respect of Universal Credit (UC) queries handled by them during the 12 months since the roll out of UC in Swansea.

As a result of this scrutiny the Cabinet Member (CM) confirms the action(s) that will be taken including the following:

- A conversation will be had with local DWP partners about the process they follow in discussing advances. It is important that people requesting advance payments fully understand the implications and are fully supported to make an informed decision
- Although a landlord would be in breach of the Rent Smart regulations by failing to register, there is no legislation that would prevent them from creating a liability for rent. The CM will discuss this with the relevant Welsh Government Minister and inform Scrutiny of their response
- CM suggests Scrutiny should look at the commitment of Social Workers to exploring the financial well-being of the people they work with and seeking early help from Welfare Rights where necessary. The CM has discussed this with relevant Cabinet colleagues who are welcoming of it. The CM would therefore like Scrutiny to progress this suggestion
- Welfare Rights Team have met with Child and Family Services to look at setting up a procedure when applications for emergency payments have been made where there are benefit issues, which should identify benefit problems at the earliest opportunity. For Housing, Cllr Andrea Lewis is currently exploring having a Welfare Rights resource within the Rents Team. Cllr Lewis welcomes the idea of Scrutiny examining how well Housing officers are working with Welfare Rights and others in Poverty and Prevention. There are not enough Welfare Rights Officers to station them throughout the organisation. CM suggests Scrutiny could take an interest in how well all service delivery departments are owning the commitment to "tackling poverty being everybody's business".
- Welfare Rights Team has ideas about quick reference resources which councillors could use when supporting someone with money worries. These will be rolled out as soon as resources allow.
- Welfare Rights Team are developing an online Benefits Awareness course and will recommend it becomes mandatory for all staff in the Authority.

## 4. Legal Implications

4.1 There are no legal implications.

## **5. Financial Implications**

5.1 There are no financial implications.

**Background Papers:** None

**Appendices:**

**Appendix 1:** Scrutiny Letters Log

**Appendix 2:** Correspondence between scrutiny and cabinet members