

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Maintaining & Enhancing Our Natural Environment

(Lead: Councillor Peter Jones)

Scrutiny councillors have told the Council what it should be doing to maintain, enhance and promote its natural environment and biodiversity, and in doing so promote the resilience of eco-systems.

An in-depth Scrutiny Inquiry into the Natural Environment published findings in a report that was presented to the Cabinet meeting on 21 March. The Inquiry Panel, led by Councillor Peter Jones, spent much of the last year looking at this topic. It took in a range of perspectives, from both within the Council, from partners and the public, and the report makes twenty recommendations for Cabinet to respond to, on an issue that is now a matter of priority for the Council.

The report includes a view on how this priority can be delivered effectively. It recognises that the Council is one of the leading public authorities in Wales in thinking through and exploring how best to deliver on the Welsh Government environmental and sustainability legislation. However, the task is to meet expectations and to deliver on and embed requirements, and the inquiry report serves as a contribution to that effort.

Some of the recommendations have been identified by the cross-party Inquiry Panel as ‘quick wins’, other as more medium and long-term actions, touching upon all areas of the Council’s work. This includes calling for action on:

- Raising the profile of the Natural Environment and Biodiversity internally and externally.
- Maintaining and increasing the specialist and high quality work currently delivered by the Council.
- Recognising the benefits of ‘nature based’ prevention projects, such as to limit air pollution and for flood risk management etc.
- Cost sharing across the Council in providing additional resources to maintain and enhance the natural environment, and more cross-departmental working
- The authority working co-productively with external partners, including voluntary groups, Community Councils and the public in maintaining and enhancing the Council’s green spaces.
- Making a commitment to natural environment education in schools.

Councillor Peter Jones, convener of the Panel said:

‘This work has been an extensive undertaking. We found that a lot of positive action was evident but it is clear that there was much to be done. This report concentrates on biodiversity loss and how we, as a Council, can and must set about halting and reversing this process, not least to meet the 2020 target set by the Welsh Government which aims to halt the loss of biodiversity and take steps toward recovery. However, the Panel is clear that delivery will be difficult without financial support to meet, in particular, additional staffing requirements.’

The final report can be found here: <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/35863/Scrutiny-Reports-Library>

A decision on the inquiry recommendations is expected within the next two months – more on that in the next edition.

Improving Community Safety*(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)*

Scrutiny councillors have shone a light on the community safety issues facing Swansea and actions to tackle these.

The performance of the local Community Safety Partnership is looked at each year as part of the scrutiny work programme – in Swansea this is known as the Safer Swansea Partnership. In April, the Scrutiny Programme Committee met with representative(s) from South Wales Police and the Council who are involved in the joint-chairing arrangement for the Safer Swansea Partnership Steering Group.

The vision of the Safer Swansea Partnership is ‘a place where all members of society can feel safe at all times’, and its key purpose being ‘to create a safe and welcoming environment in which to live, work, visit, trade, study, relax and retire’. A discussion about the performance of the Safer Swansea Partnership, looking at partnership priorities, actions, and impact, highlighted the achievements against objectives and crime and disorder challenges, covering the following:

- Safe, Confident and Resilient Communities
- County Lines and Substance Misuse
- Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence
- Hate Crime and Community Tension Monitoring
- Evening and Night Time Economy

The scrutiny session generated much media interest, with a number of stories in the local press, in particular around tackling issues relating to High Street and its regeneration. The session also has contributed to a public conversation about crime recorded in Swansea, with performance and crime statistics from the past two years being revealed – showing challenges around drug trafficking and substance misuse, organised crime, robberies, and sexual offences. Councillors also raised some concerns around the visibility of policing, limited powers of PCSOs, the 101 telephone reporting system, and the effectiveness of existing approaches to community engagement, and the level of engagement and information sharing with local Councillors.

Dealing with Welfare Reform*(Lead: Councillor Louise Gibbard)*

Scrutiny councillors have made recommendations to help manage the impact of welfare reform on people in Swansea.

A cross-party Scrutiny Working Group met in January to look at the impacts of Welfare Reform in Swansea and works / measures in place to support citizens and mitigate problems. The one-off focused meeting also received evidence from Citizen’s Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot, in respect of queries handled by them during the 12 months since the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) in Swansea.

As a result of this scrutiny action is expected, including:

- talking to local Department for Work & Pensions partners about UC processes
- rolling out quick reference resources which councillors could use when supporting someone with money worries
- developing an online benefits awareness course, mandatory for all staff in the Council

Further scrutiny may result from this work, looking into how well welfare rights support and advice, and commitment to tackling poverty is being delivered across the Council e.g. by staff working in Social Services, Housing and by others in direct contact with vulnerable people.

Managing Environmental Enforcement*(Lead: Councillor Jeff Jones)*

Scrutiny Councillors have asked questions about what is being done in relation to the

enforcement and prevention of a range of environmental issues, concerns about which are regularly raised by the public.

A one-off Working Group took place in February to discuss the work of the Council and issues such as fly tipping, dog fouling, litter, pavement parking, overhanging branches and undergrowth, public footpaths and highways etc. Councillors met with the Cabinet Member for Environment & Infrastructure Management and relevant officers, who provided the Working Group with a briefing on this topic on activities to improve the local environment. It was recognised that this was a challenging area for the Council, with enforcement action being the final step.

Following this scrutiny activity, the Cabinet Member confirms actions will be taken, including around:

- raising public awareness about the cost of fly tipping to the Council, publicising fly tipping prosecutions and highlighting successes
- improving public information about disposal of dog waste
- developing a policy for the enforcement of verge and pavement parking
- providing information around the enforcement contract with 3GS and its focus, for possible review

More details about the discussion, and correspondence between the Working Group and Cabinet Member following the meeting, can be found here:

<https://democracy.swansea.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=653&MId=8435&Ver=4&LLL=0>

Chair's Roundup:

This is my third roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2018/19, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Delivering the priorities for 2018/19

We have approached the end of another year of scrutiny and again delivered a range of scrutiny activities targeted at the things that matter most, through the work of the Committee, in-depth inquiry, ongoing detailed performance and financial monitoring, and one-off Working Groups.

The Natural Environment Inquiry came to an end in March, as reported in the main feature of this paper. With evidence gathering complete, the Inquiry into Equalities is about to conclude. The Inquiry Panel is reflecting on the findings, and will draw conclusions and recommendations. This piece of scrutiny has been looking at how effectively the Council is meeting and embedding equality requirements under the law. It has included councillors undertaking a number of informal evidence gathering activities including engagement with a range of groups / networks who represent people with protected characteristics.

Each of the Performance Panels played a part in scrutinizing the draft Council budget in February. Their examination of service specific proposals and implications supported the work of the Service Improvement & Finance Performance Panel, which plays the lead role in financial monitoring. Feedback was provided to Cabinet ahead of Cabinet decision-making and scrutiny helped to prepare councillors for the budget debate at Council.

Since I wrote to Council previously we have also been able, through Working Groups, to look at, and make improvement recommendations, on the Council's work regarding Local Flood Risk Management, Anti-Social Behaviour, and Tourism.

Questioning Cabinet Members

The Committee continues to focus on holding all cabinet members to account, through monthly Q & A sessions to discuss their work. Acting as a 'critical friend' we question and challenge them on their priorities, actions, achievements and impact. As I write we are due to meet with the

Cabinet Members for Delivery, and Investment, Regeneration & Tourism in May. We invite the public and all scrutiny councillors to contribute ideas to ensure the Committee asks the right questions. We have recently put questions to the Cabinet Members for Better Communities, Councillors June Burtonshaw and Mary Sherwood. A summary of each session and views of the Committee are published in a letter to relevant Cabinet Members.

Challenging decisions

Following the agreement of new arrangements by Council the first scrutiny call-in of a Cabinet decision took place in March. Any valid call-in of cabinet decisions leads to the calling of a meeting of the Committee. The Cabinet report on the New Build for Gorseinon Primary School was called in and the Committee was able to question the Cabinet Member for Education Improvement, Learning & Skills and lead officers who responded to satisfy the concerns raised.

Supporting Joint Scrutiny

With scrutiny of the City Region City Deal and regional Education Improvement body (ERW) already in place, and the possible development of further regional scrutiny arrangements, we welcome the launch of a new Joint Scrutiny Handbook in June. I will be attending the national launch that will be led by the Welsh Government Minister for Housing and Local Government, on 17 June in mid-Wales. We look forward to the advice and guidance that the handbook will provide to support and strengthen the development of collaborative scrutiny in Wales.

End of Year Review

At the end of each year it is good practice to look back on the year's work and achievements, and consider its effectiveness. All councillors were invited to give their views and along with feedback from an informal workshop in early May to help members to reflect and discuss issues, the Committee reviewed the year's work at its meeting on 13 May. Alongside this reflection and self-evaluation by scrutiny councillors, Scrutiny Procedure Rules are being reviewed by the Head of Service to ensure they are not only up-to-date, but provide the best reflection of scrutiny practice / process, and take into account any issues raised by councillors.

Developing a new work programme

A Work Planning Conference will take place on 10 June (in place of the scheduled Committee meeting) that will help the Committee to consider and identify priorities for scrutiny for the coming year. All scrutiny councillors will be invited to participate in this. As well as new topics the Committee will need to consider the continuation of current activities in the Work Programme for 2019/20 because of their importance or because work may be incomplete. Following the Work Planning Conference, the Scrutiny Programme Committee will meet on 8 July to reflect on feedback from the Conference, and other relevant considerations, and agree the work programme for 2019/20. We look forward to a new year of scrutiny, and making an even bigger difference!

Making the work of scrutiny transparent and accessible

Scrutiny agenda packs are available on the Council's 'agenda and minutes' webpage. There you can also find scrutiny letters sent to cabinet members following meetings and responses. Our meetings are open to the public and anyone living or working in Swansea can suggest a topic for scrutiny. There are also opportunities for anyone to suggest questions, and submit views. To keep an eye on what's going see the links below, subscribe to our newsletter, or even follow us on Twitter.

Councillor Mary Jones

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