

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2018/2019 (No. 1)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Developing regional working

(Lead: Councillor Lyndon Jones)

Work carried out by scrutiny councillors will help develop and improve the way the Council and partners work with each other across the region for the benefit of citizens.

An in-depth Scrutiny Inquiry into Regional Working published findings that were presented to Council in June. The report includes a view on the current picture, the national reform agenda, challenges to collaborative working, and arrangements for the accountability of regional working. Scrutiny Councillors held a number of evidence gathering sessions including discussion with different council departments and partners to discuss the experience of regional working activities that are taking place.

All 11 recommendations made by the cross-party Scrutiny Panel were agreed by Cabinet in August. This means action on the following:

- A review of governance arrangements of the three main regional partnerships (Education, through Regional Working, Western Bay Health & Social Care Programme; and Swansea Bay City Region) to ensure they are fit for purpose.
- The authority undertaking a lessons learnt exercise across the three main regional collaborations and develop an action plan/s with resource implications to address any specific and remaining barriers.
- An assessment of the value to the Council from being involved in existing or new partnerships, including an analysis of costs and benefits.
- Greater use of technology e.g. on-line meetings, amongst partners to reduce travelling and Councillor / officer time and further encourage participation in partnership working.
- More engagement of the third sector in existing partnerships.
- Pressure on Welsh Government for a more streamlined grant process to support regional working
- An annual report to Council on the progress made across main regional collaborations.

The Panel had particular concerns about the accountability to local councillors of some regional collaborations. They stressed the need for the big three partnerships to have clear accountability and scrutiny process built into their governance arrangements.

Councillor Lyndon Jones, convener of the Panel said:

‘We felt it was important to look at this issue because there was some concern about the transparency of current regional working and the extent to which the public understood such activities. We found regional working in Wales to be a complex and confusing picture. Regional working must have a real benefit for the people of Swansea and therefore needs to add value and not be seen as another layer of bureaucracy, and be accountable. We hope that this piece of scrutiny will go some way in helping Swansea map the way forward for its regional working activities.’

The Inquiry Panel will reconvene during 2019 in order to follow up on the implementation of recommendations and assess the impact of their work.

Promoting Community Cohesion

(Lead: Councillor Louise Gibbard)

Scrutiny has been myth busting whilst looking at what the Council is doing to support and promote community cohesion.

Having already looked at efforts to tackle hate crime in the area last year a Scrutiny Working Group met in June to focus on this issue, and spoke with representatives from the Councils Poverty and Prevention Team, South Wales Police and the Regional Community Cohesion Coordinator.

The Working Group considered progress and wrote to the Cabinet Member for Better Communities (People), Councillor Mary Sherwood, highlighting a number of issues and suggested areas for improvement. One of these was around myth busting. Councillors found that there is good [myth busting information](#) available but felt that it needed to be shared/used more widely.

Having now received a response from the Cabinet Member this piece of scrutiny is leading to action on:

- Developing a stronger role for Councillors and Local Area Co-ordinators in mainstreaming community cohesion.
- Myth busting information being made available online and shared via social media.
- Better links with and information to Governing Bodies, so they can have a direct impact on community cohesion in Swansea schools.
- Making more use of local media including using corporate communications to get more good news stories and myth busting out into local community.

Tackling Poverty

(Lead: Councillor Sybil Crouch)

Scrutiny heard about the impact it has made in tackling poverty, following an in-depth inquiry carried out in 2017.

The Panel of Councillors which carried out the scrutiny met in October to follow up on the implementation of inquiry recommendations and assess the difference made. The inquiry had focused on ways in which the Council could improve its Tackling Poverty Strategy. Their main conclusion was that, when developing and delivering a strategy it is vital that those people experiencing poverty were not only involved, but involved in a powerful and meaningful way.

The Panel recently heard that the inquiry and its recommendations:

- has supported raising the profile of the tackling poverty agenda as everyone's business, and improved understanding and awareness
- has provided the role of a critical friend, supporting and reaffirming the direction of travel that the development of the revised Tackling Poverty Strategy took
- engaged a number of partners and organisations including The Bevan Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Leeds Truth Commission, whose input has proved useful in the development of the revised plan

The Panel Convener, Councillor Sybil Crouch, said about the original inquiry that: 'Tackling Poverty is key to delivering the health and well-being of our citizens and of our city. We heard powerful testimony from people experiencing poverty and I am especially grateful to them for taking time to tell us what they face on a daily basis. I was moved by their testimony and by their courage in the face of complex problems. The Tackling Poverty Strategy lays considerable emphasis on the need to involve people experiencing poverty, without whom there is no delivery'.

Scrutiny – fit for the future?

(Lead: Councillor Mary Jones)

Our scrutiny arrangements have received positive feedback from Wales Audit Office (WAO).

Following an external audit to assess whether scrutiny was fit for the future the review praised a number of aspects of scrutiny practice in Swansea. The WAO report recognised that scrutiny is well-placed to respond to future challenges, regularly challenges decision-makers, and has arrangements to review its own effectiveness. Whilst there is much to be pleased about the report also makes a number of proposals for improvement to develop scrutiny further. This challenges us to think about development needs for scrutiny councillors, the relationship between scrutiny and the Council's Policy Development Committees, and how we can better demonstrate the impact and outcomes of scrutiny.

Councillor Mary Jones, Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee said: 'We welcome the auditor's assessment of scrutiny in Swansea. Overall it is a positive report and this is down to the hard work everyone in Swansea has put into developing scrutiny over many years. But it is also a reminder that we must keep on pushing and continue to develop. We will be preparing an action plan to address the proposal for improvement.'

The Wales Audit Office published its findings having conducted a review of scrutiny in all Welsh Councils, looking at the environment scrutiny is operating in, practice, and its effectiveness. As well as desktop research, the WAO held a number of focus groups with Councillors here, interviewed key officers, and observed meetings.

Chair's Roundup:

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

Priorities for 2018/19

The Scrutiny Work Programme was agreed by the Committee in July, following a Work Planning Conference in June. Every year we invite all scrutiny councillors to participate in an informal discussion on priorities for scrutiny, and invite suggestions. The Conference reflected on last year's programme, and heard about council priorities and challenges, and views gathered from surveys, including issues raised by the public. The Work Programme contains a varied selection of topics that show the focus for scrutiny over the coming year. It represents strategic issues balanced with community concerns to ensure that scrutiny is always looking at the right things, and making good use of limited time and resources. A significant feature of the Work Programme is regular in-depth monitoring and challenge of performance in key areas, including Education and Social Services, through a number of Performance Panels. However we also identify topics either for in-depth Inquiry or light-touch Working Groups. The first inquiry will look at Equality issues and a 'call for evidence' has just been issued by the Inquiry Panel. This invites interested people to submit views that will help the Panel to explore how effectively the Council is meeting and embedding requirements under the law. This inquiry will go on until March 2019. The already in progress inquiry on the Natural Environment is coming to a conclusion and will report before the end of 2018. In terms of one-off Working Groups, this will include a look at Air & Noise Pollution, Residents Parking, Welfare Reform, Environmental Enforcement, Tourism, Anti-Social Behaviour, Digital Inclusion and the Archive Service.

Annual Report published

Looking back at 2017/18 the Scrutiny Annual Report was presented to Council (Oct). It highlights the work carried out, shows how scrutiny has made a difference, and supports continuous improvement for the scrutiny function. It gives examples of specific activities to demonstrate impact, and show our contribution to better services, policies and decisions. I think it gives good indication about the 'health' of scrutiny – using facts and opinions – and there is much to be pleased about.

Improving scrutiny

One of the hallmarks of an effective scrutiny function is one that reflects on and learns from experience. Following a process of self-evaluation the Committee has identified five scrutiny improvement objectives. This was informed by annual councillor, staff, and public scrutiny survey findings as well as Committee members' reflection on scrutiny process and practice, taking into account characteristics of effective scrutiny. An action plan to address the WAO proposals and deliver the Committee's own improvement objectives is being developed.

Questioning Cabinet Members

The Committee continues to focus on holding cabinet members to account, through monthly Q & A sessions to discuss their work. As I write we are due to meet with the Cabinet Member for Care, Health & Ageing Well in December. 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 Children Services, Education Improvement, Learning & Skills, Business Transformation & Performance, and Homes & Energy.

Challenging proposed decisions

Pre-decision scrutiny enables us to question Cabinet Members on proposals and present views and any concerns to Cabinet ahead of decisions. Since May scrutiny has looked at reports on: More Homes Parc Yr Helyg Site Options Appraisal (Jun); The Future Structure and Delivery of the Ethnic Minority Achievement Unit (Jul); and the future of Residential Care & Day Services for Older People (Sep). The Committee has also given views on the draft Homelessness Strategy 2018-2022 ahead of formal pre-decision scrutiny that will take place in November.

Calling-in decisions

Scrutiny has the power to call-in Cabinet decisions following the agreement of new arrangements by Council in July. Any valid call-in of cabinet decisions will now lead to the calling of a special meeting of the Scrutiny Programme Committee. A call-in can be made by the Chair or Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Programme or by any four councillors by giving notice in writing to the Head of Democratic Services within a specific call-in period.

Scrutinizing the City Deal

A new Joint Scrutiny Committee has been established to provide accountability and challenge to the agreed Swansea Bay City Deal. Swansea councillors will work with councillors from Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire and Neath Port Talbot Councils, also involved in the City Deal, who together will scrutinise the work and decisions of the Joint Committee responsible for delivering the regional City Deal Programme. Scrutiny of local City Deal projects remain a matter for each authority so our Development & Regeneration Performance Panel will be keeping a close eye on work happening in Swansea.

Making the work of scrutiny 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. 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. To keep an eye on what's going on check out the links below, subscribe to our newsletter, or even follow us on Twitter.

Councillor Mary Jones

Connect with Scrutiny:

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

Web: www.swansea.gov.uk/scrutiny

Email: scrutiny@swansea.gov.uk

Twitter: @swanaseascrutiny

Blog: www.swanaseascrutiny.co.uk