

Scrutiny Dispatches

City & County of Swansea – 2021/2022 (No.1)

‘How scrutiny councillors are making a difference’

Focussing on the importance of efficient bus services in Swansea

The Bus Services Working Group met to look at bus network coverage and levels of service, community transport provision and integration with other forms of transport. Representatives of First Cymru and Cardiff Bus were invited to participate.

(Lead: Councillor Lyndon Jones)

Scrutiny Working Groups are one-off meetings where scrutiny councillors focus on one particular item and produce a letter with comments and recommendations to the relevant Cabinet Member.

The Bus Services Working Group met early in July with Councillor Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement and Infrastructure Management.

The Working Group talked about the importance of getting a regular bus service to all areas in Swansea to tackle residents’ isolation and to start to shift away from car use to using public transport. People who have given up driving need to be able to access public transport otherwise they become prisoners in their own home. Funding for active travel has been used to make it easier for people to cycle or walk, but not everyone is able to do this and accessibility has to be the main point for the elderly.

The Working Group emphasised the importance of bus companies and public transport more generally contributing to carbon emission reduction.

The Working Group recommended that regular meetings are held between Members and First Cymru to raise and discuss issues and felt it was very important for the Authority and bus companies to listen to people who currently do not use buses in Swansea, as well as people who do, to help shape current and future bus services.

The importance of joining up bus and rail times so services are more co-ordinated and the introduction of cross ticketing between bus and rail were also issues emphasised by the Working Group.

A follow up meeting of the Working Group is anticipated in around six months to see what changes / improvements have been made, as it is vitally important to see positive changes taking place that will benefit Swansea residents.

Holding Cabinet Members to account

The Scrutiny Programme Committee continues to hold cabinet members to account through regular question sessions. Acting as a 'critical friend' Scrutiny Councillors explore Cabinet Members' priorities, actions, achievements and impact in relation to specific areas of responsibility. The Committee recently met with Councillor Robert Francis-Davies, Cabinet Member for Investment, Regeneration & Tourism.

(Lead: Councillor Peter Black)

The Committee questioned the Cabinet Member on specific areas of his portfolio responsibilities, namely Tourism, Destination Management & Marketing and Business & City Promotion. The Panel heard about the value of tourism to the local economy and the impact of Covid-19 on the tourism industry.

Committee Members were informed of strategic priorities outlined in The Tourism Recovery Action Plan (TRAP), developed as part of the recovery strategy for the Tourism Sector and forms an integral part of Swansea Council's wider Economic Recovery. The vision of TRAP is to 'Create a world class tourism destination, which delivers a high-quality visitor experience in a pleasant, clean and well-maintained environment.'

The Committee also discussed the specific effect of the pandemic on the city centre and recovery plans. Committee Members discussed the large number of empty units in the Quadrant and heard that work is ongoing with the owners of the Quadrant and new lettings were due to come on board. Committee Members heard that a 'City Centre Repurposing Strategy' report is scheduled to go to Cabinet in September.

Continuing to monitor council performance in relation to the natural environment

The Natural Environment Performance Panel has continued to examine performance indicators on issues relating to the natural environment including climate change, air quality and Ash Dieback disease affecting local trees.

(Lead: Councillor Peter Jones)

The Panel recently considered progress on the Council's response to Ash Dieback and future aims. Ash Dieback is a disease that affects Ash Trees and causes trees to become brittle over time with branches breaking away from the main body of the tree. If they are not dealt with, trees are at risk of collapsing, presenting an immediate danger to the surrounding area. The Council have surveyed trees on council land and categorised them in four categories with category three and four being at highest risk. Hundreds of trees that cause a risk to the public such as on highways, parks and cemeteries have been felled.

The Panel questioned Councillor Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management on what the council is doing in terms of re-planting and which trees are being re-planted. Panel Members heard that should a single ash tree be removed within a cluster or woodland, then nature is allowed to take its course and no replanting at that site would be carried out. To offset the removal of trees the Council has a replacement programme in place where trees that are planted will be of a natural native and mixed species to ensure that any other future diseases that may naturally come along, only affect individual trees within a cluster.

Panel Members queried if there is currently any engagement ongoing to inform members of the public why trees are being felled. Officers explained that extensive communication via social media, media outlets and its' website has occurred and that notice boards are used where large tree felling operations are carried out. Panel Members felt that permanent signage maybe more suitable so that information is also available post the felling operations. Panel Members put forward ideas to get members of the public engaged more and recommend that information on large felling operations should be circulated with all Councillors for awareness.

Commencing of Procurement Scrutiny Inquiry

The Procurement Scrutiny Inquiry has commenced and is currently in the evidence gathering stage. The key question of the Inquiry is: *'What is Swansea Council doing to ensure it procures locally, ethically and greenly while being cost effective and transparent in its practices?'*

(Lead: Councillor Chris Holley)

The inquiry is looking at procurement in relation to the provision of council functions. It will consider what the Council does well and what can be improved in this area. This will include:

1. Legislation/policy including national, local and European influences on our procurement practice
2. Positive social/local procurement
3. Environmentally and ethical procurement practices
4. Equalities Duty
5. Systems/processes and consistency of approach
6. Joint procurement activities and working with others
7. Measuring success

Panel Members met the Council's Chief Auditor to answer a set of key questions on how procurement is audited internally. To understand what the departmental perspectives are on procurement activities the Panel have already met with the Director of the Place Directorate and are due to meet with Social Services and Education services.

The Panel recognise the importance of ensuring probity, transparency and value for money in its procurement practices. They are keen to look at how we embed social value and sustainability in what we do.



Chair's Round up

This is my first roundup of the work of scrutiny for 2021/22, as Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee.

Scrutiny Work Programme

The work of scrutiny continues in accordance with the Work Programme agreed in November 2020, which will take us up to the end of this Council Term. We are making progress on scrutiny priorities. The in-depth inquiry focusing on Procurement, which originally started before the pandemic, re-convened in June 2021 and will report around March 2022. Continuing from the previous municipal year, our six Performance Panels are meeting on a regular basis and we are working through a list of one-off Working Groups. I am grateful to the conveners for their leadership in delivering scrutiny activities and councillors across all parties coming together to participate in this important work. We continue of course to ensure the work programme, and demands of scrutiny, remain flexible whilst still in the midst of the pandemic.

Looking back at 2020/21

Our Annual Report for 2020/21 is out. We have reflected on what was a relatively short municipal year, affected by the pandemic, but it nevertheless shows a good level of scrutiny. Councillors have worked hard in both supporting and challenging the organisation, contributing to better services, policies, decisions, and a better Swansea. I presented the report to Council on 2 September.

Praise for our Scrutiny arrangements

I am pleased to report that an internal audit of scrutiny was carried out earlier this year, the outcome of which is a high level of assurance and no recommendations, with no key issues / risks found. The audit looked at the role of Scrutiny, its work programme and reporting lines, the relationship between the scrutiny and audit committees, scrutiny of partnership arrangements, coverage of corporate risks in the risk register, examination and follow-up of external reviews, and compliance with the Wales Audit Office discussion paper - Six Themes to Make Scrutiny Fit for the Future. The outcome was reported to the Governance & Audit Committee in June. Credit to all involved!

Committee Work Plan

As well as monitoring the delivery of the work programme, the Committee has a varied work plan looking at a broad range of service / policy matters, targeting specific issues of concern and focused on addressing any gaps in the overall scrutiny work programme. The Committee will call in Cabinet Members as and when required to account for delivery of objectives, performance, and service improvement. We have already questioned Cllr. Mark Thomas, Cabinet Member for Environment Enhancement & Infrastructure Management, on the Council's work and his responsibilities relating to Highways & Engineering, Infrastructure Repairs & Maintenance, and Litter & Community Cleansing. Similarly, the Committee has met with Cllr. Robert Francis-Davies on Tourism, Destination Management & Marketing, and Business & City Promotion, and Cllr. Andrea Lewis on Energy Policy (including Generation, Supply & District Heating).

We invite the public and all scrutiny councillors to contribute ideas to ensure the Committee asks the right questions. We publish a summary of each scrutiny session and views of scrutiny in a letter to relevant Cabinet Members, ensuring a clear and ongoing conversation between scrutiny and the executive to have an influence.

Future Committee meetings will include looking at: Recovery & Transformation Plan Progress, Annual Corporate Safeguarding Report, Delivery of Corporate Priority – Tackling Poverty, Scrutiny of Public Services Board, Parking Policy, Control & Enforcement, Q & A with the Leader of the Council, Crime & Disorder, and Children & Young People's Rights Scheme Annual Progress Report.

Regional Education Scrutiny

With the winding down of the Education Through Regional Working (ERW) regional school improvement consortium and establishment of a new South West Wales Education Partnership consisting of Swansea Council, Carmarthenshire Council and Pembrokeshire Council, new scrutiny arrangements are to be developed. Those involved in the scrutiny of ERW, which has seen an informal regional Scrutiny Councillor Group operating since 2016, have been able to feed their views into the process as the new Partnership is developed. We await the legal agreement between the Councils will confirm the terms of the partnership and governance arrangements, for details on future scrutiny.

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 is going see the links below, subscribe to our newsletter, or even follow us on Twitter.

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