



**To/  
Councillors Alyson Pugh &  
Louise Gibbard  
Cabinet Members for Supporting  
Communities  
BY EMAIL**

cc: Cabinet Members

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SPC/2021-22/9

17 December 2021

Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 16 November 2021. It is about the Delivery of the Corporate Priority of Tackling Poverty.

Dear Councillor,

### **Scrutiny Programme Committee – 16 November**

We are writing to you following our scrutiny session to monitor and challenge Council action in relation to Tackling Poverty.

We thank you both, and officers, for attending the Committee meeting to present a detailed report on the delivery of the corporate priority, so we can comment on progress, achievements, and implementation of strategy.

You will be aware that there was a Scrutiny Inquiry on Tackling Poverty which reported in 2017. This was followed up in October 2018 and recorded good progress with most of the scrutiny recommendations. The inquiry was credited with generating and helping to bring a clear focus to tackling poverty activity and informed the development of the Council's Tackling Poverty Strategy and Delivery Plan.

Your report provided us with information on aims and objectives, a comparative assessment of poverty in Swansea, an outline of key plans and priorities, available resource, an overview of delivery and performance, case studies / examples of the difference made to people's lives, and key service

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achievements, as well as describing current challenges and risks, and future priorities.

We noted that Swansea Council's Tackling Poverty Strategy defines poverty as:

- income below the Minimum Income Standard (the Minimum Income Standard is based on what the public think people need for an acceptable minimum standard of living as researched by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation).
- inadequate access to necessary services of good quality.
- inadequate opportunity or resource to join in with social, cultural, leisure and decision-making activities.

You reported that poverty is caused by things that reduce resources or increase needs and the costs of meeting those needs. Causes of poverty can also be consequences which can then create a cycle known as the poverty trap. Causes can include unemployment or low-paid jobs lacking prospects and security, low levels of skill or education, an ineffective benefit system, high cost of housing and essential goods and services, discrimination, weak relationships, and abuse, trauma, or chaotic lives. Common triggers of poverty are often life changing events or changes in circumstances such as becoming sick, bereavement, redundancy, or relationship breakdown.

We were told that the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted low-income households, pushing more people into poverty, and those experiencing it, further into poverty resulting in an increase in demand for services including crisis support services and increased complexities for those in need; and that the Council's ongoing response to the pandemic in relation to mitigating the impacts of poverty and meeting demand continues to shape new ways of working.

You highlighted that there is a holistic approach to tackling poverty and praised the work of officers involved in the Council's Tackling Poverty Service working hard to improve people's lives, though we noted that there is a heavy reliance on grant funding with approximately 15% core funding which was an ongoing risk to service delivery. You provided a list of service achievements and case studies of support to families and individuals. You also highlighted the importance of partnership working in tackling poverty and dealing with the impacts, and felt that relationships both within the Council, and between the Council and external organisations was good, with the common aim of improving lives, and that there is an active quarterly Swansea Poverty Partnership Forum.

This letter reflects on what we learnt from the information presented, questions, and discussion. It shares the views of the Committee and highlights any outstanding issues / actions for your response - main issues summarised below.

## **Aims and Objectives**

The Committee recognised that this is a massive agenda and poverty is of course a problem across Wales and affected to a great degree by national and UK policies and decisions. Given that the Council is limited in its powers to reduce or eradicate poverty we questioned whether the aims and objectives of the Council could be more clearly defined, i.e., was it best described as 'tackling poverty'? Looking at the range of actions being taken, you agreed that what the Council is trying to do is alleviate the problem / effects and deal with the impacts to improve people's lives, for example with welfare rights / benefits advice, lifelong learning opportunities to gain skills and qualifications, employability support, supporting health and well-being, etc.

We recognised the importance, nevertheless, of small wins, given the scope of what one Council can achieve, contributing towards a bigger goal. The Committee acknowledged that there is a lot of good work being done, as shown in the detailed report provided, but felt that the Council should be better placed to monitor, measure, and clearly demonstrate the success from all the clearly considerable efforts being made. We felt that the suite of current corporate / national performance indicators alone does not adequately tell the story, and each of the objectives the Council has should have clear targets and an effective measure, so that we can see the value from the resources being put in. We heard that this is acknowledged to be an area where more work could be done, so that it is clear what 'good' or 'success' looks like, how we measure that, and where we are in achieving that. We would welcome future reports being able to tell this clearly, tell us what the headlines are, with supporting evidence, linking investment to action and activities. Measuring the success was essential to check if actions were working and having the desired impact. An improved 'performance and delivery' report will help us to monitor and challenge whether there has been change and improvement.

As an example, there was a discussion on what the Council is doing, as part of its Tackling Poverty Strategy, to ensure poverty was not a barrier to doing well at school. It was unclear from the report whether we have been successful in achieving this. We know from performance data that children in receipt of free school meals do less well at school academically, which would tell us that poverty remains a barrier to academic success. Did we know whether the gap is widening or being closed, which will help assess the effectiveness of resources being put in and actions being taken by the Council under the Strategy? This is something which our Education Scrutiny Performance Panel can explore in more detail, particularly around the effectiveness of the Pupil Development Grant, but the overall report on the delivery of the Corporate Objective would be better if it can tell us how work

being done is helping poorer pupils to succeed, and what we mean by success. This is something that the Committee can return to next year.

### **Link to Well-being Goals**

Your paper referred to how Swansea's Tackling Poverty actions align with the seven well-being goals within the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015. A Resilient Wales is a key goal and is about maintaining and enhancing a biodiverse natural environment with healthy functioning ecosystems that support social, economic, and ecological resilience and the capacity to adapt to change, for example climate change. With that in mind, we asked you to clarify how tackling poverty actions support this goal, which were unclear from the report.

We heard that work across the Council in supporting that goal, with links to 'tackling poverty', has focussed on things like improving access to green space to improve people's environment and health, the development of energy efficient houses that will reduce the cost of heating, and employability support in relation to the green economy.

### **Swansea Poverty Truth Commission**

One of the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Inquiry was to create a Swansea Poverty Truth Commission, with real input from people who have experienced poverty, to provide challenge and promote culture change. The evidence the Inquiry Panel heard from the Leeds Poverty Truth Commission persuaded the Panel that this was a model which Swansea should follow and should be at the heart of our Strategy. It is pleasing that this has been progressed and that it is planned to launch the Poverty Truth Commission in 2022. We noted that it has been developed based on learning from Leeds Poverty Truth Commission and the Poverty Truth Commission Network, who have provided valuable assistance in our work on this here and ours would be the first in Wales.

We discussed the benefits of having an independent Poverty Truth Commission and how it will add value and improve lives, by bringing together key multi-agency decision makers with people who have direct lived experience of poverty to work together to bring about change, based on issues raised by those experiencing poverty. This will be a good example of co-production, with partners and the public involved in shaping the solutions to poverty, which we welcome.

You reported that although the Covid-19 pandemic has delayed the pace of delivery, a Commission is establishing, which includes a mix of Community Commissioners with lived experience of poverty and key decision makers, known as Civic/Business Commissioners. A Facilitation Team has been recruited, hosted by SCVS (Swansea Council for Voluntary Service) and work

is currently underway to identify the themes that the Poverty Truth Commission will focus on.

### **Access to Advice & Support**

We asked about sources of advice and support for people and whether there was any intention of setting up a one-stop-shop in communities to support families, e.g., in a school or community centre, where people can access a range of information and advice? We are aware of the development of a Community Hub within the City Centre and asked whether that could also be utilised.

It was explained to us that a range of methods are employed to offer advice and support, with much of this available on-line, and that the one-stop-shop approach already exists in some quarters but is also being developed further. You referred to the Common Access Point and Early Help Hubs within Social Services, Local Area Coordinators supporting communities, projects in Libraries, and the development of a multi-agency facility within Dyfatty shops which will grow organically. You stated that there are still discussions around which front-facing services will be delivered out of the new City Centre Community Hub.

### **Food Poverty**

The Committee noted plans to focus on improving opportunities for people to grow food. It has already been a Policy Commitment of this Council to 'Support Community Enterprises, Growing and Cooking Skills to help people escape food poverty'. Your report told us that there has been grant funding to many organisations to tackle food poverty and food insecurity. We asked about the impact this has made, how successful this support been in the development of community gardens, etc, and which areas of Swansea have benefited most.

We heard that over the last three years, a total of £463,484 of funding has been allocated to over 100 applications supporting organisations, with projects right across Swansea, to tackle food poverty and food insecurity from ensuring crisis food parcels and hot meals are available to those in need, to building on opportunities for community food growing and developing cooking skills, which is hoped to reduce dependency on food banks or other food support. You felt that it may be too early to be able to show the impact, but referred to some good examples, including the St. Johns Day Centre in Cwmbwrla and Matthew's House and Swansea Together in the City Centre, with positive feedback from organisations which have helped people during the pandemic. We also noted the Council's emergency food support effort, and help to food banks and other organisations, provided during the lockdown. The Committee praised the number of people volunteering to support vulnerable people their communities. We also noted that there is a Swansea Food Poverty Network, facilitated by the Council, which meets

monthly to discuss food crisis support and how best resources can be co-ordinated to deal with food poverty.

You told the Committee that, with increasing interest, you were looking at developing a community food growing policy that would be able to facilitate the development of community gardens more quickly and easily than might be possible under the Council's existing Community Asset Transfer policy, where there may be parcels of suitable land that could be utilised for growing. You stated that more work on this would be done by the Policy Development Committee and wanted the Council to be pro-active in identifying suitable areas across Swansea. Councillors will be interested in hearing more on this and opportunities in their local areas.

Our Education Scrutiny Panel could also investigate practice in Swansea following concerning reports in the national media that pupils have been denied school meals through no fault of their own because of accounts being in debt, as no child should be left hungry at school.

## **Earnings**

We note from the Annual Survey of Hours & Earnings, which you included in your report data showing that the Swansea median full-time figure (2020) of £27,480 is 2.8% lower than the Wales average, although both Swansea and Wales figures are below the UK average (in Swansea by 12.6%). Over the year 2019–2020, average annual full-time earnings in Swansea fell by 2.3%, whilst Wales and UK figures increased. We asked whether it was likely to be the case that many people in Swansea would need to work more than one job to earn that median income amount. You agreed that this would be the case for some people, and of course the data shows that some earn much less than the median figure and are struggling. You stated that the pandemic has made matters worse for many and officers in the Welfare Rights Service have had contact from many new people. We can see the spike in claimant count totals / rates since March 2020 which have not come down to pre-pandemic levels. You stated that there were many people in 'in-work' poverty when they work more hours or hold down more than one job, but then reach a certain threshold and benefits stop. You talked about the various employability projects to support people.

We also asked about the key issues that are affecting employability, and whether there were any areas of concern that was making it difficult for people to gain employment, e.g., access to transport. You stated that transport – lack of personal transport and public transport - was a significant issue making it difficult for some people to take up employment, particularly shift work. Childcare is also a significant problem for some. Both issues were made worse by the pandemic. You also talked about lack of experience (and opportunities to gain experience) and the gap in receiving pay after starting work as barriers to employment, where people cannot wait until they are paid.

It is clear that the transition from unemployment to work is difficult for many people.

We will re-visit work on Tackling Poverty at least annually within the Committee and will advise on meeting arrangements in due course. This will enable us to keep close watch regularly on progress, follow up on the issues we have raised, and enable scrutiny views to influence action and improvement. We acknowledge that tackling poverty cuts across the whole organisation therefore this is something that our Scrutiny Panels can also explore with other Cabinet Members, during their scrutiny work, about their efforts and contribution. The Service Improvement & Finance Scrutiny Performance Panel will regularly review poverty performance indicators as part of corporate performance monitoring reports.

### **Your Response**

We hope that you find the contents of this letter helpful and would welcome any comments on any of the issues raised within; however, we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Yours sincerely,



**COUNCILLOR PETER BLACK**

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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