



Report on the Audit Wales ‘Time for Change’ – Poverty in Wales - report recommendations

Governance & Audit Committee

11 January 2023

1. Executive Summary

In 2017, Swansea Council published **Working towards prosperity for all in Swansea: A tackling poverty strategy for Swansea**. This corporate strategy represented the Council's commitment to reducing poverty and the impacts that poverty has on the people of Swansea. In line with this commitment, tackling poverty was identified as one of Swansea Council's six well-being objectives defined in its **Corporate Plan** published in 2017:

Tackling Poverty - so that every person in Swansea can achieve their potential.

On 1st November 2022, Audit Wales published the report '**Time for Change**' – **Poverty in Wales**. The report shares findings of the investigation on the challenge of alleviating and tackling poverty. The report concludes that "the scale of the challenge and weaknesses in current work make it difficult for Welsh and local government to deliver the systemic change required to tackle and alleviate poverty".

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the findings of this report (including the key recommendations for consideration) and set out proposals for our local response.

2. Context

Audit Wales compiled this report based on an extensive review conducted between April 2021 and September 2022, using document reviews, data analysis, interviews and surveys to inform the final report which was published on 1 November 2022. The report recognises that poverty is multidimensional, complex, growing and impacting more people across Wales.

The report identifies the 'dimensions' or 'characteristics' of living in poverty in Wales to be:

- **Housing** issues;
- **Fuel and energy** issues;
- **Clothing and footwear** issues;
- **Food and water** issues;
- **Financial issues**;
- **Exclusion from service** issues;
- **Emotional and relationship** issues.

Other findings of the report include:

- The number of people living in poverty in Wales is estimated to be rising and deprivation is evident in all parts of the country.
- Wales has consistently had the highest levels of relative income poverty in the UK over the last decade.
- The number of children in poverty is rising sharply, estimated at 34% of children in Wales living in poverty in March 2021.
- The Cost of Living crisis is pushing more people into poverty and has significant impacts on households in low income groups;
- Welsh Government Cost of Living budgeted support for 2022/23 totalled £162m including winter fuel, holiday hunger and vulnerable family support funds;
- Councils are changing services as a result of the pandemic and ongoing budget pressures but the new models of delivery are not always helping people in poverty.

The report covers a wide range of themes and aspects of tackling poverty that spans across public services. There are references throughout the report to Swansea demonstrating good

practice such as key poverty-focused leadership roles, a framework for tackling poverty, developing a personal debt recovery policy and regional collaborative working.

3. Recommendations

R1 - National strategy and targets for tackling and alleviating poverty

The report states: we note that there is currently no specific target for reducing poverty in Wales and the current Child Poverty strategy needs to be refreshed. We recommend that in updating its strategy the Welsh Government:

- set SMART national actions;
- establish a suite of performance measures to judge delivery and impact;
- sets targets for alleviating and tackling poverty;
- undertake regular evaluation of performance and public reporting.

Our response:

Committing to developing a revised national strategy to tackle child poverty and reviewing the national measures and milestones related to poverty is welcome.

We will engage directly with Welsh Government to explore opportunities to participate in development of the national strategy, targets and performance measures.

R2 - Local strategies, targets & performance reporting for tackling & alleviating poverty

The report states: we highlight that councils and partners have prioritised work on poverty, but the mix of approaches and a complicated delivery landscape mean that ambitions, focus, actions and prioritisation vary widely. We highlight that evaluating activity and reporting performance are also variable with many gaps. We recommend that the councils use their Wellbeing Plans to provide a comprehensive focus on tackling poverty to co-ordinate their efforts, meet local needs and support the revised national plan targets and actions. This should:

- include SMART local actions with a greater emphasis on prevention;
- include a detailed resourcing plan for the length of the strategy;
- be developed with involvement from other public sector partners, the third sector, and those with experience of poverty;
- include a robust set of consistent outcome indicators and measures to increase understanding of poverty locally;
- be subject to annual public reporting to enable a whole system view of poverty locally to help improve delivery and support.

Our response:

Swansea Council's Tackling Poverty Framework is referenced as good practice, having a vision with themes and outcomes linked to relevant plans. Swansea's cross-organisational co-ordination approach involving senior officers is also highlighted as good practice.

The Council's strong position provides the foundation for more engagement and commitment to tackling poverty in Swansea. The refresh of the Swansea Tackling Poverty Strategy will include SMART actions with an emphasis on prevention, revisiting and incorporating the Prevention Strategy (2017) approaches. Work has started on the refresh via the internal Poverty Forum and it will be developed further with involvement of partners via our Poverty Partnership Forum, Food Poverty Network, the Poverty Truth Commission and wider public.

We will develop a Tackling Poverty Performance Framework linking national outcomes to corporate indicators to performance measures realised by our services.

R3 – Leadership on the poverty agenda

The report states: we note that just over a third of councils have lead members and lead officers for addressing poverty. Given the importance of effective leadership in driving the poverty agenda forward and breaking silos within councils and between public bodies, we recommend each council designate a cabinet member as the council's poverty champion and designate a senior officer to lead and be accountable for the anti-poverty agenda.

Our response:

Swansea is one of few councils in Wales with a Cabinet Member, senior officer and Tackling Poverty team responsible for leading on tackling poverty. A communications campaign to raise awareness and the profile of this structure with our partners and stakeholders is the next step. We continue to engage with Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) colleagues and their newly established Poverty Group to share knowledge and opportunities for learning. This will allow us to explore innovations and new ways to improve our approach to tackling poverty.

R4 - Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of grant-funded programmes

The report states: we note that all councils are dependent on grants but weaknesses in programmes mean that funding is not making the impact it could. To ensure councils are able to maximise the impact of funding and tackle the more difficult and longstanding problems, we recommend that the Welsh Government:

- provide longer timescales for announcing and receiving bids to enable better resource planning;
- move away from annual bidding cycles to multi-year allocations;
- enable funding to be more flexibly spent to avoid an emphasis on quicker projects, rather than more impactful interventions that take longer to establish;
- allow councils to consolidate funding to reduce bureaucracy;
- streamline and simplify processes and grant conditions to reduce the administrative burden;
- keep requests for information and supporting materials from councils to a minimum.

Our response:

The number and broad nature of the grants and funds available makes it difficult to define levels of spending focused on tackling poverty. While the report recognises that Swansea does have clear data about total Welsh Government grant funding commitments, there is

recognition that the data only goes so far and more is needed to quantify the value of investment. Whilst this is a recommendation for Welsh Government, the development of the Swansea Tackling Poverty Performance Framework will provide data about the investment of funding and the value it brings in making a difference to people's lives, both qualitative and quantitative data.

R5 - Experience mapping to create inclusive services for people in poverty

The report states: we highlight that people in poverty are often in crisis, dealing with extremely personal and stressful issues, but they often find it difficult to access help from councils because of the way services are designed and delivered. We recommend that councils improve their understanding of their residents' 'lived experience' through meaningful involvement in decision-making using 'experience mapping' and/or 'Poverty Truth Commissions' to review and improve accessibility to and use of council services.

Our response:

Swansea's Poverty Truth Commission is referenced in the report. Lived experience is vital in driving our strategic approach to tackling poverty. This includes recognising the extent of the journey that people experience when they are in or at risk of poverty, as these journeys can be very different depending on a range of factors. Experience mapping will help us to understand the experience of people living in poverty and develop the right policies, changes and services.

Swansea launched the first Poverty Truth Commission in Wales last month. This presents an opportunity to spearhead this approach and work closely with the commission and others to improve accessibility and use of council services.

R6 - Single web landing page for people seeking help

The report states: we highlight the difficulties people in poverty face accessing online and digital services. To ensure people are able to get the information and advice they need, we recommend that councils optimise their digital services by creating a single landing page on their website that:

- is directly accessible on the home page;
- provides links to all services provided by the council that relate to poverty;
- provides information on the work of partners that can assist people in poverty.

Our response:

The Council recently launched a dedicated web page - <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/costoflivinghelp> with information and advice on support for people in or at risk of poverty. This includes links to Council services such as Local Area Coordinators and to external websites including Welsh Government and Citizens Advice. The intention is to use feedback on this site to explore what improvements could be made.

The corporate Digital Strategy supports this recommendation and there are further opportunities to address difficulties people in poverty face in accessing online and digital services as we refresh the Tackling Poverty Strategy.

R7 - Streamlining & improving application & information services for people in poverty

The report states: we note that no council has created a single gateway into services. As a result, people have to complete multiple application forms that often record the same information when applying for similar services. We highlight that whilst it is important that councils comply with relevant data protection legislation, they also need to share data to ensure citizens receive efficient and effective services. We recommend that councils:

- establish corporate data standards and coding that all services use for their core data;
- undertake an audit to determine what data is held by services and identify any duplicated records and information requests;
- create a central integrated customer account as a gateway to services;
- undertake a data audit to provide refresher training to service managers to ensure they know when and what data they can and cannot share;
- review and update data sharing protocols to ensure they support services to deliver their data sharing responsibilities.

Our response:

The corporate Digital Strategy supports this recommendation, along with the Information Management Policy.

The joint campaign to increase pension credit take-up between Swansea and Neath Port Talbot is included in the report as a good example of targeting those most in need to provide support and assistance.

Development of our Corporate Personal Debt Recovery Policy is cited as good practice but there is also a view that council services are generally more focused on helping people in crisis than prevention. Developing strategic approaches to prevention and poverty in the refreshed Tackling Poverty strategy will support this.

Through the Coordinated Crisis Support programme, we - along with our partners - have piloted a multi-agency referral process and a Wales Accord on Sharing Personal Information (WASPI) data sharing agreement is in place across Employability providers through our Swansea Working Partnership and both demonstrate this recommendation.

Community Hubs are referenced in the report as offering councils the opportunity to help people at the point of crisis and the development of the City Centre Hub will support this along with integrated health and care centres.

R8 - Complying with the socio-economic duty

The report states: we set out that while all councils undertake some form of assessment to determine the likely socio-economic impact of policy choices and decisions, approaches vary and are not always effective. We recommend that councils review their integrated impact assessments or equivalent to:

- ensure that they draw on relevant, comprehensive and current data (nothing over 12 months old) to support analysis;
- ensure integrated impact assessments capture information on:
 - involvement activity setting out those the service has engaged with in determining its strategic policy such as partners, service users and those it is co-producing with;
 - the cumulative impact/mitigation to ensure the assessment considers issues in the round and how it links across services provided across the council;
 - how the council will monitor and evaluate impact and will take corrective action;
 - an action plan setting out the activities the Council will take as a result of the Integrated Impact Assessment.

Our response:

Swansea Council is recognised in the report for its comprehensive Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) approach that provides a robust measurement of the socio-economic impact of strategic decisions.

To ensure that we draw on relevant, comprehensive and current data, we will work with Data Cymru utilising their new 'A View of Poverty' data tool. The importance of robust, quality data to inform policy development is highlighted and we will develop a Swansea-centric dashboard of data and intelligence relating to tackling poverty.

4. Way Forward

Overview of the report findings

In summary, we agree with the findings of the Audit Wales report and welcome the positive references to the good work being done in Swansea. There is clear evidence that more needs to be done and there are opportunities to contribute at national and regional levels. The Council is strongly positioned to play a key role in this work.

Section 5 includes a table summarising the eight recommendations including what could be done in the future to address the recommendations. More detailed actions and proposals will emerge from our engagement and co-production approach to the Tackling Poverty Strategy.

5. Recommendations and Actions

	Recommendation	What we do now / have already done	What we will do in the future
R1	National strategy and targets for tackling and alleviating poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established links with national groups and networks 	1. Work with Welsh Government on the national strategy, targets and performance measures.
R2	Local strategies, targets and performance reporting for tackling and alleviating poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Swansea Council's Tackling Poverty Framework Cross-organisational co-ordination approach to tackling poverty Targeted services such as Welfare Rights and Employability & Skills 	2. Refresh Tackling Poverty Strategy, aiming to publish by April 2023. 3. Develop Tackling Poverty Performance Framework, aiming to publish by April 2023. 4. Develop a Swansea-centric dashboard of data and intelligence relating to tackling poverty.
R3	Leadership on the poverty agenda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identified council member, senior lead and core team aligned to tackling poverty 	5. Engage with Welsh Local Government Association Poverty Group 6. Communications campaign to promote tackling poverty leadership roles and structures with our partners, networks and communities aligned to publication of the refreshed Tackling Poverty Strategy.
R4	Improve the efficiency and effectiveness of grant-funded programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reporting on Welsh Government grant funding allocations and spend 	7. Develop a Tackling Poverty Data Framework to publish by July 2023.
R5	Experience mapping to create inclusive services for people in poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established Swansea Poverty Truth Commission (SPTC) Established poverty networks & forums 	8. Deliver programme of engagement and 'experience mapping' activities with people with lived experience of poverty. 9. Review and identify opportunities and draft proposals for addressing digital and social inclusion.
R6	Single web landing page for people seeking help	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Launched dedicated web page on Swansea Council website 	10. Review feedback on web page and undertake continuous improvement of content.
R7	Streamlining and improving application and information services for people in poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Referral approach between partners piloted. Swansea Working Partnership WASPI Corporate Digital Strategy Development of a Corporate Personal Debt Recovery Policy 	11. Develop collaborative plan of community enablement activities and commitments as part of the corporate 'Tackling Poverty and Enabling Communities' priority. 12. Launch Corporate Personal Debt Recovery Policy to publish by April 2023.
R8	Complying with the socio-economic duty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) approach 	Action 4 above.