



**To/
Councillors Alyson Pugh & Andrew
Stevens
Cabinet Members for Better
Communities**

BY EMAIL

cc Cabinet Members

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SPC/2018-19/12

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Summary: This is a letter from the Scrutiny Programme Committee to the Cabinet Members following the meeting of the Committee on 8 April 2019. It is about Communities First, Weed Spraying Programme, Allotments, Welfare Rights, Equalities & Diversity, Community Cohesion, Co-production, and Digital Inclusion.

Dear Councillor,

Cabinet Member Question Session – 8 April

The Committee is writing to you following a Q & A session held in April focussing on the Better Communities cabinet portfolios. At the time we heard from, and put questions to, Councillors June Burtonshaw and Mary Sherwood. Recognising that you are now portfolio holders following a cabinet reshuffle, we need to share with you the issues arising from the discussion, and views of the Committee, including any outstanding concerns / actions for your response as responsible cabinet members.

Councillors Burtonshaw and Sherwood each provided the Committee with a written paper in support of their appearance, and helped the Committee to explore priorities and achievements in relation to the wide-ranging areas of responsibility within both portfolios.

They highlighted activities relating to the following: -

- Leading on the Well-being of Future Generations Act (embedding across the Council)
- Equalities & Diversity (Strategic Equality Plan)

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY / TROSOLWG A CHRAFFU

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- Allotments (transfer of management to Allotment Associations)
- Localised Services / Community Hubs (pilot hub in Clydach)
- Community Asset Transfer / Working with Community Groups / Community Centres
- Community Grass Cutting – Tend and Mend (opening up services beyond council tenants)
- Libraries (annual performance presented to scrutiny, efforts to keep libraries open despite financial pressures)
- Litter / Community Cleansing (guidance has been sent to members)
- Member Community Budget Scheme (managing the scheme)
- Weed Control (careful use of glyphosate, in line with guidelines – recognising reported concern about harm)

The main issues from the meeting are summarised below:

Communities First

We asked about the transition from the now ended Communities First Programme and legacy. There was some concern about the sustainability of the Legacy Fund projects and need for alternative sources of funding as Welsh Government legacy funding is phased out e.g. supporting the activities of the 'Faith in Families' organisation, which focusses on supporting children, young people and parents.

We were assured that the Council is keen to preserve the good work and will look at alternative grants from Welsh Government. We heard that there has been some discussion about the whether there was scope for the work delivered by Faith in Families to be commissioned on a different basis, given its links to council objectives. The Committee suggested that the Council should have dialogue with Housing Association partners about what financial support they could provide in ensuring the work of organisations such as Faith in Families can survive given their impact in areas of council and other social housing. We were told that this, and other aspects of joint working, could be picked at the existing Swansea Poverty Partnership Forum.

Weed Spraying Programme

There have been widely reported concerns about the use of glyphosate-based herbicide for weed control and the need for a precautionary approach. It is apparent that a number of other Councils are looking for alternatives and possible phasing out of the use of such weed-killing products. One of these new approaches appeared to be involve the use of acetic acid. There is also an argument for leaving things alone, i.e. significantly reducing or ceasing cutting / weeding, to support the biodiversity / ecosystem, and protect the natural environment. This issue has been raised in other scrutiny meetings and we were told, by relevant cabinet members that the minimum strength of product is used.

We invited comment about the latest thinking on this matter by the Council. It was reiterated to the Committee that the Council was aware of health concerns that have been raised and has ensured that current use of glyphosate is within EU / UK guidelines. We heard that the Council has contracted out weed spraying, and as long as its use is licensed it will be difficult to switch to alternatives. However, we noted that the Council is aware of the need to explore alternatives (given possibility of future ban on use), and would be watching intently what other Councils do, but has already reduced use on verges and has taken other steps including the planting of wildflowers.

Another aspect to this we recognised was the need for effective communication with the public, as there are often complaints about overgrowth, so they understand what the issues are and why there may be less weed spraying.

We were told that our concerns would be noted. We were also reminded that individual councillors could be proactive and avoid the need for certain areas to be included in the spraying programme if they are able to tackle weeds in a different way (e.g. through community groups) locally.

Allotments

We were aware that the Council has transferred the management of allotments but asked about the extent of communication around this decision with local communities. Some Committee members felt there was a degree of confusion amongst local people, and asked about liaison with Community Councils.

We noted that allotments are now run by local associations and the response given us was that communication and engagement about allotment provision, opportunities and plans were entirely a matter for these associations, including any dialogue with Community Councils.

Welfare Rights

We discussed the work of the Welfare Rights Team and financial impact. The written report provided to us showed that:

- in the financial year 2017/18 the team raised £1,154,597.16 by securing rights and entitlements to welfare benefits - worth £5,772,985.80 to the local economy.
- from April 2018 to December 2018, the team have raised £707,606.57 by securing rights and entitlements to welfare benefits - worth £3,538,032.85 to the local economy.

There was also discussion around the effect of rising Council Tax on arrears, and the advice / assistance for vulnerable people including ensuring take up of entitlements and benefits. We heard about the new Council Tax Protocol for Wales which is aimed at a more consistent and people-focused approach to debt, arrears and enforcement, across Wales, to help protect the most vulnerable from increasing financial pressures.

We looked at Welfare Reform in a one-off Scrutiny Working Group in January. Having seen Councillor Sherwood's response to this work, we acknowledged her suggestion for scrutiny to look at how well welfare rights support and advice, and commitment to tackling poverty was being delivered across the Council e.g. by staff working in Social Services, Housing and by others in direct contact with vulnerable people. We will be considering the scrutiny work programme for 2019/20 in the next month and this may be included, depending on other competing issues of importance and concern.

Following a query about portfolio responsibilities, and reference to 'Food Banks' we noted that there was no specific role or responsibility within the Cabinet on food banks, which are independent organisations, though of course was something of relevance given the Council's commitment to tackle poverty.

Equalities & Diversity

It was reported to the Committee that work with partners to explore Swansea becoming a Human Rights City has continued. We heard that this aim was also a step contributing to the Stronger Communities Well-being Objective within Public Service Board's Local Well-being Plan. We noted that work has progressed via a Steering Group led by Swansea University and has benefited from the discussion within the Council's Poverty Reduction Policy Development Committee. We were told that a shared 'Statement of Intent' on respecting human rights in Swansea is under development with partners, with potential pilot projects / actions then being developed to change practice.

Please note that an in-depth scrutiny inquiry on Equalities has been carried out over the past year and is at the final report stage. The Inquiry Panel, which has been convened by Councillor Louise Gibbard, will provide conclusions and recommendations on how effectively the Council is meeting and embedding the requirements under the Equality Act 2010 (Public Sector Duty for Wales). We anticipate publication of report at the end of June. The Committee will need to approve its submission to Cabinet for decision. A Cabinet Member response to the recommendations and action plan to take forward agreed recommendations will be expected after the report is presented to Cabinet.

Community Cohesion

The Committee asked whether there was a community cohesion index, or indicator, that measures the level of social cohesion among the people in Swansea. We heard that there was no index of cohesion however noted the practice and activities to support and promote community cohesion. We noted that a Community Cohesion Co-ordinator had been recently appointed and there was a current public survey about people's views and experiences, but had generated a low response level to date. This suggested there is much work to be done on cohesion and making sure that people have the confidence to have a conversation about community cohesion.

Co-production

We discussed ways of improving community consultation and engagement across the Council. We heard that the Council continues to pilot work that allows citizens to influence policy and service delivery through the development of a co-production approach.

The view provided to the Committee however was that public consultation and engagement generally remains patchy, resulting in low levels of involvement in statutory consultation and other interfaces; and was a cause for concern. We noted corporate resources were stretched, however heard that there were pockets of good practice in specific service areas (e.g. social services) in engaging service users and the public in the design and delivery of services.

Co-production is clearly a developing area and everyone in the Council is aware that more can be, and should be, done to improve public engagement and help people to understand the work of the Council. We felt that it was vital for public confidence that when consultation and engagement opportunities are created it must be meaningful, with the possibility that something could change depending on feedback, and therefore mean that the public can have a real impact in the decision-making and direction of the Council.

Digital Inclusion

We asked about progress with the development of a Digital Inclusion Strategy and Implementation Plan. Scrutiny has previously discussed the Council's work and efforts to ensure digital inclusion, and avoid exclusion, as more and more contact between the public and Council is through digital means.

A Scrutiny Working Group gave its views back in March 2017 to inform the development of a strategy. We have been looking to arrange a further meeting this year in order to follow up on this. It will help us to assess progress in helping / preparing the public, as well as Council staff, to effectively communicate and engage via digital technology, and understand the benefits.

We noted that:

- the Council continues to roll out its 'Get Swansea Online' programme
- the Council had a target of 440 attendees of the 'Get Swansea Online' courses and in 2018/19 the Council had 453 attendees
- in line with the involvement principle, the courses have taken place in 17 locations across Swansea, which includes three quarters of the libraries.

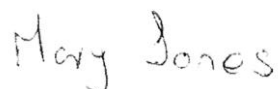
We heard that work on a Digital Inclusion Strategy and Implementation Plan is still in progress, and aimed to integrate with the Welsh Government Digital Inclusion Strategy. We noted that a draft framework would be ready by the end of April 2019. We have not yet agreed the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2019/20 however anticipate that we will need to look at digital inclusion given its importance to both the Council and the public.

Your Response

We hope that you find the contents of this letter useful and would welcome any further comments however we do not expect you to provide a formal response.

Finally, on behalf of the Committee, congratulations on your appointment to the Cabinet and we look forward to your engagement with scrutiny. We will be arranging for a further Q & A session later in the municipal year to follow up on portfolio developments.

Yours sincerely,



COUNCILLOR MARY JONES

Chair, Scrutiny Programme Committee

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