

Wales Audit Office - Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future? – Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council

Draft response to Wales Audit Office’s recommendations for improvements to the scrutiny function

PROPOSAL FOR IMPROVEMENT	POSITION	FURTHER ACTION PROPOSED
<p>P1 The Council’s scrutiny committees should, where appropriate, ensure that Cabinet Members rather than officers are held to account for the efficient exercise of executive functions in accordance with statutory guidance</p>	<p>The WAO study was conducted very early into the new term of the Council following an election which saw 22 new Members elected. Committees have developed and continue to do so.</p> <p>The Leader of Council made it clear at the beginning of the term that Cabinet Members would take responsibility for reporting policy issues to Council and responding to questions on policy. Cabinet Members now routinely take responsibility for matters at Council.</p> <p>In terms of scrutiny, both officers and executive Members attend scrutiny meetings but at the invitation of the scrutiny committee. Scrutiny Members question both</p>	<p>Revisit the seating arrangements at formal scrutiny meetings to clarify the different roles of the attendees. Suggestion is:</p> <p>Chair and committee support – one side Scrutiny members – one side Officers – one side to answer operational detail Cabinet Members – one side – to answer policy detail</p>

	officers and Cabinet Members.	
P2 Council should consider the intended role of scrutiny committees in pre-decision scrutiny activity and ensure that current arrangement provide sufficient time for scrutiny.	<p>The Council's arrangements for scrutiny were subject of review in the previous administration. The Council has made a conscious decision to organise scrutiny committee meetings in the way currently scheduled. It should be noted that two additional sub-committees were established for public protection and leisure/arts by the current administration on taking office. Neither of these sub-committees take place immediately before the Cabinet Board.</p> <p>There are two approaches to pre-decision scrutiny:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Topics selected from the Cabinet /Cabinet Board agenda which follows on from each scrutiny committee - Committees select a small number of items for pre-decision scrutiny and offer 	None.

	<p>comments/recommendations to the Executive who attend the scrutiny committees to answer questions and hear the views of the scrutiny committee.</p> <p>2. Topics are selected from the forward work programme of the Cabinet/Cabinet Board for inclusion on the scrutiny committee forward work programme with the scrutiny committee indicating what early work they would like to conduct prior to final recommendations and advice being developed.</p>	
<p>P3 The Council should review its arrangements for planning and undertaking scrutiny, and consider different ways of working that best suit the topic area and the desired outcome</p>	<p>The Cabinet and cabinet boards routinely publish forward work programmes which, amongst other things, enables scrutiny committees to determine what they wish to focus scrutiny activity on.</p>	<p>Ensure the method/criteria by which decisions may be evaluated is embedded into decision reports so as to inform post-decision scrutiny practice.</p>

	<p>Scrutiny committees already use a range of different approaches to their work, dependent on the topic and objectives of the approach. This can include asking questions in a formal committee meeting, undertaking one day inquiries, undertaking task and finish projects. At the present time, scrutiny committees mostly address questions to their officers and executive Members, but there is also evidence of scrutiny being assisted by external experts (Welsh Language Promotional Strategy, Estyn), holding partners to account (Community Safety Partnership, Public Services Board, Education Regional Working), and making visits to the community/services to inform their work (eg social services, waste)</p> <p>Scrutiny chairs have all received training in chairing scrutiny committees and further development for scrutiny committee</p>	
--	--	--

	Members has also been delivered through the Member Development Programme.	
P4 The Council should strengthen scrutiny committee ownership of forward work programmes, ensuring there is a clear rationale for topic selection	<p>The forward work programmes in place for each scrutiny committee were determined following workshops that involved scrutiny committee Members.</p> <p>The forward work programmes of the executive were one of a number of areas considered when determining topics for inclusion in the scrutiny work programme. Service performance, issues of concern to residents and funding were amongst other factors taken into account</p>	None
P5 The Council should strengthen the arrangements for engaging the public in scrutiny	It should be remembered that Members are elected to represent the views of their constituents. Members were encouraged to consider issues of interest to their constituents when determining the current forward work programme	Following the training and development delivered for scrutiny committees, and in line with the decision already taken by Council to strengthen communications and community relations, explore additional ways in which scrutiny

	<p>for scrutiny committees.</p> <p>There are a number of examples of scrutiny inquiries seeking the views of the public when formulating proposals to put before the Executive eg Welsh Language Promotional Strategy, Direct Payments in Social Services.</p> <p>The Deputy Leader has already introduced a Communications and Community Relations Strategy to strengthen communications and engagement across all areas of the Council's work. These arrangements will extend the range of mechanisms available to scrutiny committees to aid them in their work</p>	<p>committees can strengthen community involvement in the democratic process</p>
<p>P6 The Council should put in place mechanisms for assessing the impact and effectiveness of scrutiny</p>	<p>The Council does capture information that identifies the work activities and impact of scrutiny work.</p> <p>The Scrutiny Champion has</p>	<p>Ensure each committee produces an annual report each year</p>

	<p>observed a number of scrutiny committee meetings and fed back to the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of Scrutiny Forum where areas for development were supported. The Democratic Services Committee subsequently endorsed the proposed areas for development and is overseeing the associated work. It is the Scrutiny Champion's intention to conduct observations of scrutiny practice from time to time to encourage collaborative working across the committees, ownership of the scrutiny function and to distil good practice and areas for further development.</p> <p>It is intended that each committee will produce an annual report setting out the work undertaken each year, assessing what impact the committee has made.</p>	
--	--	--