

NEATH PORT TALBOT COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

GOVERNANCE & AUDIT COMMITTEE

26th JANUARY 2024

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES – C GRIFFITHS

Matter for Information

Wards Affected – All wards

Audit Wales Review of Scrutiny Arrangements at the Council.

Purpose of the Report

To provide the Governance & Audit Committee with the Audit Wales Review of Scrutiny Arrangements at the Council final report, and the Council's organisational response form detailing how the Council intends to respond to the recommendations made.

Background

In 2018, Audit Wales published a report on Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council- Overview and Scrutiny- Fit for the Future? (Attached at Appendix 1) They concluded that the Council was making improvement to the scrutiny function, but further work remained to make it better placed to respond to current and future challenges.

Since the audit work of 2018, Local Government elections were held in May 2022 and the COVID 19 pandemic brought about changes to scrutiny meetings, including the introduction of online and hybrid meetings.

Audit Wales returned in 2023, where they focussed on looking at the current effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny function including the introduction of online and hybrid meetings. They drew on the findings from the 2018 review, as well as the Audit Wales 2019 discussion paper 'Six Themes to help make scrutiny Fit For the Future.'

Audit Wales undertook their review between February and May 2023.

They interviewed a variety of stakeholders including:

- Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny
- Scrutiny Committee Members
- Chief Executive
- Heard of Legal & Democratic Services
- Head of Democratic Services
- Scrutiny Officers
- Leader of Council

They also observed Council Scrutiny Committee meetings in person and online and conducted desk research into such items as the Council's constitution and the scrutiny procedure rules.

Outcome of the Review

The review (attached at Appendix 2) concluded that:

The Council is missing opportunities for scrutiny to maximise its impact, influence and effectiveness in holding cabinet to account, shaping council policies and reviewing performance.

It was recommended that:

Current model and role of scrutiny

- R1 The Council should review its current model for scrutiny to ensure scrutiny can fulfil its broader range of roles and responsibilities. Any revised model should ensure there are opportunities for scrutiny to engage in its wider roles, including for example, in relation to:
- Policy development
 - Performance monitoring
 - Holding cabinet members to account throughout the decision-making process
 - Following up outcomes of previous recommendations or decisions

Public engagement

- R2 The Council's scrutiny model should be more citizen focused by strengthening its arrangements for public involvement and engagement in scrutiny. This should include ensuring greater

transparency and timeliness about which items will be on the scrutiny committee agendas; and using existing engagement and consultation work to inform its scrutiny work including consideration of scrutiny topics, as part of its scrutiny reviews, in holding cabinet members and decisions to account, and in its performance monitoring roles.

Planning and work programme

R3 To enable the scrutiny model to be more citizen focused, the Council should review its arrangements for the way in which scrutiny is planned to ensure scrutiny can independently plan and strategically prioritise its own work programme.

Support

R4 The Council should review the type of scrutiny support it requires across all areas of the organisation including service areas, to enable scrutiny to perform its wider role and ensure that any resourcing implications arising from any changes to the scrutiny model are understood and planned for

Evaluation

R5 The Council should strengthen its arrangements for assessing the effectiveness and impact of scrutiny

Next Steps

Audit Wales presented their final report to all Members via an All Member Seminar on the 14th November 2023.

Members of Council agreed that the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny Forum be responsible for taking the recommendations in the review forward. They tasked the forum with establishing a Task and Finish Group to research and consider other models of scrutiny, with a view to presenting their findings on how an alternative model of scrutiny could operate in this Council, as well as informing how the Council will respond to the recommendations from the Audit Wales review.

The Task and Finish Group has commenced, and members plan to report their findings and proposals for improvement to Council in March 2024 so that any constitutional or administrative changes can be

actioned in the Council's Annual General Meeting (AGM) in May to inform the next Civic Year's arrangements.

The Council is obligated to complete an Organisational Response Form (ORF) to Audit Wales and to the Governance and Audit Committee, setting out what actions it intends to put in place in response to the recommendations made.

At this stage, and with the agreement of Audit Wales, the ORF is fairly brief in detail as the actions will be completed following the conclusion of the Task and Finish Group of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny Forum and subsequent agreement by Council to any proposed changes to the model of scrutiny.

The ORF is attached at appendix 3, and Governance and Audit Committee are asked to note that a further version of the ORF will be brought to a future meeting at the conclusion of the ongoing review work.

Financial Impact

There are no financial impacts in respect of this item, although any proposed changes to the scrutiny model may impact costs relating to the delivery of that model.

Integrated Impact Assessment

There is no requirement for an integrated impact assessment in respect of this item.

Valleys Communities Impacts

There are no impacts in respect of this item.

Workforce impacts

There are no workforce impacts in respect of this item, although any changes to the scrutiny model may impact Democratic Services Staff and officers across the Council.

Legal Impacts

There are no legal impacts in respect of this item, although any changes to the scrutiny model will result in necessary changes to the Council's constitution and scrutiny procedure rules.

Risk Management

Failure to respond to Audit Wales and consider this matter at the Governance and Audit Committee could lead to further consideration by Audit Wales, with association reputational issues for the Council.

Consultation

There is no requirement under the Constitution for external consultation on this item.

Recommendation

It is recommended that:

- The Governance & Audit Committee note the report issued by the Audit Wales in relation to their Review of Scrutiny Arrangements.
- The Governance & Audit Committee note the Organisational Response Form issued by the Council in response to Audit Wales.
- The Governance & Audit Committee note that the Chairs and Vice Chairs of Scrutiny are currently undertaking a Task and Finish Group, which will add the detail
- The Governance and Audit Committee receive the final Organisational Response Form, once the Task and finish Group has concluded and Council has agreed how it plans to address the recommendations raised by Audit Wales.

Appendices

Appendix 1-

Audit Wales Review. Neath Port Talbot Council- Overview and Scrutiny- fit for the Future? 2018 Scrutiny Review Report

Appendix2-

Audit Wales Review of Scrutiny Arrangements at Neath Port Talbot Council 2023.

Appendix 3-

Organisational Response Form

Background Papers

Audit Wales 2019 Six Themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future.'

Officer Contact

For further information on this report item, please contact:

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