

Report of the Chair

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 13 July 2015

PUBLICATION OF WALES AUDIT OFFICE ANNUAL IMPROVEMENT REPORT (INCORPORATING THE CORPORATE ASSESSMENT REPORT 2014) – COMMENTS ON SCRUTINY

Purpose	This report alerts the committee to the recent publication of the Wales Audit Office Annual Improvement Report, which incorporates the Corporate Assessment Report 2014.
Content	This report summarises what the audit report says about scrutiny.
Councillors are being asked to	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consider the findings of the Wales Audit Office report in relation to scrutiny
Lead Councillor(s)	Councillor Mary Jones, Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee
Lead Officer	Dean Taylor, Director – Corporate Services
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Wales Audit Office published its Annual Improvement Report (incorporating the Corporate Assessment Report 2014) for the City & County of Swansea on 24 June 2015. This work has involved looking at the governance arrangements in the authority, including scrutiny.

1.2 Overall the Auditor General has concluded that:

The Council can demonstrate improvement across a range of key services and has developed a clear framework for managing future challenges.

1.3 One of reasons for this is that the Auditor General has found that:

The Council has generally robust governance arrangements and is improving access to information about its scrutiny activity

1.4 Although the audit report will be discussed by Council in July it is important for the committee to recognise what the report says about scrutiny.

2. Comments about Scrutiny

2.1 It should be noted that the Auditor General has not found cause to make any formal recommendations for improvement. He has made four proposals for improvement however none relate directly to scrutiny.

2.2 Specific sections within the audit report that refer to scrutiny are detailed below (*paragraph numbers in the audit report are cited*):

a) Cabinet Members are held to account through a number of mechanisms

15 The Council has clear mechanisms for holding Cabinet Members to account.... Individual Cabinet Members also attend the Scrutiny Programme Committee on a rolling programme to present their own reports and respond to questions, and, on request may attend scrutiny panels.

b) Roles and responsibilities in decision-making processes are clear but records of delegated decisions made by officers are not as transparent as intended

17 The Council publishes forward work programmes for Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny and the scrutiny function employs a number of methods to raise awareness of its work through social media and the preparation of the Scrutiny Dispatches publication.

c) The Council's scrutiny structure enables a flexible and focussed approach and access to information about scrutiny activity has improved in recent months

19 The Council's scrutiny structure consists of a formal Scrutiny Programme Committee, performance panels and time limited inquiry panels. The structure is intended to enable a more flexible response to issues through the establishment of time limited inquiry panels and affords members the opportunity to participate in the scrutiny of topics that matches their areas of interest.

20 However, because the performance panels and inquiry panels are not regarded as 'formal' parts of the Council business at the time of this assessment details of their meetings were not publicised on the Council's website in the same way as other formal meetings. This meant there was a lack of access to information about proceedings and to the information provided to panel members. This meant that the way in which councillors dealt with that information and the results being achieved could not be readily assessed. Whilst some information about activity was subsequently recorded in the Scrutiny Programme

Committee minutes, access to specific information was difficult unless the date that an item had been considered was already known – this included difficulty in identifying the programme of proposed activity.

- 21 In recent months the Council has been taking steps to improve access to the information about its scrutiny work. Scrutiny Dispatches are being published explaining current inquiries and a Scrutiny Reports Library provides better access to the reports produced by inquiry panels. Social media is also being used to raise awareness of scrutiny activity.
- 22 The Scrutiny Programme Committee has also approved an action plan that has the potential to improve communication and engagement with scrutiny. There are also clear processes in place for reporting the outputs of scrutiny work and for following up and monitoring the implementation of recommendations, as well as the responsibilities of the Cabinet in responding to recommendations. The Scrutiny Programme Board has also approved proposals to improve the impact of scrutiny including for example by establishing measurable outcomes at the start inquiries.
- 23 Cabinet Advisory Committees were being introduced at the time of this assessment. The constitution refers to functions of the Cabinet Advisory Committees as being:
 - a to advise the relevant Cabinet Member as appropriate on matters relating to the Policy Commitments adopted by Council within any portfolio; and
 - b to advise and support the work of the Cabinet and the Council as a whole advising the relevant Cabinet Member on potential changes to Policy and the delivery of major service change and alignment with the direction in Sustainable Swansea - Fit for the Future.
- 24 The constitution also includes detailed terms of reference for the Scrutiny functions. Both members and officers recognised the need for effective coordination and operational clarity regarding these arrangements because of the potential for duplication in their work both in terms of the subject matter they examine and the methods they employ to undertake the work. For example the scrutiny programme committee amongst other roles has a role in contributing to corporate and partnership policy and strategy, conducting in depth inquiries into service and policy areas, involving the public in service improvement and policy development and as a 'critical friend' in undertaking pre-decision scrutiny.

25 Cabinet Advisory Committees have a role in 'advising the relevant Cabinet Member on potential changes to Policy.' In undertaking their role Cabinet Advisory Committees ways of working described in the constitution are similar to the methods employed by scrutiny functions and can include 'holding enquiries, going on site visits, conducting public surveys, holding public meetings, commissioning research, hearing from witnesses and appointing advisors and assessors.'

d) The Council has robust strategic financial planning arrangements but early scrutiny involvement has been limited

66the involvement of scrutiny in financial planning has been limited to date and the Council recognises this as a function to be improved for 2015-16.

3. Legal Implications

3.1 There are no specific legal implications raised by this report.

4. Financial Implications

4.1 There are no specific financial implications raised by this report.

Background Papers: None

Legal Officer: Tracey Meredith

Finance Officer: Paul Cridland