

# Scrutiny for the well-being of future generations – more questions than answers? Tim Buckle WAO

In January, we are holding a seminar which is going to challenge how public services in Wales need to rethink how they hold members and officers to account in relation to future generations. We recognise that this is a step change for public services and we caught up with our colleague Tim Buckle who has a foot in both camps – working on a Wales Audit Office review of local authority scrutiny arrangements during 2017-18, and helping shape this seminar.

There have been numerous conversations about the term ‘scrutiny’, we thought it would be helpful to clarify how this fits with the seminar in January.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (WFG Act) challenges public services in Wales to work differently. So what does this mean for scrutiny? That’s what we’ll be discussing and working through in the seminar in January 2018. But before we start talking about that, in this blog I wanted to talk about another question, what do we mean by ‘scrutiny’?

My initial reaction to this question is....well more questions! It depends who you ask? It depends who’s doing the scrutinising? It depends who’s being scrutinised? Do we mean local government overview and scrutiny because that has specific roles set out in legislation? Do we mean the process or function or scrutiny more broadly across the 44 public bodies covered by the WFG Act? But then in trying to work differently I’ll ask another question – does it really matter that we don’t have a succinct definition? Maybe not, as long as we are all talking about broadly the same type of activity then we can still discuss what might work, what doesn’t work and what might need to change including possibly the behaviours of the scrutineers and the scrutinised. Maybe one of the things we all need to come to terms with is that in a complex, fast moving world where change is constant we have to accept that not everything can be neatly defined and compartmentalised?

The term scrutiny is commonly used in local government because Councils in Wales have at least one ‘overview and scrutiny committee’. But the process of ‘scrutiny’ also takes place in councils in many different forums and processes – officers ‘scrutinise’ performance information, as do Cabinet Members. In any public body there will be some ‘scrutiny’ of performance, budgets and policies. To keep things simple what we are really talking about is holding decision-makers to account, challenging performance, policies and ways of working, reviewing outcomes and so on and so on.... There are probably quite a few other words that we could use to describe what we mean by the process of ‘scrutiny.’

If we follow this logic this also means that simple designations of the ‘scrutineers’ and the ‘scrutinised’ are also too simplistic. There are some obvious groups who will probably see themselves as part of the ‘scrutiny community’ – scrutiny committee members and scrutiny officers in local government, non-executive board members and so on, but cabinet members and executive board members may also find themselves scrutinising the way in which their own organisations have acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle. Crucially they may also be holding partner organisations collectively to account on Public Service Boards – accountability isn’t always vertical it can be horizontal too....

So what does this mean for delegates attending the event in January 2018? It means we want them to bring their knowledge and experiences of scrutiny – whether as a ‘scrutineer’, as the ‘scrutinised’, or as someone who’s observed scrutiny in action – and to share this with people from other organisations and sectors. It means we hope that delegates learn from each other and can work through solutions to common (or not so common) barriers to effective scrutiny to help improve the wellbeing of future generations and to find solutions that will work in their organisations. To help do this, at the event, delegates will be challenged to think differently about scrutiny, about what effective scrutiny means and about why they think it’s important for the wellbeing of future generations?

The WFG Act requires public bodies to challenge themselves to reconsider what they do and how they do it. This challenge is not limited to a single policy area, team or function and it is recognised that the change won’t happen overnight. Scrutiny, in all its forms, could potentially play a key role in driving that change by ensuring the right questions are asked, at the right time.