



Report of the Chair

Scrutiny Programme Committee – 10 September 2018

Overview and Scrutiny: Fit for the future? – City and County of Swansea Council (Wales Audit Office Report)

Purpose:	The Committee is provided for discussion the final report published by the Wales Audit Office, following their review of scrutiny arrangements in Swansea.
Content:	The Audit report, which is appended, contains a number of proposals for improvement and will require the Authority to produce an action plan.
Councillors are being asked to:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review the Wales Audit Office report findings.• Consider how the proposals for improvement can be addressed in order to inform the development of action plan.
Lead Councillor:	Councillor Mary Jones, Chair of the Scrutiny Programme Committee
Lead Officer:	Tracey Meredith, Head of Legal, Democratic Services and Business Intelligence
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Over the last year the Wales Audit Office have undertaken review of scrutiny arrangements in all Welsh Local Authorities. The review of scrutiny was dubbed 'Overview & Scrutiny: Fit for the Future?'. The Wales Audit Office carried out its review of Swansea Council earlier this year and have now published its report – **appended**.

- 1.2 The Committee should consider the report in detail, in particular the proposals for improvement which will need to be addressed. Committee discussion will help inform the development of an appropriate action plan in response to the audit report.

2. Summary of Audit Report

- 2.1 Overall it is a positive report which recognises good scrutiny practice here. The report concludes that scrutiny in Swansea:

- is well-placed to respond to future challenges;
- regularly challenges decision-makers; and
- has arrangements to review its own effectiveness.

- 2.2 The report however contains three proposals for improvement:

- Develop a training & development programme for scrutiny members
- Strengthen the evaluation of impact and outcomes of scrutiny activity
- Further clarify the distinction between scrutiny and policy development committee activity in relation to policy development

- 2.3 As well as recognising the positives, consideration will need to be given to actions that will address the auditor's proposals for improvement.

3. Positives Identified in the Report

- 3.1 Scrutiny is well-placed to respond to future challenges. The Council has an active scrutiny function that benefits from a flexible approach:

- The work of the Scrutiny Programme Committee and Performance Panels includes consideration of the Council's performance management, self-evaluation and improvement arrangements. (*para.11*)
- The Scrutiny Team is well regarded and as well as supporting the delivery of the work programme play a significant role in promoting scrutiny activity through the Council's website, scrutiny blog and social media. (*para.18*)

- 3.2 The scrutiny function regularly challenges decision-makers:

- The Annual Scrutiny Work Planning Conference. (*para.19*)
- There are arrangements for engaging in evidence based challenge of decision makers. (*para.21*)
- Well run meetings with challenging and focused questioning from scrutiny members. (*para.21*)
- Cabinet Members are regularly held to account by scrutiny members. (*para.21*)
- The relationship between Cabinet and the scrutiny function is generally constructive, with Cabinet member regularly

considering and responding to scrutiny questions and recommendations. *(para.21)*

- Meeting settings / room layouts which promote understanding of the distinctive roles of Cabinet and scrutiny members. *(para.21)*
- Well-structured Q & A sessions with Cabinet members – scrutiny members are well informed from the papers which support each session and build on previous questioning to develop lines of enquiry. Supports constructive dialogue between the scrutiny function and Cabinet. *(para.22)*
- The Council has sought to improve the way in which overview and scrutiny activity informs, and engages with, stakeholders – scrutiny members frequently invite stakeholders to provide evidence as part of scrutiny activity. *(para.23)*
- The Council has an established approach to promoting the work of its scrutiny function, particularly through social media and its website – Scrutiny officers work with the Council's Communications Team to generate scrutiny content for Council news pages and press releases. The Scrutiny Team manage dedicated scrutiny web pages, blogs and twitter feeds. The Team also work with scrutiny members to produce Scrutiny Dispatches, a quarterly impact report to Council, and also produce monthly newsletters available to the public to subscribe to. *(para.24)*
- The Council tries to help the public and other stakeholders to understand the proceeding of scrutiny meetings, should they attend. *(para.25)*

3.3 The scrutiny function has arrangements to review its own effectiveness:

- Inquiry Panels reconvene to follow up on implementation of recommendations and difference made. *(para.28)*
- The Scrutiny Team monitors Cabinet responses to scrutiny letters. *(para.30)*
- The Council produces an annual scrutiny report to assess the scrutiny function's effectiveness as a whole. *(para.31)*
- Scrutiny Dispatches – focuses on achievements and difference made by the work of scrutiny. *(para.32)*

4. Proposals for Improvement

4.1 The following proposals for improvement are contained in the audit report *(para. 8)*:

- 1. The Council should consider the skills and training that scrutiny members may need to better prepare them for current and future challenges, and develop and deliver an appropriate training and development programme, including providing additional training on the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.**

This recognises financial pressures to support / deliver training but suggests we develop and deliver an appropriate training & development programme that could include further training on the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, as well as other topics that may help members in their role, e.g. scrutiny chairing training (see *paras. 16 & 17*)

2. The Council should strengthen its evaluation of the impact and outcomes of its scrutiny activity.

This relates mainly to measuring the impact and outcomes of activity on citizens / other stakeholders but suggests: a need to identify measurable outcomes, such as an indicator we want to change, that can be looked at pre and post a scrutiny inquiry to see difference made by scrutiny; tracking of scrutiny recommendations to evaluate impact / effectiveness; and improving the Scrutiny Annual Report to reflect more about activity and impact. (see *paras. 29, 30, 31 & 33*)

3. The Council should further clarify the distinction between scrutiny and Policy Development Committee activity in relation to policy development

This recognises there are processes in place to avoid potential for confusion / duplication between the roles, but suggests the need to further clarify the distinction vis-à-vis the policy development role because some members remain unclear about the difference and therefore potential for overlap remains. (see *paras. 14 & 15*)

4.2 Other issue identified in the report:

- Improve pre-decision scrutiny (see *para. 20*)
This relates to timeliness of scrutiny. Having more time to consider proposed cabinet reports would enable sufficient time for effective planning and broader range of evidence gathering, and more meaningful involvement of scrutiny members in the decision-making process. NB – this has already been identified by the Committee as an improvement objective recently ('We need to be involved at an earlier stage in proposed cabinet decisions so that our input can be more meaningful')

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 It is important to address the proposals which the audit report makes. Following discussion, it is proposed to bring a further report back to the Committee on improvement action(s) that will be appropriate / necessary in response to the audit report. This should be considered alongside actions to support improvement objectives recently identified by the Committee to result in a co-ordinated and comprehensive single improvement plan for scrutiny.

6. Legal Implications

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

7. Financial Implications

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

Background Papers: None

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Wales Audit Office Report: Overview and Scrutiny: Fit for the Future? (July 2018)