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Overview and Scrutiny – Fit For the Future? – **Isle of Anglesey County Council**

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This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Charlotte Owen, Alan Hughes and Jeremy Evans directed by Huw Rees.

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Summary report

Summary

- 1 This review explored with each of the 22 councils in Wales how ‘fit for the future’ their scrutiny functions are. We considered how councils are responding to current challenges, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in relation to their scrutiny activity, as well as how councils are beginning to carry out scrutiny of Public Service Boards. We also examined how well placed councils are to respond to future challenges such as continued pressure on public finances and the possible move towards more regional working between local authorities.
- 2 As part of this review we also reviewed the progress that councils have made in addressing the recommendations of our earlier National Improvement Study **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?** (May 2014) (see [Appendix 2](#)). We also followed up on the proposals for improvement relevant to scrutiny that we issued in local reports including those issued to councils as part of our 2016-17 thematic reviews of Savings Planning and Governance Arrangements for Determining Significant Service Changes.
- 3 Our review aimed to:
 - identify approaches to embedding the sustainable development principle into scrutiny processes and practices to inform practice sharing and future work of the Auditor General in relation to the Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015 (WFG Act);
 - provide assurance that scrutiny functions are well placed to respond to current and future challenges and expectations;
 - help to embed effective scrutiny by elected members from the start of the new electoral cycle; and
 - provide insight into how well councils have responded to the findings of our previous Scrutiny Improvement Study.
- 4 To inform our findings we based our review method around the Outcomes and Characteristics for Effective Local Government Overview and Scrutiny that were developed and agreed by scrutiny stakeholders in Wales following our previous National Improvement Study **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?**
- 5 During November 2017 to January 2018 we reviewed documents, interviewed and ran focus groups with key officers and councillors to understand their views on Isle of Anglesey County Council’s (the Council) current scrutiny arrangements. In particular how the Council is approaching and intends to respond to the challenges identified above.
- 6 We observed a sample of overview and scrutiny meetings and reviewed relevant meeting documentation provided to committee members to support their scrutiny role, such as reports and presentations.

7 In this review, we concluded that **the Council has strengthened its overview and scrutiny function and is making arrangements to meet future challenges.**

We came to this conclusion because:

- the Council is supportive of overview and scrutiny, and arrangements necessary to help overview and scrutiny members meet future challenges are being put in place;
- overview and scrutiny committee practice is improving, the range of evidence sources they draw on has increased, and scrutiny committees forward work programmes align with the work of the Executive; and
- the overview and scrutiny function is contributing to improvements in performance and decision-making, and the Council regularly evaluates its effectiveness.

Proposals for improvement

8 The table below contains our proposals for ways in which the Council could improve the effectiveness of its overview and scrutiny function to make it better placed to meet current and future challenges.

Exhibit 1: proposals for improvement

Proposals for improvement	
P1	The Council's Overview and Scrutiny function should further improve arrangements for promoting the engagement of the public and other stakeholders in scrutiny activity.
P2	The Council should build on its experience through further self-assessment, to consider more innovative methods of undertaking scrutiny activity.

The Council has strengthened its overview and scrutiny function and is making arrangements to meet future challenges

The Council is supportive of overview and scrutiny, and arrangements necessary to help overview and scrutiny members meet future challenges are being put in place

- 9 The Council's Constitution defines the role of overview and scrutiny within the Council. The Council's two scrutiny committees undertake overview and scrutiny activity, supported by three scrutiny panels. Overview and scrutiny is a systematic part of the Council's governance arrangements and both officers and councillors regard it as valuable. Councillor roles and responsibilities for scrutiny are clearly set out in the constitution with member and chair role descriptions, and the member training and development program has enabled those involved in the scrutiny function to develop a clear understanding of their roles.
- 10 The Council engaged the Centre for Public Scrutiny¹ to clarify the role scrutiny plays in the Council's governance arrangements. The Council's Scrutiny Improvement Programme² identifies the steps scrutiny committees need to take in the short and medium term to improve scrutiny performance. It recognises scrutiny as an important part of the Council's governance arrangements that provides constructive challenge as a "critical friend" to influence policy and service improvement.
- 11 The Council provides training on effective scrutiny and chairing skills as part of its councillor induction and scrutiny member's development programme. The Council has engaged with external training providers to develop members' ability to question effectively and analyse information and evidence presented and have engaged services from Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) to assist in developing committee members' capacity to undertake financial scrutiny. Committee members and officers value the training provided, and commented on the positive impact it had on members' ability to effectively question and scrutinise. Several committee members noted that they have seen the level of challenge improve and expect it to continue to do so.
- 12 The Council has recognised the need to strengthen scrutiny of the PSB however, it has begun to scrutinise elements of PSB activity including its draft well-being plan in March 2018. The Committee's has also scheduled further items to examine the work of the PSB later in 2018 and in 2019. Having recognised the need to clarify

¹ <https://www.cfps.org.uk/>

² <http://www.anglesey.gov.uk/download/63274>

and strengthen the scrutiny of the Gwynedd and Isle of Anglesey Public Service Board (PSB). The Scrutiny Improvement Programme action plan notes the need to:

- develop the forward work programme of the Partnership and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee to review governance arrangements;
- focus on scrutinising the impact of collaboration and partnership on local services;
- act as a statutory consultee on the Well-being Assessment and Well-being Plan;
- monitor progress on implementing the well-being plan and engagement in the planning cycle; and
- the detail of this work stream will become clearer following the publication date of the PSB's well-being plan.

- 13 The Partnership and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee has engaged with six partners in 2017-18, ensuring that there is scrutiny of partnership working across a range of council services. The Council has identified the need to prioritise and focus on key strategic partnerships and consider their impact in delivering services locally. A report was presented to the June 2018 Partnership and Regeneration Scrutiny Committee identifying key partnerships undertaken in 2017-18, identifying the characteristics of effective partnership scrutiny, and identifying key partnerships, including the Public Services Board for prioritising the forward work plan for the next two to three years.
- 14 Overview and scrutiny committee members spoke highly of the support they receive from the Council's two scrutiny support officers. Scrutiny support officers provide support and help facilitate the work of scrutiny meetings, and are instrumental in providing development opportunities for members. The officers can, if required, produce additional briefing information, which assist committee members to develop an understanding of a topic they are scrutinising. Officers also provide suggested key scrutiny questions that committee members can use if desired. Several commented that this was very useful early in their roles as scrutiny members, and as a result were able to develop their own questions as their experiences grew. Committee members were supportive of these arrangements and credited the facilitators with raising the standard of committee meetings.
- 15 The quality of papers that we observed being presented to scrutiny committee is generally good, and the Scrutiny Report Template provides guiding principles for scrutiny members including references to the WFG Act's five ways of working. Councillors were aware of limited officer capacity within the scrutiny support function and expressed a view that "they could do with another officer", but also recognised the resource difficulties facing the Council.
- 16 Officers and councillors demonstrate awareness of the future challenges facing the scrutiny function, such as reduced budgets and an increased focus on regional working. The Council expects the scrutiny function to evolve to meet the future

financial and regional challenges, and the forward work programme includes a number of PSB and partnership agenda items.

Overview and scrutiny committee practice is improving, the range of evidence sources they draw on has increased, and scrutiny committees forward work programmes align with the work of the Executive

- 17 Scrutiny committees have a well-defined forward work programme, which sets out the workload for six months to a year in advance. In developing their work programmes committees take into account information from a number of sources including the Executive; the Chief Executive / Senior Leadership Team and Corporate Plan and other corporate priorities. The Scrutiny Committee forward work planning has significantly improved over the last year, and is a result of discussions between the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs, the Leader and Chief Executive as part of the scrutiny forum. There are monthly briefing sessions on key strategic/service matters that helps shape the forward work programmes and is a standing item on the scrutiny meeting agendas.
- 18 The Scrutiny Forward Work Programmes are predominantly occupied with monitoring improvement, with policy development and pre-decision scrutiny having a lesser role. The Scrutiny committees have reduced the number of agenda items in order to allow greater time for topics that they consider to be priorities. The scrutiny committees receive agenda items from officers, Panels, and external partners. To further strengthen forward work programmes committees need to consider the best method for scrutiny, which may not be within a committee setting,
- 19 Overview and scrutiny committees regularly challenge and hold lead members and officers to account. The role of members in relation to scrutiny is clearly set out in Scrutiny Committee Member, and Chair of Scrutiny Committee, role descriptions. The relevant lead member introduces most agenda items and officers provide support and further detail.
- 20 The scrutiny meetings we observed are well run. We saw examples of robust challenge and well-informed debate. Chairs encourage contributions from committee members and ensure that discussions remain focused. The scrutiny committees also prioritise agenda items to allow sufficient time for individual topics.
- 21 The Corporate Scrutiny Committee has sought to include external contributions such as that of young people (Llais Ni) and adults (Citizen Panel) in the 2018-19 budget scrutiny arrangements, and is now an ever increasing part of key decision making within the Council and is prioritised as such eg budget setting/school modernisation. Such engagement is not fully embedded within all of the work of scrutiny.
- 22 Public involvement in overview and scrutiny in general is more limited, and public attendance at committee meetings is rare and limited to controversial issues. There

is no advertising of the meeting in the Council reception area and no clear procedure for welcoming the public. The Council also does not webcast its overview and scrutiny committee meetings. Whilst there are examples of public engagement within scrutiny, there is scope for the Council to use Participation Cymru's 10 Principles for Public Engagement in improving the way scrutiny engages with the public and stakeholders.

The overview and scrutiny function is contributing to improvements in performance and decision-making, and the Council regularly evaluates its effectiveness

- 23 Both councillors and officers provided examples of overview and scrutiny committees contributing to solutions to recognised problems, for example changes to frequency of residual waste collection, location of gypsy and travellers sites, and raising school educational standards and modernising of schools in the Llangefni and Seiriol wards. The Council has raised the importance of 'closing the loop' by having the Scrutiny Committee chairs presenting the findings of scrutiny to the Executive. The good practice of Scrutiny Committee chairs presenting the findings of scrutiny to the Executive is formalised in the Council's constitution.
- 24 The Council regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the scrutiny function and has identified good progress in a number of areas, including:
- a new scrutiny vision, agreed between the Executive, the Chairs and Vice-chairs of scrutiny, and the Senior Leadership Team;
 - better alignment of Executive, Scrutiny, and Senior Leadership Team work programmes;
 - greater focus on strategic aspects in the scrutiny work programme;
 - prioritising items using robust criteria focussing on outcome and improving impact;
 - introduction of three scrutiny panels to focus on schools' standards, children's services improvements and finance scrutiny; and
 - introduction of greater public engagement such as including inputs from children and young people (Llais Ni) and Adults (Citizen's Panel) as part of the budget setting process.
- 25 An Improvement Programme for Scrutiny is in place that identifies a number of improvements designed to realise the potential of the scrutiny function. This includes an 18-point action that identifies expected outcomes, responsibility for delivery, timeline, and status.

Appendix 1

Outcomes and characteristics for effective local government overview and scrutiny

Exhibit 2: outcomes and characteristics for effective local government overview and scrutiny

Outcomes	Characteristics
<p>What does good scrutiny seek to achieve?</p>	<p>What would it look like? How could we recognise it?</p>
<p>1. Democratic accountability drives improvement in public services. 'Better Services'</p>	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Scrutiny has a clearly defined and valued role in the council's improvement arrangements. ii) Scrutiny has the dedicated officer support it needs from officers who are able to undertake independent research effectively, and provide Scrutiny members with high-quality analysis, advice and training. <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iii) Overview and Scrutiny inquiries are non-political, methodologically sound and incorporate a wide range of evidence and perspectives. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iv) Overview and scrutiny regularly engages in evidence based challenge of decision makers and service providers. v) Scrutiny provides viable and well evidenced solutions to recognised problems.

Outcomes	Characteristics
<p>What does good scrutiny seek to achieve?</p>	<p>What would it look like? How could we recognise it?</p>
<p>2. Democratic decision making is accountable, inclusive and robust. 'Better decisions'</p>	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Scrutiny members have the training and development opportunities they need to undertake their role effectively. ii) The process receives effective support from the Council's Corporate Management Team which ensures that information provided to scrutiny is of high quality and is provided in a timely and consistent manner. <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iii) Scrutiny is Member led and has 'ownership' of its work programme taking into account the views of the public, partners and regulators whilst balancing between prioritising community concerns against issues of strategic risk and importance. iv) Stakeholders have the ability to contribute to the development and delivery of scrutiny forward work programmes. v) Overview and scrutiny meetings and activities are well-planned, chaired effectively and make best use of the resources available to it. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> vi) Non-executive Members provide an evidence based check and balance to Executive decision making. vii) Decision makers give public account for themselves at scrutiny committees for their portfolio responsibilities.
<p>3. The public is engaged in democratic debate about the current and future delivery of public services.</p>	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Scrutiny is recognised by the Executive and Corporate Management team as an important council mechanism for community engagement. <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii) Scrutiny is characterised by effective communication to raise awareness of, and encourage participation in democratic accountability. iii) Scrutiny operates non-politically and deals effectively with sensitive political issues, tension and conflict. iv) Scrutiny builds trust and good relationships with a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> v) Overview and scrutiny enables the 'voice' of local people and communities across the area to be heard as part of decision and policy-making processes.

Appendix 2

Recommendations from the report of the Auditor General's national improvement study 'Good Scrutiny? Good Question?' (May 2014)

Exhibit 3: recommendations from **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?** Scrutiny Improvement Study

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
R1 Clarify the role of executive members and senior officers in contributing to scrutiny.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R2 Ensure that scrutiny members, and specifically scrutiny chairs, receive training and support to fully equip them with the skills required to undertake effective scrutiny.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R3 Further develop scrutiny forward work programming to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide a clear rationale for topic selection; • be more outcome focussed • ensure that the method of scrutiny is best suited to the topic area and the outcome desired; and • align scrutiny programmes with the council's performance management, self-evaluation and improvement arrangements. 	Councils
R4 Ensure that scrutiny draws effectively on the work of audit, inspection and regulation and that its activities are complementary with the work of external review bodies.	Councils, Staff of the Wales Audit Office, CSSIW, Estyn
R5 Ensure that external review bodies take account of scrutiny work programmes and the outputs of scrutiny activity, where appropriate, in planning and delivering their work.	Staff of the Wales Audit Office, CSSIW, Estyn

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
R6 Ensure that the impact of scrutiny is properly evaluated and acted upon to improve the function's effectiveness; including following up on proposed actions and examining outcomes.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R7 Undertake regular self-evaluation of scrutiny utilising the 'outcomes and characteristics of effective local government overview and scrutiny' developed by the Wales Overview & Scrutiny Officers' Network.	Council
R8 Implement scrutiny improvement action plans developed from the Wales Audit Office improvement study.	Councils
R9 Adopt Participation Cymru's 10 Principles for Public Engagement in improving the way scrutiny engages with the public and stakeholders.	Councils

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