

# Scrutiny Arrangements – Caerphilly County Borough Council

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# Summary report

## Summary

### What we reviewed and why

- 1 We looked at the Council's arrangements to support its scrutiny function. Effective scrutiny is a key element of good governance at all councils. Effective scrutiny can provide a key check and balance to the decision making of local government improving council services and ensuring decisions are transparent. Scrutiny functions can also have an important role to play in contributing to developing policy, undertaking specific reviews, monitoring performance and holding the executive to account.
- 2 We previously undertook a review of scrutiny arrangements at the Council in 2018. We concluded that the Council values its overview and scrutiny function, but for it to improve and meet future challenges, members need more focussed training, development, and support to better understand and undertake their scrutiny roles effectively. We made three proposals for improvement about training for members, clarifying the role of Cabinet Members, and setting clear priorities for improvement. In 2019, we also published our discussion paper, 'Six themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future''<sup>1</sup> and an accompanying checklist<sup>2</sup>.
- 3 In 2023, the Council changed its scrutiny committee arrangements. Where it previously had five scrutiny committees, it currently has three service specific committees which meet regularly. The Council also has a Joint Scrutiny Committee, made up of all non-executive members, which meets as required to discuss issues that cover the remit of more than one scrutiny committee.
- 4 We undertook the review during the period November 2024 to February 2025.

### What we found

- 5 Our review sought to answer the question: **Do the Council's arrangements support effective scrutiny?**
- 6 Overall, we found that: Scrutiny in Caerphilly has limited impact, which raises questions about its value for money. We reached this conclusion because:
  - the role of scrutiny is understood by officers and members, but in practice responsibilities are not always applied;
  - training and support are offered to members, but our findings raise questions about the impact of that training;

<sup>1</sup> Auditor General for Wales, [Discussion Paper: Six Themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future'](#), February 2019

<sup>2</sup> Auditor General for Wales, [Checklist: Six steps to help make scrutiny Fit for the Future'](#), 2019

- limited member involvement in planning scrutiny activity impacts on members' ownership of their work;
- scrutiny committee meetings can lack impact;
- the Council does not proactively engage the public in scrutiny, who do not always understand its purpose; and
- the Council does not fully evaluate scrutiny's impact or its value for money.

7 We are concerned that some of the findings are similar to those we made in our report in 2018.

## Recommendations

### Exhibit 1: recommendations

The table below sets out the recommendations that we have identified following this review.

Recommendations	
<b>Roles and responsibilities</b>	
R1	<p>We found that scrutiny is not always fulfilling all aspects of its role. To help address this, scrutiny members should ensure that they are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reading reports before meetings;</li> <li>• holding Cabinet to account, for example by addressing Cabinet members directly in their questioning, whilst limiting questions to officers to asking for factual clarification.</li> </ul>
<b>Support and training</b>	
R2	<p>We found that not all members feel supported in their role. To address this, the Council should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• revisit its training and support to ensure it is meeting members' needs, particularly less experienced members. This should focus on ensuring members have the tools they need to be well prepared for scrutiny activity.</li> <li>• work with members to determine whether reports are meeting members' needs.</li> </ul>

## Recommendations

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### Work planning

- R3 We found that member involvement in developing the scrutiny work programme is limited. To address this, the Council should revisit its work planning processes to ensure that:
- members have opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to the work programme; and
  - topics for consideration reflect the Council's risks and priorities across service areas.
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### Engaging with the public

- R4 We found that public engagement in scrutiny is minimal. To address this, the Council should proactively explore opportunities to engage the public in scrutiny that are not restricted to participation in formal committee meetings.
- 

### Evaluating impact

- R5 We found that the Council's arrangements to evaluate the impact of scrutiny are underdeveloped. To address this, the Council should
- move beyond measuring scrutiny activity to evaluating scrutiny's impact;
  - identify how it can improve the Member response rates to its self-evaluation survey; and
  - identify alternative means of understanding Members' perspectives on the effectiveness of scrutiny.

# Detailed report

## Scrutiny in Caerphilly has limited impact which raises questions about its value for money

### The role of scrutiny is understood by officers and members but in practice responsibilities are not always applied

- 8 The Council's constitution sets out the role of overview and scrutiny as part of the Council's decision making and governance arrangements. It also sets out the terms of reference for each of the scrutiny committees. On its website, the Council sets out that its scrutiny committees have four main roles:
- Holding the cabinet and officers as decision-makers to account
  - Undertaking reviews of Council services and policies
  - Undertaking reviews to develop Council services and policies
  - Considering any other matter that affects the county borough
- 9 Council members and officers were able to articulate a common understanding of scrutiny's purpose and their own roles in helping to achieve that purpose.
- 10 Council members and officers agree that holding Cabinet to account is a key role for scrutiny, as set out in the constitution. In our 2018 report to the Council, we found that scrutiny members directed their questions to officers rather than Cabinet. This remains the case. Cabinet Members regularly attend scrutiny committee meetings and present their reports to the committee, but most questions and discussions are directed at officers. This increases the risk that Cabinet Members and their decisions are not effectively scrutinised. It also undermines the extent to which scrutiny is fulfilling its role to hold the executive to account, in line with Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000. This finding is consistent with that of Estyn, which identified in its inspection report in 2024<sup>3</sup> that elected members put challenging questions to officers, but do not always hold Cabinet to account well enough.
- 11 Some members and officers told us about meetings they had attended where some members appeared unprepared, or it was evident from the questions being asked that members had not read their papers. They also raised that there had been some instances where reports about the Council's financial position had been agreed or noted with little or no discussion or debate.
- 12 From our observations of committee meetings, we saw that discussion of significant issues can sometimes be limited. If members are not adequately prepared for the committee meetings, they cannot fulfil their role. We say more about member preparedness in **paragraph 16**.

<sup>3</sup> Estyn, [A report on education services in Caerphilly County Borough Council](#), June 2024

## Training and support are offered to members, but our findings raise questions about the impact of that training

- 13 When we previously looked at scrutiny arrangements at the Council in 2018, we recommended that the Council improve training and development opportunities for members. Since then, the Council has provided additional training to Chairs and Vice Chairs, but the training offer for other members has not developed significantly since 2018.
- 14 The Council provides comprehensive training as part of the member induction process, but specific training opportunities for scrutiny after that point are limited. There is a risk that some members may not have had training for some time.
- 15 Members are also provided with a Member handbook, which covers similar issues to the training but is available to members to refer to as and when they need. However, the handbook has not been revised since the Council changed the number and remits of its scrutiny committees, so some of the information in it is not up to date.
- 16 The Council asks members to take part in a self-evaluation exercise twice each electoral term. As part of that exercise, members are asked for their feedback against a series of statements.
  - the response rate in the most recent survey (2024) was just over 50%, or 35 responses out of a possible 69;
  - 77% of respondents (or 27 members) agreed or strongly agreed that 'Scrutiny has the training and development opportunities they need to undertake their role effectively';
  - 23% (or 8 members) disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement; and
  - 34 members did not express a view as they did not respond to the self-evaluation exercise.
- 17 During our fieldwork, some members and officers suggested that not all members are fully participating in scrutiny and sometimes appear under-prepared. We also found this from our observations of scrutiny committees. This further suggests that the training provided to members is not giving them the skills they need to participate fully in the scrutiny process.
- 18 We heard mixed views about the training and development members receive. We heard evidence to suggest that a small number of members may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they receive and the demands on their time. Therefore, they may not be taking advantage of all the training opportunities available to them. Overall, we found that there is a risk that some members are not getting the support they need, which will impact their ability to scrutinise effectively.



## **Limited member involvement in planning scrutiny activity impacts on members' ownership of their work**

- 19 In our 2019 discussion paper, 'Six themes to help make scrutiny Fit for the Future' we noted that in a number of councils, scrutiny work programmes are not planned and owned by scrutiny members.
- 20 In Caerphilly, members can suggest items for inclusion on the scrutiny committee forward work programmes. However, not all the members we spoke to were aware that this was the case. Each committee considers its forward work programme as a standing agenda item at each meeting, apart from the Joint Scrutiny Committee which meets on an ad hoc basis to consider specific items. In meetings we observed, we saw that there was little discussion of the forward work programme.
- 21 The Council has a Scrutiny Leadership Group which consists of the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the scrutiny committees. However, this group meets infrequently and has not met since November 2024. At that meeting, the Group did not discuss work programmes. The Council, therefore, does not have an active mechanism for scrutiny members or scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs to discuss the forward work programmes at a strategic level, or to consider alternative approaches to scrutiny activity. Scrutiny members, therefore, have limited opportunities to set their own agenda or influence the content of reports. This increases the risk that the scrutiny forward work programme is not owned and driven by scrutiny members.
- 22 Some members we spoke to felt that scrutiny's involvement took place too late in the decision-making process for them to have impact. They suggested that getting involved at an earlier, policy development stage would allow for greater engagement and impact.
- 23 Most of the agenda items considered by scrutiny deal with specific proposals or decisions that are due to be considered by Cabinet in the near future. It is positive that the scrutiny and Cabinet work programmes are aligned, and that scrutiny input is considered a routine part of the Council's decision-making process. However, concentrating on this aspect of scrutiny's role can mean that there is less time and resource available for other, important aspects of scrutiny activity, such as performance monitoring and policy development. As some members have observed, it can also mean that scrutiny input occurs after the key elements of a decision or policy have been put in place, which limits scrutiny's impact on those decisions.

## **Scrutiny committee meetings can lack impact**

- 24 During our interviews for this review and as part of our Assurance and Risk Assessment work, there was a clear frustration from officers and members that scrutiny committee meetings were not having impact.
- 25 Our observations of a sample of committee meetings found that member engagement was mixed. We saw examples of relevant questions being asked and

effective scrutiny taking place, but we also saw that not all committee members take part, and some important agenda items receive little or no discussion.

- 26 One reason for the limited engagement in the committee activity could be the level of detail and complexity in the reports, as we found members had a difference of opinion about this. Some expressed concern that reports were difficult to read. Although we uncovered no significant issues in the reports we looked at, there is scope for the Council to develop their understanding of what members need from reports.
- 27 Our review of scrutiny committee agendas found that there were regularly items for noting. Therefore, the impact scrutiny can have on these items is limited.
- 28 Members and officers told us that the new scrutiny committee arrangements are working well, although views expressed in the self-evaluation were less positive about specific committees<sup>4</sup>. During our observations, we saw committee meetings that were generally well run with engagement from a range of members and invitees, as well as some where engagement and discussion were more limited.
- 29 The Joint Scrutiny Committee was well regarded by officers and members as an effective forum to discuss significant issues. The less positive comments in the self-assessment suggest that members have specific concerns about the merger of the Education and Social Services committees.
- 30 The agendas for the Education and Social Services Scrutiny committee during 2024 show that the committee has received significantly more reports relating to education than it has on social services. We appreciate the number of agenda items in itself is not an indicator of effective scrutiny. However, given the significance of social services, in terms of budget and risk, there is a risk that the Council is not adequately scrutinising one of its key service areas.
- 31 We also noted in our Scrutiny fit for the Future discussion paper that scrutiny activity should consider a range of approaches, beyond officer reports to formal committees and task and finish style investigations.
- 32 Scrutiny Committees have set up Task and Finish groups, such as on car parking, which have helped shape corporate policies. But overall, we found that scrutiny activity in Caerphilly typically focuses on members receiving and considering officer reports. Committees may hear evidence from people outside the Council and members can take part in task and finish groups, but we did not find examples where scrutiny adapted their approach to the topic at hand or developed innovative methods of gathering evidence. When we asked interviewees for examples where scrutiny had had an impact, most pointed to the Joint Scrutiny Committee and some of the Task and Finish groups.
- 33 In our 2019 Scrutiny fit for the Future discussion paper, we commented on the limited impact of the default approach of receiving officer reports. We also highlighted that the time and resources taken to prepare and present numerous

<sup>4</sup> 37% of respondents agreed that 'the impact of reducing to three scrutiny committees has been adequately mitigated through the use of joint scrutiny'.

reports are considerable. Importantly, we raised the question as to whether this provides value for money for councils. This remains a pertinent question for Caerphilly.

## **The Council does not proactively engage the public in scrutiny, who do not always understand its purpose**

- 34 Scrutiny committees in Caerphilly continue to have a traditional approach to engaging with the public, as we also highlighted in 2018<sup>5</sup>. There is still some way to go to explore how scrutiny proactively engages the public to help inform their work
- 35 Members of the public can speak and provide evidence at any of the Council's scrutiny committees. Information on the process is easily accessible via the Council's website. Generally, the public do not use that process and public participation in committee meetings is infrequent. In identifying topics for scrutiny, the Council does not proactively consider methodology or engagement of the public.
- 36 As set out in **paragraph 22**, scrutiny often engages with specific topics relatively late in the decision-making process. Engaging with topics at an earlier stage of development would give scrutiny more opportunities to gather evidence from a range of organisations and individuals. This would help ensure that a range of voices are heard and reflected in the Council's decisions.
- 37 We heard that where there is an issue being discussed that people feel strongly about, they will participate in the relevant scrutiny meeting. For example, in September 2024, the Council held a Joint Scrutiny Committee meeting to discuss future options for the Meals on Wheels service and the Llancaiach Fawr visitor attraction. A member of the public spoke on each item and a number of people came to observe the meeting.
- 38 We heard from some members that after that meeting, there had been some confusion from the public about the role of scrutiny in the decision-making process. Some members of the public were under the impression that because the scrutiny committee had recommended that both services should continue, the decision had been made. Therefore, they were disappointed and confused when Cabinet subsequently agreed with scrutiny's recommendation to retain the Meals on Wheels service, but not to keep Llancaiach Fawr open. Proactively seeking the views of the public at an earlier stage gives the Council more opportunities to clarify expectations and avoid misunderstanding.

<sup>5</sup> Audit Wales, Caerphilly County Borough Council – Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?, April 2019

## **The Council does not fully evaluate scrutiny's impact or its value for money**

- 39 The Council has not changed its approach to setting out the impact of scrutiny since we last reported on scrutiny in 2018. The Annual Report to the Democratic Services Committee and Annual Governance Statement include sections on scrutiny, but neither are evaluative. They do not include any analysis of the impact or effectiveness of scrutiny activity either.
- 40 Since our 2018 report, the Council has introduced a self-evaluation in the form of a survey to members. The self-evaluation asks questions that seek to understand members' views on scrutiny arrangements and takes place twice per electoral cycle. The results of the self-evaluation are discussed by the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs, who decide what actions they would like to take as a result of the survey findings.
- 41 Thirty-five out of 69 members responded to the survey in 2024 (just under 51%). This was an improvement on the 26% response rate in 2022. The Council uses the survey as its key mechanism for understanding members' perspectives about scrutiny. So, it should consider how it can improve the response rate to make the self-evaluation exercise more meaningful. The Council should also identify alternative means of understanding members' perspectives on the effectiveness of scrutiny.
- 42 The introduction of the survey is a positive step but can only provide part of the picture. For example, the Council has no mechanism for gathering the views of officers, the public or other partners.
- 43 The Council does not have a means to assess scrutiny's wider impact. Cabinet discussions and reports will often refer to scrutiny recommendations having influenced their decisions, but this information is not collated or used as a means of demonstrating scrutiny's impact. This is important so the public are assured that decisions have received an appropriate level of challenge.
- 44 Overall, limitations in its approach to evaluating the impact of scrutiny undermine the Council's ability to understand where there is scope to improve. Importantly, it also hinders the extent to which the Council can determine if its scrutiny arrangements are providing value for money. In our 2019 Scrutiny fit for the Future discussion paper, we noted that most councils do not routinely consider the effectiveness and impact of their scrutiny functions relative to the amount of resource in terms of money and time dedicated to them.

# Appendix 1

## Audit Criteria

Main audit question: **Do the Council's arrangements support effective scrutiny?**

Level 2 questions	Criteria
1. Has the Council clearly set out the roles and responsibilities for those involved in its overview and scrutiny arrangements?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Council has clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of members and officers in relation to scrutiny, for example, in the Council's constitution.</li><li>• The Council has clearly set out the scrutiny procedure rules.</li><li>• There are arrangements to facilitate pre-decision scrutiny and to help shape policy development.</li><li>• There are clear and agreed terms of references for the Council's scrutiny committees.</li></ul>
2. Does the Council have arrangements to support its scrutiny committee members and officers?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Council has put in place arrangements for officer support, training and development that will help the scrutiny function achieve its intended outcomes.</li><li>• The Council evaluates the effectiveness of the training and development it provides to scrutiny members and officers.</li><li>• Scrutiny Committee Chairs are provided with support from the Council to help them in their role.</li><li>• Scrutiny Chairs have received training to help them understand and fulfil their role.</li><li>• Members have access to advice and support both during and outside of committee meetings to help them with their scrutiny roles.</li></ul>
3. Does the scrutiny function prioritise and plan its activities to achieve the intended impact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Council provides support to scrutiny members to inform their work planning.</li><li>• Scrutiny members plan and take ownership of the activities in their forward work programme effectively, taking account of the rationale for undertaking the activity when undertaking their work.</li><li>• Scrutiny committees have up-to-date and published forward work programmes.</li><li>• Scrutiny forward work planning takes account of how much time and resource might be needed to effectively scrutinise topics.</li><li>• Scrutiny members understand the range of scrutiny methods they can use for proposed topics.</li><li>• Scrutiny committees have set out clear aims and purpose for the topics they are examining.</li><li>• Scrutiny members understand the intended outcomes of their planned scrutiny activity.</li><li>• Scrutiny members evaluate if they achieve those intended outcomes.</li></ul>

<p>4. Does the Council have arrangements to ensure scrutiny committee meetings operate effectively?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council has clear guidelines for the administration of scrutiny committee meetings and task and finish/working groups including setting of agendas, use of verbal updates and presentations, reviewing minutes and declarations of party whips.</li> <li>• Officers use a consistent reporting template for all scrutiny agenda items.</li> <li>• Information provided to scrutiny committees is clear and easy to understand, and relevant to their remit.</li> <li>• Officers and members have a good understanding of the terms of reference of scrutiny committees.</li> </ul>
<p>5. Does the Council have arrangements to facilitate the involvement of the public in its scrutiny arrangements?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council has published clear and accessible information about the scrutiny process.</li> <li>• The Council has clearly set out how the public can get involved in the role of scrutiny.</li> <li>• The Council has explored how it can maximise technology to help it engage the public.</li> <li>• The Council has arrangements to ensure that the scrutiny function meaningfully engages with information and views from a wide range of the public.</li> </ul>
<p>6. Are the Council's scrutiny arrangements working effectively to enable scrutiny to fulfil their role and achieve their intended impact?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scrutiny is valued as a key part of the Council's governance arrangements and given the opportunity to meaningfully influence decision-making.</li> <li>• Elected members and officers demonstrate a clear understanding of scrutiny's role and function as set out in legislation and in the Council's constitution.</li> <li>• Agenda items clearly set out the role the scrutiny committee is being asked to undertake and they are in line with their terms of reference.</li> <li>• The Executive responds to scrutiny reports and recommendations.</li> <li>• Scrutiny committees hold the Executive to account.</li> <li>• The Council can demonstrate the impact of its scrutiny committees (for example, by providing examples of the positive impact and benefit of their work).</li> </ul>
<p>7. Does the Council have arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of scrutiny?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Council regularly evaluates its scrutiny arrangements, using measures of effectiveness including impact.</li> <li>• The effectiveness of the Council's scrutiny arrangements is considered as part of the Council's Annual Governance Statement.</li> <li>• The Council has addressed the recommendations made by Audit Wales in the 2019 report on its scrutiny arrangements<sup>6</sup>.</li> </ul>

<sup>6</sup> Audit Wales, [Caerphilly County Borough Council – Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?](#), April 2019





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