

Follow-up Review: Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future? – Carmarthenshire County Council

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Summary report

Summary

What we reviewed and why

- 1 In June 2018 we published our report Overview and Scrutiny Fit for the Future – Carmarthenshire County Council which included six proposals for improvement for the Council to address.
- 2 We followed up the Council's progress during October – November 2021 as part of our ongoing Assurance and Risk Assessment work. We undertook the follow up work through document reviews, observing meetings and interviews with key Council officers.
- 3 As the new Council is undertaking a review of its own scrutiny arrangements currently, we thought it would be helpful to specifically report the findings of our work at this point to provide independent feedback to the Council to inform its own review.

What we found

- 4 A summary of our findings is included at **Exhibit 1**. Overall, we found that, **the Council has made some progress in addressing our previous proposals for improvement but still needs to strengthen arrangements to assess the effectiveness and impact of its scrutiny function.**
- 5 We have issued a further recommendation in this report (see **Exhibit 2**) and also included some further issues for the Council to consider in its review of its overview and scrutiny arrangements (see **paragraph 15**).

Exhibit 1: summary of findings

The table below sets out a summary of our findings against each proposal for improvement issued in our 2018 report.

Proposal for Improvement (PFI)	Audit Wales finding
PFI 1 – Review the overview and scrutiny committee structure to ensure it is able to meet current and future challenges.	Partially met
PFI 2 – Clarify the role of Executive Board members in the overview and scrutiny committee process, to ensure that committees are undertaking their role in holding the Executive to account.	Met
PFI 3 – Be specific in the reports presented to overview and scrutiny why the committee is receiving the information and how this relates to the role of the scrutiny committee.	Partially met
PFI 4 – Ensure that Chairs and committee members control committee agendas by deciding on and agreeing content and prioritising the issues that scrutiny examines, to allow enough time for more effective scrutiny.	Met
PFI 5 – Identify and implement further ways to encourage greater public involvement in overview and scrutiny.	Partially met
PFI 6 – Put in place arrangements for assessing the effectiveness and impact of overview and scrutiny.	Not met

Recommendation

Exhibit 2: recommendation

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

Recommendation
<p>Fully addressing all previously issued proposals for improvement</p> <p>R1 The Council needs to ensure that it acts to fully address the proposals for improvement in the <u>'Overview and Scrutiny: Fit for the Future?'</u> report (June 2018) issued by Audit Wales.</p>

Detailed report

The Council has made some progress in addressing our previous proposals for improvement but still needs to strengthen arrangements to assess the effectiveness and impact of its scrutiny function

- 6 In our June 2018 report, Overview and Scrutiny Fit for the Future – Carmarthenshire County Council, we included six proposals for improvement (PFIs) for the Council to address. In this follow-up review we have focused on assessing the progress made by the Council against each of our proposals for improvement, taking into account the wider impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Council since 2020.

Proposal for improvement 1: Review the overview and scrutiny committee structure to ensure it is able to meet current and future challenges

Finding: Proposal for improvement partially met

- 7 In 2020 the Council reviewed its Overview and Scrutiny committee structure and made minor adjustments to align them to the existing directorate portfolios. Since the Local Government elections in May 2022, the Council is now undertaking a more systematic review of its overview and scrutiny arrangements.

Proposal for improvement 2: Clarify the role of Executive Board members in the overview and scrutiny committee process, to ensure that committees are undertaking their role in holding the Executive to account

Finding: Proposal for improvement met

- 8 The Council changed its constitution in October 2020 in respect of Executive Board Member attendance at scrutiny committees. The constitution now states that, 'Executive Board Members will normally be expected to attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, to allow scrutiny of their respective portfolios in relation to decisions taken. Executive Board Members will present reports and answer questions in relation to proposed decisions that have been included within the Forward Plan/included on the agenda. Executive Board Member may call upon

Officers to provide additional information on operational issues.' In our follow up work, we saw evidence of Cabinet Members routinely attending scrutiny committees, presenting reports, and answering questions.

Proposal for improvement 3: Be specific in the reports presented to overview and scrutiny why the committee is receiving the information and how this relates to the role of the scrutiny committee

Finding: Proposal for improvement partially met

- 9 The Council has adopted an internal 'gateway' process to determine whether an item should be considered within the formal overview and scrutiny process. This process has two phases. Phase one uses a flow chart to help determine if an item should go forward for scoring and including on the forward work programme or be considered outside of the formal committee process. Phase two is to assess the importance and impact of the item using the Council's scoring priorities matrix tool. After scoring an item the Council will then include the item on the relevant 'forthcoming items for next meeting' report which goes to each scrutiny committee meeting, with guidance for the respective scrutiny committee to consider whether the topic is suitable for scrutiny. However, this 'gateway process' it is not being used by all scrutiny committees.

Proposal for improvement 4: Ensure that Chairs and committee members control committee agendas by deciding on and agreeing content and prioritising the issues that scrutiny examines, to allow enough time for more effective scrutiny

Finding: Proposal for improvement met

- 10 The Council produces a 'forthcoming items for next meeting' report which is presented at each overview and scrutiny committee meeting, with guidance for the committee to consider whether the topic is suitable for scrutiny.

Proposal for improvement 5: Identify and implement further ways to encourage greater public involvement in overview and scrutiny

Finding: Proposal for improvement partially met, the Council recognises that further work is needed in this area

- 11 The Council has undertaken some actions to encourage greater public involvement in overview and scrutiny including:
- webcasting of overview and scrutiny committee meetings;
 - contacting Town and Community Councils prior to setting the forward work programme to ask if they have any items they would like to propose for review by scrutiny committee;
 - the Council's Communications Department (in January 2020) promoted a social media campaign to encourage and increase public participation and seek subject topics for scrutiny;
 - the Council's Marketing and Media Department producing a one-page document entitled, 'Helping to increase engagement with scrutiny committee' (July 2018). This consisted of nine bullet points about what the Marketing and Media Team would do to support this process; and
 - monitoring the number of 'hits' on the Council's overview and scrutiny web pages.
- 12 However, there remains very limited public engagement in overview and scrutiny in Carmarthenshire County Council. In our review of scrutiny committee papers, from January 2021 to September 2021, no questions were submitted by the public. There were also no examples since our review in 2018 of the public having suggested topics for scrutiny review. Topics for consideration were suggested by Town and Community Councils.

Proposal for improvement 6: Put in place arrangements for assessing the effectiveness and impact of overview and scrutiny

Finding: Proposal for improvement not met

- 13 The Council has a system of each scrutiny committee producing an Annual Report. Article 6.2 of the Council's Constitution requires all scrutiny committees to, 'prepare an annual report giving an account of the Committees activities over the previous year.' All scrutiny committees produced an annual report for 2020-21. However, the annual reports were largely an account of the work undertaken rather than an assessment of their effectiveness or impact. There were some limited examples of outcomes referenced in the annual reports.

- 14 The Council does not have clear arrangements in place for assessing the effectiveness and impact of its scrutiny function or any success measures on which to evaluate these.

Further issues for the Council to consider as part of its review of its overview and scrutiny arrangements

- 15 This report covers the findings from our follow up work against the proposals for improvement previously issued. However, we feel that there are further issues for the Council to consider in its own review of its overview and scrutiny arrangements¹. These include:
- determining the strategic importance of the overview and scrutiny function to the Council;
 - establishing what the Council wants from its scrutiny arrangements;
 - defining how overview and scrutiny can help support delivery of the Council's Well-being Objectives and its wider corporate aims;
 - enhancing the corporate culture around effective challenge by scrutiny;
 - demonstrating the positive impact that the scrutiny function is having on delivery and decision making;
 - ensuring that there are sufficient resources to support effective scrutiny, including:
 - sufficient democratic officer support for scrutiny (including for running hybrid meetings); and
 - sufficient focus on the quality and timeliness of reports for scrutiny committees. In order to maximise the value from scrutiny, the committees need to receive high quality reports in a timely fashion to enable them to constructively and meaningfully hold officers and Cabinet Members to account for their respective roles and responsibilities.
 - continue to build on the Council's Member development programme to ensure overview and scrutiny Members equip themselves to undertake their roles effectively.
 - clarifying the role and responsibilities of scrutiny committees. During the follow up work it was evident that the roles and responsibilities of scrutiny committees is blurred. Under the Council's constitution Part 4.5 Scrutiny Procedure Rules. Point 12 Presentation of Task and Finish Reports it states, 'The final report will set out its recommendations in order of achievability with associated cost implications...The recommendations would also identify the

¹ The Auditor General for Wales issued a [Discussion Paper: Six themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future'](#) (February 2019) which may be a useful resource for the Council to consider

Lead/Responsible Officers for implementing the immediate/short term recommendations and for drawing up and implementing a programme for the medium/long term recommendations.' We do not consider that it is appropriate for the scrutiny committee to undertake the role of specifying which officer(s) would be responsible for implementing their recommendations.



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