



DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE - 13TH JUNE 2013

SUBJECT: WALES AUDIT OFFICE SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT STUDY

REPORT BY: HEAD OF LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Democratic Services Committee of the outcome of the Wales Audit Office (WAO) Scrutiny Improvement Study which commenced in November 2012.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report outlines the WAO Scrutiny Improvement Study.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The operation of scrutiny is required by the Local Government Act 2000 and subsequent Assembly legislation.

4. THE REPORT

- 4.1 WAO commenced a National Scrutiny Improvement Study in November 2012, which involved local authorities in self-evaluation, and peer-learning exchange. Caerphilly County Borough Council was partnered with Monmouthshire County Council within the Gwent WAO area.

- 4.2 The WAO Scrutiny Improvement Study was carried out in six phases outlined below:

Phase 1 - Collaborative Scoping

- 4.3 This involved a meeting with scrutiny practitioners, WLGA and Welsh Government on 28 August 2012.

Phase 2 - Initial Self Evaluation

- 4.4 The WAO issued each local authority with an electronic scrutiny self-evaluation questionnaire, this was completed at the end of October 2012.

- 4.5 The questionnaire was built around the key characteristics of effective scrutiny relating to the scrutiny environment, scrutiny practice and the impact of scrutiny. The Council was required to make judgements on whether our arrangements support effective scrutiny, identify areas of good or innovative practice and areas for development.

- 4.6 Each Council had to establish a Learning Exchange Team (LET) for Phase 3 and the following members of the Democratic Services Committee agreed to form the LET:

Councillor H David
Councillor W David
Councillor D T Davies
Councillor C Forehead
Councillor G Kirby
Councillor C Mann

- 4.7 In addition Councillors, J Summers, M Sargent and D Carter acted as substitutes during the study.

Phase 3 - Regional Workshops

- 4.8 A regional half-day workshop was held for the Gwent WAO region in November 2012. The Learning Exchange Team were supported by the Democratic Services Manager and Scrutiny Research Officer
- 4.9 We presented our initial self-evaluation findings to the other Learning Exchange Teams within the Gwent WAO area. This was intended to be an opportunity to understand each other's arrangements and identify areas for improvement and opportunities to work together. In addition we were asked to identify our partner local authority for the next phase of the study.

Phase 4 – Peer Learning Exchange Fieldwork

- 4.10 This phase of the study involved three key fieldwork activities for the Learning Exchange Teams to work with their partner Council to share learning and support.
- 4.11 The CCBC Learning Exchange Team observed two scrutiny committees of Monmouthshire County Council during March and April 2013. They were asked to provide feedback using the following headings:
- Organisation/ environment
 - Practice
 - Outcomes and impact of the meeting.
- 4.12 The CCBC LET was asked to identify strengths and areas for improvement and this was shared with the Scrutiny Committee at the end of the meeting.
- 4.13 In turn the Monmouthshire County Council LET observed two Scrutiny Committee meetings at CCBC. The two committees who were observed were Health Social Care & Wellbeing and Policy & Resources Scrutiny Committee. The feedback is attached at appendix 1.
- 4.14 A focus group meeting of the two LET's and the Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees was held in order to ask questions and develop their overall findings. This allowed us to clarify practice we had observed and ensure that Monmouthshire Councillors had a clear understanding of our practice.
- 4.15 The LET used the information from the focus group and the observations of scrutiny committee meetings to formulate an evaluation of Monmouthshire County Council, and compare it to their original self-evaluation. There were some areas where it was not possible to come to a conclusion because we did not observe or receive evidence to support the original self-evaluation. Therefore, it was decided not to make a judgement on those questions.
- 4.16 The Monmouthshire LET was asked to carry out an evaluation of Scrutiny at Caerphilly County Borough Council, which was based on the observations and findings from the focus group meeting. The key points identified by Monmouthshire Members were as follows:
- Too many officers in attendance, which could upset the balance between Scrutiny Committee Members and Officers i.e. risk of being seen as handholding.

- They were concerned that a young persons representative at the Health Social Care & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee meeting was asked a personal question by one of the Members.
- A forum for Scrutiny Chairs to meet and discuss issues can be of benefit thereby allowing the agenda of the Democratic Services Committee to be unhindered
- The information provided in reports could have benefited from performance information, which allows the scrutiny members to probe deeper thereby seeking outcomes and added value
- The Cabinet Member and Officers presenting (i.e. witnesses) could be better identified if sat at a separate table (i.e. 'Cabinet style') with nameplates for the benefit of any observers. This would also ensure the committee is "seen to be independent" to the public and would separate responsibilities and ensure accountability
- There were a few instances when 'good' questions could have led to 'better' supplementary questions i.e. probing beneath the surface of the first answer. Members did not pursue their lines of inquiry, which could signify a confidence issue or a training need
- The committee may benefit from a short planning session at the start of the meeting to agree questioning themes and the structure of questioning, to ensure best use of time and robust answers from those questioned
- Very impressed with the wide range of individuals co-opted onto the Health, Social Care and Well-being Scrutiny Committee who actively took part in the meeting
- A final area for improvement would be to provide opportunities for the public to engage in scrutiny meetings

Phase 5 – Regional Workshop 2

- 4.17 The second regional workshop for the Learning Exchange Teams from the five local authorities in the former Gwent area was held on 19 April 2013 to feedback findings, views and share learning. The areas identified by CCBC for change were as follows:
- Develop questioning skills for Members
 - Re-organise scrutiny meeting layout – distinct area for witnesses
 - Involve Cabinet Member in answering questions at Scrutiny Committee
 - Develop Forward Work Programmes using Scrutiny Chairs forum
 - Develop public involvement in Scrutiny
- 4.18 Members and Officers were asked to select the top 5 issues for the Gwent area and split into mixed groups to start developing them further, the issues identified were:
- Engagement
 - Planning and Preparation
 - Questioning Skills
 - Training and Skills Development
 - Developing Capacity – set up Chair/Officer Network
- 4.19 These very much replicate the priorities identified by Caerphilly to take forward. It was suggested at the workshop to form a Gwent area network and identify areas for local authorities to work together.
- 4.20 The WAO require each Council to complete a final self-evaluation questionnaire, which was completed by 31 May 2013. Following this the WAO will provide each council with their final self-evaluation and summary.

Phase 6 – Reporting and Ongoing Dissemination

- 4.21 The WAO will prepare a national summary report, provide feedback to individual councils and prepare good practice case studies.

- 4.22 The WAO will hold a national scrutiny conference during Autumn 2013 to give feedback on the study.
- 4.23 WAO giving continued message that they will be monitoring Councils' action plans and progress made in improving the effectiveness of scrutiny.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This report is for information purposes, so the Council's EqIA process does not need to be applied.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no financial implications not contained in the report.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no personnel implications not contained in the report.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 There are no consultation responses not contained in the report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 To agree to develop an action plan based on the final self assessment, changes recently made by National Assembly to strengthen arrangements for Scrutiny, the action plan approved by full Council following the WAO Public Interest report and issues identified during the study.
- 9.2 To work with the local authorities within the Gwent WAO area network and identify opportunities to work collaboratively on common areas of scrutiny development.
- 9.3 Establish a Scrutiny Leadership Group made up from the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Councils Scrutiny and Audit Committees.

10. STATUTORY POWER

- 10.1 Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000

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Appendices:
Appendix 1 Feedback of observations made by Monmouthshire County Council