



DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE - 8TH NOVEMBER 2012

SUBJECT: WALES AUDIT OFFICE SCRUTINY IMPROVEMENT STUDY

REPORT BY: HEAD OF LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Democratic Services Committee of the planned Wales Audit Office (WAO) Scrutiny Improvement Study which will commence during November 2012.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report outlines the WAO Scrutiny Improvement Study methodology and timetable.

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 has set out its plans for a national Scrutiny Improvement Study during 2012/13. They will use the Key Characteristics of Effective Overview and Scrutiny as a basis to benchmark the effectiveness of scrutiny in each local authority.
- 4.2 The programme differs from a traditional audit approach in that it involves self-evaluation, and peer-learning exchange based on the following principles:
- Co-development and learning.
 - Self-evaluation.
 - Real-time feedback.
 - Openness and sharing.
 - Learning and development.
 - Relationship building.
- 4.3 The WAO Scrutiny Improvement Study will be carried out in six phases outlined below:

Phase 1 - Collaborative Scoping

- 4.4 This involved a meeting with scrutiny practitioners, WLGA and Welsh Government on 28 August 2012. WAO also attended a regional meeting of Scrutiny Champions on 7 September 2012. Many local authorities expressed their concern about the timing of the study as it coincides with the implementation of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, the creation of Police and Crime Panels and, following the elections in May many Councils

have a large number of new and inexperienced Members. It seems far more logical to implement the changes contained in the Measure and allow new Members to gain the appropriate experience and skills before undertaking a study on the effectiveness of scrutiny. Despite these reservations the WAO are proceeding with the study and have developed the project brief attached at appendix 1.

Phase 2 - Initial Self Evaluation

- 4.5 The WAO have issued each local authority with an electronic scrutiny self-evaluation questionnaire, which must be completed by the end of October 2012.
- 4.6 The questionnaire is built around the key characteristics of effective scrutiny relating to the scrutiny environment, scrutiny practice and the impact of scrutiny. The Council is required to make judgements on whether our arrangements support effective scrutiny, identify areas of good or innovative practice and areas for development.
- 4.7 Each Council must establish a Learning Exchange Team (LET) for Phase 3 and be made up of up to five Members. WAO suggest that when forming their LET councils should ensure a cross section of executive and non-executive Members from a mix of political groups, as well as officers. It is suggested that Members of the Democratic Services Committee make up the LET.
- 4.8 The WAO will not challenge the council's initial self-evaluation, however, the outputs from the phase 2 will provide a baseline of the council's scrutiny arrangements and will be shared with other Councils at phase 3, 4 and 5.
- 4.9 The draft responses to the self-evaluation questions are attached at appendix 2. The suggested responses are highlighted in bold with a list of supporting evidence after each response.

Phase 3 - Regional Workshops

- 4.10 A regional half-day workshop will be held for each of the four WAO regions, Gwent, Mid and West Wales, South Wales and North Wales. The Learning Exchange Teams and Lead Officer from each Council will be invited to attend the workshops being held in November 2012.
- 4.11 Each Lead Officer will present their initial self-evaluation findings to the other Learning Exchange Teams. Councils will have the opportunity to understand each other's arrangements and identify areas for improvement and opportunities to work together.

Phase 4 – Peer Learning Exchange Fieldwork

- 4.12 This phase of the study involves three key fieldwork activities for each Learning Exchange Team to work with a partner Council to share learning and support.
- 4.13 The Learning Exchange Teams will:
- Hold a focus group with the Chairs of the Scrutiny committees of the partner council. To be held in December 2012/January 2013.
 - Observe two scrutiny committees of the partner council and share their views with the committee members at the end of the meeting. To be carried out during January – March 2013.
 - Meet during March 2013 to reflect on their experience, and complete an evaluation by 31 March 2013.
 - Prepare a short summary of their views, including key messages to be presented at the regional workshop at phase 5 in April 2013.

- 4.14 The WAO will facilitate these activities and provide a challenge to the self-evaluation and Learning Exchange Teams.

Phase 5 – Regional Workshop 2

- 4.15 The second regional workshop for the Learning Exchange Teams will be held following phase 4, to feedback findings, views and share learning. These will be held during April 2013 and facilitated by WAO. Council Learning Exchange Teams will share their overall views and circulate their completed peer learning exchange evaluations.
- 4.16 Following the workshop the WAO will ask each Council to complete a final self-evaluation questionnaire, which must be completed by 30 April 2013. The WAO will provide each council with their final self-evaluation and summary.

Phase 6 – Reporting and Ongoing Dissemination

- 4.17 The WAO will prepare a national summary report, provide feedback to individual councils and prepare good practice case studies.
- 4.18 The WAO will hold a national scrutiny conference during Autumn 2013 to give feedback on the study.

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 note the arrangements for the WAO Scrutiny Improvement Study.
- 9.2 To comment on the draft responses to the initial self-evaluation.
- 9.3 To agree that Members of the Democratic Services Committee will form the Learning Exchange Team.

10. STATUTORY POWER

- 10.1 Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000

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Appendices:

Appendix 1 Good Scrutiny? Good Question! Wales Audit Office Scrutiny Improvement Study –
Project Brief
Appendix 2 Self-evaluation draft response