

CONSTITUTION & DEMOCRATIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Wednesday, 17 October 2018
Report Subject	Wales Audit Office Study – Overview & Scrutiny – Fit for the Future.
Cabinet Member	Not applicable
Report Author	Democratic Services Manager
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As a result of carrying out their study of Overview & Scrutiny in Flintshire during the autumn of 2017, the Wales Audit Office have made four proposals for ways in which the Council could improve the effectiveness of its Overview & Scrutiny function, to make it better places to meet current and future challenges.

These are:

- P1 The Council should undertake regular self-assessment of its overview and scrutiny function, to consider its impact, and identify areas for improvement.
- P2 Further develop scrutiny forward work programming to:
 - ensure that the method of scrutiny is best suited to the topic area and the outcome desired, and consider more innovative methods for undertaking scrutiny activity.
- P3 Overview and scrutiny committees should further improve their arrangements for promoting the engagement of the public and other stakeholders in scrutiny activity.
- P4 The Council should review the support arrangements for overview and scrutiny in light of current and future challenges.

The Committee is invited to consider and comment on those recommendations. Which are constructive and, if the committee is supportive, intend to examine how they could inform future Overview & Scrutiny work, including the development of a self- assessment template for use by Overview & Scrutiny committees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That the committee considers and responds to the four recommendations made by the Wales Audit Office in their <i>Overview & Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?</i> Study report.
2	That the officers be tasked with examining how the proposals could inform future Overview & Scrutiny work, including the development of a self-assessment template for use by Overview & Scrutiny committees.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE WALES AUDIT OFFICE STUDY – OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY – FIT FOR THE FUTURE? FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL REPORT
1.01	During the autumn of 2017, the Wales Audit Office conducted a study of Overview & Scrutiny across the 22 Welsh principal councils. The study involved interviews with individuals and groups of both Members and officers, document research and observation at a small number of committee meetings.
1.02	The study, <i>Overview & Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?</i> was a follow up to the previous study - <i>Good Scrutiny? Good Question!</i> which the Wales Audit Office carried out in 2012/13.
1.03	In Flintshire, interviews were held with: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Leader,• a group of Cabinet Members,• a group of Overview & Scrutiny Committee Chairs• a group of experienced Members and co-optees who had served in the 2013-2017 Council• a group of Members first elected in 2017• the Chief Executive• the Chief Officer, Governance• the Democratic Services Manager• the Corporate Business and Communications Executive Officer
1.04	The intended benefits of undertaking the project were: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• identification of 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 Wellbeing of Future Generations Act;• providing assurance that scrutiny functions are well placed to respond to current and future challenges and expectations;• helping to embed effective scrutiny by elected members from the start of this new electoral cycle; and• providing insight into how well councils have responded to the findings of the previous Scrutiny Improvement Study.

1.05	<p>Wales Audit Office had provided councils with suggested discussion questions before the interviews and group work. These were;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scrutiny environment: Is the Council creating a supportive environment to enable scrutiny to operate effectively? • Scrutiny practice: Is the operation of the scrutiny function well planned, efficient, objective and based on evidence from a range of sources? • Scrutiny impact: Is overview and scrutiny activity contributing to improvements in performance and decision-making?
1.06	<p>The finding of the Wales Audit Office are :</p> <p>In this review we concluded the Council values its overview and scrutiny function and is taking steps to promote effective scrutiny, however better work planning, use of a wider range of scrutiny methods and routine evaluation of the impact of scrutiny activity will help in responding to current and future challenges. We came to this conclusion because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the Council has created a positive environment for Overview and Scrutiny to operate effectively, but continuous work is needed to keep up that momentum and ensure that officers and committee members' understanding of and commitment to its purpose is maintained; • Overview and Scrutiny Committees are increasing their use of different sources to inform their work and recognise the need to ensure that work planning has more rigour and to consider alternative ways of undertaking scrutiny activity to gather evidence from a wider range of sources; and • arrangements to evaluate overview and Scrutiny are under-developed.
1.07	<p>Following on from the conclusions, the Wales Audit Office have made four proposals for ways in which the Council could improve the effectiveness of its Overview & Scrutiny function, to make it better places to meet current and future challenges. These are:</p> <p>P1 The Council should undertake regular self-assessment of its overview and scrutiny function, to consider its impact, and identify areas for improvement.</p> <p>P2 Further develop scrutiny forward work programing to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that the method of scrutiny is best suited to the topic area and the outcome desired, and consider more innovative methods for undertaking scrutiny activity. <p>P3 Overview and scrutiny committees should further improve their arrangements for promoting the engagement of the public and other stakeholders in scrutiny activity.</p> <p>P4 The Council should review the support arrangements for overview and scrutiny in light of current and future challenges.</p>

1.08	As officers, we welcome the proposals, which are constructive and, if the committee is supportive, intend to examine how they could inform future Overview & Scrutiny work, including the development of a self- assessment template for use by Overview & Scrutiny committees.
1.09	With regard to P2, we recognise the validity of employing innovative methods of scrutiny activity where they are appropriate and beneficial.
1.10	Flintshire has offered public engagement over a number of years, but this has not been effective. Subject to committee agreement, we will investigate this further.
1.11	Flintshire's support for Overview & Scrutiny is on a par or better than most principal councils: the committee's views are welcomed on P4.

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	There are no implications within this report which will adversely affect the Overview & Scrutiny budget.

3.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED / CARRIED OUT
3.01	None

4.00	RISK MANAGEMENT
4.01	Wales Audit Office recommendations are taken seriously and evaluated.

5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Report of the Wales Audit Office <i>Overview & Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?</i> Document reference 763A2018-19

6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	None Contact Officer: Robert Robins, Democratic Services Manager Telephone: 01352 702320 E-mail: robert.robins@flintshire.gov.uk

7.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
7.01	<p>Wales Audit Office (WAO): works to support the Auditor General as the public sector watchdog for Wales. They aim to ensure that the people of Wales know whether public money is being managed wisely and that public bodies in Wales understand how to improve outcomes.</p>