

FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: **CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE**

DATE: **WEDNESDAY, 17 JULY 2013**

REPORT BY: **MEMBER ENGAGEMENT MANAGER**

SUBJECT: **WALES AUDIT OFFICE PEER REVIEW AND SELF
EVALUATION**

1.00 **PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1.01 To inform the Constitution Committee of the results of the Wales Audit Office Scrutiny Improvement Study Self-evaluation of overview and scrutiny arrangements and the feedback received from the from peer review by the Wrexham Peer Review team of Overview & Scrutiny arrangements in Flintshire

2.00 **BACKGROUND**

2.01 This issue was reported to the committee at the meeting on 24th October 2012. As part of a national programme of Wales Audit Office improvement activity, Overview & Scrutiny was to take part in a self-evaluation and peer review process working with Denbighshire and Wrexham Local Authorities. The Flintshire Peer Learning Evaluation Team (PLET) undertook a peer review of Denbighshire County Council Overview & Scrutiny, whilst the Wrexham Peer Learning Evaluation Team visited Flintshire to undertake a peer review.

2.02 Following the guidance that the PLET should comprise a range of Members: both Overview & Scrutiny and Cabinet, and officers, the PLET members identified by the committee were:- Cllr Billy Mullin, Cllr Richard Jones, Cllr Clive Carver, Cllr David Mackie, Robert Robins, Member Engagement Manager and Margaret Parry-Jones, Scrutiny Facilitator.

2.03 The PLET members took part in a number of activities: the completion of an extensive self-assessment tool, a workshop in Llandudno with representatives of the other five North Wales authorities and the WAO. The Flintshire PLET also observed and provided feedback at two Denbighshire Overview & Scrutiny committees. The Wrexham PLET attended meetings of Flintshire's Environment and Lifelong Learning Overview & Scrutiny meetings.

2.04 Four members of the team attended the regional workshop on the 19th of April in Colwyn Bay which gave the teams across North Wales an opportunity to feedback their findings and views, share experiences,

practice, ideas and lessons learned with a view to further improving scrutiny arrangements.

2.05 An all-Wales workshop to discuss the outcomes of the study has been arranged on the 28th of November 2013 and a diary marker has been circulated to stakeholders.

2.06 The self-evaluation and peer review process has enabled us to reflect on our overview and scrutiny arrangements. The draft action plan attached as appendix 1 attempts to build on the good practice that is already taking place within Overview & Scrutiny in Flintshire

3.00 CONSIDERATIONS

3.01 The peer review team highlighted a number of key strengths. The following are quotes from the feedback received which reflect positively on our overview and scrutiny arrangements.

- Scrutiny appears to have an important role in influencing new policies prior to their implementation
- The Action sheets produced after each meeting by the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator assists in monitoring recommendations/actions.
- Good working relationships with, but effective challenge of other public bodies and voluntary organizations – e.g. rigorous challenge of BCUHB proposals.
- Scrutiny plays a key role in shaping the way performance information is structured, presented and delivered.
- Scrutiny Team support highly valued
- Officers responsive to requests for further reports/information.
- Good use of comparative data

3.02 The review also provided some extremely helpful challenge and feedback in relation to areas for development. This external input will be very helpful as we look to refine our scrutiny arrangements.

Some of the key areas of feedback were:-

1. Restricted space for public attendance

Response: Acknowledged. When the number of Members on an O&S committee was increased from 11/12 to 15 (20 for Lifelong Learning) the two rows of seats in the Delyn Room public gallery had to be reduced to one. Experience has shown that holding meetings in the Alyn & Deeside Room isn't popular and the Council Chamber is generally too large and too formal for effective scrutiny meetings.

2. Need to raise the profile of scrutiny

Response: Acknowledged. One of the 'six conditions for effective scrutiny' contained within the 2002 report commissioned by the then deputy prime minister (the ODPM report) was to achieve a high level of understanding of overview & scrutiny. Despite a number of initiatives, the profile of overview & scrutiny remains low. This is not a problem confined to Flintshire.

3. Reports to Cabinet to include a section to ensure scrutiny views are accurately reflected

Response: this has recently been acknowledged by Cabinet and the Chief Executive and Head of Legal and Democratic Services will ensure scrutiny's views are more fully reported in future. If implemented in conjunction with recommendation 6 it will be easier to convey the opinions of Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

4. From the meetings observed, there could have been more in-depth questioning

Response: whilst the comment was made on the basis of observation at two meetings, training on questioning techniques has provided in the past and could be commissioned again if Members felt that it would be beneficial.

5. More training required on the scrutiny role

Response: There was a disappointing 'take up' for the scrutiny training offered as part of the 2012 Member Induction Programme. If there is an appetite for training, then the officers will provide it. This could be delivered prior to the start of meetings or at separate events depending upon the wish of the committees and the size of the topics to be covered.

6. More detailed recommendations to be agreed and recorded to better reflect the discussions at the meetings (most recommendations in the observed meetings appeared to be "note the report").

Response: it could be argued that the noting of a report is 'passive' and that effective scrutiny should be 'active'. The committee chairs and the officers could discuss how best to achieve this: a recommendation inviting the committee to comment on a report, rather than to note it would be a useful starting point.

7. Could other means be found to deal with awareness raising items to create capacity in work programmes?

We have previously used workshop meetings to great effect, even though this approach attracted some criticism from the Wales Audit Office

8. Members of the public not allowed to routinely speak at scrutiny and no evidence of public interest in scrutiny items

Response: We have developed four protocols for public engagement, which were considered and approved by the Constitution Committee at the meeting on 30th January, which is between the two meetings observed. Thus we do have the facility for members of the public to speak if they ask so to do.

We have attempted to engage with the public over the years through a variety of media but there has been very little interest. Flintshire was one of the first authorities to provide a web site area to enable the public to suggest scrutiny topics. It has been scarcely used over the ten years of its existence. We shall continue to try and engage public interest.

9. The political nature of scrutiny in Flintshire

Response: Overview & Scrutiny is intended to be apolitical. Again in conjunction with recommendation 6 it might be possible within each report to suggest issues for exploration reinforcing and further enhancing the current evidence based approach to scrutiny.

- 3.03** The PLET members wish to place on record their appreciation of the work put into the self-assessment by the Overview & Scrutiny Facilitator who acted as Flintshire's lead officer and co-ordinator throughout the study.

4.00 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.01** That the Committee consider the feedback received from the Wrexham Peer Review Team and the officer responses to those.
- 4.02** That the committee consider and comment on the draft action plan attached.
- 4.03** That a further report be made to the committee to provide an update on progress with implementing the learning points from the self-assessment.

5.00 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

None arising directly out of this report.

6.00 ANTI POVERTY IMPACT

None arising directly out of this report

7.00 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

None arising directly out of this report

8.00 EQUALITIES IMPACT

None arising directly out of this report

9.00 PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

None arising directly out of this report

10.00 CONSULTATION REQUIRED

Publication of this report initiates consultation

11.00 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN

See 10.00 above.

12.00 APPENDICES

Appendix A – Peer Review Action Plan

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION ACT) 1985
BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

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