

APPENDIX 2

Elected members carry out their roles diligently but the impact of scrutiny is less than it might be

- 49 Cabinet members are generally well informed about their portfolios. They meet regularly with the relevant senior officers and the Leader and Deputy Leader have a constructive and trusting relationship with the Chief Executive and Chief Officers. Informal Cabinet meetings with the Chief Officer Team prior to each Cabinet meeting are productive in clarifying members' understanding of up-coming papers. The subsequent formal decision-making at Cabinet is therefore well-informed, and meetings are brisk and business-like, although the extent of debate in the public arena is often limited.
- 50 Member development programmes and training, while offered and promoted, are not well attended, and the take-up of member personal development reviews has not been a success. Appropriately, councillors may only take part in Planning or Licensing Committee meetings after undertaking specific training, and these courses are well attended. However, attendance at other training events has been poor. The Council has undertaken a review into this, and is changing the way some training is delivered. Members do not feel they have the opportunity to shape training programmes but member development is not driven at the Council.
- 51 Some longstanding members question the need for training. However, the various committees that we observed suggested that there remains the potential to improve member skills such as the chairing of meetings, the interpretation of council reports and the identification of strategic rather than ward-based issues for discussion.
- 52 The Council has six overview and scrutiny committees which are well resourced with dedicated officer support. The Council recognises that the balance of work between committees varies and the number of committees is comparatively high compared to the Welsh average. Overview and scrutiny structures have not been reviewed since 2010 and the Council is now planning to review structures.

- 53 Cabinet members support the scrutiny process well by attending meetings regularly. However, the impact that scrutiny is having on decision-making is often unclear. A high proportion of the work of scrutiny committees takes the form of monitoring reports on matters such as the budget or on performance against targets, although individual members also raise items and request reports on issues of interest to them. A small proportion of scrutiny agendas relate to 'predecision scrutiny' whereby committees consider issues before they reach Cabinet for decisions to be taken. All Scrutiny committees have forward programmes but it is not clear how these are influenced by corporate priorities, the Cabinet agenda or the corporate risk profile.
- 54 The level of challenge and quality of debate in scrutiny committee meetings varies. There are examples of scrutiny providing decisive challenge, such as when a task and finish group was established to review the Council's approach to target setting. However, reports presented to scrutiny committees are often for noting rather than requiring the agreement of recommendations to Cabinet. Discussion tends to lack focus as a result and the scrutiny function is limited in terms of its contribution to Council policy or priorities and in ensuring that decisions benefit from a wide range of political views.
- 55 The quality of papers presented to scrutiny committees and to Cabinet varies too much. Some reports are too long, too detailed or include unnecessary jargon, meaning that they can be difficult to understand for non-specialist members. For example, the ICT quarterly reports presented to Cabinet and committees include helpful performance indicators relating to customer satisfaction. However, references to progress on larger projects relating to systems are vaguer and rely on members referring to previous reports to get an understanding of how projects have moved on or how much work remains. Finance and budget-related papers are also not easy to understand. This means that the Council risks inadequate challenge on financial performance as members may not understand the issues fully.

Proposal for Improvement

Group Leaders should strongly encourage Members to take advantage of the Member Development Scheme