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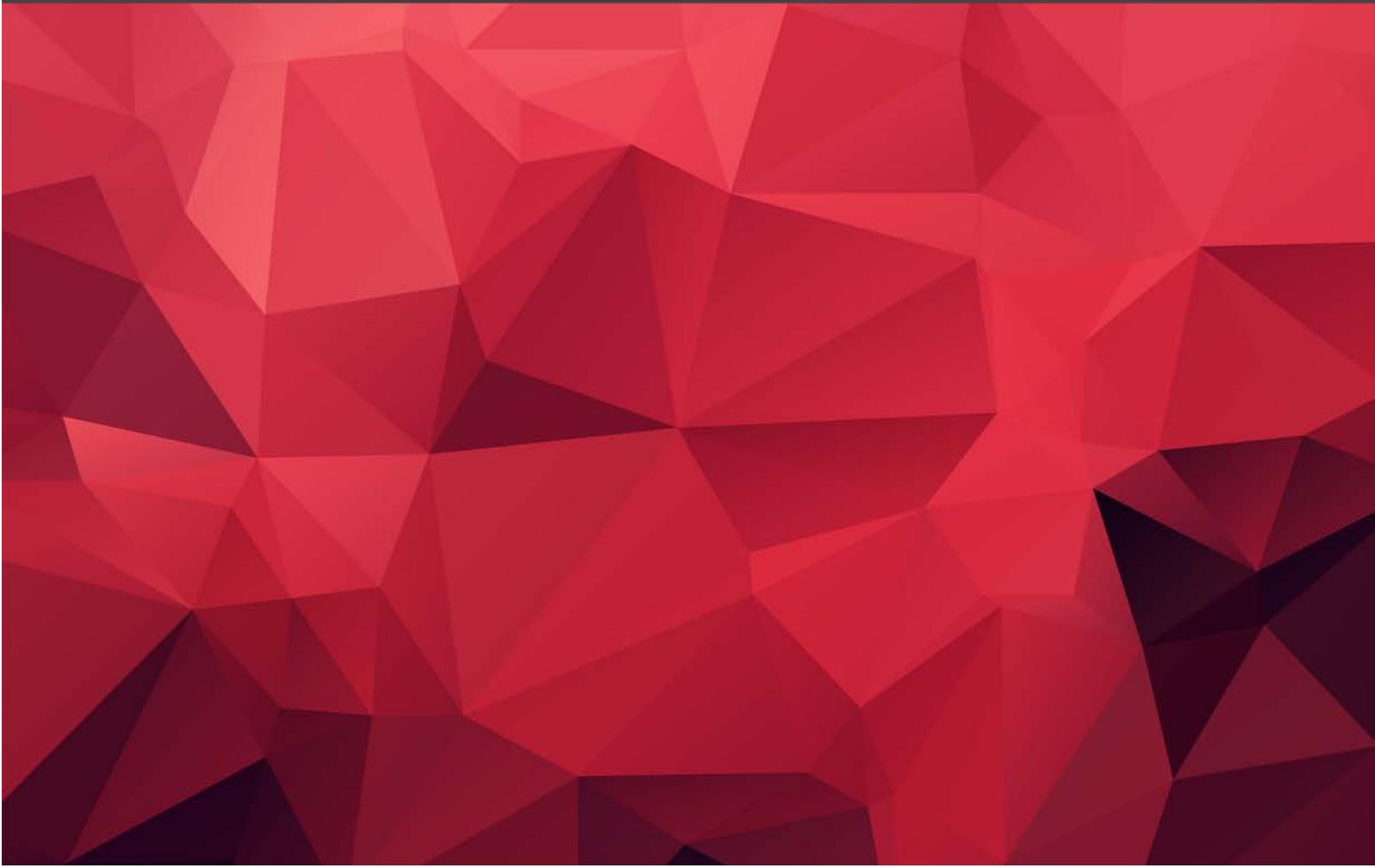
Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru
Auditor General for Wales

Overview and Scrutiny – Fit For the Future? – **Wrexham County Borough Council**

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This document is also available in Welsh.

The team who delivered the work comprised Charlotte Owen, Paul Goodlad and Jeremy Evans directed by Huw Rees.

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Summary report

Summary

- 1 This review explored with each of the 22 councils in Wales how ‘fit for the future’ their scrutiny functions are. We considered how councils are responding to current challenges, including the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 in relation to their scrutiny activity, as well as how councils are beginning to carry out scrutiny of Public Service Boards. We also examined how well placed councils are to respond to future challenges such as continued pressure on public finances and the possible move towards more regional working between local authorities.
- 2 As part of this review we also reviewed the progress that councils have made in addressing the recommendations of our earlier National Improvement Study **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?** (May 2014) (see [Appendix 2](#)). We also followed up on the proposals for improvement relevant to scrutiny that we issued in local reports including those issued to councils as part of our 2016-17 thematic reviews of Savings Planning and Governance Arrangements for Determining Significant Service Changes.
- 3 Our review aimed to:
 - identify 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 Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015;
 - provide assurance that scrutiny functions are well placed to respond to current and future challenges and expectations;
 - help to embed effective scrutiny by elected members from the start of the new electoral cycle; and
 - provide insight into how well councils have responded to the findings of our previous Scrutiny Improvement Study.
- 4 To inform our findings we based our review method around the Outcomes and Characteristics for Effective Local Government Overview and Scrutiny that were developed and agreed by scrutiny stakeholders in Wales following our previous National Improvement Study **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?**
- 5 During November 2017 and February 2018 we reviewed documents, interviewed key officers and ran focus groups with councillors to understand their views on Wrexham County Borough Council’s (the Council) current scrutiny arrangements. In particular how the Council is approaching and intends to respond to the challenges identified above.
- 6 We observed a sample of overview and scrutiny meetings and reviewed relevant meeting documentation provided to committee members to support their scrutiny role, such as reports and presentations.

- 7 In this review we concluded that the Council has strengthened its overview and scrutiny function but there is scope to consider more fundamental changes to meet future challenges. We came to this conclusion because:
- a. the Council is supportive of overview and scrutiny, but arrangements necessary to help overview and scrutiny members meet future challenges are not yet fully developed;
 - b. overview and scrutiny committee practice is improving and has increased the range of evidence sources they draw on but committee members need to take full ownership of their forward work programmes; and
 - c. the overview and scrutiny function is contributing to improvements in performance and decision-making through regular challenge and can demonstrate positive impact, but the Council needs to review whether the function is fit for the future.

Proposals for improvement

- 8 The table below contains our proposals for ways in which the Council could improve the effectiveness of its overview and scrutiny function to make it better placed to meet current and future challenges.

Proposals for improvement	
P1	Explore options to modernise the overview and scrutiny function, to ensure it can meet future challenges.

Detailed report

The Council has strengthened its overview and scrutiny function but there is scope to consider more fundamental changes to meet future challenges

The Council is supportive of overview and scrutiny, but arrangements necessary to help overview and scrutiny members meet future challenges are not yet fully developed

- 9 Overview and scrutiny has a clearly defined role within the Council. Overview and scrutiny activity is predominantly carried out at meetings of the Council's five overview and scrutiny committees, with some activity undertaken through task and finish groups. Overview and scrutiny is a systematic part of the Council's governance arrangements and both officers and councillors regard it as valuable. Councillor roles and responsibilities for scrutiny are clearly set out in the Council's constitution and associated protocols but there is some confusion among councillors over the legal function of scrutiny.
- 10 The Council provides training on effective scrutiny and chairing skills as part of its councillor induction and development programme. The Council consults councillors about the councillor development strategy and programme. Training sessions are held during the evening as well as the day to improve accessibility. However, some new scrutiny committee members told us that they do not feel sufficiently prepared to scrutinise effectively and that it is taking time to develop the necessary skills.
- 11 So far, training on Public Services Board scrutiny has been limited. There is scope for the Council to review training provision because of future challenges. While councillors receive training on the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Public Services Board framework, there has been little focus on training councillors to scrutinise the Public Services Board or other joint working arrangements. However, the Council intends to run specific training on Public Services Board scrutiny during 2018 to prepare councillors for scrutiny of the Public Services Board.
- 12 Overview and scrutiny committee members spoke highly of the support they receive from the Council's scrutiny facilitators. As well as delivering independent research and supporting task and finish groups, scrutiny facilitators provide dedicated support and guidance to committee members, which complements the formal scrutiny training provided. Scrutiny support officers also facilitate pre-meetings to help committee members prepare for overview and scrutiny meetings. Scrutiny facilitators prepare briefing notes for both the chairs and committee members and provide guidance on potential lines of enquiry. Councillors were

supportive of these arrangements and credited the facilitators with raising the standard of committee meetings.

- 13 The quality of papers presented to scrutiny committee is comprehensive, helped by the Council's arrangements for monitoring report quality. However, if committees ever consider that they lack enough information to carry out their scrutiny role effectively, they seek further detail from officers. Councillors expressed concern about reduced officer capacity within the Council's services and the impact that this has sometimes had on the timeliness of reports to scrutiny.
- 14 Officers and councillors demonstrate awareness of the future challenges facing the scrutiny function, such as reduced budgets. Increased focus on regional working is a key consideration and the Council is developing its approach to regional scrutiny. The Council expects the scrutiny function to evolve to meet future challenges; the Council's new Monitoring Officer intends to review the constitution over the next two years; this review will reflect discussions with partners over new or emerging implications for scrutiny and any agreed regional scrutiny arrangements.

Overview and scrutiny committee practice is improving and has increased the range of evidence sources they draw on but committee members need to take full ownership of their forward work programme

- 15 Each scrutiny committee has a well-defined forward work programme. The Scrutiny Chairs Coordinating Group oversees and coordinates the workload of the five committees and regularly reviews the Executive Committee forward work programme to inform scrutiny programmes. Each scrutiny committee develops an annual work programme, taking into account:
 - the Council Plan;
 - performance reports;
 - corporate risk register;
 - recent public consultations;
 - proposed budget savings and significant service changes; and
 - scrutiny topic selection forms from officers, councillors and the public.Committees routinely review the forward work programme and any recently presented scrutiny topic selection forms as a standing item on all committee meeting agendas. There are clear protocols to agree the topics to scrutinise and forward work programmes set out the purpose and expected outcome of each item.
- 16 Some new overview and scrutiny members felt that they lacked ownership of the 2017-18 meeting agendas because committees were still working through items chosen under the previous administration. These concerns are likely to be resolved as committees begin to work through their programmes for 2018-19. However, this

suggests that some new councillors do not fully understand the opportunity to reshape the committee work programmes, or that committees have full ownership of their work programmes. Further guidance from officers and more experienced committee members might help to address these concerns.

- 17 The overview and scrutiny committees try to carry out their prescribed activities in a balanced way and uses both pre and post-decision scrutiny. Scrutiny members favour pre-decision scrutiny but there is scope for committees to carry out more reflective work, looking at the impact of past decisions.
- 18 The Council has strengthened the links between its overview and scrutiny and audit functions; for example, an Audit and Scrutiny Protocol sets out expectations for sharing information between them. The Audit Committee Chair and Internal Audit Manager attend Scrutiny Coordinating Group meetings twice a year to discuss work programmes and to share any concerns. External audit and inspection reports are routinely reported at Audit Committee, and many of these reports are also considered in scrutiny committee meetings.
- 19 The Council has developed a Public Services Board scrutiny protocol and Public Services Board scrutiny is included in the Council's existing overview and scrutiny committee structure. The Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance Scrutiny Committee will review the Public Services Board's governance arrangements and monitor progress against the Well-Being Plan. More detailed scrutiny of the Public Services Board's priorities will be carried out by the Lifelong Learning and Safeguarding, Communities and Well-being scrutiny committees. At the time of this review, scrutiny committees had considered the Public Services Board's well-being needs assessment and draft well-being plan.
- 20 The scrutiny meetings we observed were well run. Councillor conduct was polite and constructive and we saw examples of robust challenge and well-informed debate. Chairing is generally effective, helping to ensure that debate and questioning is focused and arrives at clear conclusions. Scrutiny facilitators also provide support and feedback to less experienced chairs when necessary. Overview and scrutiny committees also prioritise agenda items to enable items to be considered in sufficient detail.
- 21 Although overview and scrutiny committees are largely informed by officer reports, committees have increased their use of external sources of evidence. External regulators and representatives from other public sector organisations such as the local health board and police regularly attend. Recent overview and scrutiny committee debates have also been informed by the views of local market traders, school governors and teachers, council tenants and Senedd yr Ifanc¹.
- 22 However, involvement in overview and scrutiny by the wider public is more limited. The Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Public Engagement Protocol, which

¹ Senedd yr Ifanc is Wrexham's youth parliament, made up of young people aged 11- 25. It gathers the views and opinions of young people in Wrexham on specific issues that affect them.

provides guidance on public involvement in the scrutiny process. Overview and scrutiny annual reports and the Council's website also explain how members of the public can get involved. Despite this, councillors and officers told us that public attendance at committee meetings is rare and limited to controversial issues. When members of the public do attend committee meetings, the Council provides an informative leaflet that explains overview and scrutiny committee proceedings. The Council is committed to webcasting its overview and scrutiny committee meetings to improve accessibility and transparency. The Council has allocated enough resources to webcast around five meetings a year. The Scrutiny Coordinating Group selects which meetings to webcast based on agenda items that are likely to cause the most public interest or impact. Nevertheless, public engagement in the scrutiny process remains passive rather than active; there is scope for the Council to revisit Participation Cymru's 10 Principles for Public Engagement in improving the way scrutiny engages with the public and stakeholders

The overview and scrutiny function is contributing to improvements in performance and decision-making through regular challenge and can demonstrate positive impact, but the Council needs to review whether the function is fit for the future

- 23 Overview and scrutiny committees regularly challenge and hold lead members and officers to account. The role of Executive Board members in relation to scrutiny is clearly set out in the Council's protocols. Both lead members and officers present reports to committees and we observed Executive Board members presenting reports, taking questions, and being held to account at committee meetings. Senior officers help respond to questions and present reports of a more operational or technical nature.
- 24 Both councillors and officers provided examples of overview and scrutiny committees contributing to solutions to recognised problems, for example regenerating Wrexham town centre. They highlighted the work of scrutiny task and finish groups as being of particular value.
- 25 The Council regularly evaluates the effectiveness of the scrutiny function. Informal post-committee discussions provide Chairs, Vice Chairs and scrutiny facilitators with the opportunity to reflect on committee meetings and potential areas for improvement. The Council responds appropriately to councillor concerns about scrutiny, such as changing the way scrutiny recommendations are drafted. The Council is also reviewing its budget scrutiny arrangements following concerns from committee members that the timing of meetings and reports provided did not support effective scrutiny. The Council also reviews the impact of the scrutiny function each year in its annual overview and scrutiny report. The reports summarise the work of the scrutiny function and include some examples of the impact of scrutiny's recommendations.

- 26 In 2014, the Council commissioned the Centre for Public Scrutiny to help it review and improve its scrutiny function. The Council set up a working group to help implement and monitor the resulting action plan. The changes made have strengthened the scrutiny function and it is now better placed to deal with current challenges.
- 27 However, as with most councils, the scrutiny function remains traditional in its approach. The Council could benefit from a more ambitious review that considers more modern, and potentially more efficient, ways of carrying out scrutiny which will make the function fit for the future. For example, the Council could consider reducing the amount or type of activity undertaken through formal committee meetings and for example placing more emphasis on gathering different views rather than receiving reports, and/or increasing the capacity for task and finish groups and other forms of overview and scrutiny activity. The Council could also explore opportunities to engage members of the public more actively in the scrutiny process, complementing other actions intended to modernise its scrutiny arrangements.

Appendix 1

Outcomes and characteristics for effective local government overview and scrutiny

Exhibit 1: outcomes and characteristics for effective local government overview and scrutiny

Outcomes	Characteristics
What does good scrutiny seek to achieve?	What would it look like? How could we recognise it?
1. Democratic accountability drives improvement in public services. 'Better Services'	Environment i) Scrutiny has a clearly defined and valued role in the council's improvement arrangements. ii) Scrutiny has the dedicated officer support it needs from officers who are able to undertake independent research effectively, and provide Scrutiny members with high-quality analysis, advice and training. Practice iii) Overview and Scrutiny inquiries are non-political, methodologically sound and incorporate a wide range of evidence and perspectives. Impact iv) Overview and scrutiny regularly engages in evidence based challenge of decision makers and service providers. v) Scrutiny provides viable and well evidenced solutions to recognised problems.

Outcomes	Characteristics
<p>What does good scrutiny seek to achieve?</p>	<p>What would it look like? How could we recognise it?</p>
<p>2. Democratic decision making is accountable, inclusive and robust. 'Better decisions'</p>	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Scrutiny councillors have the training and development opportunities they need to undertake their role effectively. ii) The process receives effective support from the Council's Corporate Management Team which ensures that information provided to scrutiny is of high quality and is provided in a timely and consistent manner. <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> iii) Scrutiny is Member led and has 'ownership' of its work programme taking into account the views of the public, partners and regulators whilst balancing between prioritising community concerns against issues of strategic risk and importance. iv) Stakeholders have the ability to contribute to the development and delivery of scrutiny forward work programmes. v) Overview and scrutiny meetings and activities are well-planned, chaired effectively and make best use of the resources available to it. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> vi) Non-executive Members provide an evidence based check and balance to Executive decision making. vii) Decision makers give public account for themselves at scrutiny committees for their portfolio responsibilities.
<p>3. The public is engaged in democratic debate about the current and future delivery of public services.</p>	<p>Environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i) Scrutiny is recognised by the Executive and Corporate Management team as an important council mechanism for community engagement. <p>Practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ii) Scrutiny is characterised by effective communication to raise awareness of, and encourage participation in democratic accountability. iii) Scrutiny operates non-politically and deals effectively with sensitive political issues, tension and conflict. iv) Scrutiny builds trust and good relationships with a wide variety of internal and external stakeholders. <p>Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> v) Overview and scrutiny enables the 'voice' of local people and communities across the area to be heard as part of decision and policy-making processes.

Appendix 2

Recommendations from the report of the Auditor General's national improvement study 'Good Scrutiny? Good Question?' (May 2014)

Exhibit 2: recommendations from **Good Scrutiny? Good Question?** Scrutiny Improvement Study

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
R1 Clarify the role of executive members and senior officers in contributing to scrutiny.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R2 Ensure that scrutiny members, and specifically scrutiny chairs, receive training and support to fully equip them with the skills required to undertake effective scrutiny.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R3 Further develop scrutiny forward work programming to : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide a clear rationale for topic selection; • be more outcome focussed • ensure that the method of scrutiny is best suited to the topic area and the outcome desired; and • align scrutiny programmes with the council's performance management, self-evaluation and improvement arrangements. 	Councils
R4 Ensure that scrutiny draws effectively on the work of audit, inspection and regulation and that its activities are complementary with the work of external review bodies.	Councils, Staff of the Wales Audit Office, CSSIW, Estyn
R5 Ensure that external review bodies take account of scrutiny work programmes and the outputs of scrutiny activity, where appropriate, in planning and delivering their work.	Staff of the Wales Audit Office, CSSIW, Estyn

Recommendation	Responsible Partners
R6 Ensure that the impact of scrutiny is properly evaluated and acted upon to improve the function's effectiveness; including following up on proposed actions and examining outcomes.	Councils, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association
R7 Undertake regular self-evaluation of scrutiny utilising the 'outcomes and characteristics of effective local government overview and scrutiny' developed by the Wales Overview & Scrutiny Officers' Network.	Council
R8 Implement scrutiny improvement action plans developed from the Wales Audit Office improvement study.	Councils
R9 Adopt Participation Cymru's 10 Principles for Public Engagement in improving the way scrutiny engages with the public and stakeholders.	Councils

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