

WAO Annual Improvement Report 2014-2015 (Corporate Assessment)

Conclusions on MCC's Scrutiny Process

Extracts from the WAO Annual Improvement Report 2014-2015 (Corporate Assessment)	
Paragraph	Commentary
43	A range of guidance and training is made available to members. An area where this is clearly demonstrated is in relation to the scrutiny function. The Council's Scrutiny and Executive protocol is a guide for members and other parties which outlines the interface between Scrutiny and the Executive, and the procedural elements that underpin the relationship. The protocol sets out key responsibilities, processes and the overall scrutiny framework. There is also a scrutiny handbook available, providing a higher level and more simplified introduction and guide to the scrutiny process. This guidance supplements the procedures set out in the Constitution and provides practical support.
51	Scrutiny is improving and has come a long way from an earlier low base. In 2010 a Wales Audit Office review of Monmouthshire's scrutiny arrangements concluded that 'Scrutiny is beginning to provide a more robust challenge and is starting to have a positive impact on the business of the Council'.
52	Select Committee chairs now determine their programmes, with the support of the Scrutiny Manager, drawing from a wide range of sources, including: the Cabinet and Council Forward Planner; suggestions from members, officers and the public; and the Council's risk assessment. Work programmes are updated accordingly as new matters emerge. All scrutiny work programmes are publicly available online and meetings are webcast. Pre-scrutiny meetings are held to determine the line of questioning to improve the effectiveness of the sessions, and recommendations are logged and actions followed up. All of this contributes to better processes underpinning the scrutiny function.
53	Select Committee members say they are well supported by training opportunities but take-up is low. Extensive training is provided for scrutiny members, which is organised and co-ordinated by the Scrutiny Manager. Training has covered a broad range of areas, including raising the bar in scrutiny, challenge, performance management, financial management, and schools' finances. However, although training for Select Committee members on performance management information was provided in summer 2014, less than 40 per cent of members attended this training.
54	Despite an established scrutiny system and protocol being in place, the ability to proactively challenge is hindered by tensions relating to cabinet member attendance, participation at meetings and poor quality information. We understand that it is rare for Cabinet Members not to attend Select Committees but on the occasions when we observed recent Select Committees a number of decisions were being scrutinised but the relevant Cabinet Members were not present. The reports were presented by officers, who also responded to queries raised. For one decision, relating to a policy matter, the issue could not be resolved as the Cabinet Member was not present. An instance was also observed where, although the Cabinet Member was in attendance, the Member did not present the report nor respond to any queries, both of which were done by the officer.
55	Our observations also showed examples where: reports were not clear enough for members to understand important issues; members expressed concern about the perceived over-positivity of reports and the lack of objectivity; and a report was deferred because of the lack of information. Unless Select Committee members receive appropriate information in a timely manner, they will be unable to carry out the function effectively.
56	The lack of some clear targets sometimes makes it difficult for scrutiny members to assess performance and provide adequate challenge of cabinet members and officers, which hinders accountability.
78	Members and senior managers within the Council do not receive sufficient accurate data to help them manage the workforce strategically. The failure to collect and maintain accurate data on the profile of the workforce and statistics on a range of key workforce indicators and regularly report this to Senior Management and Leadership hinders effective management and scrutiny.

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94	The Council is proactive at working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders and partners and is improving accountability and scrutiny arrangements
98	Arrangements for holding partners to account and scrutinising their activities are improving but this remains challenging with the number of partners and delivery channels used. A lack of clarity about the aims and measurable anticipated improvements from collaborative projects also makes holding partners to account more difficult. We found the Council sometimes struggles to articulate what it is trying to achieve in clear terms, resulting in different understanding.
99	Stronger outcome reporting and regular liaison mean the Council is better placed to monitor how well the Shared Resource Service is delivering agreed outcomes, and there are member aspirations that the newly formed Education Achievement Service Audit Committee will further challenge the corporate governance aspects of the company's performance. (99)
101	A strategic review has been completed which is addressing the weaknesses identified in performance management, oversight and scrutiny. (101)
110	Some of the initial weaknesses in scrutiny and oversight of the SRS have been addressed but further work is needed. Sound budget management arrangements are in place, but more work is required by the SRS to demonstrate it is delivering value for money. (110)
117	In 2014, the Council improved performance management arrangements for members. The Council's Select Committees now receive quarterly updates on the improvement objectives 2014-17 and Welsh Government outcome agreements, and do request additional information if reports are not clear.
126	The regional school improvement commissioned services are providing better quality information to the local authority on standards and leadership in schools, which in turn enables the local authority to identify underperformance and to use its statutory powers where necessary. As a result, the local authority is intervening more appropriately in underperforming schools. Head teachers from underperforming schools have been invited to attend scrutiny meeting to account for the performance in their schools. School leaders now have a better appreciation of their lines of accountability, and this is beginning to impact well on the outcomes achieved by their pupils. There is also an increasing rigour and better clarity to the process of setting school attainment targets and this is helping to promote more appropriate expectations for improvement in the local authority's schools.
133	Performance information is available to the public via performance monitoring reports to Scrutiny, Cabinet and full Council meetings. These are available on the Council website. In 2014, the Council started to live stream Scrutiny, Cabinet and full Council meetings on YouTube, demonstrating openness and transparency in debate and decision making.

Governance and Accountability Summary (scrutiny specific comment)

A culture of mutual respect and trust exists between Councillors and officers, leading to productive working relationships, although there are examples of decision making that could have been more robust, informed and subject to effective challenge. The Council has well-defined roles and responsibilities, is developing a culture of accountability and is engaging with staff to better embed its expected values and behaviours. Well-managed risk taking and the quality of decision making are sometimes hindered by a lack of strategic direction, poor data quality, and limitations in legal monitoring. The Council has improved the transparency of its public reporting of Council business, but some weaknesses remain. The Council is taking steps to improve scrutiny but progress is sometimes hampered by poor quality of information and inconsistently robust challenge.

Collaboration and Partnership Summary (scrutiny specific comment)

The Council is proactive at working collaboratively with a range of stakeholders and partners and is improving accountability and scrutiny arrangements.