

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

Scrutiny Self-Evaluation 2025-2026

Executive Summary

This Scrutiny Self-Evaluation for 2025–2026 concludes that Scrutiny at Monmouthshire County Council is operating effectively, independently and apolitically, and continues to add clear value to governance, decision-making and service improvement.

The report highlights strong committee culture, effective chairing, constructive relationships with Cabinet Members, officers and external partners, and meaningful public engagement, alongside evidence of Scrutiny influencing policy development, monitoring performance and risk, and holding decision-makers to account on issues of importance to residents.

It also identifies targeted opportunities to strengthen impact further, particularly by improving Cabinet engagement with Scrutiny feedback, enhancing forward planning and transparency, reducing duplication of effort, evidencing Scrutiny's influence more clearly, and continuing to invest in Member and Chair development, ensuring Scrutiny remains outcome-focused and effective for the communities of Monmouthshire.

The Role of Scrutiny

The Scrutiny function is a fundamental component of Monmouthshire County Council's governance arrangements, providing independent, non-Executive oversight of decision-making, policy development, performance and service delivery. Established as part of the Executive–Scrutiny split introduced by the Local Government Act 2000, Scrutiny's purpose is to improve transparency, accountability and openness by ensuring that decisions taken by the Cabinet and the Council are robust, well-evidenced and focused on delivering the best outcomes for communities in Monmouthshire.

A key role of Scrutiny is to act as a "critical friend" to the Cabinet and other decision-makers. Scrutiny is not about political opposition, adversarial challenge or pursuing personal agendas. Instead, it provides constructive, apolitical challenge, testing how and why decisions are made, scrutinising their likely impact and recommending improvements where necessary, while maintaining a respectful and professional relationship with Cabinet Members, officers and external organisations.

Scrutiny adds value by assessing policies and services to ensure they are fit for purpose. Through pre-decision Scrutiny, Committees can influence proposals at an

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

early stage, helping to identify risks, unintended consequences or alternative approaches before decisions are finalised. Scrutiny can also review decisions that have been made prior to them being implemented should they have concerns about them. As part of the Council's Scrutiny arrangements, there is a Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee dedicated to monitoring performance, risk and budget management. The ongoing oversight by this Scrutiny Committee drives continuous improvement in service delivery and strengthens public confidence in the Council's governance.

The Scrutiny function also enhances service improvement through evidence-based inquiry and meaningful engagement. Scrutiny Committees gather evidence from a wide range of sources, including officers, Cabinet Members, external partners, service users and the wider public, using methods such as public meetings, workshops, research and consultation. This inclusive approach ensures that Scrutiny recommendations are grounded in real experience and robust analysis, and that the public voice is actively heard in shaping council services and policies.

Through making clear, evidence-based recommendations, Scrutiny Committees drive improvement and ensure accountability for their implementation. Conclusions and recommendations are formally reported to Cabinet and decision-makers and are also embedded within officer reports. Cabinet Members are required under the Council's Constitution to consider Scrutiny's recommendations, and if requested, to respond with rationale and actions and to attend Scrutiny meetings to account for their progress. Scrutiny arrangements are underpinned by legislation, because it is essential in terms of effective governance, that Scrutiny Committees are not simply forums for debate, but are able to be powerful mechanisms for learning, accountability and sustained improvement in service delivery for the people of Monmouthshire.

The Self-evaluation Process

The Scrutiny function undertakes detailed self-evaluation towards the close of each administrative term to review/reflect on their own effectiveness and, in doing so, to identify areas for future improvement. In addition, a shorter self-evaluation is conducted annually by the Scrutiny Chairs Group. The self-evaluation process was introduced as a national benchmark exercise by Audit Wales in 2013 in preparation for the national study "Good Scrutiny? Good Question" report, published in 2014. The process applied the "Characteristics of Good Scrutiny" as performance measures for determining the effectiveness of Scrutiny, the measures having been compiled by the National Scrutiny Officers Network in 2012 for both the purpose of self-evaluation and the need for a recognised performance evaluation framework for Scrutiny. The WLGA Framework for Self-Evaluation is based upon this framework but has been revised to

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

consider the latest developments in the Scrutiny arena, such as the development of joint scrutiny arrangements for Corporate Joint Committees.

Previous comprehensive self-evaluations have been informed by three evidence sources: a self-evaluation conducted internally by scrutineers, a peer-observation exercise conducted by experienced Scrutiny practitioners from other local authorities, and a survey of Scrutiny Members, Executive Members and officers. This led to a restructure of Scrutiny arrangements which was fully implemented for the new administration in May 2022. It is important to continue self-evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the new arrangements and scrutiny practice to identify where further improvements could be made. Self-evaluation also ensures there are continued efforts to consider how the function can best achieve added value for the Council and the public. It provides evidence to assist future scrutineers to develop and implement the priorities for improvement.

The Scrutiny Chairs Group has conducted annual reviews since May 2022 and produced reports of its findings. The review applied the “Characteristics of Good Scrutiny” (the national performance measurement framework for evaluating the effectiveness of Scrutiny) using the WLGA Framework for Self-Evaluation. The model seeks to provide a situational analysis and to identify actions to address shortcomings, through focussing on the following components:

- **The Scrutiny environment** ~ i.e. the culture within which Scrutiny operates in a council and how conducive that is to effective Scrutiny, the recognition of Scrutiny as a key improvement mechanism and a vehicle for citizen engagement, the level of support Scrutiny Members are given to perform their role (by dedicated officers and wider officers in terms of research and information) and whether Scrutiny Members have access to development programmes that support them in performing their role.
- **Scrutiny practice** ~ i.e. whether Scrutiny operates apolitically, is member-led and well chaired, whether it utilises a wide range of evidence to inform its work, whether it builds good relationships with stakeholders, partners and regulators, the extent to which it balances the prioritisation of community concerns against issues of strategic risk and importance, and whether it actively encourages the public to participate in democratic accountability.
- **Scrutiny’s impact** ~ i.e. whether Scrutiny’s challenge of decision makers and service providers is evidence based, whether Scrutiny offers viable and well evidenced solutions to recognised problems, whether decision makers are held to public account for their responsibilities, and the extent to which Scrutiny enables the ‘voice’ of local people to be heard as part of the decision-making process.

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

The Scrutiny Chairs were asked to complete the 'Scrutiny Self-Evaluation Survey' (Appendix 1) to draw their conclusions and to identify key areas for continued improvement.

Key Findings

Culture

Cabinet Member attendance at Scrutiny meetings should always be at the Scrutiny Committee's discretion to ensure they are not exerting influence on Members of a Scrutiny Committee by their presence. There have been instances where Cabinet Members have wished to attend Scrutiny Committee meetings when they may not have been invited, so the Scrutiny Manager has attended a Cabinet Meeting to explain the parameters of the Scrutiny and Executive roles. The varied roles of the four Scrutiny Committees were discussed, emphasising the difference in requiring a Cabinet Member to be present for accountability purposes on matters of service performance versus allowing a Scrutiny Committee to conduct policy review or pre-decision Scrutiny without Cabinet Member presence, in line with the Council's constitution and best Scrutiny practice.

Attendance by Cabinet Members at Performance and Overview Scrutiny Meetings has been consistently strong and their engagement is valued and helps ensure understanding of key issues and performance matters. While questions can be challenging, they reflect the seriousness of the reports and services being scrutinised, and officers are consistently available to provide clarification.

In the first year of the new Cabinet and Scrutiny arrangements (2022), Scrutiny Chairs were attending Cabinet Meetings in person to provide feedback on key points from Scrutiny meetings. With full Cabinet agendas, a compromise has been implemented whereby written feedback is provided on every Cabinet agenda from the Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee and the other Scrutiny Committees where appropriate.

Chairs highlighted during their review that the feedback from Scrutiny Committees is routinely noted but not discussed at Cabinet meetings, and that this could be viewed by the public as a lack of engagement from the Cabinet, especially if the views of the Scrutiny Committee are at odds with the Cabinet's view. There is an opportunity therefore to consider how engagement with the issues raised through Scrutiny could be more meaningful. It was felt to be critical that the Cabinet and officers recognise the contribution of Scrutiny in enhancing decision-making and driving improvements in service delivery. As the Scrutiny feedback is apolitical and focusses on

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

'improvement', addressing the points made by Scrutiny in a concise manner would support collective awareness of emerging issues and strengthen oversight of the topics scrutinised, whilst also improving transparency for residents who may view Cabinet meetings, but not necessarily Scrutiny Committee meetings.

To improve this, Cabinet Members will be requested to provide a concise response to a small number of specific points, which will be included in the next Scrutiny Committee meeting agenda. This should assist Scrutiny to develop smarter recommendations and should make the process more effective.

Politics

Chairs felt that Scrutiny meetings are conducted in an apolitical way, and that it is very important to reinforce this in Scrutiny pre-meetings. It was highlighted that a small number of Scrutiny Members ask no questions of the Cabinet Member, leaving the work for the remaining Committee Members. The Council's Constitution under section 8, paragraph 8.1.2 states that "Scrutiny Committees should not shy away from the need to challenge and question decisions and make constructive criticism". Chairs are remedying this by making greater efforts to encourage fuller engagement by those who are not participating, but overall, it was felt that most Members engage well, asking constructive and useful questions and that meetings are respectful and acknowledge good performance and helpful contributions from Cabinet Members and officers.

Over the past year, improvements have been evidenced in how Committees are working together as a group, rather than along political lines, and there are greater efforts amongst Scrutiny Members to contribute constructively. It was felt that political tensions tend to dissipate as Members interact more and understand each other's perspectives and that this has led to more constructive and friendly relationships.

The issue of duplication of workload was highlighted as a matter that has featured throughout the past year, whereby Cabinet Members may have inadvertently asked officers to arrange Member Seminars on topics that feature in the Scrutiny Forward Work Programme. Often the seminars were requested several days in advance of a Scrutiny Committee that was due to scrutinise the same issue. This resulted in duplication of effort and significant confusion in cases where the guests invited were external. It could be the case that the need for a special Scrutiny Committee meeting may not have been fully understood, but despite efforts by Chairs to be proactive, such occasions led to scheduling conflicts and inefficiencies, which proved frustrating and reflected poorly on the Council as a whole.

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

It is incredibly important that the prerogative of a Scrutiny Committee to schedule external witnesses to attend its meetings to discuss issues at the sole discretion of the Scrutiny Committee is respected. Whilst such occasions may have arisen accidentally, it could be perceived as a lack of parity and respect towards the Scrutiny process and an ultimate undermining of Scrutiny's role. The Scrutiny Team has therefore requested that Democratic Services approach them prior to booking Member Seminars to ascertain whether the topics are scheduled for Scrutiny. This should avoid duplication of effort and less impactful Scrutiny.

Councillor-led

Feedback from Committee Members, Cabinet Members and officers suggests that the role of Scrutiny is valued and well understood, and Chairs feel this is due to effective running of their Scrutiny Committees.

Scrutiny Committees set their work programmes, although officers often request items be scrutinised. There have been some issues with the timing of reports and there is a need to balance officer-led reports with Member-initiated topics of public interest. Sometimes it has appeared that officer reports have been last-minute additions, rather than part of a planned approach. Further improvements could be made to ensure reports are properly planned in the Council and Cabinet Forward Planner and that matters of public interest are included in good time, because if significant decisions are not included early in the forward plan, it becomes challenging for Scrutiny to identify and undertake effective pre-decision Scrutiny.

Recent improvements to the structure of the Cabinet and Council Forward Planner which were intended to address issues like the duplication of Member Seminars on subjects being scheduled for Scrutiny should also improve Scrutiny's ability to plan effectively.

Public Engagement

Public involvement in the work of Scrutiny Committees has been greatly enhanced through the expansion of ways in which the public can participate. The potential for public involvement in each Scrutiny meeting is set on the agenda and the Council's website, and Chairs cover ways they can become involved in each meeting. There has been significant interest in public participation in the two policy Committees where key topics of public interest are debated. The public have sent videos, written submissions and have attended meetings, which has added value to the Scrutiny activity and the public have fed back that they have been made to feel welcomed and were respected.

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

There is lesser direct public input in the meetings of Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee and Public Services Scrutiny Committee, largely due to the nature of their accountability roles; however, there have been quite a number attending in the public gallery. Chairs felt that it would assist public engagement if the Cabinet were to discuss the key points arising from Scrutiny meetings at Cabinet meetings.

Effective Scrutiny Meetings

It was felt that good preparation is carried out by most Members, and this is reflected in questions raised. Pre-meetings are held before every Scrutiny meeting and are well attended. These are very useful in preparing questions and additional lines of inquiry arise through those discussions.

The Scrutiny Committees are held in an apolitical way and are engaging. Feedback from Scrutiny meetings is drafted by independent Scrutiny support staff and reports are forwarded to the Cabinet. In addition, report authors taking forward decision reports are provided with the findings of the Scrutiny Committee to include in their report under the 'Consultees' section, to ensure that the conclusions of the Scrutiny Committee are considered in a transparent manner, in line with good governance practice.

Chairs have received training and they play a key role in championing the Scrutiny function and ensuring that the role of Scrutiny is valued. This is not always an easy task, however, the Scrutiny Chairs feel adequately supported to do so and have a clear understanding of their responsibilities to ensure robust Scrutiny which only strengthens the Council's service delivery and decision-making.

Chairs acknowledged the challenges of developing relationships and a positive Committee culture within a hybrid working arrangement, highlighting the need to contact individuals directly and set up video calls to maintain engagement and support Members who primarily participate remotely. It was felt that remote Members often appreciate direct contact, as it helps them feel more connected and involved and that it was important to accept and adapt to hybrid working.

Scrutiny's Contribution

Scrutiny Chairs could evidence many examples of constructive contributions by their Scrutiny Committees that should enable better decision-making but felt that the administration could make better use of those contributions in their decision making, evidenced by the same issues arising annually that have previously been commented upon by Scrutiny Committees during routine performance monitoring reports.

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

Similarly, there are many examples of Scrutiny contributing to the development of policies, Cabinet Members and officers acknowledging that the contributions from Scrutiny have been particularly useful, so improvements could be made by clearer evidencing in reports how the Scrutiny activity has informed the policy development.

Chairs felt confident that their Committees are regularly and effectively monitoring performance and risks and their mitigations, focussing on key areas where improvement is needed, with many examples cited. Scrutiny isn't actively involved in the Council's self-assessment process but does scrutinise the draft self-assessment and holds the Cabinet to account for the performance of the Council when scrutinising the self-assessment.

Co-option

The Performance and Overview Scrutiny Committee has statutory co-opted Membership for education matters. Other Scrutiny Committees have chosen to call in individual witnesses for topics to maximise their opportunity engage a wider range of individuals to support their work. Thought is given to each topic whereby Members request organisations to invite to Scrutiny; Dwr Cymru, National Resources Wales, Mind, Aneurin Bevan University Health Board, Gwent Police being just a few examples. This has been the preferred option for bringing information, evidence and the required expertise to each topic being scrutinised.

Focus on Outcomes and Adding Value

Scrutiny Committees set their own agendas. It was concluded that the topics selected for scrutiny are relevant and add value to the organisation. There is a clear balance between policy review and proposed improvement and oversight and accountability that has been built into the revised Scrutiny arrangements that were implemented in May 2022. Where it is beneficial, Scrutiny Committees meet jointly or invite other Scrutiny Committees and, in some cases, all Members to its meetings.

There are many examples of feedback that has been provided to Cabinet on key decisions, such as the Gypsy and Travellers Needs Assessment, Active Travel and the Replacement Local Development Plan. Such scrutinies examined the decisions but also played a key role in reflecting the public voice on the topics, with a significant number of public in attendance and expressing views via written submissions.

Whilst it would be difficult to quantify how all the views expressed at the Scrutiny Committee meetings and those submitted through the Council's consultation process individually affected the decisions made, the Scrutiny process enabled public participation in its meetings, which ensured democratic involvement in the major

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

decisions taken by the Council. At each Scrutiny Committee meeting, conclusions are drawn based on the evidence heard by the Committee and the views expressed by the public and this is reflected in the minutes and the feedback report that is prepared for onward decision-making, which ensures the Scrutiny activity is meaningful and adds value.

The work of the Public Services Committee has focussed on ensuring accountability for services delivered in the public sector to residents and their Scrutiny of Dentistry Services, Substance Misuse, Dementia Services, Adult Suicide and Race-related Crime has ensured that the Police and Crime Commissioner, the Chief Constable and the health board have been held to account for their performance in service delivery to Monmouthshire residents.

Where major decisions are taken by external partners which will affect residents, such as closure of hospital services, or restrictions for heavy goods vehicles on the Severn Bridge, being the gateway to Monmouthshire and South Wales, this Scrutiny Committee has called emergency meetings to ensure that a public debate is held on matters affecting its residents.

The Scrutiny Committees have consciously limited the number of topics on their agendas to allow effective and thorough Scrutiny, giving priority to the most important areas. Whilst an improvement in the Council's forward planning has been recognised within this report, there is acknowledgement that together with better understanding by officers and the Cabinet of the need for a planned Council Forward Work Programme, the new 'app' is already assisting in earlier identification of forthcoming decisions. This allows Scrutiny Committees to plan their forward work programmes more effectively. All the Scrutiny Committees are flexible and call additional meetings where necessary to ensure timely Scrutiny to maximise effective outcomes and deliver added value.

Training for Scrutiny Members

Scrutiny Members have received comprehensive training to conduct their roles effectively; however, they have identified that further training upon critical analysis for large volumes of data would be helpful and mid-term short training reminders have been requested. Some further training for Scrutiny Chairs should include advice for Chairs on scrutinising an administration that they may be part of, summarising techniques and seeking consensus on the way forward.

Chairs commented that there may be a perception that Scrutiny is 'opposition', whereas in reality, a large proportion of total Members sit on Scrutiny Committees. They acknowledged that the best Scrutiny Committee meetings are those where it isn't

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

clear which party the Chair and Committee Members belong to. Chairs felt that significant progress had been made in this respect and that the Scrutiny Committees have a positive culture with high attendance levels, these improvements being evidenced in the Chairs' summing up.

Whilst training for Scrutiny Members and Chairs is important, it was felt that it may also be beneficial to include Cabinet Members in refresher Scrutiny training sessions. Extending the invitation to all Members and recording the sessions would allow Members to watch them back if they cannot attend. This approach would also ensure that everyone is on the same page regarding Scrutiny's role and would also clarify mutual expectations of Scrutiny and Cabinet, underpinned by the Scrutiny and Executive Protocol. [MCC - Scrutiny - Scrutiny and Executive Protocol.pdf - All Documents](#)

'Scrutiny of Scrutiny '

The Scrutiny function undertakes annual self-evaluation and will be a subject of the Council's first Panel Performance Assessment. The Scrutiny function has been reviewed on numerous occasions by Audit Wales, the most recent review being during 2018 [Overview and Scrutiny: Fit for the Future? – Monmouthshire County Council](#). Scrutiny Chairs also reflect on the efficiency of each of their meetings to identify how they could further improve. This is evidenced by the increased confidence of the Scrutiny Chairs in dealing with contentious issues and wide-ranging views of Members, whilst simultaneously managing a significant public element to the meeting and conducting robust Scrutiny in a live-streamed environment.

The Chairs benefit from a dedicated Scrutiny resource, with independent and impartial Scrutiny officers who support them to perform their roles effectively. Chairs are coached and receive guidance on policy and governance to manage their Committees' workload effectively and to steer their Members towards delivering outcome-focussed Scrutiny that adds meaningful value. The Chairs felt that their meetings are effective and that time is dedicated to Scrutiny of the right issues at the right time, thus ensuring Scrutiny adds value to the authority.

Improvement Actions

The Scrutiny Self-evaluation undertaken by the Scrutiny Chairs Group has concluded that the Scrutiny function is operating effectively and adds demonstrable value to the Council's governance and decision-making arrangements. However, the process has identified several areas where further improvement would strengthen Scrutiny's impact, transparency and effectiveness. The following improvement actions are proposed as the way forward:

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

- Scrutiny will work with the Cabinet and officers to strengthen the visibility of reporting Scrutiny's feedback. In line with paragraphs 32.2.4 (a) and (d) and 32.7.3, Scrutiny is required to report its findings and conclusions to Cabinet or Council. In terms of responding to Scrutiny, Scrutiny can also "require any Member of the Cabinet, the Chief Executive and/or any senior Officer to attend before it to explain in relation to matters within their remit" (paragraph 32.12.1). To strengthen accountability and ensure collective oversight of key issues, Cabinet Members will be requested to provide concise responses to key points raised by Scrutiny, which will be tabled to the subsequent scrutiny agenda. Cabinet Members may also be requested to attend and provide explanation, at the discretion of the Scrutiny Committee.
- Further consideration will also be given as to how Scrutiny feedback is considered at Cabinet meetings, with greater reference to the points made by Scrutiny to demonstrate its value of Scrutiny and improve public understanding of its influence.
- The principle that Cabinet Member attendance at Scrutiny meetings is at the discretion of Scrutiny Committees will continue to be exercised. This is essential to protect the independence of Scrutiny and to ensure that pre-decision and policy review work can be undertaken in line with the Council's Constitution and recognised best practice.
- Actions will be taken to reduce duplication of effort between Scrutiny Committees and other meetings arranged, such as Member Seminars. Democratic Services will liaise with the Scrutiny Team before seminars are arranged, to confirm whether topics are already scheduled within the Scrutiny Forward Work Programme. This will improve efficiency, avoid confusion for external witnesses and ensure Scrutiny activity remains impactful.
- Improvements will continue to be made to forward planning arrangements. This includes ensuring that reports and key decisions are identified and included in the Council and Cabinet Forward Planner at an earlier stage, enabling effective pre-decision Scrutiny and better balance between officer requests for Scrutiny and Member-initiated topics of public interest.
- Scrutiny will seek to further strengthen public engagement, building on the positive progress already made. This includes enhancing public visibility of Scrutiny's influence and improving the understanding of how the public's views are considered within the Scrutiny process.

Monmouthshire Scrutiny

- Further work will be undertaken with officers to strengthen how the impact of Scrutiny is evidenced in reports. This includes more clearly demonstrating how Scrutiny activity has informed policy development, service improvement and decision-making, particularly where similar issues re-emerge over time.
- Training and development for Scrutiny Members will continue to be prioritised to reinforce key skills and good Scrutiny practice.
- The Scrutiny function will continue its annual self-evaluation to support its continuous improvement, reinforcing effective practice and ensuring that Scrutiny remains outcome-focused and adds meaningful value to the authority.

Further information on Monmouthshire's Scrutiny function can be accessed via the website www.monmouthshire.gov.uk/scrutiny or via the Scrutiny Team, by contacting scrutiny@monmouthshire.gov.uk.