

Scrutiny Arrangements

Newport City Council

October 2025



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Audit snapshot

What we looked at

- 1 We looked at whether the Council has arrangements in place to support effective scrutiny. We also considered the progress the Council has made to address the proposals for improvement in our 2018 report, Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future? – Newport City Council.

Why this is important

- 2 Effective scrutiny is a key part of the Council's governance arrangements. Scrutiny can provide a check and balance to decision makers, ensuring decision making is transparent, and helping to improve Council services.
- 3 Scrutiny can also have an important role to play in contributing to policy development, monitoring performance and helping to ensure the voice of the public is heard.

What we have found

- 4 Overall, we found that the Council's scrutiny arrangements are working well, with scope to further develop them in some key areas.

What we recommend

- 5 We have made three recommendations to the Council. They are about
 - improving public engagement in scrutiny,
 - thinking about different ways of delivering scrutiny, beyond the traditional committee approach, and
 - improving how the Council measures the impact of scrutiny activity.

Our findings

Roles and responsibilities

Roles and responsibilities are clearly set out and understood

- 6 Scrutiny committees have clear terms of reference which are generally well understood by members and officers. Members and officers also showed a clear and shared understanding of the role and purpose of scrutiny.
- 7 Cabinet Member attendance at, and participation in, scrutiny committee meetings varies. Cabinet members sometimes attend to present reports and answer questions. We also found evidence that Cabinet Members value scrutiny as part of the decision-making process. We also heard several examples of scrutiny activity improving decision-making. However, when Cabinet members do not attend scrutiny committee meetings for relevant items, it is difficult for committees to hold them to account.
- 8 Having a clear and shared understanding of the role of scrutiny can help ensure that committees focus on the right topics, ask the right questions, and arrive at well-evidenced recommendations.

Support for scrutiny committees

Arrangements to support scrutiny committees are effective, although training has not been evaluated

- 9 The Council provides scrutiny training for members and officers, including specifically for scrutiny Chairs. Members were positive about this training. They felt it had led to improvements, for example in the quality of questions, and that this shows the training is effective. Committee meetings are generally well run. Members' questions are generally relevant to topics being considered and provide appropriate challenge.
- 10 The training provided has not been evaluated. Evaluating training could help further improve the quality of scrutiny.
- 11 Scrutiny Chairs are also supported by scrutiny advisors and democratic services officers. We heard positive feedback from members on this support.
- 12 Information provided to scrutiny committees is generally of good quality. Scrutiny advisors provide a cover report for each agenda item, along with more detailed reports from officers. Cover reports summarise the information provided, suggest key lines of enquiry and explain what the committee is being asked to do. Members also ask for extra information, or for it to be presented in a different format, if they need it.
- 13 The support provided to members helps to ensure that the role and purpose of scrutiny are clear for each agenda item, and that members have access to the information they need. This helps scrutiny committees to understand their role and focus their questioning.

Scrutiny committee work programmes

Scrutiny work programmes are well organised, with scope to increase member involvement and try different ways of working

- 14 Scrutiny committees, Cabinet and Council forward work programmes are well co-ordinated. This means scrutiny committees can inform policy development in a timely way.
- 15 Although scrutiny work programmes are well organised, they are focused on committee reports and committee meetings. Scrutiny committees do not routinely consider the best way to scrutinise each topic. By not considering different ways of working, scrutiny committees may be missing opportunities to improve their effectiveness. The importance of prioritising and planning scrutiny activity to improve its impact was a theme we also highlighted in the Auditor General's 'Discussion Paper: Six themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future'' in 2019.
- 16 The Council has a form for members to request an item to be added to the work programme, although this form is rarely used. Committee forward work programmes are a standing item at each meeting. Members can suggest items to add to the work programme. Our observations of some committee meetings suggest that members sometimes do this, but not often.
- 17 Many items on the committee forward work programmes are regular items, such as performance reports and budget or policy proposals to be reviewed or adopted by Cabinet. It can be helpful to align work programmes with the Cabinet, but it is also important that scrutiny work programmes are owned by scrutiny members. By not taking ownership of what, and how, they will scrutinise, there is a risk that members may not identify topics or methods where they could have the most impact.

Public engagement in scrutiny

Public engagement in scrutiny is limited but the Council is developing plans to address this

- 18 Effective engagement of the public in scrutiny arrangements can help scrutiny committees identify issues that matter to local communities. It can also help them understand the views of local communities and recommend potential solutions.
- 19 There is little public engagement in the Council's scrutiny committee meetings. The Council webpage for each scrutiny committee says that members of the public are welcome to attend meetings, but does not explain if or how they could take part.
- 20 Scrutiny committees make use of the Council's wider public engagement to inform their work. For example, the results of consultations run by the Council on its services or policies. But the Council recognises it can do more to encourage public participation in its scrutiny arrangements.
- 21 The Council's scrutiny activity is largely through committee meetings. Many councils find it difficult to encourage members of the public to attend and take part in committee meetings. Through its planned work to increase public engagement in scrutiny activity, the Council could consider whether different methods of scrutiny activity would be helpful.
- 22 We made similar observations on public engagement in our 2019 report, but the Council has not made significant progress in this area.¹
- 23 The Council is planning to refresh its Public Participation strategy in 2026 and plans to undertake a scrutiny self-evaluation in 2025-26. We understand that public involvement and engagement in scrutiny will be considered as part of this work.

¹ Audit Wales, [Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future? – Newport City Council](#), August 2018

Evaluating the effectiveness of scrutiny

The Council does not evaluate the effectiveness of scrutiny arrangements but recognises it needs to address this

- 24 The Council does not review the effectiveness of its scrutiny arrangements. The Council's annual scrutiny report largely describes activity rather than outcomes. The Council has introduced more qualitative information, such as case studies, and intends to make further changes in next year's report. As noted above, the Council is also planning to undertake a scrutiny self-evaluation in 2025-26.
- 25 Despite not regularly evaluating the effectiveness of scrutiny arrangements, the Council does seek to improve them. For example, changes to the format of its scrutiny annual report, and its planned scrutiny self-evaluation.
- 26 The Council has also improved how it monitors outcomes of scrutiny activity. At each committee meeting, members are informed of progress against actions arising from scrutiny activity. This helps scrutiny members to understand if they have achieved their intended outcomes.

Recommendations

R1 Public engagement

- 1.1** The Council should explore opportunities to increase public involvement in scrutiny activity. (Paragraphs 18 to 22)

R2 Alternative ways of working

- 2.1** The Council should support scrutiny committees to routinely consider the best method for scrutinising each topic. (Paragraph 15)

R3 Evaluating impact

- 3.1** The Council should regularly evaluate the effectiveness of scrutiny arrangements. (Paragraph 24)

Appendices

1 About our work

Scope of the audit

The audit reviewed the Council's arrangements to support its scrutiny function. It also looked at the Council's progress in addressing the proposals for improvement and recommendations set out in our 2018 report.

The audit did not cover other review functions of the Council, such as those undertaken by the Governance and Audit Committee.

We undertook the audit during August and September 2025.

Audit questions and criteria

Questions

The audit sought to answer the following questions:

- Has the Council clearly set out the roles and responsibilities for those involved in its overview and scrutiny arrangements?
- Does the Council have arrangements to support its scrutiny committee members and officers?
- Does the scrutiny function prioritise and plan its activities to achieve the intended impact?
- Does the Council have arrangements to facilitate the involvement of the public in its scrutiny arrangements?
- Are the Council's scrutiny arrangements working effectively to enable scrutiny to fulfil their role and achieve their intended impact?
- Does the Council have arrangements to evaluate the effectiveness of scrutiny?

Criteria

To help us assess the effectiveness of the Council's arrangements we have developed criteria based on the Auditor General's 'Discussion Paper: Six themes to help make scrutiny 'Fit for the Future'' and the checklist of Six steps to help make scrutiny fit for the future as reference documents.

Methods

The audit used the following methods:

- document review, for example, of committee papers, guidance for members, and training materials;
- observations of a sample of scrutiny committee meetings; and
- interviews with key officers and elected members.

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