Scrutiny Arrangements

Vale of Glamorgan Council

June 2026

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Contents

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, 'Vale of Glamorgan Council – Overview and Scrutiny – Fit for the Future?'.

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 has taken steps to strengthen its scrutiny arrangements. But the purpose and intended impact of scrutiny activity are not always clear, limiting its effectiveness.

What we recommend

5 We made one recommendation to the Council which focuses on ensuring that the role and purpose of scrutiny are clearly understood and reflected in scrutiny practice, and that the effectiveness of its scrutiny arrangements is regularly evaluated.

Key facts

The Council underwent a Panel Performance Assessment (PPA) in November 2024. The assessment recommended that the Council should: 'enhance the effectiveness of its scrutiny arrangements, specifically committee meetings, by assessing current practices to identify opportunities for improvement to make them more effective'.

The Council formally set out its response to the PPA recommendation in February 2025 and implemented its Reshaping Scrutiny proposals in April 2025 following a series of consultation activities with councillors.

The Council's Reshaping Scrutiny programme resulted in changes to the number, membership and terms of reference of its scrutiny committees and a renewed focus on task and finish group work alongside changes to ways of working. Scrutiny committees no longer receive reports for noting. The changes also led to a refreshed approach to member training, information sharing and methods of evaluating scrutiny.

Task and Finish groups are set up for scrutiny committee members to focus on specific areas of interest in more detail outside of formal committees. This provides opportunities for councillors to engage with a broader range of stakeholders.

Our findings

Roles and responsibilities are clearly set out, but not always fully understood in practice

8 Roles and responsibilities are clearly set out in the Councils constitution and policies. However, in practice, councillors and officers do not always demonstrate that they are clear about scrutiny's role.

9 For example, Cabinet Members do not always present their reports to scrutiny committees, and committee questions tend to be directed towards officers. It is not therefore clear how scrutiny members are holding Cabinet Members to account. Agenda conferences are held in preparation for committee meetings. These provide an opportunity for the Chair, Vice Chair and officers to discuss the purpose of the reports, although these are not held for all committees. However, reports presented to scrutiny committees do not always explain what the committee's role is and what they are expected to do with the information in front of them. Scrutiny committees' recommendations to Cabinet are also not always clear about what they are asking Cabinet to do or do differently.

10 Clearly setting out roles and responsibilities can help ensure that scrutiny focuses on the right topics, asks the right questions and makes robust recommendations. However, the above examples suggest that, in practice, scrutiny members and the wider organisation are not always clear about what scrutiny's role is, particularly in relation to specific reports. This increases the risk that scrutiny activity does not always have impact.

The Council provides scrutiny committee members with a broad range of support and training but arrangements to evaluate this are at an early stage

11 Democratic Services and Scrutiny Support Officers provide a broad range of support to scrutiny chairs, vice chairs and committees. This includes:

- supporting scrutiny committee members through briefings and other training provision;
- advice and support for chairs during and outside of committee meetings;
- working with scrutiny committee members to develop scrutiny committee forward work programmes; and
- providing research to support task and finish group inquiries.

12 The Council provides councillors with training and development opportunities and member briefings on a range of topics. Whilst the training programme for councillors is not specific to scrutiny, several councillors told us that they found the information to be useful in their scrutiny roles as it increased their knowledge on a range of subjects.

13 The Council's induction programme for new councillors included information specifically about the scrutiny process. Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs have also received training on their roles. Councillors told us that they had found that training useful.

14 The Council has some arrangements in place to collect information about the effectiveness of the training and support it offers councillors. It has developed these arrangements further as part of its Reshaping Scrutiny work. However, since the changes associated with the Reshaping Scrutiny programme, the Council has not yet formally evaluated the effectiveness of its training provision for councillors. Our observations about roles and responsibilities suggest that there are opportunities to clarify the role and intended impact of scrutiny activity.

The Council has had some success in engaging the public in scrutiny activity

15 The Council is taking steps to increase public awareness of and participation in scrutiny activities. For example, its webpages set out how the public can get involved in the scrutiny process, including speaking at scrutiny committee meetings. These arrangements are promoted through the Council's social media channels. There are recent examples where members of the public have spoken at committee meetings.

16 The Council has also developed an online form so that anyone who lives or works in the Council area can suggest potential topics for scrutiny committees to discuss. The Council has received around 30 suggestions for scrutiny topics through this method.

17 Some scrutiny committees also have non-statutory co-opted members to represent the views of specific groups, such as young people. Several scrutiny task and finish groups have also sought the views of the public. Councillors felt this had been a good way to engage people in constructive discussions.

18 By having arrangements in place to encourage public participation in scrutiny, it is more likely that scrutiny will consider a wide range of views when choosing topics for scrutiny and/or arriving at findings and recommendations. This in turn can help to improve the effectiveness of the scrutiny function and therefore the Council's decision-making.

The intended impact of scrutiny activity is not always clear

19 The Council does not always clearly articulate the intended purpose and impact of specific scrutiny activity. For example, reports to committees do not always set out what the purpose of scrutiny considering an item is. Our observations of committee meetings suggest that in some instances, committee members may not be clear about why specific items are being considered.

20 Scrutiny members are involved in selecting items for their work programmes. Discussions we observed at committee meetings demonstrate that committee members recognise the need to consider scope, resources, timescales and methodology when selecting topics.

21 If it is not clear why topics are chosen, it is difficult to understand the intended outcome of scrutiny activity, which increases the risk of it being ineffective.

The Council has recently changed its scrutiny arrangements, but has not yet assessed their effectiveness

22 The Council has taken action to improve its scrutiny arrangements. For example:

- it developed its ‘Reshaping Scrutiny’ proposals following a comprehensive evaluation of its scrutiny arrangements;
- it replaced its Annual Scrutiny Impact Survey with an Annual Member Survey, which still asks councillors about their experiences of scrutiny but now also covers broader issues such as training and support;
- it has changed the template for its annual scrutiny report for 2025-26.

23 Councillors and officers, we spoke to were generally enthusiastic about the recent changes to the Council’s scrutiny arrangements.

24 The Council monitors its progress against the PPA recommendations, including the recommendation relevant to scrutiny, as part of its performance management arrangements. These include consideration of performance reports at Joint Performance scrutiny sessions and tracking of recommendations from external review bodies by Governance and Audit Committee.

25 The Council plans to introduce ongoing evaluation of its committees, including its scrutiny committees. It intends to do this through supporting councillors to reflect on the effectiveness of specific committee meetings and by introducing annual self-assessments for all committees. It also plans to introduce reflection on process and lessons learned as a standard item for meetings of the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs Group. As these arrangements are at an early stage, the Council cannot yet demonstrate whether they are effective. Being clear on the purpose of scrutiny items and the outcomes that scrutiny committees are seeking to achieve will also be important to help inform any evaluation of their effectiveness.

Recommendations

R1 The Council should ensure that the role and purpose of scrutiny are clearly understood by councillors and officers and is reflected in scrutiny practice. This should include:

- ensuring that there is a clear and shared understanding of the role of cabinet members in relation to scrutiny committees and scrutiny activity more generally;
- ensuring that the specific role and purpose of scrutiny activity are clearly set out for each scrutiny topic, including the intended outcomes; and
- ensuring that scrutiny committees' recommendations to Cabinet are clear on the action they would like the Cabinet to take.
- ensuring that as the Council continues to develop its arrangements for evaluating scrutiny, these arrangements enable it to understand the impact of scrutiny activity.

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 March and April 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 councillors, and training materials;
- observations of a sample of scrutiny committee meetings; and
- interviews with key officers and councillors.

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