

Agenda – Public Accounts Committee

Meeting Venue:

Committee Room 3 – Senedd

Meeting date: 10 February 2020

Meeting time: 12.45

For further information contact:

Fay Bowen

Committee Clerk

0300 200 6565

SeneddPAC@assembly.wales

(Private pre-meeting)

(12.45 – 13.00)

1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

(13.00)

2 Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales: Evidence session with Royal Town Planning Institute

(13.00 – 14.00)

(Pages 1 – 23)

Research Briefing

PAC(5)-06-20 Paper 1 – Royal Town Planning Institute

Dr Roisin Willmott – Director of Wales and Northern Ireland, Royal Town Planning Institute

(Break)

(14.00 – 14.10)

3 Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales: Evidence Session with Welsh Local Government Association

(14.10 – 15.30)

Craig Mitchell – Head of Waste Support, Welsh Local Government Association

Mark Hand – Head of Placemaking, Housing, Highways and Flooding,

Monmouthshire County Council



Cynulliad
Cenedlaethol
Cymru

National
Assembly for
Wales

Andrew Farrow – Chief Officer (Planning, Environment and Economy)

Flintshire County Council

Llinos Quelch – Head of Planning, Carmarthenshire County Council

Nicola Pearce – Corporate Director of Environment and Regeneration, Neath

Port Talbot Council

4 Scrutiny of Accounts 2018–19: Consideration of Assembly

Commission Response

(15.30 – 15.45)

(Pages 24 – 27)

PAC(5)–06–20 Paper 2 – Scrutiny of Accounts 2018–19: Assembly

Commission’s Response

5 Motion under Standing Order 17.42 to resolve to exclude the public from the meeting for the following business:

(15.45)

Items 6 & 7

6 Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities in Wales: Consideration of evidence received

(15.45 – 16.00)

7 Waste Management: Consideration of survey results

(16.00 – 16.30)

(Pages 28 – 45)

PAC(5)–06–20 Paper 3 – Survey Results

Document is Restricted

Public Accounts Committee January 2020

Inquiry into the Effectiveness of Local Planning Authorities

1. How can local planning authority services become more resilient?

Planning services in Wales have seen budget cuts of more than 50 per cent over the last decade, leading to the stretching of planning officer capacity and a decrease in skills in key areas. Problems have been further exacerbated by a drop in the number of trainees entering the profession in the public sector.

A shift of planners from the public to private sector has seen far fewer planners working in the former. Recent RTPI research, drawing on Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures, estimated there are 22,000 planners in the UK. It also found that this period has also seen a major shift in where planners are employed. Until 2010 the public sector employed about 70% of all planners in the UK, however it is now around 55%. This indicates a likely drop of about 21% in the number of planners working in the public sector.

This shift is likely to be a direct result of austerity and many associated problems for local planning authorities. Local authorities will both lose the ability to fund the same amount of positions, and struggle to recruit to fill the ones they do have.

If this trend continues it could mean a fundamental reshaping of the profession. While half of architects used to work in the public sector the number is now closer to 3%. Recent research has highlighted some of the potential issues with this shift, however, ultimately we cannot know the full range of implications.

The RTPI undertook research to explore public and private sector planners' experiences of how local planning service delivery is changing, and what these changes mean for the planning system's ability to deliver in the public interest.

It finds that LPAs have had to adapt to survive in this environment, often adopting private sector working practices and aggressively pro-development stances to draw in the funding they need to resource their planning teams. But, while LPAs are increasingly acting like the private sector, and the private sector continues to be seen as an indispensable and legitimate source of the expertise and capacity they need, there are signs of a growing backlash against the partial outsourcing that has proliferated in recent years, particularly in England. While full outsourcing has always been rare, and only occurred in England, this appears to be part of growing dissatisfaction with the practice in general across the local public sector. Our participants pointed to higher long-term costs, weaker relationships with applicants, and greater staff 'churn' as some of the reasons for this rising scepticism within planning.

This is not to say that LPAs no longer outsource key areas of their work, or that they will not do so in the future; there are strong forces that continue to drive both of these things.

The concept of 'balance' –weighing up different considerations, interests, and requirements – remains central to the way both public and private sector planners in the UK execute the public interest. In many ways, little has changed in the toolkit they use to carry out this balancing: professional expertise; accreditation; and continuing development remain central to their decision-making and credibility. However, 'proceduralism' – in other words, a box-ticking culture – has closed down a lot of the space planners traditionally had for reflection, professional discretion, and proactive planning. In so doing, this is making it harder to undertake the kind of long-term strategic thinking many equate with delivering the public interest.

There are certainly exceptions. Large, transformative projects can carve out spaces that make this possible. But these cases go against the grain, and opportunities like these were seen as disproportionately concentrated in large urban authorities that experience high development demand.

Strong, experienced, local planning leadership could also make a difference by ensuring strategic oversight, institutional memory, and smart commissioning. In the process, effective leaders with a good knowledge of planning maintain and make the case for efficient, in-house planning services. We hear many examples of effective leadership and case studies of inspirational change, however more often reported were the challenges LPAs face in recruiting experienced leaders. Austerity and restructuring has led to a lack of experienced senior planners in the public sector, and consultancies offer an enticing, well-regarded, well-paying alternative to a public sector that is commonly regarded by planners as having image problems.

The current picture of local planning service delivery in the UK is not a universally gloomy one, but it does raise serious questions. These questions are not necessarily the same across the UK, and indeed, planners in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland remained more optimistic than their English counterparts. The study did however find a prevailing sense that local authority planners currently face huge challenges to their ability to plan effectively in the public interest.

We need to look beyond patching up the holes that have been created by cuts, to see public funding of planning as an investment in delivering the land use we need to deliver the social, environmental, economic and cultural outcomes we aspire to. To deliver this we need more resources for planning, and broad new investment in place to bring in more place-based professionals across the board.

Planning can be an efficient way of using public investment to deliver social, economic and environmental value. Rather than look at planning as a way of facilitating development as cheaply as possible we need to explore what the optimum level of support is to achieve a broad range of outcomes in an efficient way.

Furthermore there is an obvious financial case for local authorities investing in planning. Planning fees and other income from development management are just a small part of the story. Planning and placemaking can also raise income by developing new industrial and employment space, which comes with increased business rates. It can make a place more attractive to visit which brings income to the local economy. And it can help provide new homes in places people want to live, which brings in more council tax.

Increased investment in planning would go a long way towards improving the functioning of LPAs, however more will be needed to make local authorities an attractive place to work and help counter the shift to the private sector.

A key benefit of increasing resourcing would be to free up enough capacity to enable local authorities to release planners for training. At the moment many local authority planners struggle to get a day away from the office to take part in training sessions. This is especially important given it will be difficult to deliver a major increase in the number of local authority planners in the short term.

We also need to restore the corporate power of planning within local authorities. Our research on Chief Planning Officers has shown both how few Welsh local authorities have a planner at the top table, and the wide range of benefits that can be achieved through having one there. We should follow Scotland's lead in legislating for mandatory Chief Planning Officers in every local authority.

New technology may also offer opportunities for improving the working lives of planners. RTPI is currently working with the Connected Places Catapult to explore how technology can free up planners time to work on proactive planning.

2. How can timeliness and decision making on planning applications be improved?

It is not just with LPAs where there are staff shortages and a lack of skills. The statutory consultees markedly affect the timeliness and decision making by a LPA. These include NRW, Highways Authorities for example.

The quality of submissions should also be considered. If a submission is not complete or the supporting information is lacking, then this can affect the length of time taken for an application to be determined.

3. How can local planning authorities improve the positive community impact of their work?

Too often community participation is not resourced as a key part of the planning process. As with planning policy, rich community engagement can seem like an unaffordable and time consuming burden to overstretched local authorities. Benefits of greater resourcing for participation would include greater social cohesion, greater trust in government, and a closer link between communities and land use.

4. How can local planning authorities deliver the aspirations of the WFG Act and help improve Well-being?

The justification for increasing investment in planning services is clear: (1) the current level of resourcing is unsustainable, especially if we want to deliver increased numbers of quality homes; (2) planning is an efficient way to deliver a broad range of social, environmental and economic goals, (3) it is an investment which will bring not only social return, but increased tax revenue for local authorities by bringing people and economic activity into areas and by reducing social costs.

Spending on planning is a very small part of total public spending, which means relatively major increases in resourcing could be made with little overall impact on budgets. Moreover these investments would deliver huge returns – rather than being forced to rely on generating more fees, LPAs could help deliver social, environmental and economic outcomes which make society more resilient, happier and fairer.

4th February 2020

Chair of Public Accounts Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Tŷ Hywel
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

28 January 2020

Dear Chair

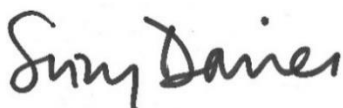
Public Accounts Committee Report on the Scrutiny of Accounts 2018-19

I am writing in response to the Public Accounts Committee report on the Scrutiny of Accounts 2018-19. I would like to thank the Committee for their scrutiny. We will continue to develop our approach of including accessible and transparent information within our Annual Report and Accounts document.

I would also like to take this opportunity to assure the Committee that we remain as committed as ever to providing assurance through external scrutiny and audit as well as our internal governance framework. This work is vital in underpinning our confidence that we use resources efficiently, economically and effectively in delivering our services to the Assembly.

Your Committee's recommendations concerning the Commission are addressed in full in the attached Annex. If you would like any further information on any matter covered in the Annex, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely



Suzy Davies

cc Assembly Commissioners, Manon Antoniazzi, Nia Morgan



Public Accounts Committee Report on the Scrutiny of Accounts 2018-19

Recommendation 1. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission introduce a KPI focusing on financial management as opposed to an outturn target.

Not accepted.

The Commission believes that the introduction of a performance indicator requiring unqualified accounts provides an authoritative measure of financial management arrangements whereby the notification from the AGW clearly accredits the Commission for its processes, management and control of the Assembly's budget.

The new indicators provide assurance that true and fair accounts are produced on a timely basis, in line with the budget set out and scrutinised by the Finance Committee.

The new indicator on outturn (ensuring an outturn operational underspend of no more than 1.5%) removes the prior target (<0.5%) which could have driven behaviour to spend all available funds and also increased the risk of overspending. It also maintains and encourages the return of any underspend where there are delays or no firm plans for expenditure. Both the Commission and ACARAC consider this to be a pragmatic and constructive indicator.

The Assembly Commission will review these corporate performance indicators at the end of the first reporting period and consider whether any changes are required.

Recommendation 2. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission includes the last three years figures of BAME pay gap within the diversity and inclusion report to allow for better comparisons of the progress made in this area.

Accepted.

The Assembly Commission will include comparative information, where available, on its BAME pay gap within its 2020 diversity and inclusion report. In the next report this will be two years of figures and three years of figures in future years.

Recommendation 3. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission provide evidence to reassure the Committee that recruitment policies are not restricting the overall number of applicants and in particular those from BAME and people from lower socio-economic groups, to feed into the Committee's scrutiny of the Annual Report and Accounts next autumn.



Accepted.

The Assembly Commission is committed to improving its engagement with Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, through its outreach work and by continuing to identify all opportunities to increase representation within the Commission's workforce. The Commission has agreed a new stretch indicator for BAME representation in the workforce, and engaged Business in the Community Wales to support our activities.

Recommendation 4. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission gives consideration to setting a more specific percentage figure target for the engagement index in light of its consistently exceeding the target currently set.

Not accepted.

The engagement score is a combination of five core questions, and it provides an indicator benchmark across comparable organisations. We are careful not to review the score in isolation and consider other workforce indicators to provide a broader picture of organisational health. We are content that the benchmark comparator is appropriate, and our continued good performance in this area allows us to focus instead on other areas of activity which may require greater support.

Recommendation 5. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission makes public the overall results for each individual question in the staff survey. This should include comparative data over a three year period.

Accepted, subject to consultation.

The Assembly Commission will consult with staff and following consultation will consider publishing the overall results of future staff surveys.

Recommendation 6. The Committee recommends the Assembly Commission revisits the targets for citizen engagement to ensure they are deliverable, recordable, aimed at reaching as wider a cross section of the population as possible and will add value.

Accepted.

The Commission has recently appointed a new Director of Communications and Engagement and a new strategy is being developed. As part of this process, the Commission will revisit targets and will take into account the view of the Committee.

Recommendation 7. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission revisits its target for procurement to ensure that, while balancing value for money



considerations, it drives an increase in the proportion of expenditure with small businesses in Wales, including those involved in the supply chain.

Accepted.

The Assembly Commission will review the corporate performance indicators at the end of the first reporting period and, noting the Committee's recommendation, will consider whether the target for procurement needs to be revisited as currently its main purpose is to drive up the % of spend with Welsh suppliers.

Recommendation 8. The Committee recommends that the Assembly Commission set a range of indicators to achieve the ambitious aims needed to continually improve sustainability and reduce the Assembly Commission's impact on the environment.

Accepted.

The Assembly Commission is currently in the process of setting a new range of ambitious targets. These will be considered by the Commission at its March meeting.



Agenda Item 7

By virtue of paragraph(s) vi of Standing Order 17.42

Document is Restricted