Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus
The Public Accounts Committee

Dydd Mawrth, 19 Mehefin 2012
Tuesday, 19 June 2012

Cynnwys
Contents

Yn y golofn chwith, cofnodwyd y trafodion yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi. Yn y golofn dde, cynhwysir trawsgrifiad o'r cyfieithu ar y pryd.

In the left-hand column, the proceedings are recorded in the language in which they were spoken. The right-hand column contains a transcription of the simultaneous interpretation.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Mohammad Asghar	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig
	Welsh Conservatives
Andrew R.T. Davies	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig (yn dirprwyo ar ran Darren Millar, Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor)
	Welsh Conservatives (substitute for Darren Millar, Committee Chair)
Mike Hedges	Llafur
	Labour
Julie Morgan	Llafur
	Labour
Gwyn R. Price	Llafur
	Labour
Jenny Rathbone	Llafur
	Labour
Aled Roberts	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru
	Welsh Liberal Democrats

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Huw Vaughan Thomas	Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru
	Auditor General for Wales
Alan Morris	Cyfarwyddwr Grŵp, Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru
	Group Director, Wales Audit Office

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Dan Collier	Dirprwy Glerc
	Deputy Clerk
Joanest Jackson	Uwch-gynghorydd Cyfreithiol
	Senior Legal Adviser
Tom Jackson	Clerc
	Clerk

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.28 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.28 a.m.

Cynnig i Ethol Cadeirydd Dros Dro
Motion to Elect a Temporary Chair

[1]   **Mr Jackson:** Good morning, and welcome to the Public Accounts Committee. We have apologies today from the Chair, Darren Millar, along with Lindsay Whittle. Therefore, I call for nominations for a temporary chair under Standing Order No. 17.22.

[2]   **Aled Roberts:** I nominate Andrew R.T. Davies.

[3]   **Mr Jackson:** Andrew R.T. Davies has been nominated. There are no other nominations. Are Members content for Andrew to be appointed as temporary chair? I see that Members are content.

Penodwyd Andrew R.T. Davies yn gadeirydd dros dro
Andrew R.T. Davies was appointed temporary chair

9.29 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introductions, Apologies and Substitutions

[4]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** As we have been informed, Lindsay Whittle has sent his apologies and we do not have a substitute on his behalf. Looking around the table, I think that everyone else is present. I have a few housekeeping rules before we go into the general meeting. If the fire alarm sounds, please fall under the direction of the ushers, who will escort you to the nearest fire exit. The meeting is fully bilingual, and the audio sets are available for everyone to use. The ushers can give information on the channel sequence. Are there any declarations of interests? I see that there are none.

Sesiwn Friffio gydag Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru ar Ymgysylltiad y Cyhoedd â Llywodraeth Leol
Briefing from the Auditor General for Wales on Public Engagement in Local Government

[5]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I welcome Huw Thomas, the Auditor General for Wales, and Alan Morris, who are with us at the table today. I invite you to make some opening remarks before Members present their questions to you.

9.30 a.m.

[6]   **Mr Thomas:** I remind the committee that, normally, I present reports to you under the normal value-for-money pattern of the powers that I have under the Public Audit (Wales) Act 2004. However, I felt that it was important that you had a glimpse of the totality of the work that the Wales Audit Office does. I have separate powers in respect of local government, of course, and the committee does not normally hold local government to account. So, this is a report that arises out of local government powers that I feel it is important that the committee sees, because the information presented in it can inform the committee on the local implementation of an important area of Welsh Government policy. The Government policy in Wales is to continue to emphasise the importance of effective public engagement, and that is generally true right across the whole of the public sector. However, if we are to develop a more citizen-focused approach to the design and delivery of policies, programmes and services, we need to engage properly with the public on their design. As 'Making the Connections' said,

[7]   'People must not be seen as passive recipients.'

[8]   They must be actively engaged in shaping the services. That comes right from the heart of a number of Government statements, ranging from 'Making the Connections', which came out in 2004, to the current sustainable development scheme 'One Wales: One Planet', in which people are said to be 'at the heart' of sustainable development. It is clear, therefore, that members of the public have a role to play as contributors to policy development and participants in its implementation.

[9]   This report has been pulled together as a result of work that my staff have undertaken in all the local authorities in Wales as part of the pattern of our work in those individual authorities. It asks whether local authorities are doing enough to improve the quality of public engagement and maximise opportunities for participation, especially at times of change and

possible cuts in services. The headline message is that there is a great deal of engagement activity going on, some of which enables citizens to help to shape local services. However, a lot of that is ad hoc and the quality and effectiveness is variable, particularly as the measurement of public engagement is weak and inconsistent.

[10]   My conclusion is that, left unaddressed, public engagement activity will not keep pace with the demands of legislation and the public expectation to improve communication and interaction. We need to consider the impact of financial pressures on councils, of course. However, in a period of austerity, I would argue that public engagement should not be seen as a luxury activity. It needs to be used to help to prioritise services, and so we need to continually highlight the importance of public contribution in providing information and evidence to validate decision making and ensure that resources are targeted more effectively. The report's conclusions suggest that public engagement needs to be better embedded in the structure of local authority work and also that there should be feedback mechanisms provided. I will ask Alan to enlarge on that in a few minutes.

[11]   The report recommends that local authorities seek to develop a more strategic approach to improving public engagement to establish good practice. It also says that this should be done in collaboration with partners, stakeholders and neighbouring authorities. In this report, we have looked at public engagement in the context of local government, but I want to continue to extend our knowledge of public engagement in the public sector as a whole, so we will be continuing to review this engagement activity in the fire and rescue authorities. We also intend to include it as part of our work in the health sector. Finally, plans are being discussed to look at engagement activity within the police authorities for the 2013-14 review period. By then, there will also be impacts as a result of the police and crime commissioners.

[12]   As well as identifying a number of areas for improvement—and I draw your attention particularly to the recommendations on pages 12 and 13—the report also includes many examples of good practice in the form of case studies.

[13]   On 28 June, I will be hosting a shared learning seminar on public engagement in Wales, drawing upon the findings and good practice examples contained in this report. Hopefully, this event will bring together senior leaders from across the public sector to share good practice and to learn from each other how they could improve their approaches to engaging with the public. Of course, that fits into the pattern of how we can use the reports that I have developed and have provided to you, in an ongoing way, not just as a single, one-off report, but as a means of continuing good practice provision.

[14]   I will now hand over to Alan to draw out a few more details on the report.

[15]   **Mr Morris:** As the auditor general has mentioned, this work draws on the work at each of the 22 unitary authorities in Wales. That local work has already been fed back to the authorities, and the headline messages were included in the annual improvement reports that we published earlier this year. The report also draws on research at a higher level on policies in Wales and beyond, and it draws on good practice from beyond Wales.

[16]   There are three main sections in the report. The first main conclusion in part 1 is that councils undertake a great deal of public engagement, some of which enables citizens to shape services. Through its policy development programme, the Welsh Government has demonstrated that it considers public engagement and citizen focus to be a critical feature of public sector activity. Local authorities do organise and undertake a great deal of public engagement activity, but it mostly consists of informing and consulting. However, we have found that they develop it in different ways and at different rates, which is down to variations in how councils prioritise their engagement activity and the capacity and resources that they

invest in those activities. The quality and effectiveness of that activity also varies significantly between authorities.

[17]   There are instances when public engagement activity can and does influence changes and improvements to local government services. Councils are adapting to public tastes and using new technology and social media, for example, to inform and consult, as well as the more traditional methods of consultation. So, we do see examples of the use of Twitter, Facebook and so on. However, websites predominate as the main mechanism for public engagement. It is important to remember that approximately one third of the population of Wales does not have access to the internet and websites, so it is important that local authorities target the mechanisms that they use so that they are appropriate to the audience and to local demand, and are aligned with what they are trying to achieve. Perhaps we have found that there is not sufficient targeting of the mechanisms of engagement to the audiences at the moment.

[18]   We found that councils lack detailed knowledge of how best to engage with the public, and do not use all the potential resources available to them. For example, their own front-line staff can be a very valuable mechanism to consult and engage with the public, but that is often overlooked as an easy method of carrying out that work. The issue remains that not enough is known about which methods are effective, and there is a lack of data on monitoring and evaluating engagement activity.

[19]   More collaborative forms of engagement with the public are rare, but we found an encouraging number of examples where, to address a particular problem, vulnerability or interest area, councils had set up groups or processes to engage with the people concerned. There is evidence that these groups and processes can lead to improved confidence and capability of the individuals and communities and help to resolve issues. Consultation can go beyond just an exchange of information; it can actually grow the confidence of local communities and help them to start addressing their own problems. Again, there are few examples, and the data to really understand why these approaches are effective are rare at present.

[20]   Part 2 of the report concludes that most councils have not yet fully embedded and mainstreamed public engagement into their organisational culture and into their partnership activities. Senior officers in councils almost entirely express a commitment towards the concept and practice of public engagement, but that commitment has not always been translated into encouraging a more open and participatory culture, or led to the development of a strategic, dedicated and planned approach to implementing public engagement. That lack of leadership and direction can impact on the aspiration and ability of a council to establish robust corporate structures and functions to support their public engagement work.

[21]   We found that there are concerns about the place of public engagement within the democratic processes. Councillors and local government officers have expressed concerns about the lack of clarity on where engagement activity sits within governance arrangements and policy development, and what role democratically elected councillors should play in public engagement. Some councils expressed fears that public engagement could undermine local democracy, democratic structures and processes.

[22]   Although around a third of councils are beginning to recognise the need to develop a more strategic and planned approach to public engagement, the majority still lack clear ideas on their overall plans and intentions. As a result, they lack an in-depth awareness of the benefits of public engagement, what outcomes they should be seeking, how that engagement activity impacts on the public, and how the council should organise itself to establish a corporate approach to planning, co-ordinating and implementing effective engagement.

[23]   Many councils focused mainly on short-term consultation projects that address an immediate need, such as to validate their improvement objectives, or to seek views on proposals in a local development plan. We found that little forethought was given to longer term planning and sustainable resource allocation to implement engagement. To develop an approach to improve relations with the public, build trust and demonstrate that participation is a worthwhile activity both for the council and for the citizens who participate.

[24]   We found several examples of councils clearly recognising the benefit of joint working with partners so as to share resources and to avoid overconsulting with the public, but those examples were mainly project based. Councils and their local service board partners have not yet fully developed a strategic approach to public engagement by, for example, clarifying their respective roles, co-ordinating their agendas, and developing agreed joint outcomes that they are trying to achieve as a partnership of local bodies. A small number of councils are in the process of developing a local service board-wide strategy for public engagement. There are examples of councils working with neighbouring authorities, town and community councils, and the voluntary sector. This can help to resource and implement public engagement in a more effective and efficient way. However, these are currently few in number, and at initial stages.

[25]   The new legislation introducing the single delivery, or the single integrated plan, emphasises the role of the citizen voice as a driver for service improvement. This should have a significant impact on accelerating the development of a more co-ordinated and area-wide approach to public engagement.

[26]   The third and final part of the report concludes that councils rarely provide feedback on the difference that public engagement has made, and monitoring and evaluation is weak. We found that councils are not good at gathering information about their public engagement activities. They do not collect enough data to ensure that they have a complete picture of the public engagement activity undertaken corporately and throughout their services. These are often disjointed activities taking place within the same organisation. Most measure the number of people that have been consulted, and the response rates, but there is frequently insufficient detail on whether these numbers provide an adequate and valid amount of response to the consultations that have been carried out. Neither do they thoroughly and comprehensively analyse the data accumulated through the public engagement activity. The storage and sharing of information is an issue, but very few councils have adequate corporate databases or the ability to ensure that services share engagement data, as databases are often incompatible between different services within the same organisation.

[27]   Many councils struggle to clearly identify and demonstrate the benefits arising from their public engagement because they do not have robust mechanisms to develop outcome measures. A lack of clear and agreed outcomes supported by performance measures makes it difficult for councils to meaningfully assess how effective their public engagement activity is, both in respect of data, quality, and the effectiveness of the engagement processes themselves.

[28]   Many councils told us that such outcomes, measuring the quality and impact of public engagement, are not easy to formulate, which we recognise, but several councils are now developing such measures to help to identify more tangible outcomes. However, councils are not drawing on the skills of their own specialist performance management staff to develop these outcomes and to ensure that performance measures and outcomes are closely linked to their key, corporate or improvement objectives.

[29]   A lack of central data collection systems and analysis of activity impairs the quality of performance management reporting and the scrutiny of public engagement activity. Those councils are less able to closely assess and scrutinise the quality and impact of their activities. Similarly, councils do not collect sufficient information to be in a position to assess the value

for money of their public engagement. Few councils record and analyse the true cost of public engagement in budget and resource terms to produce a credible cost-benefit analysis, which would help them to develop a rationale for service charges and costs.

9.45 a.m.

[30]   Feedback of findings and outcomes to the public is a common area of weakness, even in councils that have well-developed consultation processes. Councils are not consistently providing well-drafted and thorough feedback to participants and the public to communicate what difference the engagement activity has made and to show clearly that they have been listening to the views expressed and have considered them in making their decisions. A lack of robust outcomes and performance measures can hamper the ability to calculate and show what differences have been made. Most councils lack corporate standards and agreed processes on how to provide feedback and they are unclear about who has overall editorial control to develop user-friendly feedback—feedback that is provided in such a way that people understand the messages and build upon them.

[31]   Finally, the public is rarely given the chance to comment on the design, suitability and effectiveness of public engagement activity. So, a number of areas with regard to using feedback and using it as a mechanism to engage with the public are current weaknesses. That summarises the key points from the overall report, so it is over to you for any questions.

[32]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you very much, gentlemen, for that analysis of your report. Alan, I did not say what your role was in the audit office. You are the group director of the performance unit. I am correct in saying that, am I not?

[33]   **Mr Morris:** That is correct, yes.

[34]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** That is for the benefit of our millions of viewers so that they know who is speaking about the report. [*Laughter*.] Gentlemen, you touched on various issues, but one issue that came across, particularly from you, Alan, was a lack of leadership, on the corporate side and the political side, with regard to public engagement and promoting public engagement. You used an interesting phrase. Correct me if I am wrong, but you said that you saw some political figures within local authorities who perceived this to be trespassing on their democratic mandate. Why do you think that view persists? Surely public engagement is a vital component of any public body. Secondly, do you believe that there is the capacity and the will to change on the political side and the corporate side in order to get better engagement and a better level of engagement?

[35]   **Mr Morris:** There are two aspects to that question. First, with regard to leadership, we generally found that senior politicians and officers expressed a commitment to the principles of public engagement. Where we found some tension was with regard to the fact that some members see themselves as the local member and the local representative of their community. There was a slight tension between that and the idea of having another mechanism to seek the views of that community, that is, a public engagement activity. They found that slightly uncomfortable and saw it as possibly trespassing on their role as the elected representative of the people and the person who acts as the conduit for the views of the local community into the council. It is not widespread, but that tension is still there, and that holds back some of the development of public engagement activity.

[36]   There is a bit of confusion about what the role of the elected member, the local member, is in that activity. We have seen examples in some councils of active work with local councillors to reassure them that it does not threaten their local role and that they have a key role to play. Where that has happened, it has been successful. However, not all councils have done that. The leadership's commitment at a high level to engagement has not always

filtered down to more junior officers and to the members as a whole with regard to how to implement that high-level commitment to public engagement as being a good thing that they should do. That has perhaps not always been translated into what that means in reality.

[37]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Is it a conscious decision when that is not filtered down? In other words, have they said, corporately, 'We're not going to take the lead on this'? If that is the case, there needs to be direction from, for example, the Welsh Government, to encourage that corporate lead on public engagement of a more robust nature.

[38]   **Mr Morris:** I do not believe it is a deliberate block. I think it is seen as one of a number of competing priorities. Sometimes, public engagement can be seen as 'something we've got to do'—they know that they are required to consult and that there is a process for doing it—rather than it being embraced as something that will help the council to develop improved and better services and to better inform it in its decisions. Sometimes, that tension exists and engagement is not always bought into as something entirely positive. Sometimes, it is seen as a hoop they have to jump through.

[39]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** There are two supplementary questions on this issue. Jenny will go first and then Aled.

[40]   **Jenny Rathbone:** I want to challenge your terminology, because I feel that it is part of the problem. You referred to things filtering down. Unless we see councils empowering their front-line staff, we are never going to get to where we need to be because they are the ones who see the detail on the ground. I was a little disappointed that you did not look in your report at some of the more grass-roots-focused programmes, such as Flying Start, Sure Start and Communities First, to see whether they had cracked some of the problems around engaging the public in spending large sums of money and reshaping services. I felt that that was a bit absent from the report.

[41]   **Mr Morris:** The report was based on local work at each of the 22 councils. We identified a tracer area in each of those, which tended to vary from one council to another. Those tracer areas may have been in those fields in a small number of councils, but in others we looked at engagement in areas such as waste and recycling. In others, we looked more at the corporate arrangements. So, within the capacity that we had for this study, we tried to look at a range of different activities. We did find some examples of a number of those kinds of areas of more community engagement and involvement of front-line staff. Where we refer to a small number of the more positive engagement activities that have resulted in a change in community participation, they are examples of how that can work effectively and how the involvement of front-line staff can really make a difference. There are also one or two case studies in our report on using refuse operatives, for example, to be part of communicating to and engaging with the public on changes to recycling regimes. So, there are examples of that, and we have seen how it can work effectively.

[42]   One of the big messages in the report is that that good practice is not shared effectively enough between councils and even within councils. You find a pocket where that works well but it is not shared effectively as a learning point for the council as a whole, and certainly not often with other public sector bodies or with other councils.

[43]   **Aled Roberts:** A oes tuedd hefyd i uwchreolwyr ddefnyddio barn gyhoeddus lle mae'n cefnogi sut maent yn gweithredu'n barod, a, lle mae'r farn gyhoeddus yn cwestiynu sut maent yn gweithredu neu'n gofyn iddynt i newid eu ffordd o weithredu, a ydynt yn amharod i wneud hynny? Rwyf yn

Aled Roberts: Is there also a tendency for senior managers to use public opinion where it supports the way in which they already operate, and, where public opinion questions the way in which they operate, or asks them to change their way of operating, they are reluctant to do so? I am thinking of my

meddwl am fy mhrofiad yn Wrecsam lle gofynnwyd am farn tenantiaid. Mae'n un o'r esiamplau rydych yn ei roi yn yr adroddiad. Roedd y tenantiaid yn eithaf llym eu barn am sut roedd y gwasanaeth yn cael ei gyflwyno ynghynt, ac roedd yr uwchreolwyr yn amharod iawn i'w newid gan fod rhai o drefniadau mewnol y cyngor yn seiliedig ar hen drefn, sef bod yr adran gyfreithiol neu'r adran amgylcheddol yn ddibynnol i ryw raddau ar arian mawr o'r adran dai. Unwaith roedd hynny yn cael ei gwestiynu gan y tenantiaid ac yn cael ei gefnogi gan y gwleidyddion, dyna'r adeg lle roeddwn yn gweld rhyw fath o *kickback* yn erbyn y trefniadau newydd gan rai o'r uwch swyddogion.

experience in Wrexham where the views of tenants were sought. It is one of the examples that you give in the report. The tenants were quite scathing about the way in which the service was previously delivered, and senior managers were very reluctant to change it because some of the council's internal arrangements were based on an old system, that is, the legal department or the environmental department relied to some degree on large sums of money from the housing department. Once that was questioned by the tenants and supported by the politicians, that was when I saw some kind of kickback against the new arrangements by senior managers.

[44]   **Mr Thomas:** Efallai y gall Alan ateb yn fwy manwl ynglŷn â'r materion hynny, ac yn enwedig o safbwynt yr esiampl yn Wrecsam. Yr hyn sy'n bwysig yw sicrhau bod y meddylfryd o ymgynghori â'r cyhoedd yn rhan annatod o'r ffordd y mae'r cyngor yn strwythuro ei hun. Y broblem rydych yn cyfeirio ati yw bod pobl yn chwilio am gefnogaeth i'w syniadau presennol, yn hytrach na bod yn agored i'w hailystyried oherwydd efallai nad yw eu syniadau yn cyd-fynd â'r hyn y mae'r cyhoedd yn chwilio amdano. O ystyried yr arian sydd ar gael, mae'n hynod o bwysig bod pobl yn ailystyried sut y dylent gyflwyno'r gwasanaeth hwn.

Mr Thomas: Perhaps Alan can respond in more detail about those matters, and the example in Wrexham in particular. What is important is that the mindset of consulting with the public is an innate part of the way in which the council structures itself. The problem to which you are referring is that people look for support for their current ideas, rather than being open to reconsider them because their ideas might not correspond with what the public is seeking. In light of the funding available, it is very important that people reconsider how they should deliver this service.

[45]   **Mr Morris:** I ychwanegu at yr hyn a ddywedodd Huw, mae ymgynghori ac ymgysylltu yn aml yn cael eu defnyddio fel rhywbeth i gefnogi penderfyniad sydd wedi cael ei wneud yn barod, ac nid fel rhywbeth i agor trafodaeth gyda'r cyhoedd a defnyddwyr gwasanaeth i'w helpu i siapio'r gwasanaeth neu siapio'r penderfyniad. Dyna un o'r tensiynau, sef nad yw ymgysylltu yn mynd y cam nesaf i fod yn rhywbeth mwy na barn yn unig, bwydo'r farn i mewn, a thicio'r bocs eu bod wedi bod drwy'r broses, ac i gael ei ddefnyddio fel rhywbeth llawer mwy adeiladol. Rydym yn gweld nifer fach o enghreifftiau o hynny ar hyn o bryd.

Mr Morris: To add to what Huw said, consultation and engagement are often used as something to support a decision that has already been taken, and not as something to open up a discussion with the public and service users to help them to shape the service or to shape the decision. That is one of the tensions, in that engagement does not go the next step to being something more than just getting an opinion, feeding in that opinion and ticking the box that they have been through the process, to being used as something much more constructive. We see a small number of examples of that at the moment.

[46]   **Aled Roberts:** Faint o enghreifftiau a welsoch pan oedd barn y cyhoedd yn mynd yn groes i syniadau swyddogion? Faint o enghreifftiau sydd o hynny?

Aled Roberts: How many examples did you see of where public opinion ran contrary to the ideas of officers? How many examples are there of that?

[47]   **Mr Morris:** Mae enghreifftiau, ac mae ambell enghraifft lle mae'r awdurdod wedi cymryd sylw ac wedi newid cyfeiriad. Fodd bynnag, mae enghreifftiau eraill o'r farn honno yn cael ei hystyried fel, 'Wel, dyna un farn, ond nid yw'r bobl sy'n ymateb yn deall y darlun cyfan ac felly'r penderfyniad gwreiddiol yw'r un cywir.' Yn yr enghreifftiau hynny, mae'n bwysig sicrhau bod gwell cyfathrebu gyda phobl a gwell dealltwriaeth. Po fwyaf yw'r ddealltwriaeth sydd gan y bobl sy'n cymryd rhan yn y prosesau hyn ar y dechrau, gorau i gyd fydd y cyfle i gael ymateb sy'n dangos bod y darlun cyfan wedi'i ddeall. Ambell waith, mae'r ymgysylltiad yn cael ei wneud yn y tywyllwch. Maent yn gofyn y cwestiwn, ond a ydynt wedi rhoi digon o wybodaeth i bobl iddynt ddeall yr holl ddarlun? Mae angen adeiladu systemau i wella'r wybodaeth sydd gan bobl cyn iddynt ymateb. Dyna un o'r materion mwyaf pwysig i symud y rhaglen hon ymlaen.

Mr Morris: There are examples, and there are a few examples of where the authority has taken notice and has changed direction. However, there are other examples where that opinion has been considered as, 'Well, that is one opinion, but those responding do not understand the full picture and therefore the original decision is the right one.' In such cases, it is important to ensure better communication with people and greater understanding. The greater the understanding that those taking part in these processes have at the outset, the better the opportunity to get a response that understands the whole picture. Sometimes, the engagement is made in the dark. They ask the question, but have they given people enough information for them to understand the whole picture? Systems need to be built to improve the information that people have before they respond. That is one of the most important matters in moving this programme forward.

[48]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Oscar, I think that you have a very brief supplementary question.

[49]   **Mohammad Asghar:** I want to talk about accessibility. It is very hard for the general public to gain access. We are all in public service, whether we are councillors, Assembly Members or Members of Parliament. It is very easy to get hold of us, but very difficult to get hold of councillors and council officials, which is an area that is not fully covered in your research. They are not accessible to the public.

[50]   **Mr Morris:** Different councils are using different ways to try to make themselves more accessible, but what is accessible varies from one member of the public to another. One member of the public may be happy to use a website and e-mail to contact the council, but another may want face-to-face contact. One of our messages is that councils need to think more about the right interface for different communities, different groups and different individuals, and to target more effectively, rather than assuming that everyone is happy to use e-mail and the internet, for example.

[51]   **Mike Hedges:** I have three quick questions. First, councils get a lot of responses to the local development plan, school closures and planning decisions. They get better returns in relation to those than we get in relation to people voting in general elections. On each of those occasions, the view of the public is normally ignored. People do not want land next to them to be developed, they do not want a new housing estate to be built on the green area near them, and do not want their schools to be closed. Therefore, when we have large-scale consultations, the public tends to get ignored. Do you agree with that?

[52]   Secondly, when you have general consultations, you get the usual suspects and interest groups taking part. That is one of the problems. If Swansea council went out to consultation on a transport policy, I can tell you that it would be told that there is a desire for more cycle routes. There would be very little interest expressed in buses or any other modes of transport, because the best organised group in Swansea is cyclists.

[53]   Thirdly, I do not know whether you are aware of the Swansea citizens' panel and its work over the last 15 years. I can say many good things about it, and it has been very effective. One of the best advantages of it is that it reports back to people on what happens afterwards. However, the difficulty is that, in terms of age and geographical location, the panel tends to be very different from Swansea as a whole. That is, those taking part tend to be older and they are more likely to live in the west than in the east. So, there are problems with each one of these. Important as it is to consult, do you accept that one of the dangers of consultation is that either you consult and you cannot do what the people want, or you consult and you get such a skewed group of consultees that the result of the consultation does not necessarily give you a good way of going forward?

[54]   **Mr Thomas:** The report also draws attention to the good practice in the areas of identifying where the gaps are and how you consult with the disadvantaged, who would not be the usual suspects lining up to participate in a normal consultation process. What is the analysis that the council has undertaken to ensure that it really is deriving views that are reflective of the totality of its work? Participation Cymru—and indeed the group that we used as a reference point for this work, through Consumer Focus—has done quite a lot of work in terms of trying to help people undertaking consultation to reach out to a wider audience. We hope that, from the development of good practice, more councils will be able to tap those streams as well.

10.00 a.m.

[55]   **Mr Morris:** Your question highlights the difficulty of good and effective public engagement. We are not saying it is easy—absolutely not. It is a challenge, but the danger is that if you do not do it properly, you get a skewed response—you will get the usual suspects and an unrepresentative sample of people responding. Does that really add significant value to the process, or is it just seen as something that has to be done? Building more effective engagement does need that commitment to be embedded in the organisation. It will need a bit of time and resources invested in it, but if public bodies are really committed to effective engagement, engaging the right people in the right way to get an informed response to their decisions, they will have to put a bit more time into that activity and move beyond the traditional method of a questionnaire or survey or citizens' panel, which can be very effective, but over time, become less and less representative as there is turnover. You end up with the kind of demographic that you describe, with the people who are left, and you do not have people from the harder-to-reach groups taking part. You then have to ask whether that adds value in terms of understanding what the community as a whole thinks, rather than the people who are inclined to become members of citizens' panels. There are a lot of tensions, but also examples of good practice, and if more people looked at them more closely, they could show them the way to be more effective.

[56]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I think that that fits in neatly with the point that Julie wanted to make.

[57]   **Julie Morgan:** Yes, following on from what Mike said, the question of who makes up 'the public' is obviously one of the big issues. I wondered if you had any evidence from what you have looked at about whether women are more engaged than men, for example, or whether it is the other way around. What about black and minority ethnic groups, and people with disabilities? Is there much evidence of councils trying to reach out to diverse groups among the public? The other question that I wanted to ask was about engagement with children and young people, who obviously make up a huge part of 'the public'.

[58]   **Mr Morris:** We have not looked at that analysis of responses in detail, and part of the reason for that is that local authorities themselves very often do not do the detailed analysis,

and we would need to draw on their results. They will often look at response rates and so on, and they might have some breakdown of that kind, but it is not a comprehensive picture, and that lack of data is one of the weaknesses in assessing how good and effective public engagement is. So, there is not a lot of evidence at the moment.

[59]   Again, it is the curate's egg—it is a mixed picture, and there are examples of particular engagements on particular issues that do try to ensure that minority groups are represented, and try to target them, and so on. So, there are examples where that happens.

[60]   In terms of children and young people in particular, I think that it was Rhondda Cynon Taf where we found some particularly positive examples of working with young people in terms of local public engagement. Again, there are examples there; it is making them more widely known and spreading that good practice that is important. Data are a bit weak at the moment in terms of how effective engagement is at getting at those various groups that need to be involved.

[61]   **Julie Morgan:** So, you are basically saying that there is not effective engagement.

[62]   **Mr Morris:** Based on the evidence and data that are available it is very difficult to judge how effective it is. That is one of our key messages: authorities need to be doing a bit more research to understand who is responding and how representative that response is.

[63]   **Gwyn R. Price:** When councillors ask the public to suggest topics for scrutiny, how effectively are these followed up, in your opinion?

[64]   **Mr Morris:** This is a growing area. In view of scrutiny arrangements, there is a stronger emphasis on issues coming in from the public. We did not look at scrutiny particularly in the study, but I know from our wider work in local government that it is not a particularly strong area at the moment. It is something that councils will need to address following the full implementation of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2010, in going forward with the new arrangements for scrutiny where the role of the public in raising topics is highlighted more strongly. That is something that they will need to address going forward. We have some work in our work programme for local government looking more closely at scrutiny over the coming year, and that is something that we could look at as part of that activity—the extent to which scrutiny committees take that opportunity to involve people. It is not something that we looked at in this piece of work.

[65]   **Aled Roberts:** Rydych chi'n eithaf beirniadol o gynghorau—dyna bwnc yr adroddiad hwn. Rydych chi wedi dweud bod hon yn strategaeth genedlaethol. Pa dystiolaeth sydd fod Llywodraeth Cymru neu'r gwasanaeth iechyd yn ymwneud â'r fath ymgynghori? Mae adroddiadau eithaf uchelgeisiol yn cael eu cyhoeddi diwedd y mis ynglŷn ag adolygiadau o fewn y gwasanaeth iechyd. Nid wyf yn ymwybodol bod unrhyw waith wedi'i wneud yn fy rhanbarth i gan y gwasanaeth iechyd i ofyn am farn y cyhoedd wrth sefydlu patrwm newydd o wasanaethau.

Aled Roberts: You have been quite critical of councils—that is the subject of this report. You have said that this is a national strategy. What evidence is there that the Welsh Government or the NHS are undertaking such consultations? Quite ambitious reports are being published at the end of the month on reviews within the NHS. I am not aware that any work has been done in my region by the NHS to seek public opinion on establishing a new pattern of services.

[66]   **Mr Thomas:** Fel y dywedais yn gynharach, wrth inni edrych ar y sector iechyd flwyddyn nesaf, rwy'n bwriadu

Mr Thomas: As I said earlier, when we look at the health sector next year, I intend to include the work that they do on seeking

cynnwys y gwaith maen nhw'n ei wneud yn gofyn am farn y cyhoedd ac yn ymgynghori â'r cyhoedd ar ailstrwythuro yn rhan o'r gwaith hwnnw. Mae'r gwaith hwn yn edrych ar lywodraeth leol, ond byddwn yn edrych ar y sector iechyd y flwyddyn nesaf. Byddwn yn parhau i adeiladu darlun o'r hyn y mae Cymru a'r sector cyhoeddus yn gyffredinol yn ei wneud ar ymgynghori.

public opinion and consulting the public on restructuring as part of that work. This work is looking at local government, but we will look at the health sector next year. We will continue to build up a picture of what Wales and the public sector in general are doing on consultation.

[67] **Aled Roberts:** Erbyn hynny, hwyrach bydd y rhan fwyaf o'r penderfyniadau eisoes wedi'u gwneud.

Aled Roberts: By then, perhaps most of those decisions will already have been taken.

[68] **Mr Thomas:** Rydym yn trio gweithio gyda'r sector cyhoeddus, wrth iddo ddatblygu. Ond, dylai'r sector fod yn ymgynghori â'r cyhoedd nawr, os ydyw am ailstrwythuro. Mae'n rhaid gweithio gyda'r cyhoedd os ydych yn mynd i lunio gwasanaethau at y dyfodol a fydd yn cwrdd ag anghenion y cyhoedd. Mae hynny'n rhan annatod o waith y sector cyhoeddus.

Mr Thomas: We are trying to work with the public sector, as it develops. However, the sector should be consulting the public now, if it wants to restructure. You have to work with the public if you want to create services for the future that will meet the public's needs. That is an inextricable part of the public sector's work.

[69] **Mohammad Asghar:** The report details a wide range of good practice in enabling engagement. What barriers are there to such practice being effectively spread and utilised?

[70] **Mr Morris:** There are a number of case studies in the report and we have more examples that we will be putting on our good practice website in the Wales Audit Office. We are also holding a shared learning seminar next week. So, we are doing what we can to share that good practice and to promote shared learning.

[71] On the barriers, not just in this report, but very often in our reports, we find that shared learning and the sharing of knowledge and good practice are not particularly effective in public sector bodies—not just in councils—because it is often seen as a bit of an afterthought. Often, within organisations, there is a bit of a silo mentality and people are so focused on the delivery of their day job and their service that they do not raise their heads, look at the bigger picture and ask what they can learn even from the authority next door, let alone authorities in England, Scotland and beyond, where there is often cutting-edge practice. There is a risk, particularly in these pressured times for public services, that the focus is all on, 'I've got to do my job with fewer resources, fewer members of staff and that is my focus'. People need to create capacity to look at and learn from what is more effective. It might need an investment of time and resources in the short term, but we are convinced that if it means that they learn and implement more effective and efficient ways of doing it, it will bring long-term benefits in terms of efficiency and better services. The more effectively you engage with citizens, customers and service users, the more they begin to be seen as playing a part in supporting and developing the service and not a source of complaint, which is what they are often seen as. That results in time being soaked up dealing with dissatisfaction and complaints, rather than dealing with these issues in a more positive way, using the public as a means of informing and supporting a service. However, that needs some investment, and people are finding it difficult at the moment to invest the time to get to that point.

[72] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Before I call Mike to ask his supplementary question, I will just raise one point. You used the words 'cutting-edge practice' in relation to Scotland and England, and I think that you mentioned Northern Ireland as well—obviously, we could

include public services across the world. In preparing this report, did you look at that cutting-edge practice? Did you find other councils looking to best practice in other parts of the United Kingdom, let alone other parts of the world, in order to bring that best practice to Wales?

[73]   **Mr Morris:** Even in Wales, we found some innovative and positive practice. The frustration is that you get that even within Wales, but there is limited sharing and use of that information by neighbouring authorities or other public bodies in the same area. So, it is a bit frustrating that people are not learning. We have done some work to look at examples from beyond Wales. We can use our good practice exchange to share those examples and we can share them with individual bodies as part of our routine audit work. So, it is there, there are examples there, and there are other mechanisms. Participation Cymru is in an important part of this picture. It was established in order to support the Welsh Government in delivering improved public participation. It is an excellent source of advice, good practice and support for local authorities and, perhaps, greater use needs to be made of the resources that are there and available.

[74]   **Mike Hedges:** I know that they are highly expensive, but opinion polls have been used in England, and they were used in Swansea once, but not more than once because of costs. They give more accurate information than almost any other means of consulting with individuals. I read your report last night—along with other two other reports, so I apologise if I have confused or missed anything—but I did not see any mention of opinion polls in it.

[75]   **Mr Morris:** Opinion polls can often be used as a targeted way of consulting or getting a view on a specific project, initiative or policy, and they have their place to play. In our report, we are looking in particular at something beyond that where people are engaged. Opinion polls are not an effective way of engaging and involving people. We are trying to look beyond just getting the view or the opinion to something that actually enables people to feel that they are part of shaping and developing services. So, yes, there is a place for them, but they are a part of a broad picture of engagement and we feel that, at the moment, the focus is still a bit too much on the survey, poll and citizens' panel end and not sufficiently on actually building an effective relationship with people so that they are a part of developing and improving their local services.

[76]   **Aled Roberts:** I want to ask about an objective assessment of other methodologies. We looked at changing from a citizens' panel to other methods, and we looked at examples of public participation in some beacon authorities in England. They were very expensive methodologies in some instances. It was slightly worrying that, in some instances, even though significant sums had been invested by the local authority, the actual participation rates were not much better than the rate that we were criticising officers for in our authority. Is there a danger that Participation Cymru or something may say that a methodology is good, but, in the fact, the actual stark response rates may not be much better? There is also the kick-back that the authority gets, in that if it significantly increases the resources that are put into public participation exercises, the expenditure could be the subject of public criticism.

[77]   **Mr Morris:** What is encouraging in your question is that there is an example of a council that has done that analysis. It is important that people analyse the costs and benefits of different methods of consultation and engagement. Very often we find that that does not even happen. There is an assumption of, 'Here's a methodology, let's just use it', without a full understanding of the cost-and-benefit equations of that activity. We would want to encourage more councils to ask those kinds of questions, such as, 'Is this an effective means of engagement?' and 'Is this going to cost a lot of money for limited results?' rather than those councils—not quite blindly, but often—assuming that, because someone else has used it, it must be good. We would want to encourage a more detailed understanding of processes. Yes, it is horses for courses. A particular methodology or process may be entirely suitable for one particular type of engagement, but not for another, because it is a different target audience or

a different kind of question that you are trying to ask. It is about pitching the right methodology at the right issue in a way that maximises the return on the investment.

[78]   **Mr Thomas:** It is not just the methodology by itself. You also have to consider the culture in which the methodology is used, including the responsiveness of the council, which is why we stress that the feedback is so important. You will not achieve quick wins in this area. You have to start changing the understanding and get people to see the council as a responsive one. So, methodology by itself helps, but it is not the be all and end all of the problem.

10.15 a.m.

[79]   **Jenny Rathbone:** Engagement for engagement's sake is a complete waste of time and money and we do not have a lot of either of those in the current economic situation. We cannot reshape services to better meet people's needs unless we engage with the people who are going to use those services. So, how are we going to have that sea change? I was quite interested in the example of Anglesey—a council that is not held in very high esteem—which held council budget-setting roadshows. Did it change its budget priorities as a result of what it heard on the roadshows? Did the roadshows make more people interested in putting themselves forward to serve on the council? What was the impact? Was it just a tick-box exercise?

[80]   **Mr Morris:** That was more than a tick-box exercise, and it was done at an early stage in order to inform the council's budget setting. What often happens is that consultation is done after a decision has been made as a means of getting some support or endorsement. If it is done at an early stage, where the information from that engagement can be taken back and taken into account before the decisions are taken and finalised, that is when it can be effective. Anglesey's roadshows involved going out to talk to people and to get their views in order to take them back and ask what that means for the council. So, that can possibly adjust priorities in some way. There is also the aspect of it being a two-way flow of information. These roadshows are often as much about making people better informed of the reasons why public bodies have to make certain decisions, the limitations that are placed on them and why difficult decisions have to be made. So, there is that two-way flow of information as well: it is not just about informing the decision makers, but informing the people who are the service users. That is quite an important dialogue.

[81]   An important thing is that there is a clear understanding of the expectations with which people enter into those sessions. If you are holding some sort of consultation event or roadshow, people should be clear what impact they are likely to have. If there is a decision on the table and you have limited opportunity to influence that decision, that is when public engagement gets a bad name and people see it as a formality of jumping through a hoop. If people are genuinely given an opportunity to express a view that could have an influence on the decision, it should be ensured that people understand how they can have that influence. Being open about how these various mechanisms work will help people to feel more confident in the engagement activity.

[82]   **Jenny Rathbone:** Is it your perception that some councils have not even got to that first base? You have provided a list of councils that have offered their examples of good practice, but there are a few councils that have not offered any examples of good practice.

[83]   **Mr Morris:** There are a small number of those. One of the frustrations is that, within councils, you will find some service areas that are very good and effective and others that are not at first base. So, you get that disconnect even within a particular public body, let alone between them. Sharing information is not just an inter-body issue; it is often a style of thinking within the organisation as well.

[84]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you, gentlemen. I could not agree more with you about your point about sharing the information once it is collected, rather than for it to stay in a particular directorate, let alone in the entire council. If I had £1 for every time someone has told me that they have engaged with the consultation process but have heard nothing in return, we could all probably retire early. It is an anomaly, particularly in local government consultation, and I think that your report touches on this. Why do you believe that there is such poor attention given to providing feedback to the people who have taken the time and effort to engage with the consultation process, whether that be through a written or an oral consultation, or a roadshow-type presentation? Surely the fundamental purpose of a consultation is to hear the views, formulate the policy and report back exactly what the effect of that policy will be, or why their view was not taken on board and will not be acted upon? Why is that such a poor service?

[85]   **Mr Morris:** It is one of the more significant weaknesses that we have found. If engagement is to be seen as something useful and important, and as something that someone will participate in again, they must see that their involvement or engagement had some effect or was at least taken into account. We found that those feedback mechanisms are very weak. Why is that? Often, consultation is carried out and then the focus shifts from the consultation to taking the decision and the next steps, with limited focus then going to what needs to be done.

[86]   Sometimes, the people carrying out the consultation activity may not be the best people to provide the feedback—we mentioned some editorial skills and so on. People within a service area who are carrying out a consultation should perhaps engage with the corporate communications teams and get them involved in asking how they get a message back to all these people in a way that is clear and easy to understand.

[87]   Again, there is a bit of silo thinking, in that people do it within their service and, having done it, they will put something on the council's website, perhaps, but does that reach the people who participated? Investment in going back to ensure that the people who took part get some kind of response is very valuable, because if they do not get that, they will not bother the next time.

[88]   The focus shifts. You have done the consultation; right, okay, our focus now shifts to the next step in the project. Thinking back and noting the importance of going back to the people often becomes a bit of an afterthought.

[89]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you, gentlemen. As there are no further questions, I thank you both for giving evidence and for taking questions this morning. I welcome the report; I hope that it is thought-provoking for the organisations that it is aimed at. The ability to interact with your local authority and to have your views heard is a fundamental principle of our local democracy. A copy of the Record will be sent to you; if you believe that it contains anomalies, please raise the matter with the clerks.

10.22 a.m.

Cynnig o dan Reol Sefydlog Rhif 17.42 i Benderfynu Gwahardd y Cyhoedd
Motion under Standing Order No. 17.42 to Resolve to Exclude the Public

[90]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I invite a Member to propose the motion.

[91]   **Gwyn R. Price:** I move that

the committee resolves to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting in accordance

with Standing Order No. 17.42(vi).

[92]   **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I see that the committee is in agreement.

Derbyniwyd y cynnig.
Motion agreed.

Daeth rhan gyhoeddus y cyfarfod i ben am 10.22 a.m.
The public part of the meeting ended at 10.22 a.m.