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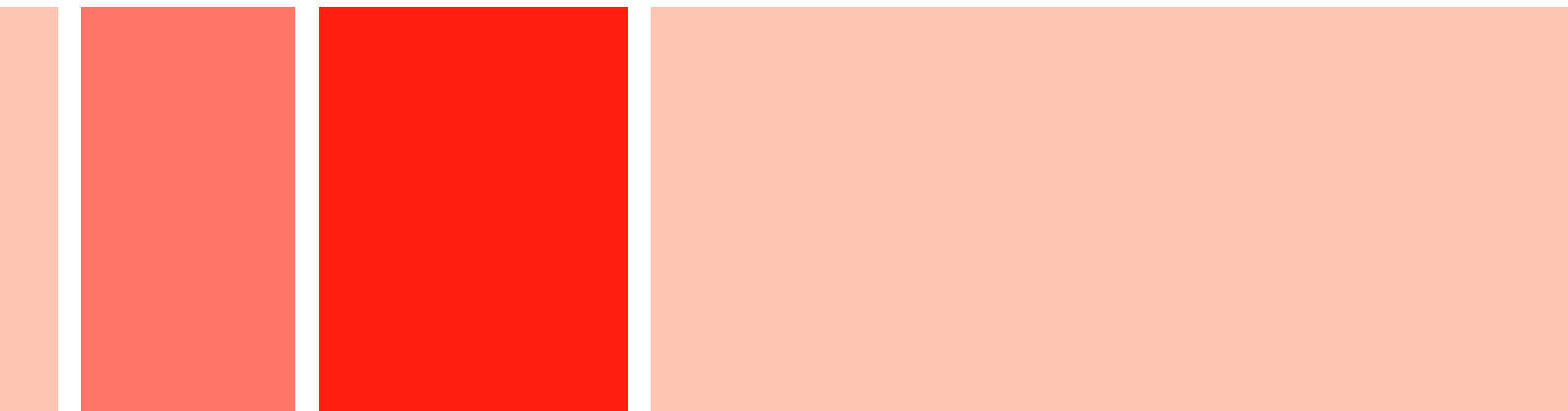
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# Evaluation of the Scrutiny Development Fund in Wales



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Dr James Downe and Dr Rachel Ashworth,  
Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Jackie McDonald

Social Research Division

Welsh Government

Cathays Park

Cardiff

CF10 3NQ

Tel: 029 20801193

Email: [jackie.mcdonald@wales.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:jackie.mcdonald@wales.gsi.gov.uk)

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

1. This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Scrutiny Development Fund (SDF) conducted by the Centre for Local & Regional Government at Cardiff Business School. The aims of the study were:
  - a. to assess to what extent the Scrutiny Development Fund has succeeded in developing more effective scrutiny in Local Government in Wales
  - b. to provide a view as to whether the Fund provided value for money
  - c. to identify and describe any issues and lessons which might have implications for the future of scrutiny development in Wales.
2. The evaluation consisted of a literature review on scrutiny development and its impact on local government, a series of stakeholder interviews, a focus group of scrutiny officers and elected members, seven case studies of SDF-funded projects and telephone interviews with authorities that had not applied for funding.

## Context

3. Developing the role of overview and scrutiny has been a challenging experience for local government across the UK. Whilst the executive arm of the new political management arrangements is working well, the overview and scrutiny function is failing to achieve its full potential and requires further development. While there have been some signs of improvement in Wales in recent years, there are a series of barriers which continue to impede its effectiveness.
4. The Scrutiny Development Fund was launched in May 2008 and provided up to £100,000 per financial year to support the improvement of local scrutiny arrangements across Wales. The Fund had the following objectives:

- improve the scrutiny culture
- develop the 'critical friend' function
- improve scrutiny of services and issues across the public sector
- promote a citizen centred approach to scrutiny
- address key barriers to effective scrutiny
- encourage collaboration between bodies
- produce sustainable benefits applicable across Wales.

### **Findings on the Scrutiny Development Fund**

5. There was an overwhelmingly positive response to the SDF with many authorities welcoming the opportunity to further boost scrutiny's capacity, profile and legitimacy. The application process was perceived to be a straight-forward one and authorities seemed to appreciate the support and guidance provided by Welsh Government officials throughout. Applicant authorities reported that the Fund would enable them to deliver a step-change in scrutiny and develop innovations within the scrutiny process whilst non-applicants were not opposed to the idea of the Fund, they pointed to a lack of capacity and timing issues in explaining their decision not to apply for SDF funding.
6. The SDF funded projects have taken a wide variety of forms from joint training events and scrutiny of external partners to commissioning and conducting in-depth research. The Fund provided an opportunity to test innovative ways of maximising scrutiny capacity and extending the role and remit of scrutiny. Funding has provided an opportunity to hasten and underpin existing projects as well as attempting in other cases to push scrutiny to the next level.
7. The Fund has had some success in helping to develop more effective scrutiny in Welsh Local Government. It gave authorities the opportunity to make a difference to the way in which scrutiny performs at relatively low cost. Interviewees were supportive of the Fund's flexible approach where ideas for projects could be designed locally according to their own priorities, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. There was some

evidence to suggest that the culture within some councils was shifting as a result of the Fund and that relationships with partners have improved but there was little evidence to suggest that the SDF had changed public attitudes.

8. One of the key objectives of the SDF was to deliver sustainable benefits across Wales. It has been difficult to estimate progress against this objective, as the impact of the Fund has been stymied by the lack of wider dissemination of knowledge from the projects. There was little evidence of a systematic dissemination strategy and interviewees and scrutiny network attendees reported ignorance of SDF projects and their outcomes
9. Interviewees expressed a concern about the future for scrutiny. In part this reflected nervousness about the challenges associated with the new Local Government Measure but also a worry about shrinking resources. In many case study authorities, member development training and development budgets had been drastically cut whilst scrutiny officer support was being reduced at a time when scrutiny is due to be given additional responsibilities. Whilst there was a clear appetite for a repeat of the SDF – likely to be especially valuable given the resource situation - it was clear that this may not be successful if it was dependent upon match-funding.

## **Recommendations**

10. *Responding to variations in scrutiny performance.* A significant issue for a future Fund is how to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny, given that councils are at different stages of scrutiny development. There is an urgent need to engage and support those councils which lacked the capacity to make an application, as additional resources are likely to make a significant impact in those circumstances. One way of addressing this may be to create a Fund which supports innovative scrutiny projects to run alongside a national capacity-building scheme which could provide bespoke development support appropriate to local need.



11. *Securing high quality scrutiny training and development.* There were mixed views on the current provision of scrutiny training and support. Several projects reported positive experiences whilst others felt that some providers were ill-informed about the Welsh context which diminished the quality of training. Interviewees – especially members - reported a lack of information regarding the potential scrutiny support available. It is clear that scrutiny officers need to invest time in the tendering process to ensure that providers deliver an appropriate and high quality product.
  
12. *A tighter specification of the fund objectives.* There is scope for Welsh Government to clearly prioritise, and further specify, objectives for a future SDF. There is potential for a future Fund to be theme-based whilst also containing an ‘open’ element to allow for the flexibility which was appreciated by applicants.
  
13. *More consistent and systematic reporting mechanisms.* A future Fund might include clearer guidelines and a standard report proforma; a strict reporting timetable for authorities; clear co-ordination between the Welsh Government and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) on dissemination; a requirement for councils to evaluate the success of their projects; and more flexibility on how and when resources could be spent.
  
14. *A clear dissemination strategy.* Responsibilities for dissemination were confused with authorities unsure as to whether they, the Welsh Government or the WLGA were responsible for dissemination. In addition to a national event hosted by the Welsh Government, most dissemination was conducted through scrutiny network meetings, but there is a question over whether these fora should be relied upon as the best vehicle for dissemination. A future Fund needs a dissemination strategy within which responsibilities are clearly specified. Such responsibilities can subsequently be incorporated within the reporting process to ensure learning is successfully transferred, thereby delivering sustainable benefits across Wales.

15. *Facilitating peer support and review.* The SDF built upon and further accelerated pre-existing processes of peer review and learning and helped to develop new relationships. Members especially seemed to benefit from the opportunity to meet counterparts and observe their practices. The Welsh Government might give more thought as to how they might more further support and facilitate these kinds of 'buddying' arrangements.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the Scrutiny Development Fund (SDF) which was commissioned by the Welsh Government from the Centre for Local & Regional Government at Cardiff Business School. The aims of the study were:
- a. to assess to what extent the Scrutiny Development Fund has succeeded in developing more effective scrutiny in Local Government in Wales
  - b. to provide a view as to whether the Fund provided value for money
  - c. to identify and describe any issues and lessons which might have implications for the future of scrutiny development in Wales.
- 1.2 The evaluation involved three main stages. The first stage consists of a review of the literature on scrutiny development and its impact on local government. This provides an overview of the 'state of play' regarding overview and scrutiny in the UK. It assesses which elements of scrutiny have been successful and also identifies the barriers facing those seeking to improve scrutiny processes, practice and outcomes – barriers which the SDF seeks to overcome. The review also assesses what approaches have been used in the UK and beyond to improve scrutiny and analyse whether these ideas could help develop scrutiny in Wales in the future.
- 1.3 The second stage of the evaluation drew upon the literature review to design a series of research tools. These included:
- interviews
  - focus group
  - case studies
  - telephone interviews.

- 1.4 We conducted six stakeholder **interviews** with a total of eight respondents from the Welsh Government, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), the Wales Audit Office and the Centre for Public Scrutiny during June 2011. These were important in deepening our understanding of the main issues to be addressed in the evaluation. They also provided an opportunity to review the findings from the literature and seek advice on which projects to visit and individuals to interview.
- 1.5 A **focus group** was carried out with members of the Mid and West Wales Regional Scrutiny Network on 17 June 2011. Twelve officers and councillors from five local authorities participated. The aim was to gather data about their perspectives on the SDF, rationales for engagement or non-engagement, knowledge of SDF projects and perceptions of whether it offered good value for money. It also provided an opportunity to discuss emerging issues and lessons which might have implications for the future of scrutiny development in Wales.
- 1.6 Seven **case study** SDF projects were selected using project reports provided by the Welsh Government (Table 1). The case studies were selected purposively to ensure the evaluation covered a cross-section of different kinds of projects. They include projects from different parts of the country over the three years in which the Fund has operated and which had different kinds of objectives and used different methods of scrutiny. A total of 43 interviews were conducted with representatives from 18 of the 22 Welsh councils. Three of the four councils not included in the research were represented when we disseminated the findings from the evaluation.

**Table 1: Summary of the case study organisations**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Project</b>	<b>Funding</b>
Blaenau Gwent	2009/10	Promoting a joint scrutiny culture	£19,674
Bridgend	2009/10	Scrutiny Timebank	£20,000
Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire National Parks	2010/11	Developing the critical friend function	£19,500
Cardiff	2008/9	Scrutiny and regulation	£22,500
Carmarthenshire	2008/9	Joint Health and Social Care Scrutiny Forum	£7,500
Rhondda Cynon Taf	2009/10	Scrutiny of the Local Service Board	£10,000
Wrexham	2008/9	Collaborative scrutiny member development programme	£7,608

1.7 The final component of stage two of the evaluation was a series of **telephone interviews** with the Heads of Scrutiny (or equivalents) in the six authorities that had not applied to the SDF to explore the reason(s) for their lack of engagement.

1.8 Stage three of the evaluation involves the dissemination and reporting of research findings and an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the SDF. Early findings were presented to the SDF project steering group

on 1 November 2011 and to the Wales Scrutiny Champions Network on 18 November 2011 attended by more than 40 officers and members from 19 councils and two national parks. This final report, together with the earlier inception report, constitutes the written outputs of the study.

## **2. Context**

2.1 Developing the role of overview and scrutiny has been a challenging experience for local government across the UK. The implementation of the Local Government Act (2000) resulted in enormous change to the way in which councils operate. Evidence suggests that the division between executive and non-executive responsibilities has proved successful in terms of providing clear and transparent political leadership. However, the effectiveness of overview and scrutiny is mixed, and concerns have been expressed about the ability of overview and scrutiny to hold executives to account, a lack of resources and officer capacity and some councillors' unwillingness to embrace the role (Ashworth and Snape, 2004; Coleman and Glendinning 2004). New responsibilities in the areas of health, crime and disorder and the scrutiny of partnerships and the wider public sector have presented further challenges. Whilst it is possible to point to many good practice examples, concerns remain about the overall effectiveness of the overview and scrutiny function. This section summarises the recent research on scrutiny and identifies the conditions for successful scrutiny.

### **The effectiveness of scrutiny across the UK**

2.2 Overview and scrutiny has been the subject of considerable policy debate and a plethora of good practice guides have been produced such as WLGA's reports on Citizen-Centred Scrutiny (2010a); the Scrutiny of Multi-Agency Partnerships (2010b); the Scrutiny of Schools and Education Issues (2009); the Scrutiny of Budgets and the Budget Setting Process (2008); and Scrutiny: Driving Performance Improvement (2007). But there is only a small pool of academic evidence on the overview and scrutiny function which includes several large scale studies (e.g. Stoker et al., 2007, Ashworth and Skelcher, 2005, 2007) and smaller

evaluations (Cole, 2001, Coleman and Glendenning, 2004, Coleman, 2006). Much of this work continues to suggest that the results of scrutiny are mixed. For example, research has identified a perception across English local government of uncertainty about the value of scrutiny (Ashworth and Skelcher, 2005; 2007) whilst those seeking to identify the predominant model of overview and scrutiny in English local government described it as 'Management Tool' – a system where scrutiny adopts an executive-driven agenda and is encouraged to review policy rather than provide internal challenge (Stoker et al., 2004). Consequently, evaluations report gloomy overall conclusions such as: 'there is still room for improvement (for scrutiny) in terms of holding the executive to account' (Ashworth and Skelcher, 2007) and 'this (scrutiny) role has taken some time to embed and that scrutiny arrangements are not as robust as executive arrangements' (Stoker et al., 2007:9).

- 2.3 Many have sought to evaluate the scrutiny function through an analysis of progress against the four main roles originally identified for overview and scrutiny by government: policy development and review, holding the executive to account, performance management and improvement and external scrutiny. Evidence here demonstrates that trying to perform multiple roles simultaneously has not been straight-forward. However, there has been some impressive work by scrutiny in the area of policy development and review (see for example the Scrutiny of Schools and Education Issues (WLGA, 2009)) although there is less evidence to suggest that scrutiny has been successful in fulfilling its key accountability role: holding the executive to account. There is a continued debate around scrutiny's role in the improvement agenda. Some argue that there is a lack of a clear distinction between the role of scrutiny and regulation and a need for a rapprochement between the two whilst evidence suggests scrutiny of performance is not always systematic or sufficiently challenging. The external scrutiny agenda has been significantly advanced and there are now many examples of external scrutiny being successful and making an impact. However, there is also quite a degree of confusion and trepidation about how far



local government overview and scrutiny can go in holding other organisations to account. Scrutiny has also been under increasing pressure to be 'citizen-centred' with several authorities rising to this challenge but others failing to progress this aspect of the agenda. Overall, Coleman and Glendenning argue that effective scrutiny – whether conducted internally or externally – will depend on three factors: independence, access to information and appropriate support and training' (2004: 32).

### **The effectiveness of scrutiny in Wales**

- 2.4 Research on scrutiny in Wales has tended to echo results of research conducted in the rest of the UK. The most recent large-scale study revealed evidence of improvement within individual councils and, moreover, several national partners felt that scrutiny had developed significantly (CRG, 2007). There were a number of benefits identified in relation to the overview and scrutiny process, such as an evidence-based approach, better team-working between officers and members and the sourcing of additional expertise. However, the key conclusion was that, overall, scrutiny in Wales (as in the rest of the UK) was failing to achieve its full potential with almost all interviewees (national and local) identifying scrutiny as the element of the post-2000 arrangements that was working least well with phrases such as 'under-developed' and 'under-powered' often used.
- 2.5 Furthermore, few councillors or officers could point to concrete examples of effective scrutiny. Scrutiny of performance was deemed to be patchy and not sufficiently challenging and it was felt that overview and scrutiny committees could make more use of Wales Audit Office reports, risk assessments and so on. Some authorities were conducting wider public service scrutiny but for most it remained a marginal activity and concerns were expressed about whether scrutinising external agencies could have a negative impact on partnership working arrangements. In terms of exercising the local accountability function, few councillors

believed that scrutiny provided an effective set of checks and balances or offered a means of securing greater public accountability with interviewees speaking of the need to develop a more open culture within local authorities which is more receptive to internal questioning, challenge and requests for information via scrutiny. A large number of councillors reported that they felt disengaged from, and disillusioned with, the overview and scrutiny role. Finally, whilst it was clear that several councils had made real efforts to involve the public in scrutiny with some success, overall, there was little evidence of public engagement in overview and scrutiny, with information provided to the public limited largely to details of committee meetings.

2.6 Policy reviews and reports came to similar conclusions. For example, the Beecham Review (WAG, 2006) argued that effective, respected and proactive scrutiny was vital to the achievement of citizen centred governance and service delivery in Wales. But it concluded that existing approaches were retrospective and too narrowly focused on local authority services. A need was identified for more training and technical support for scrutineers, increased public engagement in scrutiny processes and a greater emphasis on issues which cut across organisational boundaries. In 2009, the Assembly's Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee made a series of recommendations for improving scrutiny and built upon the earlier report of the (then) Local Government and Public Services Committee in 2004. The report acknowledged the considerable efforts made by the Assembly, WLGA and other interested parties to support the role of overview and scrutiny but concluded that 'the role of scrutiny generally needs to be developed and strengthened further' (WAG, 2009: 28).

2.7 To summarise, the following conditions for successful scrutiny have been identified:

- engaged, competent and skilled scrutiny committee chairs and members

- sufficient resourcing
- appropriate officer support
- responsive executives
- intra and inter-organizational learning and transfer of good practice.

2.8 It is clear that, across Wales, as in the rest of the UK, scrutiny varies in terms of its effectiveness but as Coleman and Glendenning argue 'effective scrutiny needs resources' (2004: 35). In England, a number of Government-led schemes have been developed which seek to encourage innovation in scrutiny and support authorities in securing improvements and developing good practice. For example, the Centre for Public Scrutiny was funded by the Department of Health to support the implementation of health, care and well-being scrutiny. The funding allowed for bespoke consultancy support and advice, along with financial support for 26 innovative and creative scrutiny projects on topics such as 'healthy communities' and 'independence without isolation'. In addition, CfPS received separate funding over a five year period in order to support creative and innovative scrutiny reviews on topics such as 'winter deaths and fuel poverty', 'practice-based commissioning and 'caravan and trailer park residents'.

2.9 For this reason, the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government launched the SDF in May 2008. Its objectives reflect the key barriers to scrutiny identified above:

- improve the scrutiny culture
- develop the 'critical friend' function
- improve scrutiny of services and issues across the public sector
- promote a citizen centred approach to scrutiny
- address key barriers to effective scrutiny
- encourage collaboration between bodies
- produce sustainable benefits applicable across Wales.

2.10 The Fund provided up to £100,000 per financial year to support the improvement of local scrutiny arrangements across Wales. It was hoped that projects would ‘stimulate significant changes to the scrutiny culture within local Councils, other public sector and partner bodies, and amongst the public’ (WAG, 2008). The Welsh Government has spent approximately £220,000 on the SDF since 2008 and the majority of local authorities have applied.

2.11 Since December 2009, the Welsh Government has been preparing for the introduction of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011. This measure outlines a number of ways in which overview and scrutiny can be further developed. The measure includes provisions to facilitate successful joint scrutiny exercises and also strengthen scrutiny of the wider public service through a provision to scrutinise ‘designated persons’. The measure also further encourages the involvement of the public in scrutiny, whilst acknowledging the challenges this may entail. Further, the councillor call for action facility is being extended to Welsh local government. In addition, political group whipping at overview and scrutiny is discouraged and there is a provision to ensure that scrutiny chair positions are allocated in proportion to political representation. Finally, the legislation hopes to secure a greater involvement from co-optees.

## **Conclusions**

2.12 This section has presented an overview of the research on the effectiveness of scrutiny. It is clear that the implementation of the Local Government Act (2000) presented a challenge for local authorities across the UK. Whilst the executive arm of the new political arrangements is working well, evidence suggests that the overview and scrutiny function still requires further development. Data on scrutiny in Welsh local government indicates that there are signs of improvement since the report of the Local Government and Public Services

Committee's enquiry in 2004 (CRG, 2007). However, research also identifies a series of barriers which continue to impede the effective operation of overview and scrutiny in Welsh local government and demonstrates that scrutiny continues to suffer from a lack of legitimacy. The SDF sought to achieve a step change in the effectiveness of scrutiny and to minimise the impact of the barriers identified above. The following sections of the report outlines whether these objectives have been achieved.

### **3. Findings on the Scrutiny Development Fund**

3.1 This section reports on the findings of the interviews with key stakeholders, a focus group of officers and members, the case studies of seven SDF projects and telephone interviews with non-applicant authorities.

3.2 We asked them for their views on a range of issues which included:

- their initial response to the idea of a SDF
- the application process
- the reasons why authorities applied/did not apply for funding
- the experience of managing and delivering an SDF project
- learning points emerging from the process.

#### **The aim of the Fund**

3.3 Interviewees understood the objectives of the Fund. It aimed to 'raise the level of scrutiny up to a new level' (Int 1) by 'trying to get some innovation and creative thinking' (Int 2). There was a view from some of the more progressive local authorities that if the scrutiny process was going to be improved, the Welsh Government needed to lead an initiative to provide it with some credibility and attach some resources. The Fund had strong ministerial backing, since the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government was a keen supporter of local government scrutiny and wanted to see it extended to wider public services.

3.4 The underlying premise of the Fund was to facilitate innovation in scrutiny and to unleash some of the existing enthusiasm to change current scrutiny practice. As one interviewee explained, 'It's actually stimulating thoughts, and different ways of doing things, and projects

and just giving people that freedom and flexibility to be able to do it. So unless you do that yourself, you're never going to build capacity up. It helps to build capacity of everyone' (Int 3). It was not originally intended that SDF projects should facilitate training and development, although almost all projects involved an element of capacity-building.

- 3.5 The response from local authorities to the idea of the Fund was largely very positive. One member of the focus group thought that 'it was a good idea. I wondered why they'd taken so long to set up a development fund' (Int 4), especially as a number of policy documents (such as the Beecham Review and Making the Connections) had made commitments to strengthen scrutiny. The response from another officer was, 'We were very excited because we take any opportunity to raise the profile and strengthen scrutiny and we regard it as an opportunity to do that and raise the profile within the Council, [and] outside the Council' (Int 5).
- 3.6 Views on the Fund reflected the low profile of scrutiny within some authorities. One officer explained that, 'for those authorities that were on the learning curve for scrutiny, there was some real benefit to being able to get money externally in order to develop' (Int 7). This was certainly the case in one of our case studies where an officer believed that, 'Hopefully those authorities where scrutiny is a bit of a Cinderella service, [it will] demonstrate that by putting a bit of money into something, they see the added value from it' (Int 5). For another authority, it was about giving scrutiny a further push, 'I think that the funding will actually give Scrutiny an opportunity of getting out of a lorry crawl out into the fast lane' (Int 13). For some authorities, however, the amount of resource was not necessarily the issue, rather, the fund was of symbolic value as it was important that the Welsh Government was devoting some resource to scrutiny. In the words of one officer, 'WAG were putting money where the talk was' (Int 5).

## **The application process**

- 3.7 The application process was designed to minimise bureaucracy so that it was as simple as possible to apply. According to one interviewee, 'We tried to make it robust but not onerous to apply for it because it was tiny amounts of money that they were applying for' (Int 3).
- 3.8 As the Welsh Government weren't initially 'overwhelmed by enthusiasm from local authorities' (Int 1), a Welsh Government official was proactive in visiting scrutiny network events to 'sell' the Fund and visited councils to discuss their application. One officer described a process where there was 'quite a lot of support and guidance...I think it was quite clear where the projects had to be targeted at. I don't think you could ...set up something which was totally out on a limb to what WAG expected' (Int 5). This contact was clearly welcomed by authorities with one officer saying that the official 'gave us some tips really on what they were looking for, which helped us to maybe word the bids to kind of tick the boxes. So it was all fairly straightforward really in terms of completing the paperwork' (Int 4). The Panel which decided on the merit of applications asked for a number of applications to be amended before funding was received.
- 3.9 An unusual feature of the application process was that the Leader, chief executive and Chair of Scrutiny had to sign-off each application. There was a high level of support for this idea as 'there's no point in scrutiny development unless the executive is up for it' (Int 7). We did not hear of any instances where an application was blocked by the executive.
- 3.10 As this evaluation focused mainly on authorities that had been successful in gaining SDF funding, it is not surprising that views on the application process were largely positive. There were however, suggestions for improving it. The main criticism of the application process was that the timescales for the first round were pretty short, so



'you really had to bust a gut to get the application in' (Int 4). There were also complaints about the co-funding that the application required as this 'limited the amount of funding that we applied for' (Int 6). The Fund was launched at a time of tight budgetary constraints and a number of authorities struggled to find the 40% co-funding. As one officer explained, 'I think the difficulty was that like all councils, we saw where we were going in terms of finance and I do not want to put my boss in the position of over-committing when we could potentially be making people redundant' (Int 5). Another applicant suggested that the Welsh Government should have had a more structured approach to the application process. A template could have been used to ease the comparison of project applications.

3.11 A more important criticism of the application process was whether there was a need for a competitive process at all, as all applicants to the SDF received funding. This was the result of a 'happy coincidence [where the bids] didn't exceed the amount of funds that were available' (Int 1), although another interviewee admitted that 'we wanted to be seen to be supporting all of them' (Int 3). One officer was frustrated that the projects were not awarded according to merit 'when it first came out we thought, oh gosh we've got to aim really high and come up with something mega, mega amazing to get this money' (Int 12) but in effect they could have drafted something pretty quickly and still received the money.

3.12 Generally, the view from those authorities which applied was that the application process was straight-forward. One officer concluded that, 'I didn't think it was bureaucratic. It's not often you can say that about the Welsh Government' (Int 15).

### **Why authorities applied**

3.13 A pot of money with only limited strings attached was an offer that the majority of Welsh scrutiny teams accepted with open arms. Scrutiny practitioners have often complained in the past of being under-

resourced, so this was an opportunity not to be missed. For one officer, 'It's easy to say that we need to strengthen scrutiny, but like a lot of authorities, it comes down to money cos the resources weren't there. And I think this has helped' (Int 5). In another authority, the Fund was 'seen as quite a high profile, good thing to be doing and I think there's always a tendency in local government if there's a grant available you must go for it' (Int 4).

3.14 For a number of case study authorities, the funding allowed them to do something that they would not have been able to achieve without the SDF. One officer nicely summarised this view by saying that, 'All pots of money I think are opportunities for doing something that you couldn't normally do, and the projects that we looked at were a piece of sort of qualitative research work that we didn't have the capacity to do within the team ...and something that we could do that would improve [the council's] reputation on the national stage as well' (Int 9).

3.15 Another respondent suggested that, 'The main reason we applied for the Fund, because we thought that it was a really good way of joint working and it hadn't been done before and also because we just didn't have the funds to do all we were planning to do. We didn't need an awful lot, but in [name of council] we don't have a huge budget in terms of available spend. We've got the funding in place for staff, but that's about it really' (Int 6).

3.16 Ultimately, authorities applied because it increased the chance of making things happen and leading to improved outcomes. As with all award schemes, potential applicants carefully considered the balance of time spent applying for the money and the benefits this resource could bring. A chief executive explained that, 'I'll embrace any concept, any idea if I can see that actually there's going to be some product at the end of it... Where is this going to go? What's it going to be all about? Can I see the value of it? Was I convinced?' (Int 13). The answer was 'yes' and the council made an application.

## **Why authorities did not apply**

- 3.17 There are six authorities which did not make an application for funding. The main reason for not applying was a lack of capacity. For smaller authorities with limited resources, there was little capacity to develop a project proposal, let alone deliver a project. In one council, there was only one dedicated scrutiny officer, no dedicated scrutiny budget for the 40% co-funding and no-one to lead the project. Another council submitted an application but did not have the desire to make the requested changes requested by the Panel.
- 3.18 Linked to the issue of capacity was a concern from some authorities that they needed to focus on 'the day job' rather than making an application. The following three quotes make this point very clearly: 'We needed to know we were doing OK internally', 'I wanted to get our own house in order before I started any collaborative work with anyone else', and 'I sat down with the chief executive and we decided that we weren't ready to apply'. Plus the timing of the Fund was not convenient for several authorities as 'We are under the cosh at the moment from inspectors' and in 'the first year we weren't really ready to look at how can we add value or make a difference really' (Int 8).
- 3.19 A common complaint concerned the trade-off between the perceived time taken to complete an application and the relatively small pay-off. As one officer remarked, 'There's an awful lot of work for what the funding is likely to be. What's the point?' Another officer agreed that 'given the amount of money and the general faff of external funding, it wasn't really a particularly attractive option' (Int 4). One officer 'was concerned about lots of work needed to put an application together', although he later acknowledged that he had not even looked at the application process! Finally, the resource was perceived by one authority to be too small to do anything useful with.

3.20 Some non-applicant authorities realised that the Fund did not cover what they wanted or needed to develop scrutiny. In some cases, this was additional staff. In others, training and development was required but in the second round of the Fund, the Welsh Government was reluctant to award projects based purely on training.

3.21 In conclusion, the research findings suggest that there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the SDF with many authorities welcoming the opportunity to further boost scrutiny's capacity, profile and legitimacy. The application process was perceived to be a straight-forward one and authorities seemed to appreciate the support and guidance provided by Welsh Government officials throughout. Applicant authorities reported that the Fund would enable them to deliver a step-change in scrutiny and develop innovations within the scrutiny process whilst non-applicants were not opposed to the idea of the Fund, they pointed to a lack of capacity and timing issues in explaining their decision not to apply for SDF funding.

## **4. Has the Fund achieved its' objectives?**

4.1 The SDF had seven objectives which were to:

- improve the scrutiny culture
- develop the 'critical friend' function
- improve scrutiny of services and issues across the public sector
- promote a citizen centred approach to scrutiny
- address key barriers to effective scrutiny
- encourage collaboration between bodies
- produce sustainable benefits applicable across Wales.

4.2 Given that the aim of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the SDF had succeeded in helping to develop more effective scrutiny, we have structured our research findings around these objectives. They were not ranked in order of importance but clearly some were perceived to be more important – and achievable - than others. For example, improving the scrutiny culture, improving scrutiny of services across the public sector and encouraging collaboration between bodies were perceived to be easier to achieve. Whereas promoting citizen centred approach to scrutiny and addressing key barriers to effective scrutiny were seen to be more challenging.

### **Improve the scrutiny culture**

4.3 This objective was regarded by one interviewee as being the most important. 'Surely that's the only objective you need...Cos if you do that it will be a critical friend, it will be cross-public sector, it will be public focused etc.' (Int 7). A number of interviewees thought that the scrutiny culture in their local authority had been improved. For example, in one case study project, a core of elected members interpreted their scrutiny role in relation to their electoral mandate and had concentrated solely on scrutinising internal council affairs.

- 4.4 An SDF project which focussed on conducting scrutiny with external partners began to change the perceptions of members who are now more enthusiastic and confident about scrutinising across public sector boundaries and holding external organisations to account. The authority also benefited from learning about the ways in which others conduct their scrutiny and have improved their practice as a result. An officer explained that, 'If they're looking at a particular issue, they won't just do a desktop exercise, we'll take them out and we'll show them what the issues are and...they'll talk to people who are experiencing issues' (Int 6).
- 4.5 In another authority, shifts in the scrutiny culture have developed more rapidly as a result of the Fund. 'We've been able to accelerate, and having that rigour that maybe you wouldn't otherwise have had... the quality of the work which has been produced to date probably wouldn't have been where it is without that support' (Int 13).
- 4.6 In one project, there had been a mutually beneficial improvement in scrutiny culture as a result of a partnership between two councils. A council with a strong track record in the delivery of effective scrutiny provided a range of support to another which included work shadowing and opportunities to develop skills. Officers had the opportunity to run a scrutiny inquiry in the partnering authority so that both sides could get a sense as to how different organisations functioned. 'What we got out of that was really superb staff development...I don't doubt that scrutiny in [this council] actually also improved through starting to see what was happening elsewhere' (Int 7).
- 4.7 In addition to improving the culture of scrutiny within councils, there were instances of impacts on other organisations. In one SDF project, training was delivered on preparing elected members and stakeholders on the implications of the Local Government Measure. These events were said to have assisted a number of outside organisations - which included

health boards, the voluntary sector, the police and the fire service - to understand the role of scrutiny and their part in it. Similarly, projects which involved conducting joint scrutiny with non-elected members had resulted in improved awareness of scrutiny amongst public service and third sector partners.

- 4.8 To conclude, respondents from each SDF project identified examples of where the scrutiny culture had improved. Benefits were identified in terms of wider public service partner organisations. 'Buddying' either on an individual or organisational basis, seems to have been particularly successful. This is a ripe area for future development as there is potential for both parties to benefit. However, there is a question about the degree to which culture change can be achieved and sustained. There remains a strong possibility that local authorities, members and officers may revert back to previous patterns and behaviours once an SDF project has come to an end. In most cases, it was too soon to assess whether culture change has been achieved. In the meantime, it will be important for local authorities, the Welsh Government and others to act quickly and build upon these perceived successes and further develop the scrutiny culture in Wales.

**PROMOTING A JOINT SCRUTINY CULTURE - BLAENAU GWENT, CAERPHILLY, MERTHYR TYDFIL AND TORFAEN.**

**Context**

The Local Government Measure outlined the option where two or more local authorities could set up a joint overview and scrutiny committee.

**The project**

It aimed to build relationships with partners, to raise awareness of the role of scrutiny and identify the benefits and barriers of joint scrutiny. It was undertaken jointly between Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil and Torfaen.

**Reflections**

Training sessions were held across the four authorities and were attended by officers and members and representatives from health, the police and fire service, and voluntary sector

organisations. The individual authorities may not have been able to afford to run these events on their own.

A small sample group of participants were interviewed. One officer was convinced that 'You've got to invest in the training and you've got to invest in good, quality training'. The training events were said to have been useful for members as they improved understanding of how to scrutinise other public service providers. One member enjoyed the small group learning and the chance to learn not only from members in other authorities but also from partners on the consequences of decisions taken at scrutiny. He explained that 'Scrutiny in isolation is a dangerous thing so we need to be aware...of the need to engage with outside bodies or partners if you're...going to make a recommendation that's really going to impact people's time and effort. So that was really good'.

Following feedback at one of the early training sessions, a review of the facilitation arrangements was undertaken and the remainder of the sessions were delivered by an officer from one of the councils rather than an external facilitator.

### **Outcomes**

Feedback from the events was largely positive with four out of five participants feeling that the content of the sessions were either good or excellent. Two interviewees suggested that there were poor levels of councillor attendance at some sessions.

The councils' report on the project concluded that 'there is an appetite for working together in terms of scrutiny' and suggested that the project had helped to set foundations for future joint training and scrutiny.

A report was produced at the end of the project which summarised the learning from the project and highlighted the benefits from joint scrutiny. A member found this document really useful, 'I still use that, I still refer to that'.

## **Develop the 'critical friend' function**

4.9 Several interviewees reported that their SDF project had helped to strengthen and develop the critical friend aspect of scrutiny. In many authorities, these claims were evidenced with reference to capacity-building and training and development sessions which were aimed at fine-tuning members' questioning skills.



4.10 Considerable attention was devoted to thinking through the role of scrutiny within the National Parks project. In this context, all members constitute the Park Authority and therefore make decisions. Whilst members have responded positively and enthusiastically to conducting scrutiny, conceiving 'critical friend' challenge here has been especially difficult with attention now turning to the most appropriate way to incorporate scrutiny within existing, and predominantly decision-making, structures.

4.11 For others, the SDF projects have also necessitated a re-conceptualisation of scrutiny and a re-interpretation of the critical friend role. This was especially the case for those focusing their attentions on external organisations and partnership bodies, such as Local Service Boards. In these instances, a softer more collaborative approach to scrutiny was adopted with frequent references to local authority scrutiny as the constructive critical friend.

## **CASE STUDY 2: DEVELOPING THE CRITICAL FRIEND FUNCTION IN THE NATIONAL PARKS**

### **Context**

The National Park authorities have not traditionally had a formal responsibility to conduct scrutiny but in anticipation of the Local Government Measure, Brecon Beacons and Pembrokeshire National Parks decided to explore the potential for conducting scrutiny.

### **The project**

The project aimed to 'introduce a culture of scrutiny into two National Park authorities...in order to produce a sustainable model that can be applied to authorities across Wales and disseminated more widely...as a tool for improving services to the Parks' communities and visitors and delivering on core purposes'.

The project was ambitious in scope and involved a wide range of activities. An initial set of workshops was held with members to explore the potential for joint-working, followed by an extensive set of training events which involved building capacity, buddying with members of different authorities, observing scrutiny in a variety of contexts and developing questioning skills. One facilitator worked with members throughout and described the project as 'the most

interesting and positive work' she had ever been involved in. Members then selected a topic for a pilot review – the analysis of Sustainable Development Fund expenditure – which was undertaken collaboratively. Following the review, Methodology was developed for the second review of the rights of way network.

### **Reflections**

The project revealed that the concept of scrutiny was helpful and could be applied within the National Park context to make the authorities more 'outward-looking' - 'it was certainly worth exploring how the philosophy of scrutiny could be implemented in the National Parks...and could drive better performance management and more active member challenge'. It was felt that scrutiny was important in order to improve accountability but also to assist the authorities in improving their performance.

However, there were concerns amongst officers and members as to 'how we develop an effective model for scrutiny'. The project prompted debates about whether a specific scrutiny committee should be established comprising a set of members who would be charged with conducting in-depth reviews or whether scrutiny should be incorporated within existing structures – for example, within the remit of audit committees. A further issue concerned the level of commitment that members and officers could reasonably be expected to deliver in relation to scrutiny. Without provision for additional scrutiny resource - especially officer capacity - it was perceived to be difficult to see how in-depth reviews could be conducted on a regular basis.

### **Outcomes**

The WLGA are currently undertaking an evaluation of this project but it is possible to identify some early outcomes. National Park authority members and officers made a significant time commitment to this project, engaged with an extensive training programme and conducted two scrutiny reviews. This provided the opportunity to develop a template and terms of reference specific to National Park scrutiny. There are still concerns, however, about how ambitious the Parks can be in terms of conducting scrutiny. Scrutiny activity has to be 'proportionate' and there are still major question marks over resourcing. One unanimous outcome was that members and officers had highly valued the opportunity to compare experiences and practices with those from different authorities.

## **Improve the scrutiny of services and issues across the public sector**

4.12 Improving the scrutiny of public service providers was one of the main features of the Fund. The Welsh Government was clear that it would

look favourably on projects which scrutinised services which were not delivered directly by the local authority. A small number of projects focussed upon addressing 'wicked issues' such as domestic abuse and homelessness which involved working with a number of partner organisations. Some officers recognised that this objective was politically salient and therefore were attracted to developing a project which would be leading the way. 'I think it's put us in a far better place to move forward as well, because obviously – we've made some of the hard yards quite quickly really' (Int 13).

4.13 Perhaps there have not been more examples of this type of scrutiny because of the nervousness and reluctance on the part of some councils to look externally. It was clear also that in some cases where authorities were at different stages regarding the development of scrutiny, the focus was on improving internal scrutiny prior to engaging in externally-focused activities.

#### **CASE STUDY 3: SCRUTINY OF RHONDDA CYNON TAF'S LOCAL SERVICE BOARD**

##### **Context**

In the absence of any clearly defined process for effective and efficient scrutiny of Local Service Boards, RCT's project scrutinised one of the LSB's key priorities - Tackling Domestic Abuse in order to further develop its own understanding and establish a set of principles for LSB scrutiny.

##### **The project**

A cross-party working group was set up to establish whether the LSB's Domestic Abuse Action Plan was robust and if it was leading to improved service outcomes. The group consisted of a mix of councillors and representatives from the South Wales Police Authority, the voluntary sector and Cwm Taf Health Board. Each scrutiny member had voting rights, including partners, but a vote has not been necessary to date. According to one partner, the group was 'not council-dominated'.

The partner representatives received a presentation on the role of scrutiny, prior to the group's inaugural meeting and the whole group received two days training on the challenges of partnership working and scrutiny of multi-agency partnerships. The group met on eleven occasions.

Members of the working group reviewed evidence from a wide range of sources (including the Kafka process) and interviewed more than a dozen key witnesses from across the public sector. They conducted site visits and met people who were heavily involved in the whole of the process, including victims.

### **Reflections**

According to one participant, it really helped to 'tackle a real project' rather than just a desktop-type study. The Kafka work was seen to be ground-breaking and had a high-profile in Wales. Scrutiny provided an opportunity to take a step back from the issue and to be objective about what processes could be introduced or revised in order to achieve better outcomes.

One of the most significant problems was the fast-moving agenda. By the time the scrutiny group recommended changes to the Action Plan, the LSB had already made improvements.

The project provided the opportunity to scope scrutiny of LSBs. The domestic abuse objective was 'a vehicle to help people understand the complexities of the different organisations involved'. While there was real learning from looking at the issue, there was also wider generic learning of how a LSB should conduct itself.

### **Outcomes**

The working group produced a report and made a series of recommendations to the LSB. This report was presented to the council's overview & scrutiny committee.

The LSB has taken a number of actions to address the problem of domestic abuse and a number of mini-reviews will be undertaken which will lead to further improvements. The culture within the LSB was described as being 'very open' so it is likely that they will recognise the issues that have been raised and look to address them.

It was clear that this kind of scrutiny is likely to generate outcomes that will not directly benefit the authority but nevertheless will be important to the wider public: 'Partnership work is not easy...It is important to keep the end goal in mind (i.e. better outcomes for service users) as it can sometimes be difficult to accept that the organisation that invests in an initiative is not necessarily the organisation that benefits' (RCT, 2011: 9).

## **Promote a citizen centred approach to scrutiny**

4.14 This was the objective that was perceived to be most difficult to achieve. Consequently, few respondents suggested their project had any impact in this area. In one case study, interviewees pointed to the terms of reference for the Joint Health and Social Care Scrutiny Forum, which were 'to make sure that the Local Service Board is operating effectively with a citizen focus in relation to health and social care services. The forum will look at activities from a citizen perspective'. In another authority, a project on domestic abuse which used the Kafka approach, examined services from the citizens' perspective.

4.15 Interviewees largely agreed with the principle of scrutiny being citizen centred and some drew a distinction between a citizen-centred approach and citizen engagement in the process. However, most discussion centred on citizen involvement in scrutiny although it was recognised that efforts 'trying to get the public to engage in scrutiny and to get interest is painfully difficult' (Int 8). It was clear that participatory techniques are increasingly being used e.g. interviewing people with an interest in the subject area and holding meetings in the community, but these have often been met with poor attendance. One member explained that, 'There was something coming up about the IT centre. I actually held [a scrutiny meeting] in the IT centre. I thought people in the area would be interested and three people turned up' (Int 16).

4.16 Interviewees suggested that the public were more likely to engage on matters that impact directly upon them such as a closure of a school or hospital. 'I think it... is going to be dependent entirely on what's being scrutinised. You can go to most scrutiny committees in County Hall and you won't see anybody in the public gallery, hardly a soul. Yet the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered car parking charges. The place was packed' (Int 18). The answer from one officer's perspective was clear, 'I feel that public participation is probably more

about looking at a particular topic and getting the public to come in and talk about that particular issue and how it affects them. So we tend to do it on a task and finish basis' (Int 6).

4.17 There was some concern about the usefulness of engaging with citizens in the scrutiny process. While there was support for gathering evidence from those organisations affected by the policies and strategies and actions of the local authority, one elected member had 'more difficulty in the, 'Open it up to citizens'. I have great difficulty to grasp exactly how that can be sort of managed and reported' (Int 18). This view was supported by another member who said that, 'It's a strange paradoxical thing to say, but I don't think elected members like the citizen centred one. When I think about it as a politician, I think well what does it mean...I don't see this citizen centred emphasis very well. It's almost as if I've got dark glasses on' (Int 10).

4.18 Finally, there was a perception that if the Welsh Government was keen on making scrutiny more citizen-centred, there is an opportunity to do so through the Measure. 'If they really want citizen engagement in democracy, they could give them a mechanism to do so e.g. 'All 22 authorities, you will have a public engagement session at the outset' (Int 18).

<p><b>JOINT HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY FORUM – CARMARTHENSHIRE</b></p> <p><b>Context</b></p> <p>The council wanted to strengthen the relationships with their partners and promote a more joined-up approach to the scrutiny of health and social care issues within the county.</p> <p><b>The project</b></p> <p>The aim of the Joint Scrutiny Forum is to make sure that the Local Service Board (LSB) is operating effectively with a citizen focus in relation to health and social care services.</p> <p>The Forum is composed of members from the council's Health and Social Care scrutiny committee and Carmarthenshire Community Health Council (CHC). Meetings were held on a quarterly basis around the county and scrutinised issues of common interest of the two</p>
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organisations. Member development sessions were also delivered to enhance the knowledge of members.

### **Reflections**

The project received only a small amount of funding but this was enough to bring the two organisations together and start a work programme. 'There is no doubt that without the Fund...we wouldn't be in this position today'. The funding helped to give the Forum its own identity and the use of neutral venues has ensured that it wasn't seen as either a council or CHC initiative but a joint venture.

An officer explained that they had to focus on the softer elements and culture issues at the beginning in order to lay foundation for future work. 'The emphasis of the project was very much on relationship building'.

Officers had planned to conduct a mapping of performance management arrangements across health and social care but discovered that a lot of this work had already been undertaken, so the Forum focused more on investigative scrutiny.

The members received some training on how scrutiny operated in England and this 'really opened their eyes in terms of what this forum could deliver and I think it helped the members'.

### **Outcomes**

The Forum has monitored service performance and been used as a sounding board on significant policies and strategies. It has also selected issues to scrutinise in greater detail (e.g. dementia services). A number of development sessions on the subject have been delivered, evidence has been gathered from various experts in the field and site visits have taken place. The Forum recently held an event designed specifically to listen to the experiences of people who care for loved ones with dementia and how they would like to see services develop in the future.

It was judged to be too soon to identify concrete outcomes although interviewees were confident that recommendations would be adopted by the LSB. It was argued that the Forum has laid the foundations for future regional work on health and social care.

The test-bed for the success of the Forum will be the extent to which their recommendations on service areas such as dementia and mental health are received by the Local Service Board and whether or not they are implemented.

Some authorities have expressed an interest in the work of the Forum and there is a need for learning to be further disseminated.

## **Address key barriers to effective scrutiny**

- 4.19 The Welsh Government did not outline what they perceived to be the key barriers but interviewees were consistent in their identification of impediments to scrutiny. Overall, there were two kinds of barriers – ones which related to individuals and others which were prevalent at the organisational level.
- 4.20 We heard that the quality, capability and capacity of individual scrutiny members (and particularly committee chairs) was impeding effective scrutiny in some councils. The experience in one council was disheartening, ‘they rely on officers – they’re almost thinking perhaps it’s the officer’s job to get involved on scrutiny challenges’ (Int 11). In another council, an officer believed that ‘a lot of members are still quite, well unaware really of their powers, and roles and responsibilities’ (Int 5). Some members were also critical of their colleagues, ‘I don’t think a lot of councillors really understand what [scrutiny] is about’ and ‘there’s only a certain number who turn up regularly’ (Int 16).
- 4.21 Where a council has a few (or even one) committed individuals, they can be crucial in driving improvements in scrutiny. These members often act as the champion for scrutiny within the authority and also externally. ‘We struck lucky with [name of person] and we struck lucky with [another person]. And I think a lot of this is down to people who are committed to it, enthusiastic about it and willing to overcome the barriers which you do face’ (Int 5).
- 4.22 Interviewees also revealed a small number of key organisational barriers. One officer was clear in identifying the factors limiting effective scrutiny, ‘Three things have to be right. Resourcing, timing and culture’ (Int 7). In one well-performing council, extra resources for scrutiny could always be found as ‘we’ve adopted this attitude of not wanting to effectively curtail scrutiny by applying a guillotine. “The money’s all



gone. Sorry chaps.” Because if something’s important we should be getting on with it’ (Int 13).

- 4.23 However, this was not the case for most authorities, with resources allocated to scrutiny being the most frequently mentioned barrier. This is significant as ‘if you actually haven’t got the right level of resource to go off and look at something in detail, then it’s not going to be effective’ (Int 7). If additional resource was available, one council reported that they would devote more time to research so that they could look at what other authorities are doing, give members something to get their teeth into and run development sessions. In another authority, the focus would be on greater public engagement (different types of consultation, focus groups etc) to try and get the public interested.
- 4.24 Others argued that expectations of scrutiny should be more realistic. A two-hour meeting every six weeks with limited research undertaken between meetings is unlikely to lead to significant improvements in public service. One member stated that he would like to have more frequent meetings to drill down on issues in greater detail.
- 4.25 Another significant barrier to scrutiny was the relationship between scrutiny and the executive. Numerous interviewees highlighted the view that the executive needs to understand the positive role and value that scrutiny can play. This varied significantly across authorities but also within councils where one executive member might operate in an open and constructive manner and work with scrutiny, whilst another executive member chose to ignore scrutiny. The same was said to be true of officers.
- 4.26 It was suggested that barriers might be reduced if there was a change in emphasis in terms of capacity-building. One officer explained that ‘far too much effort is placed on developing scrutiny members, scrutiny committee and scrutiny techniques, and if you want really good scrutiny, the first thing you should do is spend time developing executives’

understanding of what it is to be held to account...If you can do that, you can then start to develop really good scrutiny' (Int 7). Similarly, rather than rolling out 'best practice' to scrutiny practitioners, more could be done to 'change the chief executives' view of scrutiny' (Int 15).

4.27 Party politics was also identified as a barrier to effective scrutiny.

Scrutiny teams in some authorities had clearly tried hard to remove politics from scrutiny but this is a very difficult task. An officer was realistic about the situation in her authority, 'There's no getting around the fact that you can ask people to be independently minded...[but] we know they're in their group meetings on the Monday' (Int 12). The executive needs to be mature enough to use scrutiny before decisions are taken and 'if you can crack that cross party working, then you would have this basis for good scrutiny' (Int 4).

4.28 The barriers to effective scrutiny are long-standing. So, according to one interviewee, 'It's time to stop pretending this is young' (Int 7). If a new fund was launched, it would be sensible to focus resources on mitigating the key barriers to effective scrutiny.

#### **CASE STUDY 5: BRIDGEND SCRUTINY TIMEBANK PROJECT**

##### **Context**

This project developed in response to a sense that scrutiny teams are becoming increasingly stretched as scrutiny's remit continues to expand in Wales. There was a consensus for an online resource to support scrutiny in Wales to avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. Whilst scrutiny officers and members were positive about CfPS, there is a view that, somewhat understandably, most material on the CfPS website is English-centric.

##### **The project**

The project aimed to develop a new and innovative national scrutiny resource, to encourage collaboration amongst local authorities and to facilitate the sharing of scrutiny best practice. It would provide an online depository for scrutiny reviews and methodologies but also a facility whereby time could be donated and shared between authorities to enable them to support one another in developing effective scrutiny. The Timebank was perceived to be fulfilling a capacity-building role 'to lift scrutiny up to a place where it had more tangible respect'.

The process began with a Timebank Roadshow which visited the regional scrutiny networks to discuss perspectives on the Timebank and potential needs and requirements. The roadshow feedback suggested a positive response to the creation of a Welsh scrutiny 'one-stop shop' where scrutiny methodologies could be shared. A website was then created to facilitate the depositing of scrutiny reviews, a discussion forum and a time exchange facility. The Bridgend scrutiny team then engaged in extensive dissemination in order to promote the Timebank and explain how scrutiny officers and members might make best use of it.

### **Reflections**

The project had been developed on the basis of altruistic intentions – to improve scrutiny capacity across Wales – and the assumption was that smaller authorities were likely to benefit more from the Timebank but as one interviewee stated 'we have developed ourselves as a result of doing it...it has helped us all personally'. It was clear that the work would have been extremely difficult to undertake without SDF support – 'we certainly would have had to think twice about doing it' - as the development and promotion of the Timebank involved a significant amount of 'hidden' officer time.

### **Outcomes**

Outcomes are difficult to estimate as the Timebank has only recently been established and Bridgend aims for operational self-sufficiency within three years. To date, the perception is that the knowledge exchange element of the Timebank has already proved to be a success and especially beneficial for scrutiny officers. In contrast, it seems members have used the Timebank to a lesser extent although Bridgend were in the process of conducting further promotion with members. Take-up has also varied geographically with authorities in North Wales being especially enthusiastic about the resource.

There was a consensus that the time exchange component of the Timebank has been less successful to date although it is clear that authorities are continuing to trade time and assist one another in an informal sense. Overall, the view was that a resource has been established and its success largely depends on the level and degree of take-up from the scrutiny community – 'it has the capacity to press the buttons...if the community embraces it'.

## **Encourage collaboration between bodies**

4.29 This was a major theme of the Fund with the Welsh Government keen for councils to explore further the powers of scrutiny across public services within the area and, as a result gave greater weight to those projects that were not only of benefit to one local authority'.

4.30 The projects reflected, in some part, the expectation for more joint working and collaboration and seem to have precipitated joint working around scrutiny. One officer admitted that ‘I think it wasn’t so much the training as the fact it was one of the first collaborative projects I think that was what interested the Welsh Assembly at that time as much as anything’ (Int 11). Another interviewee was unsurprised by the collaborative bids as ‘most of the people that applied for it had got the vision which is greater than their own and they wanted to involve more than just them in the project’ (Int 3).

4.31 Some respondents supported the Welsh Government’s intention for encouraging collaboration. As one officer explained ‘if it hadn’t been for collaboration, [we] would not have applied, because it’s a capacity issue’ (Int 12). For another officer, ‘collaboration was just coming on the agenda at that time, it did appear that it was a perfect opportunity to work with other authorities’ (Int 11). For other authorities, collaboration was made possible by the fact that councils had previously worked together and so there was mutual respect and understanding that the collaboration was for the right reasons.

4.32 This is a significant amount of learning that can result from different organisations coming together either in a training event or by working with other councils. For one officer who was relatively new in post, ‘It’s helped my understanding of what happens in [a council] which has been great. I’ve met people there I wouldn’t normally come into contact with and they’ve enabled me to understand how they go about things, which is in many ways different to us’ (Int 18). Collaborating with other authorities has also helped others to realise that the problems they are facing (e.g. scrutinising partnerships) are ones where others are in the same position and could help.

4.33 It generally takes a long time to build collaboration. For one local authority scrutinising the LSB, ‘it must have taken us a year of talking to

people to actually get to the stage where we could actually sit down and do the scrutiny' (Int 7) and a similar message came out of other projects. In other councils there were anxieties about working with others, 'it's like moving into a new job and going, "Oh, my colleagues are going to be so much cleverer than me. Will my weaknesses be exposed? Will I fit in?"' (Int 15).

4.34 The experience of collaborating can also put some partners off future joint work. In one authority which had a bad experience of a joint bid, they concluded that 'We wouldn't do a joint bid again because our members did nothing but criticise. Oh! I think that was an eye-opener as to which level you're at' (Int 14). There was also evidence that collaborative training and development could prove problematic. Whilst coming together enabled authorities to pool resources and provide better facilities and trainers, the time taken to travel to events can impact significantly on attendance levels.

#### **COLLABORATIVE SCRUTINY MEMBER DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN WREXHAM, CONWY AND DENBIGHSHIRE**

##### **Context**

Various reports by the WAO and WLGA amongst others have highlighted the need for members to improve their knowledge of the scrutiny process. The greater emphasis on improving collaboration with other authorities also meant that this was an opportune time for councils to work together on member training.

##### **The project**

The project aimed to design and deliver a bespoke training programme for scrutiny members of Conwy, Denbighshire and Wrexham. Training was provided on the scrutiny of partnerships, chairing and communication skills and the role of members in the financial management process.

##### **Reflections**

The quality of the trainers is crucial in determining the success of member training. Officers across the three authorities spent a great deal of time ensuring that they commissioned the most suitable trainers and they were 'very very good'.

The events were held at a nice venue (Bodelwyddan Castle in Denbighshire (at a discounted rate as it is owned by one of the councils)) and were relatively well-attended at 71%.

The training events provided useful networking opportunities for members to meet, share ideas and 'best practice'. It gave members (and officers) the chance to see how other authorities were using scrutiny to make a difference and in what areas.

Officers recognised that 'scrutiny goes at different paces' but this didn't mean that all authorities couldn't learn from each other. There were a number of common issues relevant to all authorities.

### **Outcomes**

The SDF funding meant that externally facilitated training could be provided which the three authorities could not have afforded on their own.

The training received 'really good feedback, people generally enjoyed the day and came away feeling quite enthused'. 76% of those who attended said that they had gained skills. The events were said to be particularly useful for new members as they improved their understanding of their scrutiny role.

Officers from across the three authorities were largely positive about the possible impact of the training. In one authority, an officer said that they would definitely use what they had learnt from the events through 'feeding into next year's corporate training programme and what we want from scrutiny out of it'. In the second council, they expected that the training events 'should lead to better scrutiny and to improve scrutiny of services'. In the third authority, the financial training has meant that the council has 'set effective budgets in the last few years and scrutiny of those budgets are a key component of financial scrutiny committee so you'd like to think it more than paid for itself'.

Feedback from elected members indicated that while they appreciated the venue and opportunities to meet with other members, they preferred the convenience of training closer to home. As a result, the final sessions were delivered separately in each individual authority. Collaborative scrutiny training events, facilitated by the availability of the SDF, have not been able to continue after the project was completed.

While improving collaboration and scrutiny of partnerships are 'hot topics', the bespoke training product has not been used by any other local authorities. 'To be blunt it probably hasn't been shared as widely as you would hope'.

## **Produce sustainable benefits applicable across Wales**

- 4.35 This objective is the most difficult to assess for two reasons. Firstly, many of the projects have only just concluded and it is too early to review lasting and transferable impacts. Secondly, dissemination has been minimal and knowledge across local authorities of SDF projects is somewhat limited. Nevertheless, interviewees were able to point to some potential sustainable benefits.
- 4.36 Many respondents were able to identify lasting impacts in terms of the way they conducted the scrutiny process internally – whether in relation to training or learning from other authorities. Others suggested their projects would generate transferable lessons and practice. For example, all three Parks in Wales, in addition to other organisations, such as fire and rescue authorities, are likely to benefit from the Parks project, Similarly, the Cardiff scrutiny and regulation SDF project was one which was perceived to have potential to generate an all-Wales discussion and debate about the relationship between scrutiny and regulation, although it is debateable whether it has achieved this.
- 4.37 Interviewees in several projects were clear that joint scrutiny with other authorities would continue into the future. In other areas, the Fund has provided a platform for future collaborative scrutiny involving authorities in a region. As one officer suggested, 'There's no intention here of stopping when the money stops. This will continue. We've gone too far' (Int 5). In another authority, the project aimed to be self-sufficient within three years, after the pump-priming money had been spent.
- 4.38 Finally, in one project outside of our case studies, an officer was adamant that once the project was properly implemented, it had the potential to have lessons for all authorities in Wales. Without the project being funded, he argued that these recommendations would not have been produced.

## **CASE STUDY 7: CARDIFF SCRUTINY AND REGULATION**

### **Context**

The general health and effectiveness of scrutiny processes is increasingly being taken into account by regulators when determining whether authorities have sufficient mechanisms in place to monitor performance improvement. Given the cost expended on both scrutiny and regulatory processes, Cardiff Council reflected upon the point at which an authority with high-performing scrutiny could shift to greater self-regulation: 'if you've got good scrutiny, solid scrutiny, and you're getting scrutiny recognised by the inspectors as credible, then does that not suggest that there should be some shift towards self-regulation in those situations?'

### **The project**

The project aimed to determine 'what conditions would need to be met by a Council's scrutiny arrangements to afford scrutiny greater influence and involvement in the development and discharge of regulatory programmes'. Cardiff applied a three-stage research methodology which involved undertaking four focus groups with scrutiny members and officers, conducting 48 interviews with stakeholders and representatives from 20 Welsh authorities, audit and regulatory bodies, holding a validation workshop to fine-tune scenarios and scrutiny criteria and conducting a final set of in-depth case studies.

The research findings indicated a broad support for a closer working relationship between scrutiny and regulators. Cardiff explored three key areas for potential collaboration. Firstly, there were clear opportunities for scrutiny and regulation to build on one another's reports although some regulators questioned the reliability and validity of scrutiny evidence. Regulators were more enthusiastic about scrutiny building on inspection reports and assisting authorities in scrutinising delivery on action plans. Secondly, there should be enhanced two-way communication between scrutineers and regulators in the form of sharing work interests, programmes and co-ordinating activities. The third area for potential collaboration concerned the role for scrutiny in local authority self-assessment processes. Whilst there was enthusiasm here, there was a lack of clarity as to precisely how this could be practised but ideas included using scrutiny findings within the self-assessment and incorporating an assessment of the effectiveness or 'credibility' of the scrutiny function within the final self-assessment report. 'Credible scrutiny' was defined as scrutiny which provides genuine challenge, sits within clear governance arrangements, develops and sustains effective communication with regulators, aims for a work programme focused on risk and improvement, conducts high quality, rigorous, focused and relevant enquiries and has competent members.

### **Reflections**



The perception was that without the support of the SDF it would have been difficult to progress a meaningful dialogue between scrutineers and regulators and fully explore potential interface scenarios: 'opening up lines of communication with regulators' and 'locking the regulators into that so they were part of that debate and part of that discussion – because scrutiny talking to scrutiny is really a very unhelpful thing'.

#### **Outcomes**

The project findings were disseminated at Cardiff and at a scrutiny network meeting and SOLACE annual conference. The key aim of the project was to stimulate debate about the relationship between scrutiny and regulation and one of the outcomes has been the development of a broader discussion between the Welsh Government, WAO and others around the definition and key components of 'credible scrutiny' – 'if you have a fabulously researched piece of scrutiny where the report is wonderful but the executive don't act on it, then actually scrutiny's not credible'.

### **Improve value for money**

4.39 The Fund also aimed at making efficiencies but as one senior officer remarked, 'I don't think...that was really what it was all about. I would be wary about saying "Yes, we're all so massively more efficient as a result of this particular programme" (Int 13). The resources available for each project was so small (£20,000 maximum) that it is difficult to know how efficiencies were going to be generated.

4.40 It is difficult to provide robust evidence on whether the Fund led to improved value for money. For those authorities involved in collaborative training events, there were clear financial benefits 'because these sessions were costing two or three thousand pounds a time and it would have tripled the cost in a way to do it across the three authorities' (Int 12). For one of these authorities, an officer explained that they have no specific scrutiny training budget, so 'any training we would've done would have been probably in-house...so from our point of view as a council it's definitely value for money, we've had a much better product out of it' (Int 12).

- 4.41 There have been a number of positive outcomes from across the projects such as improving relationships with key partners, improving the knowledge of members through training and collaborations etc., but most interviewees were unable to estimate a specific saving in terms of resources. One officer explained that, 'If you talk about outcomes...in terms of the knowledge of members, the skills of members, the relationships with non-executive and executive partners, I suppose we can't measure those. I know they're definitely there, but it's difficult to measure' (Int 5).
- 4.42 Interviewee perceptions were reasonably positive. One officer thought that member training on financial matters has had an effect on producing effective budgets and the scrutiny of those budgets. For a member, 'If I've improved, if you can get one person to improve then it's got to be some value for money' (Int 16).
- 4.43 Some argued that the Welsh Government received good value for money from the Fund because officers devoted significant chunks of time to projects which was 'unpaid'. So for one project, an officer explained that, 'It's been an add-on to what I do and that had to be costed into it. So £7,500 might sound not very much, but there's also been a lot of my time invested in it as well and that hasn't been costed' (Int 6). This feeling emerged from several of the case study projects and whilst interviewees were not complaining, they were keen to ensure that it was understood that projects could not have been completed without this additional officer commitment.
- 4.44 Interviewees suggested that the relatively small amounts of money allocated through the Fund had been spent carefully and pointed to ways in which several of the projects might pave the way for future efficiencies, in improving collaboration with public sector partners, but these efficiencies are likely to occur further down the road. For example, the test will be whether the recommendations from a scrutiny committee

are implemented by the LSB or whether collaborations amongst inspectorates improve and scrutiny takes on a more regulatory role.

### **Perspectives on future scrutiny development**

4.45 The next few years will pose significant challenges for local government scrutiny. There was a unanimous view from interviewees that, if possible, the SDF should continue although some authorities were also keen to secure further guidance and advice from the Welsh Government and focus on the implementation of the Measure. Others, however, perceived the SDF as a way of trialling key aspects of the Measure, and also offered suggestions for filling gaps in the SDF projects and advocated making the scheme forward-looking.

4.46 In order to make the projects a little more focused, a number of interviewees suggested the introduction of a theme-based Fund. This could include topics likely to have currency across Wales such as shared services. For example, one interviewee suggested that 'I have to say of all of the local government functions, scrutiny would lend itself to shared scrutiny functions across a number of authorities' (Int 7). Other themes could include improving the performance of key services; regional scrutiny; identifying efficiencies and innovation, as well as continuing with SDF objectives such as the scrutiny of public service providers (in particular trying to improve the relationship between local government and health) and improving citizen-centred scrutiny. It would be important to have an open theme to encourage those authorities who wish to try something different and it was clear that some of the most innovative SDF projects had emerged in response to the flexible and open nature of the Fund. These themes should be consulted upon with the local government community (both officers and members) and key local stakeholders and some could be changed every year.

4.47 Two interviewees saw closer regional working as being the key to improved scrutiny. An officer saw 'the potential for the community of

local government, and the regions particularly, doing something, you know, each taking an initiative in an area and doing some work on it and then sharing it through the Timebank, or through the WLGA network'. A councillor was more specific in his recommendations, 'focus it on education and social services and maybe community safety...and do it on a regional basis and I'd invite the chairs or those people responsible for those areas and share some best practice with them in those regions and leave it to those people to drive the process at the local authority level; and we should have a strong lead from the Welsh Government in it otherwise what's the point? '(Int 16). This approach is currently being developed by the WLGA.

## 5. Conclusions

### Views of the Fund and its over-arching objectives

- 5.1 There was unanimity that the SDF was a highly positive development with support expressed from across Welsh local government, including from those authorities which did not apply. The amount of money was not seen as being particularly important, 'it was about Welsh Government standing up [and] saying we're supporting you on this' (Int 3). Even for one of those councils which did not apply, the feeling was that 'if money is available to improve scrutiny and for innovative projects, then good to those who get it' (Int 4).
- 5.2 This evaluation has shown that the Fund has had some success in helping to develop more effective scrutiny in Welsh Local Government. It gave authorities the opportunity to make a difference to the way in which scrutiny performs at relatively low cost. A chief executive concluded that, 'The real – the punch question in all of this is, "Would you do it again?" "Was there value in it?" "Did you see it as a positive exercise?" That's the question and then it's me having to look you back in the eye and say, "Yes," or "No." I can look you back in the eye and say, "Yes"' (Int 13).
- 5.3 There are clear lessons for the future scrutiny development. In particular, it is the responsibility all stakeholders (local councils, the Welsh Government, the WLGA) to work together to ensure that lessons from Wales (and elsewhere) are disseminated in the most effective way to improve future scrutiny practice.
- 5.4 Overall, the objectives of the Fund can be judged to be appropriate as they covered a wide range of issues which limit the effectiveness of scrutiny. However, there was a perception in some quarters that there were too many objectives and that the Fund may have been too wide-

ranging and ambitious, 'It's let's do everything. Let's change the culture. Engage with citizens, improve outcomes, and all of this lead to efficiencies across the public sector. And there you are, have £14,000 and do that. When the reality is sometimes it's much harder than that' (Int 4). Some objectives certainly seemed under-specified – for example, the need to address 'key barriers' which was left open to interpretation.

- 5.5 However, this lack of specificity left room for interpretation and interviewees were supportive of the Fund's flexible approach where ideas for projects could be designed locally according to their own priorities, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. It provided an opportunity for scrutiny officers to raise their horizons about what they could do. One council 'wanted to do something that would fill that gap that we felt other agencies weren't filling' (Int 9). In another case, the lack of guidance on scrutiny of LSBs led to their project. For another council, the advantage from their perspective was that they 'ended up doing something that we wanted to do. You can find yourself drawn in sometimes into national projects which are of no benefit to you' (Int 13).
- 5.6 For the Welsh Government, it was clear that the priority was to develop capacity within local government in order to reflect the fact that 'nobody has the monopoly on good ideas' (Int 3). It is likely that the open application process had a positive impact on the large number of authorities applying for funding. However, as all applying authorities received funding, it was not a genuine competition and time spent on the bidding process (and the evaluation of the bids) could have been put to better use.
- 5.7 Finally, it was not always easy to obtain robust evidence which would help to inform a judgement on whether objectives had been achieved (e.g. sustainability) as the impact will only be felt in the longer-term.

## **Has the SDF improved the effectiveness of scrutiny?**

- 5.8 The Fund aimed to ‘stimulate significant changes to the scrutiny culture within local councils, other public sector and partner bodies, and amongst the public’ (WAG, 2008). There was some evidence to suggest that the culture within some councils was shifting as a result of the Fund and that relationships with partners have improved but there was little evidence to suggest that the SDF had changed public attitudes.
- 5.9 Overall, it was clear that the Fund allowed authorities to undertake scrutiny work which they otherwise would have been unable to do. While some of the larger authorities may have undertaken their projects regardless of the SDF (albeit at a later date), the Fund allowed the majority to further develop their scrutiny capacity. The projects have taken a wide variety of forms from joint training events and scrutiny of external partners to commissioning and conducting in-depth research and launching more ambitious long-term projects like the Timebank and the examination of scrutiny and regulation. In this sense, funding provided an opportunity to hasten and underpin existing projects as well as attempting in other cases to push scrutiny to the next level.
- 5.10 There was also some evidence that the Fund had changed the way in which scrutiny was perceived, both internally and externally. Internally, the project provided a chance to ‘raise the profile and strengthen scrutiny’ (Int 5). This had been relatively successful in one authority where ‘the SDF project was seen as having kick-started a movement to try and improve the scrutiny function’ (Int 2). In another authority, impact was demonstrated by greater corporate involvement as ‘our Chief Executive never ever attended a scrutiny meeting, and yet he has now’ (Int 14). It was recognised, however, that ‘it takes a long time to develop scrutiny...It’s all about behaviour or cultural change’ (Int 5).

- 5.11 There were several projects which were able to further develop knowledge of scrutiny amongst external partners and in some cases, encourage a shift in perceptions of scrutiny. Several authorities were highly strategic in anticipating and responding to the shifting policy agenda and collaborated with partners or other local authorities on SDF projects. For example, involving a partner in a scrutiny project has resulted in them seeing scrutiny in a favourable light as a ‘friendly helper’ and ‘he's a great advocate for us now and he's selling that message to his colleagues’ (Int 15).
- 5.12 The case studies demonstrate the ways in which a small amount of funding has made a real difference to scrutiny. One criticism is that, perhaps, the projects were not ambitious enough but this may reflect the varying stages of scrutiny development across Wales along with the short timescale for the projects, levels of confidence within scrutiny teams and a need for authorities to ‘get the basics right’ first. One interviewee concluded that, ‘I would look at those projects and think gosh they haven’t really raised the game of scrutiny that much except perhaps [name of council]’ (Int 3).
- 5.13 In terms of sustainability, a number of the projects are likely to continue once funding ceases, demonstrating the benefit of this kind of seed corn funding. In other cases, there has been considerable learning as a result of the SDF. For example, in those projects which incorporated aspects of training and development, the fund enabled councils to learn about the most effective providers and delivery mechanisms. It isn’t clear, however, whether this learning has been disseminated wider within the local government family.
- 5.14 The timing of the Fund’s introduction was especially appropriate as a large number of members were elected for the first time in 2008 and a number of the projects could focus on capacity-building. The Fund has also prepared the way for some of the provisions in the Measure so that some authorities are particularly well-prepared for the changes. If a



similar Fund was to be introduced, post-2012 local elections might prove to be a similarly appropriate point in time.

- 5.15 The Fund helped to encourage peer review and learning across authorities in Wales. Often councils within Wales were already, to some extent, sharing learning informally by contacting or visiting other councils to see how scrutiny is undertaken. This has even developed into work-shadowing in some cases. This sharing of learning can have benefits for officers by improving processes as well as opening the eyes of members to the type of subjects that scrutiny can examine.
- 5.16 There has been support for formalising these arrangements in order to establish a 'buddying' scheme. One officer with direct experience of the arrangement suggested that their council received very useful support from another council. The help was 'invaluable in terms of just having somebody who has experienced the same psychology of scrutiny within the culture of an organisation' (Int 2) and a number of changes to scrutiny were introduced as a result.
- 5.17 It should be recognised, however, that not all respondents were positive about these developments. Indeed, one member said that 'In this day and age, as a member, if my officers were saying I've got time to give to somebody else, I'd be asking the question why' (Int 4)

## **Limitations to the Fund's effectiveness**

### ***Poor dissemination***

- 5.18 One of the key objectives of the SDF was to deliver sustainable benefits across Wales. It has been difficult to estimate progress against this objective, as the impact of the Fund has been stymied by the lack of wider dissemination of knowledge from the projects.
- 5.19 While recognising the fact that the Fund had 'given councils the flexibility to try new things which they wouldn't have otherwise' (Int 2), in the main,

it has been the councils receiving the funding which have benefitted as there has been little wider knowledge transfer between organisations.

5.20 A national event was held at the end of the first year of the SDF which showcased all the projects and results have been presented at several scrutiny champion network events. Some councils have been proactive in explaining to others how they could benefit from their project (e.g. Bridgend Scrutiny Timebank) whilst others have organised their own visits to learn more about project outcomes. However, there was little evidence of a systematic dissemination strategy and unsurprisingly interviewees and scrutiny network attendees reported ignorance of SDF projects and their outcomes. As one officer explained, 'We don't really know what these projects are, who are successful, what their objectives were and what the learning is. So we can't use any of that to improve our practice. And that's quite disappointing from £100,000' (Int 4).

5.21 An officer from a SDF funded project recognised the weakness. 'The one thing that we probably didn't do enough of was talking to each other between projects' (Int 7). The difficulty for some councils was that they were so busy delivering their own project to spend much time thinking about what other projects had achieved and what lessons were transferable.

5.22 Interviewees felt the Welsh Government should have done more to share the learning from the projects. One interviewee thought that 'Having put forward the bid, having made political capital out of the funding, I think it's the Welsh Government's job to disseminate the learning in partnership with the WLGA' (Int 2). There is also an onus on councils themselves to be more proactive in sharing lessons especially if they can have pan-Wales benefits.

5.23 One interview nicely summed up the situation: 'As you wander around Wales you tend to find that people are wrestling with the same issues and the learning exchange is not great. Now, it's not because anybody's

deliberately hanging on to bits of information – it isn't about that. It's just we're not good at it. We don't have great mechanisms for actually exchanging learning' (Int 13). Similar views were expressed at scrutiny network events where officers observed that they had little time to reflect on their practice and often events were too short to fully discuss what 'good practice' means in terms of scrutiny. It is also important to continue to learn lessons from beyond Wales so that councils are not spending time re-inventing processes that have been developed elsewhere.

5.24 The Scrutiny Timebank has the potential to be a useful resource to stop councils re-inventing the wheel and for co-ordinating collaborative training events but its success depends upon the desire and capacity for people to engage. One of the largest authorities in Wales had not taken the time to find out about other SDF projects and suggested there was little time to use the Timebank. If relatively well-resourced authorities do not have the capacity to engage with others to improve scrutiny, it is difficult to see how a further sharing of good practice can be facilitated.

### ***Light-touch evaluation***

5.25 A significant weakness of the Fund was a perception that there has been 'minimal evaluation' of the SDF as the Welsh Government did not have the capacity to look in any detail at individual projects. 'We have largely had to manage it on a wing really' (Int 1).

5.26 This lack of attention from the Welsh Government was clearly felt by respondents in the case studies. One officer felt that the Welsh Government 'didn't seem to be very up on following it up to be honest, they gave the money and that was it...they just didn't seem that bothered' (Int 12) while another said 'I found myself having to ask when do they want update reports on what we've achieved and in what format. And you get a response of don't know' (Int 4).

### ***Variable performance on scrutiny across Wales***

5.27 It is difficult finding a balance between supporting innovative scrutiny whilst also ensuring that councils are able to get the basics right. One respondent was clear in saying that it was 'Far better to have focused the resources on perhaps a third of [authorities] and some really punchy projects, put more resources into it, which would have had greater impact and been far more influential in taking scrutiny forward' (Int 3). To improve scrutiny across Wales will need a cultural change so that councils think about scrutiny in a different way. There is therefore only so much that the Welsh Government can do to facilitate this improvement, but 'if they don't, it won't happen is the bottom line' (Int 7).

### ***Perspectives on alternatives to the SDF***

5.28 Most respondents supported the idea of the SDF as projects could be designed to respond to local scrutiny needs. There was a feeling that a centralised programme of development or capacity-building would take a 'one size fits all approach' (Int 4). The perception was that this would diminish opportunities to develop a resource which was appropriate to particular scrutiny models and cultures and supported innovative local practice. For example, there were complaints regarding the number of national events which were difficult to travel to and often were not relevant to particular local circumstances.

### **The Future for scrutiny and the SDF**

5.29 Interviewees expressed a concern about the future for scrutiny. In part this reflected nervousness about the challenges associated with the new Local Government Measure but also a worry about shrinking resources. In many case study authorities, member development training and development budgets had been drastically cut whilst scrutiny officer support was being reduced at a time when scrutiny is due to be given additional responsibilities under the Measure. Whilst there was a clear appetite for a repeat of the SDF – likely to be especially valuable given the resource situation - it was clear that this may not be successful if it was dependent upon match-funding.

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1 *Responding to variations in scrutiny performance.* The SDF aimed to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny across Welsh local government. However, authorities are at different stages of scrutiny development, depending on their history, context, size etc. In some cases, a lack of capacity deterred councils from even applying for funding. In others, funding was required to fulfil basic needs – such as training and development to prepare them for new scrutiny challenges. In several other cases, authorities were looking for funding in order to lead the way in certain aspects of scrutiny, operationalise innovative ideas and stimulate wider debates around the role of scrutiny. Often these were the councils with the capacity to put time into making an application and delivering it.
- 6.2 A significant issue for a future Fund is how to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny, given the varying levels of capacity and performance. There is an urgent need to engage and support those councils which lacked the capacity to make an application, as additional resources are likely to make a significant impact in those circumstances. One way of addressing this may be to create a Fund which supports innovative scrutiny projects to run alongside a national capacity-building scheme which could provide bespoke development support appropriate to local need. However, it should be noted that almost all, including even the most innovative and creative, SDF projects involved an element of training and development so it is unlikely that a future SDF could exclude capacity-building, training and development from its specification.
- 6.3 *Securing high quality scrutiny training and development.* There were mixed views on the current provision of scrutiny training and support.

Several projects reported positive experiences whilst others felt that some providers were ill-informed about the Welsh context which diminished the quality of training. Interviewees – especially members - reported a lack of information regarding the potential scrutiny support available. It is clear that scrutiny officers need to invest time in the tendering process to ensure that providers an appropriate and high quality product.

- 6.4 *A tighter specification of the fund objectives.* There is scope for Welsh Government to clearly prioritise, and further specify, objectives for a future SDF. There is potential for a future Fund to be theme-based whilst also containing an 'open' element to allow for the flexibility which was appreciated by applicants.
- 6.5 *More consistent and systematic reporting mechanisms.* A future Fund might include clearer guidelines and a standard report proforma; a strict reporting timetable for authorities; clear co-ordination between the Welsh Government and the WLGA on dissemination; a requirement for councils to evaluate the success of their projects; and more flexibility on how and when resources could be spent.
- 6.6 *A clear dissemination strategy.* Responsibilities for dissemination were confused with authorities unsure as to whether they, the Welsh Government or the WLGA were responsible for dissemination. In addition to a national event hosted by the Welsh Government, most dissemination was conducted through scrutiny network meetings, but there is a question over these fora should be relied upon as the best vehicle for dissemination. A future Fund needs a dissemination strategy within which responsibilities are clearly specified. Such responsibilities can subsequently be incorporated within the reporting process to ensure learning is successfully transferred, thereby delivering sustainable benefits across Wales.

6.7 *Facilitating peer support and review.* The SDF built upon and further accelerated pre-existing processes of peer review and learning and helped to develop new relationships. Members especially seemed to benefit from the opportunity to meet counterparts and observe their practices. The Welsh Government might give more thought as to how they might more further support and facilitate these kinds of ‘buddying’ arrangements.

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