



# Annual Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government

2024-25

# Introduction

## What this is

**The Annual Scrutiny Survey for England in 2024-25** run by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), explores the structure, effectiveness, and impact of scrutiny committees in English local authorities.

This year, insights came from 148 people (officers, councillors, and cabinet members) across 91 different local authorities, providing a snapshot of current practices and perceptions of scrutiny's value.

### Method

The survey was open for just over three weeks, between 13<sup>th</sup> January 2025 and 9<sup>th</sup> February 2025. We invited both members and officers to participate in the survey.

To avoid duplicate responses, some of the survey was routed to the most senior officer overseeing day-to-day scrutiny. Consequently, response numbers varied across sections, with some completed by all respondents and others only by senior officers.

### Data limitations

The Annual Overview and Scrutiny Survey historical data we hold reveals trends spanning the past 20 years. However, given the differences in councils who take part each year, in this report, we highlight the findings we believe are most useful.

## What's inside

**This year's report takes a more visual approach, turning our findings into infographics.**

We explore the key themes scrutiny committees are focusing on, along with insights into how they work.

You'll find information about chairing arrangements and diversity among Chairs and Vice-Chairs.

Scrutiny's impact is often under the radar and we explore this through a series of sentiment statements.

We also take a closer look at place-based scrutiny, examining how councils are engaging with people and organisations beyond their own. Here, we share ideas on how this engagement could evolve.

Finally, we highlight how councils think scrutiny is working and share suggestions for strengthening its role.

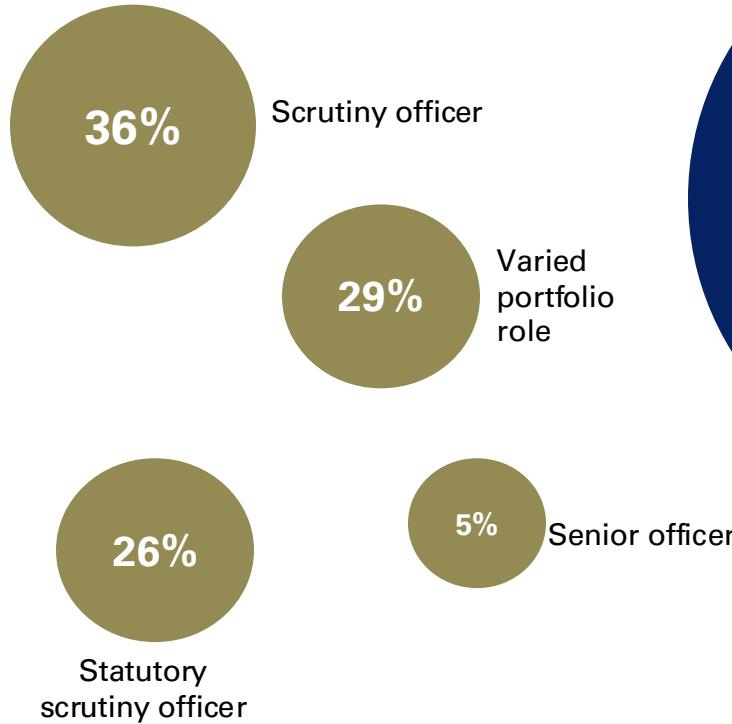
**Thank you to everyone who completed the survey, helping us build this snapshot of how scrutiny is working across councils.**

# Who took part

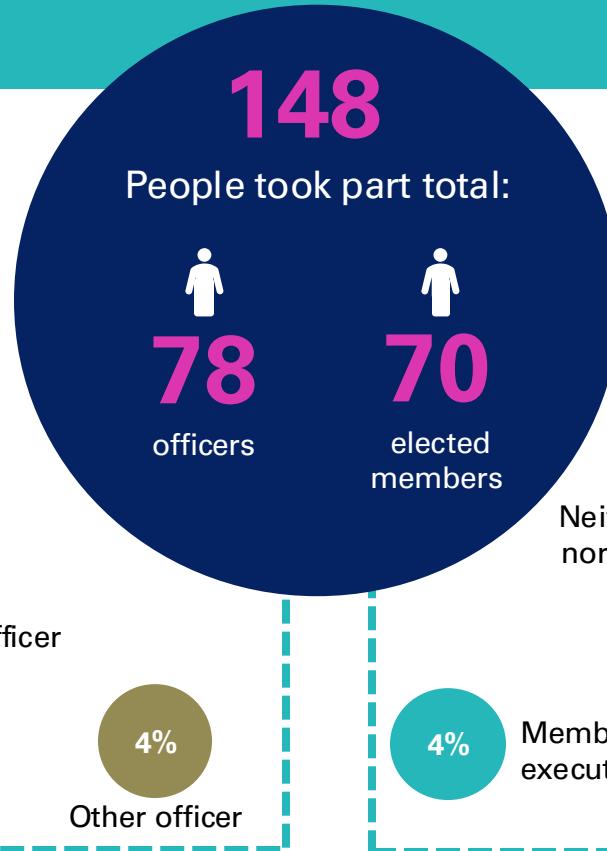
We collected data from 148 participants (officers, councillors, and cabinet members) across 91 different local authorities. To understand more about who took part, we have looked at geographic spread, level of seniority and roles, plus types of authority and governance models.

## Level of seniority and role

**78 officers**



**70 elected members**



Member of the executive

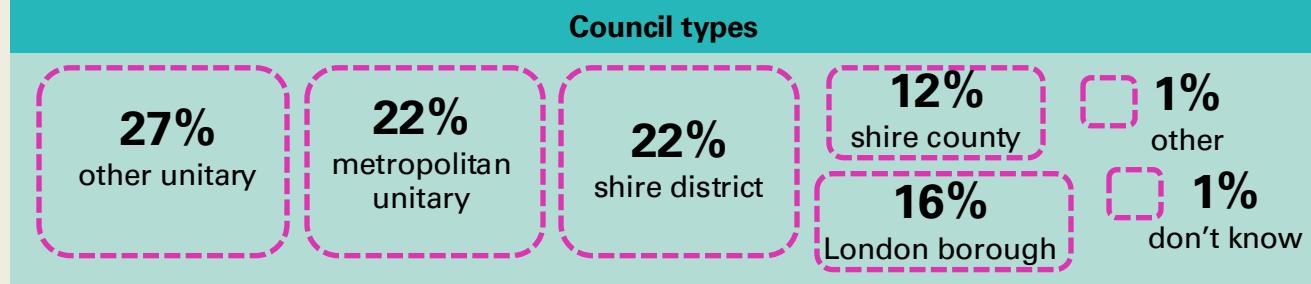
Councillor for more than one authority

# Who took part

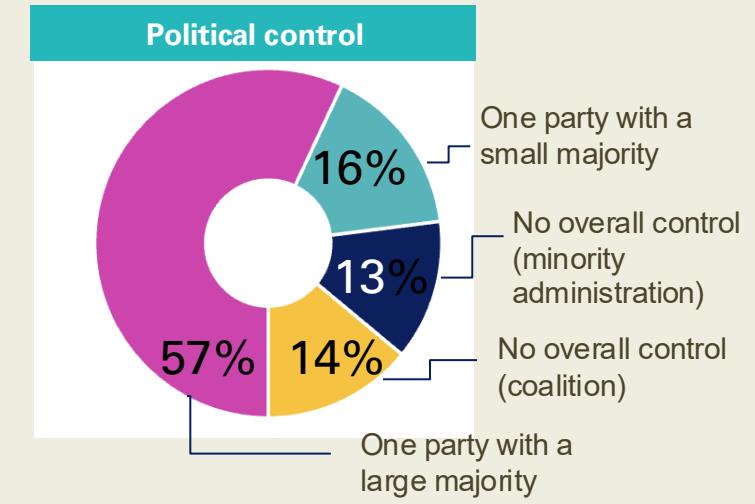
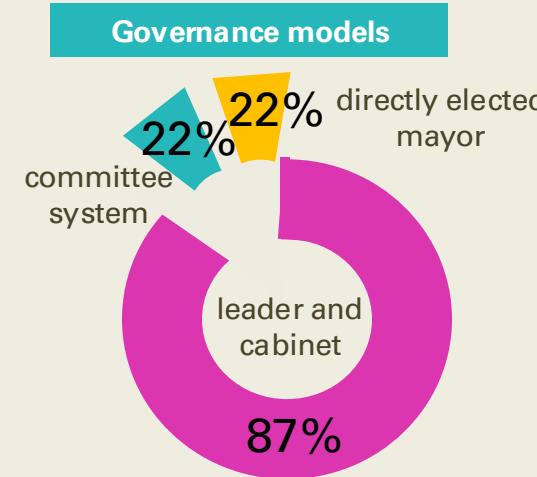
## Geographic spread



## Types of authority



## Governance structures

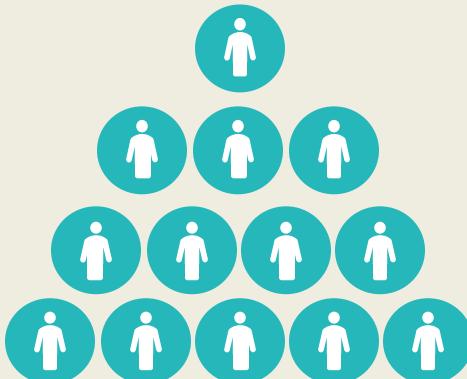


# Scrutiny Committees

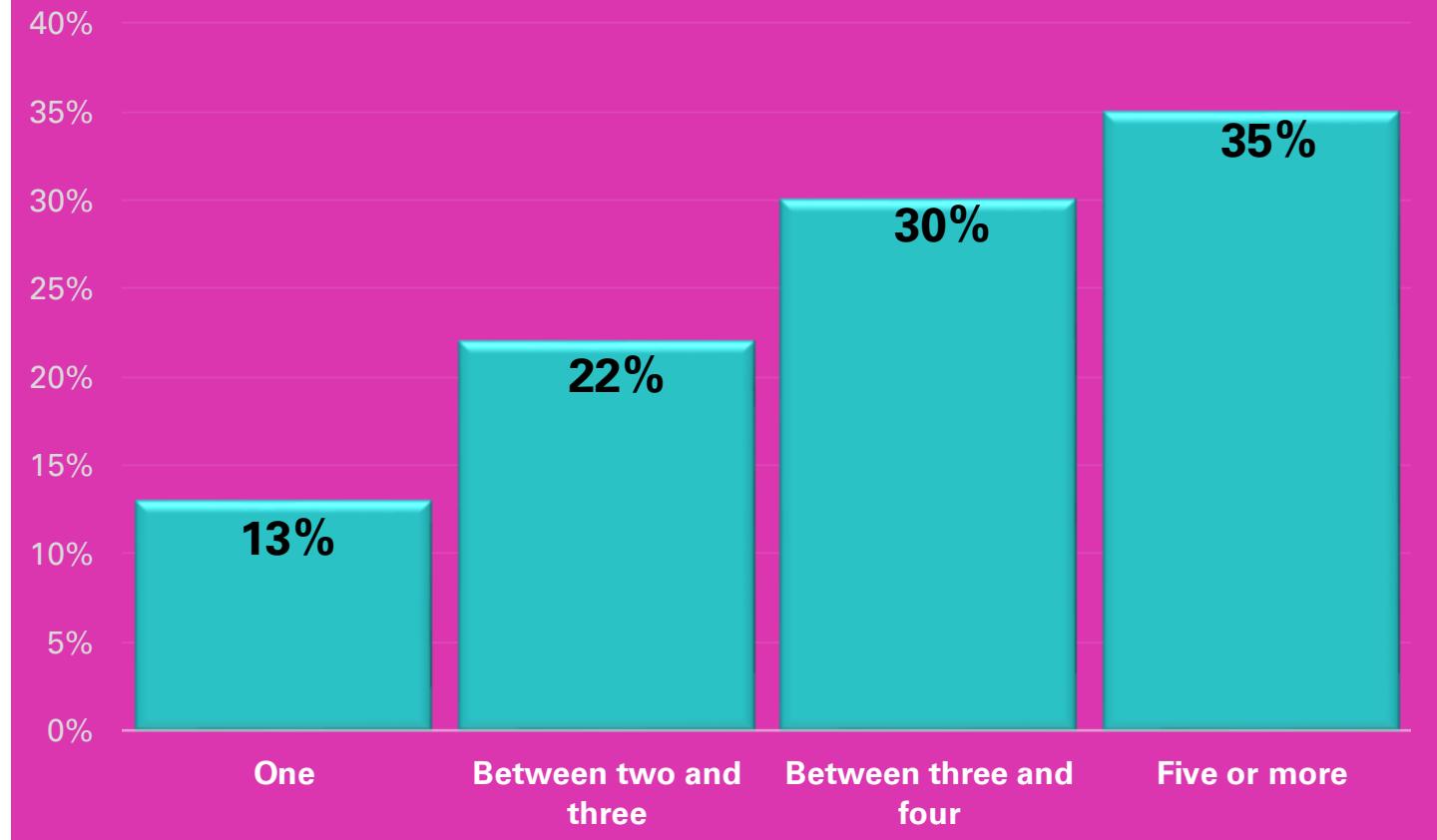
Most councils have multiple scrutiny committees.

Out of 148 responses, 52 councils (35%), said they have five or more scrutiny committees.

Only 19 councils (13%) said they have one overarching scrutiny committee.



## Number of Scrutiny Committees



# Thematic Scrutiny Committees

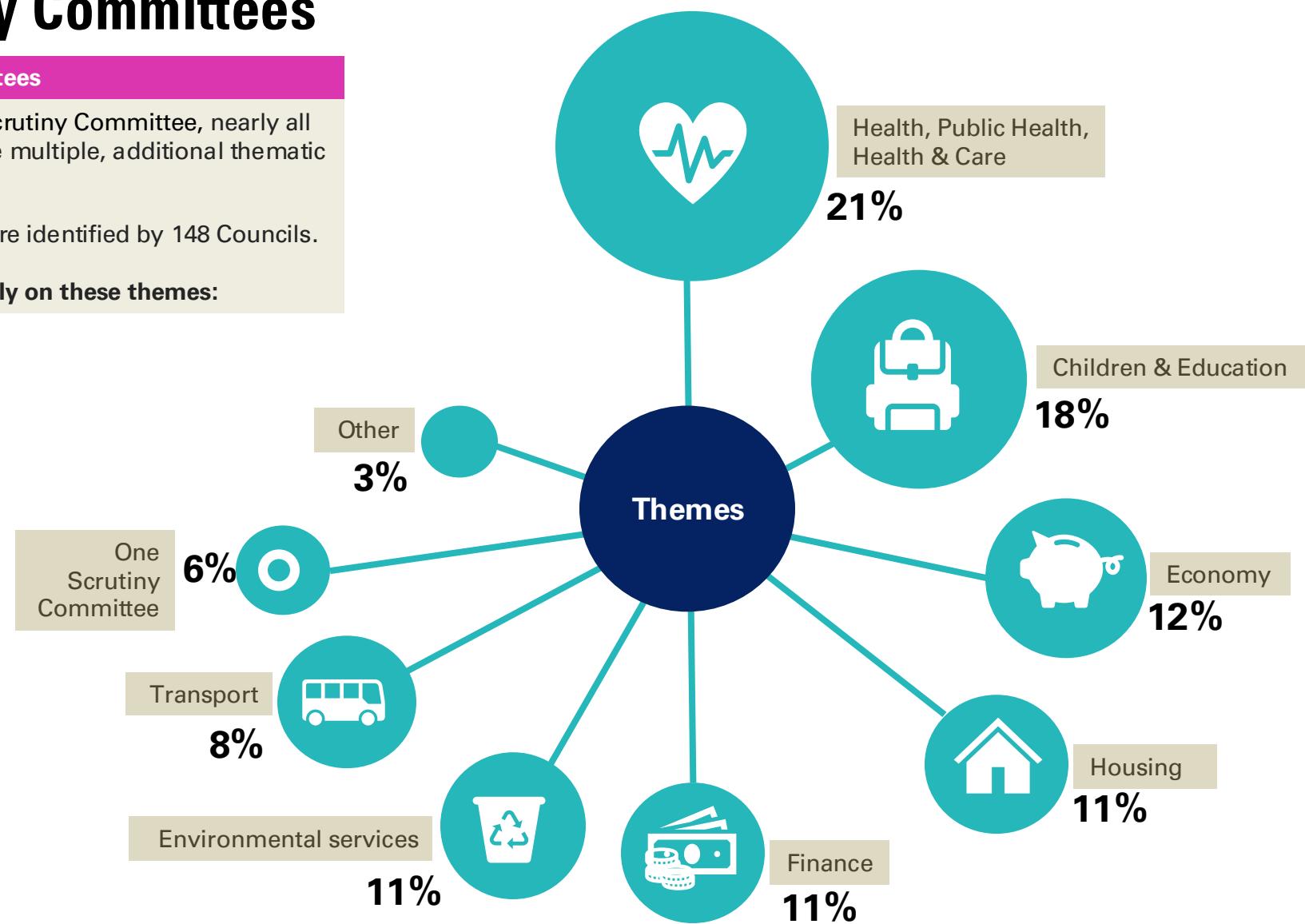
## Additional thematic scrutiny committees

As well as a primary Overview and Scrutiny Committee, nearly all councils who took part said they have multiple, additional thematic scrutiny committees.

A total of 506 themed committees were identified by 148 Councils.

They focus either mainly or exclusively on these themes:

Thematic Scrutiny Committees	Number of selections
Health/Public Health/Health & Care	104
Children & education	92
Economy	59
Housing	56
Transport	38
Finance	56
Environmental services	54
One scrutiny committee	16
Other	31
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>506</b>

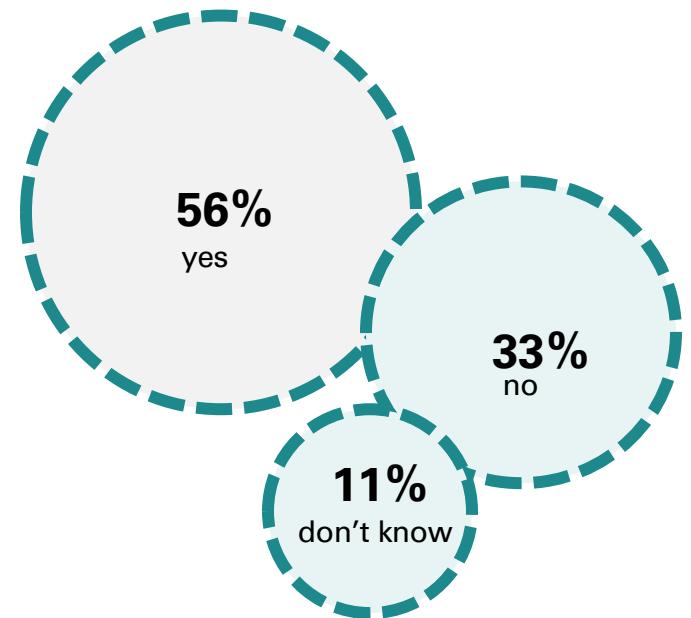


# Scrutiny processes

## Scrutiny ways of working

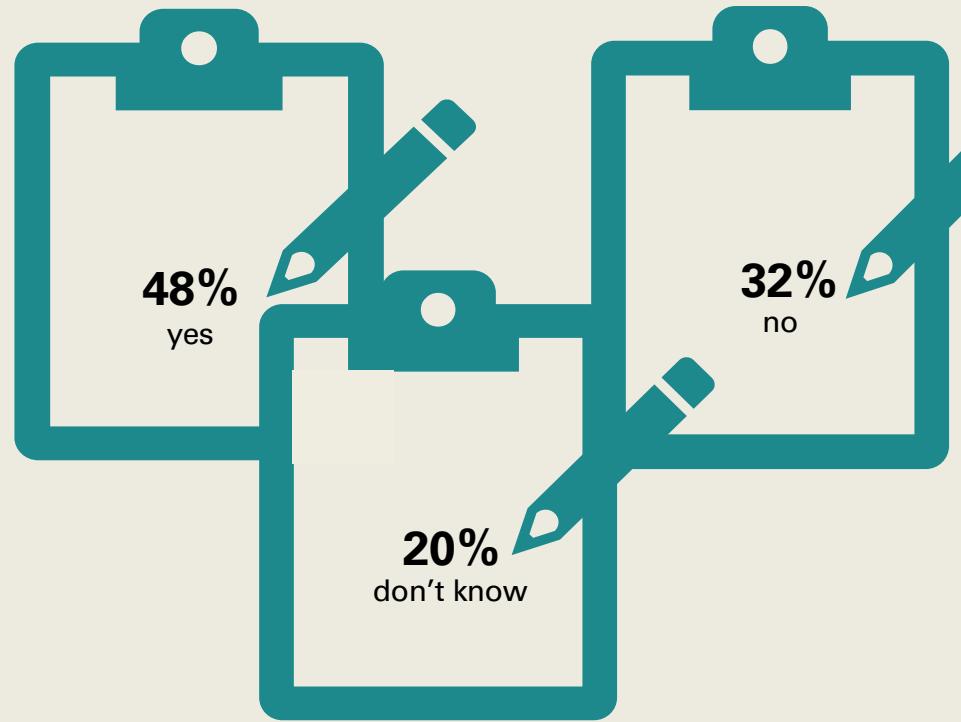
While many councils track the implementation of recommendations, we found that a significant number either lack formal processes or awareness of them.

### Data gathering on recommendations accepted



Similarly, while nearly half the respondents are aware of an Executive Scrutiny Protocol, many councils either lack one or said they don't know if they have one.

### Executive scrutiny protocols in place



# Chairing arrangements for scrutiny by political party

We asked councils to describe chairing arrangements for their scrutiny committees.

The results show that for over half of the 147 councils who responded, someone from the majority party is most likely to chair a scrutiny committee (63%).

Opposition chairing is identified by 20% of the respondents, and 17% said that chairing is intentionally politically balanced in their local authorities.

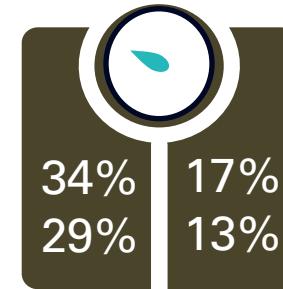
***Which statement best reflects the chairing arrangement in your authority?***

## Scrutiny committee **chairing** positions by political party

### Majority

All in the hands of majority party

Mostly in the hands of majority party



### Opposition

All in the hands of opposition

Mostly in the hands of opposition

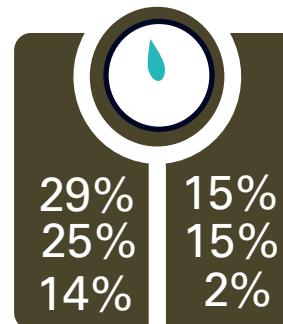
## Scrutiny committee **vice-chairing** positions by political party

### Majority

All in the hands of majority party

Mostly in the hands of majority party

Intentionally politically balanced



### Opposition

All in the hands of opposition

Mostly in the hands of opposition

Other

# Views on opposition-chaired scrutiny

We wanted to hear views on opposition-chaired scrutiny committees.

Most of the 147 councils who responded thought there are benefits to having scrutiny committees chaired by the opposition (88%), compared with 17 councils (12%) who thought there are no benefits.

*"Opposition chairs ensure scrutiny is independent of the administration and not influenced by party loyalty"*

*"Equity, inclusion, and balance are important loyalty"*

## Views on opposition-chaired scrutiny

There are benefits to opposition-chaired scrutiny

88%



There are **no** benefits to opposition-chaired scrutiny

12%



## Benefits

- Independence and accountability
- Greater challenge and scrutiny
- Fairness and balance
- Public perception and transparency
- Cross-party working
- Effectiveness of scrutiny

*"A good chair is more important than whether they are in opposition or administration"*

## No benefits

- Risk of politicisation
- Effectiveness depends on individual, not party
- Current system works well

# Who are the Chairs/Vice-Chairs?

## Scrutiny Committee Chairs

We asked councils how many scrutiny committee chairs they have in their council.

In total, 612 chairs were recorded across 146 councils.

Of these, 210 (34%) are female and 76 (12%) are from a black or ethnic minority background.

## Diversity in Chairing and Vice-Chairing positions

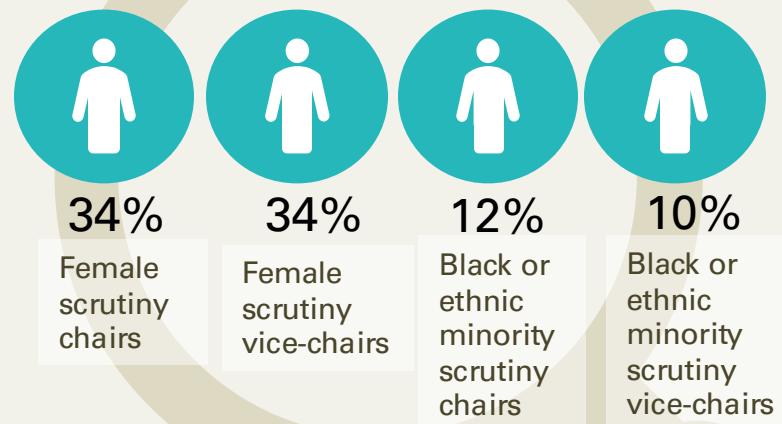
**Gender:** Around one-third of both chairs (34%) and vice-chairs (34%) are women. This suggests that, while women are represented at similar levels in both leadership and deputy positions, they remain under-represented here in chairing positions.

**Ethnicity:** 12% of chairs and 10% of vice-chairs are from a Black or ethnic minority background. This shows only a small presence of minority ethnic councillors in scrutiny leadership roles, with slightly higher representation among chairs than vice-chairs.

## Scrutiny Committee Vice-Chairs

Turning to scrutiny committee vice-chairs, the same 146 councils reported 502 all together.

From this total 172 (34%) are female and 48 (10%) are from a black or ethnic minority background.

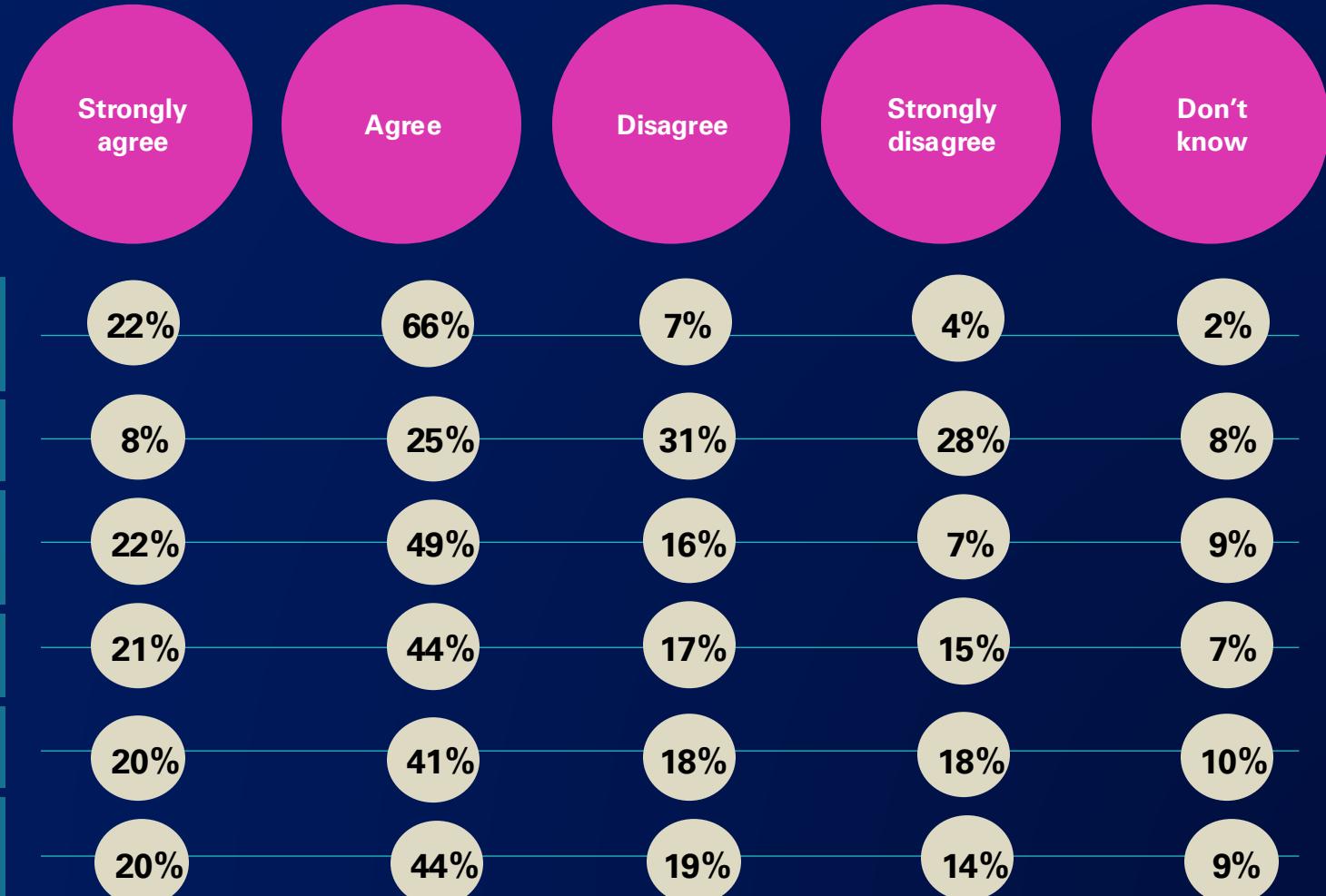


## What this tells us

The figures indicate limited diversity overall, with the majority of leadership positions in scrutiny committees held by men and councillors from white backgrounds. The consistency between chairs and vice-chairs implies that councils are not necessarily using vice-chair roles to bring in more diverse representation as a pipeline to leadership. Progress has been made, but these numbers suggest there is still significant scope for councils to improve inclusivity in assigning both chairing and vice-chairing roles.

# Scrutiny's impact

**Sentiment statements to explore views on the impact of scrutiny**



# Other organisations that councils are engaging in scrutiny

Councils want to involve external partners in scrutiny so they can better understand how those organisations work and what their priorities are. They also want to make sure services are being delivered properly and respond to ongoing problems.

Good scrutiny relies on open, informed, and collaborative relationships with key partners. Councils gave plenty of ideas for how to improve this engagement.



## Councils' ideas for how to evolve the engagement of partners in scrutiny

-  **Build stronger relationships and increase collaboration**
-  **Keep communication transparent and open**
-  **Increase visibility and public awareness**
-  **Use of non-confrontational, problem-solving approaches**
-  **Use digital tools and hybrid meetings to make it easier for partners to get involved.**
-  **Highlight the enhanced outcomes and impact, achieved through effective scrutiny**

# Place-based scrutiny

We wanted to know how organisations beyond the council itself, engage with scrutiny.

Place-based scrutiny is all about looking beyond the council itself and focusing on the wider geography and engaging with the many organisations and services operating within a place. Instead of just scrutinising the council, this approach builds a better understanding of how different partners work together to improve the area as a whole.

Our data shows that when councils do engage with these external partners, the results tend to be positive.

However, read the numbers with caution as many councils had not made attempts to reach out, for example, in the case of broadband providers.

## Engagement with organisations outside the council

Broadband or phone company

Private contractor

University/FE provider

Transport companies or operators

Community Safety partner

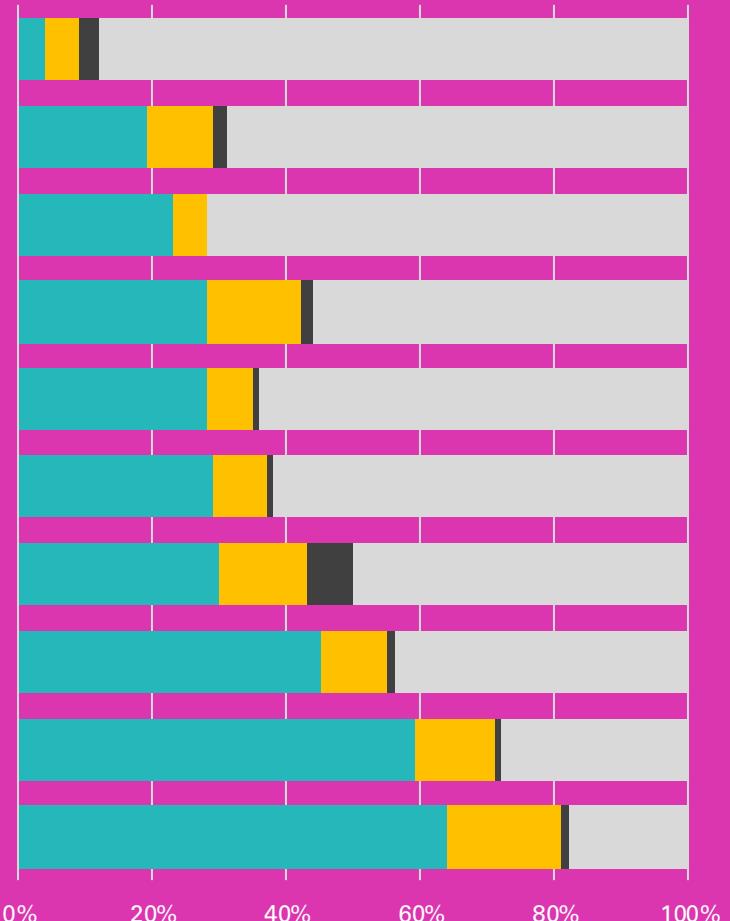
Arms length companies, eg leisure

Water companies

Housing provider

Police

NHS



■ Successfully engaged with positive outcomes

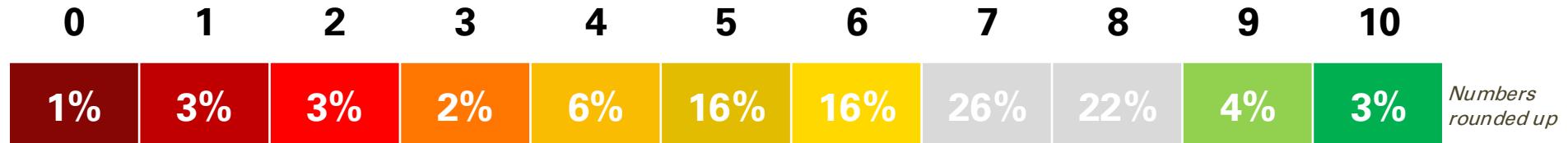
■ Engaged but efforts were not successful

■ Tried to engage but the organisation refused

■ Have not attempted to engage this organisation

# How scrutiny is working

We asked councils how well they think scrutiny is working within their authority on a scale of 0 to 10.



*Does not work at all*

*Works extremely well*



68 (45.95%)

**Total respondents: 148**

Works extremely well (score 9-10): 10 (6.76%)

Works fairly well (score 7-8): 70 (47.30%)

Works less well or does not work at all (score 0-6): 68 (45.95%)



70 (47.30%)

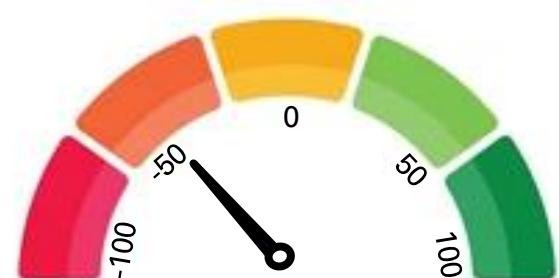


10 (6.76%)

Overall, more people think scrutiny isn't working well than think it's working extremely well.

The net score here is calculated by taking the percentage of high ratings (between 9-10) and subtracting the percentage of low ratings (between 0-6). This gives an aggregated score of **-39.19** showing the overall tilt of opinion.

**-39.19%**  
Aggregated score



# How scrutiny is working

In asking councils how well they think their scrutiny is working, we asked for reasons why they had chosen their answers. Here's a selection of what they said.

## Positive reasons for why scrutiny works well

Effectiveness & Impact

Improvement & development

Positive relationships

*"Scrutiny has been actively involved in developing Policy Framework documents and associated action plans and reviews budget and performance management on a quarterly basis"*

*"Scrutiny has a good relationship with the executive and recommendations are tracked to completion"*

*"It's an improvement journey"*

## Negative reasons for why scrutiny doesn't work

Resource challenges

Political inertia & influence

Lack of engagement

Poor chairing & leadership

*"Inertia on behalf of scrutiny members and a tendency of opposition group leaders to 'play politics' coupled with poor chairing"*

*"Scrutiny is dominated by the majority party who want to maintain the status quo. So the role of scrutiny is limited."*

*"Most decisions are made on a partisan/party political basis"*

*"We could be doing more but we need further engagement from both Members and Senior Officers"*

# Improvements to scrutiny

Finally, we asked how councils would improve scrutiny in their authority, with a range of response shown here.



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