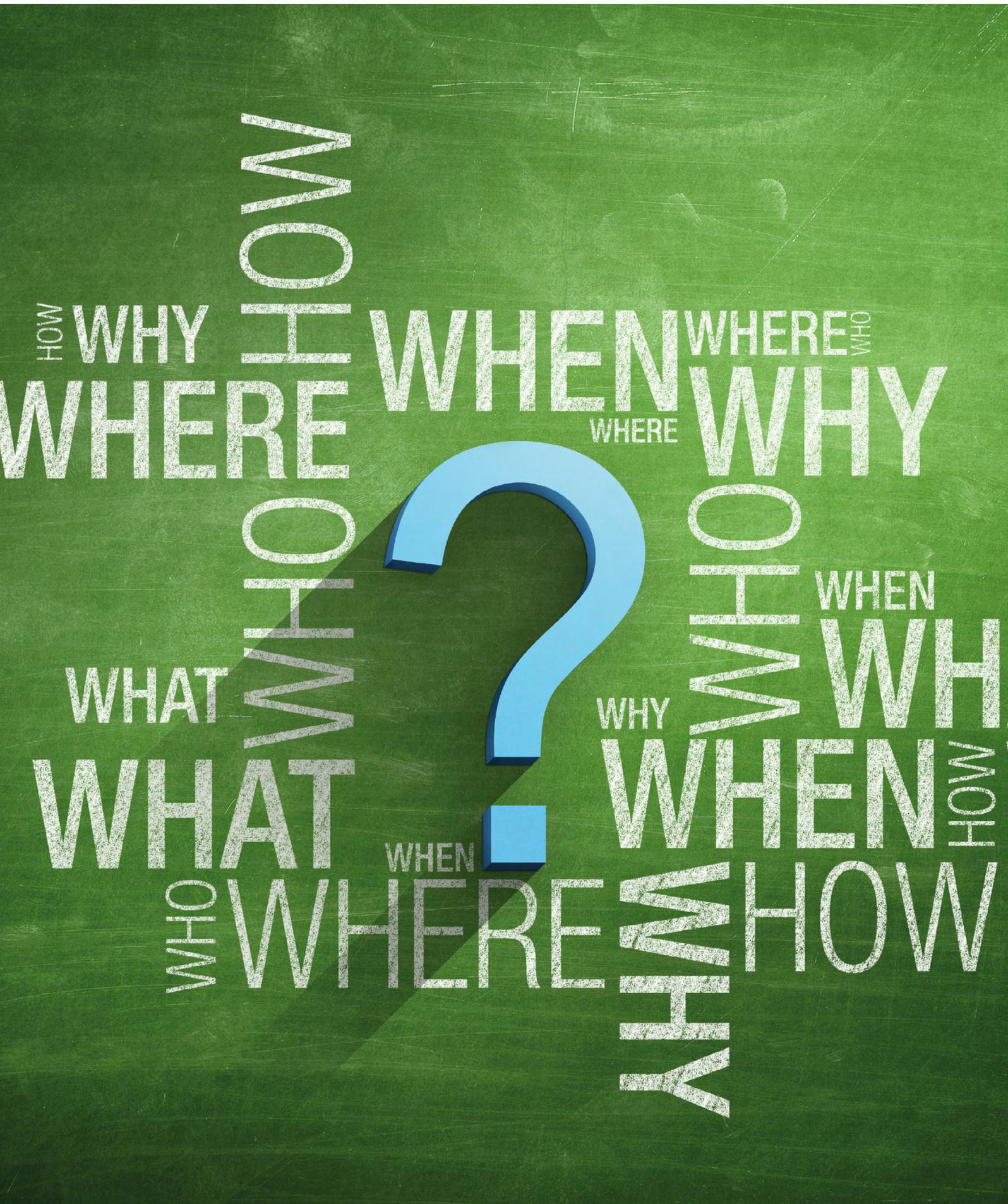


# Annual survey of overview and scrutiny in local government

2014-15



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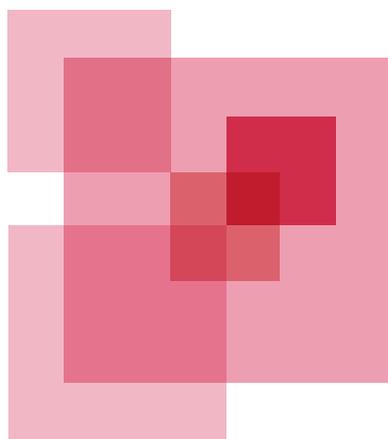
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## **About the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS)**

The Centre for Public Scrutiny is an independent charity, focused on ideas, thinking and the application and development of policy and practice for accountable public services. CfPS believes that accountability, transparency and involvement are strong principles that protect the public interest. We publish research and practical guides, provide training and leadership development, support on-line and off-line networks, and facilitate shared learning and innovation.

# Introduction

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This year's CfPS' annual survey received its highest response rate since 2010, gives us real confidence in the value of the results and how we can use them to inform our discussions with leaders, decision-making and government on your behalf and in devising our support programme.

As with previous years, there is a story of diminishing resources, which is not surprising given the financial pressures faced by councils. A situation which is set to continue for the foreseeable future. It is reassuring however that responders (75%) said that scrutiny is perceived positively in their organisation as being highly flexible and responsive.

A more worrying element of the feedback is the lack of engagement of scrutiny in some councils in future policy development (36%) and major transformation (22%). A further 18% felt that scrutiny would not be able to detect poor decision-making or wrong-doing.

We know from the bitter experience in Rotherham how damaging the absence of effective scrutiny was in the surfacing and tackling the difficult issues of child abuse. The challenge is how to deliver scrutiny in a way that is alive and dynamic, cost effective and meaningful, and seen as essential to all decision-makers.

Effective scrutiny is vital to successfully responding to austerity and greater devolution. It can go beyond the traditional adversarial and organisational boundaries and be a genuinely creative force in generating new ideas. It enables the public to engage in the difficult choices and can play a significant role in ensuring implementation is done correctly.

Scrutiny will form an essential part of the public assurance needed when central government devolves greater powers to metro mayors and combined authorities.

CfPS will continue to play its part in supporting the scrutiny system we have today, campaigning for accountability, transparency, and involvement in all public services. We will also be responding to the call for 'creativity and radical thinking', scrutiny must transform to become more vital and valued. We look forward to continuing to work with you.

# Methodology

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Respondents were asked to fill out the full survey and an abridged version. One full survey response was requested from each council and ideally filled out by the most senior officer with day-to-day responsibility for scrutiny. All other respondents, junior officers or councillors, were asked to complete the abridged version.

This year, the closing date for survey responses was April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015. As such, results and analysis reflect the political balance, control of authorities, and reflections on scrutiny up to that date.

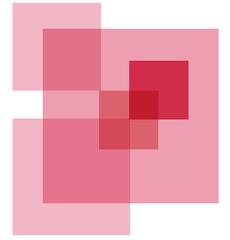
Nevertheless, the response rate this year for total number of respondents and total number of full responses is the highest since 2010.

To provide a better understanding of the raw data collected through the annual survey, this year we undertook a series of short interviews with a small selection of councils across England and Wales. The questions were limited to 4 areas looking specifically at the perceptions related to the adequacy of the scrutiny budget (based on scrutiny's role in those authorities), the impact of scrutiny's work on local people, information and data at the disposal of councillors, and the general attitudes towards scrutiny across their authority. The goal had been to interview one scrutiny officer and one councillor but this did not prove possible in every area.

## Responses

- Total responses used for survey analysis were 393.
- 283 councils provided a full response to the survey, which is 76% of all councils.
- Of those 283 councils<sup>1</sup>:
  - 233 were Leader-Cabinet council.
  - 10 were Mayoral councils.
  - 29 were Committee system councils.
  - 6 were "Hybrid" system councils (councils legally operating the leader-cabinet system but whose governance approach shares some characteristics with the committee system).
- Of those 283 councils:
  - 39 were County Councils.
  - 134 were District/Borough Council in a two tier area.
  - 27 were London Boroughs.
  - 26 were Metropolitan Boroughs.
  - 46 were other unitary authorities in England.
  - 11 were Welsh councils.
- Total number of short interviews done was 13.
- This year, looking at the percent of council responses per region, the North East, South West, and West Midlands were highest at over 90% each.

1. Five councils did not indicate what governance option they used.



## Resourcing

Resourcing continues to be a concern; the merging of scrutiny support into other roles means that even though the average number of full time equivalent scrutiny support posts is holding up, more of these will be people spending a quarter or a third of their time on scrutiny, limiting their ability to work with members to make an impact. Moving away from dedicated officer resourcing mean that many councils lack the capacity to provide support to councillors to scrutinise transformation and major change. This should be a big concern to these councils.

- Last year, the full time equivalent (FTE) scrutiny officer average was 1.75. When we asked people for their projections during that survey for 2014/15, the predicted FTE average was 1.63. This year, the average number of FTE officer posts for the municipal year of 2014/15 was 1.87, well above the predicted average. This is positive news and may, in part, be due to a higher response rate compared to last year. It also supports that FTE scrutiny officer support cycles with increases and decreases every few of years.
- However, the dedicated average scrutiny budget does not follow this trend. For the 8<sup>th</sup> year in a row, the budget has declined and the average budget for 2014/15 is £3, 277, down from £3, 447 in 2013/14. Last year's predicted average FTE and budget for this year are significantly different from the data received this year and is likely due to the increase in respondents.
- This year we asked about scrutiny's involvement in major projects and services changes, and reasons why scrutiny may not be involved in such projects in the future. Of the 36% of respondents who advised they did not believe scrutiny would be involved in major projects in the future, the most common reasons listed were opposition from the executive/senior officers and the lack of resources.
- 43% of councils reported having one or more dedicated scrutiny officers. This is down 5% from last year, and is at its lowest level since 2006. This may be further evidence to suggest an increasing number of officers are splitting their time between scrutiny work and other obligation due to shrinking officer resources.
- 20% of respondents reported they did not know of or that the situation was unclear regarding potential changes in their resourcing for the coming year. This is significant as it indicates one fifth of councils are not able to effectively plan for the coming year.

## Impact and Influence

There is a more robust attitude towards the need for scrutiny to focus on securing positive outcomes, but a substantial proportion of councils still need to do more work in this area. Many councils are not producing "ambitious" recommendations. In asking questions about how ambitious recommendations are, we wanted to understand whether scrutiny was challenging groupthink and making recommendations which provoked decision-makers to think differently, rather than going with the grain. Although "ambition" is a subjective concept, it is still troubling that only a minority of respondents felt that they were doing this.

- 77% of respondents reported they were able to effectively monitor the implementations of recommendations. Last year's report indicated 70.3% of councils had a formal mechanism to monitor recommendations. 47% of

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councils indicated recommendations included measurable outcomes that allowed them to judge progress and implementation.

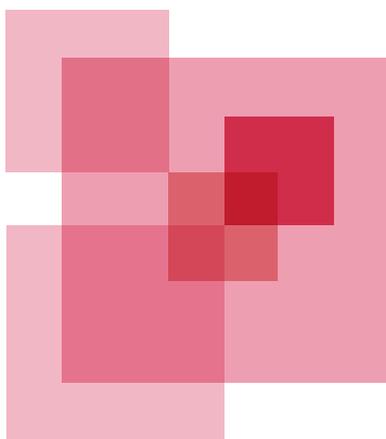
- Just over 30% of respondents indicated they had ambitious recommendations where changes may be challenging or difficult to achieve, for organisational or political reasons. This is concerning as it may indicate scrutiny does not have the necessary resources or support to monitor or be involved in more complex/larger project.
- Evidence also suggests that councils with a more positive outlook on the future of scrutiny are more likely to report a positive ability to not only monitor recommendations but have higher rates of recommendations with measurable outcomes and undertaking ambitious recommendations.
- Again this year, there is evidence to indicate a relationship between the value placed on scrutiny and the political makeup of the council.

We set out some more general conclusions on impact at the end of the report.

### **Transformation and Practitioner Skills**

Transformation presents a huge opportunity for scrutiny councillors to influence decisions which will affect local people's lives for many years. Despite the fact that a majority of councils feel that scrutiny has a clearly defined role in improvement and governance arrangements, this is not the case in a substantive number of councils. In a sizeable minority, scrutiny is effectively cut out from exercising any meaningful role.

- 22% of respondents reported they will be expecting scrutiny resources, either officer or financial support, to decrease in the coming year.
- Over 80% of respondents advised their council will be or is undertaking some form of major transformation. Of those, as many as 22% indicated their council is or will be undergoing major changes but scrutiny is not involved or involved in a limited way.
- 18% of respondents believed scrutiny was not able to expose wrongdoing or poor decision making in their council.
- Over two thirds of respondents this year agreed that scrutiny in their council was driven by the priorities and insight of members, and that it drew evidence from a range of sources.
- 65.6% agree that scrutiny in their council has 'a clearly defined and valued role in the council improvement and governance arrangements.'



# Resourcing

- FTE support for scrutiny has increased from last year. Based on the response of 271 authorities, the average of FTE officer for the municipal year of 2014/15 was 1.87, up from 1.75 last year. Although the current rate is higher than had been predicted, this may be due to the high response rate this year. It should also be noted that of the 271 respondents 19 of them listed zero, meaning those councils provided no policy support to councillors performing a scrutiny role at all.<sup>2</sup>
- This year, only 43% of councils reported having one or more dedicated scrutiny officers. This is down 5% from last year, and is at its lowest level since 2006. The number of councils with less than one FTE officer has also risen from 22.3% last year to 27.5% this year.
- 56% of respondents indicated they were not expecting any changes to their budget to change in 2015/16, only 2% expected an increase, 22% expected resources to decline, and 20% did not know or reported the situation as unclear. The last figure is concerning as it limits the ability of scrutiny officers and managers to effectively planning for the future.
- Lack of resources was indicated as being the second biggest barrier for scrutiny's involvement in major changes in the council.

It is not clear what effect ongoing austerity will have on scrutiny's effectiveness. Scrutiny's capacity and resources are, however, clearly declining.

22% out of the 275 councils reported they will be facing a decrease in officer resourcing or discretionary budget. Evidence provided in the short interviews suggests that a portion of councils anticipated further cuts while drafting their last budget but are uncertain what will happen in two years' time. What is more concerning is that nearly 20% of councils do not know if resource changes will occur in their council next year, which means they not as able to effectively plan for the coming year. Data indicates that London Boroughs, in general, will undergo the most resource reductions, particularly regarding their discretionary budgets. However, Welsh councils report the most significant change in officer resources for 2015/16. This is likely to have a particularly significant impact as the Welsh government is currently reviewing scrutiny and likely to further expand scrutiny's

2. It should be noted that the FTE scrutiny officer average may be slightly higher due to an outlier who reported having a particularly large number of dedicated officers. Nevertheless, the numbers are representative of the trends in the last year.

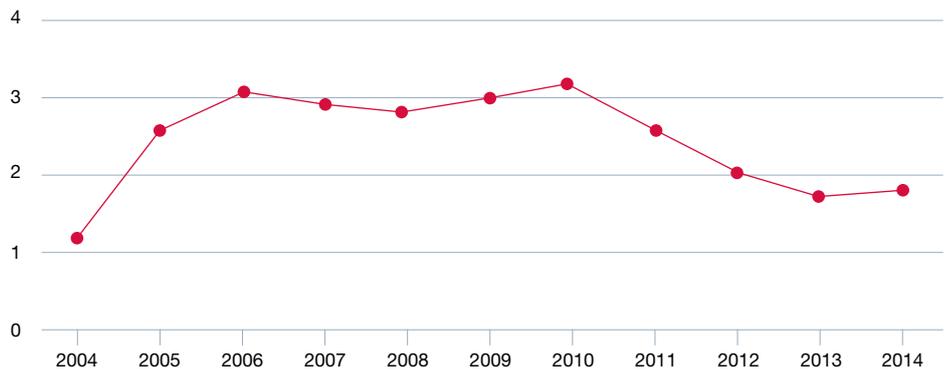
Figure 1: Potential Change in Authority Support for Scrutiny by Council Type



role in councils. This may result in scrutiny officers facing increasing challenges in fulfilling their current role let alone additional responsibilities.

Not all scrutiny posts were listed as filled by authorities for a variety of reasons (including vacancy freezes and imminent reorganisations). Although some commented on how scrutiny posts had been removed outright, there is greater evidence indicating the role of scrutiny officers has changed. This is further supported by the significant number of councils reporting scrutiny officers having split roles and a wider remit, with many supporting and clerking committees or carrying out corporate policy and performance work. This is known informally as “twin-hatting” or, where posts are shared across policy, performance, scrutiny and other corporate services, “generic posts”. Data supports this with 27.5% of the 271 respondents reporting less than one fulltime scrutiny officer.

Figure 2: Average Number of FTE Officers by Year. – The slight uptick for 2014/15, we think, reflects a move to more generic posts, where more officers have scrutiny support in their job description but less time to actively provide that support.



As with previous years, we asked councils about their discretionary scrutiny budgets. This is the budget specifically available to scrutiny after staffing has been taking care of. This year the average discretionary budget reported was £3277, marginally down from last year. Of the 233 respondents, 54% of them reported they had zero funds available to them as a discretionary budget. This will, in part, also reflect the move to create generic officer teams, where there will by definition be no specific budget set aside for things such as additional research by scrutiny.

Figure 3: 2014/15 Discretionary Budget Average by Authority Type



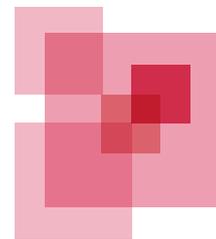
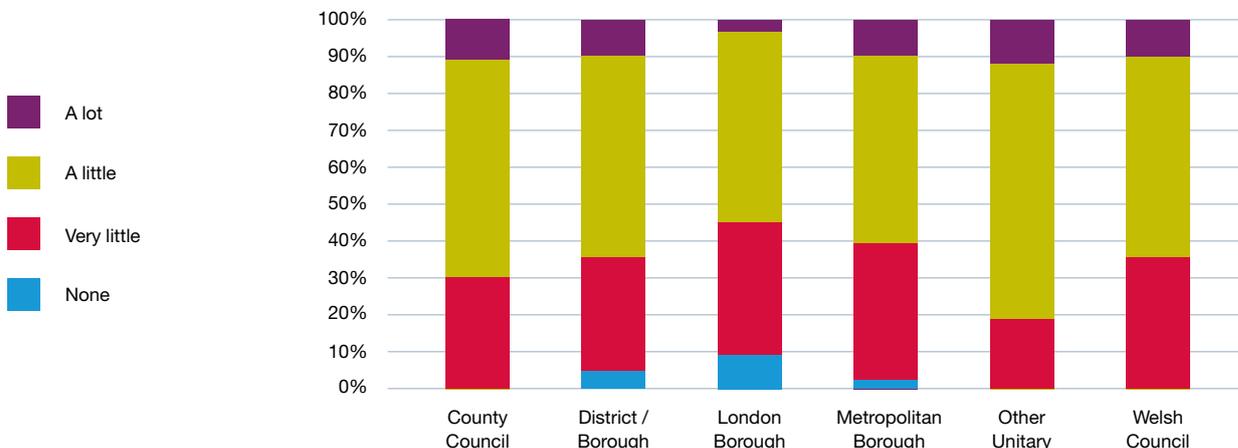


Figure 4: Perception of Scrutiny's Impact on Local People by Authority Type

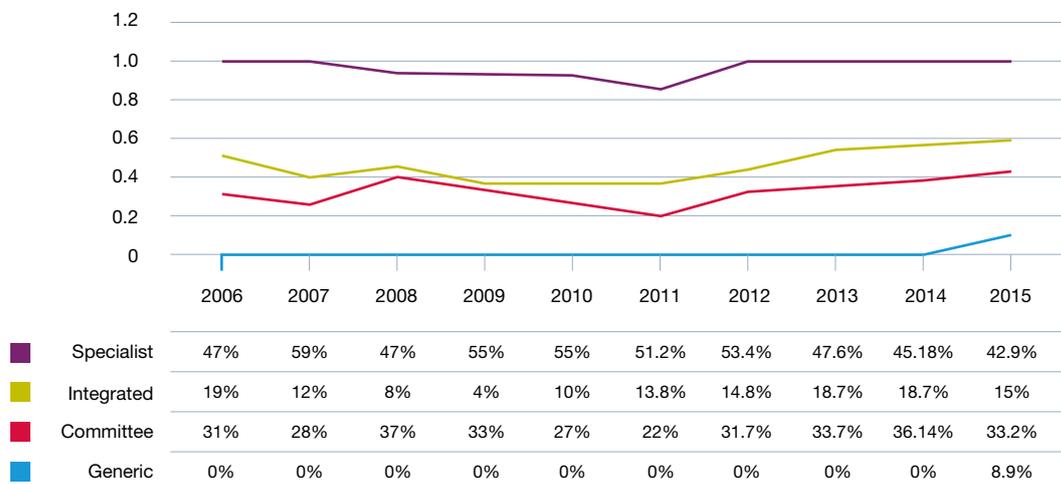


In general, there are four model types for councils; specialist, committee, integrated, and generic.

- **Specialist model:** councils have a dedicated scrutiny support team
- **Committee model:** scrutiny support is principally provided by democratic services officers
- **Integrated model:** scrutiny support comes mainly from policy officers in service departments
- **Generic model:** officers sit in a large team and have responsibilities for scrutiny, corporate policy, and corporate performance. This is a new option for this year – previously, these councils would have been described by us as operating under the integrated support model.

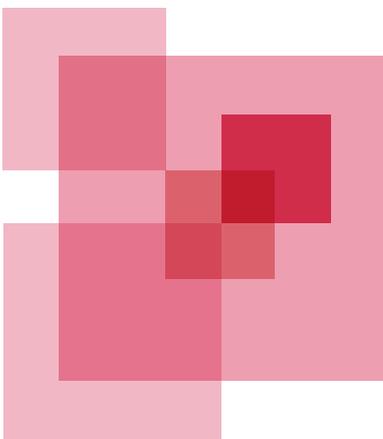
The largest concentrations of “generic” support are in District/Borough, London Borough, and Other Unitary councils with approximately 10% of each of their totals.

Figure 5: Councils Support Model Type by Year



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We have already noted our concern with generic support for scrutiny. Inevitably, it fails to take into account the unique skillset required by dedicated scrutiny officers, and risks officers' time for scrutiny support being "crowded out" by work for the executive, to say nothing of the potential for conflicts of interest between executive, and non-executive, support. We do, however, recognise that in some authorities, resources are such that this appears to be the only sustainable way to retain some scrutiny support – and we do note that the model of support makes less difference to one of our measures of impact and influence than might be expected. We will go on to explore this in more detail in the next section.



# Impact and influence

- 77% of respondents reported they were able to effectively monitor the implementations of recommendations. However, only 47% of councils indicated recommendations included measurable outcomes that allowed them to judge progress and implementation.
- Just over 30% of respondents indicated they had “ambitious” recommendations (changes which may be challenging or difficult to achieve, for organisational or political reasons – we asked this question in part to assess scrutiny’s ability to act as a strong, independent voice challenging groupthink, where it exists).
- Evidence also suggests that councils with a more positive outlook on the future of scrutiny are more likely to report a positive ability to not only monitor recommendations but higher rates of recommendations with measurable outcomes and undertaking ambitious recommendations.

In the past we have looked at three measures together to make an assessment about the impact of scrutiny’s work. These have been the percentage of recommendations accepted and implemented, the value placed on scrutiny’s work by the council, and respondents’ own assessment of the impact of their work. This year we have refined this to introduce other ways to assess impact, derived from independent sources.

## We asked

- The extent to which recommendations have measurable outcomes;
- The extent to which recommendations are ambitious;
- How respondents rated scrutiny against seven principal means of securing impact. Those seven were designed by the UCL Constitution Unit to use in their research on the impact and influence of Select Committees in the UK Parliament;
- How respondents rates scrutiny against fifteen characteristics of effective scrutiny. These characteristics were developed for use in Wales by the Wales Audit Office, following a comprehensive study carried out into scrutiny in all 22 Welsh councils.

Figure 6: Perceptions Relating to Recommendation Monitoring, the Use of Measurable Outcomes and the Relative Ambition of Recommendations

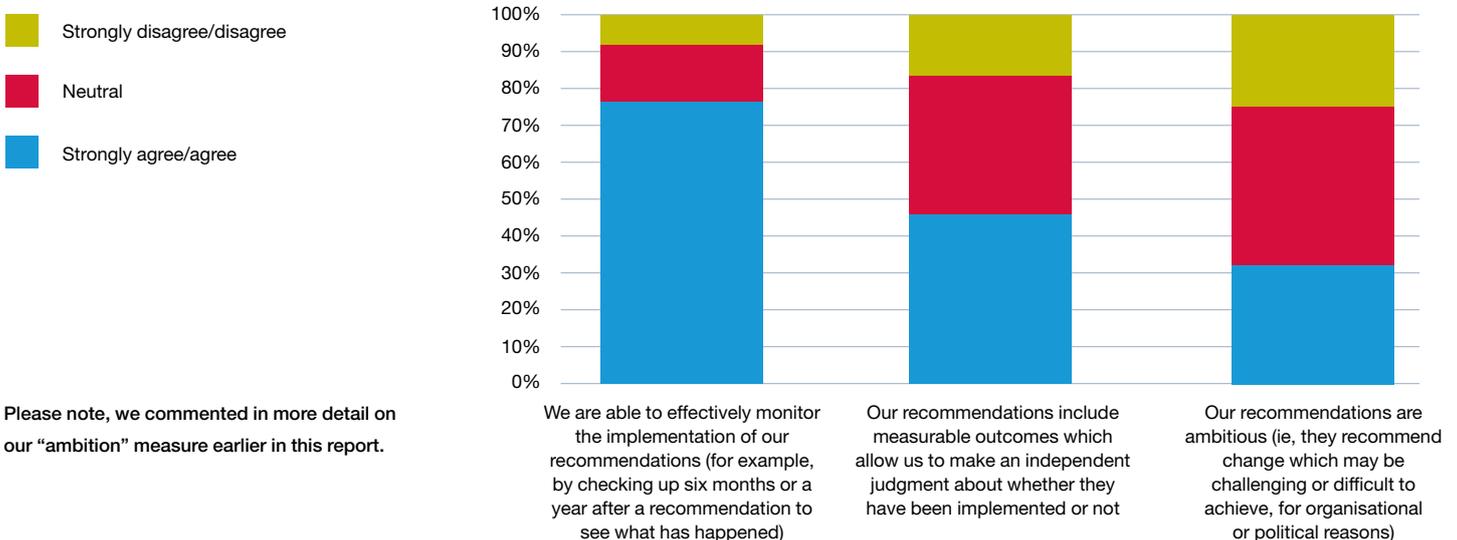
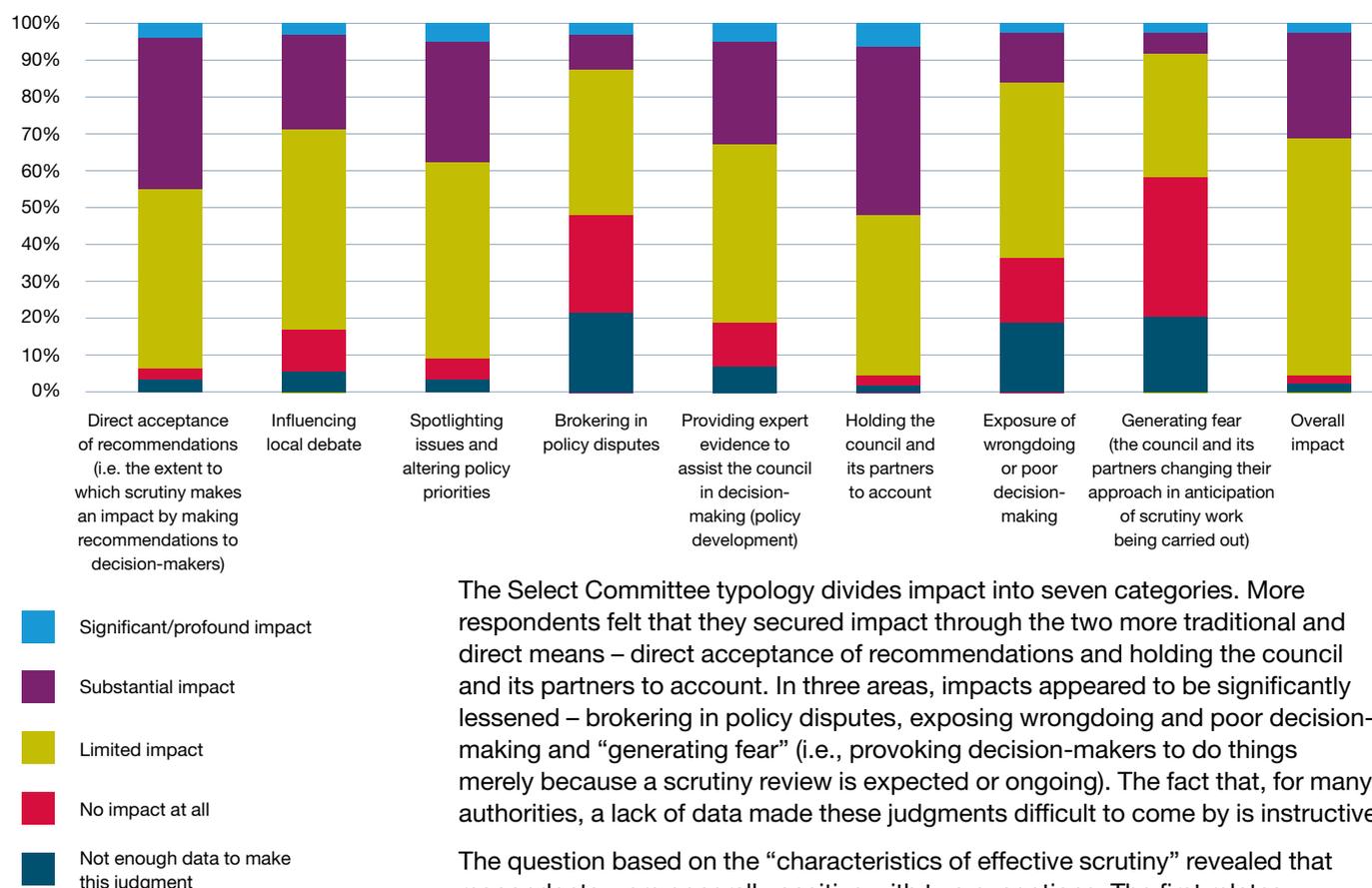


Fig 7: Scrutiny's Impact on Policymaking



The Select Committee typology divides impact into seven categories. More respondents felt that they secured impact through the two more traditional and direct means – direct acceptance of recommendations and holding the council and its partners to account. In three areas, impacts appeared to be significantly lessened – brokering in policy disputes, exposing wrongdoing and poor decision-making and “generating fear” (i.e., provoking decision-makers to do things merely because a scrutiny review is expected or ongoing). The fact that, for many authorities, a lack of data made these judgments difficult to come by is instructive.

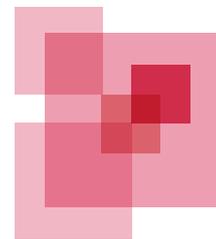
The question based on the “characteristics of effective scrutiny” revealed that respondents were generally positive with two exceptions. The first relates to people’s confidence that resources are adequate (which we have already commented on). The second relates to the five characteristics which focus on scrutiny’s ability to build and sustain positive working relationships with others. Here, 29% disagreed or disagreed strongly that scrutiny was seen as a key tool for citizen involvement and engagement; a similar proportion considered that scrutiny was not seen as encouraging participation in democratic accountability. These measures do not reflect scrutiny’s core purpose in many authorities, but they are concerned in the light of the more central role we consider scrutiny can play in managing major service change. 17% of respondents in total felt that their councils did not live up to at least one of the characteristics.

### Focus on the Impact of Dedicated Scrutiny Support

Compared to last year’s report, the different in average FTE support between councils who do have a recommendations system and those who do not has expanded significantly.

Figure 8: FTE Support by Year and Monitoring System

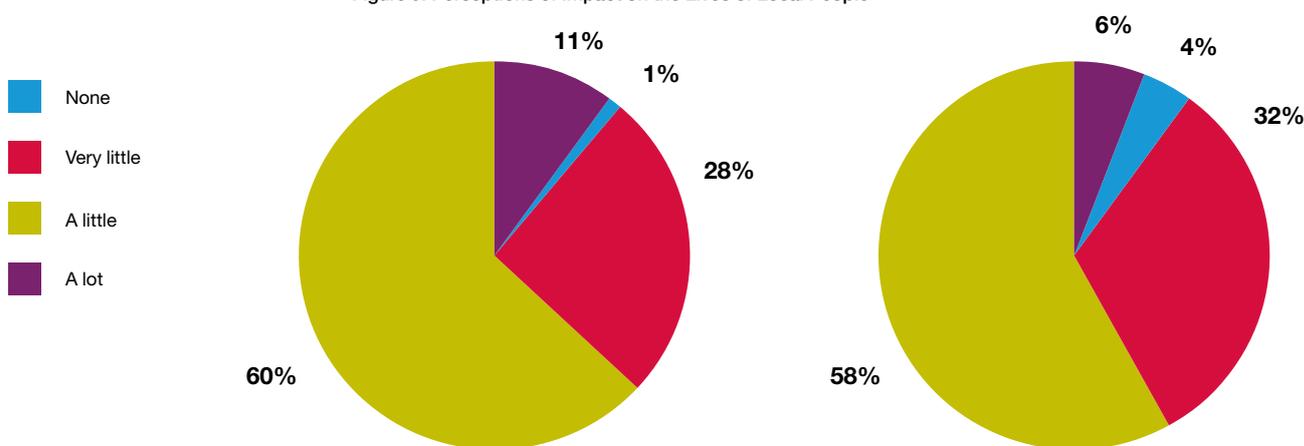
	2013/14	2014/15
Councils with a system for monitoring recommendations	1.84	2.04
Councils without such a system	1.59	1.45



We asked respondents what level of impact they believed scrutiny had on the lives of people living in their authority. Of the 355 who responded, only 10% believed scrutiny had a lot of impact on the lives of local people.

When looking at the percent of respondents who agree or strongly agree they are able to effectively monitor the implementations of recommendations, those who reported scrutiny had a significant impact on the lives of local people was almost four times higher than those who reported no impact.

Figure 9: Perceptions of Impact on the Lives of Local People



Left: Councils with dedicated scrutiny support.

Right: Councils without dedicated scrutiny support.

Unsurprisingly, councils using a specialist model reported higher rates of scrutiny having a positive impact on the lives of local people. 43.7% of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to effectively monitor the implementations of recommendations also reported using the specialist model. This being said, many of those who commented on this question pointed out that the level of impact scrutiny can have in their authority was highly dependent on the elected members and the topics they were looking at. A few respondents noted members were not always able to fully take on the scrutiny role, that they may have faced interference from the executive, were limited by finances, or had recommendations ignored. Although some of the comments are concerning, they highlight some of the many challenges councils face in their efforts to have a meaningful and positive impact through scrutiny.

### The Influence of Authority's Attitudes and Culture

We asked two questions specifically on organisational culture. First, if respondents perceived their work had an impact on the lives of people in the authority. Second, whether – in general – they felt that their organisation had a positive culture insofar as scrutiny goes.

We split the data from both questions into positive responses (where people felt that scrutiny's impact, and culture, was 'very positive,' 'broadly positive,' or 'somewhat positive'), and less positive (where they responded 'broadly negative' or 'strongly negative'). Councils who reported having a more positive political and organisational culture towards scrutiny also reported scrutiny had a greater impact on the lives of people in their authority. This provides evidence to reinforce our theory that councils

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with a more positive attitude towards scrutiny may be able to have a bigger impact – a vicious circle or positive feedback loop.

When we looking at how this breaks down by model type, the evidence suggests having dedicated scrutiny officers may influence the level of impact a council believes it has. 11% of specialist model authorities reported that scrutiny has ‘a lot’ of an effect of the lives of local people. Additionally, we found a positive correlation between the average FTE of scrutiny officers and the level of impact they believe their authority to have, it was also found when looking at the discretionary budget averages. Although the data points to a correlation between these resources indicators, it is important to keep in mind that they do not dictate the impact a council can have but may be a barrier in some cases.

### Political factors

In previous years, the survey has considered the hypothesis that councils where no political part has overall control are more likely to have vigorous and effective scrutiny functions and place a greater value on it. This year, when we compared the political and organization culture to party control, we found that councils with a single party in majority control had a more positive culture towards scrutiny. It is unclear why that may be – we can speculate that it is because the executive, in those authorities, engages with scrutiny from a position of political security, making it easier for non-executive members of whatever party to effect change.

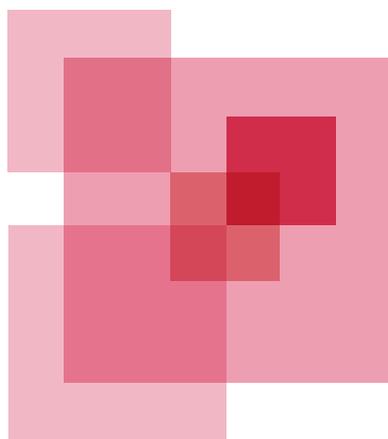
From the free text comments provided during the survey and the short interviews that were conducted, many respondents felt that scrutiny was most effective and rigorous when chaired by a member of the opposition. This is an area worth further investigation – statistical evidence from the survey is inconclusive, as it has been in previous years.

When looking at councils with effective methods to monitor scrutiny recommendations, the data indicates party control has no significant influence over this matter. However, councils with a large majority or hung councils with a cabinet from a single party had a marginally higher rate of recommendations with measurable outcomes. There were also mixed results when looking at the level of ambitious recommendations reported as large majority councils and hung councils in coalition with a multi-party cabinet had that the highest rates. This suggests that working in coalition is not a significant barrier to undertaking ambitious scrutiny related projects in a council. There is however no overwhelming evidence to suggest a multiparty council has a stronger scrutiny function or greater impact.

Although this year’s survey does not directly address the impact of party politics on scrutiny, evidence provided through the free text comments and short interviews suggests that perceptions vary on whether or not it has a negative impact. Our own – also anecdotal – view is that party politics has a negative impact on scrutiny because where it tends to be more prominent, scrutiny’s cross-party nature breaks down, and its credibility is diminished. We consider that there are more appropriate places to bring out party politics – such as full council – but that councillors should seek to use and channel their political skills differently on scrutiny committees.

### Chairing

As we found last year, there are a variety of ways in which councils decide on their chairs and vice chairs. This year, of those responding to the question regarding how chairs are apportioned:



- 20.6% out of the 204 respondents assigned their chair and vice-chair positions politically proportionately, marginally up from 19.2% last year.
- 16.8% out of the 137 councils with large majorities assigned their chair and vice-chair positions politically proportionately. This is a 5% rise from last year.
- 19.3% out of 31 councils with a small majority assigned their chair and vice-chair positions politically proportionately, this is down from 37.5% last year.
- 52% out of 23 hung councils assigned their chair and vice-chair positions politically proportionately, this is up from 43.8% last year.

There is no concrete evidence to suggest that when chairs are assigned politically proportionately scrutiny is more effective. This being said, the evidence does suggest there is a relationship between how chair and vice-chairs are appointed and how positively scrutiny is viewed in the authority. Evidence shows that the political and organisational culture towards scrutiny is most positive in authorities where the minority party holds the chair position and the majority party holds the vice-chair position. When this is reversed with the majority party holding all the chair positions and the majority party hold the vice-chair positions, the data shows the highest reported rate of negative culture towards scrutiny at almost 40%.

Figure 10: Chair and Vice-Chair Distribution Overall (councils)

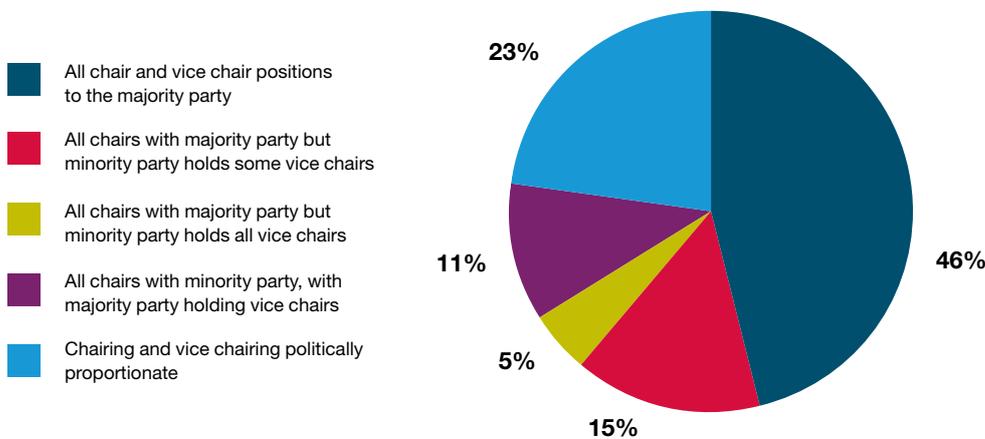
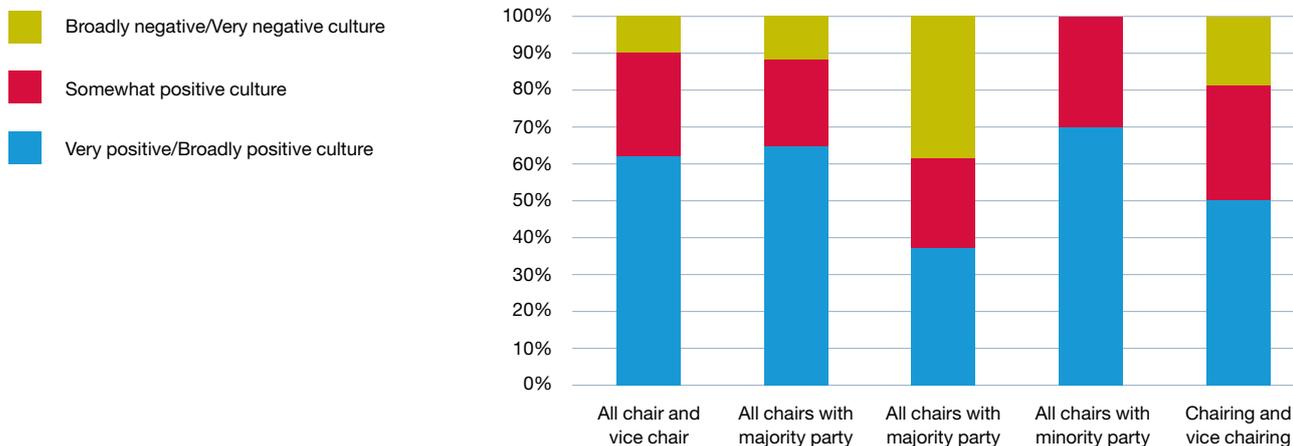


Figure 11: Chair and Vice-Chair Distribution, Compared to Self-Reported Political Culture



## Gender

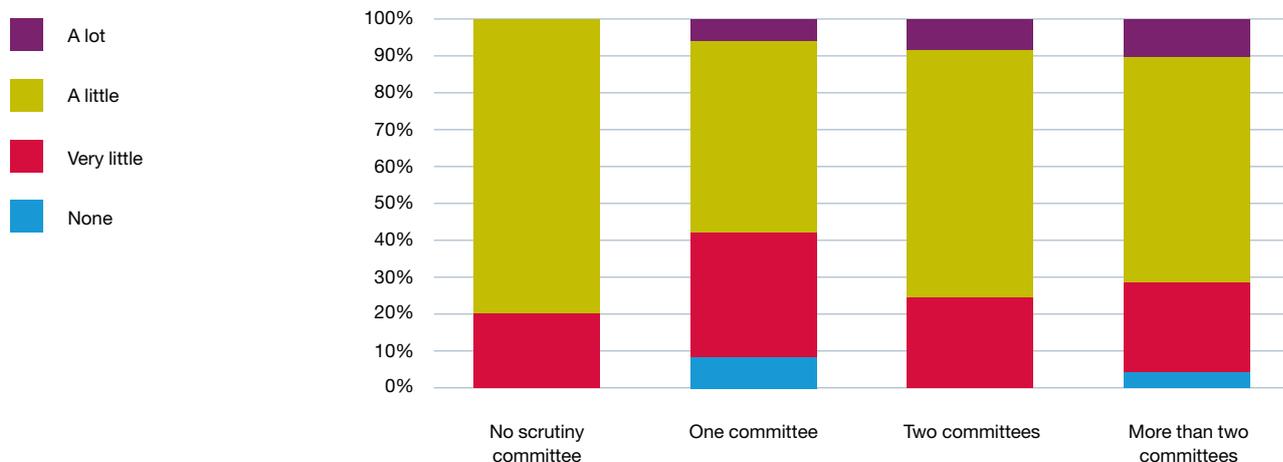
In 2013, the Local Government Association's Census of Local Authority Councillors stated that 32.7% of councillors were female. Respondents reported that the percent of female scrutiny chairs and vice-chairs were broadly similar with 30.5% of chairs and 34.7% of vice-chairs as being female. This year that figure has increased to 42% of chairs and 43% of vice-chairs being female. This is a significant increase from last year's figures. It suggests that, proportionately, more women than men are being elevated to these leadership positions. It is an encouraging trend towards gender parity in the proportionality of chairs and vice-chairs.

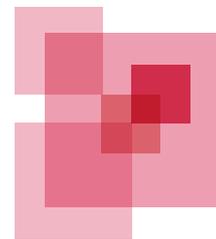
## Committees

In previous years, we have asked respondents to provide the average size of their committees in order to test the hypothesis that larger and more committees makes scrutiny less effective. As evidence suggested there was no significant relationship, this year we decided to focus on the relationship between the number of committees in a council and how positively scrutiny is viewed in their authority, the nature of recommendations implemented, and perceptions on the impact scrutiny can make.

Evidence indicates there is no significant variation on the how positively scrutiny is viewed by the authority between councils with 1, 2 or more committees. The number of committees does not significantly impact the effectiveness of councils to monitor recommendations. Though data suggests councils with two or more committees do slightly better on recommendation monitoring. When looking at the impact respondents believe scrutiny can have on the lives of local people, the greatest impact was reported from respondents with two or more committees. This suggests that the number of committees is positively correlated to perceptions and implementation of scrutiny work, although we are unclear how this connection acts and whether there is causation at work here. It goes against the widespread assumption that councils with fewer scrutiny committees tend to be more targeted.

Figure 12: Impact of Scrutiny on Local People by Committee Size





### Work programming

Data suggests that scrutiny is largely member driven and that the executive does not dictate priorities. This being said, free text comments and the short interviews indicate that there is some tension between scrutiny and the executive in certain councils and that scrutiny chairs, especially those from the same party as the majority party, may be hesitant to challenge them the executive. 50% of respondents felt that scrutiny had no or a limited impact on policy making.

Figure 13: Robustness of Scrutiny's Work Programme

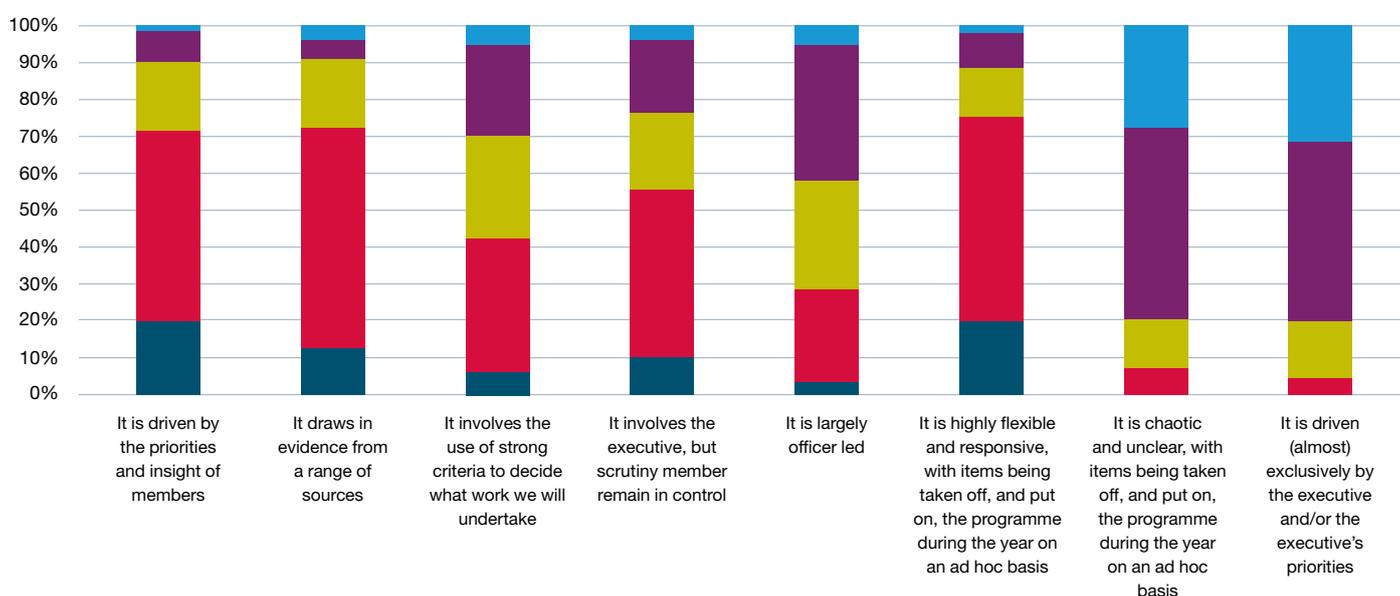
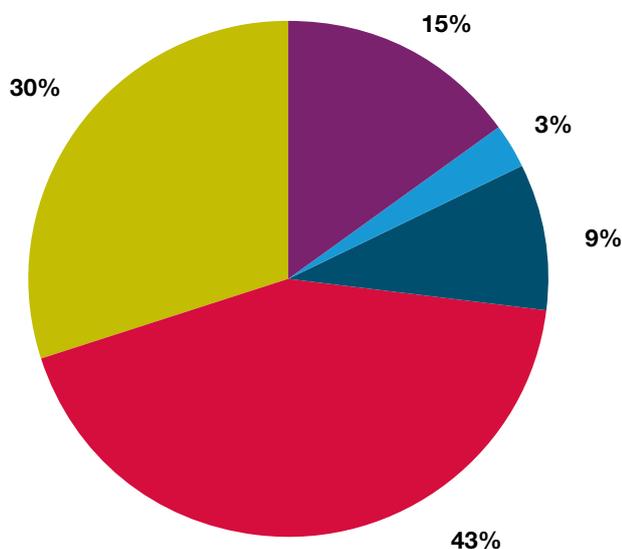


Figure 14: Perceptions of the Future of Scrutiny in Local Government. – This is a general question asking about the future of the function, rather than the function in a particular authority and can be useful to gauge people's confidence about their own work locally.



## Transformation and practitioner skills

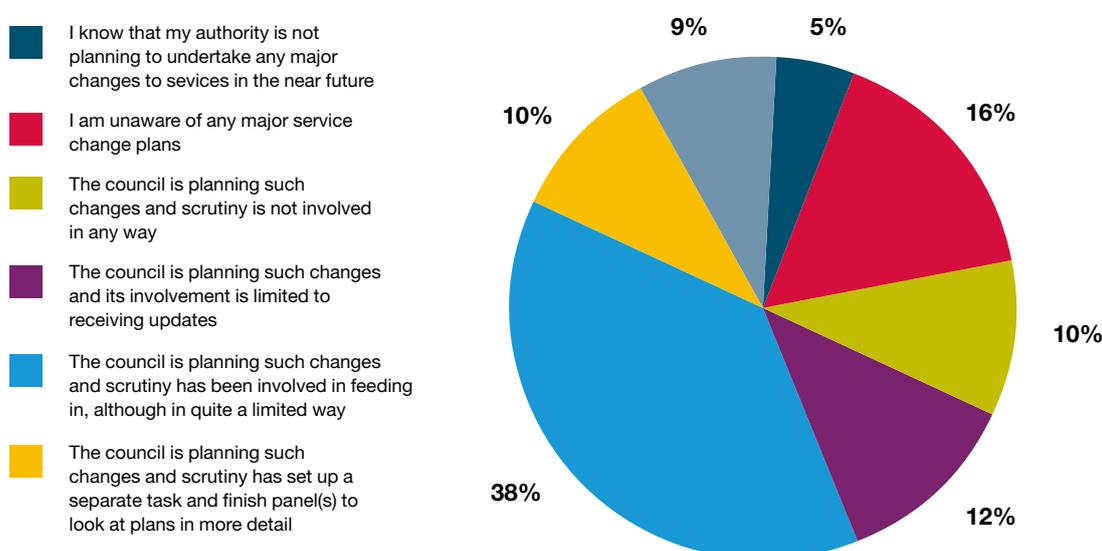
Over the last couple of years it has steadily become apparent that local authorities will be facing increasing pressures to maintain or increase services with fewer resources. Large numbers of councils are undertaking major transformation projects.

- Over 80% of respondents advised their council will be or is undertaking some form of major transformation. Of these, 22% indicated scrutiny is not involved or involved in a limited way in the project.
- 18% of respondents believed scrutiny was not able to expose wrongdoing or poor decision making in their council.
- 65.6% agree that scrutiny in their council has ‘a clearly defined and valued role in the council improvement and governance arrangements.’
- Over 70% of respondents felt scrutiny was driven by the priorities and insight of members and that scrutiny work draws evidence from a range of sources.
- 17.5% of respondents believe councillors are unable to effectively undertake their role due to lack of training and development opportunities.

This year 84% out of 256 councils reported they will be going through major service changes. The majority of respondents indicate scrutiny will have some level of involvement in this process but only 19% report being heavily involved or involved from the start. Additionally, 36% out of 254 respondents indicated they were not confident scrutiny would play a part in that process if future projects were to come up. The most cited reasons for this were opposition from the executive and senior officers, and the lack of resources.

Councils reporting higher levels of involvement in transformation projects have higher dedicated scrutiny officer FTE averages. Uninvolved councils averaged 0.9 and the most involved councils averaged 2.65. This indicates that involvement in major transformation project requires significant officer resource and council support, which some council may not have.

Figure 15: Scrutiny's Involvement in Planned Major Changes to Services



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When looking at major transformation projects in conjunction with committee size, there is tentative correlating evidence. Data indicates that councils with more than two committees are significantly more involved in major projects compared to other committee sizes.

### **Practitioner Skills and Scrutiny Support**

Almost 20% of respondents reported they felt councillors in their authority were unable to effectively undertake their role due to the lack of training and development opportunities. Although this is a significant portion, evidence suggests, particularly from the short interviews, that overall scrutiny officers believe they have rigorous training programs for officers and councillors. Nevertheless, many commented that the effectiveness of training and ability of scrutiny councillors was highly dependent on their willingness to engage with scrutiny work. Some respondents did indicate that their discretionary budget limited their ability to provide councillors additional with external training and development opportunities, and that an induction training to scrutiny across the council could be beneficial.

When asked what would make the most significant improvement to scrutiny's work within a council, the top responses were additionally training/resources, higher member engagement, and greater engagement and trust between scrutiny and other areas of the councils, particularly the executive. When we asked a similar question on what personal skills respondents felt would help them improve their work, responses were more varied. However, responses broadly indicated greater officer support, training and development opportunities, and ability to effectively and persuasively communicate with internal and external authority partners would be beneficial. This evidence suggests that scrutiny practitioners feel that scrutiny officers and councillors could benefit from additional training and that lack of resources may be hindering their ability to improve their skills.

## **Some conclusions on impact**

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We tried to establish a clear link between scrutiny's impact and effectiveness, and other factors we measure about scrutiny's operation. Our key findings are:

- Councils that report scrutiny having a larger impact on the lives of local people are those better able to effectively monitor the progress and impact of recommendations.
- Councils reporting more positively against the characteristics of effective scrutiny, and the Constitution Unit measures of impact, tend to be more positive about scrutiny, feel that it is valued by the authority, and better resourced.
- Councils reporting that they had more robust work programming arrangements tended also to be those scoring more highly on various measures of effectiveness.
- While just over half of respondents felt positive about scrutiny's future, it is difficult to establish a particular characteristic of the authorities they worked in which explained why this was the case. It is likely to be due to a complex combination of national and local circumstances.

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- Fewer than 50% of respondents reported that they made recommendations with measurable outcomes. Fewer than 30% of respondents described their recommendations as ambitious. There is no obvious link between these councils and any other measurable characteristic. Evidence suggests there are multiple factors influencing these results. The largest being an aversion to suggesting ambitious recommendations to avoid them being rejected by the council, executive, or cabinet for being too difficult or complicated, and lack of resources to adequately tackle them. This indicates scrutiny is working within confines to ensure that positive changes are made in smaller, more manageable steps to avoid no changes being made at all.
  - There is no proven structural formula for effectiveness. A range of different council types score both well, and poorly, against the impact and influence measures we have set out. Different parts of the country also have a similar spread – although we were surprised to see that London councils’ scrutiny effectiveness had dipped. The only obvious link that we can make out – on which we have noted in previous years – is that between dedicated officer support and effectiveness. Particularly in the case of councils who now support scrutiny through large, generic teams (who are also responsible for executive-side services) have seen a decline scrutiny’s effectiveness. Additionally, political factors (see below) seem to have little effect.
  - Councils with more committees seem, broadly speaking, to be more effective. This is an interesting finding which tends not to reflect the long-held assumption, held by some, that “fewer committees = better scrutiny”. We will need to find out more about this finding and what it means, particularly given that it has only become apparent this year.
  - Culture, values, and behaviours significantly influence effectiveness. When councils look to enhance and improve their scrutiny functions, this area needs to be addressed first. For the most part, these will be the values and attitudes of decision-makers – cabinet members, senior officers – which can serve either to empower scrutiny, or to hinder it.