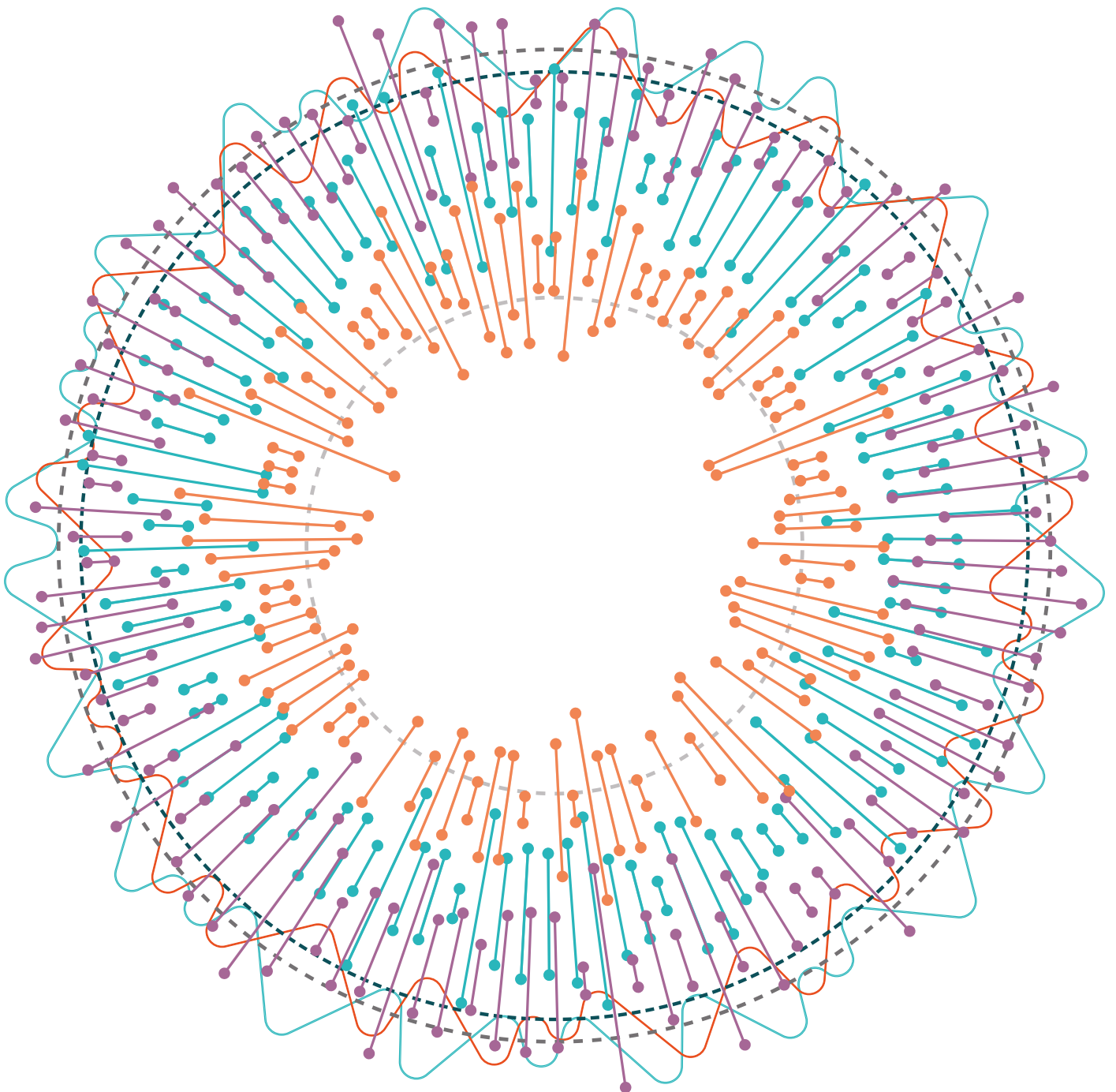


Annual Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government

2023/24



Introduction

The Annual Scrutiny Survey for England in 2023-24 aims to assess the effectiveness, structure, and impact of scrutiny committees across various local authorities. The survey gathers responses from officers providing support to scrutiny committees, council members, and members of cabinet to evaluate the state of scrutiny within their respective authorities.

Method

This survey aims to provide an overview of common practices in local government scrutiny, including perceptions of its value and effectiveness. The survey was opened on 8 February 2024 and closed on 4 March 2024 and results were analysed and compiled by CfGS Chief Executive, Mel Stevens and Pandora Ellis, Head of Operations with support from the wider CfGS Team.

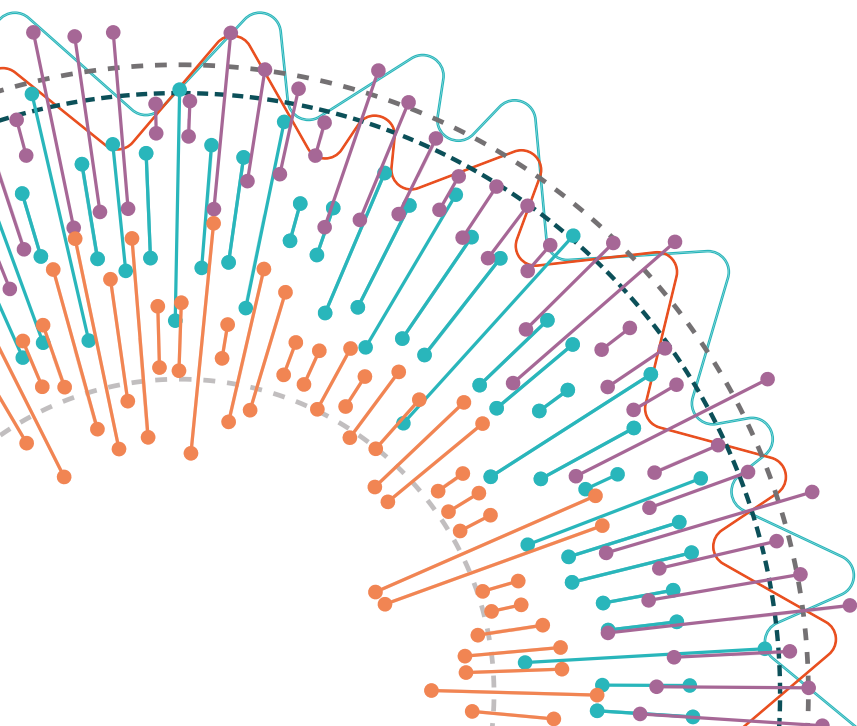
We invited both members and officers to participate in the survey. In the more technical sections, we directed the most senior officer responsible for day-to-day scrutiny to answer these specific questions. This approach was taken to prevent duplicate responses from a council. As a result, the number of participants varied across survey sections, with some sections completed by all respondents and others only by senior council officers.

Data limitations

The data collected allows us to see some themes across the past 20 years that we have been running the 'Annual Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government'.

Whilst we can compare data from 2022/23 and 2023/24, caution is advised due to the differences in which councils took part as well as differences in the number of participants. However, where useful, we have provided some comparative data for general insight.

The section on scrutiny effectiveness has some limitations due to a lack of specificity in some of the statements. Although they do nonetheless provide some important insights. Understanding more about why people disagree with the statements would benefit from a free text option, to encourage more detailed insight and is something we will add to our survey next year.



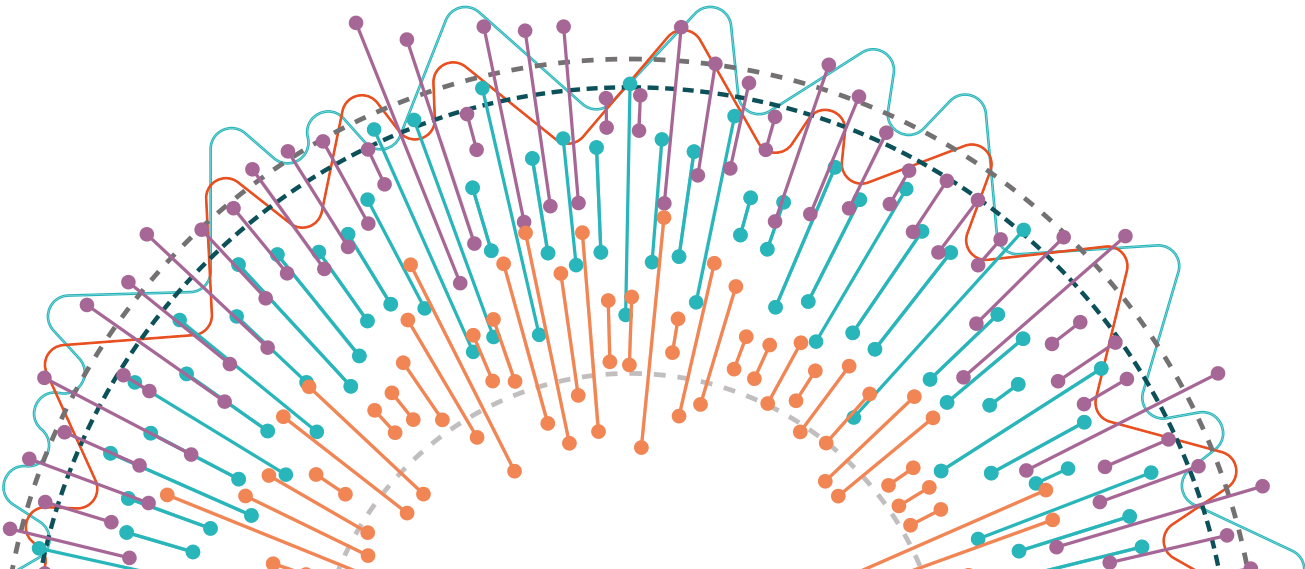
1. Who took part



Role in the council

Of the respondents who took part, 58% were council members and 42% were officers. This breaks down into more specific roles:

Q1 Who took part in the survey - by role	Percentage
Chair or vice-chair of a scrutiny committee	23%
Member of Cabinet	4%
Officer providing support to scrutiny committees / the scrutiny function	38%
Ordinary member of a scrutiny committee	25%
'Other' member	6%
'Other' officer	4%
Total	100%



Type of council

On council composition, London is slightly over-represented, compared with shire districts who are slightly under-represented. The geographic spread is also lower in relation to Yorkshire, East Midland and the North West.

Q3 Type of council	Percentage
Shire district	28%
Other unitary	29%
London borough	15%
Shire county	16%
Metropolitan unitary	10%
Other 'i.e. Isles of Scilly or City of London'	2%
Total	100%

Geographic spread

The spread of councils was wide across England, with exceptions in the South West and parts of the North West England, although the density of responses was mostly concentrated across the London Boroughs.

[Geographic spread of councils](#)



2. Governance and Structure

Type of governance model

Leader-cabinet forms the vast majority '88%' of governance models of our respondents. With Mayor and Committee models are far less frequent at 6% and 5% respectively. *NB. This may also reflect the nature of the councils that engage with CfGS, i.e. those with a strong scrutiny focus.*

In 'other,' one council told us that they have an Executive and Executive Advisory Panel, plus three Scrutiny Committees and an overarching Scrutiny Management Board. A Hybrid Leader-Cabinet model was mentioned by another council in 'other', although this is not being introduced until later this year.

Q4 - What governance model does your council operate?	Percentage
Leader-cabinet	88%
Mayoral	6%
Committee system	5%
Other	1%
Total	100%

Political control

Of those who took part in the survey, most respondents '55%' said that political control of their authority is held by one party with a large majority.

Q5 - What is the best description of the political control of your authority?	Percentage
Held by one party with a large majority	55%
Held by one party with a small majority	18%
Held by more than one party 'with the council being under no overall control'	16%
Held by one party which holds an overall minority of seats 'with the council being under no overall control'	11%
Total	100%

Scrutiny committees vary in how they are structured along with the range of their functions, as we saw in responses here:

Q7 - How would you describe the structure of scrutiny committees in your authority?	Percentage
Held by one party with a large majority	55%
Held by one party with a small majority	18%
Held by more than one party 'with the council being under no overall control'	16%
Held by one party which holds an overall minority of seats 'with the council being under no overall control'	11%
Total	100%

Resources for supporting scrutiny

Officer support provided to scrutiny

There were various ways that councils reported supporting scrutiny, with:

- Officers being employed to give advice on policy issues and to administer/clerk meetings being by far the most common way '61% of respondents'; and
- A majority of councils, 38 out of 66 respondents '58%', indicating that they have 1 Full-Time Equivalent 'FTE' or less of officer time providing policy support to Scrutiny Councillors.

Notably, six councils reported having three or more FTEs dedicated to this task, with one council exceptionally having 8 FTEs for policy support to Scrutiny Councillors. Further analysis reveals that there is no immediate pattern between the amount of FTE support and the type of council. This could be something we explore more fully in next year's survey.

Q8 - How is officer support principally provided to scrutiny?	Percentage
By officers employed to give advice to scrutiny members on policy issues and to administer/clerk meetings	61.5%
By officers employed to give advice to scrutiny members on policy issues	17%
By officers who advise both Cabinet members and scrutiny members	17%
Mix of the above options	1.5%
One Committee undertaking statutory O&S only	1.5%
Policy support by officers from individual services. Administrative support is given by Democratic Services who also develop the work programme, agendas, etc	1.5%
Total	100%

Q9 - Officer FTE time provided to scrutiny	Number of councils	Percentage
One or less FTE	38	58%
Between one and two FTE	13	20%
Between two and three FTE	9	14%
Three or more FTE	6	9%
Total	66	100%

Scrutiny ways of working

Executive/scrutiny protocols in place

The numbers of councils with written protocols in place already this year are at 54%. We are encouraged that where councils don't have a scrutiny protocol in place, a further 18% were planning to introduce one.

Whilst protocols alone do not engender successful or impactful scrutiny, the process of articulating how the cabinet/executive work with scrutiny can work to improve the visibility and regard for scrutiny.

Q10 - Does your council have an executive/scrutiny protocol in place?	2023-24 Percentage
Yes	54%
No, but we are planning one	18%
No	28%
Don't know	0
Total	100%

Arrangements for regularly sharing performance information with councillors

Arrangements for regularly sharing performance information are in place, according to 92% of respondents this year. Alongside this, a plan for introducing an arrangement is cited by an additional 6% of those who took part in the survey.

Q11 - Does your council have arrangements in place for regularly sharing information about performance with councillors?	2023-24 Percentage
Yes	92%
No, but we are planning to do this	6%
No	2%

Developing the scrutiny work programme

Looking at the approach to setting the work programme, more than two thirds of councils [69%] follow the statutory guidance and undertake an annual process which is aligned with governance processes throughout the year. A minority '8%' set work programmes over more than one year.

Interestingly, 14% of councils have a reactive or meeting by meeting approach to setting their work programme.

We do see a few councils taking different approaches, as represented by 'other'. These include the work programme being set by a chairs and vice-chairs group, following the Cabinet forward plan and having regular reports e.g. for performance.

Q12 - How does your council develop its scrutiny work programme?	Percentage
Annual process aligned to the municipal or financial year	57%
Multi-year process aligned with the electoral cycle	8%
Meeting by meeting	12%
Other	23%
Total	100%

The acceptance rates of recommendations by committees indicate that a high percentage are carried forward; over half [59%] of those who responded said that between 80% -100% are accepted.

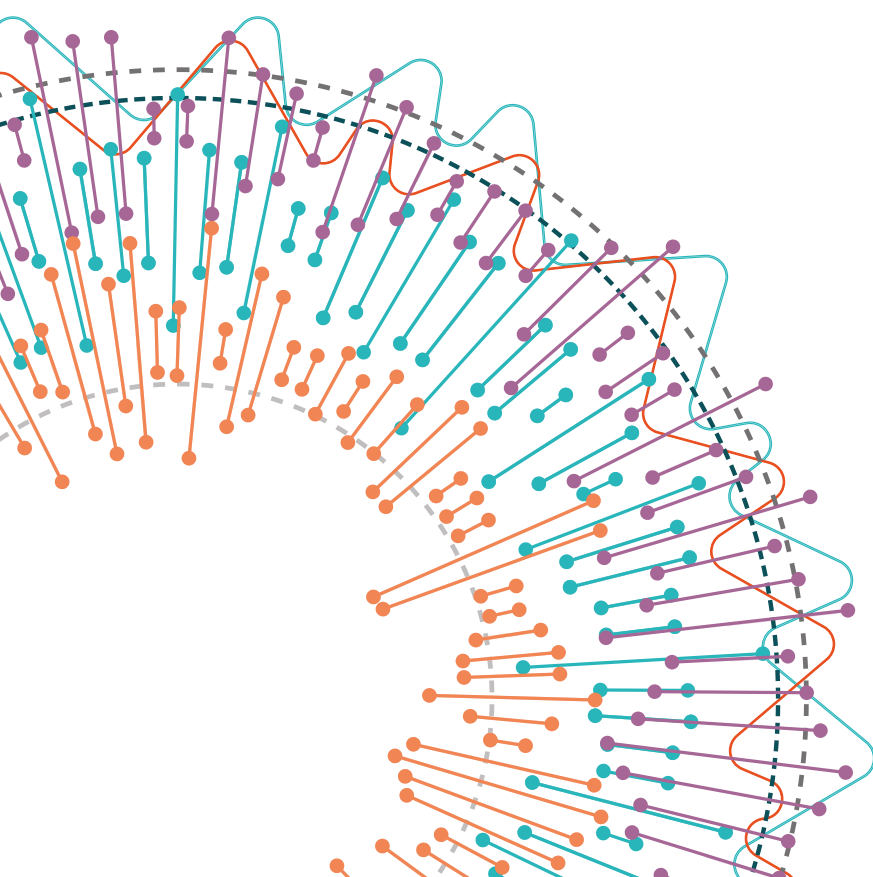
In this result, a sizable proportion, [21%,] of recommendations enjoy near-universal acceptance, falling between 95% and 100%.

At the lower end of the spectrum, fewer instances of recommendations go entirely unaccepted, with only 3% in the zero category.

Q13 - When committees make recommendations, on average, what percentage are accepted?	Percentage
Zero	3%
Between 15% - 40%	6%
Between 50% - 80%	21%
Between 80% - 95%	38%
Between 95% - 100%	21%
Other	11%
Total	100%

In relation to capturing data about recommendations, just over half said that this was a formal process.

Q 14 - Does your authority formally gather data about recommendations being accepted?	Percentage
Yes	57%
No	43%
Total	100%



3. Chairing arrangements on scrutiny

In our survey, council respondents reported that there were total of 239 chair and 206 vice-chairs positions on scrutiny committees.

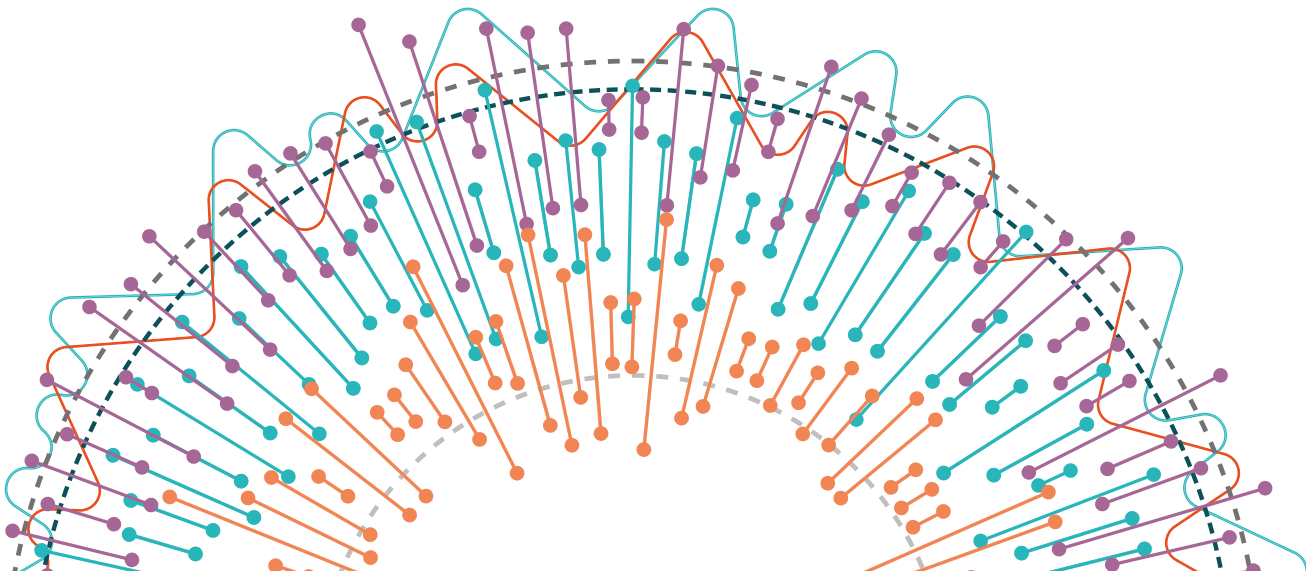
The vast majority reported that there are between one and five chairs [85%] and vice-chair [78%] positions in their councils.

A small minority of councils [13%] have between six and eight chairs, and a few [4%] have between ten and eleven. On vice-chairs, 8% of councils have eight positions and 2% have eleven.

72 '30%' of all chair positions are currently occupied by women, and 93 '45%' of all vice-chairs are women. The percentage of women in chair and vice-chairs position is very similar as last year, with a small 1% decrease in female-held chairing roles from [31%-30%], although as previously stated this data is not easily comparable.

Number of scrutiny chair positions in total - 2023-24	Number of scrutiny chair positions held by women	% of women chairs
239	72	30%
Number of scrutiny vice-chair positions in total - 2023-24	Number of scrutiny vice-chair positions held by women	% of women vice-chairs
206	93	45%

Number of scrutiny chair positions in total - 2022-23	Number of scrutiny chair positions held by women	Percentage
197	61	31%
Number of scrutiny vice-chair positions in total - 2022-23	Number of scrutiny vice-chair positions held by women	Percentage
177	78	45%



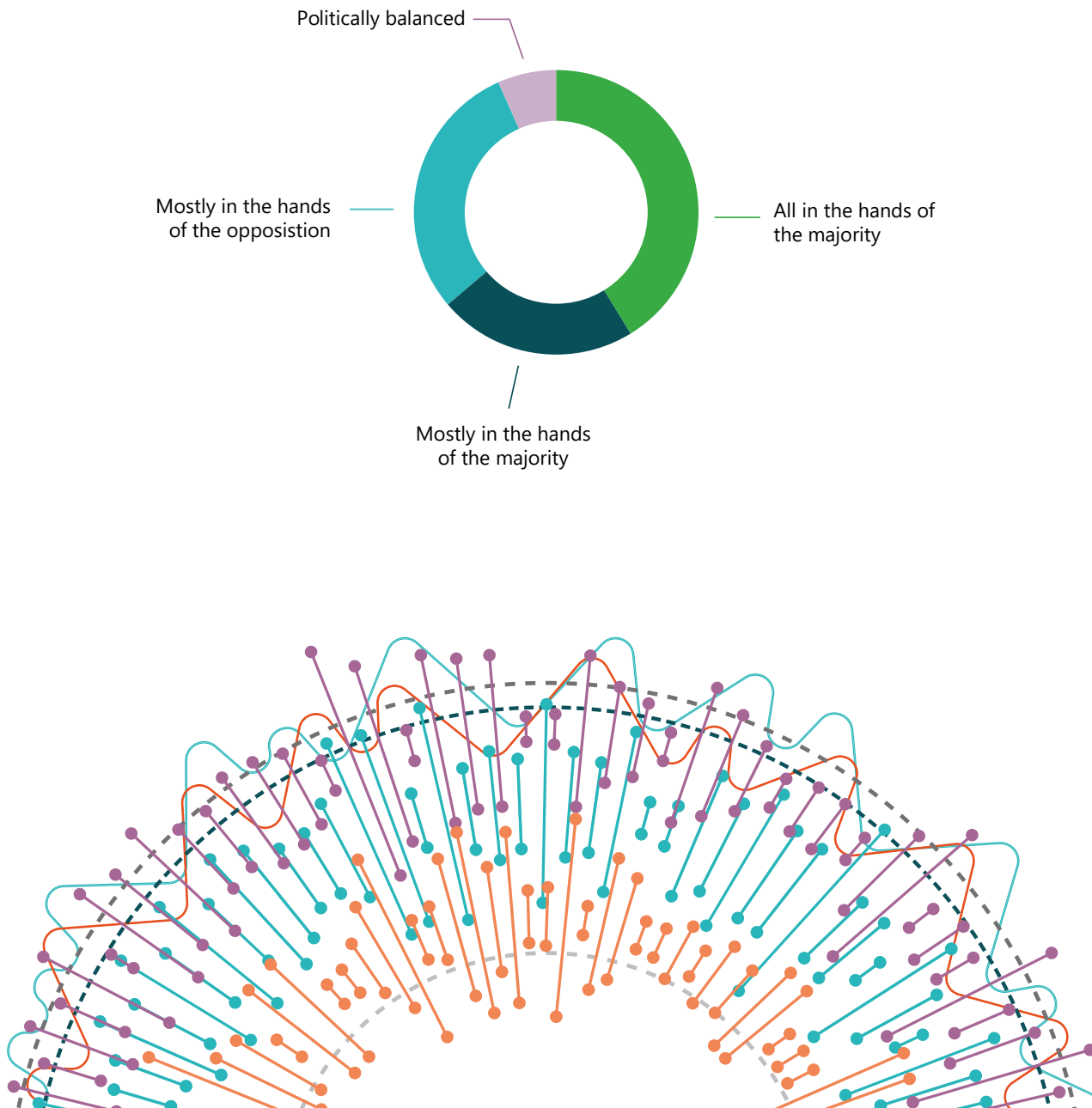
Political spread of chairing positions in the authority

The survey data reveals how chairing positions within the authority are distributed politically.

- 43% of respondents indicated that all chairing positions are held by the majority party and 22% mentioned that most chairing roles are in the hands of the majority party.
- In contrast, 29% of the responses show a preference for the opposition, holding these positions.
- Only a small portion, 6%, reported a politically balanced distribution of chairing roles.

Overall, this data reflects a strong inclination towards the majority party holding chairing positions, with a total of 65% of respondents indicating either all or most chairs are from the majority party.

Q20 - Which statement below best reflects the chairing positions in your authority?	Percentage
All in the hands of the majority party	43%
Mostly in the hands of the majority party	22%
Mostly in the hands of the opposition	29%
Politically balanced	6%
Total	100%



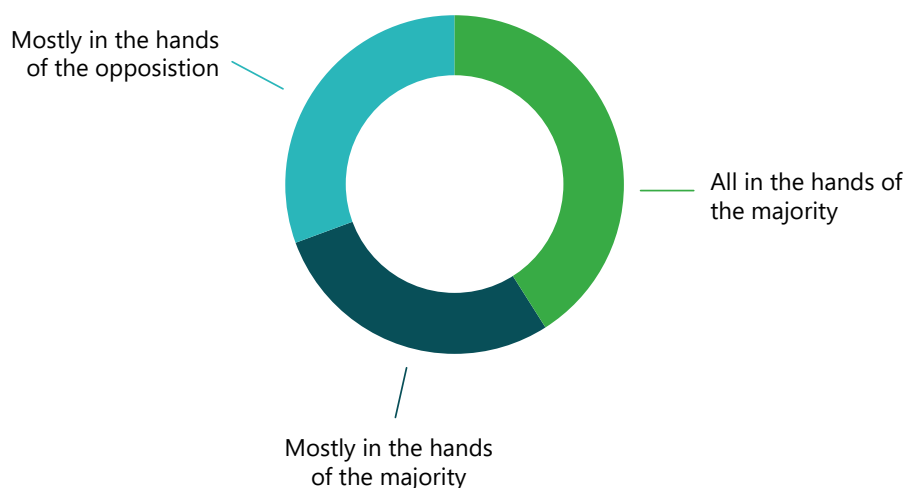
Political spread of vice-chairing positions in the authority

The data regarding vice-chairing positions within the authority shows a similar distribution pattern to chairing roles.

- 42% of respondents stated that all vice-chairing positions are controlled by the majority party. And 28% indicated that most vice-chairing roles are in the hands of the majority party.
- With 31% of responses stating that the opposition parties mostly hold these vice-chairing positions.

This data demonstrates a notable dominance of the majority party in vice-chairing roles, with a combined 70% of respondents reporting that these positions are either all or mostly held by the majority party.

Q21 - Which statement below best reflects the vice-chairing positions in your authority?	Percentage
All in the hands of the majority party	42%
Mostly in the hands of the majority party	28%
Mostly in the hands of the opposition	31%
Total	100%



Political spread of task & finish groups

The spread of balance in task and finish groups showed a much higher level of political proportionality, with the majority of respondents [62%] telling us that they are either politically proportionate, close to being politically proportionate or politically inclusive.

Q22 - If your council operates task and finish groups, are these composed in a way that is politically proportionate?	Number	Percentage
Yes	34	52%
No	12	18%
Politically inclusive	5	8%
Self-selecting	4	6%
At least 2 groups	1	2%
Close to being proportionate	1	2%
Other	2	3%
Does not apply	6	9%
Total	65	100%

4. Scrutiny effectiveness committees

We asked survey participants to respond to a range of statements to enable deeper understanding on the effectiveness of scrutiny.

Scrutiny impact

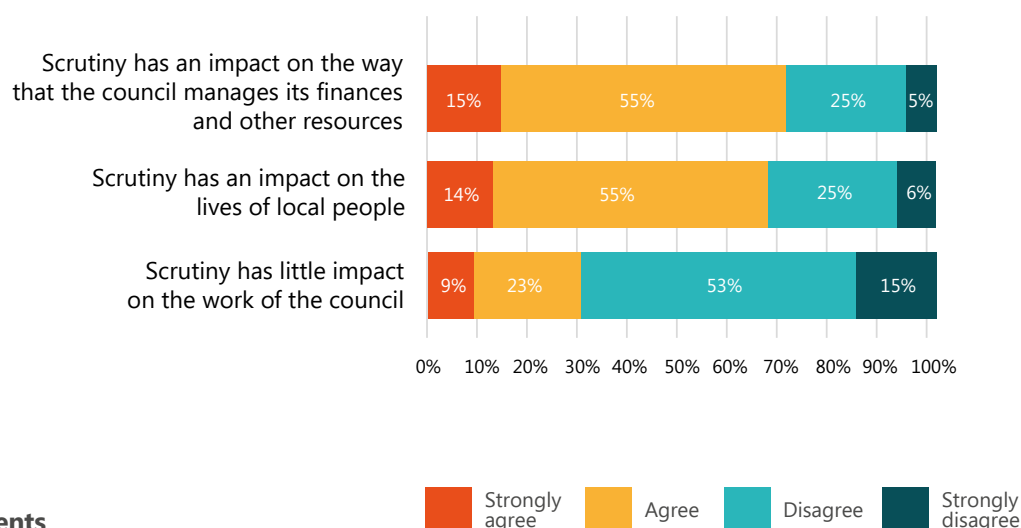
The statements relating to scrutiny impact did not make it explicit whether it was about positive impact, and whilst one might assume this is how it was understood, the statements are open to interpretation and should be treated with caution. This batch of questions highlights some limitations in our data, which we will refine in our next survey.

While we can see that there is majority agreement that scrutiny has an impact, in the way the council manages its finances [69%] and on the lives of local people, [68%], we also see that this view on impact is supported - this time by disagreement that 'scrutiny has little impact on the council's work' [68%]. This method of asking questions is confusing and will be rephrased next time.

Scrutiny has an impact on the way that the council manages its finances and other resources	Number	Percentage
Agree	128	55%
Disagree	56	27%
Strongly agree	35	14%
Strongly disagree	10	4%
Grand Total	229	100%

Scrutiny has little impact on the work of the council	Number	Percentage
Agree	52	23%
Disagree	122	53%
Strongly agree	21	9%
Strongly disagree	34	15%
Grand Total	229	100%

Scrutiny has an impact on the lives of local people	Number	Percentage
Agree	125	54%
Disagree	58	25%
Strongly agree	31	14%
Strongly disagree	15	7%
Grand Total	229	100%



Tackling big challenges and public engagement

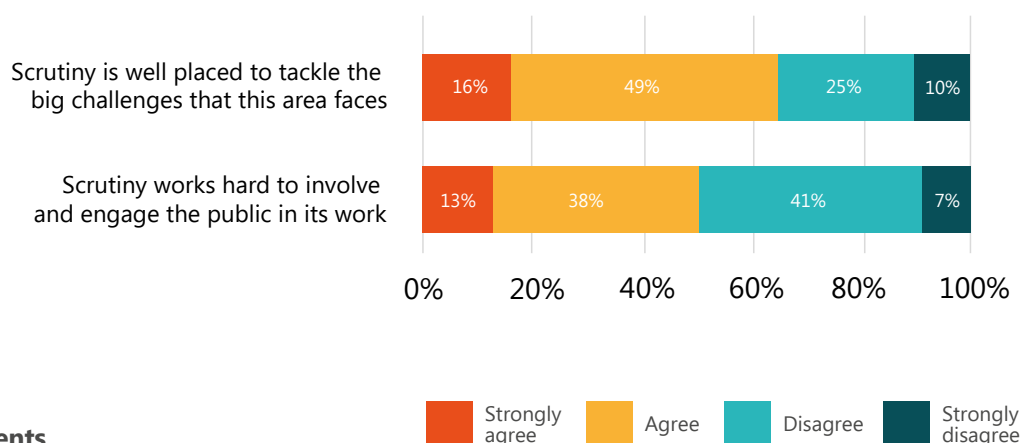
65% of respondents agreed [37 strongly agree and 112 agree] that scrutiny is well placed to tackle the big challenges. Although 35% expressed disagreement [58 disagree and 22 strongly disagree], indicating some level of scepticism or uncertainty about scrutiny's capability here.

Over half [51%], of the respondents agree or strongly agree that their council scrutiny function works hard to involve and engage the public in its work, though just under half [49%] disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Developing tools and confidence in scrutiny public participation is something that we are especially interested in supporting in future.

Scrutiny is well placed to tackle the big challenges that this area faces	Number	Percentage
Agree	112	49%
Disagree	58	25%
Strongly agree	37	17%
Strongly disagree	22	9%
Grand Total	229	100%

Scrutiny works hard to involve and engage the public in its work	Number	Percentage
Agree	88	38%
Disagree	94	41%
Strongly agree	29	12%
Strongly disagree	18	9%
Grand Total	229	100%



Access to information and financial oversight

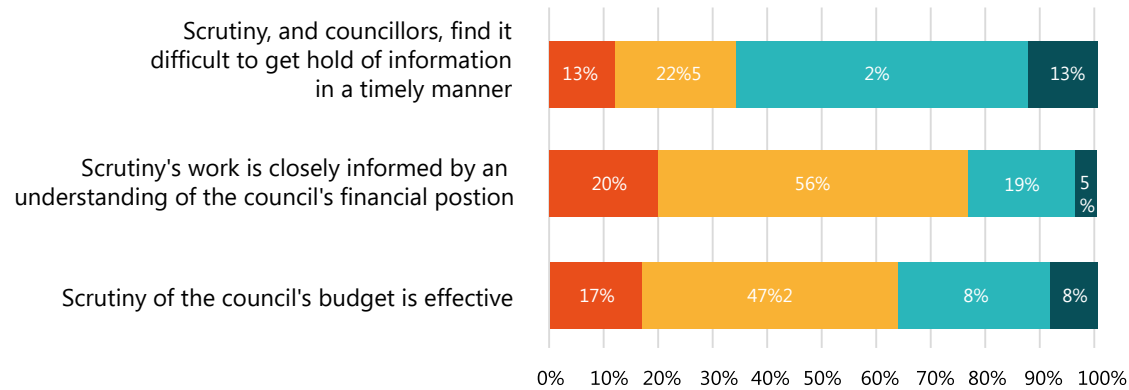
Some [34%] respondent face challenges in obtaining information in a timely manner, as indicated by those who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. However, the data reveals that a substantial number [66%] of respondents do not encounter significant obstacles hindering access to timely information, which could potentially impact the effectiveness of financial oversight and decision-making processes.

Most respondents [63%], agreed or strongly agreed thought that there was effective scrutiny of the council's budget, and there was a high number in agreement [77%] that scrutiny's work is closely informed by an understanding of the council's financial position '46 strongly agree and 130 agree'.

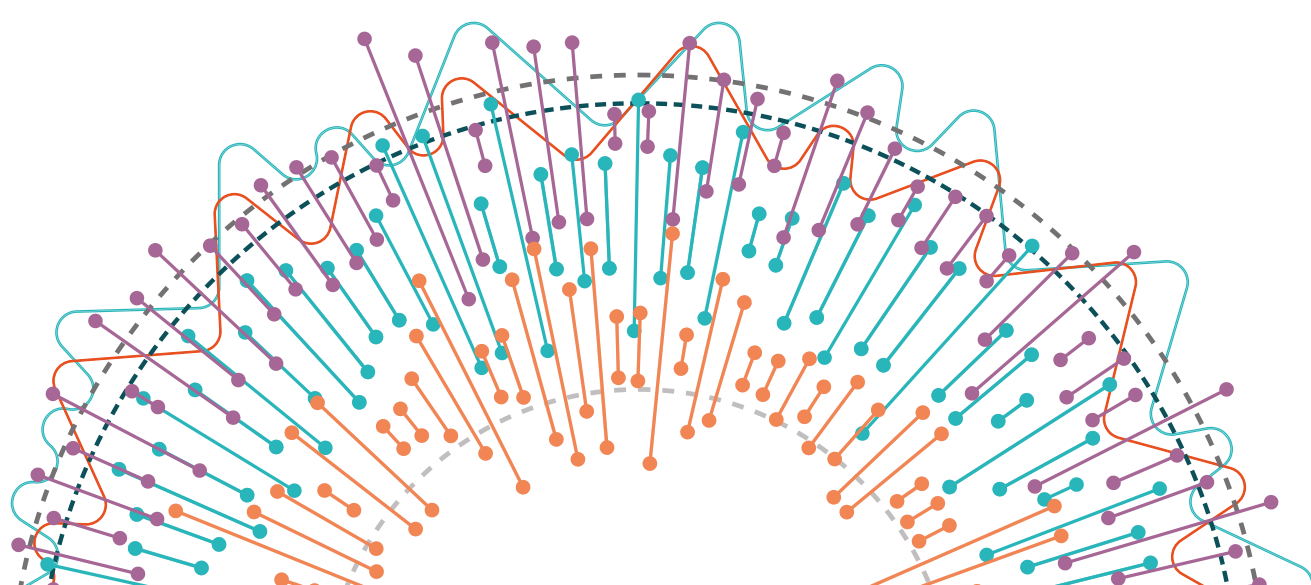
Scrutiny, and councillors, find it difficult to get hold of information in a timely manner	Number	Percentage
Agree	51	22%
Disagree	122	54%
Strongly agree	28	12%
Strongly disagree	28	12%
Grand Total	229	100%

Scrutiny of the council's budget is effective	Number	Percentage
Agree	107	47%
Disagree	65	28%
Strongly agree	39	17%
Strongly disagree	18	8%
Grand Total	229	100%

Scrutiny's work is closely informed by an understanding of the council's financial position	Number	Percentage
Agree	130	57%
Disagree	44	19%
Strongly agree	46	20%
Strongly disagree	9	4%
Grand Total	229	100%



229 Respondents



Dynamics and relationships in scrutiny committees

There were some strong levels of agreement on the dynamics and relationships in scrutiny committees, most of which was extremely positive:

- The strongest levels of agreement were a large positive perception that senior officers are supportive of the work of scrutiny, with 85% '195 respondents' agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement;
- This was closely followed by a large majority of respondents 79% '180 respondents' agreeing or strongly agree that councillor engagement with scrutiny is good;
- Additionally, a large number of respondents also reported that there is a constructive relationship between the executive and scrutiny, with 77% '176 respondents' agree or strongly agree with this statement. However, 23% '53 respondents' either disagree or strongly disagree, indicating some level of contention or uncertainty in this area.

- There was also significant agreement that there is a cross-party approach within scrutiny committees, with 176 respondents [77%] either strongly agreeing or agreeing.

However, 56% [129 respondents] agreed that poor relationships, including party politics have a negative impact on scrutiny.

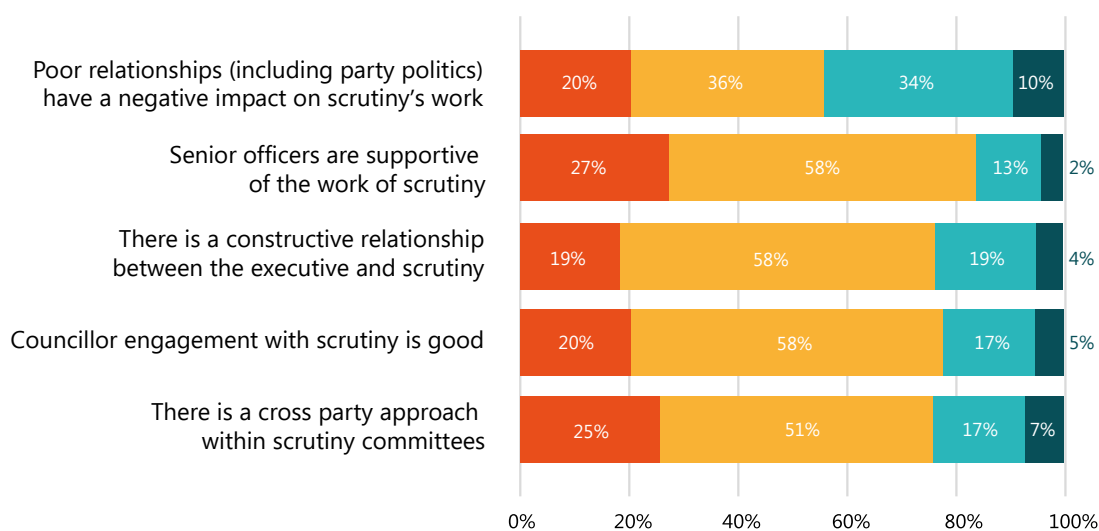
Poor relationships 'including party politics' have a negative impact on scrutiny's work	Number	Percentage
Agree	82	36%
Disagree	79	34%
Strongly agree	47	21%
Strongly disagree	21	9%
Grand Total	229	100%

Senior officers are supportive of the work of scrutiny	Number	Percentage
Agree	132	58%
Disagree	29	13%
Strongly agree	63	27%
Strongly disagree	5	2%
Grand Total	229	100%

There is a constructive relationship between the executive and scrutiny	Number	Percentage
Agree	133	58%
Disagree	44	19%
Strongly agree	43	19%
Strongly disagree	9	4%
Grand Total	229	100%

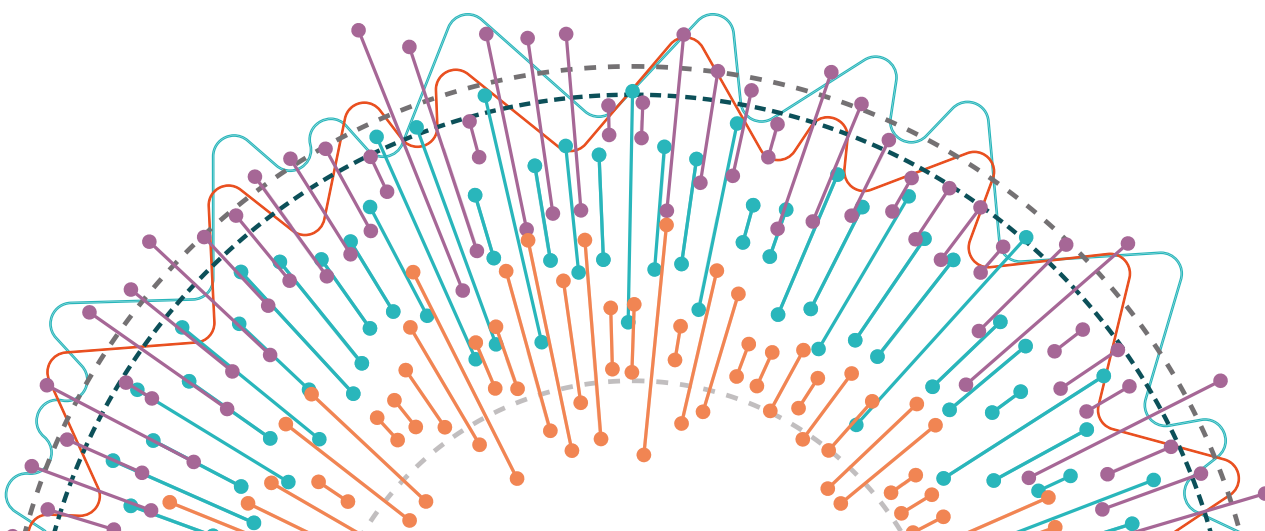
Councillor engagement with scrutiny is good	Number	Percentage
Agree	134	59%
Disagree	39	17%
Strongly agree	46	20%
Strongly disagree	10	4%
Grand Total	229	100%

There is a cross party approach within scrutiny committees	Number	Percentage
Agree	118	52%
Disagree	39	17%
Strongly agree	58	25%
Strongly disagree	14	6%
Grand Total	229	100%



229 Respondents

Strongly agree Agree Disagree Strongly disagree



5. Suggestions of topics for CfGS to research

There was a total of 101 topic suggestions for further research, covering a wide range of issues related to governance, accountability, and public service delivery, reflecting the diverse challenges and responsibilities faced by local councils and their scrutiny committees.

Banded into themes, these were:

Scrutiny of wider public services

- Collaboration and joint roles in NHS Trusts
- Roles and remits of Health Scrutiny and Health and Wellbeing Boards
- Scrutiny in Adult Social Care and CQC Inspections
- Scrutiny of Integrated Care Boards at system level
- Scrutiny of mental health services
- Scrutiny of Police, crime, and health services at local levels

Financial Scrutiny

- Budget and Performance Scrutiny
- Council finances and budget cuts
- Council housing revenue
- Improving scrutiny outcomes in financially challenged environments
- Scrutiny in times of financial constraints
- Innovative approaches to Social Care cost reduction

Governance and Representation

- Governance models and diversity in representation
- Governance models for Local Authorities
- Ensuring independence of scrutiny committees
- Scrutiny in one-party dominant systems
- Strengthening scrutiny in cabinet decision making

Social and Environmental Impact

- Climate Emergency response
- Impact on local businesses
- Public engagement in scrutiny
- Best practices in scrutiny engagement
- Debate and freedom of expression
- Digital transformation in local governance

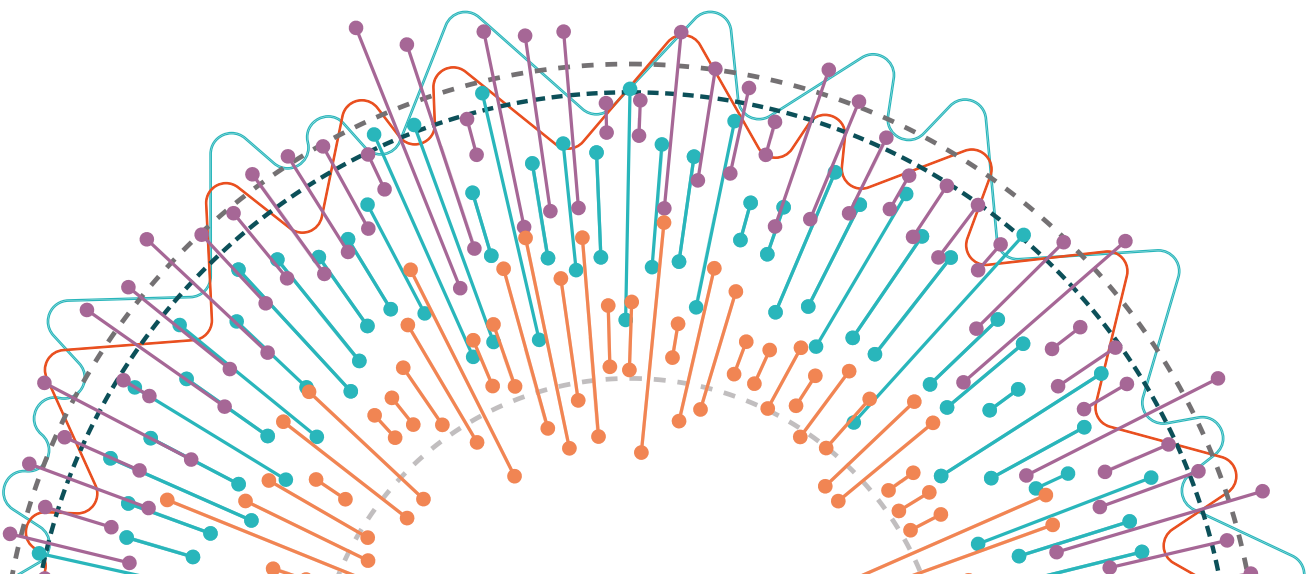
Operational Scrutiny Challenges

- Lessons learned from establishing scrutiny in CCAs
- Challenges in scrutiny committee operations
- Systems for policies/plans/strategies go to scrutiny first before going to Cabinet
- Impact assessment and evidence-based scrutiny
- Scrutiny officer roles and responsibilities
- Key decision processes and call-in procedures
- Data-driven decision making

"Repeat again the same stuff but interpret context in many different types of council. The concepts are great and it is trying to introduce the systems which need more information much earlier and more bridges to be built between officers and Cllrs to access the material and perhaps actual intentions which usually come out far too late."

"How to meaningfully strengthen the role of Scrutiny in Cabinet decision making; because the link between Cabinet decisions and scrutiny at PCC has, to date been virtually none."

"Scrutiny in the context of severe financial constraints. Impacts of any new Govt policy post-general election on scrutiny and wider local govt accountability. Relationship between scrutiny and Oflog."



6. Suggestions of topics for CfGS to host this year this year

There were 97 suggestions for potential events that CfGS might explore and host, based on following themes:

1. Enhancing scrutiny effectiveness and impact

Improving the effectiveness of scrutiny committees by addressing challenges such as poor councillor engagement, lack of impact on council decisions, and difficulties in accessing timely information.

Exploring the role of scrutiny in promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance within councils, especially in the context of financial constraints and budget setting.

2. Capacity building and training

Providing training and support for both councillors and officers involved in scrutiny, focusing on topics such as understanding the critical friend role, acting as decent scrutiny chairs, and developing fiscal literacy among councillors.

Offering guidance and examples of effective practice in scrutiny engagement, including how to conduct effective enquiries and foster constructive relationships between scrutiny and the executive.

3. Promoting good governance practices

Highlighting the importance of clear guidance and protocols for organising enquiries and facilitating productive discussions with various stakeholder groups.

Advocating for governance models that prioritise transparency, public engagement, and decision-making processes conducted in public forums, rather than behind closed doors.

4. Addressing political dynamics

Recognising the challenges associated with cross-party working, especially in politically homogeneous councils, and exploring strategies to promote constructive dialogue and collaboration across party lines.

Advocating for greater recognition of the role and value of opposition and scrutiny within the democratic process, aiming to broaden inclusion in decision-making and promote public understanding of their importance.

5. Reviewing scrutiny processes and structures

Reviewing existing scrutiny processes and structures to ensure they are fit for purpose and responsive to changing circumstances, including considerations for hybrid decision-making models and alternative approaches to decision-making by committees.


Examining peer review processes to ensure impartiality and effectiveness, and addressing concerns related to political bias or interference.

6. Promoting public engagement and awareness

Promoting broader public engagement in scrutiny processes and fostering public understanding of the role and importance of overview and scrutiny in local governance.

Providing comparative information on scrutiny practices across councils and sharing lessons learned, case studies and best practice examples from councils 'particularly those under intervention'.

"Given the challenges facing local government, I think the importance of good scrutiny is more crucial now than ever. This can only be achieved through recognition of its role and potential value to local authorities, alongside a commitment to facilitate.[SIC]"



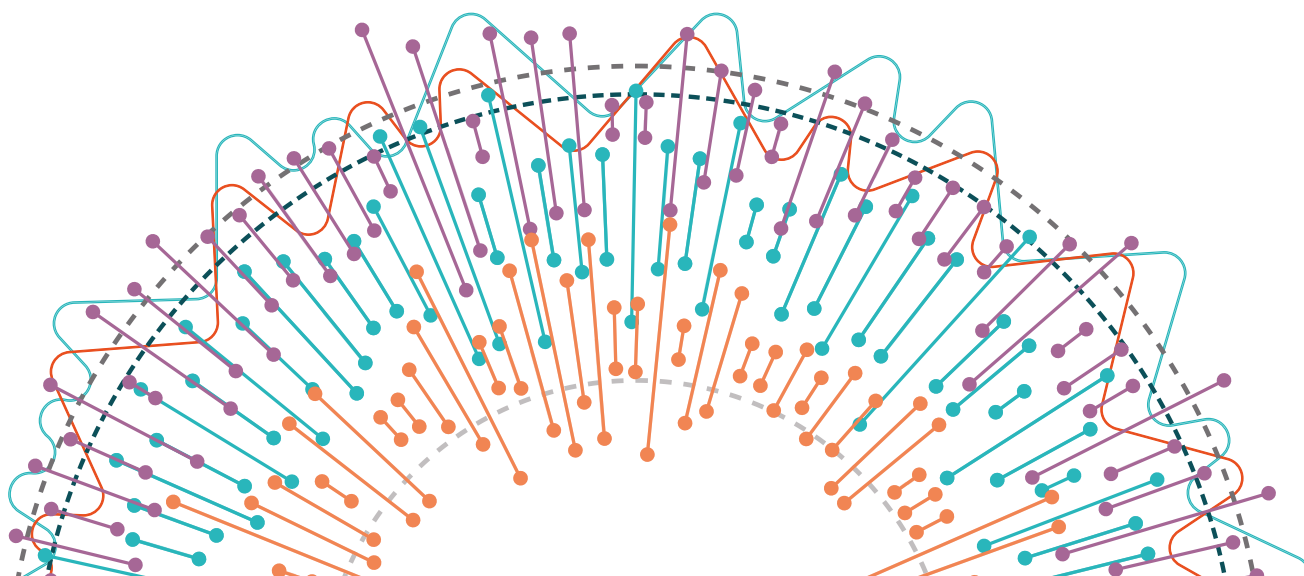

"Given the financial straits most Councils find themselves in I think it's more important than ever that Scrutiny contributes to budget setting and helps to build consensus on what's important for Councils to do."



"I would like comparative information about how Scrutiny is staffed and supported at other councils."



"I think OS is the open door of the organisation it allows the uncomfortable questions to be asked and also shows the positives in good light which might not otherwise be noticed by our residents members and officers."

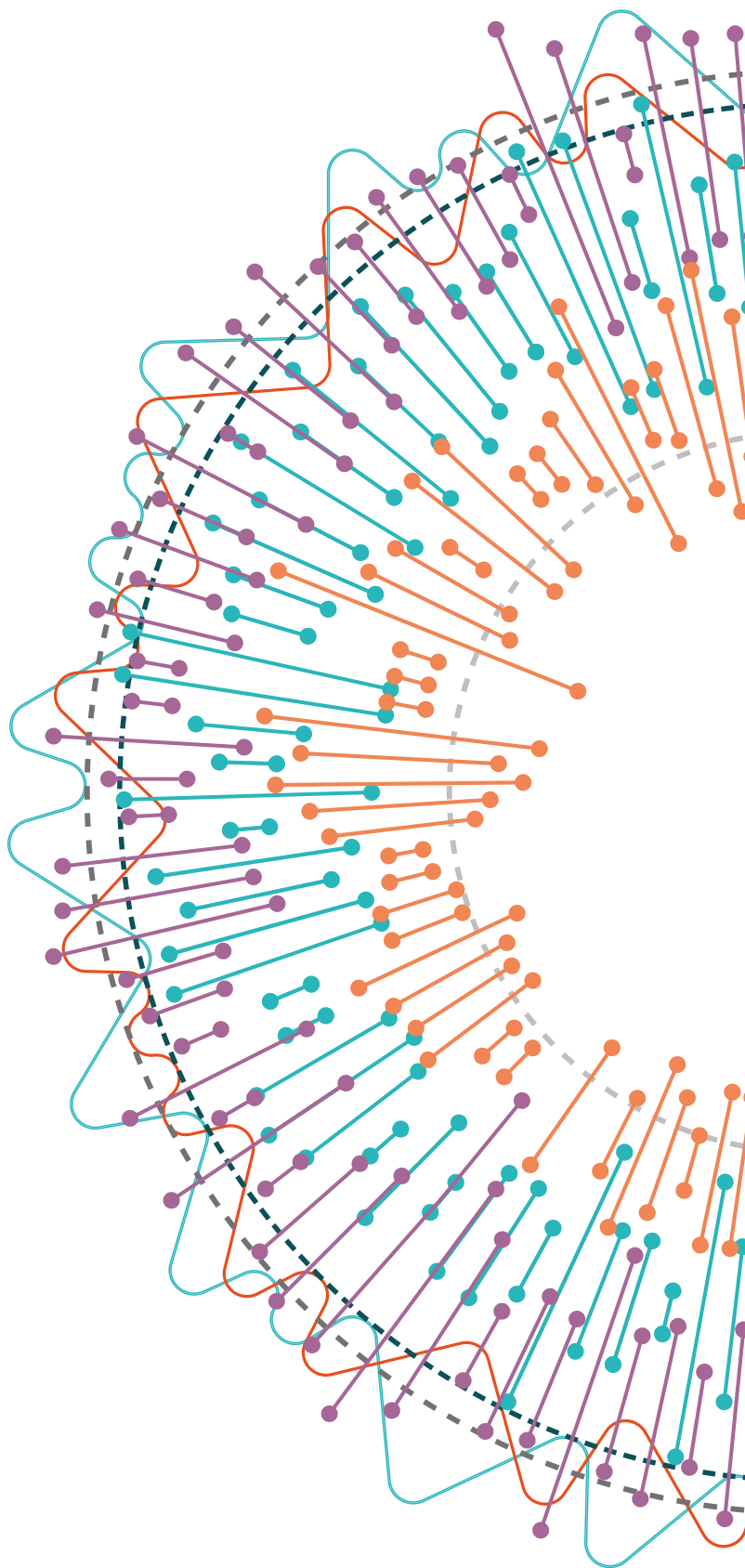


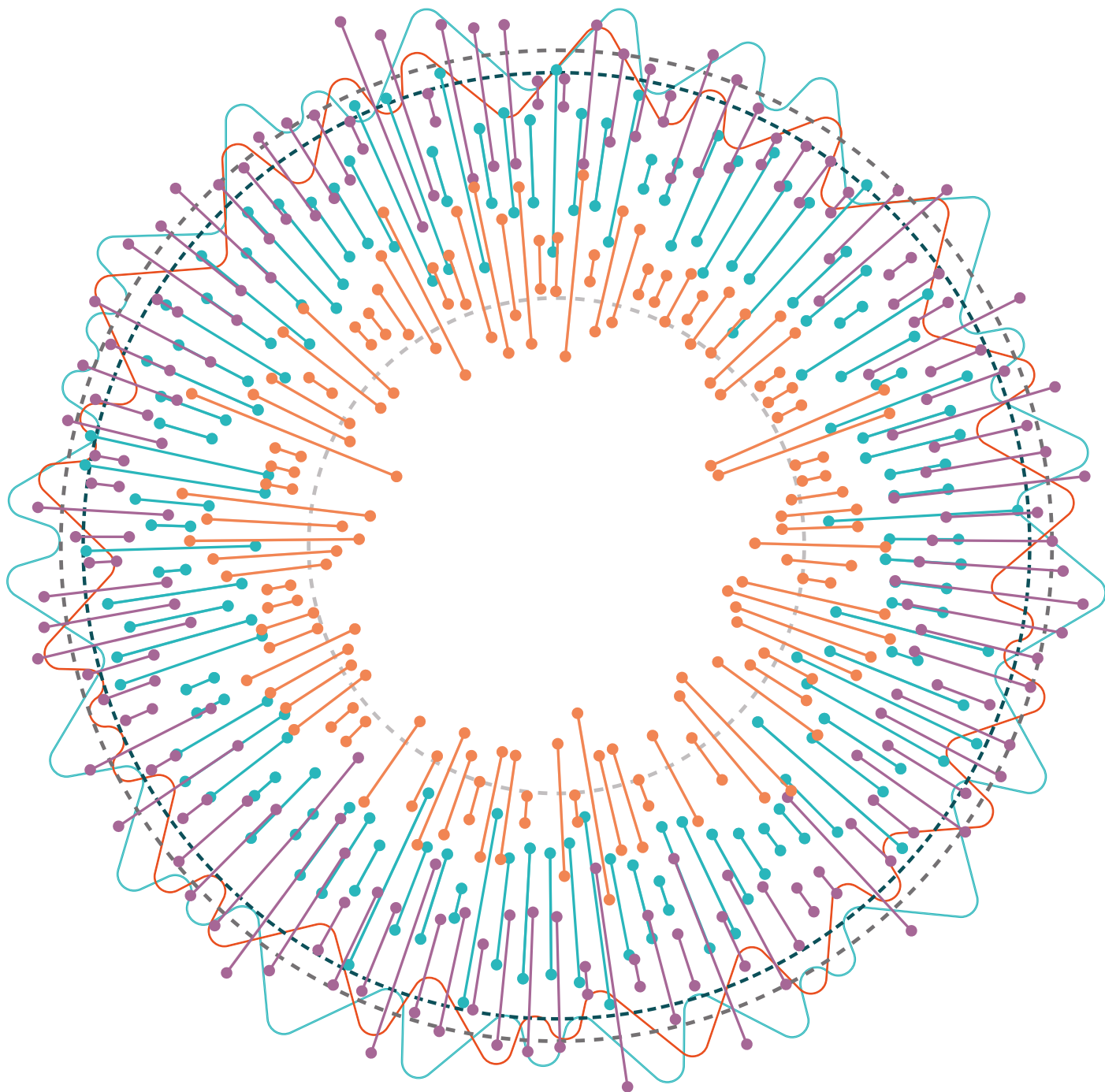
7. Acknowledgements

Thanks to everyone who took time to fill out the survey and share information with us. Every response counts. This is an annual touchpoint through which we are able to gather meaningful, comprehensive insight and develop our collective understanding of current practice. It also highlights approaches to work that yield positive results which helps inform the sector more generally and ensures that we design our ongoing support based on your needs.

The Annual Survey is funded by UK Government. We are grateful to the Local Government Association for their continued support and scrutiny curiosity.

From here, we are excited to take this learning forward on our quest to make good governance and scrutiny central to local democracy and high-quality services.





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