

2020-21 Annual Survey
of Overview and Scrutiny
in Local Government



Introduction

This year's Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) Annual Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government has been carried out in an environment dominated by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

On account of this, although we have continued to ask many of the same questions about the resourcing and structures of scrutiny, we have refocused to reflect on **experiences on governance and scrutiny relating to the pandemic**, as well as on **pressures relating to local authority finances and commercial activity**.

As we emerge from the pandemic, local government and the public sector more generally finds itself at a crossroads – on the cusp of transformation to fundamentally different ways of working but lacking the resources and capacity to confidently grab hold of this opportunity. Part of our work this year is about exploring what scrutiny can do to understand this challenge, and to assist councils with this shift in approach.

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Executive Summary

On the pandemic

- Broadly speaking, where scrutiny continued it was able to positively contribute to matters relating to the pandemic.
- Ineffective scrutiny during the pandemic unsurprisingly correlates with ineffective scrutiny in other areas (particularly financial scrutiny, and a poor approach to making recommendations), and with a poor level of organisational commitment to scrutiny in general.

On finances and commercial activity

- Less than 50% of respondents had confidence that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to their council's commercial activities.
- Scrutiny's awareness of and understanding of risk is improving, but there are still gaps.

On effectiveness generally

- Recommendation quality and monitoring has improved slightly since 2019.
- Committee structure, and the number of committees, seems to have no appreciable impact on scrutiny's effectiveness.
- In councils that demonstrated our 'effectiveness measure':
 - They tend to have more dedicated scrutiny officer resource;
 - They tend to use protocols and info digests;
 - They tend to have politically balanced chairs;
 - They tend to agree that there is a cross-party approach to scrutiny and that there is parity of esteem between scrutiny and the executive.

On councillors and politics

- Scrutiny is more effective in councils which take member support and development more seriously.
- The political contestability of councils (i.e. whether the political party holding the majority of the seats changes frequently) does not make much difference to scrutiny's effectiveness.
- The importance of culture has been reinforced.

On resourcing, and the capacity for scrutiny to deliver change

- The average number of FTE scrutiny officers per authority is 1.1.
- The specialist model is the common support arrangement for scrutiny.
- The drop in resourcing continues to have an impact on perceptions of scrutiny's effectiveness.

What we think councils could do differently

- Council executives must urgently satisfy themselves that they are proactively doing all they can to support and foster a culture which welcomes scrutiny and an effective scrutiny function.
- This assurance should be supported by advice given by an authority's statutory scrutiny officer – we now recommend that all authorities designate such an officer, even if not required in legislation.
- Councils should build a central role for scrutiny in the post-pandemic policy development environment.
- Scrutiny councillors and the officers who support them should reflect critically on whether scrutiny focuses on the right things, at the right time, and in the right way.

Methodology

Survey respondents were asked to fill out the full survey if they were the most senior officer with day-to-day responsibility for scrutiny in their council. All other respondents, junior officers or councillors, were asked to complete the abridged version.

This year the closing date for survey responses was March 5th, 2021. As such, results and analysis reflect the political balance, control of authorities, and reflections on scrutiny up to that date.

Since the mid-2000s, CfGS has aimed to carry out a full annual survey every year, although more recently we have tended to carry out a short annual survey focused on practitioners' perceptions of the function. The last "full" survey – and hence the one to which we compare most figures in this report – was carried out in 2019. However, differing response rates in recent surveys do highlight the need for care in direct comparison. It is worth noting that 85 councils provided a full response in 2021 compared to 226 in 2019; the difference is accounted for by a shorter timescale for data collection and the fact that responses were being gathered at what was an extremely challenging time for the sector. 303 responses were received in total for both the full and abridged survey.

Of the 85 councils providing a full response:

- 94% were Leader-Cabinet councils.
- 4% were Mayoral councils.
- 2% were Committee system councils.

Of those 85 councils:

- 9% were County Councils.
- 36% were District/Borough Council in a two-tier area.
- 13% were London Boroughs.
- 8% were Metropolitan Boroughs.
- 21% were other unitary councils.
- 3% were other authorities (e.g. Combined Authorities).
- 10% were Welsh Councils.

Contestable councils

This year, we asked respondents whether their council was "contestable" and 24% answered yes. A contestable council is one which is subject to frequent changes of political control; this may also mean that such councils are frequently hung (under no overall control). We wanted to understand how political contestability affects the work and effectiveness of scrutiny, and whether the political dynamics around contestability have positive or negative impacts for scrutiny. Respondents that considered their council as contestable were 9% more likely to agree that councillor engagement with scrutiny is poor, and 11% more likely to agree that party politics has a negative impact on scrutiny. However, the perceived impact of scrutiny in contestable and non-contestable councils is broadly similar.

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The pandemic

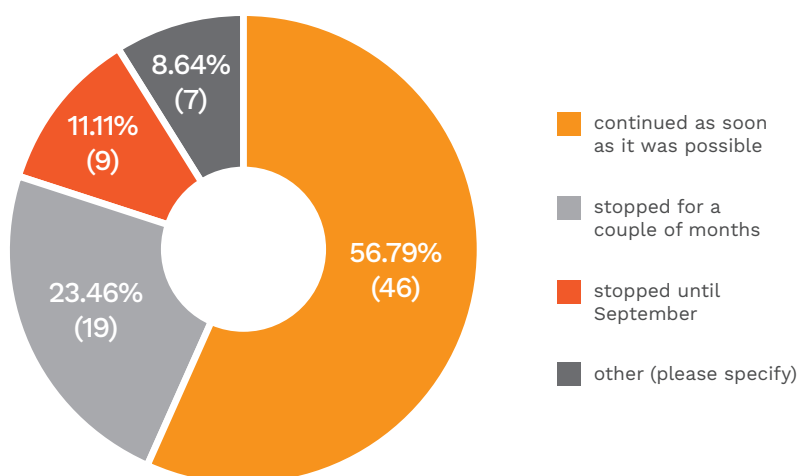
Key highlights:

- Most restarted scrutiny activity during spring 2020 but in some areas scrutiny activity was curtailed for much longer – in some cases, until September and beyond;
- Most restarted all committee activity – a minority restarted a single committee with a focus on pandemic response;
- Most changed their work programmes fairly substantially to account for the pandemic (with some completely rewriting their programmes) but some made no significant changes;
- In many places, a restart to scrutiny was later because councils opted to restart “business critical” member activity first;
- There was fairly substantial use by councils of emergency powers to make decisions throughout the pandemic, and many scrutineers are concerned that they lacked the ability to oversee these decisions;
- Plans for a proper debrief from the pandemic – and plans to involve scrutiny in this activity – are mixed, and uncertain.

The pandemic placed local governance, and scrutiny, under significant pressure. This was explored in “COVID-19: practitioner voices”, published by CfGS in summer 2020 – the annual survey updates that understanding.

For this annual survey, we asked how scrutiny activity changed during the pandemic.

Q19 Scrutiny activity...

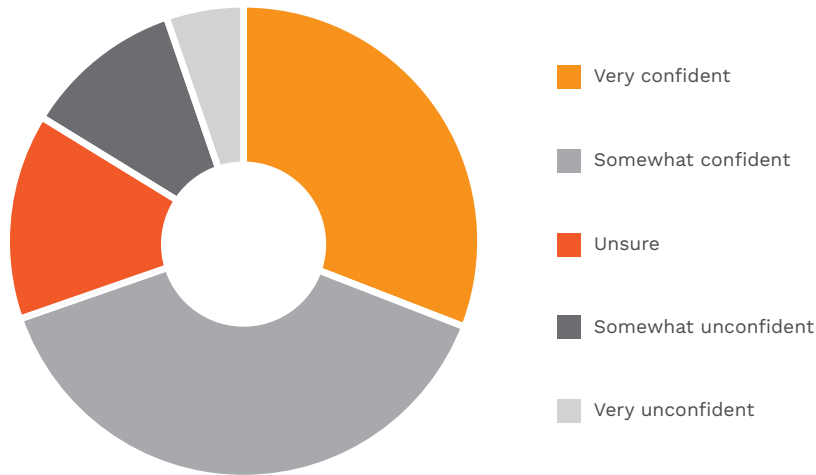


When we conducted a previous snap survey on this subject in May 2020:

- 29% (22 of 75) said that they were adopting a more streamlined approach to scrutiny;
- 8% (6 of 75) said that scrutiny was on indefinite hiatus – a further 18% (14 of 75) said that scrutiny was on hiatus but with plans to reconvene shortly;
- 42% (32 of 75) said that scrutiny was restarting, or continuing, with its full calendar of meetings.

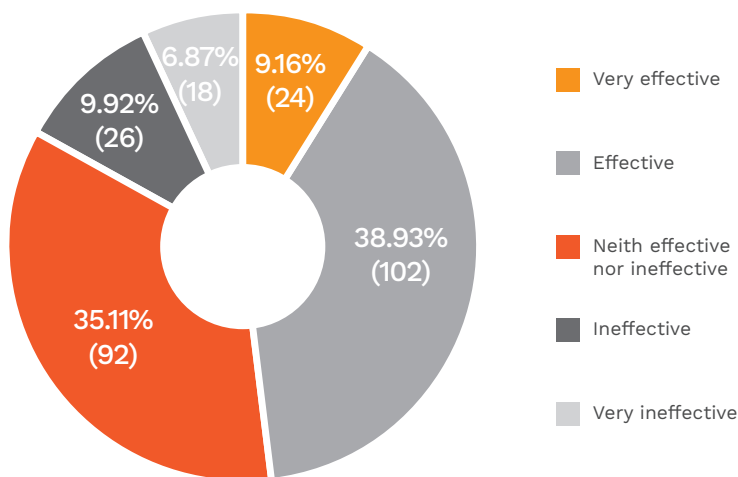
Practical issues during the pandemic

In May 2020 we asked practitioners about their confidence in scrutiny's ability to make an impact during the pandemic.



Looking back, we have now asked whether those expectations have been realised. Generally speaking, the experience has been rather more mixed than initial expectations – although it is worth noting that the councils responding to our May 2020 survey are not all the same as those responding to this survey.

Q47 What is your perception of scrutiny's effectiveness in overseeing or supporting the council, and local people, on matters relating to the pandemic?



Those who answered positively to the above question tended to be from councils:

- Where opposition parties hold chairing positions;

- Where an executive/scrutiny protocol is in place;

- Where management information is shared

- With a dedicated scrutiny officer. The size of the officer team did not appear to make much difference. Anecdotally we speculate that this may be because the impact of number of staff was lessened by redeployment on emergency response;
- Where, in most cases, scrutiny activity had restarted relatively quickly and where either a standing COVID-19 panel had been established or a single committee had convened regularly to consider COVID-19 issues;
- Which completely rewrote their work programme in light of the pandemic (there is a strong correlation here);

- Where councillors were kept informed of emergency / urgency decisions made by the executive as soon as they happened;
- Where there are plans for scrutiny to play an active role in helping the councils to learn lessons once the pandemic ends.

In many of the councils where scrutiny was able to play a positive role during the pandemic - scrutiny work continued but committees were reduced throughout the initial lockdown. When the full suite of committees first resumed, the number of items considered at each meeting focused on urgent and business critical matters.

“Our work programmes became more focused on key priorities, with a subsequent return of some of the important but deferred business at the height of the pandemic. For example, we were beginning a review of car parking charging as the pandemic began, but this was deferred for a few months whilst we focused on scrutinising the safe reopening of town centres and ensuring safe access.”

“We worked extremely hard to ensure that the scrutiny relating to the pandemic made a difference. Over 70 hours of scrutiny was undertaken, including task groups, covering the response and recovery, subjects included care homes, economy, education, the response, healthcare and much more.” tiny work continued but committees were reduced throughout the initial lockdown. When the full suite of committees first resumed, the number of items considered at each meeting focused on urgent and business critical matters.

In the cases where scrutiny was sidelined, this manifested through:

- Scrutiny being on hiatus for an extended period following the shift to remote working;
- A failure to make meaningful changes to the work programme in light of the pandemic;
- A failure by the council to keep councillors involved and informed on decision-making – especially when emergency and urgency decision-making powers were used.

Ineffective scrutiny during the pandemic unsurprisingly correlates with ineffective scrutiny in other areas (particularly financial scrutiny, and a poor approach to making

recommendations), and with a poor level of organisational commitment to scrutiny in general. Councils with ineffective pandemic scrutiny also reported poor councillor engagement with scrutiny in a general, a poor relationship between scrutiny and the executive overall (with a negative impact from party politics, a lack of a parity of esteem between the functions, and unsupportive senior officers being strong factors). There was also an extremely strong correlation with councils where scrutiny was reported to be poor at engaging with the public in its work.

Authorities from the South West and East Midlands were disproportionately represented amongst these councils where scrutiny had

been less effective. Councils in the North West seemed to have had the best experiences. Unitary councils and county councils tended to have had more positive experiences overall – shire districts generally less so.

Scrutiny activity seemed to restart sooner in more contestable councils – in these councils, the restart was more likely to involve all scrutiny committees (87%) than was the case in non-contestable councils.

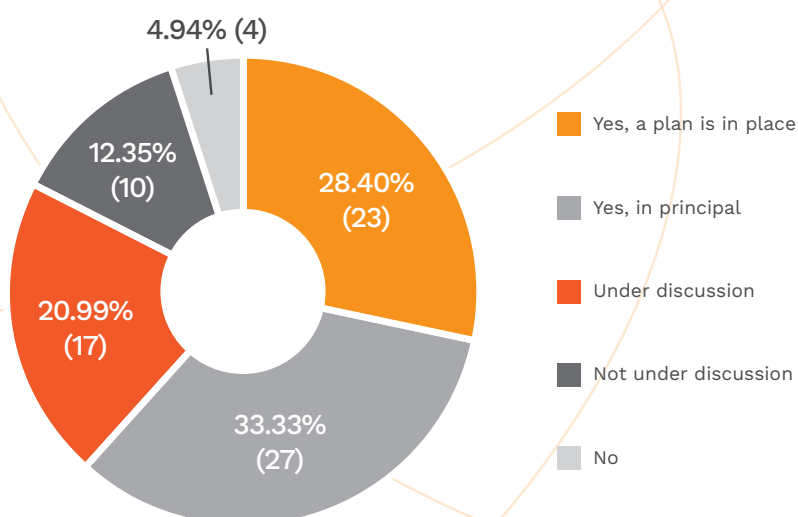
“The first few weeks of the Pandemic saw decision making mainly in the hands of the Executive officers, in consultation with the Leadership, as government guidance was changing almost daily. However once Cabinet was able to meet remotely from mid May, the OSCs soon followed. They were able to continue with their work programmes, adding pandemic related updates such as the distribution of grants, impact on the workforce and community support/engagement.”

The role of the Monitoring Officer

In councils where the Monitoring Officer is not a corporate director (ie, where they do not sit on the corporate management team or regularly attend CMT meetings) councillors were generally less informed on emergency and urgency decision-making. Such councils are also less likely to be ones where scrutiny is planning to take a role in the oversight of post-pandemic recovery.

Recovery plans

Q27 Is there a plan for scrutiny to take an active role in helping the council to learn lessons, and to debrief, once the pandemic ends?



Councils report a range of plans for scrutiny’s ongoing work around pandemic recovery. Generally these divide into three areas:

- A debrief-style exercise (essentially what we have described as a “step back” review) – looking at the emergency response and where lessons can be learned;
- Looking at the immediate and emerging community impacts of the pandemic;

- Horizon-scanning – reflecting on what the pandemic is likely to mean for long term plans.

In all respects, there is a strong tendency for councils to be planning cross-cutting work – most reported that recovery scrutiny was deliberately designed to draw together councillors from multiple committees and with multiple specialisms.

In some cases recovery scrutiny has already begun, and emerged from ongoing review of pandemic response in summer and autumn 2020. Only in London were more than 50% of authorities responding actively planning scrutiny work on pandemic recovery – in other places only around 25% of councils had such plans in place.

“If scrutiny does take a formal role in learning lessons from the crisis what, in your view, should this look like?”

- “Joint task groups to focus on specific areas, eg economic recovery”;
- “To support the strategic reset and recovery process, rather than focusing on single themed operational issues”;
- “Shaping the agenda, identifying priorities, reviewing the recovery plan”;
- “Structured task and finish groups looking at different elements of the response, breaking it up into meaningful chunks”.

Finances, commercial activity and risk

Key highlights:

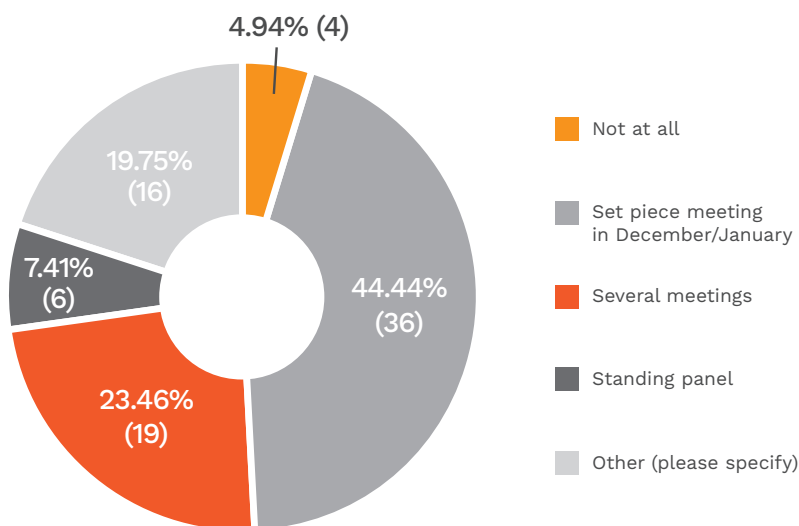
- 78% of respondents said that their council was under “significant financial pressure”;
- More councils are taking a year-round approach to financial and budget scrutiny;
- Only 65% of respondents had confidence that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to council finances;
- Less than 50% of respondents had confidence that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to their council’s commercial activities – 10% said that they were very confident that it can’t;
- A range of factors would seem to help to improve scrutiny of financial and commercial matters – principally better access to information and a clearer role for scrutiny;

- Scrutiny’s awareness of and understanding of risk is improving, but there are still gaps.

Finances

In March 2020, CfGS published a practice guide on financial scrutiny. This recommended a year-round approach to review of council finances and budget development. This sits in contrast to the traditional approach taken by many councils, which is to hold a set-piece event in December or January to consider the budget in total before it is submitted to Full Council. These set-piece events tend to be ineffective as they invite councillors to consider the budget line-by-line in a very limited timeframe, which can involve scattergun questioning and a focus on operational matters.

Q35 How does scrutiny review the budget?



This compares with 2019’s figures:

- 38% of respondents held a set piece meeting in December/January,
- 27% held several committee meetings over the course of the autumn and winter,
- 8% had a standing panel or sub-committee which sits throughout the year,
- 10% did not review the budget at all.

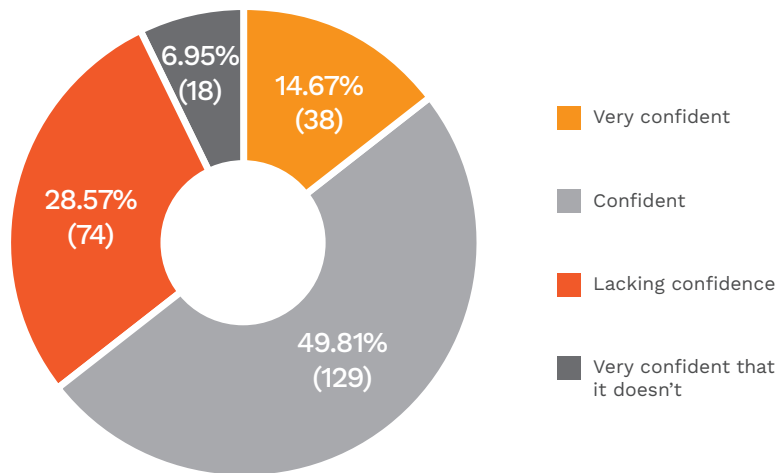
The figures are broadly similar (with any difference reflective of the fact that this year we have provided an “other” category).

Other reported ways of doing budget scrutiny

- Integrating it with quarterly monitoring of the in-year budget;
- Monitoring through the year by a public accounts select committee before consideration by other scrutiny committees individually;
- Consideration through informal working groups informing a set-piece event in the New Year;
- Through all-member workshops supported by the Director of Finance;
- Through a regularly-meeting Joint Budget Scrutiny Committee.

Confidence in councils' ability to oversee council finances generally is mixed.

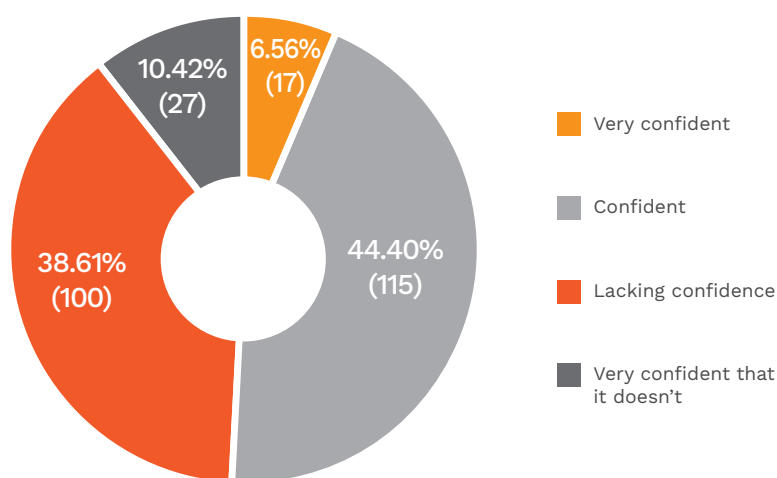
Q51 How confident are you that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to council figures?



Commercial activity and procurement

In respect of commercial activity, procurement and outsourcing, scrutiny continues to struggle to find a productive role. There is less confidence in the ability of scrutiny to have an effect here.

Q52 How confident are you that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to council's commercial activity?



Better access to information and a clearer role for scrutiny were cited as the primary things which might improve scrutiny of both financial and commercial matters. Scrutiny tends to find itself duplicating the work of others on commercial activity; requests for information are often met with refusal on the grounds of commercial confidentiality. Where scrutiny is less aware of the exposure of the council to risk and pressure on commercial activity it can increase the pressure to access information

– this can lead to vicious cycle of request and refusal which can disengage councillors, and which presents risk to governance. CfGS is planning work later in 2021 on the access by councillors of commercially confidential information.

Challenges around councillor access to information on commercial and finance issues were highlighted in the Grant Thornton RIPI relating to Croydon Council.

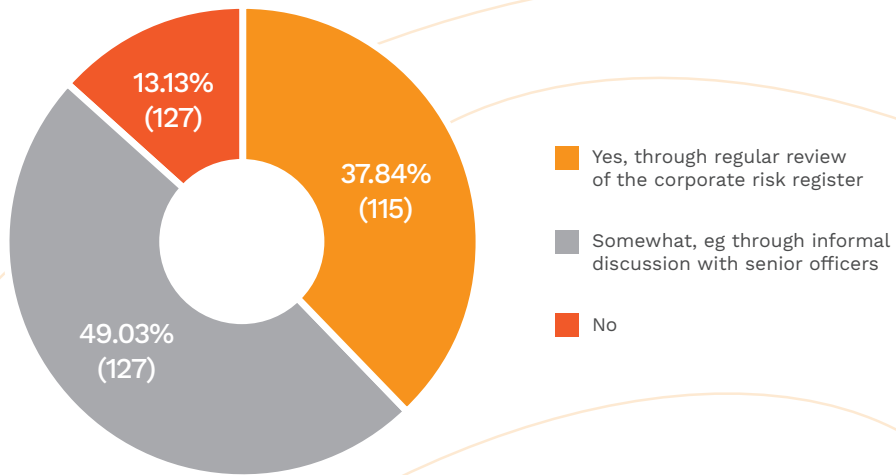
“I am [a portfolio holder]. The opposition did not like the new waste contract. They have used the Scrutiny Committee to call for reports on all aspects of the service, for absolutely no reason other than to try to find fault - which they have been unable to do. Much time and effort has been spent preparing reports for Scrutiny, which in practice are a waste of officers time.”

“We've worked to strengthen [the way that councillors scrutinise finance and performance], engage with members, provide training - do everything you should but the members just don't come to the table in the right ways; it's quite depressing to report the Council's financial position and not have a single question or issue raised about it.”

Risk

CfGS increasingly recommends that scrutiny functions develop an awareness of risk to inform their work. Oversight of the risk management framework generally sits with audit, but the greater councillors' awareness of risk the easier it will be for them to use this information to craft a work programme which engages with the issues where the council is experiencing most pressure.

Q54 Does scrutiny have an understanding about the council's overall exposure to risk - for example, on finances, on commercial activity, on demographic pressures etc?



Effectiveness generally

Key highlights:

- Recommendation quality overall is still a cause for concern, although things have improved since 2019;
- The presence of dedicated scrutiny officers tends to make scrutiny more effective although – as previously stated – while a correlation is present we cannot demonstrate causation. Perceptions of effectiveness of the scrutiny function are higher where a council's Monitoring Officer sits on CMT, but the same caveat applies;
- Councils are becoming better at monitoring recommendations (although the pandemic has impacted on councils' ability to carry out regular monitoring);
- Councils point to an average of 50 recommendations having been made in 2019/20 of which 40 were accepted and 31 implemented; an average success rate of 62%. This figure is down on previous years;
- Committee structure, and the number of committees, seems to have no appreciable impact on scrutiny's effectiveness.

Structures

As in previous years, structures have a negligible impact on scrutiny's effectiveness. A multi-committee setup for scrutiny is becoming more common – it is now the dominant committee structure in all types of council other than shire districts, where a single committee model is still most common.

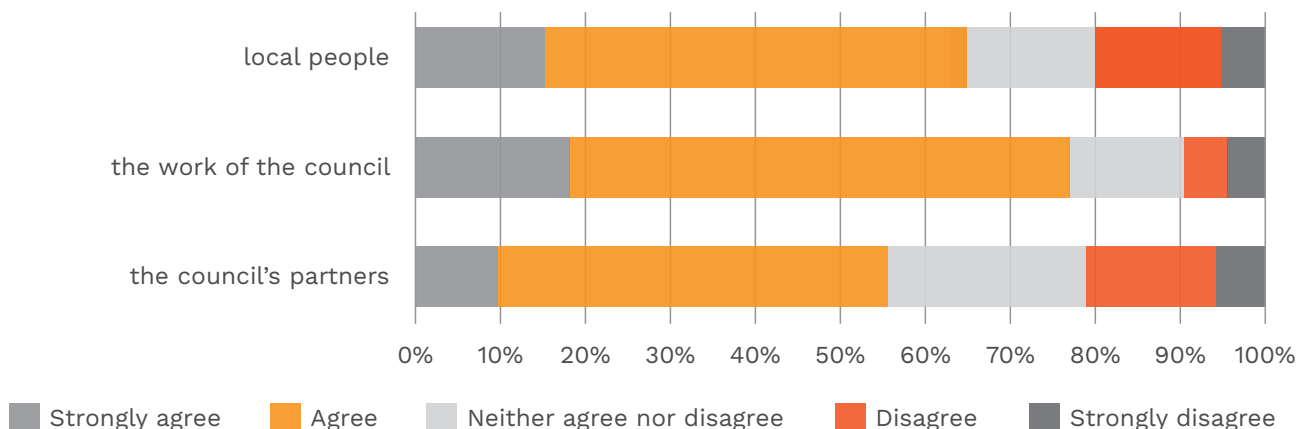
Recommendations and impact

Making high-quality recommendations and understanding how output makes a difference to local people's lives is a vital part of effective scrutiny.

Of all councils responding:

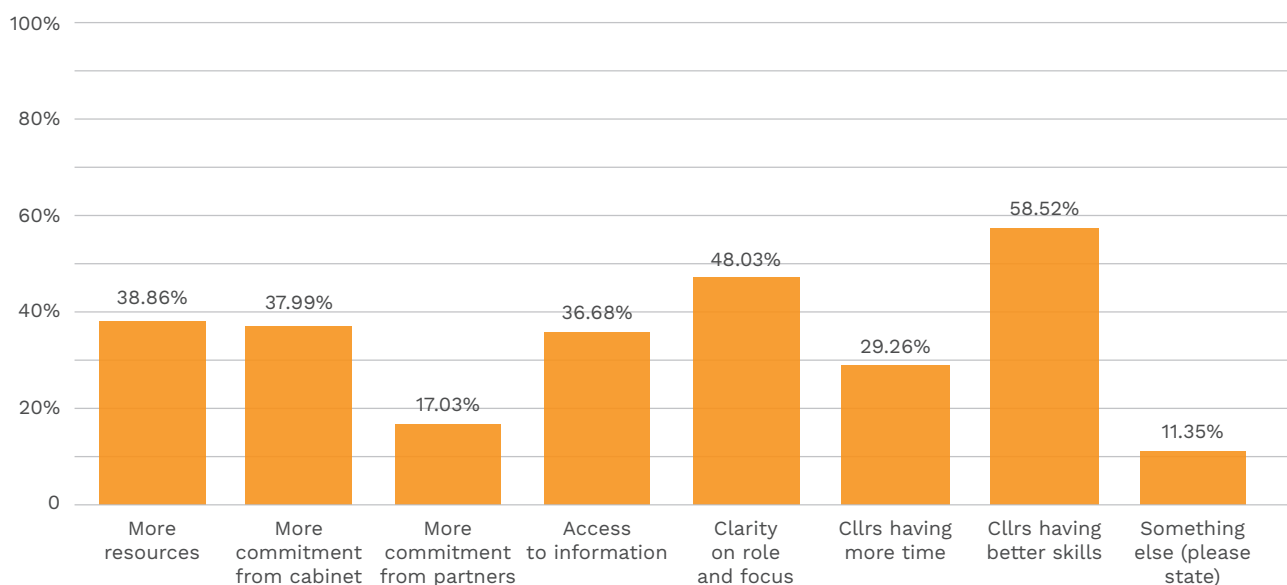
- In 2020/21, an average of 80% of recommendations were accepted and 62% implemented, compared with 82% and 65% respectively in 2019/20;
- These figures have been fairly static for several years, although this hides some rises and falls in certain authorities;
- On average, 54% of councils' recommendations asked the council or its partners to actually do something, an increase from 2019;
- 68% of councils reported that they actively monitored recommendations – a big increase on 2019's figure of 42%. Again this may be down to selection bias and sample size. However the survey also asks for specific figures on recommendations made and implemented in previous years, and in answering this only around 40% of councils responding were able to express confidence in the figure they were providing, which suggests that this is a real shift rather than a feature of who has responded;
- Overall, 77% of respondents agreed scrutiny has an impact on the work of the council, 65% agreed scrutiny has an impact on the lives of local people and 56% agreed it has an impact on the work of council partners.

Q46 Scrutiny has an impact on...



We asked people what they thought would make scrutiny more effective.

Q57 What local activity would improve scrutiny's impact and effectiveness?



While more resources and executive commitment were important factors as might be expected, there is also an awareness that clarity on role is important – and the most popular answer was the need for councillors to have better skills (we should note that, in an example of inadvertent bias by the designer of the survey, this question did not provide an option for those who felt that officers might need better skills).

In 2019 our scrutiny committee received high praise from the Local Government Association's Peer Challenge Review team. The way in which the Committee collectively plan and prioritises its work programme through its away day, had particularly impressed the team. They were also very complimentary about the focus that gives to our work and resultant impact that Overview & Scrutiny Committee has had on the way the Council operates.

In order to come to a view on effectiveness generally, CfGS looks at respondents' answers to several questions together, and seeks to understand where correlation lies – essentially whether there are any particular practices that appear to be associated with more effective scrutiny.

'Effectiveness measure'

We have for some years used a basket of several measures to evaluate scrutiny's effectiveness. Recently, we have drawn together a number of these characteristics to form an overall 'effectiveness measure', which we first used in our 2019 survey and which we are using this year unchanged.

The characteristics in the 'effectiveness measure' are:

1. The presence of at least 70% of scrutiny recommendations accepted and implemented within the last three years (noting that the national average is 62%);
2. Whether respondents recognise a constructive relationship between the executive and scrutiny;
3. Whether respondents consider that scrutiny has a positive impact.

Councils demonstrating any one of these single characteristics is a sign of scrutiny's effectiveness, but these characteristics in combination form our 'effectiveness measure' and make a very convincing case for scrutiny working successfully within a council.

It is difficult to establish conclusively that scrutiny in such councils is always more effective, but we continue to explore effectiveness as we work to better understand political culture and the practical impact of scrutiny work.

In councils that demonstrated our 'effectiveness measure':

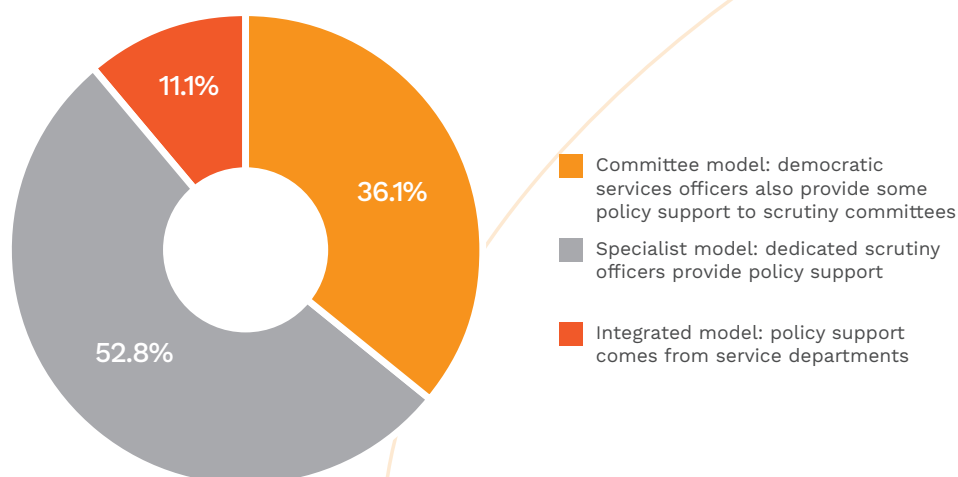
- When asked about scrutiny overseeing or supporting the council, and local people, on matters relating to the pandemic 84% agreed it had been effective
- 69% either have an executive-scrutiny protocol in place or are planning one
- The Monitoring Officer is more likely to be part of the Corporate Management Team
- 96% are confident that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to council finances, and 85% are confident that scrutiny is able to adequately oversee matters relating to the council's commercial activity.

The following graphs highlight the most statistically significant differences between councils that demonstrated our 'effectiveness measure' against those that did not - the form of scrutiny support, chairing arrangements, information sharing and opinions on scrutiny's culture and role.

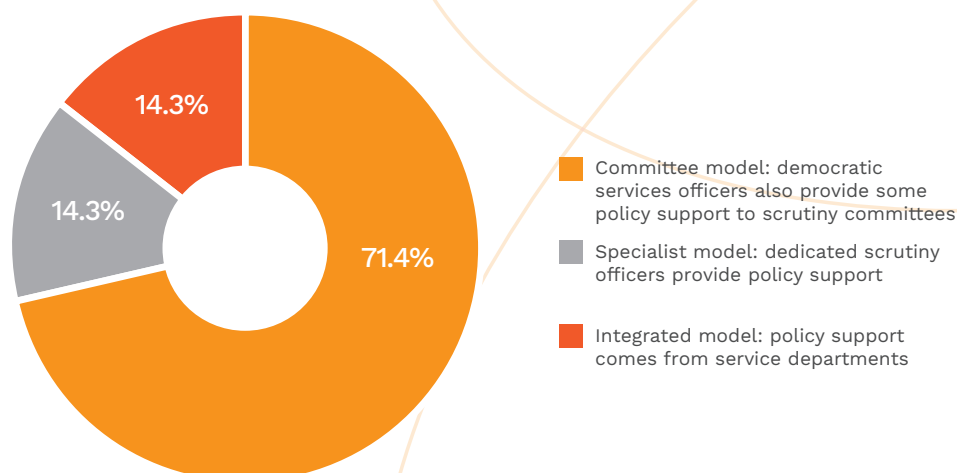
We have done this for comparative purposes – attempting to evaluate whether there are commonalities in the councils expressing these characteristics. It is interesting to note the ways of working and perceptions of culture that tend to be expressed more by these councils, but it does not necessarily mean there is one way to do effective scrutiny. The councils that did not demonstrate our 'effectiveness measure' simply did not satisfy the criteria we set out – it is not a judgement about whether their scrutiny function is able to perform effectively.

The questions of causation are much more difficult to answer, and as evidenced by the graphs below there is almost as much variation in how scrutiny operates between councils that demonstrate our 'effectiveness measure' as there is with those that do not.

Councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': What form of scrutiny support does your authority operate?

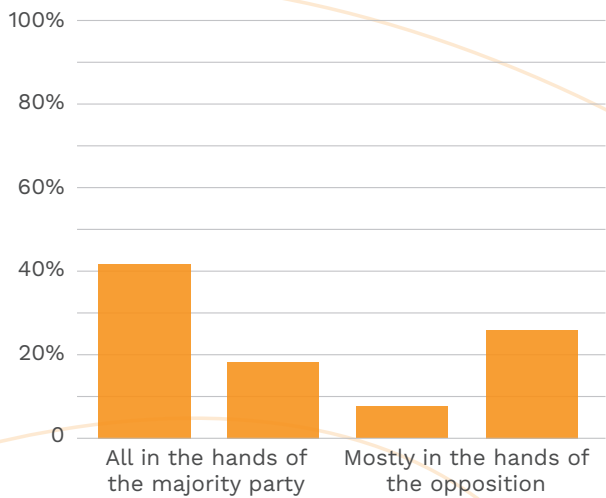


Councils not demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': What form of scrutiny support does your authority operate?

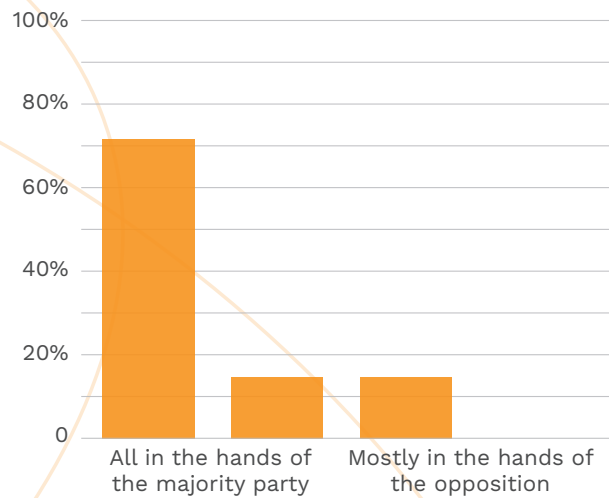


The specialist model of support is significantly more likely to be operating in councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure'. Although effective scrutiny is possible under a range of models, and there has been a drop in the number of dedicated scrutiny officers in recent times, CfGS considers that the specialist model provides the best opportunity for robust, high quality support to councillors.

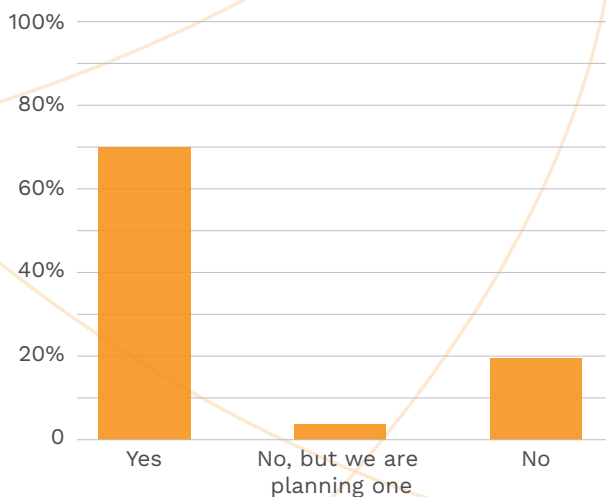
Councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': Are chairing positions in your authority...



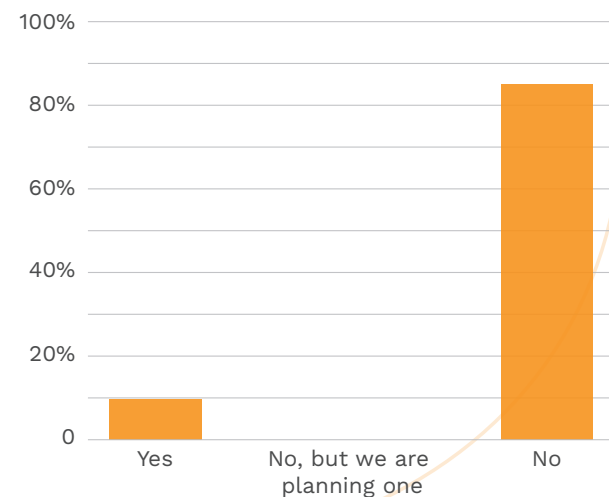
Councils not demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': Are chairing positions in your authority...



Councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': Does your council have arrangements in place for sharing key sources of information about performance etc with councillors "outside" committee (e.g. by way of an information digest)?

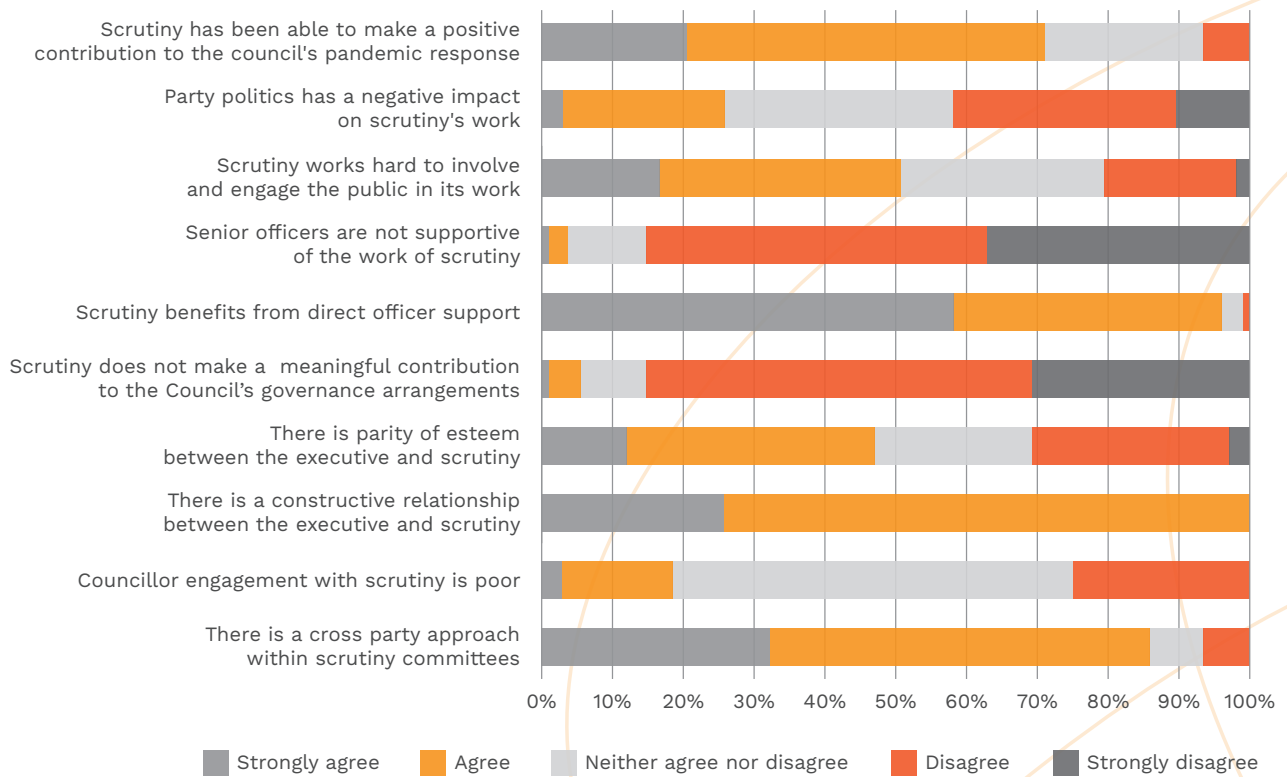


Councils not demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': Does your council have arrangements in place for sharing key sources of information about performance etc with councillors "outside" committee (e.g. by way of an information digest)?

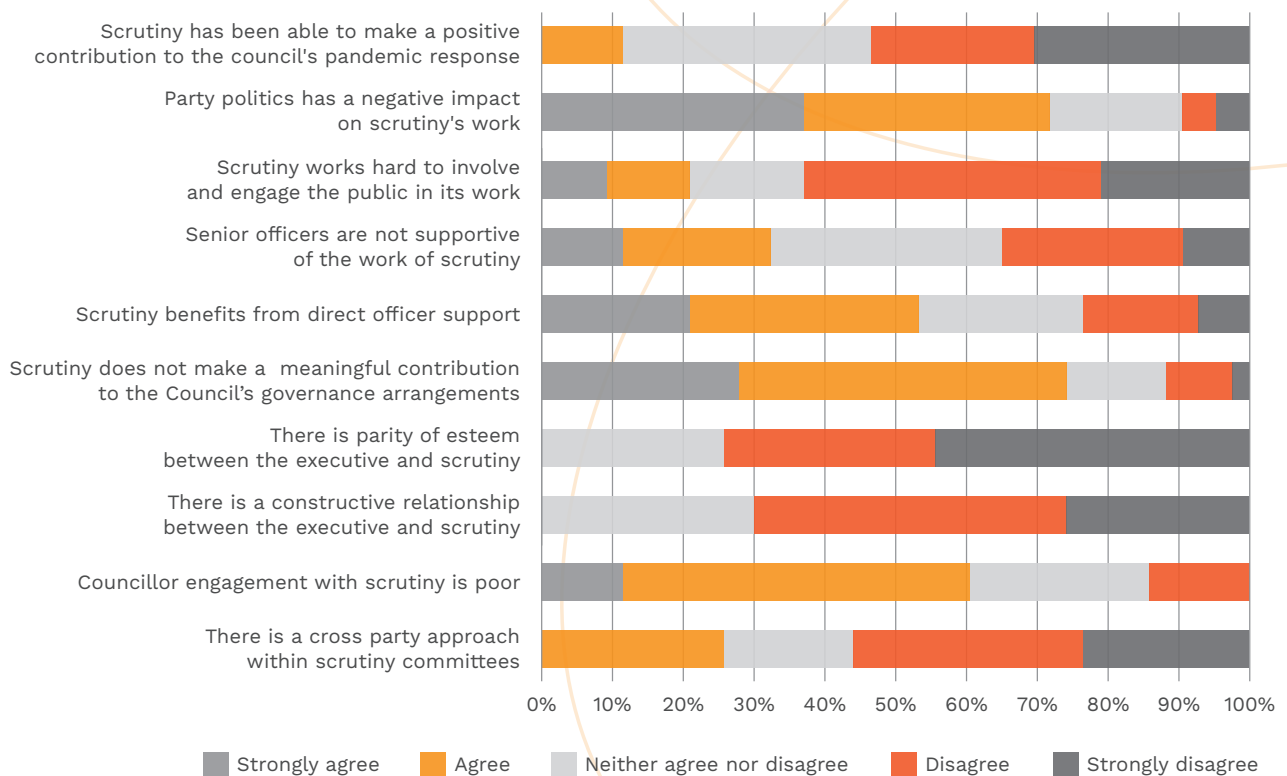


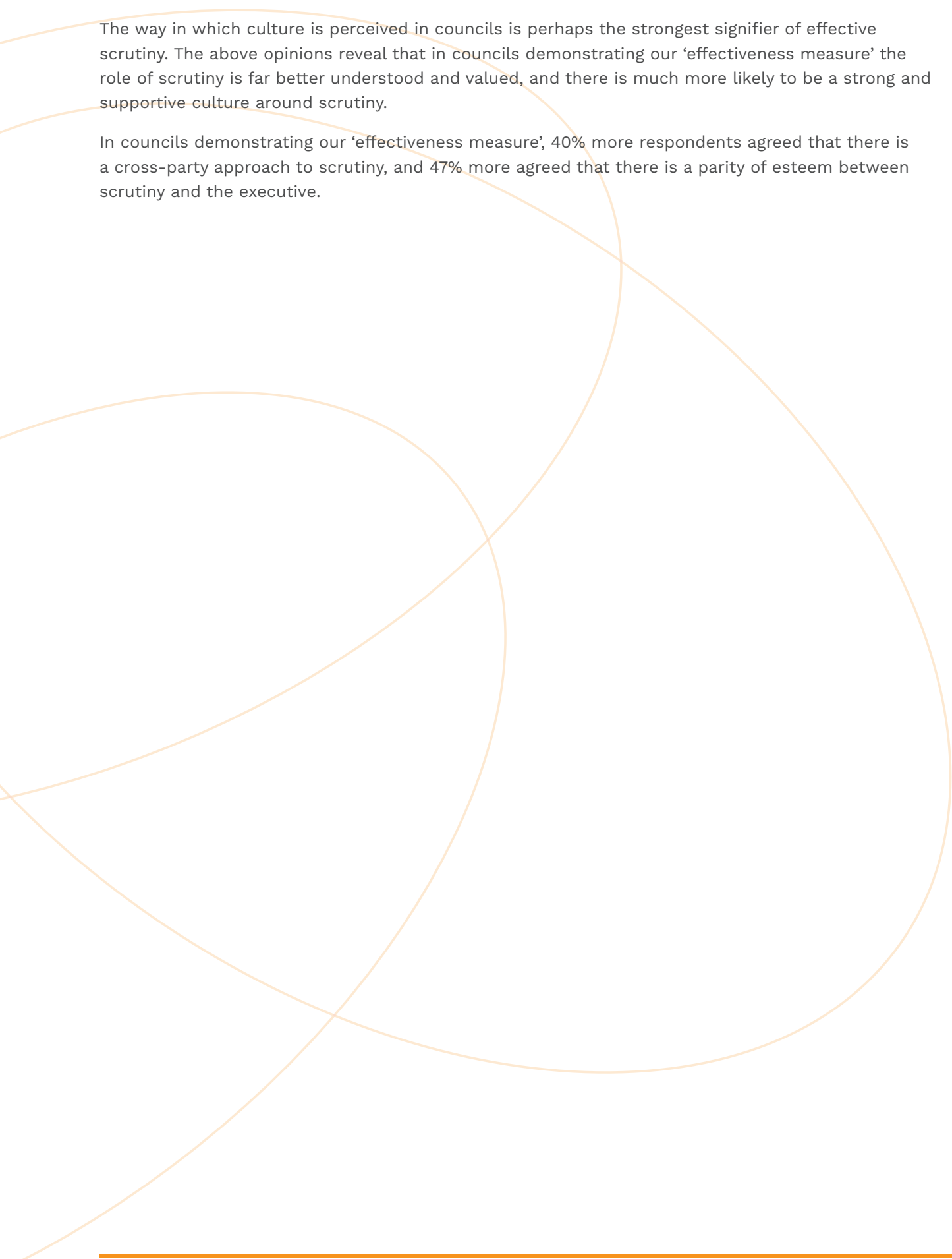
The way that councils share information with members, and the way in which members use that information, is critical for timely and relevant evidence-based scrutiny. In councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure' sharing key sources of information outside committee is a common way of working. This has the advantage of avoiding committee time being overburdened with information that could be shared more regularly and informally with members, so that issues can be identified for further in-depth investigation.

Councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about culture and role?



Councils not demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure': To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about culture and role?





The way in which culture is perceived in councils is perhaps the strongest signifier of effective scrutiny. The above opinions reveal that in councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure' the role of scrutiny is far better understood and valued, and there is much more likely to be a strong and supportive culture around scrutiny.

In councils demonstrating our 'effectiveness measure', 40% more respondents agreed that there is a cross-party approach to scrutiny, and 47% more agreed that there is a parity of esteem between scrutiny and the executive.

Councillors, representation and politics

Key highlights:

- An average of two thirds of chair and vice-chair positions are held by men;
- In 49% of councils, all chairing positions are in the hands of the majority party, and in 17% most chairing positions are in the hands of the majority; in only 20% are chairing positions occupied in a politically balanced way, and in just 14% are chairing positions mostly in the hands of the opposition. Scrutiny in councils where opposition councillors hold some chairing positions tends overall to be more effective;
- Only 53% of informal task and finish groups are composed in a way that is politically proportionate;
- 68% of councils either have an executive-scrutiny protocol in place or are actively planning one;
- 58% of respondents felt that councillors having better skills would improve scrutiny's effectiveness; training and development opportunities for councillors have been limited during the pandemic but in recent years member development has suffered from sustained cuts as well.

This year we wanted to look in more depth at the impact that positive working relationships between scrutiny and the executive have on effectiveness, and perceptions of effectiveness. Councils with an executive-scrutiny protocol are:

- Significantly more likely to have a plan in place for active involvement by scrutiny in post-pandemic recovery activity (50% of such authorities having active plans in place as opposed to 16% for other authorities);
- Marginally less likely to conduct no scrutiny of the budget;
- Significantly more likely to have a system in place to monitor scrutiny recommendations (80% as opposed to 52% of those councils with no protocol and no plans to introduce one);
 - Likely to have slightly more dedicated officer support from other councils (1.62 full time equivalent officers as opposed to the 1.13 average).

Resourcing, and delivering change

Key highlights:

- Average number of full time equivalent (FTE) officers appears to be stable, given the change in response rate (and increasing in some areas). We are cautious about drawing too many conclusions from this as we suspect that selection bias and the smaller sample size for this year's survey has had an effect;
- There seems to have been a shift in the support model for scrutiny functions, with more councils benefiting from dedicated scrutiny officers;
- It has difficult to discern whether these increases have had a clear impact on effectiveness – we explore this in more detail later.

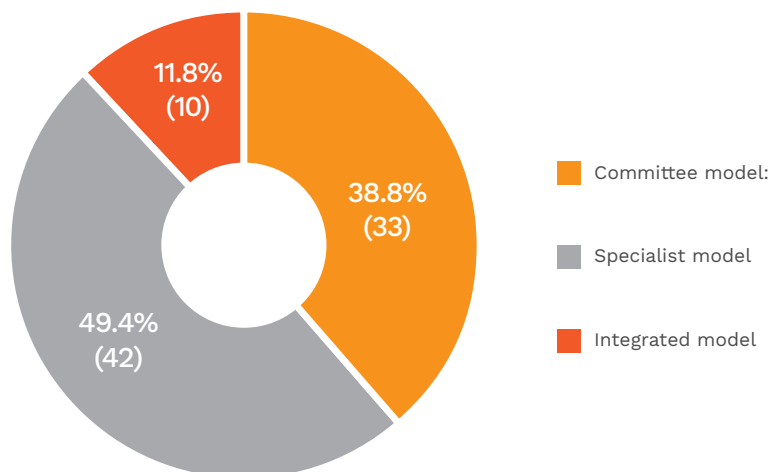
Officer resourcing

- The average FTE officer resource available for scrutiny in 2020/21 was 1.13.
- The average FTE officer resource available for scrutiny in 2019/20 was 1.29.
- The average FTE officer resource available for scrutiny for 2018/19 was 1.27.

We have for many years identified three model types for scrutiny support in councils – specialist, committee and integrated.

- Specialist model: councils have a dedicated scrutiny support team or officer(s);
- Committee model: scrutiny support is principally provided by democratic services officers;
- Integrated model: scrutiny support comes mainly from policy officers in service departments.

Q16 What form of scrutiny support does your authority operate?



Councils with specialist scrutiny support were slightly more likely to have wholly rewritten their work programmes as a result of the pandemic (20% vs 9%); they are also marginally more likely to have an executive-scrutiny protocol in place. Scrutiny with specialist support is also more likely to take a robust approach to budget scrutiny (47% carrying out little to no budget scrutiny as opposed to 59% of those with no dedicated policy support).

The impact of specialist support

As in previous years the specialist model is dominant in urban areas (with 80% of London boroughs following this model and 71% of other metropolitan unitaries), with two-tier areas (both county and district authorities) most likely to use the committee support model (50% and 23% respectively).

The impact of dedicated specialist support

Where dedicated specialist support is available it makes a positive difference to perceptions that:

- “Councillor engagement with scrutiny is poor” (specialist 6% agree, non-specialist 33%)
- “There is a constructive relationship between the executive and scrutiny” (specialist 68% agree, non-specialist 55%);
- “Scrutiny does not make a meaningful contribution to the council’s governance arrangements” (specialist 14% agree, non-specialist 29% agree);

- “Senior officers are not supportive of the work of scrutiny” (specialist 0% agree, non-specialist 26% agree);
- “Scrutiny has an impact on the work of the council” (specialist 92% agree, non-specialist 73% agree – a similar split asks when asked if scrutiny has an impact on the public and on the work of partners).

Conversely in one area councils with non-specialist support “performed” better – 29% of respondents in councils with non-specialist support reported that there was parity of esteem between the executive and scrutiny as opposed to 17% in councils with specialist support.

The questions remains as to whether this perception translates into reality.



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