



Centre for Public Scrutiny

Local authority scrutiny survey 2003

Response rate:

Total: 40% (152 authorities)

London: 80% (27 authorities)

County Councils: 75% (25 authorities)

Metropolitan Boroughs: 55% (20 authorities)

Unitaries: 33% (23 authorities)

Districts: 25% (57 authorities)

Summary findings

In a survey of over one-third of local authorities across the country it was revealed that there are more than 5,500 elected members practising scrutiny, with a total budget of over £2.5 million. Collectively, these public scrutineers have carried out almost 1,700 investigations, ranging from PFI schemes to special educational needs.

Irrespective of political control, this first survey from the CfPS shows that the value and potential of scrutiny is being reached.

The scope of these scrutiny reviews has ranged from issues of local and national concern, as evidenced by one County Council's enquiry into an incident at a detention centre which secured a promise from the government that the local police authority would not have to pick up the £100 million insurance bill. Just as importantly, last year's success stories are beginning to uncover evidence of scrutiny's long-anticipated impact and its potential to affect change – such as a flooding investigation which prompted the Environment Agency to amend their programme of work, and one district's review with the local Primary Care Trust to resolve the shortfall in local dental provision.

The scrutiny function

Local authorities in England and Wales have an average of 37 elected members practising scrutiny, which is over 70% of the national average of 52 members in total per local authority¹. In London the average figure rises to 40 and in metropolitan boroughs to 53, while even the smaller district authorities are averaging 26 councillors who are actively involved in the scrutiny role.

The average number of scrutiny committees in an authority is 5 and the majority operate a co-ordinating group which usually comprises the scrutiny chairs and other key councillors. 20% of authorities surveyed operate only a single scrutiny committee.

Staff and budgets

At present 22% of authorities operate scrutiny with less than one full-time professional officer and 14% operate without any professional support at all. However, the highest number of full-time equivalent professional staff was 11.5 in one authority. Although 18% of councils have over 5 full time scrutiny officers, the national average is only 3. In addition, 16% function without any administrative support and the national average for the administrative role is 1 full-time equivalent.

Only 55 % of authorities have a designated budget for scrutiny work, outside of staff considerations. Of those, the lowest operates on a mere £500 p.a. with 8% spending less than £10,000 per year. The national average for a local government scrutiny budget is £30,000 with one County Council spending £200,000 on supporting the function. However, only 11% of those authorities with a budget operate on more than £50,000. These figures are slightly skewed by a handful of high spenders – the London average is only £28,000 and in district councils it drops to £8,000.

Scrutiny work

In the past year, one metropolitan borough, operating 8 scrutiny committees, has completed 134 individual pieces of work – in fact 13% of authorities have carried out more than 20 scrutiny reviews. At the other end of the scale, 34% of authorities have carried out 5 scrutiny reviews or fewer and only 4% have yet to complete their first.

Perhaps surprisingly, call-in is still not being well used as a scrutiny mechanism, with an average of 3 decisions being called-in per authority. 30% have not used the call-in function at all, while only 8% have called in 10 decisions or more – the highest being a council in the Midlands which has used the power 35 times. This begs the question of how constitutional arrangements enable call-in but also could be a positive indicator of more consensual working between scrutiny and the executive.

A positive response to the work of scrutiny committees has been very high with the vast majority having over 75 % of their recommendations accepted by the executive. Although whether they have been acted on effectively remains to be seen. Only 2% of councils have no recommendations accepted at all.

Aggregated responses to all questions

The survey asked the following questions. Aggregated responses are given in the table below.

1. How many elected members are formally involved in the scrutiny function in total?
2. How many overview and scrutiny committees do you operate in total?
3. Do you have a co-ordinating scrutiny committee?
4. How many professional officers support the scrutiny function
5. How many administrative staff support the scrutiny function (full-time equivalents)?
6. Do you have a designated budget for scrutiny activity (i.e. not staffing) for this year?
7. If so how much is this? (Rounded up to nearest £10k)
8. In the past year how many scrutiny reviews, investigations or commissions have been carried out?
9. In the past year how many decisions have been called-in?
10. In the past year what percentage of scrutiny recommendations have been accepted by the executive? (Rounded up to nearest 10 %)
11. In the past year, in your view, what has been the most effective piece of scrutiny activity and why? (eg. a review which had a particular impact, public response or innovative approach)
12. In the next year what will be the most important development or next step for the scrutiny function in your authority and why? (eg. increased officer support, structural changes, member development)

Question	Yes %	No %	Total (actuals)	Average (actuals)	Range (actuals)
1 How many elected members are formally involved in the scrutiny function in total?	-	-	5,547	37	5 - 69
2 How many overview and scrutiny committees do you operate in total?	-	-	729	5	1 - 13
3 Do you have a co-ordinating scrutiny committee?	60	40	-	-	-
4 How many professional officers support the scrutiny function?	-	-	404	3	0 - 11.5
5 How many administrative staff support the scrutiny function? (Full-time equivalents)	-	-	203	1	0 - 11
6 Do you have a designated budget for scrutiny activity (i.e. not staffing) for this year?	55	45	-	-	-
7 If so how much is this? (Rounded up to nearest £10k)	-	-	£2,668.750	£30,000	£500 - £250,000
8 In the past year how many scrutiny reviews, investigations or commissions have been carried out?	-	-	1,694	12	0 - 134
9 In the past year how many decisions have been called-in?	-	-	475	3	0 - 35
10 In the past year what percentage of scrutiny recommendations have been accepted by the executive? (Rounded up to nearest 10%)	-	-	-	79	10% - 100%

A selection of responses to open questions 11 and 12 are given below

Scrutiny successes – looking back on the previous year

We asked local authorities what they considered to be their most effective scrutiny activity over the past year and why. The answers reflected the diversity and individual nature of scrutiny work programmes, as well as the continuing development of the role. Some of the responses are detailed below.

“A review of the work of the Environment Agency in relation to flooding. As a direct result of the scrutiny process, they altered their programme of work.”

“The County Council's Inquiry into an incident at a detention centre for asylum seekers - it secured a promise from the government that the police authority would not pick up the bill from Group 4's insurers for £100M. The study was a direct response to public interest.”

“The public response to the Inquiry into Noise and Environmental Pollution from Motorways was tremendous. One public meeting held at a parish venue particularly affected saw 80 members of the public attend. It was an inquiry that had regular coverage from the local and regional media and received over 70 written submissions from interested members of the public.”

“A scrutiny review into Raising Educational Standards culminated in a conference attended by 130 delegates. The delegates included LEA representatives, head teachers, representatives from other boroughs and parents. They were given the opportunity to influence the recommendations and their views were fed into the Commission's final report. In response to the conference schools have already started to implement some of the recommendations made by the Commission.”

“Our Scrutiny Committee prevented plans to pedestrianise the local town centre.”

“The review of Homelessness and Housing Advice. This review embraced the new approach to scrutiny and included:

- (1) interviewing expert witnesses, partners and stakeholders from outside organisations eg SHELTER, various accommodation projects, the Housing Trust and CAB
- (2) visiting numerous units and hostels throughout the Borough, as well as a site of best practice outside the Borough
- (3) analysis of statistical research
- (4) consideration of the homelessness supply profile and the impact of new legislation.

A series of recommendations were submitted to Cabinet which subsequently resulted in improvements to service provision.”

“Recruitment and retention of teachers. This involved engaging with all stakeholders and received considerable coverage in the local press. A new recruitment strategy was agreed.”

“Working with the Primary Care Trust to highlight shortfall in dental provision locally - the problem has now been resolved.”

“A review of the Council’s Teenage Pregnancy Strategy which involved all stakeholders. The review received conflicting evidence and required members to reach consensus and make difficult decisions.”

Review of Public/Private Partnerships which was policy development in close cooperation with the Executive. It helped build trust and understanding.

A review of the Connexions Service, held at a local School with the active involvement of a large number of pupils and teachers. The success of this piece of Scrutiny was not so much the outcomes but rather the process. A break with the more traditional approach to meetings, and a break out from County Hall to a local venue, and also the active engagement with young people.

The year ahead – key challenges for the coming months

We asked local authorities what they considered to be the most important development or next step for their scrutiny function. The majority of responses were split between developing the health scrutiny role and training for members. Some of the responses are detailed below.

“Moving from a secondary activity to an integral, respected part of the decision-making process and greater standing within the organisation as a whole.”

“Supporting an additional sub-committee which will take the lead on health. Health is as big again as our local authority. Members need an induction into the complexities of the local health arrangements, while health colleagues need an induction into Scrutiny. It is pretty unknown territory for both parties and working relationships need to be established. This will be difficult without additional resources. Having had a good year in which we positively raised expectations, we fear we will now struggle to meet these expectations.”

“Doing more follow up work on scrutiny recommendations to ensure that they are implemented is probably going to be the most effective thing we will aim to achieve.”

“An acceptance by the Council of the importance of and need for independence of the scrutiny function.”

“Member development - The Scrutiny function has been largely Officer led partly as a consequence of the 2002 Local Government Elections which resulted in a change of administration and 32 new Councillors. Significant resources have been put into Members awareness of their role in effective scrutiny.”

“It is becoming increasingly important for the Council's Select Committees to be seen to be delivering measurable outcomes. Amongst other things, Committees will place more emphasis on holding portfolio holders to account, providing more robust challenge to the bigger decisions, and actively monitoring the achievement of agreed outcomes.”

“Our evaluation report has led to member agreement around 2 key priorities for development - increased community engagement and smarter ways of co-working across the committees. As a hung council, we have to work very hard to achieve consensus around scrutiny and also have to maintain relatively formal constitutional arrangements.”

For further information please contact:

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