

Key Highlights from 2014/15 CfPS Survey

1. Scrutiny Models

In general, there are four model types:

- *Specialist model* - councils have a dedicated scrutiny support team (as in York)
- *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.

2. CfPS have expressed concern with the generic support model 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. However, they do recognise that in some authorities, resources are such that this appears to be the only sustainable way to retain some scrutiny support.

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Specialist	47%	59%	47%	55%	55%	51%	53%	48%	45%	43%
Committee	19%	12%	8%	4%	10%	14%	15%	19%	19%	15%
Integrated	31%	28%	37%	33%	27%	22%	32%	34%	36%	33%
Generic	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	9%

3. The largest concentration of 'generic' support is in District/Borough, London Borough, and Other Unitary councils.
4. 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 mode. Many of those who responded to those questions 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 their Executive, were limited by finances, or had recommendations ignored. Although some of those comments are concerning, they highlight some of the many challenges councils face in their efforts to have a meaningful and positive impact through scrutiny.

5. Resourcing

The survey results showed that resources continue 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 those officers will be spending only 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 means that many councils lack the capacity to provide support to councillors to scrutinise transformation and major change. This should be a big concern to those councils.

6. The 2013/14 survey results showed the full time equivalent (FTE) scrutiny officer average was 1.75. When asked for projections during that survey for 2014/15, the predicted FTE average was 1.63. However, 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 the evidence that FTE scrutiny officer support goes in cycles with increases and decreases every few years.
7. 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. Evidence suggests an increasing number of officers are splitting their time between scrutiny work and other obligations due to shrinking officer resources. In York there are 2 dedicated scrutiny officers.
8. The dedicated average scrutiny budget does not follow this trend. For the 8th year in a row, council's scrutiny budgets have declined and the average budget for 2014/15 is £3, 277, down from £3, 447 in 2013/14. In York the annual budget for scrutiny is £5k.
9. Overall, scrutiny's capacity and resources are clearly declining as 22% out of the 275 councils reported they were facing a decrease in officer resourcing or discretionary budget.

10. Involvement in Major Projects

The 2014/15 survey asked about scrutiny's involvement in major projects and service 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 reason listed was opposition from the executive/senior officers, with the lack of resources indicated as being the second biggest barrier.

11. Transformation

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. As a result, large numbers of councils are undertaking major transformation projects.

12. 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.

13. Over 80% of respondents advised their council was or would be undertaking some form of major transformation. Of those, as many as 22% indicated that scrutiny was not involved or only involved in a limited way.

14. 84% out of 256 councils reported they would be going through major service changes. The majority of respondents indicated scrutiny would have some level of involvement in the process but only 19% reported being heavily involved or involved from the start.

15. 65.6% agreed that scrutiny in their council had 'a clearly defined and valued role in the council improvement and governance arrangements.' In York, the council's governance arrangements currently fall within the remit of CSMC, although the value it adds is minimal.

16. Impact & Influence

The 2014/15 survey evidenced a robust attitude towards the need for scrutiny to focus on securing positive outcomes, but a substantial proportion of councils reported still needing to do more work in that area.

17. Many councils expressed the view that they were not producing 'ambitious' recommendations. In asking questions about this CfPS wanted to understand whether scrutiny was challenging group thinking 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.
18. More respondents felt they secured impact through the two more traditional and direct means – direct acceptance of recommendations and holding the council and its partners to account. However, in three areas the impact of scrutiny 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.
19. 47% of councils indicated recommendations included measurable outcomes that allowed them to judge progress and implementation. However only 30% of respondents indicated they had ambitious recommendations where changes may be challenging or difficult to achieve, for organisational or political reasons. Evidence suggested there were multiple factors influencing those 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 that 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. Historically, here in York scrutiny has struggled to make ambitious recommendations or those with measurable outcomes.
20. 77% of respondents reported they were able to effectively monitor the implementations of recommendations. The previous year's report indicated 70.3% of councils had a formal mechanism to monitor recommendations. Here in York, each scrutiny committee regularly monitors implementation of their scrutiny recommendations as approved by the Executive.
21. Effectiveness
A question based on the "characteristics of effective scrutiny" revealed that respondents were generally positive with two exceptions. The first

related to people's confidence that resources were adequate (as detailed above). The second focussed on scrutiny's ability to build and sustain positive working relationships with others. 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. Many Councils confirmed they were unclear on what effect ongoing austerity would have on scrutiny's effectiveness.

22. The survey results suggested there was no proven structural formula for effectiveness. A range of different council types scored both well and poorly, against the impact and influence measures CfPS set out. The only obvious link that could be made, which had also been noted in previous years, was 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 supporting executive services) a decline in scrutiny's effectiveness had been seen. Furthermore, Councils with more committees seemed, broadly speaking, to be more effective. This was an interesting finding which tends not to reflect the long-held assumption held by some, that 'fewer committees = better scrutiny'.
23. Many respondents felt that scrutiny was most effective and rigorous when chaired by a member of the opposition but there was no concrete evidence to support that. However, the evidence did suggest there was a relationship between how chair and vice-chairs were appointed and how positively scrutiny is viewed in the authority. Evidence showed that the political and organisational culture towards scrutiny was most positive in authorities where the minority party held the chair position (as in York) and the majority party held the vice-chair position.
24. CfPS tried to establish a clear link between scrutiny's impact and effectiveness, and other factors measured about scrutiny's operation. The key findings were:
 - Councils that reported scrutiny having a larger impact on the lives of local people, were those better able to effectively monitor the progress and impact of recommendations.
 - Councils reporting more positively against the characteristics of effective scrutiny and positive impact, tended to be those reporting that scrutiny was valued by their 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 was 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.
- 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.
- Culture, values and behaviours significantly influence effectiveness. So 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 and senior officers – which can serve either to empower scrutiny, or to hinder it. This has been identified as something to be addressed here in York.