



Walsall Council Submission to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry into Local Government Scrutiny

Following the launch of the Select Committee inquiry an online survey of all Walsall Council Members and Scrutiny Committee Co-opted Members was launched. The survey asked questions based on the areas publicised by the Select Committee on the Parliament website.

A total of 16 responses were received to the survey representing a 25% return rate. Responses were received from individuals from each political group and a co-opted members. ..

Overall, there is a mixed picture of the effectiveness of scrutiny. . .

A brief analysis of the responses received is set out below.

1. *In your opinion how effective or not effective are each of the following Scrutiny Committees at holding decision makers to account?*

At Walsall the majority of respondents felt that Scrutiny Committees were either 'very much so' or 'to some extent' effective. The Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (SCHOSC) received the highest 'very much so' effectiveness rating at 44%. The Scrutiny Overview Committee (SOC) received the highest 'not at all' effective rating at 25% but this may be reflective of its role as it is there to monitor the scrutiny function rather than hold decision makers to account. The responses for all Committees are set out below:

	<i>Very much so</i>	<i>To some extent</i>	<i>Not at all</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Corporate and Public Services	5 (31%)	8 (50%)	1 (6%)	2 (13%)
Education and Children's Services	6 (38%)	6 (38%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)
Social Care and Health	7 (44%)	5 (31%)	1 (6%)	3 (19%)
Scrutiny Overview Committee	5 (31%)	4 (25%)	4 (25%)	3 (19%)

Individual Comments from Members are reflective of the responses. For example:

Positive Comments

- *Cabinet Members attend all our meetings and answer questions put forward to them.*
- *Committees have a good knowledge of the subject matters.*

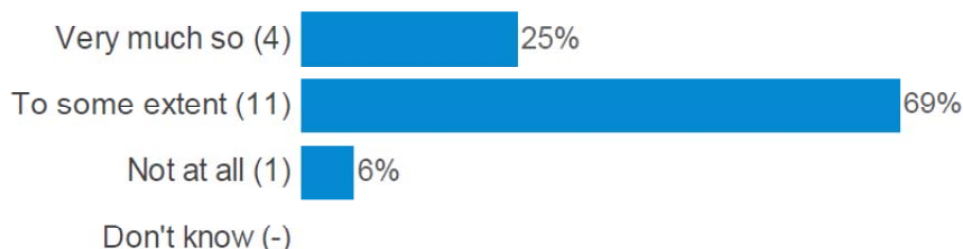
Negative Comments

- *Cabinet don't really care what the scrutiny committee have to say.*
- *There is not the appropriate requirement for action to be taken. Everything is treated as a recommendation and is therefore ignored.*
- *When important presentations are presented nothing is heard.*

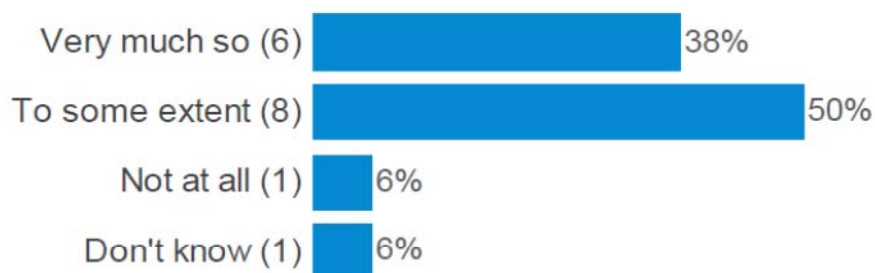
2. To what extent do you feel that Walsall Councils Scrutiny Committees generally are a) politically impartial and b) independent of Cabinet Executives?

At Walsall, the majority of respondents answered that Scrutiny is politically impartial and independent of Cabinet 'to some extent' or 'very much so'.

a) Politically impartial



b) Independent of Cabinet Executives



Comments from respondents

- *We are conscious of holding the executive to account and ensure impartiality and independence.*
- *We are all able to express our views.*
- *Politics is difficult to avoid.*
- *Scrutiny panels have always got a political element.*

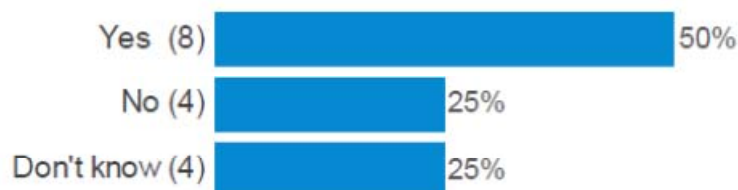
3. In your opinion are Democratic Services Scrutiny Officers independent of those being scrutinised?



4. How chairs and members are selected?*

Chairs for Scrutiny Committees are selected by political groups and appointed at Council. 3 out of 4 scrutiny chairs are from the largest opposition group.

5. Are current powers to summon witnesses to attend scrutiny meetings from outside organisations adequate?



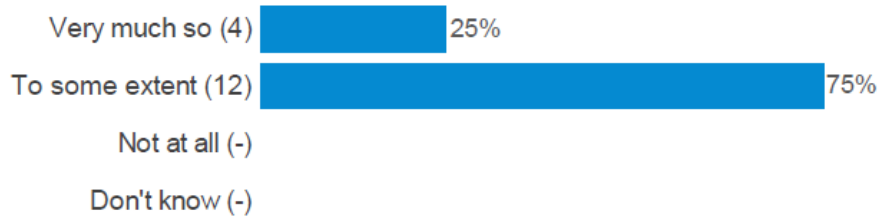
Comments from respondents

- *I have never been involved in summoning witnesses. We have had a wide range of people giving information and answering questions over the last five years...they have been invited and agreed to attend.*
- *My committee has been well served*
- *More could be done to get more input.*

- *More powers needed.*

6. To what extent do you think that Scrutiny Committees effectively represent the voice of service users and/or residents?

The majority of respondents felt that the voice of service users and/or residents was represented to 'some extent'.



Comments from respondents

- *I think we represent our constituents well at scrutiny.*
- *Engaging with service users with budget cuts brings people to the table otherwise they are not interested.*
- *This depends on the scrutiny committee.*
- *We have many attendees from the general public who at times express an opinion through the chair.*
- *More should be done to scrutinise issues that impact on residents.*

7. How are topics for scrutiny are selected*

Topics for scrutiny are selected in the following ways.

- At its first meeting of the municipal year each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees considers an item to plan its work programme for the year ahead. This work programme is reviewed and often amended at Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings.
- Overview and Scrutiny Committees receive copies of the latest forward plan for Walsall Council Cabinet and the Black Country Joint Executive Committee at each meeting.

- Members of each Overview and Scrutiny Committee can also request an item to be added to the work programme at any time.
- Any petition that received between 500-1499 signatures will be considered by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its next available meeting.

8. What support is given to the scrutiny function by political leaders and senior officers, including the resources allocated (for example whether there is a designated officer team).*

Senior officers support the scrutiny function in a variety of formal and informal ways. The following is not an exhaustive list but provides day to day examples:

- Briefing chairs on current and upcoming issues;
- Supporting chairs in dealings with external organisations, such as the NHS;
- Attending meetings and answering questions;
- Writing reports for meetings;
- Preparing briefing notes;
- Acting as support officers to scrutiny working groups.

Political leaders support the scrutiny function by attending meetings to present reports and answer questions from Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members. This is often the relevant portfolio holder(s) but the Leader or Deputy Leader also attend dependent on the business to be considered.

In terms of officer support, whilst there is not a designated officer team, the Council's Democratic Services team provide support to Overview and Scrutiny Committees and their Working Groups as part of their role. The Director and relevant officers also attend scrutiny and provide support to committees and working groups as and when required.

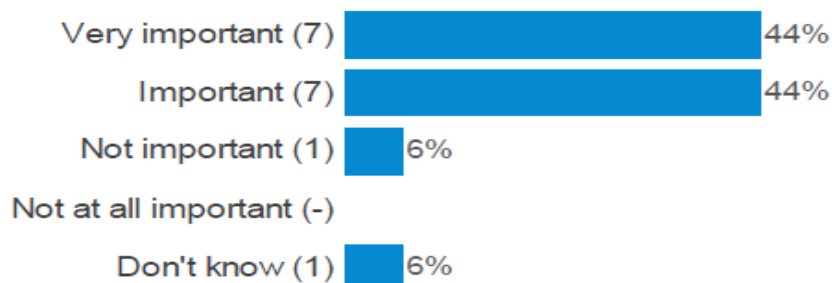
9. What use is made of specialist external advisers?*

There is no dedicated budget for specialist external advisors. Scrutiny has been supported at times by external consultants with funding from service areas. This has included:

- Analysis of the impact of welfare reforms;
- A retail market consultant;
- Independent analysis of the mortality rates at the local hospital.

10. How important do you feel is scrutiny of external organisations?

In Walsall, 88% of respondents felt that scrutiny of external organisations was either 'Very important' or 'important'.



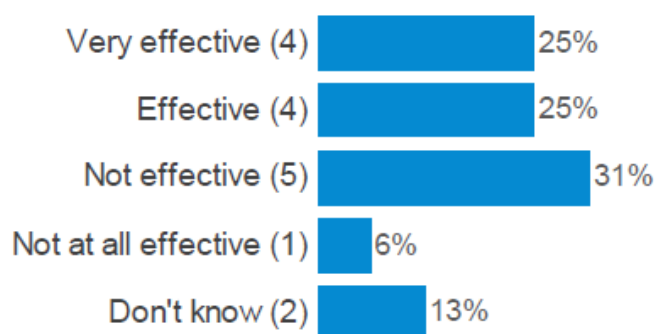
Comments from respondents

- *If the Council does not scrutinise these organisations who does?*
- *These organisations can impact on the ability of the Council to do their job. They have a direct/indirect effect on the people of Walsall.*
- *Extremely important to hold partners...to account.*
- *...there is nobody else around to do it.*
- *Depends on the issue.*

11. How effective or not effective is scrutiny of external organisations?

Whilst 50% of respondents felt that scrutiny of external organisations was either 'Effective' or 'Very Effective' the largest single answer was 'Not Effective' with 31%.

This is partially explained through the comments where there appears to be a perception that this issue applies to health scrutiny more than other areas.



Comments from respondents

- *Walsall Manor...listen to scrutiny. Other organisations perhaps take less notice.*
- *Very effective for health scrutiny. Not at all clear...for other scrutiny committees.*
- *This refers to health only.*
- *External organisations do not seem to figure. They are all part of the NHS.*
- *Not enough partner organisations are brought to scrutiny.*

12. What are your views of the role of scrutiny in the development of Combined Authority devolution deals?

Along with question 13 this issue drew out the most comments from survey respondents with 14 points of view put across. These views varied from frustration to a perceived lack of involvement by scrutiny in the devolution deal, as they felt it was negotiated by Senior Cllrs and Officers, to those that thought scrutiny had no role to play in the issue.

Other comments focussed on how scrutiny could oversee the combined authority in the future.

Comments from respondents

- *Scrutiny were not involved and should have been.*
- *I don't believe we had any influence whatsoever.*
- *There hasn't been enough scrutiny.*
- *No role at all. The job of Walsall scrutiny is to scrutinise the leadership of the Council who are fully involved in the combined authority.*

13. The West Midlands Combined Authority operates a single overview and scrutiny committee. What are your views on this model?

Once again views here were mixed. Seven out of fourteen views were in favour of the single committee model. Four were against and three took a 'wait and see' stance'.

Comments from respondents

- *It needs to be that way due to its makeup.*
- *To being with it may suffice.*
- *It may be good to see it all in one go.*
- *Too big a remit covering too many local authorities.*
- *It will not provide any assurance that the CA is acting in the best interest of Walsall.*
- *Too soon to know.*
- *There is a need to get what we have established then we should be able to judge how effective it is.*

14. Examples where scrutiny has worked well and not so well.

Members provided examples of where they perceived scrutiny to have worked well and not so well. Interestingly, libraries features in both lists.

Where scrutiny has worked well

- *Developing a community cohesion policy x 2*
- *Manor Hospital including special measures, mortality rates and car parking*
- *Healthwatch*
- *Children's Homes*
- *School expansions*
- *Budget reductions in libraries x 2*

Where scrutiny has not worked particularly well

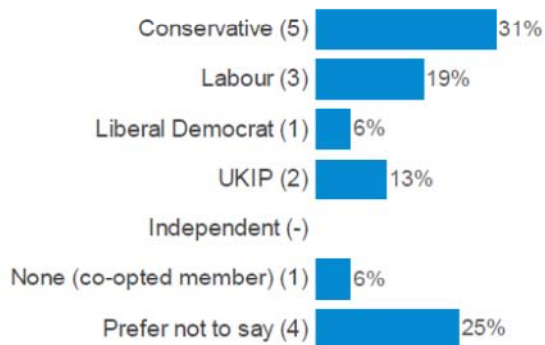
- *Trying to save the library service*
- *Budget scrutiny*
- *School improvement*
- *School attainment*
- *Health*
- *Scrutiny committees do not have the time to scrutinise anything well*

15. About you.

Respondents were predominately members of Overview and Scrutiny Committees. Two were not on any Overview and Scrutiny Committee and three preferred not to say.

Respondents were from a mix of political groups and included one co-opted member and 4 who preferred not to say.

What,if any, is your political group?



*Indicates an officer response on behalf of the Council.