

13 December, 2021

Scrutiny Survey

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: All

1. Purpose of the report

To present the results of the scrutiny survey 2021, and seek direction as to how the scrutiny process could be improved in the future.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Member learning and development programme is enhanced to include training for Members on financial scrutiny, scrutiny legislation, chairing meetings and asking questions.
- 2.2 Members be encouraged to request training on subject specific topics they would like training on.
- 2.2 Due to mixed comments in relation to the scrutiny of the council's budget setting process the Scrutiny Overview Committee review the existing approach and consider how it could be improved;
- 2.3 A recommendation tracker be developed to assist systematic follow up of recommendations made by overview and scrutiny committees;
- 2.4 The findings reflecting the importance of ensuring agendas for meetings are manageable and that prioritisation is given to reports that require scrutiny rather than reports 'for noting';
- 2.5 further development of the scrutiny report template to take place to include model recommendations which encourage outcomes and avoid requesting that reports are noted.

3. Aim

- 1.1 The role of good governance and scrutiny is critical to public trust and confidence in decision-making. In times of uncertainty and significant change, it is important that decisions are made in a way that is transparent, involves others and holds to account those responsible for implementation.
- 1.2 The Council has continually reviewed its scrutiny process and sought to make improvements over recent years.
- 1.3 Further to previous work and to seek how to develop scrutiny recent research, benchmarking and a review of recent best practice has taken place to reflect on

the way that scrutiny could be further evolved in Walsall, identify good practice and opportunities for new ways of working.

- 1.4 In response to the report taken to the Scrutiny Overview Committee on 'Scrutiny Good Practice and Benchmarking' a Member survey was carried out to determine how the scrutiny process could be improved in the future. Information gathered from the survey will be used to help shape and develop the focus of the scrutiny committees for the future. A summary of the results is presented below to allow improvements to be planned and address any weaknesses.

4. Know

Context

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Overview Committee are considering how to improve the scrutiny function, and in order to do so, wished to understand the views of Elected Members. A survey was sent to all 60 Elected Members, with 20 responses received and 1 response received in the form of feedback via an email. This was from a mix of scrutiny (16) and non-scrutiny members (5) who were asked to rate different aspects of scrutiny.

- 4.2 The majority of respondents rated the following aspects very good or good:

- Scrutiny structure.
- Work programme.
- Forward plan.
- Frequency of meetings
One comment received stated scrutiny committees were too far apart.
- Effectiveness of working groups
One comment received stated that working groups were difficult to set up.
- Number of committee members.
- Portfolio Holder involvement.
- Length of agendas.
- Scrutiny work programmes.
- Cabinet / Portfolio Holder involvement.
- Report satisfaction.

4.3 *Areas for improvement*

The scoring of some aspects suggested that these areas would benefit from further consideration in order to improve, these aspects were:

Effectiveness of Committees

- 4.4 Feedback on this aspect suggested that this was due to ineffective Chairmanship (selection of chair is a political decision and not based on abilities or subject knowledge) and ineffective scrutiny members. A separate respondent stated that Elected Members did not have the experience, background or qualifications to make a difference at scrutiny committees. It was also suggested that the follow up on decisions at each committee is not adequately fed back to Members and each year has a repetitive agenda without measuring progress in an 'evidence

based and uniform way'. Another comment expressed frustration at being denied a seat on a scrutiny committee due to political alignment.

- 4.5 A comment was received detailing lack of input provided at Committee by Portfolio Holders, with a reliance on Officers. Although it was noted that there were exceptions to this.

Cabinet forward plan

- 4.6 Of the 20 responses received, 9 respondents rated the forward plan as very good or good, 4 rated it as poor and 3 stated that it did not apply (others did not respond).

Budget scrutiny

- 4.7 This aspect created the most commentary, with suggestions for half yearly budget consultation along with another comment that budget scrutiny does not feature heavily on agendas. The impact that scrutiny feedback to Cabinet had, was also questioned.

Budget setting

- 4.13 This was an aspect which seemed to create the most dissatisfaction with scrutiny with six respondents describing scrutiny in this aspect as 'poor', having said that 7 respondents responded 'good' or 'very good'. Feedback included that 'unsure Cabinet take any notice' and a suggestion that consultation should take place 'half yearly' and that 'not much is covered on the agenda to do with the budget of this area'. When asked how they thought scrutiny should consider the budget setting process the majority of respondents (9) stated that this should be considered by all scrutiny committees. Although due to the small number of respondents it is important to note that this was closely followed by a specialist working group (6).

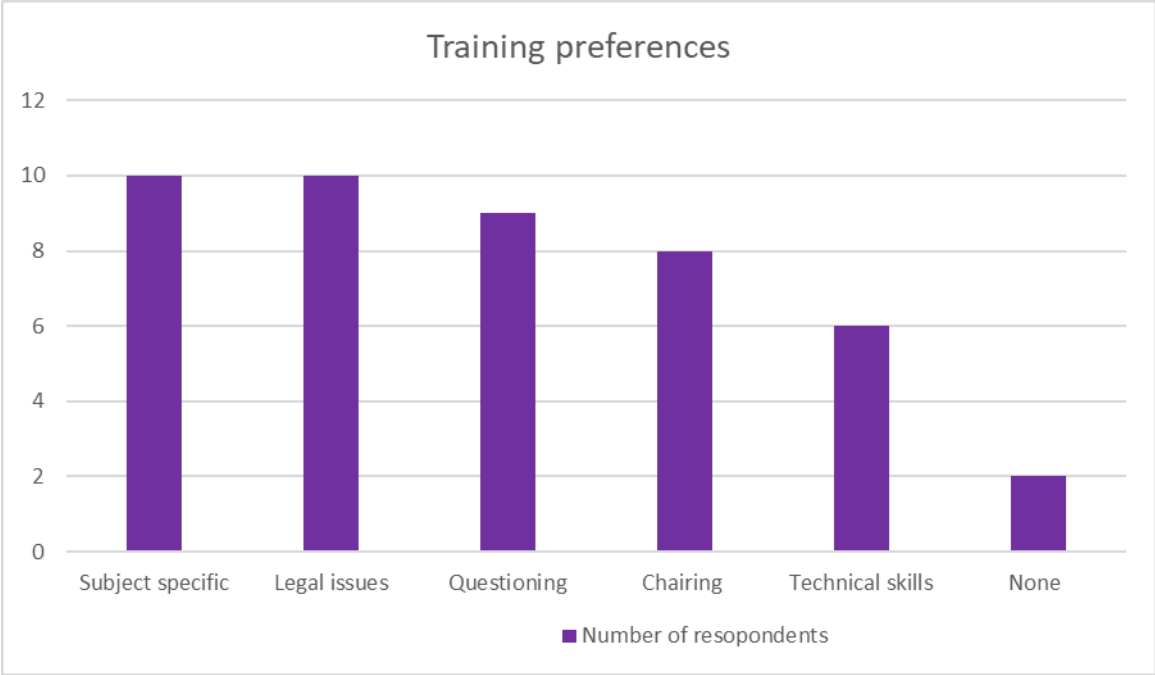
Length of agendas

- 4.8 Although this issue created a positive response in terms of satisfaction, comments for improvement were detailed and included a suggestion that items could take a long time to be debated, there needs to be a reasonable number of items on the agenda, and it was noted that officers did not need to talk through reports as they had already been circulated to Members.

Training

- 4.9 Elected Member training was recognised as a way to improve the scrutiny function. Quotes from respondents which were made throughout the survey included that '*training for scrutiny is critical*', '*Members should be aware of the parameters and functionality of the scrutiny process*', '*Training would be immensely helpful*' and '*Training for scrutiny is critical, members should be aware of the parameters and functionality of the scrutiny process*'.

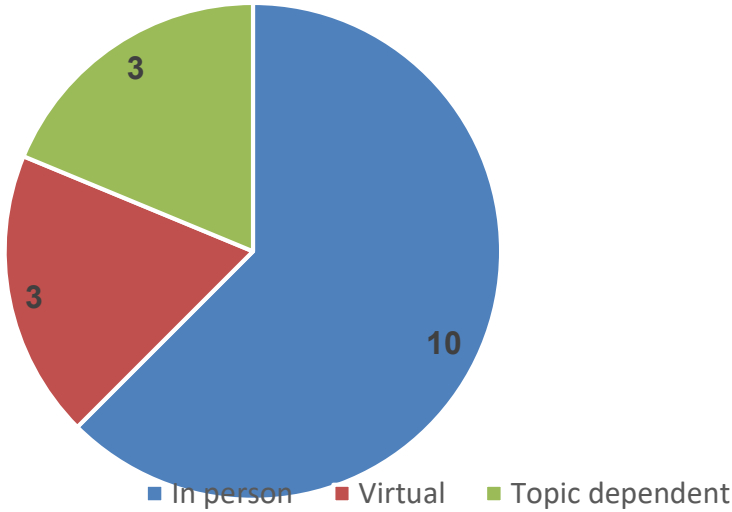
4.10 Respondents indicated their training preferences, with 'subject specific' and 'legislative' scoring high. 13 respondents stated that they would prefer face-to-face training, however respondents were able to select more than one method and a total of 13 indicated a preference for virtual/online self-guided (there is a potential to deliver sessions in both ways using the hybrid system). Responses specified a roughly equal preference for the delivery of training through in house or external training providers with a small number dependent on the topic.



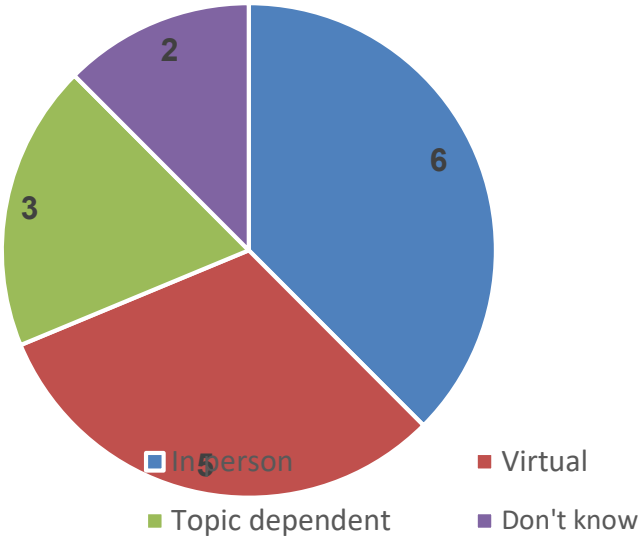
Methods of meeting

4.11 The Covid-19 pandemic provided emergency legislation to enable Council Committee meetings to operate virtually. This method of conducting meetings in Walsall was implemented swiftly and successfully allowing council business to continue. This legislation expired on 6th May 2021 and this provision was not extended – after this date elected members were required to attend committee meetings physically. A hybrid system has since been implemented to allow remote attendance by presenting officers and Portfolio Holders. Respondents were asked for their preferences in relation to the location of scrutiny committees and working groups.

Preference for location of committee meetings



Preference of location of working group meetings



4.12 For Committee meetings the main preference expressed was for in person meetings with only a small minority preferring virtual meetings. However, until such time that legislation makes it possible for Elected Members to attend

meetings in a hybrid/virtual way this question is more relevant to the organisation of working groups, which have more flexibility in operation. The survey outcome demonstrated that more members felt these could meet virtually but opinion was still split. Which suggests working group members should agree how they wish to meet when setting up meetings.

Officer support

- 4.14 Members were asked to detail how officer support to scrutiny could be improved, this question was split into Senior Officers, Non-senior Officers and Democratic services. Comments included that it would be beneficial for senior officers/non-senior officers to be more involved in the scrutiny process, that officers have advance notification of questions to ensure they can be answered at committee. One respondent stated that there was no need for improvement.

In terms of support from Democratic Services, feedback was positive, however, suggestions included that there should be more dedicated officers including a request for a dedicated scrutiny officer.

Partners

- 4.15 Respondents were asked to describe their satisfaction with the engagement of partners in the scrutiny process, 11 out of 20 were satisfied/very satisfied, with just 4 out of 20 dissatisfied. Comments suggested that it would be beneficial for partners to be provided with questions in advance of meetings to ensure responses could be provided at the committee meeting. The 'ability to address issues with the CCG and NHS', and 'face to face GP practices' noted as a successful examples of scrutiny.
- 4.16 Other successful examples of scrutiny quoted by respondents were 'how families were supported during Covid', and the way 'the council responded to the pandemic'.

Priority issues for future consideration at scrutiny in 2021/22

- 4.17 The issues below were identified by respondents as priority issues for 2021/22.
- Event management;
 - S106 allocation and spend justification authorisation.
 - Service provision and customer experience.
 - Covid 19 steps forward.
 - Dealing with mental health issues due to Covid
 - To become more effective as a new member.
 - All major areas of concern.
 - Seeing genuine "SCRUTINY" rather than considering Reports followed by "move they be noted"...
 - Reports often written by Officers whose departments may well be the subject of "scrutiny" on particular issues.
 - Mental health spend and governance.

- Post Covid scrutiny.
- Rotation of the chair.
- Access to GP services,
- Adult health & social care funding.
- To make sure funding is used to full capability and that there's proven improvements when it's been highlighted as needing improvement.
- Health & Social Care transformation.
- To ensure that all prior issues are being addressed to be more effective and challenge to be more successful.
- Council finances.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities

- 4.18 It is important that the Councils Governance arrangements are robust, transparent and effective to ensure that decisions affecting residents across the borough are made in a lawful way. This contributes to the Councils 'Internal Focus' Priority and ensures that the service is efficient and effective.

Risk Management

- 4.19 None directly related to this report.

Financial Implications

- 4.20 None directly related to this report.

Legal Implications

- 4.21 None directly related to this report.

Procurement Implications/Social Value

- 4.22 None directly related to this report.

Property Implications

- 4.23 None directly related to this report.

Health and Wellbeing implications

- 4.24 None directly related to this report.

Staffing implications

- 4.25 None directly related to this report.

Reducing Inequalities

- 4.25 None directly related to this report.

Consultation

4.26 None directly related to this report.

5. Decide

5.1 Members are asked to review the outcome of the survey and recommendations as set out in the report and consider whether or not they wish to take them, or alternative, suggestions forward.

6. Respond

Subject to the views of elected members the recommendations will be implemented and further reports provided to the Committee for Member feedback will be submitted as required.

7. Review

Subject to the agreement of the next steps regular reports will be provided as required.

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