

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 30 April 2013

Agenda item: 11

Wards: All

Subject: **Member Survey 2013 - Analysis**

Lead officer: Julia Regan, Head of Democracy Services

Lead member: Councillor Peter Southgate, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Forward Plan reference number: N/A

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Recommendations:

- A. That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considers the findings arising from the 2013 Member Survey and the proposed actions to be taken forward to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny.
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 For the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to consider the findings from the 2013 Member Survey conducted by the Scrutiny Team on behalf of the Commission's Chair and Vice-Chair and the actions to be taken forward to improve the scrutiny function.

2. DETAILS

- 2.1 Each year the Scrutiny Team carries out a survey to collect the views of Merton councillors and co-opted scrutiny members about how scrutiny is working - where things work well, where things don't work quite so well and how they can be improved. The survey also allows the Scrutiny Team to evaluate satisfaction with the scrutiny function as a whole and with the different workstreams that make up overview and scrutiny.
- 2.2 The 2013 Member Survey was completed by 25 councillors but no co-opted members, giving an overall response rate of 35% (42% from councillors). These response rates are lower than the last three years but comparable to those achieved in 2009 (35% overall), which was the last survey carried out in the year before an election. However, it is concerning that none of the 11 co-opted members replied.
- 2.3 The target set for Member satisfaction with the overall effectiveness of the scrutiny function has again been exceeded, with a rating of 86% against a target of 80%. After a gradual decline in recent years from 80% (2009) down to 74% (2012), this year's high satisfaction rating is the best recorded so far. This result is positive but may be due to the low response rate: the members who did respond may have been those who were more favourably disposed to Scrutiny.

- 2.4 The target set on scrutiny agendas was met. In response to the question “do you think that the commission/panel agendas are too full to consider the items properly?”, 50% thought this to be the case, which is lower (and therefore better) than the target of 60%. This is only the second year in which the target has been met. This may reflect actual changes made in the approach taken by the CYP Panel.
- 2.5 Overall the survey results indicate that scrutiny is well established and effective in Merton and is well regarded by councillors (both scrutiny and Cabinet). The views of co-opted members are unclear as none of them responded to the survey. Although the overall response rate was relatively low, the results were generally better than or comparable to previous years.
- 2.6 Satisfaction levels remain high, except for the call-in process, with three categories achieving the best recorded level to date. Task group work was particularly well-regarded, with a satisfaction level of 91%. There is still scope for improvement, particularly on delivering a call-in function that is considered to be more effective.
- 2.7 The analysis and detailed findings of the 2013 Member Survey are contained in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 contains all the verbatim comments received from members.
- 2.8 Appendix 3 contains a list of proposed actions for improvement.
- 3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**
- 3.1 Whilst there is not a requirement to undertake an annual member survey, the findings of the survey enable members’ satisfaction with the scrutiny process at Merton to be measured against agreed annual targets and actions to be taken to improve the scrutiny process year on year.
- 4. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED**
- 4.1 The Member Survey is conducted annually during February/March and runs for a minimum of three weeks each year.
- 5. TIMETABLE**
- 5.1 The Member Survey is undertaken in February/March each year so that the reported members’ satisfaction with the scrutiny process and the agenda length, for which there are annual service plan targets, can be fed into the performance management framework.
- 6. FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS**
- 6.1 None directly relating to the Member Survey itself. However, some actions arising from the findings of the survey year on year may have resource implications which need to be taken into consideration.
- 7. LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS**
- 7.1 None relating to this report.

8. HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1 It is a fundamental aim of the scrutiny process to ensure that there is full and equal access to the democratic process through public involvement and engagement. The findings of the Member Survey are reported to the Overview & Scrutiny Commission which is open to the public.

9. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None relating to this report.

10. RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1 None relating to this report.

11. APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

11.1 Appendix 1: Member Survey 2013

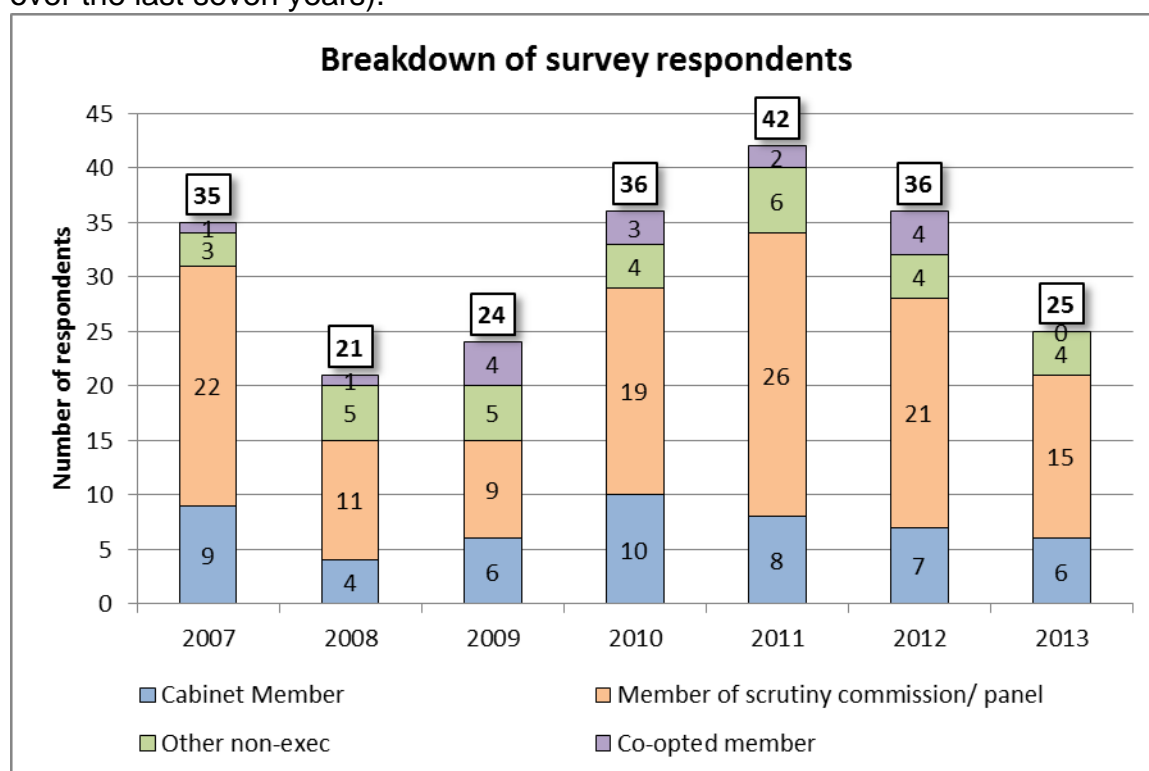
11.2 Appendix 2: Verbatim comments from members

11.3 Appendix 3: list of proposed action points

Member Survey 2013

Survey respondents

1. The survey was sent to all 60 Members of the Council and to the 11 co-opted scrutiny panel members.
2. 25 councillors completed the survey form, giving a 35% response rate overall (42% for councillors). This is significantly below the response rate achieved in the last three years but comparable to 2009, which was the last survey carried out in a year before an election. However it is the first time that no co-opted members responded.
3. The following chart shows the numbers of survey respondents (and their categories) over the last seven years).



4. The majority of respondents have been actively involved in the scrutiny process over the past year:
 - ❖ Fifteen were members of the scrutiny commission or a panel. Ten of them had sat on a task group in the last year and one had called in a decision. One had given evidence.
 - ❖ Four were “other non-executive members”, three of whom had sat on a scrutiny task group. One had called-in a decision. One had done none of the above (the member who called in a decision had also sat on a task group).
 - ❖ Six cabinet members responded to the survey, all of whom had attended a scrutiny meeting in the past year to observe or make a contribution.

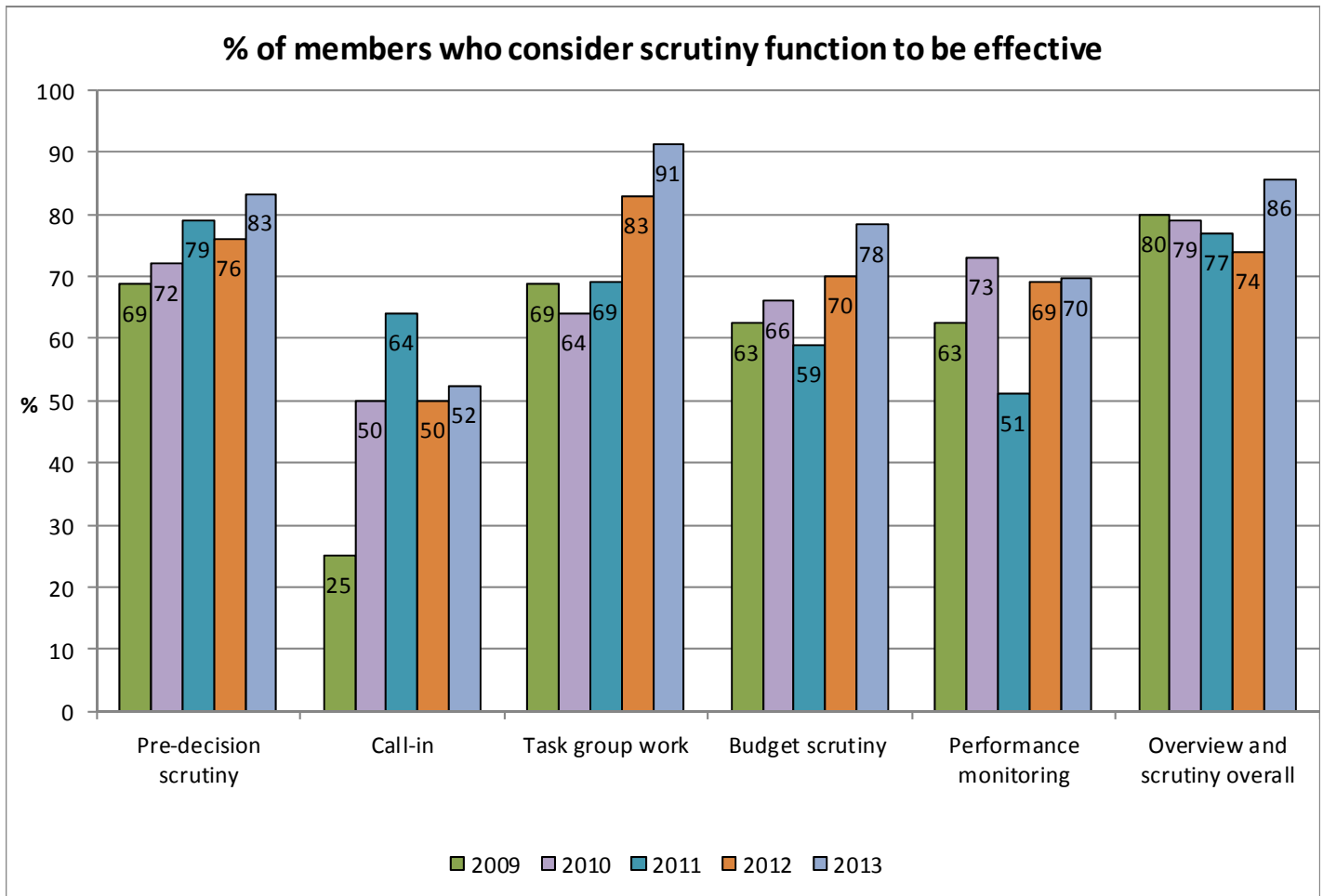
- ❖ No co-opted members responded, which indicates a need for greater engagement with them.

5. Action Point

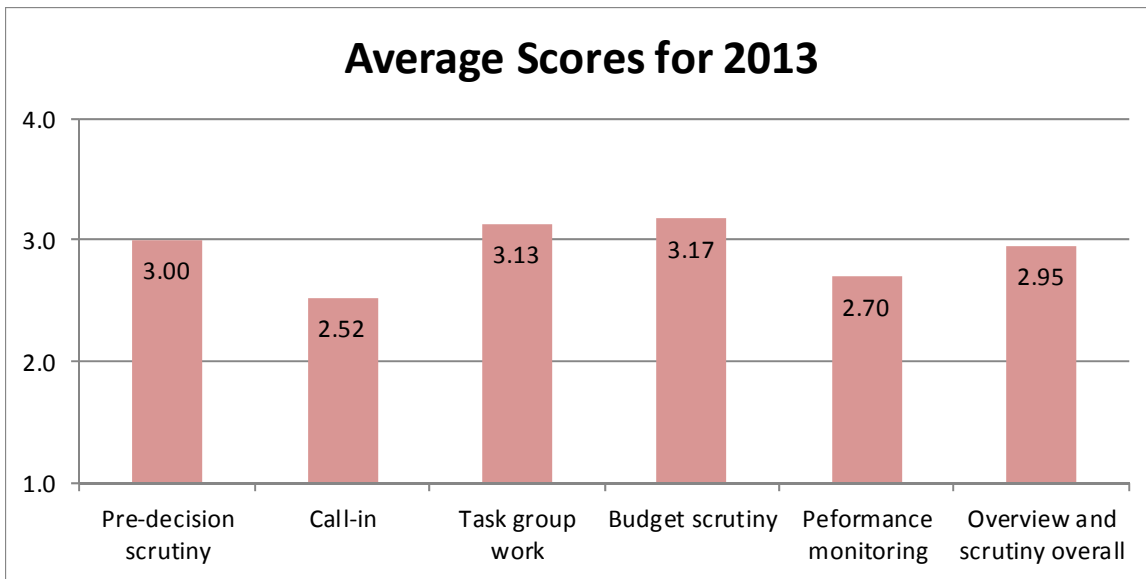
Head of Democracy Services to contact co-opted members to ascertain their views and satisfaction with the scrutiny function, and take suggestions for improvement, and find out how we can make it easier for co-opted members to respond in future.

Effectiveness of the scrutiny function

- The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they considered the scrutiny function to be effective in each key area of scrutiny activity and to rate the effectiveness of scrutiny overall. Results from the past six years are set out in the chart below. These show a general upward trend in all areas, with all of this year's results being the best or second best recorded since 2009.



The survey invited members to give each function a score from 1 to 4, with 1 being the lowest satisfaction level and 4 being the highest. The following chart shows the average (mean) score for each category:



Overall effectiveness

7. Respondents' perception of the overall effectiveness of overview and scrutiny continues to be high. Overall effectiveness is now rated at 86%, exceeding the 80% target set for 2012/13. This is the best result recorded so far. However, until this year the rating had been decreasing year-on-year, which indicates a need to work to maintain this level of satisfaction.
8. Comments made indicate a range of views held: some respondents are strong advocates of scrutiny whereas others are not convinced of its impact and believe it lacks real power:

The task groups do much to illuminate the subject matter under discussion and, on the whole, are genuine cross-party attempts to achieve service improvements.

The scrutiny panels have been instrumental in the decision making processes by the Cabinet. Cases in point are the decisions taken regarding voluntary sector funding, and the Adult Social Care Services.

Scrutiny has forgotten the outcome of the Leach review and scrutiny does not hold the executive to account & does not hold effective scrutiny that adds to council services.

Pre-decision scrutiny

9. The general trend of year on year increases in satisfaction with the effectiveness of pre-decision scrutiny indicates that this function continues to be an integral part of scrutiny within an authority that has no overall political control.
10. One respondent singled out the Customer Contact Programme in particular as benefitting from pre-decision scrutiny.

Call-in

11. Call-in remains the element of scrutiny that is found to be the least satisfactory. 52% of respondents expressed satisfaction with the effectiveness of call-in this year. This is similar to last year and 2010. 2011 saw a jump to 64% but this has not been repeated.
12. 4 call-ins were received in 2012/13. This is more than last year but comparable to previous years, with 2 received in 2011/12, 5 in 2010/11, 3 in 2009/10, 4 in 2008/9, 4 in 2007/8 and 6 in 2006/7.

Task groups

13. Task group work was once again rated the most effective element of scrutiny, with satisfaction reaching 91%, its highest level ever. This may in part be due to the continuation of last year's establishment of a consistent process for monitoring the implementation of task group recommendations.

Whilst of variable degrees of "pleasure", the task groups do much to illuminate the subject matter under discussion.

14. Action point

That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission continues to use the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report to demonstrate the impact of task group work, alongside other aspects of scrutiny.

Budget scrutiny

15. Satisfaction with budget scrutiny has shown year on year improvement, with the exception of 2011, and reached a record high of 78% this year. As ever, comments indicate differences of opinion on whether budget scrutiny has an impact on Cabinet decision making. As with previous surveys, a number of respondents cited the budget as an instance of Cabinet taking scrutiny into account in its decision making. However some were concerned that this was a token and superficial gesture.

Duke of Edinburgh Budget proposal – and other Budget measures. Changes to customer contact strategy.

Both this year and last nearly all the recommendations on the scrutiny made on the budget were accepted by Cabinet, making a significant difference to the final shape of the budget and its impact on residents.

[Has decision-making by Cabinet been influenced by Scrutiny?] Rarely save for some cherry picking at the very last Budget Scrutiny

Lip service is paid to Scrutiny but very little is accepted. A few savings suggested by Scrutiny to bring forward have been acted upon, which is a little encouraging.

Many papers are overly complicated and not very transparent. This is particularly true in terms of budget papers.

Performance monitoring

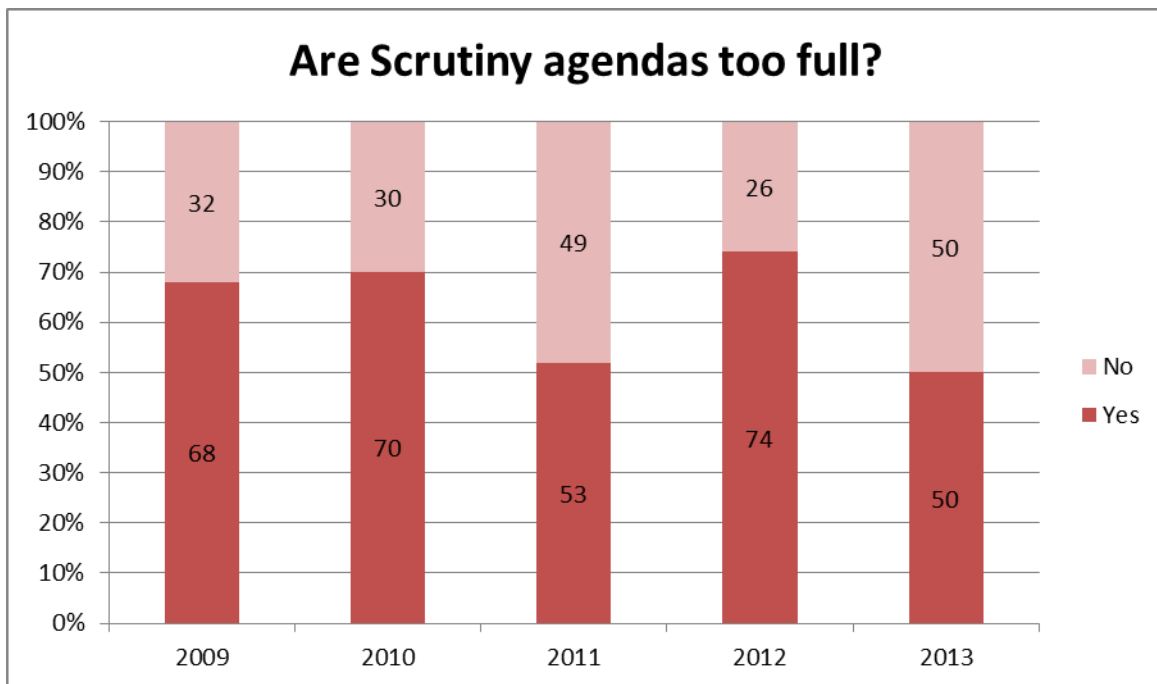
16. Satisfaction with the scrutiny of performance monitoring information has increased slightly, from 69% in 2012 to 70% this year. Last year (despite the figures) several respondents made negative comments about performance monitoring. This year that was not repeated; however, several respondents did express a wish for more training in performance monitoring.

17. Action point

See action point on training (paragraph 36).

Scrutiny agendas/ workload

18. The proportion of respondents who consider scrutiny agendas to be too full to consider items properly has decreased significantly, from 74% last year to 50% this year. This is the second time that the 60% target has been met, reflecting recent efforts made to aim for shorter and more strategically focussed agendas. This has been an area of continuing concern in the past and was the focus of three of the 2009 scrutiny review recommendations. It is good to see that these efforts have had an effect.



19. The result was good compared to previous years but there is still room for improvement. Some respondents who thought the agendas were too full made their own suggestions:

Agenda management is improving – effective chairs are key in this regard

I think some of the less “contentious” aspects could be dealt with electronically, with the opportunity to comment as appropriate. No meeting should need to last longer

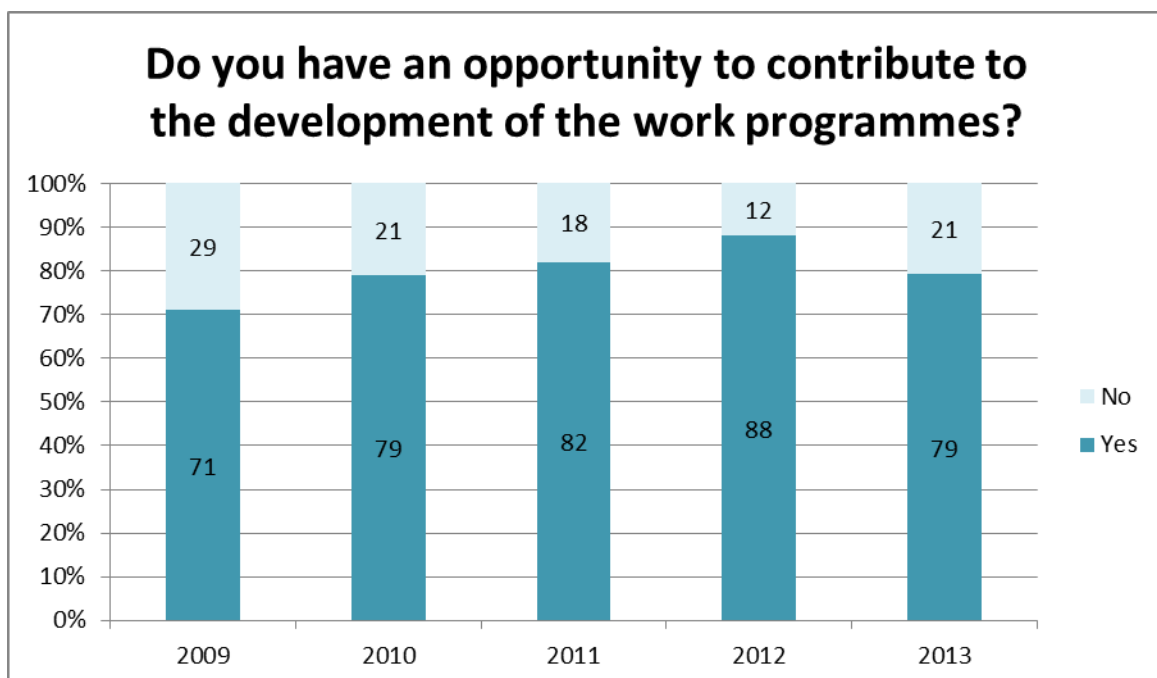
than 2 hours, beyond this time becomes counter-productive and not conducive to good developments.¹

20. Action points

21. That the Commission and Panels continue to aim for shorter strategically focussed agendas. This should include dealing with some information-only items by email rather than having them as an agenda item. Agenda management could also be improved through chairs exercising strict time management over discussion of items.
22. That the Commission and Panels plan to have some slack within the work programme in order to be able to respond to urgent or unforeseen items that arise during the year.

Development of the Commission/Panel work programmes

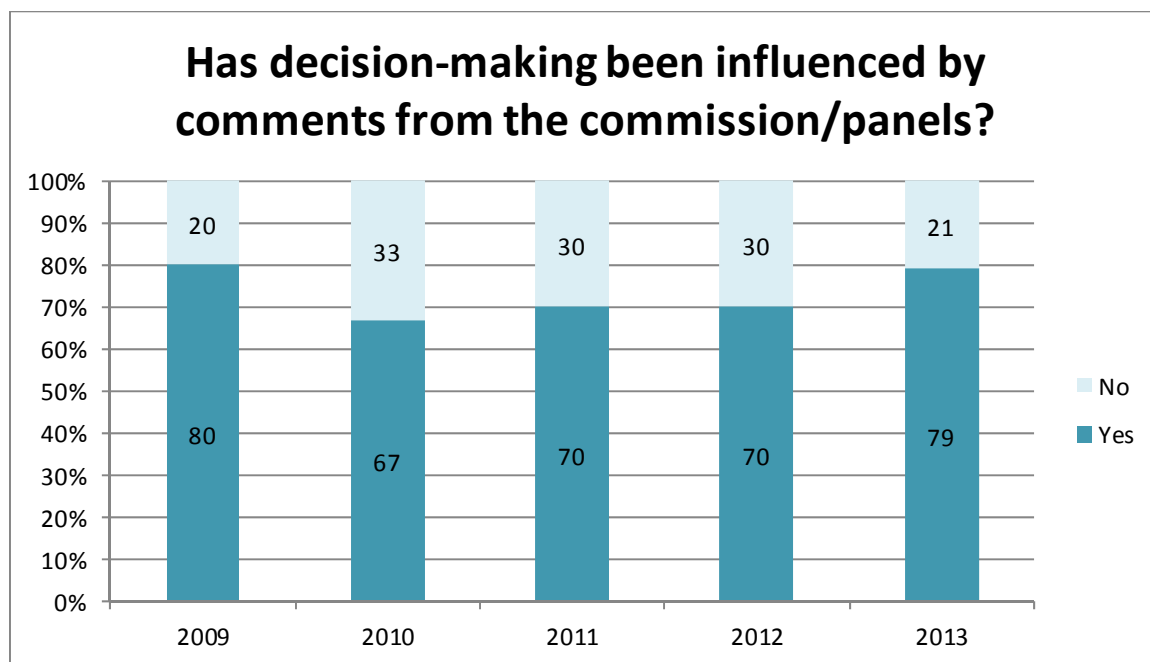
23. The survey asked respondents whether they have an opportunity to contribute to the development of the Commission/Panel work programmes.
24. Overall, 79% of respondents said that they have had an opportunity to contribute to the panel work programmes, a decrease from last year's 88%, which had been part of an overall upward trend since 2009.



¹ The same respondent later went on to suggest that particular consideration should be given to what really needs to be discussed at a meeting (with Member consent) in order to avoid overlong meetings.

Scrutiny impact on decision making by the Cabinet

25. The survey asked whether decision making by the Cabinet had been influenced by comments from the Commission and/or Scrutiny Panels. This has fluctuated from year to year – 70% agreed with the statement in 2012 and in 2011, 67% in 2010, and 80% in 2009.
26. This year, 79% of respondents agreed. This is positive but in the light of the last five years should be treated as a result that needs to be actively maintained or improved.



27. As has been the case for some time, there are conflicting views on whether the Cabinet's decision making on the budget has been influenced by scrutiny, as previously discussed in paragraph 12. However there were a number of other examples given, such as the customer contact strategy.

Noise nuisance task group recommendation accepted.

Inspection of residential/care homes in the LBM; consultation on the CPZ introduction in my ward, are some examples of suggestions.

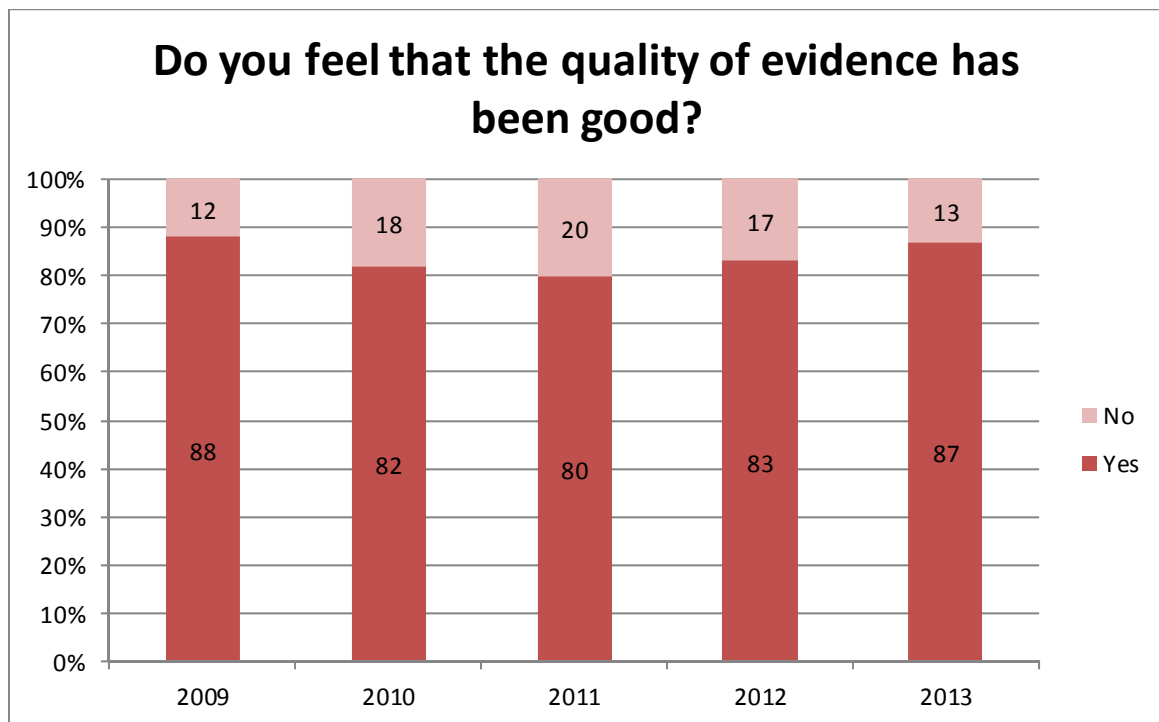
The customer contact programme benefitted from pre-decision scrutiny. And, of course, the budget and business plan process.

In reviewing services of vulnerable service users.

1. Rethink of Mitcham Regeneration development bus route; 2. Borough wide controlled drinking zone; 3. No car parking in parks and open spaces.

Quality of evidence presented to overview and scrutiny

28. 87% of respondents said that the evidence presented was good. This is comparable with 83% last year, 80% in 2011, 82% in 2010 and 88% in 2009.



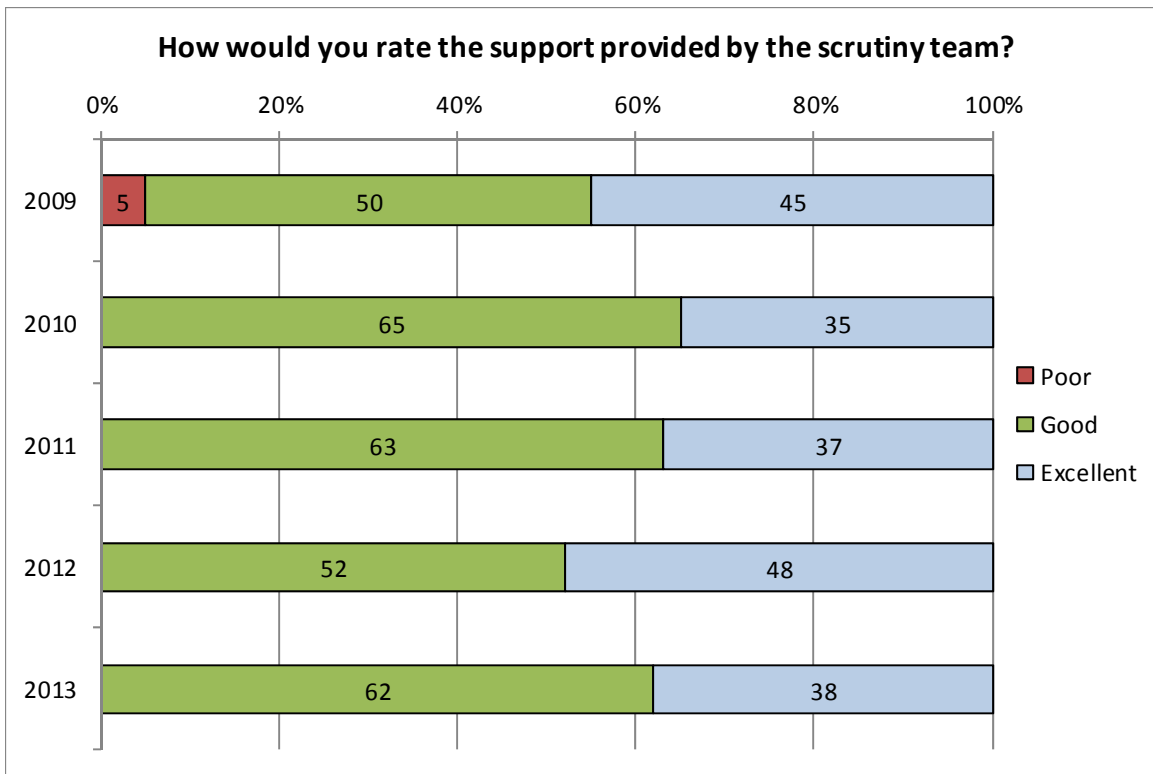
29. A significant majority of respondents thought the evidence was good. However, some of those who disagreed felt strongly that the quality was lacking and motivated by politics.

An exceptionally good report on library services brought forward on Sustainable Communities but generally they are mediocre.

*Budget info has been very vague to the point of obscurity sometimes
Information supplied is positively politically driven*

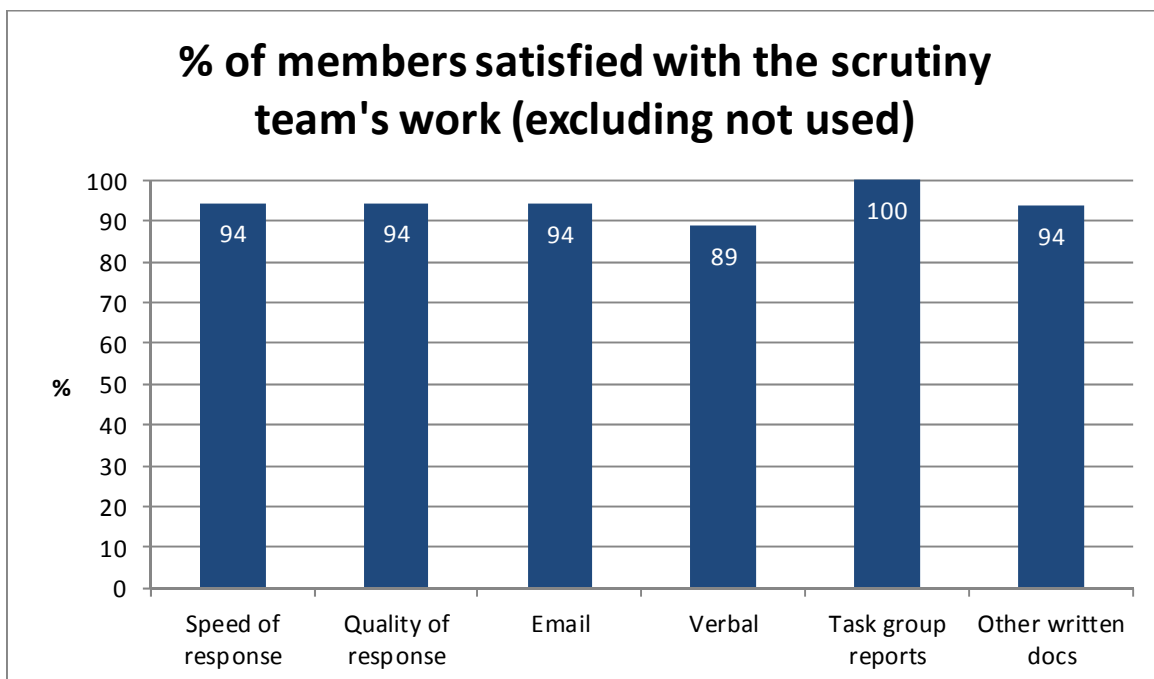
Support from the Scrutiny Team

30. Satisfaction with the service remains positive, with 38% of respondents rating the support provided as excellent, 62% as good and no poor ratings this year:



31. While the proportion of respondents rating the scrutiny team as excellent has fallen since last year, the results continue to indicate general satisfaction with the service.

32. Members were also invited to rate different aspects of the Scrutiny Team on a scale from 1 to 4 (with 1 being the lowest and 4 being the highest). These results were very positive, with only three '1' ratings and three '2' ratings. Task Group Reports in particular were well received, obtaining solely '3' and '4' ratings – a 100% satisfaction level:



Members' training and development needs

33. The skills and knowledge which members bring to the overview and scrutiny process are crucial to its effectiveness, so the survey asked what scrutiny related training and development opportunities they would like to have provided in the coming year.
34. 18 respondents answered this question. Those who did particularly favoured Performance Monitoring training, with Questioning Skills and Finance/Budget Scrutiny close behind. Relatively few wanted Chairing and Agenda Management training:



35. The two “other” suggestions were:
- *The powers councillors have on scrutiny panels*
 - *A peer review of our Scrutiny as it has lost its way.*

36. Action points

That the Head of Democracy Services will, in discussion with HR (who have responsibility for member development and training), ensure that appropriate training sessions are identified and offered to members on chairing skills, questioning skills, performance management, and budget scrutiny.

Suggested issues and themes for scrutiny

37. In response to a request for suggested issues/ themes to be considered for inclusion in the overview and scrutiny work programme in 2013/14, the following suggestions were made:

- *Advice the Council officers on budget-management for hard-pressed households and families; to understand what is given and ways in which we could enhance/improve/supplement it.*
- *Health & Wellbeing operation / Health issues*
- *Following the publication of the 2011 Census, the big theme for LBM is the changing demographic landscape and what the concept of “citizenship” means to so many disparate groups.*
- *The effectiveness of partnership in maintaining efficient use of resources*

38. Action point

All of these suggestions will be considered during the topic selection process for 2012/13.

Appendix 2: list of verbatim comments from respondents

#1 How would you rate the effectiveness of the overview and scrutiny function?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- *Scrutiny seems to have a significant impact upon a final outcome. Whilst of variable degrees of “pleasure”, the task groups do much to illuminate the subject matter under discussion and, on the whole, are genuine cross-party attempts to achieve service improvements.*
- *The scrutiny panels have been instrumental in the decision making processes by the Cabinet. Cases in point are the decisions taken regarding voluntary sector funding, and the Adult Social Care Services.*
- *Scrutiny generally is only used by the opposition parties. Unfortunately Labour Members rarely ask questions. While the probing is useful the Cabinet take little notice of scrutiny recommendations including on budget.*
- *Scrutiny is good it works.*
- *Both this year and last nearly all the recommendations on the scrutiny made on the budget were accepted by Cabinet, making a significant difference to the final shape of the budget and its impact on residents.*
- *Generally I feel scrutiny is effective and allows robust decision making*
- *Effectiveness depends on understanding of members.*
- *I think scrutiny works well, but there are things to learn and discover and improve on.*
- *Difficult to judge at this stage as am so new. However it seems to me on an initial view that many papers are overly complicated and not very transparent. This is particularly true in terms of budget papers*

Cabinet Members

- *Budget process in particular has been best I’ve experienced.*
- *An essential mechanism that works well in Merton, especially relevant given the severe financial challenges facing the borough.*

Other non-executive Members

- *Scrutiny has forgotten the outcome of the Leach review and scrutiny does not hold the executive account & does not hold effective scrutiny that adds to council services.*
- *Have not seen it in action this year.*
- *Last year I was the Mayor of Merton & this year was not actively involved in a specific panel, but I did participate in a task group as indicated above.*

#2 Do you have an opportunity to contribute to the development of the commission/ panel work programmes (for example, suggesting topics for review or items for agendas?) If not, why not?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- [YES] *At the annual May meeting and individually in the light of relevant contemporary concerns and developments.*
- [YES] *Inspection of residential/care homes in the LBM; consultation on the CPZ introduction in my ward, are some examples of suggestions.*

Cabinet Members

- [NO] *Possibly but don't remember being invited to suggest*
- [NO] *Where I believe a topic would particularly benefit from pre-decision scrutiny.*

Other non-executive Members

- [NO] *But pointless*

#3 Do you think that the commission/panel agendas are too full in order to consider the items properly?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- [YES] *I think some of the less "contentious" aspects could be dealt with electronically, with the opportunity to comment as appropriate. No meeting should need to last longer than 2 hours, beyond this time becomes counter-productive and not conducive to good developments.*
- [N/A] *Have not looked at the Commission. Have enough with panel papers.*
- [YES] *Particularly on budget scrutiny although additional meetings were asked for and granted this year.*
- [NO] *Agenda management is improving – effective chairs are key in this regard*
- [YES] *It's a challenging task as there is so much to look at but choosing top priority subjects is probably the best way forward*

Cabinet Members

- [YES] *A difficult issue. Whilst the pressure to examine many issues is there it needs to be balanced against time and resources. Not easy.*

#4 Has decision-making by the Cabinet been influenced by comments from the commission/panels? If yes, please give examples.

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- [YES] *Duke of Edinburgh Budget proposal – and other Budget measures. Changes to customer contact strategy.*
- [YES] *To some extent*
- [YES] *As stated in response No. 1, the commission has influenced Cabinet decision-making processes. See my examples [re: Q.2 – Do you have an opportunity to contribute?]*
- [NO] *Lip service is paid to Scrutiny but very little is accepted. A few savings suggested by Scrutiny to bring forward have been acted upon which is a little encouraging.*
- [YES] *Budget proposals*

- [YES] *Various changes to budget proposals*
- [YES] *Sometimes*
- [YES] *Noise nuisance task group recommendation accepted.*
- [YES] *Both this year and last nearly all the recommendations on the scrutiny made on the budget were accepted by Cabinet, making a significant difference to the final shape of the budget and its impact on residents.*
- [YES] *1. In budget setting when cuts have to be made. 2. In reviewing services of vulnerable service users.*
- [YES] *Grant reduction in the voluntary sector*
- [YES] *Should be more interaction.*
- [YES] *1. Rethink of Mitcham Regeneration development bus route; 2. Borough wide controlled drinking zone; 3. No car parking in parks and open spaces.*

Cabinet Members

- [YES] *Budget 2013*
- [YES] *Budget in particular, other items have influenced Cabinet thinking e.g. Document Management*
- [YES] *Budgetary changes*
- [YES] *The customer contact programme benefitted from pre-decision scrutiny. And, of course, the budget and business plan process where cabinet made changes in line with Scrutiny's comments.*

Other non-executive Members

- [YES] *Rarely save for some cherry picking at the very last Budget Scrutiny*

#5 Do you feel that the quality of evidence presented to overview and scrutiny has been good? Has it met the needs of the session? If not, why not?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- [YES] *In most cases.*
- [NO] *Mixed. An exceptionally good report on library services brought forward on Sustainable Communities but generally they are mediocre.*
- [NO] *Budget info has been very vague to the point of obscurity sometimes*
- [YES] *Taken very serious. Of course this is politics.*
- *Not enough experience to judge*

Other non-executive Members

- [NO] *Information supplied is positively politically driven*

#6 What scrutiny related issues/skills would you like to be covered by future training and development opportunities?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- *The powers councillors have on scrutiny panels*

Other non-executive Members

- *I would propose a peer review of our Scrutiny as it has lost its way.*

#7 How would you rate the support provided by the Scrutiny Team?

N/A

#8 How could the scrutiny team improve the way it supports overview and scrutiny

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- *Difficult to see; the number of times I've felt the need to query an aspect of any report draft has been minimal.*
- *Sometimes quite long, but in all fairness the 3s could be 4s.*
- *I think the Team is doing a good job*
- *Add 0.5 FTE to team*
- *Not experienced enough to make a judgement*

Cabinet Members

- *Not for me to say!*
- *I think the team do a good job in an era when resources are limited. This situation will not change in terms of more resources, as we move forward, given the difficult financial circumstances facing the council.*

#9 Do you have any suggestions for issues/ themes you would like to see explored as part of the overview and scrutiny work programme in 2013/14?

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- *Advice the Council officers on budget-management for hard-pressed households and families; to understand what is given and ways in which we could enhance/improve/supplement it.*
- *Health & Wellbeing operation*
- *None at the moment*
- *Following the publication of the 2011 Census, the big theme for LBM is the changing demographic landscape and what the concept of "citizenship" means to so many disparate groups.*
- *The effectiveness of partnership in maintaining efficient use of resources*
- *Health issues*

#10 If you have any further comments/ suggestions about the overview and scrutiny function, including how it can be improved, please use the space below.

Members of the scrutiny commission or panels

- *Picking up on the point overleaf [re: Q.3 – Do you think the agendas are too full?], I'm aware that the Sustainable Communities Panel needed two Budget Scrutiny meetings during the 2nd round of Scrutiny. Particularly at that time of year, therefore,*

consideration of what really needs to be discussed at a meeting (though I clearly realise that Member consent would be required)

- *Scrutiny is improving year by year and I feel that it can only get better.*

Cabinet Members

- *Overview and Scrutiny does a vital job for the borough. The difficult decisions being made in response to financial reductions from central government need proper consideration. And, whilst I believe the administration does this well, it is helped, often in very tangible ways, by the considered eye of scrutiny.*

Appendix 3: List of proposed action points

Head of Democracy Services to contact co-opted members to ascertain their views and satisfaction with the scrutiny function, and take suggestions for improvement, and find out how we can make it easier for co-opted members to respond in future.

That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission continues to use the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report to demonstrate the impact of task group work, alongside other aspects of scrutiny.

That the Commission and Panels continue to aim for shorter strategically focussed agendas. This should include dealing with some information-only items by email rather than having them as an agenda item. Agenda management could also be improved through chairs exercising strict time management over discussion of items.

That the Commission and Panels plan to have some slack within the work programme in order to be able to respond to urgent or unforeseen items that arise during the year

That the Head of Democracy Services will, in discussion with HR (who have responsibility for member development and training), ensure that appropriate training sessions are identified and offered to members on chairing skills, questioning skills, performance management, and budget scrutiny.

All topic suggestions will be considered during the topic selection process for 2013/14.