

Committee: Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Date: 6th September 2023

Subject: Analysis of the Annual Member Scrutiny Survey 2023

Lead officer: Stella Akintan, Scrutiny Officer

Lead Member: Councillor Ed Foley, Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission

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Recommendations:

- A. That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission considers the findings arising from the 2023 Member Survey.
 - B. That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission agrees the proposed actions to be taken forward to improve the effectiveness of scrutiny (actions run throughout the report and are listed in Appendix 3).
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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 2023 Member Survey and the proposed actions to be taken forward to improve the scrutiny function.

2. DETAILS

Background

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 do not work quite so well, and how they can be improved. The survey also evaluates the effectiveness of the scrutiny function as a whole and with the different workstreams that make up overview and scrutiny.

Key findings

2.2. Here are the headline results from this year's survey:

- Overall effectiveness: Regarding the overall effectiveness of scrutiny, 44% of respondents rated scrutiny as completely or somewhat effective
- Task groups: Task group work was once again rated the most effective element of scrutiny with 60% rating it as completely or somewhat effective
- Scrutiny team: Satisfaction with the team and each aspect of its work is positive with respondents giving the team an overall satisfaction rating of 84%.

2.3. This is the first survey since the 2022 elections and will provide some insight into members views and experience of the scrutiny process. It is also interesting to note that 68% of respondents are newly elected and this is their first year in scrutiny at Merton.

3. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

3.1. Whilst there is no statutory requirement to undertake an annual member survey, the findings enable members' satisfaction with the scrutiny process at Merton to be

measured against previous years and to develop actions to improve the scrutiny process year on year.

4. CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. The member survey is conducted for a minimum of three weeks each year.

5. TIMETABLE

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 that need to be taken into consideration. The cost of this would be met from existing budgets.

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 and Scrutiny Commission that 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 2023 – analysis and detailed findings

11.2. Appendix 2: Verbatim comments from Members

11.3. Appendix 3: List of proposed action points

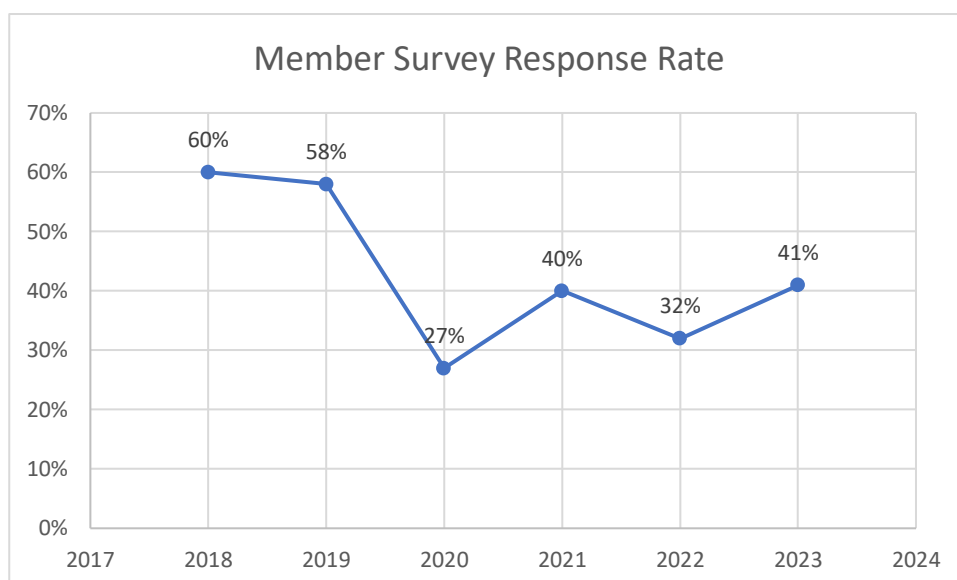
Member Survey 2023

Survey respondents

1. The 2023 member survey was sent out to fifty seven councillors and four co-opted members giving a survey cohort totalling 61 members.

Response rate

2. The survey was completed by 24 councillors and 1 co-opted member, giving an overall response rate of 41%. In 2022 the survey response was particularly low, perhaps due to a focus on the impending local elections. It was completed by twenty councillors and one co-opted member, giving an overall response of 32%.
3. **ACTION POINT:** The feedback from this survey is the basis for the scrutiny improvement plan. The Commission may wish to suggest ways to increase the response rate to this survey, in order to gather the views from as many councillors as possible.

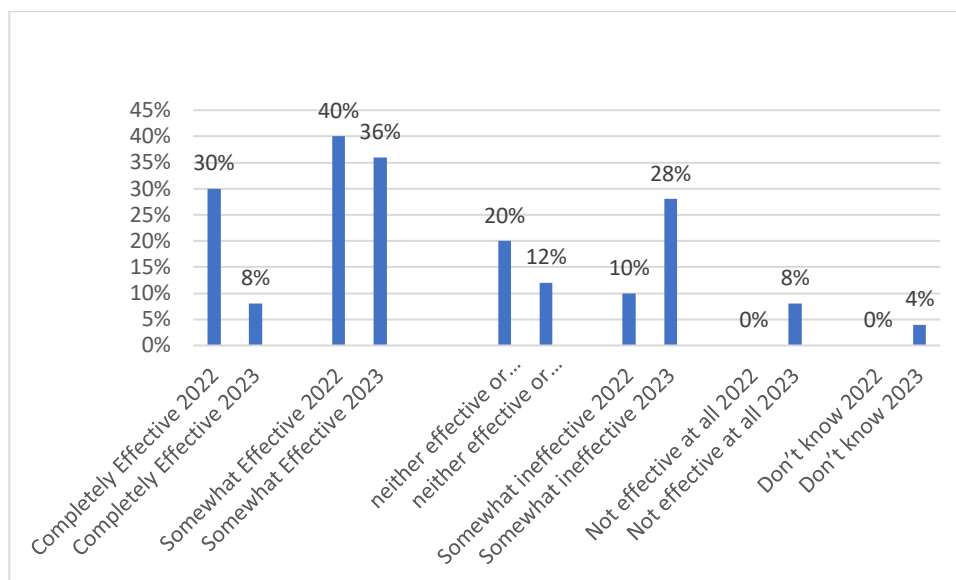


4. The majority of respondents have been actively involved in the scrutiny process over the past year:
 - 21 are members of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission or a scrutiny panel
 - 1 co-opted members
 - 3 are Cabinet Members
 - 48% of respondents have sat on a Task Group
 - 44% have attended a scrutiny meeting as a visiting member to observe/make a contribution
 - 4 respondents have had no involvement with scrutiny this year (nonetheless, their contribution is welcome)

Effectiveness of the scrutiny function

5. The survey asked respondents to consider the overall effectiveness of scrutiny. proportion of respondents who consider scrutiny to be effective overall stands at 44%

The overall effectiveness of scrutiny



6. **Pre-decision scrutiny** 44% rated the effectiveness of pre-decision scrutiny as completely or somewhat effective in 2023. This is often seen as the most effective way to influence the decision making process. Pre-decision scrutiny was rated as 70% effective in 2022
7. **Call-ins** Call-in was rated at 28% continues to be an area with the lowest rates of satisfaction. It is the most political element of scrutiny and does not usually result in a request to Cabinet to review its decision. There were two call-ins in the last municipal year.
8. **Task group work** was rated the most effective element of scrutiny with 60% of respondents finding this completely or somewhat effective. In 2022 this rate was 80%
9. **Budget Scrutiny** There was almost an even split on the response on the effectiveness of budget scrutiny with 44% finding it effective and 40% saying that it is ineffective.
10. **Performance monitoring** The effectiveness of performance monitoring was rated at 40%. The 2022 rate was 65%.
11. **Development of the Commission/Panel Work Programmes** This year respondents were evenly split on the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Commission and Panel work programmes with 60% agreeing they had influence and 64% did not feel they had the opportunity. Last year 79% of respondents agreed they had the opportunity to contribute.
12. **Scrutiny Agendas/Workload** There were 52% of respondents who agreed that Commission/Panel agendas are the correct length.
13. **Scrutiny impact on decision making by the Cabinet** This year councillors feel decision-making by the Cabinet has been influenced to some extent by comments from the Commission is 28% in 2022 and 41% in 2023. For the Panels this was 32% in 2023 and 43% in 2022.

14. **Better organisation** The survey provided a list of actions that could be taken to improve the organisation of scrutiny business and respondents were asked to tick all the items that they supported:

In what ways do you think the Commission/Panel business might be improved?

Survey Question	Response rate
More frequent meetings to accommodate more items on the agenda	20%
Commission/panels to be more selective when setting agendas	48%
Councillors supported to conduct their own individual reviews	56%
Background policy guidance provided	44%
Guidance provided on possible questions to be asked at meetings	44%
Cross party pre-meetings to agree lines of questioning for some agenda items	32%
More use of external experts to provide context and challenge	64%
Other (please specify)	

15. **Action Points:**

Two successful councillor led reviews took place in 2022-23. Commission could agree that Panels can commission Councillors led reviews as appropriate.

Commission to agree that Scrutiny officers work with the Panel to identify suitable experts to attend meetings as witnesses for the topic being scrutinised.

Support from the Scrutiny Team

- Overall satisfaction with the scrutiny team is at 84%. Last year the response rate was 92%. There were a number of positive comments made about the team including “ They are professional, effective and approachable.” One respondent said “ it is too soon to judge” which may reflect a wider view given this is the first year of scrutiny for many respondents.

Satisfaction with scrutiny team

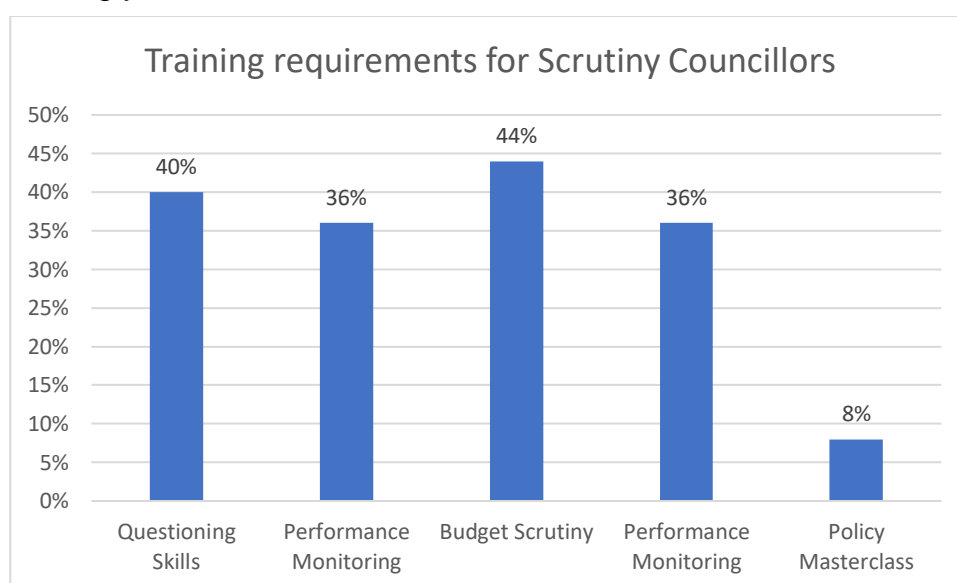
	completely satisfied	somewhat satisfied	neither satisfied/dissatisfied	somewhat dissatisfied	completely dissatisfied	Don't know
Speed of response to enquiries	44%	32%	8%	0%	0%	8%
Quality of response to enquiries	36%	36%	8%	0%	0%	8%
Quality of email communications	44%	32%	8%	0%	0%	8%
Quality of verbal communications	48%	16%	12%	4%	0%	12%

ACTION POINT

16. Any specific feedback from members on how the performance of the scrutiny team could be improved would be gratefully received by the Policy and Scrutiny Manager.

Members' training and development needs

17. 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:



ACTION POINT The Scrutiny team will put forward a suggested programme of training for scrutiny councillors based on the responses received.

Verbatim comments from Members

Question 7: Please give examples of where the Commission and/or Panels have had a demonstrable impact e.g. recommendations leading to a service improvement (other than on than on Cabinet decision-making)

- On housing issues regarding Clarion
- Sustainable communities in early 2022 resolving to create a role of tenant's champion.
- Sustainable Communities Panel publishing it's action plan Clarion Housing regarding their response to repairs.
- Youth in scrutiny initiative – having a young inspector on each scrutiny panel including OSC.
- Sustainable communities now regularly sends ideas and proposals back to cabinet to consider, such as around clarion housing, policy areas such as waste policy. Task groups but not sure how many have gone through cabinet yet.
- Various recommendations in relation to health services and cost of living crisis.
- I don't think there are examples

Question 9: In what ways do you think the Commission/Panel business might be improved?

- Particularly in relation to budget scrutiny, this should be completely re-organised. The first round should be used to set out and scrutinise the priorities of the cabinet members in relation to the budget. The second round should be to scrutinise whether the budget proposals meet those priorities. This means we can't have the controversial budget left to the January budget so they can avoid panel meetings and are only considered by the Commission, the administration group members of which owe their position and SRA to the administration.
- Chairs and vice chairs should be elected by back bench councillors. This could be done on the grounds of proportionality or it could be a free and secret ballot of all backbenchers, or indeed by the panel themselves. This give these roles real legitimacy and independence which currently they lack.

- I think the Chair of scrutiny panels would be drawn from the opposition to make them more effective, otherwise the administration is marketing its own homework with protection ?? from consequences.
- More time to read prepare for scrutiny meetings. More data on value for money from actions. More comparative data vs other boroughs.
- Reduce number of topics for any, one meeting to allow for more thoroughness and time for topics to be added in when necessary.
- Reporting back annually which recommendations have been implemented.
- More witness statements and testimonials from service users/beneficiaries
- Separate youth scrutiny panel where young panel members set the agenda and work programme to scrutinise areas which are a priority for them.
- Arrange visits to service providers.
- Agendas and reports being published at least a couple of weeks in advance.
- More visits to services covered in the report to see how they operate in person.

Question 10: Please tell us of any other training suggestions.

- Doesn't need training/ development
- Needs more openness transparency and a different attitude
- There is a lot to monitor and a very little time to understand the performance measures
- Finances – especially government settlement to local authorities
- Training in SharePoint and modern gov so documents are more accessible

Question 11: Please use this box for any further comments/suggestions you have about the overview and scrutiny function, including how it can be improved.

- Generally, the overview and scrutiny is effective.
- We're asked to cover too much policy without proper guidance as to what the policy decision or objective.
- I feel on occasion certain decisions by the cabinet have already been communicated to the public even before the scrutiny committee has discussed it. Surely, this at least puts the whole scrutiny process into doubt.
- The Administration should not mark its own homework.

- Allow scrutiny well in advance and listen to committee panels.
- There needs to be a measure of actions and whether advice is taken.
- For example, the electric vehicle charging task group resolved to have more electric vehicle charges in car parks. Then two were resurfaced in Wimbledon with none.
- I think it is good that the opposition groups have at least one vice-chair or chair position. This should be maintained. In an ideal world it might be good to have more opposition group councillors as actual chairs. Such as keeping Daniel on as chairman or vice-chair of sustainable communities O&S Panel.
- Might be good to keep progress of task groups moving as sometimes it can drag and peter out.
- Receive better feedback from cabinet on if/when/how recommendations sent to them have been incorporated and actioned. By inviting cabinet back to explain the outcome.
- More in-depth questioning allowed, i.e. follow-up questions. Need performance monitoring on health.
- Chair of committees from the opposition party
- Targets on climate change impacts
- Equality Impact Assessments included in decision making

Question 12: Do you have any suggestions for issues/themes that you would like to see explored as part of the overview and scrutiny work programme 2023/2024

- Vaping
- Knife crime
- Equality Diversity and Inclusion Policies and Procedures in everything
- A restructure of scrutiny panels to realign with the new directors. A review of Cabinet member roles thereafter to align with that. And a rebrand of parts of departments to clearly align.
- Task group exploring the effectiveness of the youth in scrutiny initiative and what the future initiative could look like.
- OSC meeting led by Young Inspectors involved in the youth in scrutiny initiative – agenda set by inspectors.
- Section 20 notices issued to lease holders by housing associations to cover cost of renovations – call in clarion to answer questions on this.
- Street maintenance policy review
- Parking enforcement policy(how to reduce entrapment)

- Cycling infrastructure (making existing routes fit for purpose)
 - School meals – do children like them and do they meet diverse needs
 - Childrens playgrounds
 - Public health – how to help people stay out of hospital and healthier.
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- School budgets
 - SEND provision/funding
 - Pupil place planning
 - Preparation for falling pupil numbers.

Question 13: How would you rate the support provided by the scrutiny team?

- Always helpful, prompt feedback and efficient distribution of papers. Thank you
- They are professional, effective and approachable.
- Stella is superb.
- Documents could be circulated earlier so we have enough time to go through them. Especially combining it with a full-time job means there is not enough time to go through them all.
- Too soon to judge.
- Need to work with Dem Services to prevent timetable clashes but always responsive.
- Stella is very supportive and responsive to my scrutiny needs.
- Improvements:
 - Reports sent over at least 2 weeks in advance of the meeting.
 - More-in person visits to service providers or testimonials from service users/beneficiaries.

Question 14. Please provide any specific feedback or comments on the support offered by the scrutiny team.

- Approachable and caring
- The support given by the scrutiny team is very helpful
- Too soon to judge
- This form should be completed as an online form
- Stella and Rosie do a sterling job, covering off so many committees and task groups. On task groups it may be helpful to have information sent to panel members sooner by email. Scrutiny officers need backing up by the relevant departmental managers when seeking external guests/info when panels have asked for this.
- Don't get notification of committee papers a week in advance. Don't get notification of committee meeting online a week in advance. Need time to read the papers (health).

List of proposed action points

1. The feedback from this survey is the basis for the scrutiny improvement plan. The Commission may wish to suggest ways to increase the response rate to this survey, in order to gather the views from as many councillors as possible.
2. Two successful councillor led reviews took place in 2022-23. Commission could agree that Panels can commission Councillors led reviews as appropriate.
3. Commission to agree that Scrutiny officers work with the Panel to identify suitable experts to attend meetings as witnesses for the topic being scrutinised.
4. Any specific feedback from members on how the performance of the scrutiny team could be improved would be gratefully received by the Policy and Scrutiny Manager.
5. The Scrutiny team will put forward a suggested programme of training for scrutiny councillors based on the responses received.

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