



Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

**Scrutiny**  
Improvement  
Review

April 2023



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Althea Loderick  
Chief Executive  
Southwark Council

Dear Althea,

### **Scrutiny Improvement Review – CfGS consultancy support**

I am writing to thank you for inviting the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to carry out an evaluation of the London Borough of Southwark's scrutiny function. This letter provides feedback on our review findings and offers suggestions on how the Council could develop its scrutiny process.

As part of this feedback stage, we would like to facilitate a workshop with Members and Officers to reflect on this review and to discuss options for improvement.

### **Background to the review**

CfGS undertook a review of these scrutiny arrangements, involving evidence gathering in person and online through conversations with Members and Officers on 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> September and 31<sup>st</sup> October 2022.

CfGS met with elected Members and Officers, including the Council Leader and Cabinet Members, the Scrutiny Committee/Commission Chairs, Scrutiny Members, and the Council's senior leadership team.

Southwark Council currently operates an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and four Commissions:

- The Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission
- The Environment and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission
- The Housing and Community Safety Scrutiny Commission
- The Health and Social Care Scrutiny Commission

The Council was also part of the Our Healthier South East London Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee at the time the review was undertaken.

We also completed a short literature review of key documents including the Constitution, the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, the Corporate Plan, the emerging Borough Plan, scrutiny work programmes, agendas, minutes and recommendations from a range of scrutiny reports. In addition we observed past Scrutiny Committee meetings online.

The review was conducted by:

- Paul Cutler – Associate, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Sarah Parry-Jones - Associate, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Review oversight – Ian Parry – Head of Consultancy CfGS

The findings and recommendations presented in this letter are intended to advise Southwark Council in strengthening the quality of scrutiny activities, increasing the impact of its outputs, and through its Members, to develop a strong and shared understanding of the role and capability of the scrutiny function.

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## Summary of findings

### 1. Scrutiny has the conditions for success

- 1.1 It is readily apparent that scrutiny has a good foundation in Southwark. Members and Officers engaged enthusiastically with the review and offered many insights and suggestions for the development of local processes. Members spoke of their confidence to participate in scrutiny activities. They are willing to pose independent and challenging questions. This is supported by a review of documentation, minutes, and reports.
- 1.2 When asked to explore the purpose of scrutiny in Southwark there was broad consensus. All groups were able to identify the following themes:
- Independent member-led exploration of key issues
  - Accountability
  - Critical friend challenge
  - Promoting the voice of residents and the needs of communities in the borough
  - Having a measurable and demonstrable impact that improves and adds value to the provision of local services
  - Exploring alternative approaches for service delivery and Council priorities
  - Transparency
  - Strengthening local democracy
- 1.3 Interpersonal relationships are largely positive. They work best when based on behaviours founded on mutual respect and values. A key unifier for individuals across the political spectrum is the explicit commitment to residents. This will prove an essential when navigating some of the more challenging aspects of scrutiny. Relationships work less well when mediated by political dynamics. A shared working agreement would help all parties explore these issues and agree ways to manage and avoid conflict.
- 1.4 A significant number of individuals have valuable scrutiny experiences beyond their current role. We were able to speak to Cabinet Members and others who had previous experience of chairing and participating in scrutiny committees. Many shared their largely positive experiences of creative forms of scrutiny, testing out different ways of working beyond the more traditional committee meetings. Officers were able to give examples of experience of scrutiny beyond Southwark, drawing on good practice from across local government. A key theme emerges of a rich set of scrutiny knowledge. These assets can help drive forward the culture of scrutiny in Southwark. The challenge is to support the sharing of this knowledge to embed it in current practice and approaches. Individuals commented that sometime opportunities from this knowledge have been missed. Issues of continuity, corporate memory and group learning are significant. Articulating 'what good looks like' and creative methods for scrutiny offers a valuable condition for success.
- 1.5 At the same time, individuals were able to identify a range of features and challenges at the personal and system levels. These will be explored throughout this report in subsequent sections. For example, there are a significant number of new Members. Some are having their first experiences of elected roles, local government and in some cases chairing a committee or commission. There are many positives as new people bring new ideas, community relationships, enthusiasm, and skills to the Council. Fresh thinking and a willingness to challenge existing ways of doing scrutiny are valued.

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However, it will be important to support the development of those joining the authority and ensure their needs are understood by colleagues and Officers.

1.6 A consistent theme during the conversations for all groups was how to enhance the position of scrutiny in a busy authority with a fast pace of decision-making and diverse needs across the different wards. This was frequently posed as building a parity of esteem. This positions scrutiny as an essential component of the democratic function in the Council. Scrutiny is therefore an active partner in delivering effective, high quality and responsive services. This can raise awareness of scrutiny for Members who are not directly involved in specific Commissions. At times these factors may, albeit unintentionally, reduce the status of scrutiny alongside other parts of Council business.

1.7 The report presents a range of recommendations based on evidence gathering and analysis. Some are incremental and process based. There are also wider strategic opportunities that can enable Southwark to build this parity of esteem and impact of the scrutiny function. Many of these recommendations have already been identified in internal discussions and some captured in documents such as the annual report of the Overview and Scrutiny committee. In many cases work has already commenced to drive scrutiny forward. There is an appetite amongst Members and Officers to achieve this. We hope that this analysis will give further encouragement and support for this journey.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 1:** Strengthen collaborative relationships between scrutiny, Cabinet and Directors whilst maintaining the independence of scrutiny. Earlier and more systematic involvement of portfolio holders and Directors would enable scrutiny to identify issues, trends, and topics where it can focus for accountability and impact.
- **Recommendation 2:** Enable the scrutiny team to take a more strategic role in managing the relationships between different parts of the Council. This offers further opportunities to raise the profile and impact of scrutiny.

Further ways to enhance and improve scrutiny:

- Developing a working agreement between Members and Officers to strengthen collaborative relationships, clarify mutual expectations and manage potential areas of conflict.
- Using benchmarking and share good practice case studies to promote examples of 'what good scrutiny looks like' to inform reviews and design challenge questions.

**2. Officer support and organisational culture**

2.1 The scrutiny team is valued and appreciated across the Council. They have developed good working relationships with Members and Chairs of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Commissions. The practical and administrative support they provide is considered good quality.

2.2 The Head of Scrutiny is particularly well regarded across the Council and is seen as a trusted and valued colleague. The current focus of the scrutiny team is balanced towards supporting the smooth administration of the scrutiny function. This has partly been a response to adapting working practices during the Covid pandemic. Later in this

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section we will highlight opportunities to support a shift to a more strategic focus and facilitate wider relationships with the Cabinet and Officers.

- 2.3 The organisational culture in Southwark has a good foundation and there is evidence of mutual respect and appreciation of the roles of Officers and Members. Officers are willing to support scrutiny by providing advice, information and participating in sessions. Officers were keen to articulate their neutral and non-political obligations to good decision-making in Southwark, based on evidence and data. They recognise that scrutiny is an important element in holding them to account. Several Officers felt that good scrutiny can enhance their work as it provides challenge and critical thinking. Officers are mindful to prevent poor experiences of scrutiny that can be overly personalised and damage respect between Officers and Members.
- 2.4 The political dimension of scrutiny is an important consideration. Scrutiny works best when Committees can work towards consensus. Officers and Members felt it was important to address these issues more explicitly. Learning from previous CfGS reviews identifies the development of mature cross-party relationships as a key component of effective scrutiny. Themes include:
- The value of listening to alternative viewpoints and opposition voices
  - The importance of independent challenge and accountability for residents
  - Creating working relationships on both the individual and group level on the Committee and Commissions to get the most from all the Members
  - Agreeing ways to manage disagreements in a constructive way that can minimise conflict and promote positive behaviours
  - The risks to trust and co-working when these issues are not addressed in an open way
- 2.5 Whilst there is a good understanding of scrutiny amongst the most senior Directors and Officers in the Council there is feedback that the wider officer group may benefit from further training and development in this area. Some Officers may not have had the opportunity to explore the principles and role of scrutiny. This includes the legislative and statutory underpinnings of the function and the expectations of participating in evidence gathering and accountability sessions. Some Officers may have had previous negative experience of engaging with scrutiny (including in other authorities) and this may influence their appreciation of the function. Development support for Officers can build the esteem for scrutiny and outline the needs of scrutiny for focused information, advice, and scoping support. Drawing on examples of good practice and ways of working can also support the development of stronger working relationships between the scrutiny team and the wider officer group. Conversations during this review indicate that this would be welcomed by Officers.
- 2.6 Minutes of scrutiny meetings are detailed and thorough. However, they appear to take up a significant amount of officer time as they take a very comprehensive approach to how the meetings are recorded. We would recommend an exploration of different ways of capturing the essential components of meetings in a streamline way that meets expectations and the needs of the accountability process. Developing and presenting effective summaries, both verbally during the meetings and in the written format of the minutes offers one option to streamline this process. Linking the minutes to the scoping and key lines of enquiry also can ensure the information captured during the meetings is aligned to the purpose of the session. Video records are also available for each session.

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- 2.7 Evidence and information are usually available for scrutiny. Officers appear to work hard to provide reports and material to support the work of the committee and commissions. This is reflected in the scrutiny reports which reference a wide range of information and evidence. However, there are a range of challenges identified by Members and Officers that could be addressed by articulating the needs and expectations of both groups to produce a shared working agreement.
- 2.8 These include:
- Ensuring reports are focused on the agenda item and topic under consideration. Officers commented that without clear guidance on the scope and focus of scrutiny agendas it is challenging to tailor the information to the scrutiny focus.
  - Managing the size of reports to ensure useability
  - Ensuring the timely production of reports and information to ensure Members have sufficient preparation and reading time
  - Managing changing expectations or realignment of key lines of enquiry as a scrutiny review progresses
  - Accessing information from a range of different parts of the Council in a coordinated and multi-departmental way – again this is partly dependent on the clarity of the scoping and design of key lines of enquiry
  - Ensuring Members are familiar with the reports before designing questions and review enquiries
- 2.9 The evolution of hybrid and IT based working as been effective and has added different opportunities for participation, public engagement and evidence collecting. Committee sessions are available to stream online. However, there is a consensus that face-to-face working offers enhanced ways to engage and work as a collective group of Members.
- 2.10 Given the strengths in Southwark, there is an opportunity to enhance the focus of the scrutiny team, empowering the Head of Scrutiny to take a greater strategic role. Conversations indicate that this would be welcomed and encouraged by senior Officers and Members.
- 2.11 Repositioning the Southwark scrutiny function would emphasise the significance of the strategic elements of the role in contrast to the operational focus of the wider scrutiny team. This could include:
- Championing the parity of esteem for scrutiny across the organisation by sharing a vision statement and promoting principles
  - Supporting the Head of Scrutiny to facilitate and broker a wider range of meetings for Scrutiny and Commission chairs with senior Officers and leaders in the Council – enabling scrutiny to have an enhanced ‘seat at the table’ as it develops its independent priorities and work planning
  - Working strategically across directorates to enable scrutiny to access cross-cutting information and insights
  - Sponsoring the development of enhanced scoping, key line of enquiry and recommendation tools
  - Articulating the purpose and added value of scrutiny for wider Council delivery
  - Focusing on trends from national policy agendas and direction to inform scrutiny
  - Highlighting wider examples of innovation and good practice for scrutiny – this can include ways to trial creative ways of working
  - Supporting Officers from other directorates to prepare for scrutiny and to align their input with the needs of the committee

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- Developing a strategic roadmap for scrutiny with a refreshed focus on impact
  - Horizon scanning

2.12 We would recommend supporting this through a development plan with the provision of further support including coaching and mentoring where appropriate. It will also be important to consider any further resourcing issues to support greater strategic working.

Organisational culture is also a product of the political context. During the review, we were able to speak to a range of Members from the main opposition party in individual interviews and group discussion. They raised several themes:

- Cross-party working between Members
- Allocation of chairing roles
- Remuneration for Commission vice-chairs
- Call-in procedures
- Transparency
- The independence of scrutiny challenge and accountability
- Focusing on residents' interests and the principles of good scrutiny

We address these throughout the report and advise that in the first instance these themes be taken forward through recommendations relating to cross-party working, work planning, pre-meetings, pre-scrutiny and the annual scrutiny review and appraisal processes.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 3:** Provide development support and training for Officers across the Council to refresh and enhance their understanding and appreciation of scrutiny.
- **Recommendation 4:** Review how reports and information is supplied to scrutiny – so that it supports the scrutiny objective, is not excessively detailed and is understandable by Members.

Establishing cross-party pre-meetings for Scrutiny Committees and Commissions offers an additional way to support this process.

### **3. Collaborative approach to scrutiny**

3.1 Members and Officers articulated a variety of diversity and demographic factors across Southwark. These included themes around age, ethnicity, homelessness, employment patterns and carer roles. It is important for scrutiny to continue to identify key lines of enquiry that can interrogate the impact of local decisions for these local groups. It is important that recommendations promote equitability of services and outcomes.

3.2 There is a commitment to engage with local partners and stakeholders to achieve this – scrutiny sees this as a powerful way to hear local voices and scrutinise the delivery of services. We looked at a range of scrutiny reports that presented a rich range of evidence and engagement with local partners in housing, education, health, and environment. This can be developed further by more systematic approaches to community engagement and the identification of local experience. Examples of good practice from other authorities can also offer examples of innovation.



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- 3.3 There is a keenness to address any potential barriers to greater collaboration including:
- Accessibility of scrutiny venues – there was interest from Members and Officers to consider different venues for evidence gathering sessions
  - Access to IT resources for virtual participation
  - Language and literacy need
  - Timings of sessions
- 3.4 Community and voluntary sector partnerships were identified as effective ways to enhance collaborations and support local people.
- 3.5 It is important to ensure good communication between different parts of the Council when engaging with local partners. Scrutiny can benefit from the networks of senior Officers and Cabinet Members to identify organisations. This advice can enable scrutiny to understand and navigate complex relationships. At the same time, keeping other parts of the Council informed of direct engagement with partners is important. This will ensure colleagues are well briefed and enhance coordination to avoid any potential difficulties.
- 3.6 There was a feeling amongst Officers that they could offer scrutiny colleagues more help with identifying local specialists and partners in Southwark. This included a greater breath of in-house expertise and in institutions located in the borough. There is a willingness to support scrutiny to map this wider range of potential partners and facilitate expert support for Members as they scope questions and enquiry lines.
- 3.7 Health scrutiny is well represented in the work of the Commission and there is evidence of interactions and relationships between the Commission and health partners. However, there are opportunities to enhance this understanding through additional training and access to best practice guides. All parties recognise that the health context is changing. It will be important for scrutiny to keep up to date with changing regulations and the development of Integrated Care Systems. At the same time, the health scrutiny work plan will need to make some strategic decisions about how it balances the voice and needs of patients and carers with wider organisational changes at the system level.
- 3.8 We were able to speak to a group of co-opted Members and education representatives who are involved in the scrutiny Commissions focusing on education, housing, and school provision. Co-opted Members can offer a valuable dimension to scrutiny, embedding local knowledge in the accountability process. Some are voting and other non-voting Members. The experience of this group was quite varied as was their length of involvement in scrutiny. All were passionate to ensure the voice of local people was included in the scrutiny work. Requests included:
- Clarifying the role and expectations of co-opted Members with reference to sections 3.1, 3.2 and 4 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules
  - Providing support and training for the co-opted role
  - Capturing their experience and contributions as part of the annual scrutiny self-appraisal
- 3.9 Members and Officers shared a range of creative and collaborative ways of working for scrutiny. These included:
- ‘Scrutiny in a day’ approaches
  - Social Return on Investment participatory scrutiny reviews

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- Field trips
  - Stakeholder mapping and scoping
  - Following a fictional service user through the system to map impacts, integration opportunities and barriers
  - Task & finish groups

3.10 There is an appetite to consider the use of creative approaches alongside the regular scrutiny meetings. It will also be important to consider any additional resourcing and scheduling issues. CfGS has a range of published resources with many creative approaches and we can signpost the scrutiny team to these.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 5:** Developing a systematic approach to mapping opportunities for community engagement and collaborative approaches including a methodology for identifying local issues for residents.

Further ways to enhance and improve scrutiny include:

- Extending the use of creative approaches to scrutiny in Southwark. Use work planning and scoping to consider the best methods for each review. Share examples of good practice and creative methods by creating a menu of different methods available to the Scrutiny Committee and Commissions.
- Supporting the co-opted Members through a refreshed support programme identifying their learning and development needs to get the most from their contributions.

#### **4. Scrutiny's focus and workplan**

4.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee and each Commission has its own independent member-led work plan. These are detailed and reflect a significant amount of thinking and prioritisation. Each work plan seeks to balance Council priorities with proactive issues as well as internal and external topics. There is also a mix of issues identified by Members. The work plans are extensive as each body seeks to ensure a watching brief on a full range of issues with a deeper examination of key priorities. As a result, individual agendas can be very busy and there are challenges to allocating sufficient time to the most important issues.

4.2 Feedback identified opportunities to strengthen the work planning process and we would recommend an incremental approach applying the following principles:

- Use a consistent work planning tool to support each body to create a balanced work plan that is manageable and logical
- Focus on key issues where scrutiny can make a significant impact for local people
- Work closely with senior Officers and Cabinet Members to understand the most challenging issues around Council delivery and outcomes
- Identify the areas where there are already robust forms of accountability and scrutiny – where possible avoid replication or where added-value is minimal
- Highlight the issues that are high priorities for resident's and that reflect their concerns
- Less is often more – focusing on two or three substantive issues in a meeting
- Link the work planning to the scoping process for specific review topics

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- 4.3 Observations and feedback highlight that scrutiny often takes a broad approach to many topics. Whilst there are virtues in considering the big picture, in many instances a more targeted and focused approach would enable greater impact and enhance accountability. Scrutiny reports are comprehensive and detailed. Reports therefore have a large spread of recommendations which may be more difficult to implement and track. There are important connections to learning from previous recommendations as scrutiny scopes new reviews. This theme is explored further in section six on impact.
- 4.4 Linked to work planning is the scoping process for individual reviews. We have seen a range of examples of scoping during this review. Officers can support Members to map a topic and identify potential issues to scrutinise. This includes appreciating the areas directly under Council control and those where there is only influence or external control. Key lines of enquiry and focused scrutiny questions can then emerge from the scoping. This will support greater targeting of challenge questions and accountability.
- 4.5 Five broad sources of evidence for scrutiny were highlighted through the discussions. Effective scrutiny needs to access, assess, and triangulate these different forms of data. From this scrutiny can form lines of enquiry and formulate recommendations:
- The voice, concerns, and experience of local people - with a focus on recognising diverse experiences and how community organisations can support this
  - The plans and decisions of senior leaders
  - Frontline experience of delivering services as encouraged by section 46d of the 2019 Statutory Guidance for Overview and Scrutiny
  - Evidence of outcomes and impact - including finance, quality, risk, and sustainability
  - A wider survey of the literature on good practice, policy frameworks and research
- 4.6 Support to design challenge questions that can highlight and probe these different sources was felt to be beneficial. Members are also keen to consider new ways to integrate frontline experiences in a proportionate and relevant way to highlight the performance and quality of services.
- 4.7 Conversations reflected on the difference between scrutinising Council performance for the benefit of accountability and the separate process of direct performance management for Officers and Cabinet Members. Further training could support Members to distinguish between these two approaches and explore skills and strategies.

Under section 5.1 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules part b states:

'...review and scrutinise the decisions made by and performance of the cabinet and council Officers both in relation to individual decisions and over time in areas covered by its terms of reference....'

- 4.8 It would be useful to clarify that this does not refer to the managerial process of performance management but rather the wider non-executive scrutiny function around accountability for performance and delivery. Conversations indicate that the boundary between these two processes are not always clear. It may result in some Members misconstruing scrutiny as a mechanism for the performance management of individuals.
- 4.9 The annual accountability session for Cabinet Members at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is seen as a valuable way to connect the committee with the full range of portfolios across the Council. The importance given to this meeting is felt to signify the

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status of the scrutiny function in Southwark. It also enables the Chairs of the Commissions to align their work with the wider strategic context including issues of policy, delivery, finance, and risk. As Members reflected on these sessions it was felt that strengthening the focus of each engagement would enable Cabinet Members to prepare effectively and enable the Committee to get the best from each set of questions.

- 4.10 Pre-decision scrutiny enables Members to engage with topics proactively. Recommendations can have impact when they influence and enhance decision making. Pre-decision scrutiny can contribute to longer-term policy development, workstreams, scheduled decision-making timetables and even more urgent short-term issues. Members have identified pre-scrutiny as an important goal across the Commissions and the Committee. Effective pre-scrutiny therefore needs joined-up collaboration with Cabinet and other decision-makers to agree a formal process. Work is already being developed in Southwark to introduce more pre-scrutiny. CfGS has a range of case studies and guidance around pre-decision scrutiny to support this process. Scrutiny will benefit from using prioritisation tools to create a balanced work plan of pre-scrutiny, post decision scrutiny and wider strategic topics.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 6:** Review and enhance work planning process for the Committee and the Commissions, building on current practice by using insights from this review. Consider the systematic use of work planning tools to assist with prioritising issues.
- **Recommendation 7:** Use member education sessions, masterclasses, and pre-briefing to support Members to be ready to engage with scrutiny topics and Council plans.

Further ways to enhance and improve scrutiny:

- Continuing to develop an approach to pre-decision scrutiny in collaboration with Cabinet and Officers.
- Supporting Members to design effective challenge questions using triangulated evidence and data to enhance accountability.

## **5. Scrutiny committee structure and scheduling**

- 5.1 The current structure of one Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its four Commissions is felt to be working effectively. The Committee enables the Chairs of the Commissions to come together to scrutinise wider Council business including the Corporate Plan, finance, and human resources issues. The Commissions also hold the key statutory briefs for issues such as health scrutiny. There is also a separate Our Healthier Southeast London Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee.
- 5.2 The Commissions are given significant autonomy in their work planning with the opportunity to report directly to Cabinet. This is felt to work well and encourages delegated leadership. Support and advice are provided by the Committee Chair to the Commission Chairs.

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- 5.3 Several individuals queried the original underlying vision for the Commissions when they were first established. Some felt that the Commissions were initially seen as task & finish groups for the Committee but over time had taken on a more overarching role for their thematic areas. Whilst this is only of historical interest at this point it does raise the issue of other formats for undertaking elements of scrutiny work such as deep dives on issues. The Southwark model does not currently use separate task & finish groups for any of its scrutiny work. The Council may wish to consider this approach as part of a wider spectrum of creative methods.
- 5.4 Frequency and scheduling of scrutiny meetings is felt to be effective. There is a recognition of the scale of the scrutiny workload. Effective work planning, prioritisation, member education sessions and pre-meetings are important tools in managing these demands.
- 5.5 CfGS takes the view that there are a range of possible committee structures that can deliver effective scrutiny. What is most significant is the culture, processes, and behaviours in which the structure operates. We would not advise any substantive changes to the current structures in Southwark.
- 5.6 A few Members and Officers raised the issue of the call-in process for the reconsideration of specific decisions prior to implementation. Across the political spectrum it was felt that call-in can be important process. Though only to be used exceptionally, it is available to consider the impact of decisions for residents including the needs of different demographics and specific wards. We looked at the regulations under section 17 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules as part of this. Three themes were identified:
- The relatively low number of call-ins for decisions
  - The threshold for making a call-in as structured under section 17.4 is reserved for Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and requires three Members
  - The decision criteria for reviewing call-in requests and how they are processed based on the content and detail of the challenge
- 5.7 CfGS is currently undertaking a review programme on the topic of call-in. This includes benchmarking practice across England and sharing practical experiences from Members and Officers. We will be producing some refreshed guidance. We recommend that Southwark draws on this work when complete to consider any learning that could enhance the local call-in procedure. This could include additional training and a strategic consideration of the purpose of call-in for the Council.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 8:** Consider the use of task and finish group work and other alternative scrutiny arrangements to ensure the most effective use of time and resources and to deliver maximum impact.
- **Recommendation 9:** Review the call-in procedure based on benchmarking and examples of good practice.

**6. Scrutiny's output and impact**

- 6.1 Scrutiny reports currently produce a wide range of recommendations. These can vary from detailed action points to wider policy topics, process changes, underpinning principles and learning themes.

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6.2 There is evidence of good dialogue and responses from Cabinet on recommendations, many of which are accepted and approved. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also provides a yearly report to the Council Assembly.

6.3 It is important to develop effective recommendations and track their impact. Key features identified during the review included:

- Focusing recommendations on a small set of priorities - this is more effective than having a long list that is not prioritised
- Ensuring recommendations are clearly articulated and are focused using SMART approaches (specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timetabled)
- Testing draft recommendations with Officers to ensure issues are understood and are factually correct
- Reviewing the impact and learning from recommendations over set time periods through regular agenda items
- Revisiting previous scrutiny reviews to identify work that has already been done to inform future scrutiny
- Ensuring a clear protocol with Cabinet to agree the process for considering and responding to scrutiny recommendations
- Where applicable, to share recommendations with external partners such as health bodies
- Collecting additional evidence and feedback to identify the impact of recommendations

Designing effective recommendations enables scrutiny to identify impact.

6.4 Evidence of tracking recommendations is currently dispersed across a range of documents including minutes, reports, work plans, scoping and agendas. A central tracking tool would support Scrutiny to maintain an overview of recommendations and enhance accountability.

6.5 Cross-cutting issues such as the wider determinants of health have real impact on residents' lives and can extend beyond the remit of each Commission. Taking a joined-up systems wide approach to cross-cutting issues is important. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is well placed to consider these types of issues as its Membership includes the chairs of each Commission.

6.6 Several individuals raised the possibility of presenting the purpose of scrutiny in Southwark through a short centralising document such as a mission statement, plan-on-a-page or theory of change. It was felt that a strategic statement would be beneficial in raising awareness and esteem for the scrutiny process. A range of possible tools are available to demonstrate the way scrutiny is embedded in the democratic process and how impact adds value for local people and service delivery. Taking a collaborative approach to developing this statement offers a practical opportunity for scrutiny to work strategically with a wider group of Cabinet Members, Officers, and stakeholders.

6.7 It is important that scrutiny can hold itself to account for its work and impact. Modelling good practice can set expectations for ways of working to promote a culture of accountability. Applying the principles of challenge to how it uses its time and resources most effectively.

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6.8 Southwark already has a process of annual review and produces an annual report to capture learning from the scrutiny activities. Additional self-assessment tools are available from CfGS to support this process. This could include a training needs assessment and exploration of templates and good practice examples.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 10:** Focus on smaller sets of high-quality recommendations from scrutiny reviews.

Further ways to enhance and improve scrutiny:

- Enhance the formal system for tracking recommendations over time – identify the impact and learning from specific recommendations as well as factors that produce effective recommendations.
- Consider cross-cutting issues as a regular part of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee work plan and agenda, bringing together strategic themes from across the four Commissions to identify opportunities for system wide working and accountability.
- Create a strategic summary statement on the purpose and contribution of scrutiny in Southwark. Use this to map impact.
- Use a self-assessment tool to support the annual review and evaluation of scrutiny.

## **7. Chairing, member development and meeting preparation**

7.1 The role of Chair is crucial to the effective delivery of scrutiny. It is the key leadership role. The tasks are complex and multifaceted with the need to manage the group, the meetings, relationships and set a vision for the culture of scrutiny across the Council.

7.2 During the review we spoke with the five Chairs and four Vice-chairs of the Committee and Commissions. We also observed Chair performance during streamed meetings.

7.3 The Chairs report good working relationships with Officers and support for their role.

7.4 Chairing is generally felt to be effective and inclusive. Most Members felt they were given opportunities to contribute to meetings. As expected, there is with some variation in style based on general approach and experience. Summary skills were felt to be very important to synthesise the discussions and identify next steps for the review. Linking these summaries to the scoping and key lines of enquiry offers a structure for this. Continuous chair development and direct support is essential to strengthening the role. This will be important as scrutiny explores new creative approaches to reviews.

7.5 Each of the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee and the four Commission chairs all come from the majority party. The vice-chairs of the four commissions each come from the opposition. Interpersonal relations between the chairs and vice-chairs are reported to be positive.

7.6 A few Officers and Members have raised the issue of chairing roles and opposition roles. Whilst recognising the virtues of independent challenge the broad CfGS view is that the role of chair is best allocated based on skillset and ability to fulfil the role. One of the key functions of an effective chair is to then ensure that a range of voices are

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heard and engaged in the Committee to promote effective challenge and accountability.

- 7.7 Member education and background briefings on key issues is essential for effective scrutiny. It is important to ensure Members are supported to understand the wider policy and decision-making frameworks before engaging in the actual scrutiny meetings. Member education, 'master classes' and briefing sessions outside the formal scrutiny sessions are the most effective way to achieve this and ensure that limited scrutiny time in the Committee and Commissions is used for questions and enquiry rather than education. Education sessions can sit alongside more formal scrutiny skills training as referenced earlier in the report. Using the scoping and work planning tools to identify and schedule briefing sessions can help to forward plan the needs of scrutiny across the year. Officers have indicated they would be very receptive to requests for these types of sessions.
- 7.8 Pre-meetings before the formal scrutiny sessions are a valuable way for the Chair and Members to coordinate their activities. Scrutiny is most effective when the group understands the purpose of the session and has prepared questions based on the scoping and key lines of enquiry for the topic. Pre-meetings also enable the group to self-manage their dynamics and provide a space for urgent or new issues. This can provide inclusive opportunities for cross-party working. Members also report that pre-meetings can help build individual confidence as they prepare for their role during the public meetings.
- 7.9 Scrutiny training has been well received in the past. Members found the following topics useful:
- Designing scrutiny questions
  - Building collaborative relationships
  - Developing a work plan
  - Exploring case studies of effective scrutiny reviews
  - Writing recommendations
- 7.10 Further training has been requested to revisit these areas plus financial scrutiny and working with data and evidence. It was also felt that refreshing member knowledge on the principles, statutory framework and procedures would be helpful.

**We recommend:**

- **Recommendation 11:** Further skills development support is offered for the key roles of Chairs and Vice-Chairs – to support them to develop their approach to leading scrutiny and to reflect on their personal style and learning

Further ways to enhance and improve scrutiny:

- Extending the development process for Members to enable them to refresh their knowledge and understanding of the role of scrutiny – this should include learning activities such as workshops supported with materials and case studies
- Use pre-meetings to prepare for scrutiny sessions by reviewing the key lines of enquiry and coordinating approaches to questions and evidence. Pre-meetings can facilitate teamwork between Members of the Committee or Commission.



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- Provide Scrutiny Members with the essential core knowledge to be sufficiently effective in the scrutiny task through briefings, education sessions or ‘master classes’ for complex topics.

## **8. Public engagement**

- 8.1 Scrutiny should explore and experiment with ways to allow greater access, openness, and involvement with the public. This could include scrutiny going on more site visits in the community, inviting the public to offer ideas for work plans, and greater use of social media channels for resident input and communicating the progress and impact of scrutiny work.

## **Thank you and acknowledgements**

We would like to thank the Chair, Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the four Scrutiny Commissions, Cabinet Members and Officers who took part in interviews for their time, insights and open views.

Yours sincerely,

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