



Final report of the Improving Scrutiny Task and Finish Group



July 2024

Overview and Scrutiny



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1. Chair's introduction

Local government, both here in Lewisham and across the UK, has experienced significant changes and challenges over recent years – and is likely to experience still more in the years to come.

Significant reform to how the services Lewisham residents rely on are delivered, coupled with increasing financial pressure have transformed the operation of this Council at the same time that demand for services has grown and local government is asked to play an increasingly important role in some of the biggest issues society faces, from the climate crisis to our ageing population.

Across each of these areas and more, the decisions that the Council makes matter, and will profoundly impact the lives of people who live and work in Lewisham for potentially decades to come. Getting those decisions right is vital – getting them right requires good decision-making, and good decision-making requires effective scrutiny.

Member scrutiny has a vital role in supporting the executive to get the best outcomes and ultimately the best value for our residents and communities. As democratically elected members, councillors have a vital role in holding the executive to account for the decisions it makes on behalf of the residents those decisions impact, and ensuring that they are empowered to scrutinise effectively is critical to residents having confidence that the Council is accountable to them.

The work of the Improving Scrutiny Task & Finish Group has built upon the work of the Lewisham Democracy Review and previous reviews of the Overview & Scrutiny function at the Council, as well as a recognition of the need to re-focus scrutiny in practice on the core objective of supporting the delivery of Lewisham Council's corporate strategy.

We have consulted extensively both within Lewisham Council and with other scrutiny authorities in London to understand what Lewisham is already doing well and where improvements to scrutiny can be made, to ensure member scrutiny is playing its full role in supporting the executive to get decisions right.

Our recommendations focus on learning from and implementing best practice from other scrutiny authorities to supplement the work of scrutiny in Lewisham and improve the participation in, performance of and impact of elected members in scrutiny. Wherever possible, we have avoided recommendations that would require constitutional change to implement, recognising that significant improvements can be made at the discretion of scrutiny committees and members.

I believe that, if implemented, these recommendations will provide a clearer purpose for scrutiny at Lewisham Council, modernise and improve how elected members are involved in it, and give residents confidence that councillors involved in scrutiny are making a real and positive difference to their lives.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the Task & Finish Group – Councillors James Rathbone, Sian Eiles, Mark Ingleby and Aliyah Sheikh – for the substantial amount of work they have put in to gathering evidence as part of this work, to the senior officers and other elected members at Lewisham Council who contributed to this process and to the other scrutiny authorities who graciously gave up their time so that we could learn from them. Finally, I would like to thank the scrutiny officer who supported this group, Timothy Andrew, for his excellent stewardship of the group and his work on this report.

Cllr Mark Jackson
Chair, Improving Scrutiny Task & Finish Group

2. The role of the Task and Finish Group

- 2.1. The purpose of the Improving Scrutiny Task and Finish Group (TFG) was to explore... 'How we (could) improve scrutiny at Lewisham: participation, performance, and outcomes'¹
- 2.2. The outline proposal for this task and finish group and its membership were put forward by Councillor Jackson – and agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting in July 2023².
- 2.3. The Group had its first meeting in September 2023³ – at which it considered a scoping report and timetable. This established the context and background for this piece of work - as well as further defining its purpose. Members agreed the following key lines of enquiry:

Influence

- How can scrutiny more effectively engage with cabinet and officers at the pre-decision stage of policy making?
- How should scrutiny chairs be made aware of upcoming issues and priorities for directorates?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that effective prioritisation of work programmes is taking place?

Collaboration

- How best can a constructive two-way relationship with Mayor and Cabinet be developed and maintained?
- How best can communication between cabinet members and scrutiny members be facilitated?
- How should cabinet priorities and plans be shared?
- Are any changes needed to the scrutiny – executive protocol?

Impact

- How might the processes for following up on requests for information, the implementation of recommendations and responses to formal referrals be made more transparent?
- How should scrutiny publicise the outcome of its work?
- What happens when there is disagreement about the implementation of recommendations?

Effectiveness

- What skills do scrutiny councillors need to carry out their roles effectively?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure that committees are implementing good practice?
- What options are available to members to increase their opportunities to hear from residents and community groups?

¹ [Link to the Improving Scrutiny TFG proforma submitted by Councillors to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee](#)

² [Link to the agenda of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee July 2023](#)

³ [Link to the agenda for the Improving Scrutiny Task and Finish Group September 2023](#)

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. The Task and Finish Group recognises that there are areas of both good quality and poor practice in Lewisham. Engagement with members, officers and stakeholders indicates a dissatisfaction with some obsolete (though long established) ways of working.
- 3.2. The Group's recommendations provide the opportunity to renew scrutiny in Lewisham, based on a cohesive and unambiguous sense of purpose. That is – to advance the delivery of the Council's corporate strategy. Accordingly, to deliver on this ambition, scrutiny processes and practices will need to align with the structures and functions of the Council overall. In addition, there will need to be regular opportunities to review, refine and re-direct scrutiny's purpose.

Recommendation 1:

The Task and Finish Group recommends that there be an annual 'scrutiny summit' at the beginning of the municipal year. This would provide the opportunity to review the previous year's work. It could also provide the opportunity for member training sessions and the discussion of proposals for new task and finish groups. The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny might also use this opportunity to set out the priorities for scrutiny in the year ahead.

At the annual scrutiny summit (and leading up to it) members should explore and discuss topics for investigation and suggest whether they see them working best as part of the work programme of a specific select committee - or whether they would be more effective as a task and finish group.

Influence

Recommendation 2:

Consideration should be given to the development of a high-level programme for the implementation of the corporate strategy over the course of the year. This could then be communicated to scrutiny – in order to inform the development of the annual work programmes and prioritisation process.

Recommendation 3:

Each scrutiny committee should have an identified Cabinet Member and Executive Director with whom they coordinate their work. Meetings between the Chair, Cabinet Member and Executive Director should occur at least quarterly to discuss priorities, review the forward plan of key decisions, and to consider where scrutiny might best add value. In the case of Overview and Scrutiny this should be the Mayor and Chief Executive. This is linked to (and dependent on) the implementation of recommendation five (below).

Recommendation 4:

Committees should focus on the implementation of the corporate strategy, removing items that are 'to note' from work programmes (where there is no opportunity for influence) and instead hold informal briefings for topics of interest. The approved scrutiny prioritisation process¹⁷ is a tool that can be used to support this work.

Collaboration

Recommendation 5:

Consideration should be given to ensuring that scrutiny resources and committee time is assigned appropriately in the context of the changing duties and structure of the Council. Committees' terms of reference should be realigned with the Council's corporates priorities and current directorates.

Recommendation 6:

In the 2024-25 municipal year, committees should trial an additional online meeting to

receive briefings, updates, and items 'to note' – which are of interest to members/further their understanding of relevant issues but where there is no opportunity for influence. The approved scrutiny prioritisation process¹⁷ is a tool that can be used to support this work.

Recommendation 7

In future years, early consideration should be given to the availability of resources and officer time to facilitate an appropriate number of committee meetings. The Task and Finish Group invites Members to consider the following options:

- A. Reducing the number of select committees from six to five to accommodate an additional formal meeting for each of the remaining select committees (30 formal select committee meetings per year) Plus six task and finish group meetings and up to nine meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (three formal and six for call-in)
= 39 formal meetings (plus six for call-in)
- B. Reducing the number of Task and Finish Groups running at any one time from three to two – whilst retaining six select committees and increasing the number of formal meetings to six per committee (36 formal select committee meetings per year) Plus four task and finish group meetings and up to nine meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (three formal and six for call-in)
= 43 formal meetings (plus six for call-in)
- C. Retaining the existing committee structure with five formal meetings per year, retaining three concurrent task and finish groups and (pending the outcome of the pilot (recommendation 6) hold an additional online meeting to accommodate briefings, information items and reports 'to note' (30 formal select committee meetings per year) Plus six task and finish group meetings and up to nine meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee (three formal and six for call-in)
= 39 formal meetings (plus six for call-in and six programmed online meetings)

Impact

Recommendation 8

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee should consider options for a standardised approach to action tracking and implementation.

Recommendation 9

Scrutiny should continue to produce an annual report.

Effectiveness

Recommendation 10

Member attendance at training and skills workshops should be an expectation. As a minimum – all members should attend skills training sessions at the annual scrutiny summit.

Recommendation 11

Select Committee Chairs should be invited to address the annual scrutiny summit – setting out the effectiveness of their committees over the previous year. This should include key indicators of committee performance in the previous year – including average finish times, items actioned and referrals to Mayor and Cabinet.

Recommendation 12

Cabinet members should be invited to address the annual scrutiny summit – their address should include their priorities for the delivery of the corporate strategy in the coming year.

4. Context

Lewisham's Corporate Strategy

- 4.1. The corporate strategy⁴ lists the Council's values, priorities and focus for the years 2022-2026:
- Cleaner and Greener
 - Strong Local Economy
 - Quality Housing
 - Children and Young People
 - Safer Communities
 - Open Lewisham
 - Health and Wellbeing
- 4.2. The work of the Task and Finish Group relates to all these priorities – given that Overview and Scrutiny considers issues within the whole of the Council's work and focuses on the needs and wellbeing of all of Lewisham's residents.
- 4.3. The Council adopted the corporate strategy in November 2023. This followed from a period of development with senior officers and members. The strategy also drew on the outcomes of the most recent resident and staff surveys.
- 4.4. Performance against the Council's priorities is tracked through the corporate performance report⁵. This outlines how the Council's services are performing and indicates the direction of travel for key indicators. The quarterly reports are a useful source of information for members of scrutiny committees to consider.

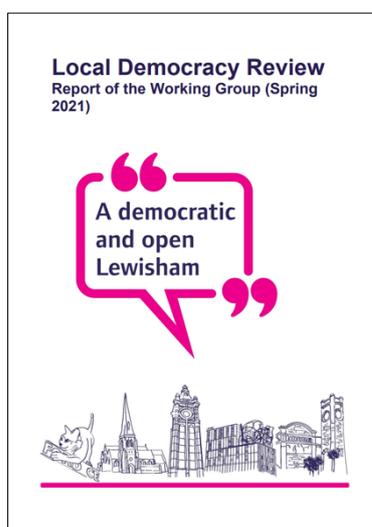


⁴ [Corporate Strategy for 2022-2026](#)

⁵ <https://lewisham.gov.uk/mayorandcouncil/aboutthecouncil/performance/corporate-performance-report>

The Democracy Review (2018)

- 4.5. Mayor Egan proposed a review of Lewisham's democratic processes and decision making as part of his election platform in 2018. The review was intended to consider how residents could become more involved in decision making – and to explore how to make the Council more open and transparent.
- 4.6. In July 2018, the Council set up a working group consisting of eight councillors to conduct the review. This group was tasked with making recommendations to Council about how the Mayor and Council could:
- enhance its openness and transparency.
 - increase public involvement in Council decisions.
 - promote effective decision making.
- 4.7. In addition to an online questionnaire completed by over seven hundred respondents, members of the working group spoke to thousands of residents at 40 community events across the borough and took evidence from local democracy experts.



- 4.8. The Working Group produced a report⁶ with a series of 57 recommendations, including a number that related directly to scrutiny – advising that:
- A further review should be carried out to identify the best structure and approach for overview and scrutiny to increase its impact and effectiveness whilst reducing the current comprehensive time commitments for all non-executive councillors. This should be inclusive of a greater focus on policy development through ‘task and finish’ in-depth review work and should give consideration to the separation of policy development from scrutiny of performance and decisions; not all nonexecutive councillors should be required to be on a scrutiny committee to allow a greater flexibility of approach and focus, and a fairer distribution of the workload across all councillors’ various roles and responsibilities. The revised structure should be ready for implementation at the Council AGM in 2020.
- 4.9. It was also recommended that:
- Whilst the review of Overview and Scrutiny structure and approach is underway, Overview and Scrutiny should operate within its current constitutional arrangements but with a greater focus on early and pre-decision scrutiny, and community engagement where possible.

⁶ Local democracy review report - <https://lewisham.gov.uk/-/media/files/localdemocracyreviewreport.ashx>

Overview and Scrutiny review (2020)

- 4.10. Councillors Juliet Campbell and Sakina Sheikh were tasked with taking forward the recommendations relating to overview and scrutiny. The scope of this work was provided for in the recommendations and included reviewing:
- The impact of scrutiny
 - The effectiveness of scrutiny
 - Ensuring a reduced time commitment for members
 - Promoting policy development through task and finish
 - Considering the separation of policy development from the scrutiny of performance and decisions
- 4.11. This work was overseen by the (then) Chair of Overview and Scrutiny and considered benchmarking information and desktop research. As part of this work, officers spoke to colleagues and gathered information from all of London's 31 other boroughs regarding their scrutiny arrangements.
- 4.12. The sub-group considered guidance from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and - in addition, councillors requested a summary of every submission and response to each formal referral to Mayor and Cabinet from 2016-2019⁷.
- 4.13. The Group met on a number of occasions to discuss the evidence gathered and to ensure that their work aligned with the recommendations of the Democracy Review. As a result of this work, three options for the future of scrutiny were proposed – each was intended to meet the recommendations set out in the Democracy Review – and to reduce the extensive time commitment for members at evening meetings.
- 4.14. The proposals presented a range of options – from fundamentally altering the structure of scrutiny and refining its purpose – to adjusting the existing arrangements and adding additional options for members to engage in pre-decision scrutiny.
- 4.15. Ultimately, it was decided that the structure of scrutiny should remain relatively unchanged with a reduction in the number of formal committee meetings and the potential to create task and finish groups (such as this) to carry out investigations and policy development.

Constitution Review (2022-23)⁸

- 4.16. In Spring 2022, the Constitution Working Party agreed that the constitution should be updated and modernised. The Director of Law and Corporate Governance proceeded with a desktop review of the existing arrangements – in comparison with good practice and other London authorities. As part of the review officers considered the composition of overview and scrutiny committees, (their size and membership) in all the other London Boroughs.
- 4.17. Proposals for changes to the number of members sitting on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee – to align with good practice – and a number of constitutional amendments to clarify the special responsibility allowances available, the functions of the revised Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the relationship between scrutiny and the executive were agreed.
- 4.18. More detailed changes, including proposals to amend the number of select committees – and to align terms of reference with directorates - were not tabled, pending further consultation with members.

⁷ This entailed the review and documentation of 84 separate referrals from scrutiny committees to the Executive over this period.

⁸ [Report to the constitution working party: constitution review phase 2, March 2023](#)

Officer – member scrutiny survey (2023)

- 4.19. The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny initiated three surveys in the Spring of 2023 to gather feedback from cabinet members, senior officers, and scrutiny members. A range of questions were included about the functions of scrutiny and on the relationship between the officers, the cabinet, and scrutiny committees.
- 4.20. The surveys were open for several weeks – with reminders sent to officers and to members of scrutiny inviting them to participate. Responses to the survey varied in their approach to the key issues and it would be challenging to draw any firm conclusions from the information gathered. The ability to generalise is also limited by the small number of responses.

Improving Scrutiny Task and Finish Group: achieving consensus (2024)

- 4.21. In the context of previous reviews, revisions, and recommendations for the improvement of the scrutiny function, one of the key challenges for the Task and Finish Group was to bring forward a shared vision for improvement.
- 4.22. The Group's early discussions focused on the need to create an environment in which all members had the ability to engage in – and influence – the outcome of the Task and Finish Group's work.
- 4.23. At its initial meeting – the Task and Finish Group agreed to broadly follow the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny framework for improving scrutiny. The framework outlines a five-step process for examining scrutiny practice and implementing new ways of working:
1. Taking stock
 2. Identifying what scrutiny's role is
 3. Ways of working and accessing information
 4. Agreeing a new structural model
 5. Ongoing review and evaluation



- 4.24. The framework process begins with the development of a set of key 'design principles' to focus effort and to avoid the evaluation becoming limited by considerations about governance structures. The Task and Finish Group members agreed that their key lines of enquiry would serve this function – under the headings: influence, collaboration, impact, and effectiveness.

5. Key findings

Taking stock: definitions and discoveries

- 5.1. The first phase of the GfGS framework approach entails ‘taking stock’ of existing practice. These questions were put forward by the CfGS to guide this process:
1. How are scrutiny councillors involved in influencing major decisions?
 2. Do different people with a role in holding decision-makers to account (like scrutiny, audit, local Healthwatch, the Safer Neighbourhood Board and the Positive Ageing Council) work together?
 3. How well does scrutiny gather evidence?
 4. How does scrutiny weigh the evidence that it has collected?
 5. How is performance, finance and risk information considered as a part of the evidence gathering process?
 6. What is the tangible impact that scrutiny activity has on the ground?
 7. What happens when decision-makers disagree with scrutiny?
 8. When scrutiny makes formal recommendations, how are they responded to?
 9. What happens when things go wrong?
- 5.2. A survey posing these questions was open for three weeks in September/October 2023. Councillor Jackson wrote to all members, inviting them to take part in the survey and welcoming comments on the work of the Group. Each Task and Finish Group member was assigned a number of councillors to speak to – as well as one of the Council’s directorates – with the intention that discussions would be held with senior officers and cabinet members. Discussions were structured around the questions in the ‘taking stock’ exercise, although they covered other topics and were broad-ranging in their nature.
- 5.3. There were 14 responses to the survey – and TFG members provided written notes of their discussions with colleagues, officers, and cabinet members to inform the evidence base for this report. A meeting for TFG members was also held at the end of October to feedback on progress and discuss emerging themes – a summary of key findings from this work is included below.
- 5.4. The Task and Finish Group recognises that there is a gap between the ambition of scrutiny members to be involved in the decision-making process and - both the practice and practicalities of the operation of the current system. This is complicated further by the difficulty in separating members’ concerns about the Council’s overall structure of governance as well as Lewisham’s corporate culture and the relationship between the executive with scrutiny more generally (including intraparty decision-making processes).

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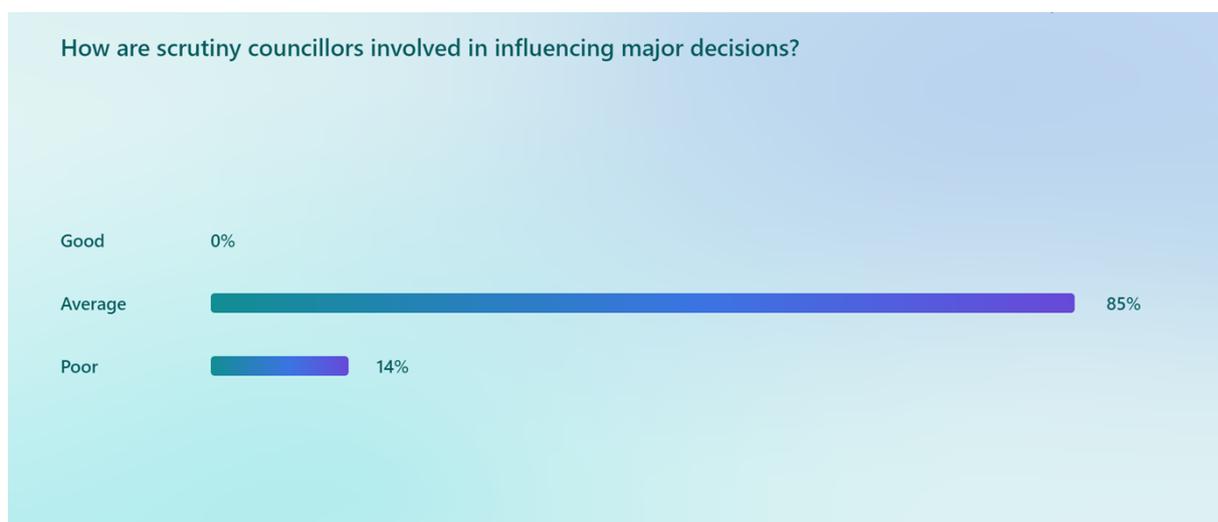


Figure 1 - How are scrutiny councillors involved in influencing major decisions?

- 5.5. Overall, responses to this question highlighted the unevenness of scrutiny’s influence on major decisions and a lack of clarity about the overall role of scrutiny in this regard.
- 5.6. Members recognised that the relationship between committee chairs, cabinet members and senior officers is an integral part of the process but there was a lack of clarity about how engagement between these groups should be structured.
- 5.7. It is apparent that the variable approaches at focus and prioritisation, by and between different scrutiny committees, hampers the effectiveness of scrutiny to demonstrably influence major decisions across the remit of the whole function. This is further complicated by the open-ended characteristics of ‘influence.’ Members found that - the decision by scrutiny to consider a topic means that there will be additional consideration given to that issue. And – even when scrutiny doesn’t make formal recommendations or referrals – officers are made aware of members’ views:
 “Even if decisions don’t change, the voice (of scrutiny) is heard” (Senior officer comment reported by a TFG member)

Key finding 1: It is difficult to draw consistent and clear lines between the involvement of scrutiny and the impact on service delivery.

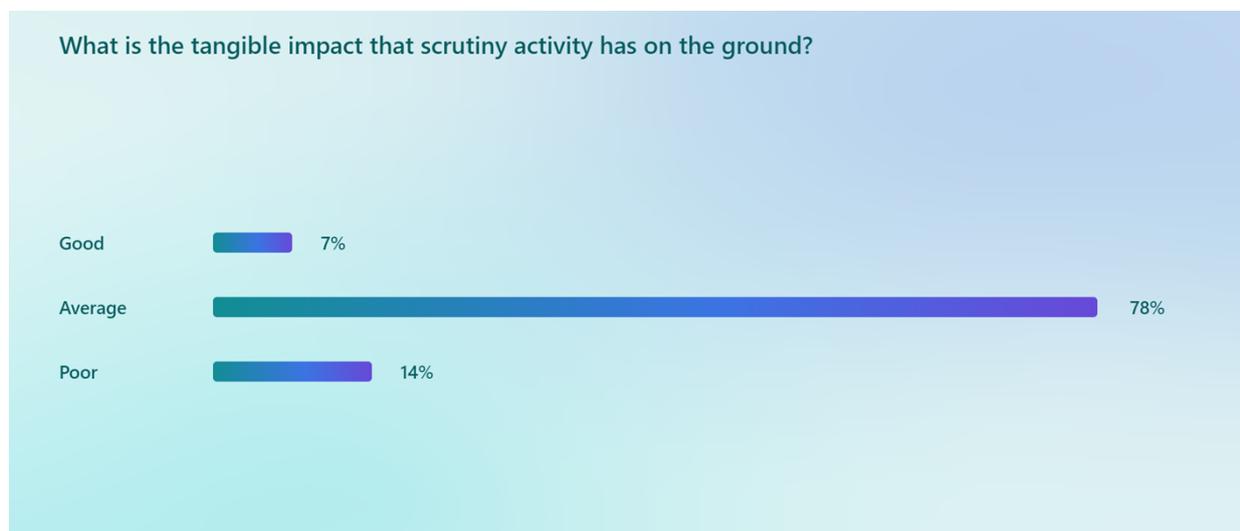


Figure 2 - What is the tangible impact that scrutiny has on the ground?

5.8. Responses to the survey indicated that perceptions of practice in this area are also mixed. Where scrutiny has the most impact, this is not always widely recognised or publicised. Additionally, there is not always a clearly demarcated route from the development of a decision to consideration by scrutiny and on to Mayor and Cabinet.

5.9. There is a perception amongst some members that their voice is entirely unheard – and as a result the sense is that the process has negligible impact:

“Scrutiny doesn’t always start with the questions “What we are trying to solve?” “How does that relate to the corporate strategy?” “What outcome would be good?” (Senior officer comment reported by a TFG member)

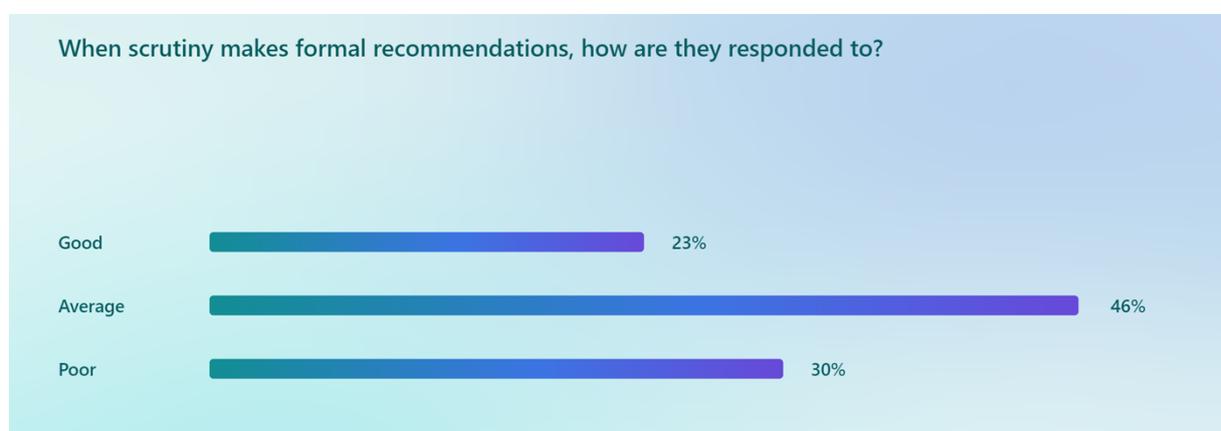


Figure 3 - When scrutiny makes formal recommendations, how are they responded to?

Key finding 2: We do not always define objectives clearly enough at an early stage.

5.10. Where decisions are not altered as a result of scrutiny recommendations or referrals – it is not always made apparent why an alternative decision has been made. The two-way communication between decision makers and scrutiny can be obscured by inconsistencies in relationships and uncertainty about formal processes. Even so, members believe that the lack of acceptance of recommendations does not necessarily indicate a failure of scrutiny to properly consider and comment on proposals.

Key finding 3: Scrutiny does not always openly assert its influence.

5.11. Formal responses to referrals are almost always received by committees – however – recommendations made by committees are not always SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound)

“Responses to scrutiny recommendations will go better when cabinet member and select committee chair have discussed with each other at the start of the specific scrutiny process or project” (Cabinet member comment reported by TFG member)

5.12. The process for responding to referrals, recommendations and committee comments is not apparent to all involved. Member discussions highlighted some good areas of practice and some inconsistencies that might make it difficult for scrutiny to follow through on proposals made by members.

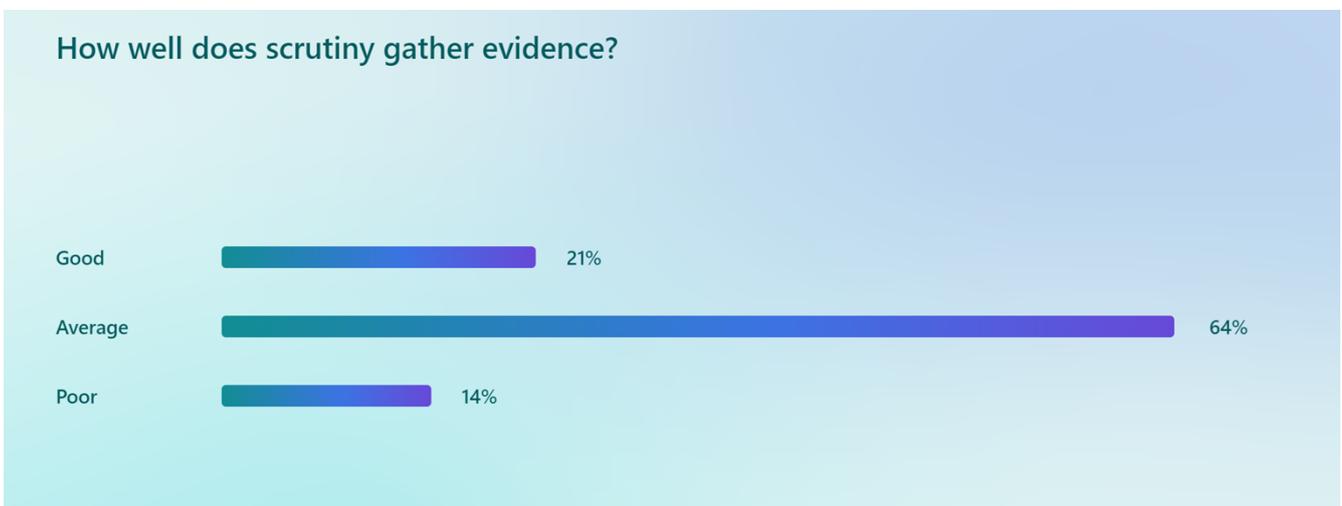


Figure 4 - How well does scrutiny gather evidence?

5.13. A common theme from previous reviews of scrutiny (as outlined in previous sections) has been the prevalence of items ‘to note’ on committee agendas. These are items which, although of interest to members, do not provide opportunities for effective scrutiny or influence.

5.14. Guidance from the Council’s statutory scrutiny officer arising from the 2020 ‘Overview and Scrutiny review’ recommended removing these items from committee agendas altogether – and focusing solely on issues upon which members could exert influence. Member discussions with officers through the evidence gathering for this task and finish group reiterated this.

5.15. A review of committee agendas, decisions, and minutes from 2022 onwards (approximately 10 meetings per committee) found that of the 148 substantive items considered by select committees (excluding minutes and work programme items) more than half resulted in the committee ‘noting’ the report without further referral or recommendations. A number of committee meetings only have items ‘to note’ on their agendas. Nonetheless, members heard that this is an improvement on previous ways of working:

“Progress has been made in reducing the number of “to note” items on agendas and key performance data is available on regular (usually quarterly) basis via the Corporate Performance Report and other sources. Most information and analysis still comes from within the Council and is officer led.” (Response to the ‘taking stock’ survey)

Key finding 4: There is an increasing awareness of the limited value of items on committee agendas that are solely ‘to note’.

5.16. Some respondents to the survey commented on the lack of committee time to engage with evidence gathering – and others noted the overload of information and agenda items on committee agendas. This may highlight an inherent inconsistency in scrutiny’s sense of purpose and its priorities. Nonetheless, members recognise that more could be done, with ambition, to improve practice:

“Committees aren’t setting themselves the right work and thus aren’t asking the right questions or getting the right evidence.” (Senior officer comment reported by a TFG member)



Figure 5 - How does scrutiny weigh the evidence it has collected?

5.17. Members would welcome more opportunities to consider issues in advance of meetings and some would welcome support with this. There is a potential opportunity to change the relationship between scrutiny members and officers in the Scrutiny and Policy Team.

5.18. Responses to the survey indicated that the training provided for members is not always widely acknowledged – with some respondents observing the lack of opportunities in contrast to the offer available.

5.19. Where practice is good, it is recognised that this is only in pockets (focused on members with experience or knowledge) and that there is the opportunity to broaden good practice more broadly across committees, meetings and throughout scrutiny processes:

“...the reports given are so incredibly long and unwieldy that there is enormous opportunity to bury important items within them. Why are they so long? What is the purpose? I think we really need to go back to core purpose. What is the point of the evidence given? If we are overburdened at every meeting with such volumes of material that it becomes pointless - then why produce it?” (Response to the ‘taking stock’ survey)

Key finding 5: More focused work is needed to get the balance between the quantity of reports and the quality of scrutiny right.



Figure 6 - How well is performance, finance and risk information considered as part of the evidence gathering process?

- 5.20. The responses related to evidence gathering highlighted a recurring theme of the desire for training and increased opportunities for skills development.
- 5.21. In TFG discussions, the 'overloading' of agendas and the lack of consistent focus were also emphasised.
- 5.22. Members noted that the vast majority of evidence provided to committees was supplied and interpreted by officers.

The future role of scrutiny in Lewisham: purpose, prioritisation, impact

'The selection of a clear and unambiguous focus for scrutiny is a critical part of improving its impact. The resource, and organisational commitment, simply no longer exist for us to talk about scrutiny as a function which "holds the executive to account" in the broadest sense of the term, without a sense of a need to prioritise its work.' (CfGS, p15)

- 5.23. In the second stage of the Task and Finish Group's work, members focused on the future role of scrutiny in Lewisham. A key driver for this stage was to seek solutions to the problems identified in the initial phase of the project – within the overarching theme of 'focus,' as noted in the quote from CfGS' evaluation framework (above).
- 5.24. Reflecting on the outcome of the first stage of evidence gathering, members identified three broad areas around which questions from this stage were organised: **purpose**, **impact**, and **participation**. It was acknowledged that:
- Members lack a shared and commonly understood **purpose** for scrutiny in Lewisham, which hampers effective prioritisation, work programming and the overall consistency and **impact** of the function.
 - There is not a shared view amongst members and officers about the **impact** scrutiny is having overall – or how the work carried out by select committees relates to the delivery of the Council's objectives.
 - There are varying levels of **participation** by members in the scrutiny process – with a lack of consensus around the ways in which scrutiny processes and decisions might be improved. For example, there are competing views about: the optimal number and regularity of meetings – as well as - the correct composition of committees and the opportunities and challenges represented by task and finish groups. This might be emerging as a result of scrutiny's unclear sense of **purpose**.
 - Members' knowledge (of both of corporate/Council structures and of the issues being scrutinised) is mixed, as is the **participation** in training and skill sharing. Relationships between scrutiny, the executive and officers are broadly positive but have developed as a result of standard practice (rather than in relation to a defined set of outcomes based on a consensus about the **purpose** of scrutiny)

5.25. Members agreed to hold discussions with representatives and officers at other scrutiny authorities – to identify good practice and consider what lessons might be learned about the potential mechanisms for implementing improved practice. Proposed questions for this phase of evidence gathering were:

Purpose

- How does scrutiny decide on its areas of focus (and over what timescale is this implemented? I.e. Meeting by meeting, year on year or over an alternative period?) How are systems of prioritisation of topics and agenda items managed?

Participation

- What is the relationship between decision makers and scrutiny? How regularly do executive members attend scrutiny meetings and what is their role at meetings? What is the relationship like between decision makers and scrutiny outside of the formal meeting cycle?
- How much independent work do members of scrutiny carry out? Is there required training for members of scrutiny or for committee Chairs before they take up their posts? Are there other agreements in place for the running of meetings and setting of agendas?

Impact

- How is the impact of scrutiny measured and monitored?

Key finding 6: Some parts of the scrutiny function are disconnected from their purpose. This is reflected in the unevenness of member and officer participation in scrutiny and a lack of clarity when it comes to the impact of scrutiny in Lewisham.

5.26. The Task and Finish Group agreed that it would use the key findings from the ‘taking stock’ exercise to consider approaches to good practice in scrutiny more broadly.

5.27. Members spoke with members/officers from:

- The London Assembly
- The London Borough of Waltham Forest
- The Royal Borough of Greenwich
- A former senior officer from Lewisham (at the time of the Democracy Review)

5.28. The resultant discussions (based on the themes of purpose, participation, and impact) informed the Group’s discussion on these themes. Where documentation was available – such as reports or briefings on the function of scrutiny in other authorities, then Group members also considered these. Recent CfGS reports on the function of scrutiny in Greenwich⁹ and Waltham Forest¹⁰ were particularly helpful in this regard – and highlighted:

- The need for scrutiny to be clear about its purpose.
- The necessity for scrutiny to align its work programmes with corporate strategies.
- The importance of ensuring that information updates are shared outside of meetings.

‘It is essential that scrutiny meetings do not become settings for information up-dates but remain focused on the scrutiny task of challenge and improvement.’

Greenwich GfGS review (p3)

⁹ RB Greenwich: [scrutiny improvement review](#) (October 2023)

¹⁰ LB Waltham Forest: [scrutiny improvement review](#) (December 2023)

- 5.29. Members also heard that the process of improving scrutiny could be difficult – and that proposals for change would not please everyone. A common theme in all of the good practice discussions was the need for a clear focus to help coordinate scrutiny activity and to encourage consensus.
- 5.30. The importance of the quality of relationships has been a recurring theme throughout the work of the Task and Finish Group – and – members recognise that not all member – officer or scrutiny member and executive member relationships will be productive. Nonetheless, it is apparent that a clear communication of the purpose and priorities of scrutiny would enhance communication and diminish the grounds for misunderstanding and disagreement. Members heard in their good practice discussions that purposeful scrutiny, was usually based on a clear set of priorities - accompanied by productive relationships and a culture of openness.
- 5.31. Alignment of scrutiny’s purpose and prioritisation processes more closely with the delivery of the corporate strategy would be a direct way of achieving this ambition – and – it is something that was recommended to RB Greenwich and LB Waltham Forest as part of their CfGS scrutiny improvement reviews. As recommended to RB Greenwich that -
- ‘Scrutiny has greater visible alignment with the Corporate Plan; identifying lines of enquiry to ensure Scrutiny is addressing the key issues facing Greenwich which highlight to members and officers Scrutiny’s relevance, impact, and connections.

Greenwich GfGS review (p14)

Key finding 7: Closer alignment of scrutiny work programmes and key lines of enquiry with the corporate strategy could bolster scrutiny’s *relevance, impact, and connections*.

- 5.32. In discussion with colleagues, members of the Task and Finish Group considered the different ways in which scrutiny could fulfil its ambition to achieve maximum impact. There was an apparent difference between those that considered that more formal meetings were important for scrutiny committees to consider a broader range of issues - and those that acknowledged the necessity to focus scrutiny work on the issues of most relevance.
- 5.33. Prioritisation of work programmes was a central theme in the work of the Democracy Review – with the working group finding that councillors were limited in their roles by the large volume of meetings (and, as members of the TFG heard, the time commitment required to prepare for meetings with multiple agenda items):
- ‘We also heard that councillors were expected to attend a large volume of meetings, limiting the time available to get involved in their community and making it difficult for them to maintain oversight of all matters.’
- Democracy Review working group final report, 2021 p21.
- 5.34. Accordingly, the Democracy Review working group recommended that all meetings should finish within two hours – and that the prioritisation process should be used effectively to enhance focus on the issues of most relevant – and upon which scrutiny would have the greatest impact.
- 5.35. The importance of prioritisation was emphasised in the discussions held with Waltham Forest, following from their recent scrutiny improvement review. It was recognised that scrutiny could not – and should not – seek to do everything within its remit, nor should it try to mirror the entirety of the executive function. Officers and members at Waltham Forest have been tasked with developing a tool to improve prioritisation. It was recognised that this is something that Lewisham has in place – although discussions acknowledged that the process was not put to consistent use.

‘Greater focus and prioritisation would enable members to give more time to consider fewer issues in greater detail and ensure that those items brought to Scrutiny are on topics where it can add value. This will mean that some of topics members find interesting will no longer feature on agendas. If this is the case, alternative approaches could provide the information...’

Greenwich GfGS review (p4)

Key finding 8: Effective and consistent prioritisation is an essential feature of good scrutiny.

Scrutiny work programme – prioritisation process

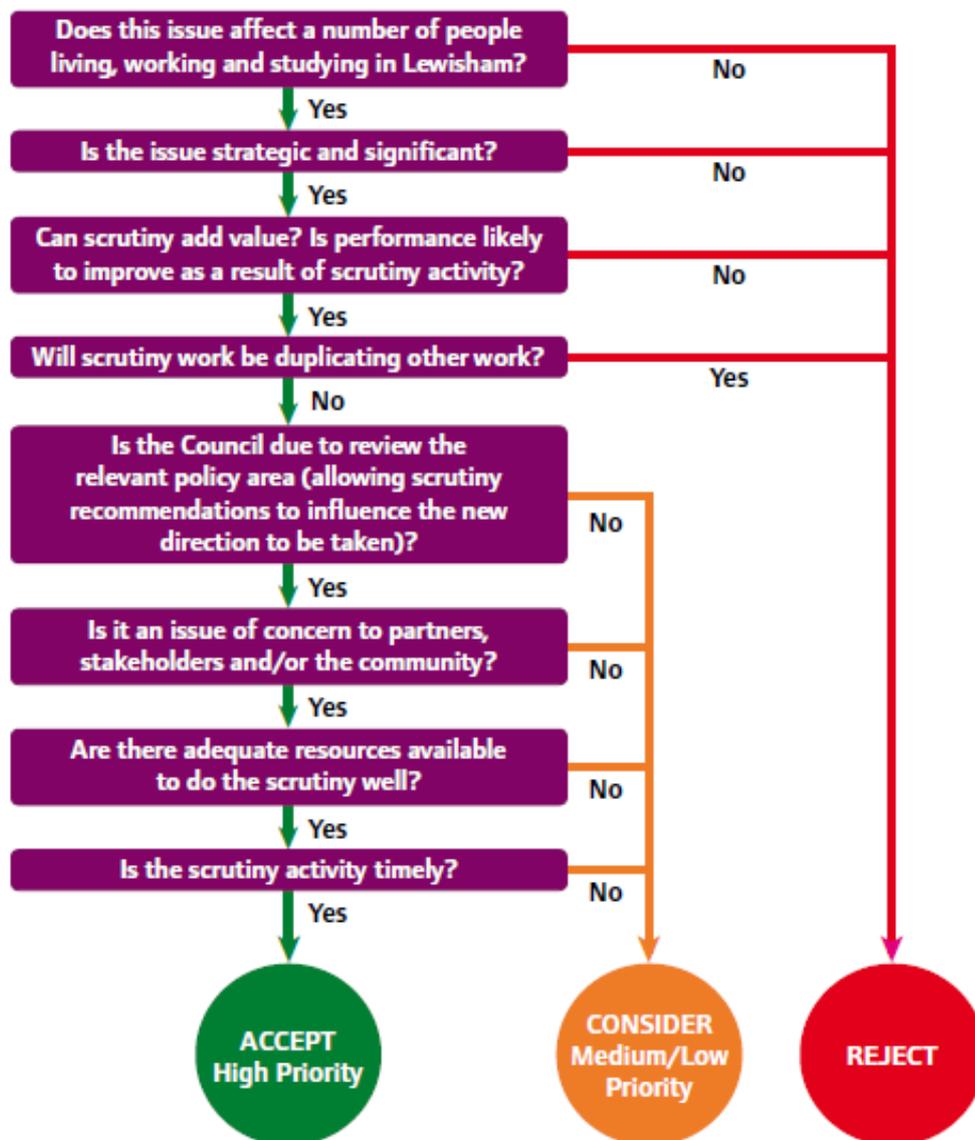


Figure 7 - Scrutiny prioritisation flowchart

Achieving consensus: potential new ways of working

- 5.36. The Task and Finish Group recognises that there is more work to be done on developing new ways of working.
- ‘Scrutiny could focus on fewer issues that are more closely linked to Council priorities to ensure that decision-making in key priority areas is scrutinised and more effective.’
Lewisham Democracy Review report 2019, p40
- 5.37. This recognition has been long standing and it has been expressed through the various reviews and revisions of Lewisham’s scrutiny functions in previous years. Members of the Task and Finish Group acknowledge that there is lots of good practice taking place in Lewisham at present. Furthermore, it is recognised that in order to achieve members’ ambition for a focused, purposeful, and efficient scrutiny structure – this quality practice should be shared, replicated, and reinforced.
- 5.38. Much of that which is considered good practice was highlighted in the Democracy Review and reiterated in subsequent reviews: the effective prioritisation of work programmes; the limiting of agendas to key issues; and the development of good relationships across cabinet, scrutiny, and officers - are all areas in which progress has been made. It is the Task and Finish Groups intention that the recommendations in this report go further in enhancing and embedding good work and good scrutiny for the benefit of Lewisham and its citizens.

6. How the Task and Finish Group was run

6.1. The Task and Finish Group was run as a project, with the intention of being:

Collaborative – scrutiny officers, directorate officers and councillors working together to address a topical issue of concern, using a shared space on MS Teams

Time limited – to suggest solutions in a timely manner, with allocated tasks, progress checks and deadlines.

Flexible – with a mixture of formal and informal meetings, visits, research, user engagement etc.

Focussed on residents – service user experience is key, the issues clearly defined, and solutions suggested, on the basis of understanding residents' experience.

Focussed on solutions – the aim was to take evidence from a wide range of sources and good practice to develop affordable, practical solutions that are evidence based and implementable and that will have a positive impact on the lives of residents.

6.2. A 'double diamond' approach was taken which split the project into two parts (diamonds). The first part was the 'discovery' stage. The issue (the topic of the task and finish group) was the starting point and then research and evidence collection was carried out to understand the issue and define it more clearly. Once the issue was well understood and well defined, the second stage began. Further research and evidence collection was carried out, seeking inspiration from elsewhere and working with a range of different stakeholders and experts to investigate potential solutions. This led to the Group's clear set of carefully considered recommendations.

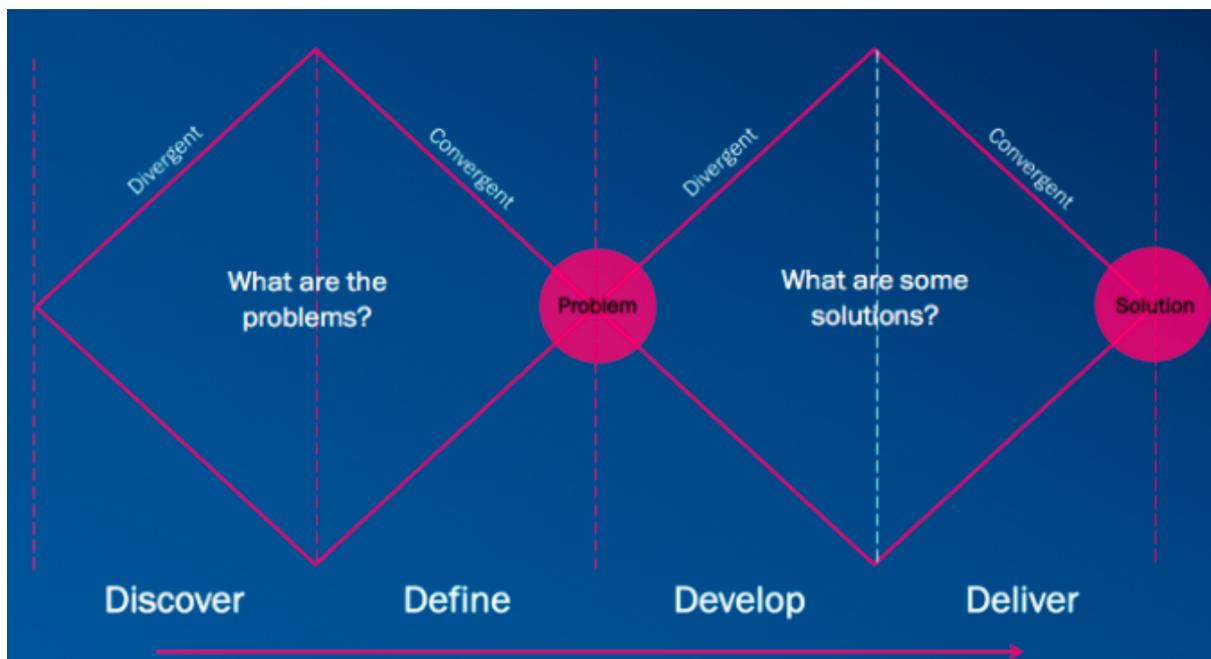


Figure 8 - Double diamond flow chart

Intended outcomes

6.3. The work of the task and finish group was intended to support work to improve the following outcomes:

- Increased influence for overview and scrutiny in policy development
- Improved opportunities for collaboration with the executive, senior officers, partners, and service users

- Renewed focus on the impact of scrutiny.
- Replication of effective practices and meeting management
- Consensus on potential changes to support the implementation of new ways of working

7. Monitoring and ongoing scrutiny

- 7.1. Responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the Group’s recommendations will be led by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 7.2. Additionally, there are options for all the Council’s scrutiny committees to continue this work by:
- Effectively prioritising their work¹⁷
 - Removing items ‘to note’ from their work programmes.
 - Holding information updates and briefings outside of formal meetings
 - Maintaining effective engagement with senior officers and cabinet members
- 7.3. Committee work programmes are a matter for the committee members and are based on the scrutiny prioritisation process.

8. List of terms

- 8.1. This list of terms incorporates the standard usage that was applied throughout the work of the group for example:

Term	Definition
Task and Finish Group (TFG)	As a result of Lewisham’s Local Democracy Review, the Local Democracy Working Group recommended some changes to the Council’s practice and approach to scrutiny, including the introduction of time limited Task and Finish Groups (TFGs) to look at topical issues of importance or concern. TFGs are established by the Council’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee, comprised of five councillors, and must conclude their work within 12 months.

9. Report authors and contact

- 9.1. If you have any questions about this report, please contact Lewisham Scrutiny Manager: Timothy Andrew (timothy.andrew@lewisham.gov.uk) 020 8134 7916

10. Sources and background reading

Democracy Review working group final report:

[link to the report on the Council website](#)

RB Greenwich Scrutiny Improvement review:

[link to the document on the Greenwich Council website](#)

Waltham Forest Scrutiny Improvement review:

[link to the report on the Waltham Forest Council website](#)