Stuart Love
Chief Executive Officer
Westminster City Council
City Hall
Westminster

May 2023

Dear Stuart,

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 Westminster City Council'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 and Context

The May 2022 local council elections resulted in a change of political control at Westminster City Council. Westminster's Corporate Leadership, the Council's new-political leaders and main Opposition Group are keen to review and reflect on elements of the council's overall governance. There is a collective ambition to improve scrutiny through a collaborative review process by

- Getting advice and support to the Council in a review of its scrutiny function to ensure it is effective in providing a quality contribution in accountability, policy and decision making, delivery of council plans and overall improvement.
- Checking and testing that scrutiny arrangements and effectiveness meet the council's high expectations of democratic accountability and that decision-making and overview and scrutiny is transparent, effective, and impactful. It is determined to make its ongoing approach to scrutiny fresh, innovative, and bold.
- Wanting its overview and scrutiny structure to create the right framework to maximise its impact within its governance arrangements.

The Council has not undertaken a comprehensive review of its scrutiny arrangements for some time and considers that this review is a timely and valuable exercise – both to assess its existing practice, and to challenge it to undertake further improvements.

Westminster City Council currently operates an Overview and Scrutiny Commission and four Policy and Scrutiny Committees as part of its Cabinet based governance model:

- Children's, Adults Public Health and Voluntary Sector Policy and Scrutiny Committee
- Climate Action, Housing and Regeneration Policy and Scrutiny Committee
- Communities, City Management and Air Quality Policy and Scrutiny Committee
- Finance, Planning and Economic Development

It also has a Budget Task Group which currently meets in January each year and considers the council's daft budget.

The Council is also part of Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee arrangements.

The Council has not changed the arrangements for delivering its overview and scrutiny responsibilities for some time. It therefore has indicated that it would welcome ideas and suggestions for any structural arrangements that could be made, if any, arising from this review.

Review objectives

The objectives of this improvement review were:

- To review current arrangements, against the backdrop of the priorities in the council and make recommendations on improvements to the structure of scrutiny/overview, including training/mentoring, governance processes.
- To make recommendations on effective and proven cultural change regarding overview and scrutiny reflecting Members, officers, and partners.
- To offer suggestions on how the scrutiny committee structure, capacity and responsibilities might be strengthened.
- To make suggestions on the Officer support required based on the above.

In addressing these objectives, the review explored

- **Operating Culture**. The behaviours, relationships and mindsets underpinning the operation of the overview and scrutiny process. This will also include key areas of inclusion, diversity, and equality within scrutiny. The focus on the Council's corporate approach and level of support for scrutiny is also included;

- **Information**. How information is prepared, shared, accessed, and used in the service of the scrutiny function. To what extent is scrutiny supported and given adequate 'tools' to effectively scrutinise;

- **Impact**. Ways to ensure that scrutiny is effective, that it makes a tangible difference to the lives of local people.

We also considered these key areas as they are significant contributors to assessing the effectiveness of the scrutiny function and organisational culture towards the scrutiny:

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- Information management, access and sharing;
- Prioritisation and focus around work programming;
- Local systems for assessing scrutiny's impact.

Evidence Base

Our evidence is based on what the review team observed, were told, and later validated, obtained from council documents, compared to good practice elsewhere and contained in latest guidance.

Conversations

In gathering evidence for the review, we arranged open conversations with members and officers in person and online.

Members included:
- All scrutiny chairs,
- All Cabinet members,
- Leader of the Council,
- Leader of the Conservative Group,
- Conservative spokesperson for Scrutiny.
- Two discussion groups were held, one with Labour Group councillors and one with Conservative Group councillors.

Officers included:
- The Chief Executive
- All Executive Directors
- Head of Governance and Councillor Liaison
- The Scrutiny Team (three officers)
- Cabinet Portfolio Advisors

Meeting observations
We observed remotely all Policy and Scrutiny Committees meetings held in February and March and the three Budget Task Group meetings held in January. We also observed some meetings that took place between June and November 2022.

Document research
Our desk research considered:
- Minutes of meetings, reports and documents considered at meetings.
- Reports of Task Groups and recommendations made from some scrutiny reports
- Elements of the Constitution specifically, the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules
- Scrutiny Work Programmes

The review was conducted by:

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- Ian Parry – Head of Consultancy, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Natalie Rotherham – Senior Governance Consultant, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny
- Sunita Sharma– Associate Consultant, Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

The findings and recommendations presented in this letter are intended to advise Westminster City Council in strengthening its approach, on the focus and quality of scrutiny activities and increase its impact and contribute towards a shared understanding of the purpose, role, and capability of the scrutiny function.

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Executive summary of findings

1.Scrutiny has the conditions to improve and succeed

1.1 Overall, scrutiny could be more effective and stronger and that the essential ingredients, support, and conditions exist for this to happen. However, it is important to consider the current baseline and acknowledge that there is a history of unclear and under-performing scrutiny at the council. The operating culture currently demonstrates a lack of sufficient confidence and experience to have real impact. Therefore, even though there is a real desire to improve, its position in the council is not as significant or valued as it could and should be. There is a strong ambition though to improve which carries support from across the council.

1.2 Objectives for scrutiny are not always clear or understood and it is therefore hard to tell how well it is delivering a useful service to the council and residents. There is consensus from members and officers that the "inherited culture" and arrangements for overview and scrutiny need addressing. This change would need to be underpinned by support from across the council. This is a whole council endeavour.

1.3 There is a clear realisation and commitment that scrutiny performance could be more effective and productive. However, there are mixed levels of respect and value for the scrutiny role ranging from "no value at all" to "it does have some important influence." Every conversation the review team held suggested a universal appetite for change and improvement.

1.4 Scrutiny work is having less impact than it should and at times it lacks sufficient focus on strategic issues. There is strong recognition that work programming across all the policy and scrutiny committees needs to be focussed and aligned to the council's priorities with flexibility to consider emerging areas of concerns, especially those arising from residents.

1.5 Scrutiny members work to ensure any recommendations arising from their work is evidenced based and can be monitored through improvements to policy making and service performance. We detected a concern that committees lose sight of and are unable to adequately track their efforts or recommendations made. We note that the system of tracking actions and recommendations has been refined which should address this concern.

1.6 Political and Corporate leadership are keen to support scrutiny members so that together the council is addressing its challenges and priorities from respective roles and responsibilities as well as enabling scrutiny members to influence and shape policies as they are being developed through alignment of the scrutiny work programme and Forward Plan.

1.7 There is recognition that since the change of political control, newly elected members have been appointed to chair and lead scrutiny. This can be a positive, as fresh ideas and rejuvenation can outweigh any temporary lack of experience. Our assessment is that they have increased confidence in their roles but may need ongoing support to ensure they

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acquire more essentials skills and experience relating to their scrutiny roles, especially those relating to questioning and probing. Newly elected councillors generally are also rapidly increasing their knowledge about the council, its services, the opportunities, and challenges faced, through their scrutiny roles.

1.8 Experienced members from both political groups acknowledged that some challenges which could negatively impact on the conditions for successfully scrutiny are historical.

1.9 Members and officers are keen to explore ways in which scrutiny can better engage with residents and the community.

1.10 Some scrutiny members do make effort to be strategic and focus on the areas of importance, although in practice this sometimes falls short of this ambition. Scrutiny can very often become a 'conversation', an information exchange or become too operational, parochial, ward issue, or detailed council performance focused.

1.11 This is balanced by those members who demonstrate strong scrutiny skills through their questioning, follow up and contribution to discussion and recommendations. Whilst these skills have been observed across all the committees, they are more prevalent at the Children's, Adult's, Public Health and Voluntary Sector meetings and the Budget Task Groups meetings.

1.12 There are missed opportunities for scrutiny to add value and to be an integral part of the Council's corporate plans and overall improvement. We note that the change of political control, shifting positions of influence and appointment to new roles means that experience of past roles is informing learning. For scrutiny to be more strategic, there needs to be change from both scrutiny and the Executive, to draw closer together to create a purposeful role and agenda without compromising scrutiny independence. If the council wants scrutiny to place more emphasis on shaping, challenging, and holding to account, then scrutiny will need the support and early access to information, resources and operate as an integral, constructive part of policy and decision-making activities of the Leader and Cabinet.

1.13 The Leader and Cabinet Members attend scrutiny meetings as contributors but are often not sufficiently held to account and constructively challenged. There is concern that Cabinet members do not attend Budget Task Group meeting resulting in officers being held to account instead. Cabinet members and the Leader express support for scrutiny and welcome challenge and accountable scrutiny.

1.14 Scrutiny leadership could be stronger through exercising the 'critical friend' role. However, the focus on busy and full meetings places an emphasis on getting through the meeting (quantity) rather than in depth scrutiny of issues (quality) or holding to account decision makers in a timely and meaningful way. Some meetings take longer than is useful or helpful in achieving outcomes.

1.15 The new scrutiny officer team is settling in and has started to implement systems for assisting Members in developing work programmes, managing agendas, and liaising with Council departments and external partners to generate reports, evidence, and information. The Team is also developing relevant professional skills and building knowledge and

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experience to provide strategic advice, research, and support to ensure scrutiny members are effective in their roles. We note this is work in progress.

1.16 Further consideration should be given to increasing and providing additional professional scrutiny officer capacity (research and strategic advice skills as opposed to administrative support) within the scrutiny team. Due to the unique set of specific challenges faced by the Council arising from its geographical location, additional dedicated scrutiny officer capacity would enable scrutiny members to provide policy development support on key priority areas. The scrutiny officer team is managed by the Head of Governance and Councillor Liaison.

1.17 Recommendation making can be improved. We have seen little evidence of sufficiently compelling recommendations arising from scrutiny discussions. Requests for information, updates, briefings tend to be preferred. This may be symptomatic of the historical political culture as well as from members settling into their new roles or that recommendations are more likely to arise from task and finish groups as they get going. Scrutiny work must ensure that its recommendations will improve policies and services for Westminster residents and the wider community.

1.18 Follow up, monitoring and tracking of accepted recommendations against outcomes needs to be strengthened. This is a development area for both scrutiny chairs and scrutiny officers.

1.19 There is an opportunity to improve collaboration between scrutiny and audit. The intersection between scrutiny and audit can be strengthened through ensuring regular dialogue between audit and scrutiny chairs. Working together in this way will enable agreement on the issues that can be passed between committees, avoiding duplication, engage members of the audit committee on scrutiny task groups or in budget scrutiny. Members could carry out work to contribute to and develop the Annual Governance Statement and provide evidence on how scrutiny work supports overall governance. This contribution should be acknowledged in scrutiny's Annual Report. Working together in this way will enable scrutiny and audit to spread awareness of the respective functions across the council.

1.20 There are some barriers and practices that need to be addressed and Member development gaps supported if progress, which is clearly desired by the council, is to be realised.

1.21 The following key themes emerged from our review which will support the Council in its development of scrutiny:

- The value of setting out a vision, refreshing and asserting the principles and purpose of scrutiny in Westminster for Members and Officers.

- The nature of relationships between Members. Finding ways to ensure scrutiny can operate in a more collaborative approach to lessen the historical political environment and thus reduce any adversarial behaviours.
- Making the best use of scrutiny and corporate resource. To consider the scope and remit for all policy and scrutiny committees and flexibility to schedule meetings to get the most from scrutiny activities.
- Focusing on the impact and outcomes of good scrutiny that adds value and supports effective services in Westminster for the benefit of residents.
- Testing through scrutiny the impact of new policies or key decisions on residents.
- Embedding new forms of public engagement to increase the voice and participation of local groups and residents in agendas and evidence gathering.
- Earlier engagement by the Budget Task Group to scrutinise the budget and MTFS process and the important foundations such as: outlook and assumptions, risks, pressures, reserves, and alignment with corporate plan.

1.22 We want to acknowledge at the outset an appreciation of the positives that have been shared during our conversations. These include:

- Acceptance and willingness to embrace change and do things differently.
- Support for Councillors arising from changed roles and for newly elected councillors.
- A long corporate memory around scrutiny with examples of learning and lessons that should be learnt.
- Examples of historical scrutiny reviews that were felt to have had an impact with topics such as education, health. More recently, 'The Mound' as it reminded the organisation of the role and impact of scrutiny.
- A desire to learn from best practice elsewhere.
- A commitment from members to address issues that matter to residents.

1.23 From its current base, in terms of political support, member engagement, resources, council support and ambition, there is a platform upon which scrutiny could successfully develop.

1.24 There is a core group of members and officers committed to working together to build, develop and improve scrutiny. There is uncertainty though about how the organisation will support this commitment, encourage cross party working, ensure value and respect to scrutiny going forward. This will require strong leadership support from the Executive Leadership Team.

1.25 These positives are the conditions to take forward a refreshed approach to scrutiny at the Council. They offer a good basis for implementing change and working through the issues raised throughout the Review.

2. Developing a vision for scrutiny

2.1 Several of the issues highlighted in this report are rooted in a developing a vision of scrutiny at the council and being clear about the purpose of scrutiny. Commissioning this

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Review in this first year of transition from the previous administration to the new administration offers a good starting point to revisit the principles and purpose of scrutiny. This would help build a shared understanding of scrutiny across the Council, its position in the wider local democratic process and governance system and, its role in improving performance of services to residents and the wider community.

2.2 By working together, Members and officers, could create a shared and agreed definition and purpose for scrutiny. This could promote and position the scrutiny function internally and externally as an important part of governance and improvement. It also boosts the parity of esteem for scrutiny alongside the executive functions of the Council.

2.3 Drawing on their own experiences and or understanding of effective scrutiny the most common suggestions for 'what scrutiny means for Westminster' were:

- Constructive challenge and accountability
- Effective cross party working, including having a chair/scrutiny leads from the opposition party.
- A focus on the needs, experiences, and interests of Westminster residents.
- Ensuring scrutiny makes a measurable impact and supports the development of more effective and efficient services that reflect Council priorities.
- Independent member-led exploration of key issues
- Exploring alternative approaches for service delivery and Council priorities
- Transparency
- Prioritising the most important topics for scrutiny
- Public engagement and public voice
- Strengthening local democracy
- Ensuring scrutiny has the confidence to prioritise the issues that are most important
- Working in a collaborative and non-political way to assess data and evidence.

2.4 As there is broad consensus in these views it offers a strong basis for moving forward with this approach. It will be important to also address some of the challenges identified in this report to ensure the council's approach is able to tackle the more complex issues of working together in a political environment. The Council could draw on wider work on principles, practices, and statutory guidance to inform this process. It could benchmark examples of 'what good looks like' in terms of scrutiny practice in other authorities.

2.5 This can be particularly valuable for new Councillors and those who have limited experience of scrutiny elsewhere.

Recommendation 1: Develop a Westminster vision for overview and scrutiny. Define its purpose and goals of scrutiny using insights from this Review. Use this definition to underpin scrutiny processes, relationships, and work programming.

Share the definition with partners, stakeholders, and the public to raise the profile and esteem for scrutiny.

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3.Culture, Leadership, Values

3.1 Whilst members and officers were keen to share ideas and ambitions for scrutiny there was some scepticism about the embedded culture which could get in the way of change. Some were realistic about the challenges faced based on experience to date. For members, these insights, observations, and suggestions were rooted in either their previous experience as a scrutiny or cabinet member or from experience gained through professional roles elsewhere which enabled them to compare how scrutiny policy development and holding to account could work.

3.2 Having a culture of trust, transparency and mutual respect between scrutiny and the Executive cannot be understated. This ensures that open and candid exchanges take place as well a flow of information and communication. Positive engagement between the Executive and scrutiny both formal and informal is vital to the success of scrutiny process and overall governance of the council.

3.3 We heard that the prevailing culture at Westminster is one which at best endures scrutiny and at worst is indifferent to it. There is a sense that scrutiny is not valued by the wider council community with some saying they are not clear about what scrutiny as a whole function is trying to achieve.

3.4 There is a strong feeling that the organisational culture cannot be open and transparent in a context where a shared understanding of the purpose of scrutiny and its value to the council does not exist. We heard numerous times from a diverse group of members that scrutiny is weak, ineffective, and that neither policy nor scrutiny roles were carried out well. Some went further and described scrutiny as a side show as the main act is Cabinet.

3.5 Majority of those interviewed provided examples of how scrutiny is overly managed by officers and questioning if scrutiny can be member led. This "over management" was described in terms of timing of issues on agendas, content of cabinet briefing reports, focus of presentations, some elements of performance reporting not addressing those areas requested by scrutiny and or complex information not tailored to scrutiny needs. Others described how they had encouraged members to lead scrutiny work, but this was not taken up. Some interviewees described how they were encouraged to keep scrutiny away from key areas of council business and "if you didn't then it became difficult, uncomfortable".

3.6 The role and purpose of scrutiny is not clear and needs to be better understood by members and officers. Some interviewees found it difficult to describe scrutiny's purpose, role and remit and its place in supporting overall governance of the council. Some were unclear about scrutiny's contribution to corporate plans and policies and the various ways in which pre-decision scrutiny could be supportive in addressing Council challenges.

3.7 Some pointed to meaningful contributions towards policy shaping but struggled to identify more than a few examples. We noted that these examples were about three years old.

3.8 In exploring scrutiny's effectiveness there was limited knowledge of its performance against that of other councils. Some stated that the culture of viewing scrutiny performance through the "insular lens of the Westminster way of working" led to the belief that scrutiny was functioning well at the council. One interviewee mentioned on joining the council, he had been told that along with other services, scrutiny at Westminster was excellent. As this view was echoed by others a significant number of interviewees also shared similar views, we consider this to be part of an organisational mindset driving a belief that scrutiny is operating and delivering good quality work. We have been told that had there not been a change of political control arising from the last local government elections then this mindset would have gone unchallenged.

3.9 This strongly suggests to us that despite some individual members and officers' best efforts that the council was either not aware of these of issues or has not been able (or willing) to address the conditions that has sustained a weak scrutiny culture.

Political behaviours.

3.10 We have heard how group politics impact at and on overview and scrutiny both under the previous administration and since change of political control. Whilst this is not uncommon in councils, the key question that needs addressing is how group politics affects scrutiny to carry out its role in a robust way and with an independent mindset. We heard scrutiny members only push so far in order not to upset political or organisational leadership or individual Cabinet members. It has been suggested that inter-group politics in the past directly impacted on scrutiny's ability to be effective. We would hope that going forward this will become less of an issue due to commitment to get best out of the scrutiny function and as scrutiny members settle into their roles. Scrutiny needs to be a safe-space where free-flowing debate and robust (but respectful) questioning can be held without repercussions.

3.11 We have observed an increase in the confidence of scrutiny chairs and members in their exploration and questioning of cabinet members since June last year to the most recent meetings. We have noted newly elected members demonstrating scrutiny principles at meetings and through their behaviours display understanding of the critical friend role. We consider this work in progress and would encourage these type of scrutiny behaviours across all scrutiny chairs and members.

3.12 Most conversations recognised that scrutiny in Westminster has an openly party-political dimension. This affects relationships and the ability to focus objectively on constructive challenge and service improvement. Cross party joint working can be difficult between Committee members. Feedback indicates that this is a major factor that could hold back scrutiny. It can also have inadvertently impact on co-optees who sit on scrutiny committees.

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11

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3.13 Observations shared by Members from both political groups and Officers illustrated acute challenges in creating a non-political and a collaborative environment. It is a credit to individuals that despite this context many work well at an interpersonal level and "behind the scenes". This is something to build on to ensure cross party collaboration is driven by shared scrutiny outcomes.

3.14 It is important to openly address expectations around behaviours and ways of working together. We found that there is an appetite to address this issue and find ways to work together constructively. Much of this aligns with the principles and values spoken about by some members as part of this review. There is hope that new ways of working can build stronger relationships and a shared platform for constructive challenge and accountability.

3.15 For some members scrutiny can be seen through the lens of political challenge which can result in frayed relationships with colleagues and in reciprocated defensive behaviours.

3.16   Three underlying causes for these challenges were identified:

1. Members and Officers speak of a long-established culture of the politicisation of scrutiny in Westminster. This makes it difficult for Members to break from the pattern. New Members learn about scrutiny through the experience of current practices and behaviours - often feeling the expectation to replicate this model. By the same token, without a shared definition of what good scrutiny looks like it is difficult for Members and Officers to find the space to reach consensus on collaboration and constructive challenge.
2. The current balance of political parties means Members feel there is much at stake for their political aspirations and agendas.
3. The public context of scrutiny means that Members contributions can be readily shared and promoted through engagement and social media reporting.

3.17 This is not to say that the politics is unhelpful - it is the cornerstone of local democracy and speaks to the challenge of different values and visions. However, scrutiny works best when Members are supported to create a more neutral political environment. Political vision, challenge and opposition agendas are best located in other parts of the Council system.

3.18 As has already been highlighted some members work well across political boundaries behind the scenes and they need to find a way to transcend the party dimensions inside the scrutiny structures. On a positive note, we have seen examples of this in our observations. This includes building trust based on shared scrutiny goals that benefit residents. We feel some work to openly address these issues and create an agreement of expectations and behaviours will strengthen existing interpersonal relationships and extend to resetting cross party working. It is also essential to directly support Chairs to establish this culture in their respective Committees.

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Recommendation 2: Develop, refresh a group working agreement for all members of the scrutiny committee – focusing on expectations, behaviours, and support for participation.

Officer Relationships with Scrutiny

3.19 Across all the officers interviewed some stated they had limited experience and knowledge of local government scrutiny and therefore relied on the existing culture and ways of doing things in providing professional advice, support, and reports to and contributing at scrutiny meetings. This also extended to their support to Cabinet members as part of assisting their preparation for attending scrutiny members.

3.20 Officers with experience of scrutiny elsewhere described the scrutiny culture at the council as "poor, weak, non-existent". Some spoke about the collective lack of ownership at senior management level to ensure that the purpose, role, and principles of scrutiny were well understood across the organisation both at wider officer and member level.

3.21 Some pointed out that when responding to scrutiny requests to attend meetings and or prepare reports or provide information, there is often tension and increased anxiety about what information can and when it should be provided to scrutiny based on the prevailing culture and historical attitude towards scrutiny. In other words, limiting information to the opposition especially on sensitive issues. We have though seen early signs that this historical and culture legacy is likely to change. Through our discussion with Leader and Cabinet there is a commitment to reset and position the organisational cultural and political dynamics so that scrutiny's worth and value as the formal check and balance to policy and decision making, underpinned by legislation is understood across the council.

3.22 Whilst being able to describe scrutiny values (openness, transparency, and accountability) which should underpin overview and scrutiny work in Westminster, interviewees struggled to provide scrutiny outcomes against these values. It is unclear from this how the council ensures scrutiny can make meaningful impact through its work.

3.23 In considering the experiences of working across two councils we noted the differences in scrutiny culture, style and approach. There was a desire by officers that they contributed in a way that was purposeful, timely and delivered robust scrutiny which influenced and shaped policies. This desire was described as "being useful to scrutiny". Some officers said they were seeing signs that the political culture and mindset has started to shift which would encourage scrutiny to fulfil all aspects of its roles.

3.24 We noted that some officers don't fully understand what 'call-in" is and its legal standing.

3.25 Those who work closely with external partners told us that whilst some external partners understand the role and powers of scrutiny and take their responsibilities to it seriously, they noticed that some officers do not place the same value on scrutiny.

3.26 The Executive Leadership Team has a key role to play in modelling scrutiny values and behaving in a way that drives performance of all members. We are hopeful that as discussions have already started as part of this Review and through considering its findings, that behaviours are, and will change to instil a scrutiny culture and supporting values at the council. It is hoped leadership from the ELT will drive this culture going forward.

Recommendation 3: Provide development support and training for Officers across the Council to build, refresh and enhance their knowledge and understanding of the role, purpose, and powers of scrutiny.

Members as scrutiny champions.

3.27 Experienced scrutiny members stated that "scrutiny needs to be different". They described efforts to develop and instil a different scrutiny culture – one that is fit for purpose for the present and future council. These members are the building blocks to take the best of the past, historical scrutiny work, positive patterns of behaviour into the future plans and arrangement for scrutiny.

3.28 From discussions there is some uncertainty about the role that scrutiny should play in influencing and shaping policy as well as when to undertake scrutiny and holding to account decision makers.

3.29 Observation of recent meetings has shown some good cross-party team-based working (intentionally or unintentionally). We observed follow through based on historical knowledge of services and past decisions, discussion of and probing on issues and pushing for other members questions to be answered more fully irrespective of which political group the questioner is from. We would encourage this type of team behaviour as not only does it increase collaboration on core areas under discussion but more importantly it encourages a focus on outcomes. Having cross party shared ownership of the outcome of scrutiny discussion is an important component of effective scrutiny.

Role of cabinet members

3.30 We have been impressed with the commitment that cabinet members have shown towards the scrutiny function in our review. Having been involved in scrutiny work prior to the change of political control, they have direct knowledge and experience of the function's strengths and weaknesses. Ideas for improving and strengthening collaboration were shared with recognition that it requires support from key officers – specifically Chief Officers, Portfolio Advisors, Scrutiny Officers, Director of Law and the Head of Governance and Councillor Liaison. There is collective desire that scrutiny "has teeth, makes impact, makes a difference to policy and decisions." We have observed cabinet members attending scrutiny meetings and paying a lead role in answering questions and a willingness to provide additional information and support. A good example of this was the recent call-in of the decision relating to the Ebury Estate Renewal: Delivery Strategy and Viability Position.

3.31 The historical legacy of Cabinet member update reports dominating meetings adds to the lack of focus. The style of interaction is problematic as it comes over as scrutiny trying to performance manage the executive on day to day service based issues as opposed to holding it to account on decisions taken and the impact of these decisions. It is not clear what purpose these update reports provide other than to keep non-executive members informed and briefed on each Cabinet members portfolios. It should be noted though that some newly elected members have found these useful to understand what each cabinet member is doing. We encourage using a different method of informing and updating all members in the business of cabinet members outside of formal scrutiny meetings which would free up time to focus in depth on two substantive strategic areas at each meeting.

3.32 It is current practice for two cabinet members to attend each meeting. Inevitably the portfolio area of one cabinet member tends to dominate the meeting. We noted this particularly in housing related matters. This leaves less time for a discussion on the other portfolio. However, we noted a shift away from this historical practice to members preferring more thematic based discussion alternating between cabinet members at each meeting. We would encourage this development to ensure that only one cabinet member at a time attends a formal scrutiny meeting based on tighter area of focus and / or to alternate cabinet member attendance. For example, a more useful style of contribution would for a cabinet member to present on a significant piece of policy development they are initiating and inviting feedback from scrutiny members. There will be occasions though where it is not possible to restrict the number of cabinet members due to cross over between some portfolio boundaries - however the same principles should be followed to ensure best use of everyone's time through focussed scrutiny.

3.33 There is recognition that the council needs to develop an updated vision for scrutiny and work together to ensure that this vision is delivered through everyone's contribution making best use of time, focus on strategic priorities.

4.Information

4.1 Access to timely, meaningful, and relevant information cannot be understated. It is an essential tool which enables scrutiny members to be effective in role. It is also a basis upon which key lines of enquiry can be developed to support evidence gathering and in formulating SMART recommendations.

Reports and presentations

4.2 We noted that evidence and information is regularly available for scrutiny. Officers work hard to provide reports and material to support the work of the OSC and the P&SCs. This is reflected in the scrutiny reports which reference a wide range of data and evidence. It is important that this investment of time and effort is targeted efficiently. Cabinet members and Officers are keen to be at the receiving end of informed challenge from scrutiny Members as this can support strategic reflection and planning.

4.3 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 through producing a shared working agreement. These include:

- Ensuring there is regular, direct communication between scrutiny chairs, cabinet members and key officers to avoid 'over management' of scrutiny activities and risk of filtering out of topics, themes without the consent of scrutiny members and avoid misunderstanding of requests.
- Ensuring reports are focused on the agenda item and topic under consideration. Work programming and clear guidance on the scope of each scrutiny agenda item would enable Officers to tailor the information to the scrutiny focus. This includes Cabinet update reports produced by officers as they tend to focus on "showcasing positives from the department". Cut and pasting from other reports should be avoided. If cabinet updates are to continue then the content should be Cabinet member directed and led, and restricted to the area of focus, concern, that scrutiny members want to consider.
- Recognising any tendencies for Officer support to shift towards unintentionally overstepping their boundaries through leading content and direction which is more likely to suit their purpose thus ensuring scrutiny remains Member led and rooted in local need.
- Managing the size of reports to ensure useability as well as offering additional support for any accessibility issues.
- Ensuring the timely production of reports and information to ensure Members have sufficient preparation and reading time.
- Ensuring Members are familiar with the contents of reports before designing their questions and review enquiries. It should be a clear expectation that Members have read reports prior to the Committee sessions.
- Coordinating information from a range of different parts of the Council in a multi-departmental way –this is partly dependent on the clarity of the scoping and design of key lines of enquiry.

- The practice of reports being presented 'to note', or inviting speakers only to share information, should generally be avoided. As a matter of general principle, items for information or updates should be shared with Members as briefing notes outside of committee.
- Utilising tools at Scrutiny's disposal to receive information via briefing notes, webinars and keeping committee time for effective scrutiny.

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16

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4.4 With tighter scoping and being clear about the objectives sought from information requested would help the officers responsible for providing it. It would help define the most effective ways that the wider officer community can support the process and the needs of scrutiny Members.

Recommendation 4: Review how reports and information is supplied to scrutiny so that it supports the scrutiny objective, is not unnecessarily detailed and is understandable by Members. Specifically, consider the format, style, and content of performance management reports. These should be tailored to address the specific areas of focus to be considered by scrutiny.

Recommendation 5: Scrutiny committees must have ownership of their work programmes following advice from senior officers and partners. Final agreement of work programmes must rest with scrutiny members.

Recommendation 6 Scrutiny committees must be clear about content sought in report and presentations. These should be linked to objectives sought from the area under consideration.

Recommendation 7: Develop a 'house style' for scrutiny reports and briefings. This would ensure consistency of communication and reporting formats as well as help focus on purpose of an item for consideration by scrutiny.

Recommendation 8: Alternative arrangements to provide information type reports for scrutiny members so they can be considered outside of formal meetings. This should include signposting to council and partners key strategic documents.

Recommendation 9: Remove the historical practice of Cabinet update briefings to scrutiny committees. If they are to be retained, then briefings to be limited to one or two challenge or policy development areas.

5.Impact

Chairing, leading scrutiny, member development and meeting preparation

5.1 Scrutiny's success is dependent on the right Members, with the right capabilities and attributes, leading and managing the scrutiny function. The four scrutiny Chairs have a vital task in leading their respective Committees. Ensuring that each build and maintains strong relationships with the Cabinet, Officers and relevant external partners is a key leadership role. Exploration of the role that chairs should play between meetings highlighted the need for scrutiny officers to offer guidance.

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5.2 Chairs also lead on setting the working culture of scrutiny, helping it to set and uphold high standards of behaviour, engagement, and debate, ensuring good cross-party working. Although there is no single 'right' approach to selecting Chairs - the emphasis ought to be on selecting chairs based on skill set and capability and providing ongoing training and support. Given the dynamics within any Committee, skills to navigate differences to build consensus and collaboration will be essential.

5.3 Vice chairs have an important role too in their own right. In supporting the Chair to uphold and deliver the principles of scrutiny they are an essential component of ensuring that scrutiny standards and performance is achieved. When required and expected they can lead and provide direction on the Chair's behalf during meetings and outside of meetings. We would hope to see greater partnership and team working between scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs.

5.4 In addition to the areas highlighted above, the Chair and Vice Chair working together will

- be accountable for delivering the work programme
- meet regularly to monitor the work programme
- contribute to and develop 'team culture' amongst scrutiny members
- work closely with scrutiny officers
- develop a constructive 'critical friend' relationship with the executive and chief officers
- liaise with others to monitor the work programme and problem solve any issues, and
- actively look to improve scrutiny ways of working through considering best practice elsewhere.

5.5 We would encourage greater collaboration between scrutiny chairs to ensure that as a team they deliver Westminster's scrutiny vision. We would like to see the scrutiny chairs play a greater role in steering themselves and scrutiny members away from personal interest issues to a strategic perspective.

5.6 There was consensus from the scrutiny chairs that they wanted to focus on the impact of policies and strategies on residents, especially vulnerable residents alongside borough wide challenges. We would expect scrutiny chairs and members to be interested in for example falling school rolls, children placed outside of the borough, aspects of the council's transformation agenda, new commissioning intentions.

5.7 We heard of impactful scrutiny relating to a mental health facility's proposed closure. The scrutiny committee was challenging and held health partners to account effectively. Scrutiny members used their powers well and council officers worked well with the committee to highlight specific gaps of likely impact of the proposals and the committee is now continuing this work.

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5.8 There is a recognition that members of the four scrutiny Committees need to support the Chair and share responsibility for the success of the process. Several themes were identified for supporting the chairing function:

- Setting the culture and expectations prior to each meeting.
- Instilling scrutiny principles
- Developing a robust approach to summarising the outcomes of agenda items from the committee meetings and overall discussion.
- Ensuring clarity of recommendations and actions from each discussion.
- Managing the time and focus for each agenda item including the focus of questions and the amount of time given to each item.
- Ensuring committee members share a group working agreement for managing their contributions and supporting the meetings.

5.9 A number of these themes can be supported by recommendations elsewhere in this report related to work planning, group working agreements and tracking recommendations.

Recommendation 10: A programme of development support for scrutiny Chairs to support them in their scrutiny leadership roles.

Recommendation 11: Skills development sessions for scrutiny members to focus on questioning skills, work programming and scoping reviews, financial and performance management scrutiny skills.

Officer skills and capacity.

5.10 Staffing and the capacity to support scrutiny was frequently raised during the conversations. The following highlights issues and ways in which the scrutiny team and other officers can support scrutiny to be effective.

5.11 There is widespread appreciation for the new scrutiny team who currently support the various Scrutiny Committees. They are viewed as supportive, approachable, and committed. They have demonstrated flexibility and creativity in supporting the Committees despite being new in role. But there is also a recognition that to be effective, scrutiny needs a range of support from across the Council.

5.12 We noted that a considerable amount of staff time is taken up administering the meetings rather than facilitating the strategic elements of the scrutiny function. Although support is drawn from Officers across the Council its acknowledged that this does not lead to scrutiny specialist support. As our review progressed and at completion, we have seen changes to staffing and expect this to be part of ongoing development. New staff members

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have learnt the administrative processes of the Council and additional administration support has been provided to the function. This has created the space for the scrutiny officers to undertake more strategic advice and researching and drafting briefings type work. We would encourage ongoing discussion about how the professional strategic advice and support is enabling scrutiny members to achieve their outcomes and make impact.

5.13 There was considerable discussion about the skills set and experience of the scrutiny officer team. Experienced members were concerned at the length of time the organisation took to address officer capacity challenges over the past two years. They felt it was not a priority for the organisation. Some wanted the Review to note their disappointed at the loss of an experienced scrutiny officer. It is recognised that there was a period of turmoil with staffing due to a period of under resourcing. The Council has over the past six months moved into a period of rebuilding the scrutiny team.

5.14 There was some concern that members' need to have the lead scrutiny officer with appropriate scrutiny skills and experience was not taken seriously. We would suggest that there is scope within the existing team for this expertise to be rapidly acquired.

5.15 As a minimum we would expect specialist scrutiny officer team would offer:

- Establishing strategic relationships across the Council with Cabinet and Officers including the development of protocols and ways of working.
- Collating national and local research themes to inform scrutiny.
- Supporting the evolution of the work programme approach including scoping, agenda setting and key lines of enquiry.
- Facilitating public and stakeholder engagement activities to support the Committees to strengthen local voices and involvement in scrutiny.
- Using examples of good scrutiny practice and creative methods to inform local reviews
- Using research and analysis skills to draft reports, suggested questions, briefings, and recommendations
- Approaches using task & finish groups to enable scrutiny to explore issues in greater depth, reporting back to the main Committees for review and recommendations.

5.16 During the review several interviewees questioned whether the location of the officer team should be reviewed. Currently scrutiny officers are based in the Governance and Councillor Liaison Team. The Governance and Councillor Liaison Team is responsible for good governance across the council working to and on behalf of, the Director of Law, who in turn leads on all governance and scrutiny matters across the council. The Governance and Liaison Team in turn sit within the Directorate of Innovation and Change. The Director

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of Law holds regular 1:1s with the statutory scrutiny officer to provide guidance and work through issues. The Council may want to consider whether the current scrutiny officer reporting structure is organised in a way that is appropriate to the risks and challenges faced by the Council.

Recommendation 12: Ensure that there is a development plan for the scrutiny team which includes formal and informal mentoring and coaching. We have been advised arrangements are in place for this to happen.

Work programming and focus

5.17 Each of the Committees has their own work programme. There is a planning process at the start of each year with a published plan that consolidates the work across the different Committees. For understandable reasons this process has taken longer in the first year of the new administration. A decision was taken by the Chair of the OSC not to establish any task and finish groups in this year to allow scrutiny members to settle into their new roles. The OSC oversees the work programmes of the Policy and Scrutiny Committees and provides coordination especially on areas that cut across more than one P&SC.

5.18 We observed that work programmes are overburdened with too much activity and full agendas focussed on reports and presentations. It is not always clear where impact and value is being added. From our observations and evidence gathering the OSC and the P&SCs need to ensure greater clarity about what they are trying to achieve or what impact they are aiming to make. Scrutiny cannot scrutinise everything, nor is it necessary to do so, therefore establishing realistic priorities based on clear objectives is essential.

5.19 Work programming is key to ensuring scrutiny stays focussed on strategic issues where it can make an impact, whilst making the best use of time and resources. Prioritisation is essential and helps the avoidance of duplication.

5.20 The best work programmes are closely aligned to the Corporate Plan, the Forward Plan, and a balance between internal and external issues. This enables scrutiny to focus on accountability and delivery issues.

5.21 We note that the current work programmes are interim plans to cover the new Council's first year in control. New work programmes are under development and will be finalised soon. It is important to stress that work programming is a dynamic and ongoing process. Whilst an annual work programming session helps to identify priorities and provide structure for the year ahead, there still needs to be flexibility in the work programme and take time to revisit the relevance of topics as the local context changes.

5.22 Members want work programmes to be strategic and consider corporate wide priorities in good time even on areas that the Council may find difficult. Several members stated that scrutiny should consider rationale and options around complex and/ or high spend areas to test out value for money against expected outcomes.

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5.23 On a strategic level there needs to be more of an emphasis on seeing scrutiny as a vital part of council business and governance with clear ownership regarding its important role in improving policy and holding to account.

5.24 Consideration of pre-decision scrutiny activity would be useful as this has a crucial role in shaping, improving, and influencing future Council plans. This would require collaboration with and a commitment from the Leader and Cabinet to ensure earlier and timely access to information.

5.25 Expanding collaboration is a priority for all the scrutiny Chairs. Building collaborative opportunities into the work programme approach can enable Members to identify stakeholders and evidence to enhance their reviews. Some members and officers are already considering ways to strengthen scrutiny in adult social care, children's, engagement with health partners, and community groups.

5.26 Feedback also emphasised the ongoing training needs for Members to help understand changes and developments to public services systems like the emerging Integrated Care Systems and ways to formulate effective scrutiny reviews across the local and system levels in health. There is also a desire to increase patient and carer engagement.

5.27 Collaboration with systems like the Health and Wellbeing and Crime and Disorder is vital. There is also a desire to strengthen the focus on inequalities, addressing poverty, cost of living and Climate Change.

5.28 Collaboration can be developed by clear communication, creative approaches, mapping partners and opportunities as well as sharing the purpose of scrutiny in terms of impact and service improvement.

5.29 Arrangements have recently been put in place to ensure regular meetings between scrutiny chairs and cabinets members supported by officers. These regular meetings will provide opportunities for a stronger Member led work programme that focuses on accountability and more strategic areas as well as ensuring scrutiny maintains a 'watching brief' for emerging issues.

5.30 Feedback indicates that scrutiny Members can find it challenging to lead and contribute to the work programme. Without active Member engagement and clear objectives, the agendas can result in adding additional items simply to receive reports to note rather than aligning to Committee priorities and key lines of enquiry with the practice of Cabinet update briefings dominating.

5.31 Clear opportunities to strengthen the planning process for each Committee are available:

- Using a consistent work planning tool to support each body to create a balanced work plan that is manageable and relevant.

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- Focusing on key issues where scrutiny can make a significant impact. Working closely with senior Officers, Cabinet Members, and strategic partners to understand the most challenging issues around Council delivery and outcomes.
- Identifying the areas where there are already robust forms of accountability and scrutiny in the Council and wider system – where possible avoid replication or where added-value is minimal.
- Highlighting the issues that are high priorities for residents and that reflect their concerns.
- Focusing on two or three substantive issues in a meeting to ensure impact.
- Linking the work planning to the scoping process for specific review topics.
- Embedding public engagement activities more centrally to the planning process.
- Task and finish groups.

Recommendation 13: Place the work programme to the beginning of meetings so it can benefit from more considered discussion rather than it being a rushed discussion at the end of the meeting. In light of discussions at meetings it may be necessary to return to the work programme at the end of a meeting.

Recommendation 14: Strengthen existing collaborative relationships between scrutiny, Cabinet and Directors whilst maintaining the independence of scrutiny. Early and 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 15: Mapping collaboration opportunities for scrutiny across a full range of local and system wide partners and stakeholders. This can then be used in the scoping of scrutiny reviews and the identification of key lines of enquiry.

Recommendation 16: Strengthen the Member led work programme with a refreshed process that uses systematic scrutiny tools to identify and prioritise agenda items, key lines of enquiry and potential impact.

Pre-meetings

5.32 Pre-meetings prior to the Committee meetings can help to revisit the purpose of specific agenda items, set objectives, align approaches, and focus on desired outcomes. Pre-meetings also offer a space to raise any concerns or relationship issues before these are taken into the public forum. Holding these directly before a meeting takes place is not ideal as it doesn't allow time and space for individual members to review, reflect and refine their thinking, approach, and contribution at the meeting.

5.33 Some concerns were raised about additional time pressures that pre meetings placed on members already busy diaries. Some saw little value in pre meetings as they didn't have a clear aim or purpose. Others saw the benefits as sharing and developing questions as well helping to build relationships.

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Recommendation 17: Ensure cross-party pre-meetings are held (ideally) a few days before the meeting and led in a way that helps committee members prepare for scrutiny sessions by reviewing the key lines of enquiry and coordinating approaches.

Scoping

5.34 There are also opportunities to enhance the scoping process for individual review topics. This can support Members to prioritise the key lines of enquiry for their questions and evidence review. Scoping can also support the formulation of recommendations by establishing clear objectives for each review. Examples from elsewhere like holding scrutiny cafes or mini conferences can provide local learning for different ways to scope reviews and engage wider voices.

Recommendation 18: Use benchmarking and share good practice case studies to promote examples of 'what good scrutiny looks like' to inform reviews and design challenge questions.

Questioning

5.35 Questioning is a core component of effective scrutiny. Successful questioning not only leads to answers but also helps to build relationships. It is important to ensure Members can coordinate their questions and contributions with the work programme. Feedback indicates that meetings can lack coordination and engagement from all Members. The political issues addressed earlier can mean that Members can be at cross purposes in their approaches. This risks key evidence being missed or lack of focus for how limited Committee time is used.

5.36 Support to design challenge questions that highlight, and probe different evidence sources was felt to be beneficial. Members are interested to consider new ways to hear from Westminster's residents to highlight aspects of service performance and quality. This engagement should contribute to evidence-based scrutiny recommendations.

Using members local knowledge

5.37 It is recognised that Members have strong knowledge and expertise around their own wards. This offers a rich source of local insight and information across Westminster. However, it needs to be used strategically. In our observations we noted several ward and

parochial issues being raised which although interesting and topical took up far too much time. The time could have been better spent on strategic issues and questioning.

5.38 Members stated that they often feel most confident in scrutiny when they can relate topics to this local experience. Supporting Members to use these ward level experience in strategic ways, highlighting connections to organisational contexts can enhance constructive challenge and accountability. It is important that Members and Officers can

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24

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work together to locate resident stories and testimony in the wider system and decision-making processes. At the same time, Members need to feel confident to signpost individual issues to other parts of the Council when advocating for their residents rather than waiting for or using the scrutiny process as they know that there will a Cabinet and or at Director at meetings.

Pre and post decision

5.39 Members are particularly keen to enhance their participation in policy development and pre-scrutiny in Westminster. 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, overview, consultation design and forward planning. Pre decision scrutiny requires buy in from Cabinet members. Without it and as has been highlighted by some interviewees, scrutiny members have only been made aware of some issues when it is too late to contribute.

5.40 As pre decision scrutiny is planned during the work programme phase, developing a pre-scrutiny protocol with Cabinet is an effective way to identify these areas and agree a process for how these are brought to scrutiny. This can take place immediately before a decision, but this will place limitations on the impact that scrutiny can make. Scrutiny carried out well in advance of the decision will allow more time to delve into and explore the issues and likely impact of the decision taking into consideration any risks and measures of success.

5.41 At the same time, we feel that scrutiny would benefit from considering the impact it can make at all points in the decision-making cycle in the Council. During the conversations there was a tendency to see pre-scrutiny as the solution to enhancing scrutiny and demonstrating influence. This reflects local experience and challenges of agenda setting whereby items are brought to scrutiny at points where decisions are imminent or have only recently been made. Post-decision scrutiny is also essential, holding the Council to account for the implementation of decisions and assessing the impact on peoples' lives. This then feeds into learning and can be applied to future decisions. A work programme that balances scrutiny across all points in the organisational cycle is likely to be most effective – with Members able to scope the key points at which scrutiny can make a positive contribution.

5.42 A good example of this is the timing of the Budget Task Group. This Task Group is the scrutiny committee that considers the Council's Draft budget. It typically holds three meetings in January each year. In practical terms this leaves very little time to influence and shape draft budget proposals, savings options before the Council makes it decision on the budget going forward. We suggest moving the work of this Task Group earlier in Autumn and for it have its membership agreed at the Annual Council meeting.

5.43 It is good practice for relevant areas of the draft budget to be considered by the relevant scrutiny committee. For example, the children's budget areas to be considered by the Children's Scrutiny Committee. We also suggest that each of the scrutiny committees carries out service specific budget and financial performance monitoring tied to quarterly performance reporting. However, this should not duplicate the work of the Audit and

Performance Committee or the Budget Task Group. The Audit and Performance Committee could refer specific risk areas to scrutiny for more detailed considered. This will require supporting members in developing their financial scrutiny skills.

Recommendation 19: Develop a protocol between Cabinet and Scrutiny around the role of Scrutiny in pre-scrutiny and policy development.
   a) **identify how and when policy development items come to scrutiny and how recommendations are embedded in Council processes and timelines.**
   b) **Ensure scrutiny's input into policy development can be early and constructive. This will require scrutiny being given early access, information, and clear line of sight to new policy areas are in open discussion stage.**

Recommendation 20: Develop an approach for post implementation scrutiny.

Recommendation 21: Strengthen finance scrutiny through member development and through rigorous and early involvement of budget scrutiny activity where scrutiny is embedded and aligned with the budget process.

Impact through recommendations

5.44 There is a strong desire in Westminster to enhance the impact of scrutiny. Demonstrating that scrutiny can make a difference in measurable ways for local people. To achieve this, it is important to develop effective recommendations and track their impact. Many of the recommendations we have seen across all the Committees are of the nature of noting reports, asking for more information and updates, and giving assurance that scrutiny has seen key Council documents.

5.45 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.
- 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.

5.46 There is concern that responses to scrutiny recommendations are not actively monitored. Coupled with the uncertainty about whose responsibility it is to monitor and track the implementation of agreed scrutiny recommendations makes it difficult to assess

the effectiveness of scrutiny efforts. This offers the basis for more in-depth dialogue as recommendations evolve into more substantive proposals and challenges.

5.47 Each committee has an action tracker which collates actions relevant to that committee. These are updated and published with each agenda. A central tracking tool would support Scrutiny to maintain an overview of recommendations, enhance accountability and assess effectiveness of scrutiny. This could then link back to agendas for subsequent Committee meetings.

5.48 Cross-cutting issues such as the wider determinants of health and climate change have real impact on residents' lives and can extend beyond the remit of each Committee. Taking a joined-up systems wide approach to cross-cutting issues on occasions will be important. The OSC is well placed to consider these system wide issues leaving the P&SCs to focus on strategic areas.

5.49 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 for the function itself and the council. Applying the principles of challenge to how it uses its time and resources most effectively.

5.50 The Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission Annual report should include a report on any learning from the scrutiny activities.

- **Recommendation 22: Focus on smaller sets of high-quality recommendations from scrutiny reviews.**

- **Recommendation 23: Enhance the system for tracking recommendations over time – identify the impact and learning from specific recommendations as well as factors that produce effective recommendations.**

- **Recommendation 24: Use a self-assessment tool to support the annual review and evaluation of scrutiny.**

6. Committee structure and scheduling

6.1 The Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Commission (OSC) as its lead Scrutiny Committee and four Policy and Scrutiny Committees (P&SCs). Their role and terms of reference are set out in the Council's Constitution.

6.2 The P&SCs mirror Cabinet member portfolios. This is seen as problematic by some and would welcome scrutiny committees to be organised around key strategic themes. We agree as it would avoid the performance management style approach undertaken by scrutiny members of individual cabinet members at meetings, by shifting the conversation to core themes and performance areas and not the performance of individuals.

6.3 Many interviewees suggested renaming the OSC to the 'Overview and Scrutiny Committee'. We agree with the use of 'Committee' rather than Commission as it better describes its role as the 'parent committee' and avoids confusion with any other

Commissions established by the Council, for example 'The Future of Westminster' Commission.

6.4 We consider two high risk service areas, Children's, and Adults, being considered by one committee is problematic. It leaves scrutiny members on that committee with limited time to properly test and challenge assumptions and key risk performance areas. We would suggest that each of these areas is considered by two separate Committees.

6.5 Another key issue raised by both Members and Officers relates to the number and scheduling of meetings. Concerns were raised from all perspectives as to whether this was both efficient, proportionate, and captured opportunities to influence decisions. We would suggest looking at the number of scrutiny meetings in the context of the overall purpose of scrutiny in Westminster and the other issues identified in this review.

6.6 The current challenges identified were:

- Aligning agenda items to Cabinet and key partners decision making timetables.
- The use of meetings for activities that may be better delivered outside the formal public Scrutiny arena such as Member education sessions and briefings.
- Evidence of a lack of impact and outcomes from these agenda items in terms of substantiative recommendations and action points.
- High demands on staff and some cabinet members both to support the meetings and to attend to provide information and presentations.

6.7 We suggest there are opportunities to coordinate meetings more efficiently to enable Scrutiny to focus on a smaller set of priorities. A more robust work programme across all the thematic areas to guide this work will help. This would help identify the core purpose and activities for scrutiny. A structure review would be able to identify the best way to deliver this. This may have an impact on staffing arrangements and organisation. A deeper consideration would highlight any potential to manage the number of meetings by merging and integrating elements of the current Policy and Scrutiny Committees.

6.8 As pointed out earlier on there is a desire to carry out pre-decision scrutiny which we would encourage. This will require scheduling meetings so that there is good time for pre decision activity to take place and provide the outcome of this to decision makers in good time for consideration.

6.9 We are aware that a work programme for 2023/24 is almost complete. We suggest that this is revisited in six months' time following any structural changes to the scrutiny committees.

6.10 Scrutiny members with experience of task and finish groups spoke positively about these as they felt they worked delivering good recommendations. The groups operate in a less formal way than standard committee meetings and this had benefits for the level of interaction and engagement with a wider group of people. Evidence gathering can also be

collated through different approaches for example through 'scrutiny in a day' to 'challenge panels' to 'café' style sessions.

Recommendation 25: Review the structure of Overview and Scrutiny in Westminster to identify opportunities to consolidate and integrate functions in the most efficient and proportionate ways.

Recommendation 26: Scrutiny of children's services (and associated areas) be separated from Adult Care and Health, possibly establishing a committee for each service area.

Recommendation 27: Ensure task & finish groups consider deeper explorations of more complex topics in the work programme.

7. Public engagement

7.1 There is a general recognition that scrutiny needs to enhance its engagement with the public. We noted that this is welcomed and encouraged by the political leadership. This offers a positive opportunity to think about how scrutiny's role and plans could support and contribute to the Council's wider community engagement strategy.

7.2 An illustration of potential contribution comes from the Chair of the Budget Task Group's blog to the public explaining what budget scrutiny is and its importance. A simple and straight forward way of both publicising the work of scrutiny and hoping to draw in interest in its work from the public.

7.3. This example of individual good practice could be scaled up throughout scrutiny. We are encouraged that public engagement was frequently raised as a goal for scrutiny.

7.4 Public observation and participation in Committee meetings through a question time agenda item is one element of increasing involvement. It is also proactively reaching out to local groups to gain insights and evidence to inform reviews and formulate key lines of enquiry. Scrutiny may also build questions around the efficacy and learning from public involvement functions into its exploration of services, systems, and decision-making.

Recommendation 28: Develop a public engagement strategy for scrutiny that can be embedded across all Committees through the work programming approach.

Thank you and acknowledgements.

We would like to thank the Chairs, Members of Scrutiny Committees, the Cabinet Members and Officers who took part in interviews for their time, insights, and open views.

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29

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Yours sincerely,

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30

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