

# Draft Annual Scrutiny Report

## 2022/23

# Scrutiny Chairs 2022/23



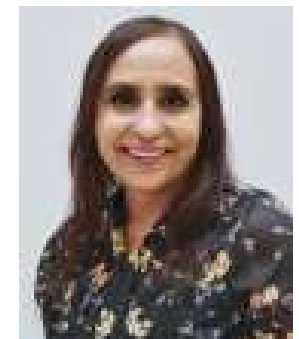
**Cllr Harjinder Gahir**  
Overview & Scrutiny  
Committee



**Cllr Ruqayah Begum**  
Customer &  
Community Scrutiny  
Panel



**Cllr Naveeda Qaseem**  
People Scrutiny  
Panel



**Cllr Maroof Mohammad**  
Place Scrutiny  
Panel

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# 1. Chair's Introduction



**Cllr Harjinder Gahir**  
**Chair**  
Overview & Scrutiny  
Committee 2022/23

I am pleased to present the Annual Scrutiny Report for the 2022/23 municipal year which describes what we have done, and how the work of my committee and its panels has changed and improved over the past year.

It continues to be a very challenging time for the Council and I have worked hard to make sure Overview and Scrutiny is playing its part in the council's improvement and recovery. For scrutiny members this has been a year of reflection, learning, planning and change, ready for a new cohort of scrutiny members in May 2023. This report describes that journey, which I am proud to have led.

This year hinged around the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's recommendations for our future scrutiny arrangements, endorsed by my committee and the Council in November. While I do have some reservations about moving to a single scrutiny committee, our Task and Finish Groups pilot was a resounding success, showing how much scrutiny could achieve next year when this becomes a standard way of working. But it will be critical to ensure that the new scrutiny function is sufficiently and permanently resourced.

Our other main focus this year has been to improve, again, our approach to scrutiny of budget and savings proposals. Scrutiny members have been engaged early and often in scrutiny of every directorate savings proposal and the draft budget. Alongside this the O&S Committee began to monitor non-financial aspects of the Council's improvement and recovery, laying the ground for next year's Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee.

I would like to thank all the members of the Committee and scrutiny panels for their work. There is much still to do but I can also say that much progress has been made. I hope we have laid a strong platform during this year of change, on which the next four years of impactful overview and scrutiny will be built.

## 2. A transitional year – the context

In October 2021 an [external assurance review](#) of Slough Borough Council was published. This included a [governance review by Jim Taylor](#) for the Secretary of State, dated September 2021. This included the following statement:

“The scrutiny function is under resourced and there is no permanent statutory scrutiny officer. All seven meetings of Scrutiny Committees were cancelled in June and July of 2021. The interim Head of Democratic services left the organisation in July 2021. Elected Members indicate they require additional scrutiny resource to carry out their function effectively. Members state that scrutiny reports are complex and hard to interpret, and it is difficult for lay people to challenge. It is acknowledged that some reports have not been given enough scrutiny. Slough Children First refer to an inadequate focus on their activity within the scrutiny function. Members also state that there is has been an ‘erosion of trust’ with officer reports, considering ‘what has happened’. There is no scrutiny forward plan.”

In December 2021 the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (“the Secretary of State”) made [Directions to Slough Borough Council](#) under the Local Government Act 1999 which included the following [in section 3 of Annexe A](#):

“In the first three months prepare and agree an Improvement Plan to the satisfaction of the Commissioners (which may include or draw upon improvement or action plans prepared before the date of these Directions), with resource allocated accordingly, and as a minimum, the following components:

...

An action plan to achieve improvements in relation to the proper functioning of the scrutiny function...”

At the time of the Jim Taylor report, Slough Borough Council also commissioned the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) to do a review of its scrutiny function. This review was carried out after commissioners had then been appointed. The CfGS report was eventually published in November 2022. It included a number of recommendations which were considered advisable for the further improvement of SBC’s scrutiny function. The recommendations were not binding, but they were evidenced, authoritative and public.

## 2. A transitional year – the response

In response to the Secretary of State's Directions, a Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan and Democratic Governance Improvement Action Plan were created in-year, and both have been monitored by Commissioners via the Improvement and Recovery Board. The Scrutiny Action Plan was [received in full by the O&S Committee in November 2022](#) and again in [February 2023 \(see p.70 at link\)](#).

The Action Plans include various actions to improve the functioning of scrutiny, many of which were completed during this year, such as:

- Scrutiny training to councillors and officers, and report-writing training for officers.
- The Head of Service role for the function has been re-filled and made Statutory Scrutiny Officer.
- Scrutiny officer capacity was built back into the Democratic Services budget, recruitment of which has been attempted twice so far without success in the market.
- A Work programming exercise was completed with all scrutiny members.
- A pilot of three focused Task & Finish groups was completed, including one focused on Slough Children First.
- An improved budget scrutiny process was agreed and delivered.
- Shadow arrangements in place for a new structure focused on the council's improvement and recovery

In addition to this, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee [endorsed the CfGS's recommendations in November 2022](#) albeit with an additional recommendation that the option of two committees also be given consideration. They asked Full Council to set up a Members Working Group for the purpose of proposing a final scrutiny structure to the Council's AGM in May 2023. Full Council in turn endorsed the recommendations and set up the group, made up of scrutiny chairs, cabinet members and the leader of the opposition. This group has met twice in January and February to progress this work.

To maximise the success of next year's new arrangements, scrutiny transitioned to shadow arrangements anticipating the future structure. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee took a stronger lead role on Improvement and Recovery monitoring as well as budget scrutiny, while the Panels freed up resources for a Task and Finish Groups Pilot – see below. A single combined work programme for all four committees was in place.

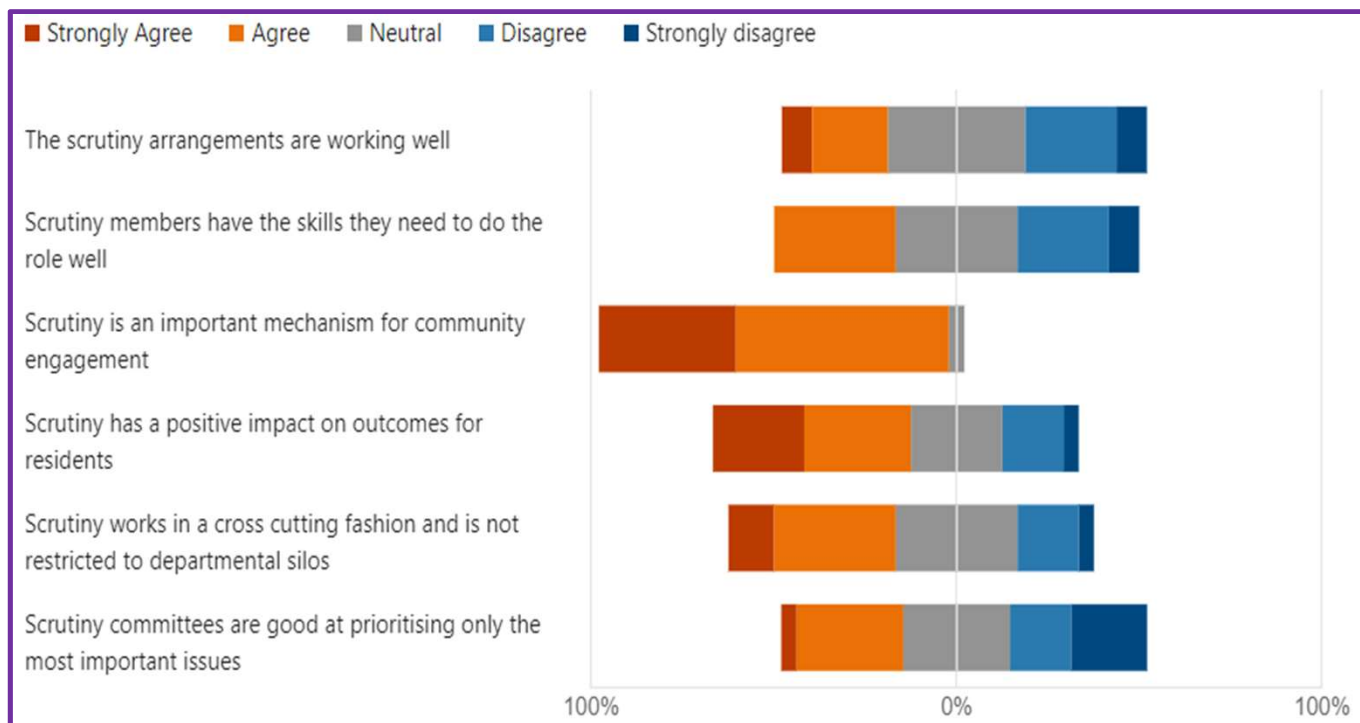
# 3. Measuring Scrutiny improvement (a)

All Members were surveyed in January – February 2023. The survey was extensive covering a range of topics. Almost 60% of members responded (24/42) providing a range of insights to support the council's improvement and recovery. The full results will be reported to the Standards Committee in April.

As well as sections about culture, member support and member wellbeing, there were sections about Democratic Governance and Scrutiny. It is to be hoped that these results show some improvement on where they would have been before the current intervention, but there is no data baseline against which to measure before now. Nevertheless this data does provide an insight into members' current views and a baseline for the future.

Of the 24 respondents, 10 were Scrutiny members.

While almost every member agreed that Scrutiny is important – which is itself an improvement on the position reported previously - only a minority of members could agree that the scrutiny arrangements are working well, or that scrutiny members have the skills they need to do the job well. There appears to be room to improve scrutiny's effectiveness at prioritising only the most important issues, which would presumably increase the overall impact of scrutiny.



# 3. Measuring Scrutiny improvement (b)

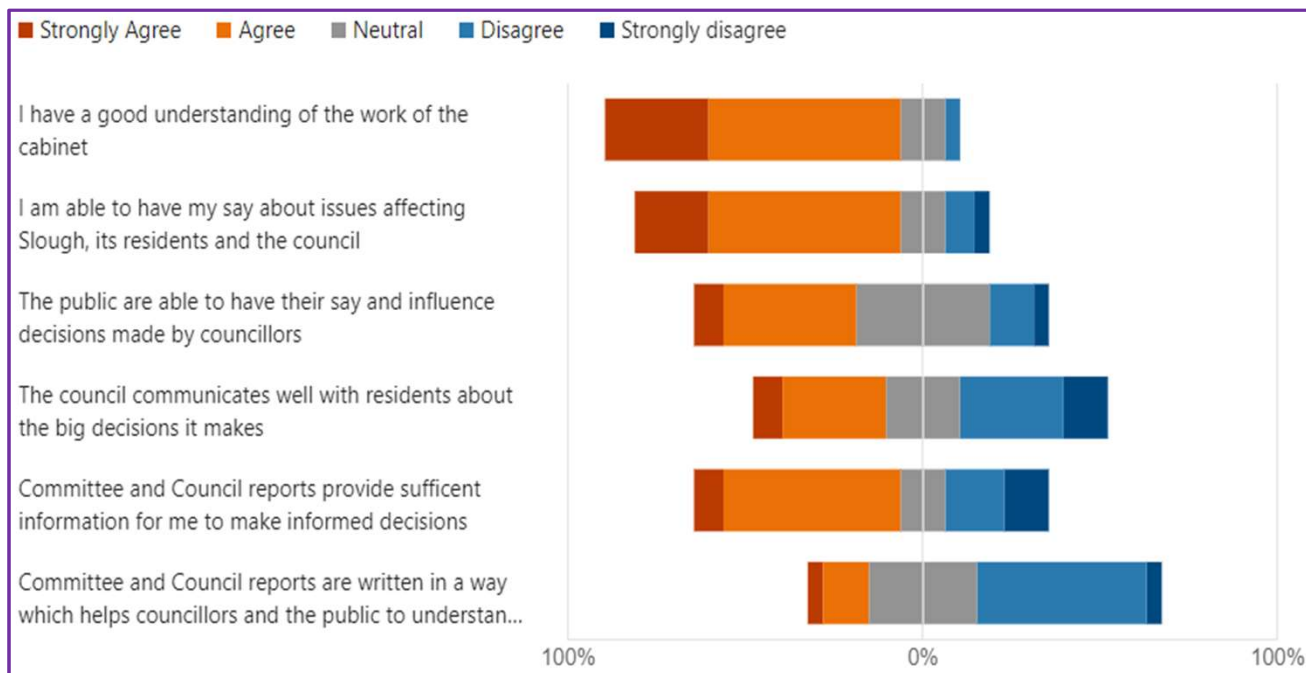
Other questions in the member survey asked about the wider democratic arena. This includes but is not limited to Overview and Scrutiny.

It is very positive that members generally feel they are able to have their say about issues affecting Slough, its residents and the Council.

But Members appear less confident about residents' ability to have their say, and especially the council's effectiveness at communicating with residents. It is not clear to what extent this latter point refers to councillors' own role in communicating with residents either directly or via scrutiny.

The issue of report quality and clarity has been raised consistently by external reviews over the past few years and, while it probably shows progress that the majority of members feel that they are given sufficient information to inform their decisions, there are still a significant number who do not, and the issue of clarity for members and the public was still strongly raised.

The survey will be conducted annually to allow tracking of improvement, and comparison between member cohorts.





## 4. Annual Review - Scrutiny members' workshop

A workshop was held on 2 March 2023 for the purposes of:

- 1) Reviewing the past year to inform the Scrutiny Annual Report
- 2) Collecting further qualitative information alongside the Member Survey, to inform the improvement of the Scrutiny function
- 3) Making recommendations to next year's Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee about areas which they may wish to prioritise.

Ten of the 24 scrutiny members attended. A summary of the outputs from parts 1) and 2) above are on the following slides. Part 3) is addressed in part 8



## 4. Annual Review – O&S Committee (a)

### What went well?

- Reviewing detail of contract performance at the outset of the year was a good insight – helped us identify new issues
- Task & Finish Groups were really good
  - The work they did, and the support from officers - the whole thing was really good
- Budget process began much earlier – previously has always felt rushed
- Some report layouts were much better eg Richard West's and Stephen Mair's
- Much fewer acronyms and jargon in most reports now
- Leader & most of Cabinet attending O&S more often
- Chairing of O&S Cttee has been good this year, more info shared with committee.
- Pre-meetings and training has been good. Members are better trained now and must keep it up.
- Enjoyed meeting Ian from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to consider proposals for becoming more effective next year. Good to ask him direct questions.

- Support from Democratic Services is appreciated.
- More structured way of approaching questioning this year
- Chair and Vice Chair have good and productive working relationship
- Good that new members had the confidence to raise questions.

### What didn't go so well?

- Some reports still not well laid out eg Children's reports
- Need Cabinet to attend and answer more questions
- Need to plan better for Police and Crime items
- Perhaps too many new councillors on the committee at once, it might be better to have a different balance of experience
- Need more training on how committees work for new councillors eg talking through the Chair
- Missed our dedicated scrutiny resource – could have been recruited faster.

## 4. Annual Review – O&S Committee (b)

### Hopes for the future

- “I’d like to be on a T&F next year, I can see now I’d enjoy that”
- Recruitment of permanent dedicated Scrutiny Officer
- Must make sure we don’t lose sight of scrutinising front line services when the structure changes
- Cabinet to attend and front items – answer questions with occasional reference to officers rather than all the questions going directly to officers (not all cabinet members do this currently eg the O&S Cttee budget scrutiny sessions towards the end of the year were good)
- Need an action tracker showing progress of recommendations made to cabinet
- Scrutiny Chairs should present their committees’ recommendations at Cabinet/Council themselves.
- The Vice Chair hopes the Chair will continue next year.
- Better quality reports
- To see more improvement in the Council’s performance.



# 4. Annual Review – People Scrutiny Panel

## What went well?

- The Task and Finish Group
  - Dedicated group
  - More informal setting
  - Split the workload between members
  - Made strong recommendations
  - Able to engage people outside of formal committees eg D&E Commissioner
- Good communication and working together as a panel
- Pre-meetings have been useful

## What didn't go so well?

- The T&F time commitment was significant
- Lack of coverage of education issues
  - Should be more prominent in work programme
  - This issue has been picked up in audit reports
- Work programming
  - We did not deliver what we agreed at the June work programming session
  - Agendas need to be agreed further in advance

## Hopes for the future

- Would like to see one education topic on every agenda
- How do we deal with 'less important' issues?
- Better report writing
  - Better use of executive summaries
  - Providing glossaries or using plain English in reports!
- Budget scrutiny
  - More explanation of reports
  - More use of appendices / explanatory notes eg for budget presentations
- Pre-meetings
  - Suggested questions to be prepared in advance and discussed at the pre-meeting

## 4. Annual Review – Place, Customer & Community Panels

*These committees conducted joint budget scrutiny during 2022/23 and reviewed their year together:*

### **What went well?**

- Osborne
  - scrutinising will make the next contract better for residents and better value for money
- Green bins
  - lots of questions were dealt with
  - Members' feedback was taken on board
- Asset Disposal
  - Many of members' questions were resolved
- Houses of Multiple Occupation
  - Made some good recommendations to officers

### **What didn't go so well?**

- Bus Lane – residents wishes and needs were not accommodated
- 2-weekly waste collection – members not able to amend the recommendation
- Charges at recycling centre – has resulted in more fly tipping

### **Hopes for the future**

- Concerned about the workload of the new Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – hope it will be able to scrutinise in depth
- Recommendations from Task and Finish Groups should be agreed
- Report authors must attend and Cabinet Members should attend to respond to questions

## 5. Task and Finish Groups pilot (a)

Three Task and Finish Groups were commissioned this year in order to pilot the proposed future ways of working while making concrete recommendations for the improvement of Council services. The hypothesis was that T&F work, while often quite resource-intensive, tends to produce more concrete and better informed recommendations, while being more rewarding for the Members involved.

The Task and Finish Groups covered the following topics:

- Contract Management (O&S Committee)
- Complaint Handling (Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel)
- Slough Children First - Workforce Strategy Business Case (People Scrutiny Panel)

A fourth Task and Finish Group was proposed on the topic of Waste Disposal and Recycling, but members of the Place Scrutiny Panel instead looked at this topic in-committee.

**All recommendations from all three T&F groups were accepted in full by the Cabinet.**

These recommendations will be included in a new Recommendations Tracker so that progress of implementation can be monitored by scrutiny members and the public.

Learning from the process of conducting the T&Fs has been fed into the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan. The feedback (above) from Committee members all raised the T&Fs as a highlight of their year in scrutiny. Further feedback follows, from the council's government-appointed Commissioners and from the officers who supported the T&F groups.

## 5. Task and Finish Groups pilot (b)

### Commissioner Feedback:

- Contract management
  - “The task and finish group has produced **a well-researched and useful report. All involved should be congratulated.** The recommendations are supported as their implementation will be a significant step in meeting the Direction.”
- Complaint Handling
  - “This is **a well-researched and documented report and those involved should be commended...**In due course Scrutiny may want to review how their recommendations were implemented. It may be useful as part of that review to look at the areas that generate the most complaints and how these are dealt with.”
- Review of Workforce Strategy Business Case for Slough Children First
  - “Commissioners would like to commend the task and finish group for the work they put in and the scope of their coverage. The approach they have followed and the learning they have obtained should flow through into future work and **members should be thanked for setting such a good standard.** DLUHC Commissioners look forward to reviewing the responses and implementation plans that follow the recommendations.”

## 5. Task and Finish Groups pilot (c)

### Feedback from Officers who supported the Task and Finish Groups:

#### What went well?

- Has strengthened the relationship with members through productive informal contact with members.
- Especially a good way of junior staff to have exposure to political domain without being in a formal setting.
- Created a platform for frank and honest conversations in which councillors get to understand some of the detailed issues which one doesn't get to raise in a formal setting.
- Members have had the flexibility to decide what they want to know about these topic areas to improve their knowledge.
- It has been a great mythbuster.
- Has been a great way to get a qualitative discussion going amongst members rather than just looking at data etc.
- Has definitely helped councillors learn about the barriers faced by the council as well as the issues we need to fix.
- Has shown a joint commitment to trying to address some fundamental areas within the council that need to work well (eg contract management, complaints - fundamental prerequisites of being able to operate a good council).
- We saw progress at the three final meetings, with councillors presenting the reports in the formal meetings, and cabinet members receiving the issues, rather than officers presenting or receiving / answering questions.
- Has felt like a good way to demonstrate to members the skills and ability of SBC's officers.

**“If there was another opportunity to do this, I would do it, because it has been so good. It has been time consuming, but I would even consider getting involved in doing this in other people's service areas because of how rewarding it has been.”**



## 6. Scrutiny of Improvement and Recovery

A critical role for Overview and Scrutiny as a whole this year was to hold the Executive to account on progress against the Directions set by the Secretary of State while representing the voice of residents by giving strong consideration to the potential impacts of proposed savings and changes to service delivery.

All four scrutiny committees took part in a multi-step scrutiny of the emerging savings and associated impact assessments, which spanned multiple meetings over the full course of the year. The process was kicked off with briefings for all scrutiny members and several training sessions and briefings were delivered for scrutiny members in pre-meetings across the course of the year. In response to the changing shape of the organisation, the Place Scrutiny Panel conducted most of this process in joint meetings with the Customer and Community Scrutiny Panel.

Furthermore, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, mindful of its role in the transition to a future Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee, commenced a programme of regular items to focus on the full Improvement and Recovery Programme. In this way, members have received and scrutinised in the public domain detailed papers which the organisation now prepares for the purpose of reporting to the Secretary-of-State-appointed Commissioners at monthly Improvement and Recovery Board meetings.

**The Member Working Group on Scrutiny has agreed to recommend to Council in May 2023 that the following be the core terms of reference for next year's Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee:**

- Monitoring and driving Improvement against any Directions by the Secretary of State and other external or internal inspections/reviews/performance information.
- Monitoring and driving progress of major corporate improvement initiatives eg transformation programmes, major programmes of savings delivery, culture change, governance improvement
- Scrutinising and inputting into the council's budget-setting cycle and monitoring the council's financial recovery progress
- Scrutinising proposals for, and delivery of, major savings initiatives, including their impact on partners and residents.
- Commissioning Task and Finish Groups to investigate specific discrete questions or issues

## 7. 2022/23 Scrutiny items (a)

### May – July 2022

- PEOPLE: [Re-Procurement of Community Equipment Service](#)
- PEOPLE: [Re-Procurement of Extra Care Contract](#)
- PLACE: [Bus Enhanced Partnership](#)
- CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Houses of Multiple Occupation](#)
- CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Call Centre Statistics](#)
- O&S: [Budget Process](#)
- O&S: [Contract Management/Procurement](#)

### August – October 2022

- CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Housing Regulation Enforcement, Licensing and Civil Financial Penalties Policies](#)
- PLACE: [Waste and Recycling](#)
- PEOPLE: [Home to School Travel Assistance and Post 16 Travel Assistance](#)
- O&S: [Financial Action Plan](#)
- O&S: [Financial Update - 2022/23](#)
- CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Task & Finish Group: Complaints Handling](#)
- PEOPLE: [Slough Children First \(SCF\) Business Planning - Task and Finish Group](#)

# 7. 2022/23 Scrutiny items (b)

## November – December 2022

- O&S: [Improvement and Recovery update](#)
- O&S: [Scrutiny Improvement Review](#)
- O&S and all Panels: [Financial Overview](#)
- O&S: [Chief Operating Officer budget proposals and Finance & Commercial budget proposals](#)
- PLACE with CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Place & Communities and Housing & Property budget proposals](#)
- PEOPLE: [Adults Social Care Budget Proposals 2023/24](#)

## January – March 2023

- Member Working Group on Scrutiny – meetings 1 and 2
- PLACE: [Asset Disposal Programme Update](#)
- PEOPLE: [Budget Proposals 2023/24](#)
- PEOPLE: [Task & Finish Group Report - Review of Workforce Strategy Business Case for Slough Children First](#)
- PLACE with CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Budget Proposals 2023-24](#)
- PLACE with CUSTOMER & COMMUNITY: [Task & Finish Group Report on Complaints Handling](#)
- O&S: [Budget Proposals 2023/24](#)
- O&S: [Task & Finish Group Report - Review of Contract Management](#)
- O&S: [Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable](#)
- O&S: [Recovery & Improvement Update](#)
- O&S: [Full suite of budget documents](#)
- O&S: [Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2023/24](#)
- Annual Review and Work Programming Workshop

## 8. Scrutiny members' workshop - Ideas for 2023/24

At the Scrutiny Review Workshop members were encouraged to consider what issues might lend themselves to whole-committee or Task & Finish work next year, bearing in mind the changing focus of the main committee (as above). It will of course be a matter for next year's scrutiny members what to prioritise for their work programme, but these are the 2022/23 scrutiny members' views:

### **O&S Committee**

- Budget monitoring
- Procurement
- Contract Management / value for money
- IT
- Transformation
- Capital Programme Monitoring

### **People Panel**

- Education item at every meeting
- SEND
- School attainment gap
- School places
- Social Care performance
- Libraries

### **Place, Customer and Communities Panels**

- Temporary accommodation
- Housing repairs reprocurement (governance – who is responsible?)
- Policies and procedures at Chalvey Hub
- Refuse and recycling
  - Recycling rates
  - community engagement
  - Best practice
- Meet with other local authorities

## 9. Priorities for Scrutiny Improvement in 2023/24

The Council's plans for Scrutiny Improvement are formally set out in the Council's Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan. As set out above, a then-current version of the plan was received by the O&S Committee on [17 November 2022](#) and then again as part of an [Improvement and Recovery monitoring item on 23 February 2023 \(see page 70\)](#). The action plan, which is updated monthly, is monitored by the Secretary of State's Commissioners as part of the papers for the Improvement and Recovery Board. The Commissioners plan to conduct a 'deep dive' into progress against those plans in April 2023.

The plan recognises the importance of developing an effective scrutiny function. It incorporates in full the recommendations of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, although recognises that the Member Working Group on Scrutiny will make an informed decision about what to recommend to Full Council where constitutional changes are required. Full Council will decide the final structure.

### Key areas of the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan include:

- Agree new scrutiny structure and ways of working in May 2023, to optimise the function for the council's unique situation. This includes:
  - a reframing of the main committee's focus (as above)
  - a move to more T&F work
  - Continuing and improving the council's whole-year focus on financial management in scrutiny
- Deliver enhanced training and induction for new members in 2023 including training for Chairs.
- Deliver enhanced training for officers working with scrutiny.
- Continue to develop a cohesive work programme for scrutiny, tightly focused on scrutiny of the council's plans for financial and organisational recovery
- Improve the effectiveness of pre-meetings
- Restore dedicated, permanent officer support for the scrutiny function.
- Empower scrutiny members to self-evaluate their performance in committee and plan steps towards further improvement.

# 10. Petitions Report for 2022/23

For the period 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March, 2023 a total of 9 petitions were received: six paper petitions and three e-petitions. None met the threshold for O&S or Council debate.

Paper Petition Title	Signatures
22-01 - Petition Against Yellow Lines on Faraday Road	114
22-02 - Petition - Oppose the Introduction of Closure of Streets around Holy Family School	27
22-03 - Petition - Chicken Ranch – Music License Review	51
22-04 - Petition - Residents Parking Bays in Cecil Way	16
22-05 - Petition Against Plan of New Bus Lane on Farnham Road	39
22-06 - Request for Double Yellow Lines on Hawthorne Crescent	10
ePetition Title	Signatures
Parking restrictions on St Mary's Road by LHPA	0
Objection to Building Height in the Proposed Mackenzie Homes Development	189
That All Labour Councillors Resign	40