

Appendix A:

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee

Annual Report 2023/24



Committee Members



Cllr Shaik
Chair
(Dec – Present)



Cllr Escott



Cllr Hulme



Cllr Iftakhar



Cllr Khawar
Vice-Chair



Cllr Mann



Cllr Manku
Chair and committee member
June-Nov 2023



Cllr Matloob



Cllr Mohindra



Cllr O'Kelly



Cllr Steadman

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1. Chair's Introduction



Cllr Mabu Shaik
Chair

Since becoming the Chair of the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee in December 2023, I have seen the committee continue the improvement started by my predecessor, Cllr Manku. Our public meetings are more focused and business like, thanks to a new approach we have taken in our pre-meeting workshops. The topics explored by the committee are also more targeted and beginning to add value to the organisation and the services it delivers. I am particularly pleased that the committee has been more effective in calling the leadership of the Council to account, especially in relation to the draft budget for 2024-25 and with regard to the Commissioners' 4th Best Value Report. The quality of the work of our task groups also has seen considerable improvement, not least because of the way we scope the terms of reference, focusing on delivering measurable outcomes.

This is not to say that there is not more to do! Far from it, and I am pleased to see that a draft improvement plan for 2024-25 is contained within this report.

I Hope that by 2026, the Borough's residents, communities of place, of interest and by association, and the Council's Members, Cabinet and senior management recognise and value CISC as an independent, objective but critical friend. The Committee will have continued to play an active role in scrutiny of the transformation of the Council as it responds to the Commissioners' Directions it will have begun to focus on responding to residents' more immediate concerns, identifying improvements to public services and policies that have been embraced by the Council (and other public services in Slough) whenever possible.

Mabu Shaik

2. Context: the need to improve scrutiny in SBC

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 called the scrutiny function ‘under-resourced’, with reports too complex and hard to interpret. Slough Children First felt there was a lack of focus on them, and councillors reported an erosion of trust, considering ‘what has happened’. There was 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 (set out later in this report) 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.

In response to the Secretary of State’s Directions, and informed by the CfGS review, a Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan and Democratic Governance Improvement Action Plan were created, and this work has continued all year, monitored by Commissioners via the Improvement and Recovery Board. The Scrutiny Action Plan was endorsed by Full Council before the election, and a change to the structure of O&S was agreed at the first Full Council meeting following the May 2023 election.

3.1 Delivery: New Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Cttee

In May 2023 the Council approved the establishment of a single Scrutiny Committee - 'laser focused' on Corporate Improvement - to be known as the Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee (CISC). This went along with newly designed Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules.

CISC Terms of Reference (extract)

- 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; and
- Commissioning Task and Finish Groups to investigate specific discrete questions or issues.



Cllr Manku became Chair of CISC at the May 2023 annual meeting of full Council, and Cllr Shaik became Vice-Chair (later, Chair). Both embraced their roles with intent and enthusiasm, while being amongst the 70% of the committee who were new councillors at that time, without scrutiny experience. As well as adjusting the induction program to meet this challenge, steps were taken to encourage a culture of mutual support and openness about the committee's learning curve, so that potential lessons could be openly highlighted and discussed during private and public committee sessions. Steps included holding in-person pre-meetings with informal seating, food and workshop-style exercises to encourage team-building. Most councillors have worked well together, after an initial period of tension largely eased. Recruitment of a long-sought-after Scrutiny and Governance Officer just after the committee formed also added some much-needed capacity, although the committee still remains dependent on temporary additional officer capacity.

3.2 Delivery: Scrutiny training and briefings 2023/24

Training and development for all councillors has been recognized as key to the council’s improvement and recovery for some time, and the programme of learning for scrutiny needed to be especially robust, since 22 of the 42 councillors (including a majority of the scrutiny committee and its Chairs) were new to the role. To achieve this, a member development strategy and plan which has been in place since 2022, agreed by Standards Committee, was adapted and upgraded. This included a full scrutiny induction for CISC members, cabinet and officers, funded by the Local Government Association and delivered by the CfGS and the Statutory Scrutiny Officer. Full details of the CfGS proposal can be found at Appendix B to an [April 2023 Standards Committee report](#). Furthermore, both the new scrutiny chairs have benefited from engaging well with excellent peer mentors provided by the LGA.

To the right is an indicative selection of the training opportunities and briefings which have been made available to Scrutiny members this year.

See [Report to Standards Committee on 19 March](#) for full details.

Chairing Skills for scrutiny – delivered 1:1	SBC	May 2023, January & March 2024
Planning an Effective Scrutiny Work Programme	CfGS	04 July
Budget/Finance scrutiny (joint cabinet/scrutiny)	CfGS	06 September 2023
Cabinet Scrutiny Training	CfGS	07 September 2023
Financial and Budget Scrutiny	CfGS	19 September 2023
Community Power	ADSO	07 December 2023
Budget Briefing I	SBC	13 December 2023
Budget Briefing II	SBC	10 January 2024
Chairing Scrutiny	LGA weekend	January 2024
Data and Managing Performance	LGA	01 February 2024
Data and Scrutiny	SBC	07 February 2024
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	SBC	20 February 2024
Community Asset Briefing	SBC	22 February 2024
PCC and Chief Constable annual report	TVP	27 February 2024

3.3 Delivery: 2023/24 Scrutiny items

The main items for each committee meeting this year are listed with links to the relevant agendas or papers.

This EXCLUDES:

- Launching and Reporting of task & finish groups (reported on slide 9)
- Development or briefing sessions held in private, occasionally using committee time
- Work programming workshops and items to review/decide the work programme (these were large items early in the year)
- Recommendations and actions tracking.

	2023		2024
June:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement & Recovery update 	January:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement and Recovery update • Human Resources Improvement Programme • Update on task and finish report: Review of Workforce Strategy Business Case for Slough Children First (SCF) • General Fund Revenue Budget Proposals 2024/25 and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024/25 to 2027/28
July:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asset Disposal Programme 	February	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEND Statutory Services Update
September:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvement and Recovery update • Budget Monitoring Report 	March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Assets Policy Development • Extraordinary meeting: The Commissioners' 4th Best Value Report and Minister's response
October:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ICT and Digital Update • PSED and SBC public sector equality duties • Update on Procurement and Contract Management 	April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual report • Safer Slough Partnership
November:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget Setting and financial update: Verbal Update 		

3.4. Delivery: Task and Finish Groups

Three Task and Finish (T&F) groups were commissioned this year. 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. It is primarily used for pre-decision scrutiny (policy development) rather than post-decision ('holding to account') scrutiny.

	Started	Completed
Task Group 1: ASC preparedness for CQC assessment of Adult Services	Sept 2023 ,	November 28 2023
Task Group 2: Resident Engagement and Building Trust	Dec 2023 ,	April 23 2024
Task Group 3: SCF Engagement with Children, Families and Faith	March 2024	Due July 2024

Each T&F has been launched and run at a scale which was mindful of councillors' learning curve and the availability of resources. Lessons learned from each one have fed into the subsequent ones. For example, the second and third are each more focused and ambitious in turn than their predecessors. The second T&F involved some member-led research into residents' perceptions of council consultations, and some simple co-design of a comms product. The third is expected to involve a face-to-face workshop or workshops with faith and community groups, in a 'scrutiny-in-a-day' style. The mechanism for reporting recommendations to council has also improved as the year progressed, to allow better tracking and accountability.

3.5.1 Delivery: Scrutiny Improvement Actions

Last year's Scrutiny Annual Report highlighted the following areas of the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan

Key area for improvement in 2022/23	Progress update
<p>Agree new scrutiny structure and ways of working in May 2023, to optimise the function for the council's unique situation. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a reframing of the main committee's focus • a move to more T&F work • Continuing and improving the council's whole-year focus on financial management in scrutiny 	<p>New structure agreed with a clear focus (see above). Pre-decision scrutiny now conducted primarily via Task & Finish groups – almost all committee members have now signed up to join at least one T&F. Members made their appetite and frustration clear with regard to budget scrutiny and their difficulty accessing early information, and this is reflected in the 2024 CfGS review, however they used their time well to gain knowledge via briefings and have a clear plan for their role in budget setting and savings delivery during 2024/5.</p>
<p>Deliver enhanced training and induction for new members in 2023 including training for Chairs.</p>	<p>Delivered, as above – and refreshers to be run soon as per the outline member development plan for 2024/5 agreed by Standards Committee in March 2024.</p>
<p>Deliver enhanced training for officers working with scrutiny.</p>	<p>Scrutiny training delivered to CLT and wider leadership via the 'Governance Leadership Learning' sessions, plus the scrutiny Chair has visited CLT personally.</p>
<p>Continue to develop a cohesive work programme for scrutiny, tightly focused on scrutiny of the council's plans for financial and organisational recovery</p>	<p>The need for a 'laser focus' on the council's improvement and recovery has been a constant theme in work programming discussions all year, but some members tend to look for chances to set up extra scrutiny committees, to look at topics deemed less 'corporate'. The committee's first draft work programme was rejected by commissioners, so members redesigned it with a stronger focus on specific improvement directions.</p>

3.5.2 Delivery: Scrutiny Improvement Actions (cont.)

Key area for improvement in 2022/23	Progress update
Improve the effectiveness of pre-meetings	There has been steady progress in the use of pre-meetings, particularly in the latter part of the year. Members have learned strategies for developing key lines of enquiry which are collaborative and conversational, with more experienced members generously reaching across the floor to help inform newer members, and genuine good humour from most attendees. There is some evidence of this translating into more effective meetings, such as the compliments given by commissioners at the March extraordinary meeting to hold leadership to account in light of the commissioners' 4 th letter and minister's response.
Restore dedicated, permanent officer support for the scrutiny function.	The Scrutiny and Governance Officer position was finally filled in the summer after several failed rounds of recruitment. While the Democratic Services Manager post was also filled, the post-holder left before they could take on the role of Statutory Scrutiny Officer. That post has recently been re-advertised without success, Further attempts are in train and meanwhile some temporary resource is available.
Empower scrutiny members to self-evaluate their performance in committee and plan steps towards further improvement.	See below for the output from members' end-of-year review workshop. Assisted by their LGA mentors, both scrutiny chairs have been self-reflective and open to feedback from officers and other members, and there is evidence of various changes to committee practice as a result, including allowing multiple follow-ups per councillor, and strong public statements about the committee's intention to behave apolitically.

4.1 Assessing improvement: CfGS 'progress review'

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny were invited back to conduct a rapid review of progress made on SBC's scrutiny arrangements since CfGS's last set of recommendations were implemented over the past 18 months.

Their report aims to show how scrutiny is developing, where it is progressing effectively and adding value and equally to highlight areas that need further support or consideration by the council if progress is to be sustained.

Their full report is at **appendix B**, and it includes a series of recommendations for the future which are reproduced in section 5, below.

The report also gives useful feedback to assist the council in measuring scrutiny's improvement progress.

Summary (P.2 of Appendix B)

"Scrutiny is steadily improving after a fairly slow start. There are a number of contributing factors to this.

- New, and inexperienced councillors
- A period of uncertainty after the election
- Learning needs of the committee
- Effectiveness of corporate level support

However, this has been offset by some important positives.

- Good commitment from most of the committee members
- Stable and generally positive committee operating culture
- Excellent cross-party working
- New Chair has key skills and capacity to effectively lead and chair scrutiny – he appears to act apolitically and is improvement-focused
- Excellent support by Scrutiny and Governance officers

Our rapid review therefore concludes that scrutiny has many of the essential characteristics for it to continue to develop and improve. But this can only happen if scrutiny operates in a core, not peripheral space and that there is whole-council support to make it work in the medium and long term.

Conclusion (P.7 of Appendix B)

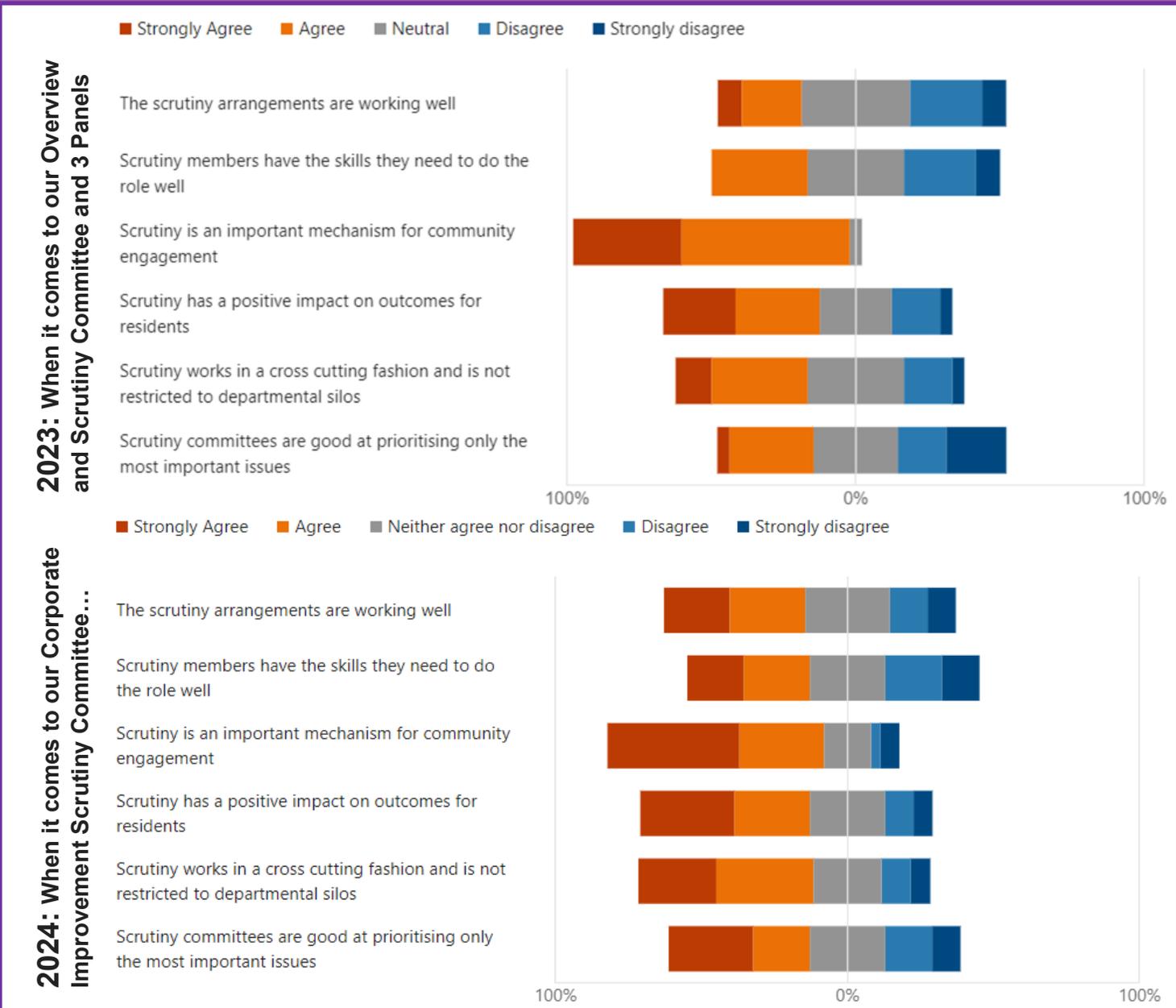
Slough need good effective scrutiny and there is lots of effort to try to make that happen. Despite its challenges, set-back, gaps in corporate support and size of its task, the CISC has worked hard to get to a reasonable position in a short period of time. It is not currently working at the level required, and it will need to be a more integral part of the council, supported and let-in to function better. It has weaknesses in its capacity and member engagement and there will be a limit to how much training and development can change this. However, many of the characteristics of good scrutiny are already present in terms of structure, process and culture and there is clearly some very experienced Members on the committee, although currently limited. The building blocks for improvement are in place and are beginning to become embedded. However, to have greater impact, it needs more time (months) and support to deliver much more.

4.2 Assessing improvement: survey data

All Members were surveyed in December 2023 and results were reported in 2024. The survey was extensive covering a range of topics such as culture, member support and member wellbeing, as well as concerning Democratic Governance and Scrutiny in particular. Thirty-one members responded to the '2024' survey, out of 42 councillors (74%). In 2023 there were 24 (57%).

The full results were reported to the Standards Committee on 19 March 2024. The following results relate specifically to Scrutiny.

Overall a moderately higher proportion of members now agree or strongly agree with positive statements about scrutiny, compared with the previous survey. However, there is still polarisation.



People tend to be more positive or optimistic about their own work than others'. Note that in 2023, over half of all councillors were on one or more scrutiny committees (24 out of 42). Whereas by the time of the second survey, only ten councillors were directly involved on a scrutiny committee.

In light of this, the improvements in the perception data are particularly good.

4.3 Assessing improvement: survey responses

The 2024 councillor survey included space for councillors to provide any additional comments about the council's scrutiny function.

This feedback has informed the action plan elsewhere in this annual report.

As reported to Standards Committee in March, the survey response data is being used in a number of settings across the council in order to learn about potential issues and to plan improvements. For example, the data is reviewed by the wider officer leadership and by individual Directorate Leadership Teams.

Furthermore the Democratic Services 'Service Plan' for 2024/25 is strongly informed by the survey data.

"Officers should support the scrutiny with any information the scrutiny team needs"

"Scrutiny Committee need to be more proactive"

"The amount of collaboration required is huge, the officers are doing great job"

"Scrutiny needs more support and training in different aspects of this function. More public engagement"

"Every six month scrutiny committee member need to refresh training"

"The committees are set up politically instead of by skills. Upskilling low skilled politicians who think they know everything already is hard work."

"The officers made sure enablement of the councillors to conduct a proper scrutiny"

"Officers need to engage with transparency and have effective communication"

"I don't think there is enough engagement with the local community, or focus on residents getting value for money. Scrutiny definitely has the potential to challenge silo working and require more collaborative effort. I think most/too much of its prioritising is done for it by officers (maybe for the reason that resources are still very limited)"

"Scrutiny should do more"

"The Scrutiny function is working well, big targets to meet"



4.5 Assessing Improvement: commissioners' comments

Slough Borough Council's government-appointed commissioners were invited to an Extraordinary meeting of CISC on 13 March, along with the whole cabinet and corporate leadership team, as scrutiny aimed to hold the council's leadership to account on the pivotally important contents of the commissioners' fourth letter to the Secretary of State. [The minutes and webcast are available online](#). During the meeting Lead Commissioner Gavin Jones gave a summary of serious issues still facing the council as well as some limited areas of success, and later the assistant commissioners offered direct feedback to the scrutiny committee.



On governance and scrutiny, some selected positive quotes from commissioners follow. More quotes about next steps, including further challenges scrutiny must address to become more effective, can be found in section 5 below.

- “Governance has been an area that has really improved quickly”.
- “There has been a commitment to member development”.
- “Scrutiny needs to engage to see when is the right time to engage and ask questions and hold to account. You’ve modelled this well as a committee tonight, you’re doing that very well. Scrutiny must stay involved in the business of the council - what’s been modelled here today is a very good example of how scrutiny can contribute.”

4.4 Assessing Improvement: councillors' annual review

A simple workshop was held in the 12 March CISC pre-meeting, followed up by an email to those councillors who could not attend, for the following purposes:

- 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

It was NOT a work programming session – this is scheduled for May.



Summary of representative POSITIVE feedback – What went well / improved in 2023/24?

- Adult Social Care T&F review -Learned from this - it was good that it was very timely and in response to something that should help the council's preparedness for the CQC inspection.
- In latter 'scrutinies' as a committee we have tried to be non-partisan which has been to the committee's credit and that is starting to embed fairly well, that's a good thing.
- The Chair is doing a good job - I might have my niggles here and there but if I do have a concern I do feel I can raise it with you, you are inclusive in your approach and you take the role seriously and that's to be commended.
- Teamwork has been good this year. So far it worked well and hopefully this should continue.
- There is a bit of disparity in the amount of knowledge and experience between councillors, but the way this has been handled has been good - the returning councillors have been generous in sharing with colleagues and helping to upskill everyone.
- We did as good a job as we could do on the budget process, changes were made to the final budget, some of which were things we raised at scrutiny eg some of the fees and charges, use of budget smoothing reserve (and some of the savings).
- [On the budget] we asked relevant questions and they were very probing. I thought they were impressed that we were able to ask such good questions by that point in the year.
- The Consultation and Building Resident Trust Task & Finish group - is ongoing - but what is good about this is that we are getting our own feedback from residents and members, asking various members to share the role of gathering information.
- We're getting better at our scoping pre-agenda meetings, where the chair sets out his expectations for a report coming through two meetings ahead, so there is more collaboration. People are coming too, and if they don't turn up the Chair is calling them.

(See part 5 for commissioners' pointers - things to work on, which could go better)

5.1 Next Steps: councillors' annual review



Summary of representative feedback – What could have gone better / needs to improve?

- We need to bring in a bit more recovery-focused items into the agenda - is this happening enough?
- Servicing of the committee by senior officers - it has got better towards the end of the year but early on we did not get given good quality reports to enable us to do the job – eg assets early on, and
- Are group leaders appointing the best people onto scrutiny? We need people who aren't going to pick their hobby horse topics, will be team players and take a whole-council view.
- The structure of having a single recovery committee means that there is a lot which the council does which is not being scrutinised. There is an issue with capacity. We'd like to be able to do more T&Fs. We haven't got the balance right yet between looking at recovery but also looking at the whole raft of council services too.
- Should circulate the actions tracker every other month to keep us all on top of it.
- How do we get info for members on important things, when scrutiny doesn't have time? Written briefings from Lead Members? More All-Member-Briefings?
- Information about recovery is always very laggy and replicates what has gone elsewhere.
- If we want scrutiny to work everyone has to want it to work. The buy-in is now there by the committee members but I haven't yet seen that matched by the rest of the organisation.
- We should consider cancelling meetings if reports aren't forthcoming again.
- In future we will have a pre-xmas meeting, rather than an early Jan meeting.
- The pre-meets are useful and they do set the tone. It's good that the pre-meets are member-led, but Michael could restrain himself less, we do welcome a steer on key things!
- There's a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes to steer and shape topics - this is working very well. Michael's engagement with the police and EDs is working well, there is a lot of collaboration, which is bearing fruit, but it does put michael in people's bad books too sometimes.
- Need to avoid occasional clashing diary invites.
- Can we circulate the extra reading Michael produces (which is handy!) earlier?
- Need to ensure we have proper debate on each recommendation, ideally one at a time.
- Give councillors more time to talk longer and ask every question they have, and ask them for follow-ups.

At the 12 March workshop (see section 4 for more detail) members gave a range of constructive feedback about issues or areas for improvement. scheduled for May.

This begins the section of this annual report which is focused on designing improvements for the future functioning of scrutiny in SBC.

5.2.1 Next steps: CfGS's recommendations

Recommendations for further improvement, from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's 2024 review (see Appendix B)

CfGS recommendation 2024	Response	SBC comments
1.CISC to maintain its core objective and purpose to support the corporate improvement plans, transition and financial recovery through strong and objective scrutiny. And to resist in the foreseeable future any expansion of the scrutiny committee structure.	Agree	A spontaneous recommendation from the committee, possibly to itself, at its extraordinary meeting on 13 March was for a second scrutiny committee to be created to cover non-improvement & recovery topics. Members should instead accept this CfGS recommendation, mindful that their work programming efforts in May should give them the opportunity to prioritise, and that an extra committee does not necessarily create extra councillor or officer resource (usually the opposite).
2.CISC Members will need to engage with the next phase of learning and development opportunities.	Agree	The outline member development programme for 2024/5 was agreed by the Standards Committee in March.
3.A focus through the Annual Scrutiny Report should evidence progress against objectives. In addition, it should also include clarity around the statutory duties regarding Health, Crime and Disorder, Education etc.	Agree - Complete	See section 4 above for progress, and section 5 below for plans regarding statutory duties. In short, our crime and disorder duty is already met and will continue to be, and work is in train to set up joint working with other authorities on Health scrutiny. Education co-optees will be appointed this coming year.
4.Cabinet role at scrutiny committee should be clarified and working arrangements with scrutiny Chairs/Vice Chair formalised.	Agree - Underway	The committee is keen to hear fewer prepared speeches and for cabinet members to take more of the reins in answering questions rather than deferring to officers. The scrutiny Chair is keen to meet regularly with cabinet members to assist in keeping the committee informed.
5.Scrutiny's role in MTFP and budget planning should be factored into the timetable with appropriate support.	Agree - underway	The committee has made clear its intention to play a continuous role in monitoring the delivery of savings across the year, and has formally requested that the cabinet member provide them with suitable materials to allow early engagement with meaningful budget choices in the coming year. Work programming on these matters is not waiting until May!

5.2.2 Next steps: CfGS's recommendations (cont.)

CfGS recommendation 2024	Response	SBC comments
<p>6. It is essential the Corporate Leaders present a consistent and resolute position on the importance of scrutiny within the organisation. Top-level support will also drive the necessary closer support by senior officers and their staff. It will build upon an agreed understanding on how scrutiny needs to be supported with information, reports, advice and expert briefings etc. This should be further developed and agreed. New senior leaders in key corporate roles should offer a plan of support and engagement for scrutiny to show how it will be supported in future.</p>	<p>Agree - underway</p>	<p>With substantial turnover at CLT-level at the time of writing, it must be assumed that there is an opportunity to reset this relationship through early and positive engagement between senior officers and members. Governance induction training for senior leaders is planned which should assist with this. There may be a need to write a cabinet/scrutiny protocol as recommended elsewhere in CfGS literature, in order to assist with this.</p>
<p>7. Reports and information supplied to scrutiny should not be overburdening or too technical. There should be an understanding that scrutiny members are not experts in many of the subjects in front of them. To be effective in their task they need the appropriate tools.</p>	<p>Agree - underway</p>	<p>'Pre-agenda' meetings now take place two months and one month ahead of each item, with report authors invited. This allows the Chair and Vice Chair to play a more active role in shaping reports to the needs and preferences of committee members, with the support of scrutiny officers.</p>
<p>8. Scrutiny work programmes should show a clear alignment with the council's corporate improvement plans and have a mechanism for subject selection and prioritisation – it needs to 'show its working out'. We note that some work on this has already started.</p>	<p>Agree - underway</p>	<p>A new process and proforma for scrutiny topic selection was developed mid-year and trialled at the December mini-workshop on the work programme. Having learnt from this, slightly more support will be given to councillors proposing items in the May round of work programming, to ensure proposals are complete before consideration. The weighting given to the topic's centrality to the council's improvement and recovery may also need adjusting.</p>

5.3 Next steps: Commissioner comments

Referring again to Commissioners' comments at the Extraordinary meeting of CISC on 13 March, for which [the minutes and webcast are available online](#), Commissioners gave a number of pointers for areas of growth or next steps for the committee to consider over the coming year.



On Scrutiny's challenges and next steps, some selected quotes from commissioners (paraphrased in places) follow:

- “The best advice I can give you is yes, you should be engaged... Stay involved, there is a very important role for you as a scrutiny committee... You'll need to work out the detail of when is appropriate for you to engage. That's good running of a council, if your scrutiny committee are informed, up to speed with what is happening, and have the opportunity to ask appropriate, searching questions of members and the officer corps, and you've modelled this well this evening.”
- “The risk is - there is so much to be done, how will you prioritise and phase your engagement? That's a challenge for the administration and for scrutiny. The main task is to identify where to add value.”
- “Scrutiny must be clear which financial issues are a national issue and what is a unique issue for Slough. These are clear and distinct challenges for the council which scrutiny should understand.”
- “Scrutiny should make sure you have full transparency and disclosure on the risk to which you are exposed and the scale of the challenge.”
- “You need to be very clear about what you require in terms of in-year sustainability, what does that look like, what needs to be reviewed, how will performance be assessed in order to track and to be able to deliver what is expected of you in-year and to be able to deliver on your balanced budget?”
- “Scrutiny should ask what does the future council look like without a requirement for exceptional financial support – that is the TOM. That is a test of sustainability and a test of resilience. Test that target operating model and be clear that sustainability and whether you can deliver core services without exceptional support are your benchmarks for considering the TOM.”
- “Must consider how to ensure you are joined up and not duplicating with the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee.”

5.4 Next steps: Priorities for Improvement in 2023/24

The following three slides set out the next proposed phases of a scrutiny improvement action plan which has now been running continuously for several years, through at least two distinct planning and delivery phases before and after the May 2023 election.

The council's new four-year electoral cycle provides an excellent opportunity for members to learn and develop together over an extended period of time, and it is to be hoped that a reasonable continuity of chairmanship and Group Leaders' appointment of informed, committed members over the coming years will allow these plans to bear fruit for the residents of Slough.

The sources in this report have informed these actions. Those sources include:

- Reference to the draft Best Value Guidance published by DLUHC;
- The 2024 CfGS progress review (appendix B)
- The wider membership via the councillor survey
- The committee's own reflections
- Commissioners' verbal advice
- Scrutiny officers' professional advice
- Prior actions still outstanding

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.



5.4.1 Next Steps: Updated Improvement Action Plan

Ref	Outcome	Outputs	Progress	Deadline for completion	Notes
1	Residents are better informed about Scrutiny at Slough	Web presence. Relevant page/s explaining the role of Scrutiny, the current forward plan and how Residents can engage with, attend meetings, provide evidence at meetings.	Underway	Sep 24	Some web pages redesigned but not ready for full launch yet.
2	Residents able to propose scrutiny topics	Process, criteria and guidance produced, needs to link in with e-petition	Underway	June 24	Citizenspace training complete.
3	Members propose topics for scrutiny that are relevant and deliver impact	Design a topic-related training programme for 2024-25 for scrutiny members	Pending	June 24	
4		Process, criteria and guidance for members to propose scrutiny topics with recovery focus and criteria/information required	Done	Dec 23	
5		Plan/process for evaluation of topics for Mid Term Review	Done	Dec 23	
6		Mid-Year review of Forward Plan	Done Pending	Dec 23 Dec 2024	
7		Plan/process for evaluation of topics new forward plan municipal year 24/25	Underway	May 24	
8	Better evidence of good governance	Action Log circulated more frequently with updates	Underway	Oct 23	Commitment to embed this as good practice over the coming months.
9	Better evidence of impact and of good governance	Recommendations Register and standard format cabinet report trialed to address cabinet response.	In progress	Oct 23	Although not satisfied we are getting timely clarity from Cabinet

5.4.2 Next Steps: Updated Improvement Action Plan (cont.)

Ref	Outcome	Outputs	Progress	Deadline for completion	Notes
10	Assurance that scrutiny recognises the value of specific stakeholders	Co-optees and expert witnesses used as appropriate	Pending	June 24	Ensure thought is given to potential co-optees on task groups during work programming. Education co-optees are separate matter.
11	Better evidence of good governance	Review key dates initiation to publication of reports	Underway	June	Trying to test new timeline/milestones for March and April
12	Residents recognise and engage with the work of scrutiny	Regularise/establish Scrutiny Brand for reports and publication routes	Pending		Task group reports need to link to annual report
13	Directors and senior managers engage positively with the work of the committee and recognise the positive impact it can have	Engagement and training plan – include scrutiny in officer induction and repeat visits by Chair to CLT. CLT role in work programming. Consider a cabinet-Scrutiny protocol.	Underway	April 2024	
14	Scrutiny is evidence based	Identify data that can be used as evidence for Residents' big Issues	Pending	Feb 2025	
15		Create Reference Library	Done	Dec 23	
16		Training on Data	Done	Feb 24	
17		Develop a mechanism/procedure to use performance data, BMOs, IRB updates etc	Pending	April 2025	Need to embed this in item 7

5.4.3 Next Steps: Updated Improvement Action Plan (cont.)

Ref	Outcome	Outputs	Progress	Deadline for completion	Notes
18	Scrutiny is making a difference	<p>CfGS progress review.</p> <p>Recommendations log containing substance</p> <p>Testimony from public and partners involved in scrutiny reviews</p> <p>Budget scrutiny is effective and mindful of national/local issues, and of risk.</p> <p>Committee's role in non-financial recovery clarified.</p> <p>Scrutiny of savings in-year happen meaningfully and in a timely fashion.</p> <p>Scrutiny has designed its role with incoming CLT in the non-financial recovery of SBC.</p>	Underway	May 2025	
19	Agendas etc more accessible and of high quality	Clean up Agendas and distinguish between reports to scrutiny rather than covering a report to Cabinet	Pending	August 2024	Democratic Services Service Plan 2024/5 includes a focus on quality and consistency.
20	Agenda items are more likely to be of member origin or public origin	<p>Public calls for evidence</p> <p>Members submitting good, viable, relevant ideas in the work programming exercise</p>	Pending	May 2025	Next test will be May sessions Proposal template has resulted in 2 submissions to date. 01/12/23
21	Scrutiny helps residents to feel they can influence decisions made by the council	Various public engagement mechanisms in place – and regularly used, with a consequential impact.	Pending	May 2026	

5.4.4 Next Steps: Updated Improvement Action Plan (cont.)

Ref	Outcome	Outputs	Progress	Deadline for completion	Notes
22	Scrutiny members feel that they have been able to adequately cover issues important to residents	<p>Best Value is at the heart of scrutiny's decision-making processes.</p> <p>Well-evidenced prioritisation in work programming cycle</p> <p>Other regular opportunities for all-member briefings (written or verbal)</p> <p>Options explored for additional officer capacity to support scrutiny or at least T&Fs</p>	Underway	Ongoing	<p>Work programming mechanisms reviewed recently.</p> <p>All-member briefings appetite and mechanism to be explored with new incoming Chief Exec and CLT members. Seek more capacity from services to support T&Fs?</p>
23	Scrutiny contributes to the wider partnership landscape, not only SBC's internal crisis	<p>Joint working arrangement set up locally for scrutiny of health.</p> <p>Education co-optees formalised via an election as necessary</p> <p>Crime and disorder item scheduled annually in work programme.</p>	Underway	May 2025	<p>Arrangements in motion to create option of co-opting SBC members onto a neighbouring council's Frimley-focused health scrutiny committee.</p> <p>Crime and disorder items build into 23/4 work programme already</p>
24	Decision-makers are held to account publicly	<p>Consider a cabinet-scrutiny protocol.</p> <p>All cabinet members appear on work programme reasonably regularly.</p> <p>Cabinet's good attendance record does not sour.</p> <p>System for news releases by O&S?</p>	Pending	Ongoing	<p>NB no cabinet member attended the late March scrutiny committee meeting – first time this has happened since May 2023.</p>

6. Petitions Report for 2023/4

For the period 1st April, 2023 to 31st March, 2024 a total of 12 petitions were received: 3 paper petitions and 9 e-Petitions. Two of these met the [threshold \(1500\) for a debate of full Council](#).

Paper Petition Title	Signatures
23-01 - Cippenham Residents Against Bus Schedules	60
23-02 - Anti Social Behaviour - Parlaunt Road	10
23-03 - Belgrave Road Parking Permits	28

ePetitions Title	Signatures
Star & Garter Inn	72 to date
Require Additional Parking Restrictions for Non-Residents Near Burnham Station (Royston Way, Crosthwaite Way, Meadway & Sandringham Court)	66
Urgent Appeal Save Community Hub	1,564
E-Petition for Review and Reversion of the Bi-Weekly Bin Collection Policy in Slough	2,103
Support the Sale of Property from the Asset Disposal List to the Langley Islamic Centre for Community Development	382
Petition Against Development on 71 Bower Way Site	31