

## House of Commons

### [Communities and Local Government Committee](#)

#### **Communities and Local Government Committee calls for culture change at local authorities to ensure independent and properly-resourced scrutiny**

The Government must encourage a culture change at local authorities to ensure overview and scrutiny is truly independent of the executive and can properly contribute to improving services for taxpayers, the Communities and Local Government Committee has concluded.

The Committee's report on overview and scrutiny in local government, published today (Friday), warns that scrutiny is often not held in high enough esteem, leading to a lack of constructive challenge to improve services for residents.

It recommends measures to strengthen the independence of overview and scrutiny committees and for increased scrutiny of combined authorities, Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) and arm's length bodies.

**Clive Betts, Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, said:** *"Scrutiny is marginalised at too many local authorities, which in extreme cases can contribute to severe service failures, letting down council taxpayers and those that rely on services.*

*Scrutiny of those in power is a vital part of any democratic system and has huge benefits for all. We are calling on the Government to strengthen guidance to make overview and scrutiny committees truly independent of those they are charged with holding to account and to make sure the process is properly funded and respected.*

*Only by rebalancing the system and ensuring scrutiny is held in high esteem will we see better decisions and the outcomes that residents who pay for council services deserve."*

Recommendations in the report include:

- That overview and scrutiny committees should report to an authority's Full Council meeting rather than to the executive, mirroring the relationship between Select Committees and Parliament.
- That scrutiny committees and the executive must be distinct and that executive councillors should not participate in scrutiny other than as witnesses, even if external partners are being scrutinised.
- That councillors working on scrutiny committees should have access to financial and performance data held by an authority, and that this access should not be restricted for reasons of commercial sensitivity.
- That scrutiny committees should be supported by officers that are able to operate with independence and offer impartial advice to committees. There should be a greater parity of esteem between scrutiny and the executive, and committees should have the same access to the expertise and time of senior officers and the chief executive as their cabinet counterparts.

- That members of the public and service users have a fundamental role in the scrutiny process and that their participation should be encouraged and facilitated by councils.
- That overview and scrutiny committees should be given full access to all financial and performance information, and have the right to call witnesses, not just from their local authorities, but from other public bodies and private council contractors. They should be able to follow and investigate the spending of the public pound.
- That the DCLG works with the Local Government Association and the Centre for Public Scrutiny to identify councils to take part in a pilot scheme where the impact of elected chairs on scrutiny's effectiveness can be monitored and its merits considered.

The Report also recommends that the scrutiny committees of combined local authorities have a role in monitoring the performance of Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) and that the Government commits more funding to the scrutiny of mayoral combined authorities.

The [inquiry](#) was set up to examine whether the overview and scrutiny model is meeting its objectives and how decision-makers can best be held to account.

ENDS

**Editor's note:** Overview and scrutiny committees were introduced by the Local Government Act 2000. The full terms of reference of the inquiry can be found [here](#). The Committee held three oral evidence sessions and heard from Professor Colin Copus, Director of the Local Governance Research Unit, De Montfort University; Jacqui McKinlay, Chief Executive, Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS); Councillor Marianne Overton, Leader of the Independent Group, Local Government Association; Councillor Mary Evans, Chair of Scrutiny Committee, Suffolk County Council, Councillor Sean Fitzsimons, Chair of Scrutiny and Overview Committee, Croydon Council, and Councillor John Cotton, Lead Scrutiny Member, Birmingham City Council; Jennette Arnold OBE AM, Chair, London Assembly, Susan Ford, Scrutiny Manager, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Councillor Peter Hughes, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, West Midlands Combined Authority, and Ed Williams, Director, London Assembly; and Marcus Jones MP, Minister for Local Government, Department for Communities and Local Government. Full transcripts of the sessions are available [here](#).

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**Further Information:** Follow the Committee on [Twitter](#) or visit the Committee's [website](#). **Membership of select committees was confirmed following an agreement of the House on Monday 11 September. The new members of the CLG Committee are:** Mr Clive Betts MP (Chair) (Labour), Mike Amesbury MP (Labour), Bob Blackman MP (Conservative), Helen Hayes MP (Labour), Kevin Hollinrake MP (Conservative), Fiona Onasanya MP (Labour), Andrew Lewer MP (Conservative), Mr Mark Prisk MP (Conservative), Mary Robinson MP (Conservative), Liz Twist MP (Labour).