



better scrutiny for better government

The Centre for Public Scrutiny promotes the value of scrutiny and accountability in modern and effective government and supports non-executives in their scrutiny role

PRESS RELEASE: Government reforms could mean 'weaker accountability', warns CfPS

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New research from the independent Centre for Public Scrutiny among councillors and officers responsible for scrutiny of council officials and decision-makers has found concerns amongst practitioners about the implications of government proposals to reform councils' governance arrangements.

As the Localism and Decentralisation Bill receives its Second Reading in Parliament, almost two-thirds (62.8%) of councils responding to the CfPS Annual Survey of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government anticipate it will have a major impact on scrutiny in their authority. More detailed research to follow these findings up revealed that three-quarters (73.4%) of those responding said that they feared that where councils chose to return to a traditional committee system of decision-making (as permitted under the Bill), this system would be weaker at holding decision-makers and officials to account than the current system of overview and scrutiny committees independent from the council executive.

While some have argued that the old committee system (abolished by the Local Government Act 2000) gave back-bench and opposition councillors more opportunities to have their say on council proposals, the CfPS research found that over 42% of respondents (42.5%) believed that bringing it back was unlikely or highly unlikely to give backbenchers more power, with a further 34% believing it will make no difference whatsoever.

These concerns may lie behind other findings which suggest that almost two-thirds of authorities are unlikely or highly unlikely to change their arrangements (60.5%), with 18.7% saying they thought it likely or very likely and the remainder yet to decide. Only 2, according to the research, have taken any formal steps towards amending their constitution, while just 3 have set up a working group to investigate the idea.

Jessica Crowe, Executive Director, CfPS, says: "Our research reveals some important concerns amongst officers and members with scrutiny responsibilities about the implications of the government's proposals for democratic accountability. While we support the principle that local authorities should be able to determine their own governance arrangements, this research indicates some key areas of potential weakness. Councils will need to take specific steps to demonstrate that any proposed change to their arrangements meets the Secretary of State's previously expressed view that "all he needs to know" is that local authority governance arrangements are "accountable, transparent and open."

The supplementary research identifies the top five benefits of strong, independent and effective overview and scrutiny arrangements, which must not be lost in any change to a different system of governance to ensure the government's aims of "accountable, transparent and open" decision-making are met:

1. Holding decision-makers to account in public
2. Members carrying out in-depth policy development and review
3. Independent 'critical friend' challenge of decisions by those not involved in making the original decision
4. Members hearing evidence directly from members of the public, service users and experts
5. Members working together on a cross-party, non-party political basis to get things done.

Jessica Crowe, Executive Director, CfPS, says: "These benefits demonstrate the value that strong and effective scrutiny can add to democratic governance arrangements. In particular the opportunity for members of the public to work directly with councillors and contribute their views and experience of council (and other partners') services in order to shape decisions about future services must not be lost going forward. Where scrutiny works effectively, CfPS's experience and research over the years that we have been supporting scrutiny and scrutineers demonstrates that it:

- Acts as an independent 'critical friend' to provide challenge
- Involves the public and enables the voice of communities to be heard in decision-making
- Is led by members acting in an independent-minded, non-partisan way
- Provides public accountability, leading to improvements in services

"These principles must be carried forward into any reformed governance arrangements, and CfPS will be seeking to work with local authorities and others with an interest in accountability to ensure this happens."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. CfPS is an independent registered charity that works to promote and support effective public scrutiny and accountability.
2. The CfPS Annual Survey was carried out with local government overview and scrutiny members and officers by CfPS using Survey Monkey on-line over autumn/winter 2010. 76% of councils in England and Wales have responded to date. The supplementary research was conducted with 63 councils during the same time period.
3. Eric Pickles's quotation comes from an interview with Iain Dale for Total Politics magazine in June 2010.
4. A longer briefing on the Bill can be found on the CfPS website [here](#) and more detail on the implications of changing local authorities' governance arrangements can be found [here](#).

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