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Executive Summary

1. This briefing forms part of the Constitution Unit's research into effective scrutiny. The research is taking place from 2002-2004, and is examining the practice of scrutiny at all levels of government: national, devolved, regional and local. This briefing is the seventh output of the project (see Appendix 3 for details of other outputs).
2. The briefing outlines and analyses the practice of scrutiny in the Regional Chambers, in the eight regions of England outside London. The Chambers are voluntary bodies, which formed through 1998 and 1999 (see Appendix 1). Under sections 10 and 18 of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 the Government has 'designated' them as bodies entitled to monitor the work of the development agency in their region. All of the Chambers were designated in 1999.
3. The Regional Chambers' membership consists of elected councillors representing local authorities,

tiers of government, where scrutiny committees, most of the time, address the work of their own executive. Therefore, we have not tried in this report to use the classification of enquiries and the typologies used in previous reports on this project. Our aim in this report is to set out how each Chamber has interpreted their scrutiny role, examining the structures set up, subjects selected for enquiry, and methods used to undertake scrutiny. Because of the ongoing work of the English Regions Network and Warwick Business School, we have also avoided making recommendations in this report.¹ The Chambers are all tightly engaged in an on-going process of sharing best practice amongst themselves, and we would have little to add to that.

8. Finally, the Regional Chambers have all changed their name to 'Regional Assembly'. For the purposes of this report, we continue to refer to them collectively as Regional Chambers, to avoid confusion with any future elected regional assemblies in England. However, where a single Chamber is referred to we use its





The work of Regional Chamber scrutiny

14. Formally, Regional Chambers are permitted only to scrutinise the work of their Regional Development Agency. The majority of Chambers have stuck to this requirement until now, holding scrutiny hearings only with senior staff and board members from their RDA. On some occasions, other regional executive agencies have been invited to question and answer sessions. The South-West Regional Assembly invited the Environment Agency and local Learning and Skills Council representatives to one in 2001.

15. Some Chambers intend to do this again in the future, though they have no ability to summon organisations to appear before them. Regional executive agencies are formally accountable to Parliament, and have no obligation to account for their actions to Regional Chambers. Nevertheless, in many cases they have built relationships with Chambers and regularly discuss their work with them.

16. However, there is a difference in the character of scrutiny at regional level. Because all regional scrutiny is external scrutiny, in all regions there has been a strong tendency towards scrutiny as a form of partnership in policy development. This tendency has several sources. On the one hand, the statutory basis of the scrutiny role (in the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998) is unclear and vague. In the early days of the RDAs, in 1999-2000 (when 'scrutiny' was still a novelty within British governance), the right of the Chambers to scrutinise was contested by some of the RDAs (notably in the West Midlands and East of England). Section 18 (1) of the RDA Act 1998 states:

"The Secretary of State may by directions require a regional development agency for which there is a regional chamber under section 8 (1)-

accountability event' in each of its six county areas per year; in recognition of the strength of county identity in the region. These events often throw up specific concerns from the sub-regional stakeholders who attend, which influences the long-term direction of EEDA policy.

26. The East Midlands and South East have begun to integrate their scrutiny process with the RDA's own performance management systems. This lessens the amount of work that the RDA has to do to make itself accountable, and enables closer working between RDA and Assembly.

27. The South-East, North-East and Yorkshire & Humber use task and finish groups instead of a standing scrutiny committee. Use of task and finish groups is relatively common

sits on the Regional Spatial Strategy committee in the South-West, and in the East of England several committees have RDA representation.

35. Although formally Chambers may decide to scrutinise any aspect of regional economic development that they choose, in practice most of them have adopted a 'routine' of scrutiny to a greater or lesser degree. Scrutiny programmes are frequently linked to the main pillars of the regional economic strategy or relate to the Integrated Regional Strategy (for instance, North-East, West Midlands, South-West). There have also been recent attempts to link scrutiny with other performance management or audit frameworks. East Midlands ensures that scrutiny topics complement the performance management of emda carried out by

41. Many Chambers have appointed teams of consultants to produce issues papers for individual scrutiny processes (South-East), or to carry out ongoing research into longer-term issues (North-West). Some interviewees indicated that consultancy papers could be of variable quality. In the West Midlands, the use of consultants was abandoned after one attempt. Rn

54 The media, often a source of pressure on politicians at local and national level, has virtually no regional presence in England. There is therefore no prospect of mistakes within RDAs being seized on by newspapers, giving a Chamber an incentive to scrutinise a particular policy. There are also few examples of party politics in the scrutiny process. Partly this is due to the dilution of party politics on the Chambers by the presence of the Social and Economic Partners, who have tended to take a very active role in the scrutiny process.

Appendix 1: Glossary of Acronyms

Region	Regional Chamber	RDA	Government Office
East of England Regional Assembly	EERA	EEDA	GO-EAST
East Midlands Regional Assembly	EMRA	emda	



Appendix 2: details of scrutiny reports produced so

Appendix 3 : other outputs from Effective Scrutiny

Lucinda Maer and Mark Sandford, *Select Committees under Scrutiny*, July 2004.

Mark Sandford and Lucinda Maer, *Issues of Importance: the scrutiny role of the London Assembly*, June 2004.

Mark Sandford and Lucinda Maer, *Old Habits Die Hard? Overview and scrutiny in local government*, February 2004, 57pp, £10.00.

Lucinda Maer and Mark Sandford, *The Development of Scrutiny in the UK: an overview of procedures and practice*, January 2004, 58pp, Available on line.

Mark Sandford and Lucinda Maer, *Scrutiny under devolution: committees in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*, November 2003, 51pp, £8.00.

Mark Sandford and Lucinda Maer, *Annotated Bibliography of Effective Scrutiny*

Mark Sandford and Lucinda Maer





