1. What evidence is there that parliamentary legislative, policy and financial scrutiny activity is effective in terms of improving public policy outcomes?

I’m not quite sure what would constitute a helpful answer to this question. If there is no evidence (by which I guess you mean academic research of some sort), does that mean that you attach less value to the process of legislation, scrutiny and representation? And what does “improving” mean? Legislation that is amended to be more effective may have an overall aim that is disliked by a significant section of the population, for example.

1. Is there any helpful/relevant research evidence on the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny and/or the value citizens attach to parliamentary legislative and oversight work?

Again, I wonder what your reaction would be if there were evidence that citizens (who are necessarily further from the process) did *not* attach much value to legislative and oversight work. Would that be an argument for scaling it down or discontinuing it?

1. If so, is either element affected by questions of size and member capacity?
2. What evidence exists as to the correlation between a Parliament’s size and its effectiveness overall, or in terms of any of its principal functions (legislative, scrutiny, or representation)?

The nature of any evidence will depend on *how* these functions are carried out. The large legislative-type committee in the French *Assemblée nationale* has different number requirements from those of a House of Commons select committee (or a public bill committee, for that matter). You should also take into account affiliation. In the House of Commons, a party with a big majority will have relatively little difficulty in finding enough Members to carry out all the Parliamentary functions required of it. By contrast, an Opposition with significantly fewer numbers may have difficulty in finding enough Members to serve on select committees (even though the party shares are an exact reflection of the numbers in the House as a whole) because there are irreducible demands, such as finding enough people to shadow the members of the Administration. This was certainly the experience with the Conservative Party in the House of Commons during the 1997 and 2001 Parliaments, for example.

1. Are there examples from elsewhere of ways in which effectiveness has been improved by increasing the number of Members?
2. Is there evidence that alternative ways, for example new ways of operating, enhanced staff support or changes in working patterns or roles for individual Members, has been, or could be, a better means of increasing effectiveness?

I think this needs to be set against the background of political reality. For example, over the last thirty years or so, the constituency demands upon Members of the House of Commons have increased hugely. This has meant that their physical availability for certain types of activity, and the time that they are able or prepared to devote, has declined markedly. But even though it would be highly desirable for Members to have – say – twice the time to devote to select committee work, that clock is never going to be put back.

“Better staff support” is a tempting option (to Members, at any rate) but it has potentially serious disadvantages. You cannot make up with staff for the non-engagement (for whatever reason) of Members, because you risk the political process being staff-driven, rather than Member-driven. That means in turn that non-elected staff have inappropriate political power, and that does not (or should not) play well with the public. It is worth looking at the degree of engagement of Members in both House of the US Congress, by comparison with the role of their staffs.

Better staff support can, of course take off Members shoulders the things that as Members they should *not* be spending their time doing; but that is a rather different type of staff use.

“New ways of operating” is also a tempting concept, and new technology has a part to play. But unless you are prepared to make profound changes (such as a virtual Chamber and virtual committees, so that Members need not be present, and Parliamentary buildings become irrelevant) the currency is always going to be Member time, whether Chamber time or Committee time. A number of Parliaments have, either through decisions or almost unconscious change, concentrated proceedings into narrower timeframes, but this may mean that the remainder of Parliamentary time and proceedings is seen as second-class, which may not be a good outcome.

**Specifically in relation to committees:**

1. What makes an effective parliamentary committee, and what role does the size of the committee play in this?

(a) independence of mind

(b) Members’ readiness to commit time and effort, and to co-operate with their colleagues

(c) good staff support

(d) indifference to headline-hunting

(e) good chairing – light touch, readiness to stand up for the committee and its work, respectful but not cosy relations with the Executive, inclusive approach to Members, no grandstanding

(f) realistic planning of work and programmes.

In my experience, there are thresholds for different dynamics of Committee operation. They come at about 8, 12, 18 and 30 Members. The more Members, the more difficult it is to question witnesses, agree reports and so on. Questioning witnesses is probably the best illustration. The more Members you have, the smaller the ration of questioning time. In turn, this means that Members don’t follow up on lines of questioning; they have simply been waiting to ask their own questions, and the Committee is much less effective as a result.

1. What makes for an effective committee member? Does being a member of two, three or more different committees have an impact on this?

See answer to Q7; but above all a Member needs to commit time and effort to the Committee’s work, especially if it is not politically glamorous. And most good Committees consist of team players. It follows that being a member of more than one committee dilutes the effort and knowledge, and reduces effectiveness.

1. Are there examples from elsewhere of ways in which the effectiveness of committees has been enhanced by changes to the number of committees, or the size, composition or working practices of committees?

An example of the reverse being true occurred in the House of Commons: in the 1970s the Expenditure Committee operated through sub-committees that were in practice independent select committees. They had a membership of 8, and tended to develop a good dynamic. The introduction of Departmental Select Committees in 1979 increased most memberships to 11; that was handleable. But bigger committees (both in the Commons and Joint Committees of the two Houses) need much more effort to be successful. It is worth looking at the possibilities of sub-committees and the *rapporteur*-style role for individual Members; these can act a force multipliers. The Banking Commission in the last Parliament operated through sometimes very small sub-committees – as small as a single Member for evidence-gathering; but this carries risks in terms of public perception and sometimes acceptability to the other Members of the Committee.  

1. Are there examples from elsewhere from which the Assembly could learn in terms of the Commission staff support or other resources available to committees?

I suggest speaking to the staff of the House of Commons Liaison Committee if you have not done so already, as these issues have been a theme over several Parliaments.