Scrutiny Overview Committee

15 April 2021

Scrutiny Good Practice and Benchmarking

Ward(s):   All

Portfolios: All

1.   Aim

1.1   The role of good governance and scrutiny is critical to public trust and confidence in decision-making. In times of uncertainty and significant change, it is important that decisions are made in a way that is transparent, involves others and holds to account those responsible for implementation.

1.2   The Council has continually reviewed its scrutiny process and sought to make improvements over recent years.

1.3   For example during March and April 2015 Professor Steve Leach of De Montfort University undertook a review of the overview and scrutiny function at Walsall Council. Following the review, a report was produced detailing the findings. This included a series of recommendations for the future operation of the scrutiny function. Further to this, Council approved a new scrutiny structure at its meeting held on 3 June 2015

1.4   Further to this the Scrutiny Overview Committee led on implementing the new guidance for overview and scrutiny which was released by the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government in May 2019. It provided advice for senior leaders, overview and scrutiny committee members and support officers. To take the guidance forward Scrutiny Overview Committee undertook an all member event to seek their views on how to proceed. This informed the Councils response to the guidance and helped to develop the scrutiny function and led to the following:

-    External training from the LGA attended by over 30 elected members;
-    The development of Scrutiny-Cabinet Protocol drafted by the Chair and Vice-Chair of the SOC and Leader and Deputy Leader;
-    A co-option scheme for scrutiny;
-    Amended sections of the Constitution regarding Member interests and scrutiny for feedback and recommendation to Council for approval;
-    Report writing and presentation guidance for officers;
     o An updated and simplified scrutiny report template.

1.5   Further to this work and to seek how to develop scrutiny recent research and benchmarking has taken place to reflect on the way that scrutiny could be further evolved in Walsall, identify good practice and opportunities for new ways of working.

1.6 In addition to this a review of recent best practice has taken place and these findings are summarised in the report.

2. Recommendations

That:

1. **subject to the views of Members, a Member survey on how to improve the scrutiny process be undertaken in the new municipal year.**
2. **The outcome of this survey be reported to the Scrutiny Overview Committee for Members.**

3. Report detail – know

Context

3.1 Varying pieces of legislation require local authorities to have in place specific structural processes in order to carry out its overview and scrutiny role. The Localism Act 2011 sought to consolidate a number of provisions, which are still formally located in the 2000 Act. This incorporates powers originally brought in through measures such as the Health and Social Care Act 2001, Local Government Act 2003, Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Powers to scrutinise community safety partnerships can still be found in the Police and Justice Act 2006.

The pre-requisite requirements for local authority scrutiny are:

1. At least one overview and scrutiny committee that is politically proportionate (Local Government Act 2000);
2. A requirement to have education co-opted members on overview and scrutiny committees that deal with education matters (Local Government Act 2000 and Parent Governor Representations Regulations 2001);
3. A requirement to have an overview and scrutiny committee to consider health service matters (Health and Social Care Act 2001) including the requirement to respond to consultations that constitute a substantial variation in service (Local Authority (Overview and Scrutiny Committees Health Scrutiny Functions) Regulations 2002);
4. A requirement to have an overview and scrutiny committee to consider crime and disorder matters at least once every 12 months (Police and Justice Act 2006 and Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009).
5. A requirement to have an overview and scrutiny committee to consider flood risk management functions that may affect the local authority's area (Flood Risk Management Act 2010).

Models of scrutiny

3.2   CfGS states 'There is no right approach' to the structure of scrutiny committees and equally there is no one right approach to chairing or any agreement about what 'adequate' resourcing of scrutiny looks like. The CfGs also stated that it is difficult to compare the committee structures due to the different circumstances of each authority. It notes that scrutiny structures are often a reflection of the culture in which it operates and it's agreed role. Form should follow function, and it is only when members and officers have a clear sense of the role of scrutiny, its approach to work programming and impact, that the structure to support the work can be properly evaluated.

3.3   The model of scrutiny currently utilised at Walsall is one that has evolved based on a model recommended by Professor Steven Leach following his review of scrutiny in Walsall in 2015:
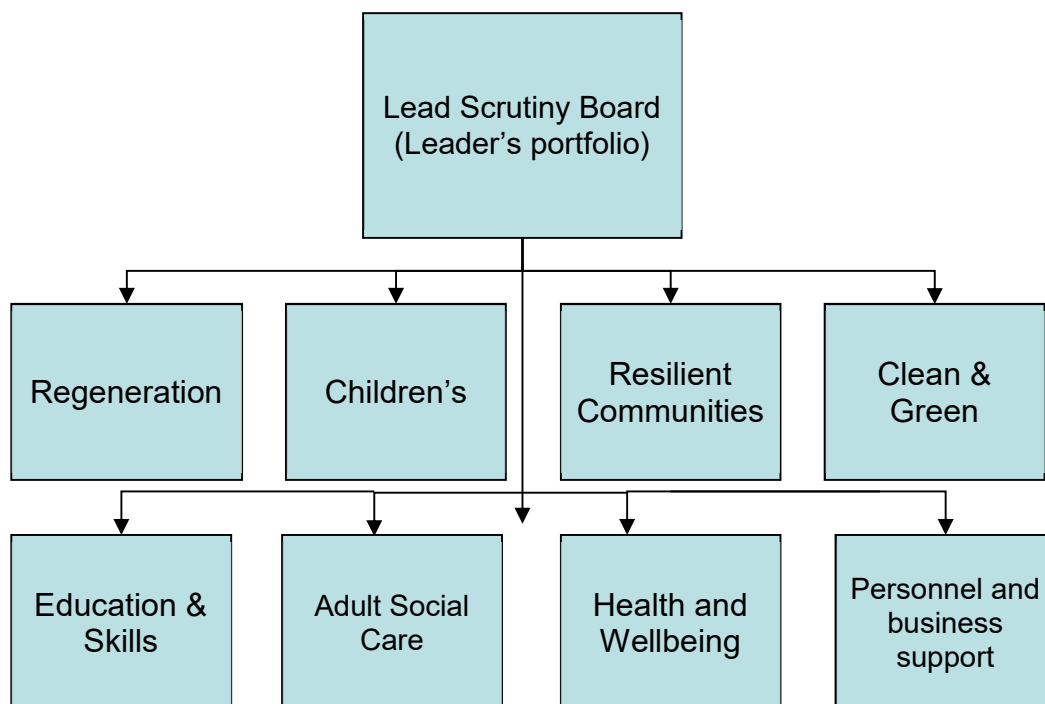
Commissioning model

3.4   The commissioning model is one that Professor Leach thought Walsall could work towards introducing. Here a single overview and scrutiny committee has all the statutory functions vested in it. Members then engage through a combination of committee work and numerous task and finish groups that produce reports and recommendations to the Commissioning Committee. Tameside, and Bury carry out scrutiny in this way.

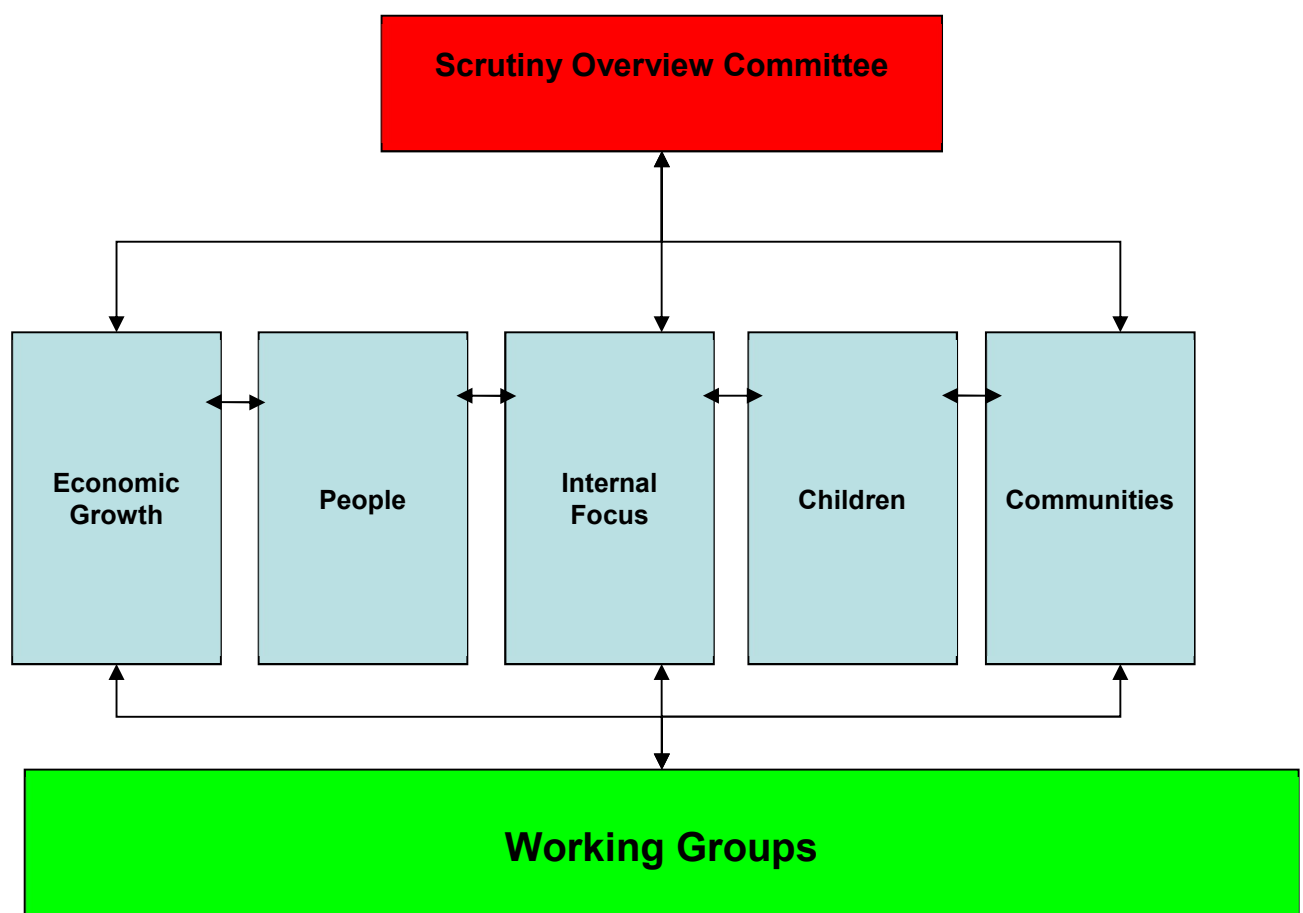| Advantages	Disadvantages
Streamlined approach.	Cultural change required by Members and Officers.
Increase member capacity to deal with detailed issues as task and finish groups.	Some areas of work could be neglected without a structured approach to what is covered and by whom.
	Question over handling of health and crime and disorder roles.
Officer resources realigned away from heavy concentration on administrative role to increased policy focus supporting task and finish groups.	Cuts across Executive Director roles and responsibilities.
	Where would Call-in's and petitions be reported?
	How would special responsible allowances be distributed?
	May require increased senior officer time if several pieces of work are commissioned within their area / alternatively may reduce senior officer time if less work is commissioned in their area.
	Unclear how successful this model is in operation at a council of this size.

Portfolio model

3.5   Another scrutiny model could be an overview and scrutiny committee per Cabinet portfolio. Coventry and Birmingham Council describe their model as Portfolio based with Birmingham feedback that this model can create cross over with agenda items. This could be as follows:

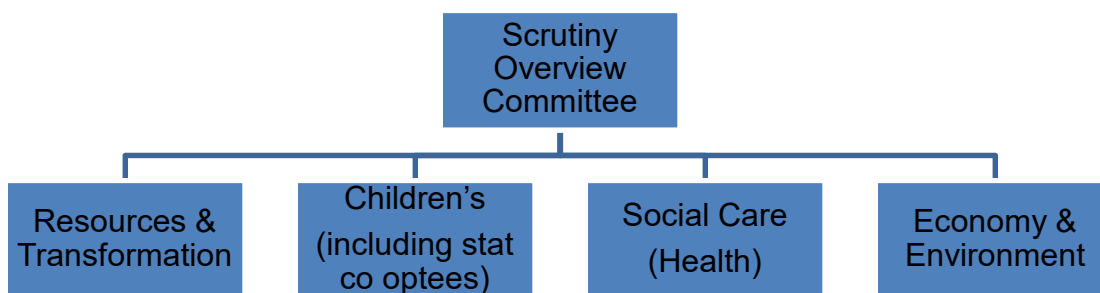| Advantages	Disadvantages
Clear link between portfolio and Scrutiny remit	9 Portfolios (currently) to cover makes implementing and maintaining this option very resource heavy. Officer and Member capacity limited.
Scrutiny remit would be clear and in most cases smaller than the current directorate focussed model.	Scrutiny work programme could mirror cabinets at the expense of other important non related cabinet issues.
Health and Crime and Disorder scrutiny would fall simply under the portfolio that held those responsibilities.	Inward focus, lack of external scrutiny
	Refresh of scrutiny remits would be required on changes to portfolio remits.

Strategic Plan Model

3.6 Alternatively, a model that was based on the five strategic priorities for the borough as set out in the Corporate Plan could be adopted. Sandwell, Solihull, Gateshead, and Wakefield adopt the strategic plan approach. Under this model, the structure could look like this:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Lends well to external scrutiny. Focus on delivery of priorities by partners rather than Council focussed. Increased ability to deal with cross cutting issues. More outward focus. Potentially easier to engage partners with remits.	Potential difficulties with remits being understood. More reliant on partner buy-in. Question over where Health and Crime and disorder would sit – as separate committee or as part of Walsall Plan perspective? Would take time and resource to embed. Cuts across Executive Director roles and responsibilities.

Directorate focussed model

3.7 Dudley, Bradford, and Rochdale take a directorate based approach. In this model the Scrutiny Overview Committee would act a as a lead panel to coordinate cross cutting issues.

Advantages	Disadvantages
A straightforward model. Any carry over items and working groups can be easily transferred from year to year. Clear accountability i.e. Executive Director for each directorate reports to 1 Scrutiny Committee.	Directorate structures change, therefore Panel remits become misaligned to directorate. Potentially inefficient in the scrutiny of partnership issues. Not enough outward focus as tendency could be to focus on Council issues. Perception that the large areas of Social Care and Health Scrutiny has a diminished status as part of a Panel with a larger remit.

Further detail on committee structures in CfGS annual survey.
https://www.cfgs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Annual-Survey-2019-WEB-1.pdf

Summary of benchmarking findings

3.8 As part of a benchmarking exercise, Walsall's nearest and statistical neighbours[1] were contacted to determine their scrutiny arrangements – fifteen Local Authorities were contacted. They were asked about their structure, financial scrutiny arrangements, statutory scrutiny officer, scrutiny leads and their working group support. A summary of the findings can be found below. A full breakdown can be found in Appendix 1.

3.9 Out of fifteen Authorities who responded, five were broadly directorate based, four were priority/vision based, two were portfolio based, two were a task and finish / Management coordination Board model, one was a mixture and one was a policy/performance split.

3.10 The majority of Authorities did not have a dedicated finance scrutiny committee, with most reporting that this was considered by the Corporate Scrutiny Committee or the Management Board. Birmingham was the only authority with a dedicated finance committee.

3.11 Most scrutiny committees were not chaired by opposition members, eleven out of fifteen authorities had chairs from the ruling group, with just one authority having all opposition chairs (Bolton). Four authorities had a mix of opposition and ruling group chairs. Out of seventy committees (across all fifteen local authorities), nine committees were chaired by opposition members (13%).

3.12 The majority of Authorities appeared to have assigned this role to the Democratic Services Manager (the grade of the DSM may differ across authorities), with others assigning this to a service Director.

3.13 Most authorities did not have dedicated support to scrutiny, and the committee lead role was mostly taken by Directors, with one Council noting that Directors supported Cabinet and Assistant Directors supported scrutiny. It was reported that Service Managers commonly supported working groups.

3.14 At least one third of the Councils canvassed stated that they had a review of scrutiny planned indicative that similar conversations are happening in many authorities.

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[1] Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Wolverhampton, Bolton, Bradford, Bury, Gateshead, Oldham, Rochdale, Tameside, Wakefield, Wigan.

CfGS –The Good scrutiny guide (June 2019)

3.15 This guidance, reflects the "four principles" of good scrutiny developed by CfGS in 2003 which remain relevant today. These are that effective overview and scrutiny should:

- Provide constructive "critical friend" challenge;

- Amplify the voices and concerns of the public;

- Be led by independent people who take responsibility for their role;

- Drive improvement in public services.

3.16 CfGS states there are three further components of good scrutiny and good governance, which support and reinforce these principles. These components are necessary in order for democracy at a local level to be participative; they are necessary for good scrutiny to thrive. These are:

- Accountability – an environment where responsibility for services and decisions is clear and where those holding responsibility can and are answerable for success and failure;

- Transparency – the publication, proactively, of information relating to services and decisions to allow local people, and others, to hold policymakers and decision-makers to account;

- Involvement – rules, principles and processes whereby a wide range of stakeholders (including elected representatives) can play active roles in holding to account, and influencing and directing the development of policy.

3.17 Effective scrutiny depends on the organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes of an authority. It is important that the environment conducive to effective scrutiny is led and owned by members.

3.18 The value in drafting an 'executive-scrutiny protocol' often derives from the conversations that precede its agreement, rather than the document itself.

3.19 CfGS recommend that councils have an area of focus, scrutiny should focus its work on what can add most value (rather than generalised oversight).
There are several ways to investigate a topic, including
- Scrutiny reviews or task and finish reviews.
- Ordinary committee meetings.
- Single issue committee meetings.
- Single issue informal meeting.
- Short scrutiny review.
- More traditional longer scrutiny review.
- Time limited committee.

3.20 CfGS suggests that pre-decision scrutiny gives scrutiny an important means to influence decisions, and improve them. This can be done shortly before a decision is made or several months before a planned decision. Post decision scrutiny can be achieved through call-in or post decision review of performance and finance information.

3.21 Scrutiny should always be informed by evidence, although this is subject to interpretation. It is important to understand what evidence does and does not tell us. Although it is acknowledged that, there are challenges in obtaining information in the first place, receiving too much information, duplication of work carried out by others.

3.22 The guide sets out expectations and the skillset and capability of chairs and committee members. Councils may wish to think further about how they articulate the qualities of a good chair, and provide assurance that the attributes are being taken into account. Also notes that other members, as well as officers, have a responsibility to support and assist the chair.

3.23 The guidance also highlights three particular models of scrutiny support. These are explained below.

1. Specialist – 'dedicated scrutiny officer'
2. Integrated – a single officer provides administrative and policy support to a committee
3. Committee – Democratic services officers administer committee meetings and support from within council service departments.

3.24 To support the scrutiny function and to promote it within the organisation. The need for the support of senior statutory officers is highlighted. Ultimately, it is up to the council to decide who to designate to carry out this role. Some choose senior officers some select more junior officers (advantages and disadvantages of this described).

Key findings of 2019 CfGS annual scrutiny survey 2019

3.25 In 2019, the Centre for Public Scrutiny carried out a comprehensive annual survey of overview and scrutiny in local government (62% response rate). Overall, the results reflect trends identified throughout the 2010s a gradual fall in the level of officer support for scrutiny and worries about effectiveness tied up with those about resourcing.

3.26 Resourcing

- Average number of FTE scrutiny officers per authority falls again;

- Most common support arrangement for scrutiny is now one where democratic services officers provide some policy support to committees alongside other duties;

- Respondents suggest a steady state to scrutiny support in the near future – no big drops expected, but no improvements either;

- Drop in resources continues to have an impact on effectiveness, although the model of scrutiny support less so;

- Concept of "discretionary budget" for scrutiny has loosened significantly as a result of changes in support arrangements

3.27   Impact and influence

- Councils with a dedicated scrutiny officer resource tend to be more effective at scrutiny;

- The quality of the scrutiny/executive relationship – and the presence of an scrutiny/executive protocol – makes a difference to effectiveness;

- There continues to be a perception that scrutiny makes an impact on the council and the lives of local people;

- Most councils are fairly systematic when it comes to selection of topics for the work programme;

- Most scrutiny recommendations are accepted and implemented – but methods for measuring this are not as robust as they could be;

- More councils look at performance and finance information more effectively than in the past, although a small majority do not do this by way of an information digest;

- Councils' approaches to scrutiny of finance (in particular, the budget) needs improvement, although there is evidence of improving practice here;

- The structure and number of scrutiny committees does not make much of a difference to the proportion of scrutiny recommendations successfully implemented;

- Where chairs are assigned politically proportionately, scrutiny tends to be more effectively.

3.28   Councillors and politics

- Political balance in chairing tends to make scrutiny more effective;

- Scrutiny is more effective in councils which take member support and development more seriously;

- The political contestability of councils (i.e. whether the political party holding the majority of the seats changes frequently) does not make much difference to scrutiny's effectiveness;

- Most respondents felt that scrutiny was able to take a positive, cross-party approach.

3.29   What councils could do differently (CfGS)

- Ensure that there are proper systems in place for making good recommendations and then being able to monitor them;

- Address executive/scrutiny relationships – a job as much for the executive itself as scrutiny. Put in place an executive/scrutiny protocol;

- Tighten up work programming. This does not necessarily involve the use of detailed scoring criteria but reflection and self-criticism on topic selection does need to improve;

- Think seriously about a more systematic approach to budget scrutiny and to the use of performance and finance information – this may involve the use of an information digest to share key data with members;

- Pilot arrangements to introduce more political balance to chairing arrangements.

Further detail CfGS annual survey (2019).
https://www.cfgs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/CfPS-Annual-Survey-2019-WEB-1.pdf

CIPFA financial scrutiny practice guide

3.30   From CfGS research and discussion with scrutiny members it is apparent that high quality and effective financial scrutiny is not the norm. CfGS's 2017 annual survey of overview and scrutiny in local government revealed that 51% felt that they did not carry out scrutiny of finance issues effectively. Much budget scrutiny focuses on review, in committee, of a draft budget a matter of weeks (or days) before it is submitted to full council for approval – this is not an effective way to conduct oversight. Scrutiny of council finances 'in year' (rolling oversight of spending) is often ad hoc, and often focuses on the review of scorecard data rather than an understanding of how spending impacts on local people's lives. Financial issues can be conspicuous by their absence when scrutiny investigates other issues – there is sometimes a sense that finance is too difficult to address as part of a substantive scrutiny review, or that members struggle to 'find a way in'. Financial scrutiny can take many forms but there are four fundamental areas where effective scrutiny can add value. The four areas are:

a. Reviewing how resources are allocated:
Monitoring how they are used, and examining their impact. This is about following through from budget development and planning to the delivery of a budget, and oversight over that budget in-year. It links to the way that scrutiny selects and prioritises its work.

b. Reviewing the integration between financial and service planning:
What is the level of integration between corporate and service planning and performance and financial management?

c. Testing out and making explicit whether the council is directing its resources effectively
To meet its priorities and demonstrating whether it is achieving value for money, equity and social value.

d. Providing, through scrutiny in a public forum, challenge to the executive's management of the council's finances, and a different perspective on challenges.

This is about scrutiny having a clearly defined role, and bringing something unique to the table in how it goes about its work.

3.31   As a start, members will want to look for information presented as follows:

- Summary tables, rather than lengthy information,
- Contextualised information (scrutiny's triangulation of financial information with other data will help here). This will include present budget monitoring reports alongside service monitoring reports and performance indicators,
- Reporting by exception or at least highlighting areas of most concern
- A plain language summary of the budget estimates book produced for the public and councillors, in hard copy or online.

3.32   Agreement between the cabinet and scrutiny about the timing of papers so that sufficient time is allowed for effective scrutiny and challenge, set out in a timetable or in a more formal protocol which also confirms what information scrutiny should expect to receive. Reports checked for overuse of jargon and financial technical terms – where this is unavoidable, they should be clearly defined in plain language.

3.33   Member development on financial scrutiny matters is likely to integrate with members' wider development needs. In so doing, it will recognise that separate training sessions – divorced from scrutiny members' wider work – are unlikely to ensure engagement. Training designed to be integrated with members' substantive work is likely to deliver the greatest impact. In practice, this means:

- Use of member induction (at the beginning of a councillor's term) to introduce basic financial concepts.
- Frequent workshops at which ongoing financial issues – in-year performance, budget development and so on – are discussed with members. This will form important background that members can use to escalate matters to committee, as appropriate.
- Reports drafted to limit the use of unnecessary jargon, and where possible, to provide contextual information.
- Councillors themselves are likely to be best placed to understand where their needs lie; a survey of councillors on whether the financial information they get is adequate will provide a good baseline, allowing mutual expectations to be explored and potentially allowing scrutiny's overall role (see below) to begin to be discussed.

Case studies of ineffective scrutiny

3.34   **Croydon Council** has experienced a deteriorating financial position and unsustainably low-level reserves over a number of years. The Council's external auditors issued a public interest report, reporting that the Council needed to urgently address the underlying pressures on service spends and build a resilient financial position. The report made a number of high priority recommendations and two of these related to scrutiny, which were:

- The Council (including Cabinet and Scrutiny and Overview Committee) should challenge the adequacy of the reserves assessment, which should include a risk assessment before approving the budget.

- The Council (including Cabinet and Scrutiny and Overview Committee) need to show greater rigor in challenging underlying assumptions before approving the budget including understanding the track record of savings delivery.

3.35   It was found that the level of scrutiny and challenge by Members in respect of significant expenditure was not good enough in terms of challenging decisions that were high risk in the context of the Council's financial position. As part of approving the budget, external auditors stated that they would expect challenge from Members on whether a significant savings plan was deliverable. The Council's governance over the setting of the original 2020/21 budget was considered inadequate. An example of this was that it was found that the Scrutiny Overview Committee raised pertinent questions in relation to the financial position but chose not to refer the reports back to Full Council when the seriousness of the financial position would have warranted a Full Council discussion.

3.36   The **Francis Inquiry** report was published on 6 February 2013 and examined the causes of the failings in care at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust between 2005 and 2009. The report made 290 recommendations. The Inquiry found that the local authority scrutiny committees did not detect or appreciate the significance of any signs suggesting serious deficiencies at the Trust. The Francis Report concluded that the Staffordshire County Council Scrutiny Committee appeared to have been wholly ineffective as a scrutineer of the Trust.

3.37   These case studies are indicative of the importance of effective scrutiny and examples of when weak scrutiny was identified when another part of a system had failed.

Summary of recommendations from the Leach review of scrutiny

3.38   Professor Leach completed a review of scrutiny in 2015. This led to a series of recommendations the majority were implemented. Set out below is a summary of the Leach Review's main recommendations and a short commentary on the action taken in the preceding years. In each case, the paragraph from the Leach Review, which justifies and elaborates on each recommendation, is noted, for ease of 'reference back' purposes.

3.39   **(1) The Children's Services and Social Care and Health Scrutiny and Performance Panels should be retained with their existing remits. The former should be re-titled the Education and Children's Services Panel.**

This recommendation was implemented. In 2018, the Education and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee split into two committees following a recommendation from a LGA Peer Reviewer. Elected Members accepted the recommendation to allow more focus on the scrutiny of education matters.

3.40   **(2) The remits of the Neighbourhoods and Business, Employment and Economy Panels should be combined in a new Panel entitled 'Strategic**

Policy and Planning. This panel should also have responsibility for overview and scrutiny work associated with the Council's corporate priorities, which are not covered by the two retained panels. (see 3.2 and 3.3)

3.41 **(3) This new panel should operate in a different way from the other panels, with a more selective approach to agenda content, and a greater emphasis on delegating work to small task-and-finish groups (see 3.4)**

This recommendation was implemented through the creation of the Corporate and Public Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee. By virtue of its remit, the Committee focussed on significant issues at each of its meetings. However, there was a perception that its remit was too large. This Committee was dissolved in 2018/19 with the remit being split between the Scrutiny Overview Committee and a newly created Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3.42 **(4) In the medium term, depending on experience with the new panel, consideration should be given to the establishment of a single scrutiny panel operating on a similar basis to the proposed new panel (see 3.4).**

This recommendation has not been taken forward and is still a potential option for the future, subject to the agreement of elected members.

3.43 **(5) The size of each panel should be reduced to ten members. However, all non-executive members of the Council should be eligible to take part in any of the task-and–finish groups set up by any of the panels, to maximise the use of members' experience and motivation.**

Overview and Scrutiny Committees have been reduced from 12 to 11 Members. With regard to working groups, these often invite other Members to join where it is felt they could add value. Typically, this is fulfilled by inviting members from other scrutiny committees to join a working group that is considering a cross-cutting issue.

3.44 **(6) A Scrutiny Co-ordination Group should be established, comprising the chairs and vice-chairs of each of the three panels, plus two additional members to ensure political balance. It should operate on an informal basis and undertake the three functions set out in 3.6 above.**

The Scrutiny Overview Committee was established as a formal committee. At first its remit focussed on co-ordination and improving the function of scrutiny within the Council. Latterly this remit has been extended to cover issues relating to the Resources and Transformation Directorate and several corporate priorities.

3.45 **(7) Chairs and vice-chairs should continue to be allocated among the parties represented on the Council, on a proportionate basis (ideally using the criterion of the 'best person for the job')**

The appointment of Chairs and Vice-Chairs is undertaken annually at the start of each municipal year and it continues to be shared between the political parties on a proportionate basis.

3.46 **(8) The role of portfolio holders at scrutiny panel meetings should be clarified, with attendance required only for items in which the portfolio holder has specific responsibilities, where he or she, rather than the relevant officer should play the dominant role in responding to questions and comments from the panel (see 3.7).**

The role of portfolio holders at meetings has been enhanced since the Leach review. Portfolio holders attend meetings where there are agenda items concerning their portfolio, and they present reports and answer questions. Some Portfolio Holders attend every overview and scrutiny committee that covers their portfolio. The role of portfolio holders at meetings has been further outlined in the Scrutiny-Cabinet Protocol that was drafted by the Scrutiny Overview Committee in collaboration with the Leader of the Council and Deputy Leader.

3.47 **(9) The balance between agenda items for information and items for action should be changed, with a greater emphasis on the latter, where the panel can actually 'add value' (see 3.8 and 3.9)**

Focussed agendas are encouraged but agendas can still become large if there are unavoidable timing issues. Special meetings can be added to assist with scheduling.

The number of finance monitoring reports has been reduced from quarterly updates to a six-month update and end-of-year reports. Members still receive quarterly updates but these are sent via email.

3.48 **(10) Where feasible, attempts should be made to provide settings and seating arrangements which are more conducive to effective scrutiny than the current venues and procedures. The traditional service committee ways of working are generally much less appropriate for the scrutiny function (see 3.10)**

(11) For high-profile issues (e.g. a major policy failure) the 'select committee' format should be used, with appropriate seating arrangements and pre-meeting preparation (see 3.11)

Select Committee layouts were piloted for one municipal year by all overview and scrutiny committees. There was mixed feedback on their effectiveness. Some committees continued to use the select committee layout in future municipal years; however, it has fell out of use. Seating plans are arranged to keep committee members and portfolio holders separate. Portfolio Holders sit together at the table for clarity to the public that they are separate from the committee.

During remote meetings introductions are made to ensure clarity between the different roles.

3.49 **(12) The criteria to be used in selecting and prioritising topics for in-depth study by task-and finish groups should be clarified and assiduously applied. This process should be set in motion at the start of each municipal year at a meeting convened by the Scrutiny Coordination Group, with directors, cabinet representatives and the scrutiny team present to advise and respond (see 3.12).**

At its first meeting of the municipal year, all Cabinet Members and Directors are invited to attend the Overview and Scrutiny Committee that covers their portfolios. They are requested to set out their priorities for the year and highlight any issues on which they would welcome the input from that committee.

Working groups are prioritised to focus on those areas where the most value can be added. Overview and Scrutiny Committees operate one working group at a time, which requires robust prioritisation by elected Members.

Opportunities for new ways of working:

3.50 The Covid-19 pandemic has provided opportunities for new ways of working, and function. Online streaming of meetings, via You Tube, has increased viewing figures in comparison to the number of people that physically attended scrutiny meetings.

3.51 It could also be argued that traditional barriers have been removed; digital meetings are not dependent on room availability, or refreshment bookings. The removal of travel time appears to increase the number of witnesses that can be invited to meetings and are able to attend. For example, the Covid-19 Working Group heard evidence from thirty separate individuals / seventeen separate organisations over a period of two - three months. This increased collaboration and created better outcomes for the working group.

4.   **Financial information**

None directly related to this report.

5.   Reducing Inequalities

None directly related to this report.

6.   Decide

Members are asked to consider the information within the report to ensure that the future of the scrutiny function, in Walsall, is as effective as possible, and capitalises on the opportunities for new ways of working.

In order to gain further insight on how scrutiny in Walsall could be improved it is suggested that a Member survey on scrutiny and how it could be improved is undertaken in the new municipal year.

7.   Respond

Subject to the views expressed in the member survey it may be considered valuable to undertake further self-reflection on how to improve the scrutiny process in the next municipal year. This could include internal review work such as a member survey or a working group. Alternatively, a further external review could take place, for example, Professor Lech could be invited back to understand how the Council has developed since his previous report in 2015.

8.   **Review**

Subject to the agreement of the next steps regular reports will be provided as required.

Background papers

Leach review of scrutiny
Centre for Governance and Public Scrutiny – Annual Survey & Good Scrutiny Guide
CIPFA financial scrutiny good practice
Francis report
Croydon Council Public Interest report

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