

SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

THURSDAY 20 APRIL 2023, 6:00pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor Murray (Chair)
Councillor Nawaz (Vice Chair)
Councillor Bains
Councillor Bott
Councillor Ditta
Councillor Follows
Councillor Hicken
Councillor Sears
Councillor Singh-Sohal

Portfolio Holders present:

Councillor Bird
Councillor Ferguson
Councillor Flint

Officers present:

Judith Greenhalgh	Interim Executive Director (Resources)
Tony Cox	Director - Governance
Elise Hopkins	Director – Customer Engagement
Helen Dudson	Electoral Manager
Karen Griffiths	Head of Service - Strategy and Policy
Nikki Gough	Democratic Services Officer
Edward Cook	Assistant Democratic Services Officer

469/22 Apologies

Apologies were received for Councillor K. Hussain.

470/22 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

471/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

472/22 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no agenda items requiring the exclusion of the public.

473/22 **Minutes**

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2023 was submitted.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 16 March 2023, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

474/22 **Voter Reforms and Raising Awareness**

The Director (Governance) presented a report which informed Members of the legislative changes brought in by the Elections Act 2022 and Voter Identification Regulations 2022, including acceptable identification, voter authority certificates, and the responsibility of the Presiding Officer. It also detailed the actions being taken by the Council to fulfil these responsibilities.

[Annexed]

In response to questions from the Committee the Director (Governance) and Electoral Manager explained that efforts had been made to minimise potential delays and disruption in polling stations arising from the new voter ID requirements through pre-election awareness campaigns, increased staffing and placing additional signage at polling stations. A mock polling station had been used to train Presiding Officers and polling station inspectors would be required to make additional visits to ensure the smooth-running of the elections.

The Electoral Manager explained that the policy regarding voter ID should be 'inclusion not exclusion', with Presiding Officers having some discretion regarding voter ID. Guidance was that if an ID of a valid type was brought which was a clear likeness of the individual but had expired, it should still be accepted, with the Presiding Officer having the discretion as to whether it was a clear likeness. Residents could apply for Voter Authority Certificates (VACs) and where voters used VACs this would be recorded for data collection purposes as would voters being turned away due to a lack of ID. Voters without ID would be encouraged to return and would be given information on valid forms of identification and contact details for Electoral Services.

It was clarified that anybody in a queue for a polling station before 10:00pm would be eligible to vote and should be issued with a ticket to show this. West Midlands Police had confirmed plans for officers to be available throughout the Borough on polling

day including at the close of polls. Members were also informed that three teams of private security would also be available on the day.

Resolved:

- 1. That the responsibilities of the Returning Officer and Electoral Registration Officer be noted;**
- 2. That the actions being taken to deliver these responsibilities be noted.**

475/22 LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Findings and Action Plan

The Head of Service (Strategy and Policy) introduced the report and gave a presentation which provided an overview of the findings and recommendations of the recent Local Government Association's (LGA's) peer review of Walsall Council and the action plan established to respond to these.

[Annexed]

Responding to questions and elaborating on key points, the Head of Service - Strategy and Policy explained that many of the challenges and recommendations identified in the review were those which were expected by the management team and for which plans were already in place to address. Internal reviews into employment equality and governance were being undertaken. The presentation [annexed] included a slide with comments from employees and it was explained that this was provided by the LGA peers to reflect the conversations they had recorded. Whilst most of these were positive, members were assured that full and frank conversations were had and certainly there had been constructively critical comments made as well. Regarding the LGA's recommendation to 'review the Council's approach to flexible working in the round and communicate this clearly to staff' the Head of Service - Strategy and Policy explained that this covered not only remote-working but other aspects of flexible work too. Managers had responsibilities for managing their teams to ensure productivity, regardless of where that work was being done.

Members commended the successes laid out in the Corporate Peer Challenge and particularly highlighted the effectiveness of audit.

Resolved:

- 1. That the findings from the Corporate Peer Challenge and the successes that it highlights be noted;**
- 2. That the recommendations that the LGA put forward, and the Action Plan produced as a response that sets out all the activity already planned or in progress, be noted.**

476/22 We are Walsall 2040 Draft Strategy Consultation

The Head of Service - Strategy and Policy introduced the report and gave a presentation which provided an update on the 'We Are Walsall 2040' draft strategy, following consultation.

{Annexed}

Large numbers of responses to the consultation had been received and highlighted the importance of feeling safe, and parks and green spaces as recurring priorities amongst respondents. The consultation and significant feedback would enable the We Are Walsall 2040 strategy to be co-designed with partners and communities. Many responses were positive and where feedback was more critical it often reflected people wishing the strategy to be more ambitious rather than substantive disagreements.

Responding to questions the Head of Service (Strategy and Policy) explained that the number of responses from the postal survey had been broadly evenly distributed throughout the Borough as larger samples had been delivered in areas with traditionally lower response rates. The highest number of respondents were in St Matthews ward, reflecting this. Faith communities had been engaged with, through visits to places of worship and engagement by the cohesion team. Some of the objectives in the draft strategy may seem overly ambitious, however, they have been developed with partners who wanted ambitious goals and it is not expected for all objectives to be met.

Members challenged whether reducing inequalities could be more prominent in the Plan, with specific objectives relating to child poverty and inadequate housing added. Others raised economic growth as an objective they would like to see featuring more prominently. The Head of Service (Strategy and Policy) and Interim Director – (Resources) confirmed these suggestions would be discussed and considered.

Resolved:

- 1. That the draft strategy framework be noted;**
- 2. That the timescales for finalisation of the strategy in June 2023 be noted.**

477/22 Feedback from Overview & Scrutiny Committees

The Committee received feedback from the Chairs of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees on meetings of their committees since 16 March 2023.

A Member requested data on how many children had attended dentist appointments over the last 12 months.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the feedback from Overview and Scrutiny Committees be noted.

478/22 Recommendation Tracker

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

[Annexed]

It was noted that several actions marked on the report as 'in progress' had been completed since the papers were published.

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

479/22 Areas of Focus 2022-23

Members received the Committee's Work Programme and considered the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

- 1. That the Areas of Focus be noted;**
- 2. That items remaining on the Areas of Focus be recommended for consideration at the Scrutiny Overview Committee in the new municipal year.**

480/22 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be determined at Annual Council.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 7:41pm.

Signed:

Date: