

# Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24



Walsall Council

## Forward by Councillor Murray, Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee

I am pleased to introduce the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2023 – 2024.

This report showcases the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from our scrutiny function at Walsall, as well as the impact and value of our recommendations on the policies and services of the Council and its partners.

For the 2023 – 2024 period, Members established two working groups to review and deep dive into Primary Care and GP Access, which was led by Social Care and Health OSC and Housing Standards, which was led by Members of the Scrutiny Overview Committee. Both working groups examined complex challenging topics and achieved positive outcomes and made subsequent recommendations to various stakeholders.

Each Scrutiny Committee also reviewed the progress and implementation of previous recommendations and responded to consultations and referrals from the executive and other bodies.

Some of the highlights of Scrutiny's work in 2023/2024 include:

- Assessing the Council's infrastructure funding secured through Section 106 planning obligations and gaining assurances on the process of committed funding.
- Scrutinising the progress and ongoing delivery of the locality working and family hubs across each of the localities in the Borough. This included supporting the work of the Council, especially with the voluntary and community sectors.
- Examining the effectiveness and feasibility of the Walsall Masterplan, including debating the future vision of housing in the Borough to support 'We are Walsall 2040'.
- Evaluating the performance and outcomes of the Council's role in reducing the number of children missing education. This included investigating the issues and challenges facing disadvantaged children and making a number of recommendations to the Secretary of State for Education.
- Providing challenges on matters relating to mental health, including improving access to provisions and services provided by health partners across the Borough and the wider Black Country.

I am grateful to everyone who contributed, and hope that our report will inform and inspire further action and improvement of Scrutiny. I look forward to continuing our work in the 2024/2025 municipal year.

**Councillor John Murray**  
**Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee**

## Contents

1. Introduction
2. Overview of Corporate Plan priorities and the four principles of good scrutiny
3. Economic
4. People
5. Internal
6. Children
7. Communities

## Introduction

The report provides the opportunity to review activity within overview and scrutiny and to highlight some of the key developments.

This report details the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees during the period from May 2023 to April 2024. It is not an exhaustive account of the work that Members have undertaken but it gives an overview of the wide variety of work that has taken place, and which is centered on the priorities of the Council Plan. This demonstrates how the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committees are contributing to the Council's strategic direction by helping to create the golden thread from a strategic plan into action. The priorities in the Council Plan are:

- **Economic** – enable greater local opportunities for all people, communities and businesses
- **People** – encourage our residents to lead more active, fulfilling and independent lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing
- **Internal focus** – Council services are customer focused, effective, efficient and equitable
- **Children** - have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well
- **Communities** – empower our communities so that they feel they are connected and belong in Walsall, creating safe and healthy places whilst building a strong sense of community

Following on from this, the contributions of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees have been cross-referenced with the Centre for Governance and Public Scrutiny's four principles of good scrutiny. This helps to demonstrate the wider contribution that was made by Members.

The four principles of good scrutiny are:

- Provides critical friend challenge to executive policy and decision makers
- Enables the voice and concerns of the public
- Carried out by independent minded councillors who lead and own the scrutiny process
- Drives improvement in public services

Many other issues have also been examined by the Committees but have not been mentioned here due to the limitations of this report. However, further details of all the Overview and Scrutiny meetings can be found on the Council's committee management website.

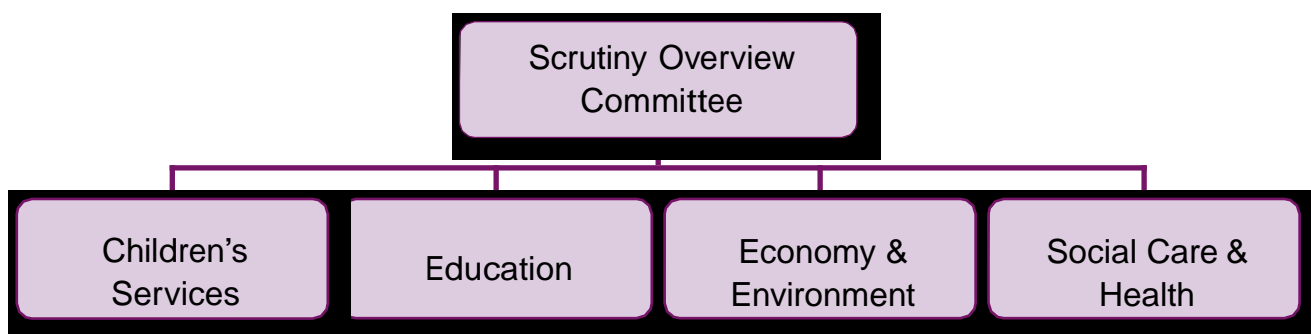
## What is Overview and Scrutiny?

Overview and Scrutiny Committees are made up of non-executive Members from across all political parties and they exist to provide accountability to the Council and its partners. The Committees have four key roles:

- Holding the executive to account for their decisions.
- Scrutinising local partners (e.g. NHS Walsall).
- Reviewing and developing policies and making recommendations to Council and Cabinet on these; and
- Reviewing services to ensure they are providing value for money and meeting local needs.

Scrutiny also has a vital role in enabling the voices of local residents to be heard through community engagement. All meetings are open to the public to attend (except in exceptional circumstances where something has to be taken in private session). The public can also suggest items for the Committees to consider.

At its meeting in May 2023, the Council set the Committee structure and remit for the year ahead, which included the following Committees:



More details on the role of scrutiny can be found at [www.walsall.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.walsall.gov.uk/scrutiny).

## Economic, enable greater local opportunities for all people, communities and businesses.

### 1. Town Funds Projects Master Plan including Willenhall Masterplan

The Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an update on the regeneration activities that were taking place across the Borough.

Following a presentation from the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, it was highlighted that £1.5 billion was being invested into transforming the Borough with several interventions to regenerate and support economic activity, increase housing choice and make Walsall a better-connected destination for businesses and residents.

Members were informed that interventions included the Connected Gateway project, which secured £11.4m from the Government's Future High Street Fund and was supported by the Council's capital programme. It was noted that this project would create a public transport gateway between the bus station and rail station, modernisation of the Saddlers Shopping Centre, transformation of the public realm in Park Street and improved accessibility of the Walsall Rail Station.

The Committee also noted the programme of works relating to the Bloxwich Town Deal, which included several commercial and community works for the area. The Construction Skills Through Regeneration programme would enable the area to build on local capacity to deliver the Borough's Housing targets through the development of apprenticeships and local training schemes.

Members raised concerns about issues of drugs and criminal activity within the town centre. Members were reassured that the Council was working with West Midlands Police on both issues and CCTV had been introduced as a crime prevention deterrent. In addition, the Council had drone technology at its disposal which would complement the presence of rapid-response Police cars to reduce criminal activity in the town centre.

#### *How did this item provide a critical friend challenge?*

The Committee provided constructive challenges to the Cabinet about the rollout and development of the Council's Master Plan and subsequent projects. Members questioned the Portfolio Holder on aspects relating to Walsall Town Centre including issues on crime, traffic management and future development to improve public footfall.

## 2. Heritage Strategy

The Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report on the Council's Heritage Strategy on 16 January 2024.

The Committee heard that the strategy was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund to create opportunities for celebrating past, present and future generations by identifying heritage assets in consultation with public, private and third-sector partners within the Borough. In addition, there was a significant task to identify challenging heritage assets, which had fallen into a state of disrepair or neglect to secure a long-term future.

A discussion took place on how the Council could work with partners and private landowners to safeguard and protect cultural heritage in the Borough. One notable example was the securement of the Grade 2 listed Guildhall in Walsall, which in partnership with a non-profit organisation, planned to create a suitable space for local makers within the creative industry.

Members were supportive of the work enabled by the Heritage Strategy, however, there was a consensus that further work was needed to work with communities across Walsall to identify suitable cultural and historical assets for future preservation. As such, the Council embarked on several engagement activities to promote such as the heritage forum which enabled consultation with a variety of consultees and stakeholders.

*How was this item carried out by independent people who took responsibility for their role?*

Through detailed debate and discussion, Members took an independent approach to examining the topic, with a particular focus on how to enable and support the strategy. A suggestion was made for the Council to establish local pop-up events in communities, which would enable local people to get involved in the Heritage Strategy and identify cultural assets within their local communities.

## People, encourage our residents to lead more active, fulfilling and independent lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing.

### 1. Primary Care Access and GP Services Working Group

The Committee established the Primary Care Access and GP Services Working Group at its meeting on 28 September 2023 after hearing items on the topic at previous meetings.

The Working Group sought to focus on GP Services provided in the Borough and how improvements could be made to access for residents. The Working Group examined the existing GP commissioning model and upcoming national improvement projects. They also looked into making services digital and the NHS workforce strategy for the whole country.

Through its work, the Working Group made the following findings:

- There had been increasing demand on health systems and a shortage of trained clinicians including GPs which created an acute problem for residents who needed to access services.
- Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there had been an acceleration in the use of technology and digitisation in accessing care and there was a risk of leaving vulnerable residents behind.
- While there had been an increase in the percentage of patients who viewed GP services as poor, the vast majority expressed a positive view of services, and this was a testament to the hard work being carried out by clinicians across the Borough.
- Some of the digitisation already undertaken through the NHS had not delivered what had been expected and further improvements were needed.
- It was clear that the current and projected demand for primary care services outstripped the supply of clinicians, and the only long-term solution was to increase the number of training positions for doctors and other clinicians.
- Improving the pay and conditions of current staff would help improve the recruitment and retention problems being experienced in the short and long term.
- While much of the Working Group's findings and recommendations focused on national policy it was the consensus that the Council and its partners could pursue local changes which could aid residents to access primary care and push for changes at a national level.

The report was presented to the Committee at its meeting on 4 April 2024 and Members supported the final report's findings and recommendations. They agreed that an update on the response to the report be presented to the Committee in the new municipal year.

#### *How did this scrutiny amplify the voices and concerns of the public?*

The Committee through the Working Group, worked effectively with NHS partners and others to voice the concerns of residents. Using the experience and concerns of residents to work with partners to identify the causes of the issues in primary care and access and GP service delivery and formulate solutions to help alleviate those concerns.



## 2. Social Prescribing

The Committee received a report and presentation on the current work being undertaken by the Council and its partners through the Walsall Together Programme which had commenced by Public Health and was now run by Resilient Communities who had since expanded the original programme.

The Committee was attended by several partner organisations which included: The Black Country Integrated Care Board, Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust, Walsall Housing Group, Mindkind (Manor Farm Community Association) and The Old Hall Peoples Partnership.

Members were informed of the work being undertaken by organisations within the Borough in the area of social prescribing and how their work had changed since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Committee were informed that there had been a shift in social prescribing referrals since the pandemic from social isolation to health and mental health, and poor living conditions. There had been an increase in the support offered by social prescribers to help residents navigate complex systems about accessing further support and healthcare.

There was a consensus that social prescribing was saving lives and making a direct impact on communities. However, there was a consensus, especially amongst partners that many people in communities did not know what social prescribing meant. Members of the Committee were supportive of the work already taking place around social prescribing and offered their support for raising awareness of it in the Borough.

*How was this item carried out by independent people who took responsibility for their role?*

Questions were raised by Members to understand the work of partners and the Council on social prescribing and what it entailed. Furthermore, Members sought to understand how social prescribing fit into the larger health and well-being offering to residents and whilst acknowledging its importance understood that it could not replace frontline statutory services. The Committee also understood that a wider understanding of social prescribing was needed and agreed to support this aim.

.

## Internal focus, Council services are customer focused effective, efficient and equitable.

### 1. Draft Revenue & Capital Budget 2024/25 to 2027/28

The Scrutiny Overview Committee considered the draft revenue and capital budget for 2024/25 to 2027/28.

Members were informed of the Capital Development Investment Scheme, which outlined that there were several capital pipeline schemes which were subject to business case approval. The majority of the schemes related to regeneration activity such as the Walsall Gateway project. The pipeline schemes enabled the Council to be ready and perceptive to Government funding allocations as and when announced. Members raised concerns about the increased costs of bed and breakfast accommodation as a result of the national trend of temporary homelessness. The Committee made several recommendations including a request for consideration to be given to further investment in the base budget for the Youth Service subject to satisfactory feedback data.

*Provide constructive “critical friend” challenge.*

The Committee provided a constructive challenge to the executive on several issues relating to the draft revenue and capital budget. Examples include scrutinising the proposed savings within Adult Social Care, Public Health and the Hub as well as how the Council was increasing its competitiveness for traded services.

### 2. Recruitment and Retention of Council Employees

The Scrutiny Overview Committee considered an item on recruitment and retention of Council employees. Members discussed the challenges facing the Council to recruit and retain workers due to the evolving technological advancements, globalisation, competition and financial constraints which provided a challenging environment to retain talent.

The Committee noted that with the creation of a workforce strategy, it was envisioned that the Council would develop future leaders, embrace technology, upskill and create a positive and psychologically safe culture that engages with its workforce.

The Committee were informed of the breakdown of the workforce profile which was based on data from March 2023. Members were eager to discuss and note the progress made with fulfilling senior management roles by individuals from an ethnic minority background. Members welcomed the establishment of staff networks for underrepresented groups as such groups were crucial to encourage existing staff to fully realise their potential.

Members recognised the importance of a workforce strategy. As such, the Committee welcomed a future report in this respect to monitor the effectiveness of policies.

*Provide constructive “critical friend” challenge.*

The Committee reflected on the Workforce Strategy and provided questions and challenges, especially with the recruitment and retention of job positions which were hardest to fill such as Social Workers. They also provided feedback on how the Council could engage with local schools to coordinate learning skills to fulfil future job roles.

## Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.

### 1. Youth Justice Partnership – Reduction of Youth Violence

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an overview of the issues relating to the reduction of youth violence in Walsall. The Committee was informed that reducing violence was one of the five priorities of the Youth Justice Service 2022 – 2025 Strategic Plan. This priority was aligned with the Safer Walsall Partnership.

The Committee was informed that a Serious Violence Needs Assessment had been undertaken and the outcome of this had been translated into a serious violence delivery plan. Violence was the most common offence type reported to Walsall Youth Justice Service.

Partners from the Safer Walsall Partnership attended the scrutiny meeting to assist the Committee in understanding and scrutinise the issue, this included:

- West Midlands Police.
- Violence Reduction Unit.
- Community Safety.
- Youth Justice Team.

Information was provided on the serious violence duty which required specified authorities to work together to prevent and reduce serious violence, for Walsall the Safer Walsall Partnership led this area of work.

*Provides critical friend challenge to executive policy and decision-makers.*

The partnership was questioned on the action being taken on children and knife crime, and the Committee was informed of the range of activities which took place with children and within schools to prevent such activity.

A challenge was provided about the collection of data about demographics – recognising the ethnicity bias in the justice system. Members were informed that the service had developed the way it worked with children who were overrepresented within the service. Specific programmes were designed for these groups. Plans were in place to influence other Partnerships and work with colleagues to prevent this bias in the first place. A further challenge was provided on the unmet health needs of children entering the youth justice system and the increased vulnerability to exclusion from school which could put children at greater risk of youth violence.

In response to a series of questions from Members, Officers stated that the success of the service was fewer children in the system and when they did enter the system they did not re-enter.

The Committee supported the direction of travel of the partnership and congratulated the team's success in lowering the reoffending rate amongst children. However, Members remained concerned that attendance and exclusions appeared to be a contributing factor to children entering the youth justice system and invited the Youth Justice Partners to attend a future meeting to discuss this issue.

## 2. Inclusion

The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee used a thematic approach to scrutinise 'Inclusion' which included reports on the following:

- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Developments.
- The Inclusion Hub.
- Transitions in Special Educational Needs.
- Learning Recovery programmes.

The Committee received an update on the Inclusion Hub and heard that the aim was to improve the educational outcomes of children with a social worker. A key focus had been to reduce the number of exclusions alongside tracking children who had been excluded from school to offer them support. Members heard that there had been an increase in the number of referrals to the Inclusion Hub, and the Team had worked with the Youth Justice Service to assist children on remand. It was agreed that this should remain an area of focus for the Committee.

Members received an overview of the developments and achievements of the SEND Service. The SEND system was designed to identify and support children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. The EHC system was a legal framework that provided comprehensive support for children and young people with complex or severe special educational needs and disabilities. It was stressed that the Council had a robust SEND system in place with effective systems for recruiting to this service. This meant that the service was better able to communicate well with parents and had helped to reduce the Education Health Care (EHC) plan backlog.

A Challenge was provided by the Committee in relation to meeting the 20-week deadline for EHC plans, and it was assured that the Council was operating well above the national average. It was further noted that the caseload for EHCPs was not more than the national average. Members questioned how the Council would improve the Ofsted rating of SEND and were provided with details of the growth in new projects, strengthened pathways with social care and improvements in EHC plans process and delivery. Members heard that the successes of the Team would be built upon to further improve the service provided in Walsall.

The Committee considered a report on key transitions for children and young people with an EHC plan. Members learned that transitions could be difficult for children with an EHC and stressed the importance that transitions were well planned and coordinated. Concern was raised by Members in relation to the backlog of EHCP annual reviews, however, assurance was provided that new processes aimed to clear the backlog.

When considering the learning recovery report, Members heard that the pandemic had disrupted education for young people, and the Council had launched several programmes to support children in recovering from this disruption. These programmes encompassed a wide range of initiatives and strategies to help students catch up academically and promote well-being. Members were provided with details of these programs and the support available. Challenge was provided in response to outcomes for year one phonics, as a result of this concern it was further considered at a subsequent meeting.

Work done to further improve the gap between Walsall and national was described and it was stressed that phonics was a key area of focus for the service. It was agreed that this would be recommended to remain an area of focus for the Committee.

*Provides critical friend challenge to executive policy and decision-makers.*

The thematic approach allowed the Committee to consider items in the wider context of the issue and select areas for further investigation. Members had the opportunity to challenge a variety of approaches. The Committee provided effective challenges to ensure that improvements were delivered promptly for the benefit of residents.

### 3. Attendance, Skills and development and Alternative Provision

As part of other themes within the areas of focus, the committee have also considered items on attendance, skills and development and alternative provision.

The Committee monitored attendance as it was important nationally and locally, and although improved, unauthorised absence remained higher than the national level and a main concern for the Committee.

Skills, linked to employment and training for young people was within the remit of the committee but not one focused on previously. The Committee received information on the Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET) provision and noted concerns regarding the level of funding. The Committee decided to continue prioritising this issue because many people who are NEET or likely to become NEET often belong to disadvantaged groups.

*How was this item carried out by independent people who took responsibility for their role?*

The Committee examined the quality assurance process for alternative provision and learned that the team will enhance the offer in Walsall to cater to the varied needs of pupils while ensuring high-quality provision with strong safeguarding measures in place. Members agreed that this should remain a focus of the Committee moving forward to ensure continuous improvement, especially in the area of SEND support.

## **Communities, that are empowered so that they feel they are connected and belong in Walsall, creating safe and healthy places whilst building a strong sense of community.**

### **1. Violent Crime**

On 9 November 2023, the Scrutiny Overview Committee considered an item on violent crime and policing in Walsall.

There was a presentation about the Council's responsibilities regarding policing, community safety and the duty of cooperation through Community Safety Partnerships. The Committee noted that there had been a change in the organisation of local policing through the establishment of Local Policing Area models. As such, the Chief Superintendent's responsibilities and control regarding specific resourcing had increased and performance had improved. This was demonstrated by the inclusion of statistics relating to arrests, intelligence submissions, expired bail and response times.

The Committee were given assurances about partnership work which had taken place concerning Bloxwich and Blakenall impact area zones. Engagement and building trust with communities was important, especially for the collection of intelligence data which enabled and embedded police work.

Members identified that road safety and tackling road harm was an area in which partnership work could be improved and community involvement could be an important part of this. The Chief Superintendent highlighted the need to 'design out' rather than 'enforce out' some highway risks. Further partnership work between West Midlands Police and the Council's Community Protection Team was welcomed.

*Provide constructive "critical friend" challenge.*

The Committee challenged partners with the delivery of the policing within Walsall. In response to numerous questions and answers concerning road safety, the Committee resolved for Cabinet to identify further partnership and collaboration with West Midlands Police to improve road safety and reduce the incidents on roads within the Borough. Members welcomed and commended the work of representatives from West Midlands Police and the work carried out by police officers within Walsall including the Council's community safety team.

## 2. Litterpicking and Volunteers Programme

The Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an overview of the Council's Litterpicking and Volunteer Programme on 27 February 2024. Members noted that the programme was designed to support and empower local people to help keep streets and open spaces across the Borough free from litter. In addition, the programme enabled:

- Community and enhance wellbeing.
- Development of Civic Pride.
- Improvement of the environment.

To strengthen the programme, the Council created a Community Litter Watch, which was championed by two volunteer coordinators. The Committee welcomed the creation of the reporting portal, which would provide opportunities for volunteers to request equipment, bags, stickers and report bag collections.

Members noted the aspiration to engage with education establishments across the Borough to educate young people about recycling and promote responsible rubbish disposal. Following a lengthy debate about the effectiveness of littering enforcement, there was a view that stricter enforcement was needed to act as a deterrent.

Overall Members expressed their admiration for the Borough's 10 green spaces which had been green flag accredited.

*How did this scrutiny amplify the voices and concerns of the public?*

The Committee successfully amplified the voices of residents and volunteers on the issues surrounding littering and fly-tipping in the Borough. Members challenged the programme supporting volunteers and thanked volunteers for their hard work.

## 3. Housing Standards Working Group

During the 2023/24 municipal year, the Scrutiny Overview Committee established a working group to consider housing standards in the Borough.

The Working Group commenced its work in January 2024, The Working Group conducted research and examined the following topics:

- Enhancing Energy Efficiency
- Quality of Housing
- Promotion of Housing Standards
- Housing Supply and Demand
- Healthy Spaces and Communities
- Local Planning Policies and the Housing Strategy

Due to the limited timescales, there was an onus on independent research and study. To complement this work, the Members invited representatives from Social Housing Landlords, private landlord representatives and Walsall Council teams such as regeneration, strategic housing standards and customer engagement.

In total, the Working Group made 23 recommendations across all of the aforementioned topics to the Cabinet for their consideration.



In particular, there was support for the Council to build on existing work to establish a Derelict Land Taskforce, to unlock the Borough's land supply to identify underused sites by existing tools and engage with the West Midlands Combined Authority and/or Homes England to assist with unlocking of this supply.

*How did this scrutiny amplify the voices and concerns of the public?*

Through the detailed reports, discussion and witness testimony, Members amplified the voices and concerns of residents about the issues centred around the housing sector in Walsall. Throughout its work, the Group actively involved the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration and supported good policy development such as Article 4 Direction initiatives.

