

Council – 22 September, 2014

Annual Scrutiny Report - 2013/14

Service: Legal and Democratic Services

Wards: All

1. Summary of report

This is the annual report to Council outlining the work of scrutiny in 2013/14.

The report provides a case study analysis of the work undertaken during the municipal year by the panels and their respective working groups.

A copy of the annual report is attached at Appendix 1 to this report.

2. Recommendations

Council is recommended to:

Note the annual scrutiny report for the 2013/14 municipal year (annexed).

3. Resource and legal considerations

Scrutiny is a key aspect of the governance framework and an integral part of how the council makes effective decisions. Good scrutiny can help to inform policy making and help ensure that decisions taken by the cabinet are in effectively considered prior to implementation. The role of Scrutiny is defined in Walsall's constitution, Article 6.

4. Citizen impact

Effective scrutiny enables the public to fully engage in the topics under review. Ensuring that the items for consideration are effectively communicated via the council's website and public notice boards encourages citizens to become involved in the scrutiny process. Any potential work item that will have citizen impact will be fully scoped and include the opportunity for public involvement.

5. Environmental impact

The work of scrutiny picks up on a range of environmental factors across the whole borough. There are no direct environmental considerations as a result of this report.

6. Performance and risk management issues

The role of Scrutiny is fundamental in ensuring that the most effective and informed decisions are taken whilst delivering value for money for residents.

This report provides an overview of the work undertaken by the Scrutiny and Performance Panels which helps to achieve these objectives.

Asking members to recognise and review past achievements and consider the potential items to scrutinise helps to ensure that the Scrutiny and Performance Panels focus their attention on the main issues that have strategic relevance and importance to the council as a whole. Incorporating an effective scoping process enables a risk based approach to be taken in the development of potential work programmes; focussing on the key issues that affect the performance of the council, impact on service delivery or potentially result in service delivery that does not meet resident expectation or offer value for money. The Council's priorities and pledges are all considered when looking at potential work programmes for the following year and frequent performance monitoring reports are presented to individual Scrutiny and Performance Panels.

7. Equality implications

This report details all of the work that has been across the whole borough. Scrutiny Members represent a number of wards across the borough and actively work with residents to best represent their views at Scrutiny.

8. Consultation

Individual panels have sought the expert opinion and views from witnesses to ensure that a balanced perspective is provided against any of the work topics under consideration. This year, evidence has been brought to the panels by officers, members of the public, officers from other authorities, partners and independent experts.



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Executive Director (Neighbourhood Services) & Statutory Scrutiny Officer
11 September, 2014

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Scrutiny Annual Report 2013/14



Walsall Council

Foreword

I am very pleased to introduce the 2013-14 Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report for Walsall Council. This report provides the opportunity to review last year's activity within overview and scrutiny panels and to highlight some of the key developments.

2013/14 was a busy year for scrutiny and this report highlights some of the many ways panels have been carrying out their role. There have been some major policy issues to consider such as national welfare reform and improvement in the performance of our services for children. There have also been a number of local issues which benefitted from the wider challenge and testing which scrutiny provides.

Scrutiny is about holding decision makers to account on behalf of Walsall residents and that doesn't only mean Council services. Last year has also seen panels scrutinising the activities and proposals of other organisations such as Network Rail, NHS and Post Office.

Scrutiny panels have now been in place in Walsall for 14 years and their role has become well established. As councillors have become more experienced and skilled at overview and scrutiny, so the variety of approaches and methods has expanded. This year's annual report includes examples of many varied ways to involve residents and service users to help strengthen the scrutiny process.

In the year ahead there will be the opportunity to share some of the good practice from scrutiny panels, as set out in this report, and to develop new ways to help members continue providing an effective scrutiny function that adds value.

Jamie Morris
Executive Director – (Neighbourhood Services)
& Statutory Scrutiny Officer





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Introduction

Scrutiny and Performance Panels are made up of non-executive members from across all political parties and they exist to provide accountability to the council and its partners. They 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 voice of local residents 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 scrutiny to consider. More details on the role of scrutiny can be found on our website www.walsall.gov.uk/scrutiny.

At its annual meeting in May 2013, Council set the Scrutiny panel structure and remit for the year ahead which included 6 panels:

- Children's and Young People
- Community Services & Environment
- Corporate
- Health
- Regeneration
- Social Care and Inclusion

This report details how the work of Scrutiny and Performance panels during 2013/14. It is not an exhaustive account of the work Members have undertaken but gives an overview of the wide variety of work that has taken place throughout the year. There are many other issues that have also been looked at that are not mentioned here but details of all meetings can be found on the [council's committee website](#).

A full list of items discussed at Panel meetings is included within the report. Members of the Scrutiny team would be happy to provide more detail in relation to any of these items.

For any queries you may have or just for a discussion about Scrutiny you can contact any of the team:-

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Membership

Corporate

Councillors S. Coughlan (Chairman), J. Rochelle (Vice-Chair), B. Douglas-Maul, G. Illmann-Walker, M. Longhi, D. Shires, R. Worrall

Social Care and Inclusion

Councillors T. Oliver (Chairman), B. Douglas-Maul (Vice Chairman)
L. Rattigan, J. Rochelle, D. Coughlan, M. Nazir, D. Barker

Health

Councillors Councillor M. Longhi (Chairman), Councillor D. James (Vice-Chair), Councillor O. Bennett, Councillor M. Burley, Councillor M. Flower, Councillor E. Russell, Councillor V. Woodruff

Regeneration

Councillors L. Harrison (Chair), I. Azam (Vice-Chair), D. Barker, M. Flower, D. Anson, R. Worrall, S. Wade

Community Services & Environment

Councillors V. Woodruff (Chair), C. Creaney (Vice-Chair), I. Azam, B. Douglas-Maul, K. Hussain, G. Illmann-Walker, L. Rattigan

Children and Young People

Councillors B. Cassidy (Chair), Councillor R. Martin (Vice-Chair), G. Perry, D. Shires, P. Lane, T. Jukes, E. Hughes

Non-elected voting members:– S. Rayner (Lichfield Diocesan Education),
Amanda Potts (Parent Governor)

Non-elected non-voting members:– R. Bragger (Primary Teacher Representative), D. Blackwell (Secondary Teacher Representative)

Remit of Panels

Corporate

All aspects and general services relating to the Council's corporate centre for example; financial services including the annual budget process and the Council wide financial position, corporate performance management, legal and democratic services, services falling within the Council's transformation agenda within the functions set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Regeneration

All aspects and general services related to regeneration for example; economic, environmental and physical regeneration, planning, land and property, partnership working and strategic housing matters within the functions set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Community Services and Environment

All aspects and general services related to (1) serving the community, for example community safety, leisure and culture, the local strategic partnership, third sector co-ordination and to review or scrutinise decisions made or other actions taken in connection with the discharge by the responsible authorities of their crime and disorder functions (no less than twice in every 12 months) as required by the Police and Justice Act, 2006, within the functions set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 and (2) the environment such as waste management, highways maintenance, grounds maintenance and traffic management, and to review and scrutinise the exercise of flood risk management functions which may affect the local authority's area as required by the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 within the functions set out in Section 21 of the Local Government Act, 2000 (as amended).

Health

All aspects and general services related to health service matters for example; adult services, health partnership matters and the public health agenda as conferred under the Health and Social Care Act 2001 within the functions set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Children and Young People

All aspects and general services related to serving children and young people for example; education, children services, youth services within the functions set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Social Care and Inclusion

All aspects and general services related to social care and inclusion for example; adult services as conferred under the Health and Social Care Act 2001 within the functions as set out in section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000.

Regeneration

How has Scrutiny added value in 2013/14?

The Regeneration Scrutiny and Performance Panel continued to ensure that the Council strived to improve the economy for both businesses and residents. Areas considered included the Chase Line electrification and Bloxwich level crossing, the Markets working group, the under occupancy (bedroom) tax, together with Crown Post Ltd proposals for the Crown Post Office, Willenhall.

Chase Line electrification and Bloxwich level crossing

The Panel kept a strong watching brief over this matter as it progressed during the municipal year and received updates from both council officers, as well as representatives from Network Rail. A key concern for Members was the impact on local communities of the various works required to enable the introduction of an electrified line, particularly traffic congestion as bridge work was undertaken. The Panel heard that a total of four bridge reconstructions were required in Walsall, including Broad Lane Bridge. Other planned works include bridge reconstruction in Park Street. The Panel continually acted as an advocate for local people and emphasised that the interests of residents must always be fully taken into account during the development, particularly in relation to the impact on local roads as demonstrated by the following extract from the minutes:

'The Chair thanked the council officers in the traffic management team for their efforts in the successful installation of traffic management measures in relation to the works at Broad Lane Bridge. This had helped mitigate the impact on local traffic of the works.'

The Panel remained focused on the best interests of local residents following the completion of the works and reopening of Broad Lane Bridge, as indicated by the extract from the minutes below:

'The Chair requested that a planned review to assess the success of traffic calming measures in roads neighbouring Broad Lane Bridge take place as soon as possible, with the results reported to the Panel.'

In relation to Bloxwich Level Crossing it was explained that Network Rail's position was that it should be closed on safety grounds. The Panel emphasised the importance of ensuring that the public consultation on the possible closure of the level crossing included all residents and businesses that could be impacted upon by the re-routing of traffic.

'The Chair stressed the importance of ensuring that those living in Dudley Fields had the opportunity to contribute to the consultation.'

The Panel were also pleased that Network Rail had acknowledged the need to fund mitigation works and were working with the council to identify and design the most appropriate improvements.

Post Office Ltd Proposals for the Crown Post Office, Willenhall

The Panel heard from a representative of the Post Office Ltd who explained that while post offices offered local services and served a social purpose they remained a commercial business and needed to turn a profit. It was also explained that the Willenhall branch was currently costing £1.45 for every £1 of income, with staff costs greater than income. As a consequence it had been determined that the branch would be more sustainable with a business partner. The Panel heard that any proposals for the operation of the branch with a partner would be subject to a six week local public consultation. As illustrated by this extract from the minute the Panel stressed the importance of a post office branch continuing to operate in Willenhall:

'In response to a Panel query it was explained that although seeking a franchise partner in Willenhall would enable Post Office Ltd to save money it also recognised its social obligations. It was intended that a viable Willenhall branch would establish itself permanently in the community.'



Markets Working Group

This Working Group was re-established from the previous municipal year. The first key aspect of the Working Group's activity was to meet with the consultants, appointed by the council, to identify the most appropriate location for the market and its layout. A range of views were expressed by the different Members of the working group. This included the view that the market should return to its original position at St. Matthew's Square. However, it was the view of the majority of the working group Members that, in order to enable future expansion of the major retail developments currently taking place, the Bridge offered a more suitable location for the market. Members of the working group also visited a two day consultation event that was held at Walsall Art Gallery. It was explained that the majority of consultation respondents supported the proposal to locate the market at the Bridge and Lower Park Street, as well as its new layout. However, a Member of the working group also expressed strong concerns regarding the robustness of the demountable stalls. Officers explained that a number of traders had also expressed concern regarding the robustness of the stalls, as well as in relation to the working and access implications of the proposed back-to-back arrangements. In addition, the impact of the bridge works being undertaken in the town centre in preparation for rail electrification would also have implications for the timescale relating to the development of the new market site. The Panel once again highlighted the importance of ensuring that the views of local people and businesses were taken account:

'The Chair expressed strong support for the revised timeline explaining that it would demonstrate that the council is listening to the views of traders. The Chair also noted the importance of the working group being re-established in the new municipal year as activity towards the installation of a new permanent market continued.'

The Under Occupancy (Bedroom) Tax

The Panel identified this as an important issue for local residents and invited representatives from different housing associations to explain the implications for their tenants. The Panel heard that over 3,400 Walsall Housing Group (whg) tenant households have been affected in some way by the bedroom tax. It was explained that the arrears of whg under-occupiers subject to size criteria at the start of April 2013 had doubled by November 2013, with 862 households in arrears at that time. whg agreed with Panel Members that a shortage of homes for those wishing to downsize was not a good state of affairs, with one property available for every six households looking to downsize nationally. The Panel also met with Caldmoreaccord Housing who explained that the key positive outcomes following the introduction of the bedroom tax was the release of some family sized accommodation. However, there were also clear disadvantages including the debt accrued by those struggling to meet the cost of having an additional bedroom while on a waiting list for a smaller property.

The Panel's Chair, Councillor Louise Harrison expressed significant concerns regarding the increase in the number of possession notices that were a result of the bedroom tax. The Chair was also concerned by the warning from the housing associations that it was inevitable that tenants affected by the bedroom tax will be evicted unless some sort of subsidy is applied.



Health

How has Scrutiny added value in 2013/14?

Councillor Longhi, Chair of the Health Scrutiny Panel explains:-

The Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel considered a broad spectrum of issues to ensure the health services used by Walsall residents are held to account and discussed in a public arena.

Members of the public have had the opportunity to attend the scrutiny Panel and contribute to debate where issues have affected them, this information has been valuable in terms of ensuring that the topics scrutinised are those which affect the population of Walsall.

Positive relationships have been established with officers from Walsall Healthcare Trust, the CCG and the Mental Health Trust. It is hoped that in the future Health Scrutiny Members will be able to work more closely with Healthwatch and the Health and Well Being Board to ensure that intelligence is used to inform improvements in the Health Service.

Some of the prominent issues considered by the Panel during the year included; -

Care Quality Working Group

Members sought to understand the arrangements for promoting care quality within residential and nursing homes across Walsall.

The working group held five meetings; each meeting had a different area of focus to ensure members were fully informed of the issues affecting the monitoring of care quality in Walsall. A visit to a care home was also arranged and Members were able to speak with staff about the challenges they faced.

Good practice was examined, areas for improvement were identified and areas of concern were challenged. A final report of the working group containing a list of recommendations was sent to Cabinet.

Urgent Care Review

Urgent and emergency care has been in the media for some time due to the pressures seen locally in Walsall but also nationally. In addition to this there was a issue regarding the two existing walk in centres the Walk in Centre in Walsall Town Centre and the Emergency and Urgent Care Centre at the Manor Hospital because the current contractual arrangements for these services were due to end in March 2015. There was also a need to review existing services from the Walk in Centre due to the town centre regeneration which meant the existing building may not be available.

Several reports detailing the review of urgent care access arrangements in the borough were received by the Panel. Members expressed the expectation that a Walk in Centre would remain in the borough and that the consultation process remained robust. The Panel continue to monitor the progress of this review.

Walsall Society for the Blind

Walsall Society for the Blind had taken the decision to cease the use of two minibuses, which take users of the Hatherton Street Blind Society Day Centre to and from the site, in June 2014. It was suggested by the Society that the service was no longer viable due to declining day centre numbers.

A special meeting was held to discuss the proposals to cease the minibus service for Day Centre users at Walsall Society for the Blind. Although Board Members declined to attend, careful consideration was given to information provided by Walsall Society for the Blind and Service Users. Representations were made to Walsall Society for the Blind on behalf of service users.

Children's & Young People

How has Scrutiny added value in 2012/13?

Councillor Cassidy – Chair of the Children's & Young People Panel explains:-

The 2012/13 Municipal Year was critically important for Children's Services as every effort was being made both politically and operationally to work to lift the Improvement Notice imposed by Ofsted. It is worth noting that there was, at all times, strong cross-party support for the actions and decisions taken by the panel.

The Scrutiny Panel continued to challenge senior management to ensure that much needed changes across Children's Services were implemented and embedded. Performance was intensively monitored with the Panel reviewing performance information at each meeting. The Panel was committed to ensuring that the Children and Young People within Walsall achieve the best possible outcome.

Whilst the main Panel provided oversight, specific working groups were established to undertake in –depth reviews of services, meeting with senior managers, frontline staff and service users to ensure that a wide spectrum of views were considered before making recommendations to Cabinet. Working Groups during 2012/13 included:-

- *Looked After Children*
- *Home Schooling (EHE)*
- *Health Matters*

In terms of Elective Home Education, Members shadowed the work of a specialist officer and visited young people and their parents who were home schooling. They also met with staff from Walsall College to learn more about the joint work being undertaken to get the very best outcomes for children and young people, regardless of which education method they chose.

The Panel itself considered a range of matters from learning and attainment to special educational needs reforms. A key area of impact was the role of the Panel in ensuring that residents and staffs voices were heard in relation to the reshaping of Children's Centres. Members raised concerns that that the 'hub and spoke' model had not been included within consultation which led to an extension of the consultation period to enable staff and the public to voice their opinions.

Looked After Children Working Group

As Corporate Parents, ensuring that Children's Services in Walsall is effective for the children and young people of the Borough is fundamental for all elected members. This is especially important for Members of the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel.

Members, whilst reassured by regular performance and monitoring reports, were keen to drill down and hear 'first – hand' from frontline staff as to how the 'Improvement Journey' was progressing from their perspective; how it is improving services for the children and young people of Walsall and how the child's voice is heard and placed at the heart of decision making.

As of 22nd April, 2014 there were:-

- **333** Children on a Child Protection Plan;
- **633** Looked After Children
- **5** Children's Homes
- **18** Children's Centres

Members of the Working Group wanted to confirm that the services for each individual were effective and so met numerous times with staff at all levels within Children's Services. Each Member took on the role of a child/young person to question officers about various issues. These included:-

- Will I have contact with my mum or dad?
- What are the plans for me?
- Who will decide if it is safe for me to go home?
- Who will talk to me about what I want?
- What can I do if I disagree with what is being suggested by professionals about my future?
- If I can't go home, who will decide where I will live?
- What about School?
- What will I know about my birth family if I am adopted?
- If I am fostered what will my contact with birth family be like?
- I am due to leave care – what happens to me?
- How can I get help to support my transition?
- What will I know about my early life if I am adopted?

Councillors on the working group explain what they learnt from their review:-

“Taking time to understand the journey of a care leaver was important to me. I have realised that there is a great deal of support available for care leavers, in particular the use of Pathway Plans to help young people into education, training or employment. It was also encouraging to learn that young people continue to be supported in day to day issues such as budgeting, finding housing as well as supporting emotional wellbeing. It was also encouraging to hear that Walsall are one of only 9 Councils to trial New Belongings - a new project aiming to improve the lives of vulnerable young people leaving care.”

“I discovered that a child under the age of 12 months would come into care in one of two ways, either the parent(s) decide that they do not wish or are unable to care for the infant (Section 20) or if the child was subject to a legal order (Section 31) which means that the Local Authority have concerns about the child. I learnt that permanence for a child under 12 months would most likely mean adoption or returning home.”

“I was keen to understand and learn more about the journey of a child between the age of 5 – 10. I learnt that children of this age are more likely to have come into care via a Section 31 – care order as they are younger and more vulnerable. It was soon apparent through discussions with various officers that the decisions, particularly if there are siblings, about the best permanence option become more complex. As children grow older the chances of adoption reduce and so other options will need to be considered. I also became aware that contact with parents, siblings and others can be difficult, especially if one child is adopted and siblings remain in care. The background of children of this age also means that early building blocks of education will most likely have been missed. It was encouraging to know that Personal Education Plans will be in place to help children achieve in education.”

Conclusions of the working group

The Working Group found throughout their investigations that there was a clear cohesive approach by all staff at all levels, together with a commitment and passion to improve and deliver all services to improve outcomes for Looked After Children in Walsall.

Members noted that the recent Ofsted inspection stated that Children’s Services now had a clear vision, the right priorities and a better awareness of the work required to continue to improve. This was evident during group discussions with each participant displaying a clear awareness of their own roles and relationship with other teams and individuals such as the Independent Reviewing Officer.

It is with confidence that the Working Group stated that, in their view, services for Looked After Children were in a much better position than previous years. It is a service which knows itself and knows what it is required to improve further. However, there is more work to be done. The implementation of the new caseload management system, to replace the PARIS system will be instrumental in continuing and building upon improvements already made. Areas such as complaints, caseload management, dependence on agency staff, better quality data and sustainability of change all need to continue to improve to ensure that services for Looked After Children in Walsall are delivering the best possible outcomes for the children and young people of Walsall.



Social Care & Inclusion

How has Scrutiny added value in 2013/14?

The Social Care and Inclusion Scrutiny and Performance Panel considered a number of important issues including the revised Operating Model for the management of the care of individuals within the local community, the Better Care Fund, Intermediate Care at Home service and employment initiatives for adults with disabilities.

Better Care Fund (BCF)

The Panel maintained a close watching brief on the introduction of the BCF which it heard was a key element of the Government's requirement for local health and social care systems to deliver greater integration as part of a five year strategy. The Panel were told that it would be necessary to reduce the number of people over the age of 75 who are admitted to hospital in an emergency, as well to reduce the number of people who receive care packages or enter care homes. The scale of this challenge, which equates to a reduction in hospital and care homes admissions by 25% was acknowledged by officers. An extract from the minutes indicates the view of a number of Panel Members as to how this challenge could be addressed with more effective joint working and the opportunities that it offered:

'Officers agreed with a Panel Member who highlighted that, given the absence of additional funding to meet the requirements of the Better Care Fund, a high level of cooperation would be required across partners.'

'In response to further Panel queries it was explained that the Better Care Fund represented an opportunity for the health and social care system to be designed to be effectively integrated to ensure people remain independent.'

Operating Model for Adult Social Care & Inclusion

The Panel welcomed the approach officers have adopted in the revised Operating Model. It was explained that the model had been revised to refocus on achieving outcomes for individuals and minimising admissions to hospital or dependent care services. The Panel heard that the approach taken in the borough was focused on a range of interventions which included intermediate care, reablement, recovery and crisis response. These services were each

part of different care pathways and form part of an overall multi-disciplinary approach. The Panel quickly identified some of the key issues:

'The Chair noted that the link between the hospital and the council was crucial, particularly in terms of being able to anticipate pressure on services based on admission and discharge rates.'

Intermediate Care at Home service working group

The working group included a representative from the Health Scrutiny and Performance Panel as Members identified that the related issues concerned both Panels. The working group heard that the intermediate care service had been redesigned to provide an enhanced way of working. In addition the new operating model placed intermediate care at the centre of the hospital discharge process. Members were pleased to hear that as demand for the service has nearly doubled over the last two years investment of around £750k has been made to increase the number of Occupational Therapists and carers. Members welcomed this work and its objective of providing those being discharged from hospital with support and rehabilitation in order to make them as independent as possible and minimising unnecessary assessments. Members emphasised the need for better sign posting of the range of services available, including walk-in centres. Members highlighted the importance of better joint working between all local health partners from GP practices through to the hospital. This would ensure that services were both efficient and effective and assist in minimising the risk of the more vulnerable in local communities "falling through the net". Councillor Doug James observed:

"Social Care has to develop new ways of working as we face increased demand against a background of budget reductions. Investing in Intermediate Care provides essential services at the right level to make a difference".

Councillor James, Vice-Chairman of Health Scrutiny also noted:

"Professional assessment is key to developing our services. Investing in Occupational Therapists is providing a flexibility of care we urgently require".

Update on employment initiatives for adults with disabilities

The Panel heard that Links to Work was a range of highly valued services for adults with a range of learning disabilities. It was explained that Recruit-ability Plus was a service commissioned from Links to Work which has now supported over 20 people into paid permanent full or part time employment. It was explained that the council was committed to these services, although work was now underway to ensure that they continued to be viable in the long-term. The Panel heard that the review process would consider a number of options for the service including whether it was suitable to be developed into a social enterprise. Extracts from the minutes demonstrate that the Panel felt that this was both an important and challenging issue:

'Officers agreed with a Member who noted that this was not a straightforward issue.....service users had identified that they considered Links to Works to be a business... (therefore they felt that the payments they received were wages rather than a form of benefit).'

'The Chair noted that the update was largely reassuring.....Officers agreed to return to the Panel by the end of 2014 with an update on the review process and potential options for the development of the service.'

Corporate

Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel

How has scrutiny added value?

The Panel focussed their efforts on how the Council was planning and adapting to change. Members focussed on two main priorities, namely, how the Council was planning and dealing with reducing resources through the 'Working Smarter' programme and secondly how the Council was adapting and supporting residents with the extensive welfare reforms being driven by Government.

Welfare Reform

The Panel were concerned about the impact that the governments welfare reforms could be having on the borough. Due to the depth and cross cutting nature of this work a working group was established that was represented by Members from each of the Councils Scrutiny and Performance Panels.

Councillor Sean Coughlan, Chair of the CSSP and Lead Member to the working group explains:

'The remit of our Welfare Reform Working Group was to understand the impact of welfare reform on the council, the local social housing providers, the advice sector and most importantly the residents affected by welfare reform.'

The Government's welfare reforms represent the most fundamental changes to the benefits system in a generation. The scale and impact of individual reforms have been documented in a variety of media coverage and are generally understood, however, what we set out to do was to try and understand the cumulative impacts of all of the Government's reforms, and claimants' and local areas' ability to deal with them. The rise of food banks over the last couple of years, the fact that millions has been lost to the Walsall economy, the pressure on landlords to find suitable accommodation for those affected by the "bedroom tax" and pressure on residents that find themselves victims of welfare reform, make this piece of work important in how we (the council) work with partners in the future to mitigate the worst affects of welfare reform over the next 4 to 5 years'.

After extensive evidence gathering the working group found that the cumulative impact of the welfare reforms combined with government funding reductions were having a significant impact on residents and local partners.

Recognising the need to manage the response to the reforms it was recommended that a 'Welfare Reform Forum' be established of local partners so that a co-ordinated approach could be taken to supporting local residents. The working groups final report and recommendations was reported to Council and Cabinet. It is expected that a 'Welfare Reform Forum' will be established in Autumn 2014.

Working Smarter

The Working Smarter programme has been the key driver in how the Council has managed government funding reductions. The programme has three key objectives, namely:

- Staff feel empower and involved with change;
- Improved services for residents;
- The Council saves money.

And five strategic themes:

- Supporting business to thrive and supporting local people to work;
- Improving health including wellbeing and independence for older people;
- Creating safe, sustainable and inclusive communities;
- Improving safeguarding, learning and the life chances of children and young people;
- Support for delivery.

Whilst recognising that the scrutiny of the actual delivery of the services lied with the remit of other Panels, the Corporate Scrutiny and Performance Panel took an overview of activity taking place under each theme to understand the levels of change being implemented across the organisation.

Community Services and Environment

How has scrutiny added value?

The Panel has taken oversight of a number of key issues throughout the year that impact on the entire borough. Issues included problems with contaminated recycling and leisure centre provision. In addition to this Members have received representations from Members of the public through hearing petitions on important matters such as a petition regarding changes to the management plan for Brownhills Common.

Brownhills Common

The Panel heard and followed up on a petition signed by over 1,400 local residents following concerns about a revised management plan for Brownhills Common. Residents were concerned that the proposed plan would see a significant number of trees on the Common cut down.

Following receipt of the petition Natural England, the accountable body for the management plan, amended their proposals so that the amount of trees being lost was significantly reduced.

The Panel recognised that public engagement needed to be improved and recommended the establishment of a Friends group for the Common to improve engagement with local people. This has now been established.

Councillor Val Woodruff, Chair of the Community Services and Environment Scrutiny and Performance Panel group explains:

'I thought it was really important that the views of local people were taken into account now and in the future for Brownhills Common. This is why we recommended the formation of a Friends group so local people have a vehicle that represents them for the future. I was pleased to see our recommendation implemented so quickly.'

Active Living

The Panel held a special meeting to consider four contrasting options for the future of leisure centres in the borough.

Members reviewed the potential facilities and different configurations, their cost and their implications. A particular emphasis was placed on the role leisure centres could play in improving public health. It was important that centres were accessible to the majority of residents in the borough. Following a robust debate the Panel recommended that the Council invested over £24m by constructing two new leisure centres. This recommendation was accepted by Cabinet.

Contaminated Recycling

Members took strong oversight of problems being caused with contaminated recycling left by residents. The contract with the authorities recycling provider required no more than 5% contamination. Members heard that contamination levels were between 7-9% with particular problem areas in Beechdale, Caldmore, Palfrey and Pleck.

The Panel felt that it was important for residents to be educated in what items were suitable for recycling and those which were not. They were reassured to hear that leaflets were being used to target problem areas and crews were briefed to spend time with residents explaining that recycling bins would go unemptied if crews identified contamination.

Scrutiny Panel Membership in 2014/15

Community Services & Environment

Chair: Councillor Hussain

Vice-Chair: Councillor Creaney

Membership:

Councillors Barker, D. Hazell, Murray, Nawaz, Sohal.

Corporate

Chair: Councillor Nazir

Vice-Chair: Councillor Rochelle

Membership:

Councillors Barker, S. Coughlan, Craddock, Ilmann-Walker, Longhi

Children & Young People

Chair: Councillor Cassidy

Vice-Chair: Councillor Martin

Membership:

Councillors E. Hazell, Hughes, Jukes, Lane, D. Shires together with representatives from

1 representative – Lichfield Diocesan (voting)

1 representative - Archbishop of Birmingham (voting)

3 parent governors (voting)

1 Primary Education Teacher (non-voting)

1 Secondary Education Teacher (non-voting)

Regeneration

Chair: Councillor Harrison

Vice-Chair: Councillor Jeavons

Membership:

Councillors Anson, Barker, Craddock, S. Fitzpatrick, Sohal

Health, Social Care & Inclusion

Chair: Councillor Longhi

Vice-Chair: Councillor Robertson

Membership:

Councillors D. Coughlan, J. Fitzpatrick, E. Hazell, Flower, Rattigan, Rusell, D. Shires

Items 2014/15

Corporate	Shaping the Future; Budget; Individual Electoral Registration.
Health & Social Care	Demand Management at Walsall Health Trust (including A and E, Urgent Care review, Community Services); Monitoring of mortality rates; Commissioning Winter Capacity; Surge Plan; Clinical Commissioning Group 5 year plan / Primary Care Services in Walsall; Better Care Fund and integration of health services; Mental Health Trust – Care Quality Commission inspection results; Health inequalities and health promotion; Public Health Contracts; Care Quality Working Group monitoring; Stroke Services Reconfiguration; Budget consultation; Social Care and Inclusion financial challenges; Revised operating model; Employment initiatives for adults with disabilities; Support for carers; The Care Act and the Children and Families Act 2014; Local account 2014/15; Safeguarding adults annual report; Replacement of the client record management system for children and adult social care; Special Educational needs and disabilities.
Community Services & Environment	Active Living; Budget; Devolution through Area Partnerships; Crime and Policing Act 2014; Implementation of Free School Meals Sept 2014; Organisational Partnership Working; Potential changes to roadside collections (TEEP); Recycling and contamination; Voluntary & Community Sector Review
Children's and Young People	Walsall Self Assessment of Services; Work Programme & Forward Plan; Quarterly Financial Monitoring; Children's Centre Reshape; Integrated Young People Support Service - Fit for the Future; Children and Young People Annual Complaints Report; Walsall Safeguarding Children Board; Replacement of PARIS – new system implementation progress; Corporate Parenting Board – Role and Function; Special Educational Needs Reforms –Update; Pupil Premium (How is it spent by schools) Is it effective?; Early Help/Intervention; School Improvement Plan; LAC Outcomes & Achievement/Virtual School/IRO Report; Children in Care Council.
Regeneration	Walsall Economic Board – update; Electrification of Walsall-Rugeley line; Black Country Growth Deal; Planning and enforcement issues update; Markets working group; Town Centre & Enterprise Zone issues; Update on Darlaston element of Black Country Enterprise Zone; Site Allocation Plan (SAP) & Town Centre Area Action Planning; Walsall Works; Apprenticeship Programme – including issues of youth unemployment & homelessness; Financial Monitoring; Supporting Employment Sustainability & Growth; Green agenda – including the Green Deal; Supplementary Planning Documents (SAP) & Affordable Housing; Strategic Economic Plan; European Investment Strategy