



Walsall Council

You are hereby summoned to attend a meeting of the Council of the Metropolitan Borough of Walsall to be held on **MONDAY the 15th day of April 2024 at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Public access via: www.WalsallCouncilWebcasts.com

Dated this 5th day of April, 2024

Yours sincerely,

Chief Executive.

The business to be transacted is as follows:

1. To elect a person to preside if the Mayor and Deputy Mayor are not present.
2. Apologies.
3. To approve as a correct record and sign the minutes of the meeting of the Council held on 22nd February, 2024 and 18th March, 2024 – **(pages 5 – 38)**
4. Declarations of interest.
5. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended):**
To agree that the public be excluded from the private session during consideration of the agenda items indicated for the reasons shown on the agenda.
6. Mayor's announcements.
7. To receive any petitions

8. To answer any questions in accordance with Council procedure rules:

(a) From the public:

Mark Brindley

How has the conclusion of the trials regarding the murders of Bailey Atkinson and Akeem Francis Kerr influenced the collaborative efforts to enhance safety in Walsall's Town Centre, and what strategies are being considered for the future night-time economy?

(b) From members of the Council:

Councillor Smith

Given that there are four particular empty areas of land in the Coalpool / Ryecroft Area of the Blakenall ward, which have been unused for far too long, serving very little purpose other than to the litter droppers and the fly tippers: They being:

The Council owned site of the former Coalpool Library, Coalpool Lane.

The Council owned site of the original Neighbourhood Office (next to the Methodist Church), Coalpool Lane.

The Council owned site where Dartmouth House, mainly used by the NHS, once stood in Ryecroft Place, and

The site where the former Coalpool Clinic once stood on Ross Road (not Council owned)

and further given that local residents in this area are still concerned and indeed many angry, that on these respective sites the local community once had a Library, a Neighbourhood Office a NHS Health Centre and a Clinic and now have none of these and nothing to replace them,

will the appropriate Portfolio holder inform me and particularly the residents and shopkeepers of the Coalpool & Ryecroft areas, what he intends to do in order to ensure that these lands are brought back into use as quickly as possible with schemes/plans that contribute to the social and economic wellbeing of the community, and that have the support of the local community?

Councillor Worrall

What is the 2023-24 attendance record of the two Walsall Council representatives on the West Midlands Combined Authority's Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Councillor Jukes

I recently visited a number of Walsall's Holiday Activity and Food programme (HAF) providers and had an excellent time seeing the services on offer through this provision. I believe the programme came about as a result of Marcus Rashford's End Child Food Poverty initiative created during the pandemic in 2020 when, after learning how many children miss out on meals during school holidays, Marcus successfully led a campaign to lobby the government to provide a £400m holiday meal and activity programme to support low-income families in England until the end of 2021. Food poverty for children is something Marcus still campaigns on today.

Here in Walsall the HAF programme provides school holiday activities for the Borough's children and ensures that all those who attend are fed healthy and nutritious meals. The HAF also provides parents with recipes which are healthy and cost effective to feed the family at home and will support families in accessing food banks if needed.

On one of my recent visits to the easter provision I was very distressed to have heard a conversation where a young child stated that they needed to 'fill themselves up' while at the session as they'd be 'having nothing' when they got home.

According to DfE sources, this funding is due to cease in March 2025. This will mean the HAF provision will likely not be able to continue across the Borough which would be hugely impactful on our children and young people, leaving many of them hungry over school holiday periods. We as a council cannot allow this to happen.

Firstly I would like to know if the Leader of the Council can confirm that there are plans for the funding to be stopped. If the funding is to be withdrawn, what are the administration going to do to ensure that these vital services remain in place for Walsall children?

Councillor Ward

Can the council please confirm how many vacant properties across Walsall are paying double council tax, how many of these properties are housing association properties and what the breakdown is by individual housing association?

9. **Mayor's use of authority to waive call in process – Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.** To note that the Mayor agreed to exercise his authority to waive the call-in process, as described in Part 4.5 of the constitution.
10. Independent Remuneration Panel – **(pages 39 – 57)**
11. Corporate Parenting Board Annual Report – **(To Follow)**

12. Scrutiny Annual Report – **(pages 58 – 76)**

13. **Portfolio holder briefings.** To receive a 5 minute presentation from the following portfolios:
 - a. Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces – Councillor Flint **(pages 77 - 83)**
 - b. Customer – Councillor Ali **(pages 84 - 89)**
 - c. Street Pride – Councillor Murphy **(pages 90 - 93)**

(Note: A member of the Council may ask the portfolio holder any question and another associated question without notice upon each report. Questioning by members is limited to 10 minutes for each report presented.)

At this point the Council to consider the following item as charitable trustees. When the Council is acting in this capacity, Council procedure rules do not apply. A corporate trustee is a corporation which has been appointed to act as a trustee of the charity. Trustees should bear in mind that when they are dealing with the business of the charity, their overriding duty is to act in the best interests of that charity.

14. **Annual report of Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee.** Report reproduced in the reports booklet for this meeting. **(pages 94 – 97)**



Walsall Council

Minutes of the **EXTRA-ORDINARY MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Monday 18 March, 2024, at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Present

Councillor C.D.D. Towe (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillors: G. Ali	R. Larden
H. Bashir	N. Latham
M.A. Bird	E. Lee
C. Bott	R. K Mehmi
P. Bott	E. Morgan
S.K. Ditta	A.A. Nawaz
S. Elson	A. Parkes
K. Ferguson	K. Pedley
G. Flint	G Perry
M. Follows	L.J. Rattigan
N. Gandham	K. Sears
A. Garcha	G. Singh Sohal
N. Gultasib	P. Smith
A. Harris	C.A. Statham
A.J. Hicken	M.A. Statham
I. Hussain	T. Jukes
K. Hussain	M. Ward
S.B. Hussain	J. Whitehouse
R. Burley	R.V. Worrall
S. Cheema	

95. **Apologies**

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors Murray, Samra, Rasab, Cooper, Wilson, Andrew, A. Hussain, Martin, Kaur, Nazir, and Nasreen.

96. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

97. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)**

Resolved

There were no items in private session.

98. **Council response to Local Government Boundary Commission England electoral review.**

It was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Perry and:

That the following be approved:

- 3.1 Council are asked to note the report and approve its submission as the council's response to the LGBCE consultation based on the consideration of evidence used in forming the proposed ward patterns.
- 3.2 As community leaders, members of council are encouraged to submit evidence-based responses to the commission directly before the consultation closes on 8 April 2024.

The following Amendment was moved by Councillor Perry (additional wording in bold and deleted words struck through), and seconded by Councillor Bird that:-

- 3.1 Council are asked to note the report and approve its submission as the council's response to the LGBCE consultation based on the consideration of evidence used in forming the proposed ward patterns.
- 3.2 As community leaders, members of council ~~are encouraged~~ **will be submitting** evidence-based responses to the commission directly before the consultation closes on 8 April 2024, **because some elected Members will not be supportive of all the current ward boundary proposals made by the commission.**

On being put to the vote the amendment was declared carried.

The substantive motion was put to the vote and declared carried and it was:

Resolved

That:

- 3.1 Council are asked to note the report and approve its submission as the council's response to the LGBCE consultation based on the consideration of evidence used in forming the proposed ward patterns.
- 3.2 As community leaders, members of council will be submitting evidence-based responses to the commission directly before the consultation

closes on 8 April 2024, because some elected Members will not be supportive of all the current ward boundary proposals made by the commission.

The meeting terminated at 6.17 p.m.

Mayor:

Date:



Walsall Council

Minutes of the **ORDINARY MEETING** of the Council of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough held on **Thursday 22 February, 2024, at 6.00 p.m.** at the Council House, Walsall.

Present

Councillor C.D.D. Towe (Mayor) in the Chair

Councillors: G. Ali

A. Andrew

B. Bains

H. Bashir

M.A. Bird

C. Bott

P. Bott

R. Burley

S. Cheema

S.J. Cooper

S.K. Ditta

S. Elson

K. Ferguson

M. Follows

N. Gandham

A. Garcha

P. Gill

N. Gultasib

A. Harris

L. Harrison

A.J. Hicken

C. Horton

I. Hussain

K. Hussain

T. Jukes

R. Larden

N. Latham

E. Lee

R. Martin

R. K Mehmi

E. Morgan

K. Murphy

J. Murray

S. Nasreen

A.A. Nawaz

A. Nazir

K. Pedley

G Perry

L.J. Rattigan

S. Samra

K. Sears

G. Singh Sohal

P. Smith

C.A. Statham

M.A. Statham

A. Underhill

M. Ward

V.J. Waters

J. Whitehouse

R.V. Worrall

80. **Clearance of the public gallery**

In accordance with Part 4, paragraph 21.2 of the Council's Procedure Rules, the Mayor called for the clearance of the public gallery due a disturbance.

81. **Adjournment of the meeting**

In accordance with Part 4, paragraph 15.10 (f) the Mayor called for an adjournment which was duly agreed.

Resolved

That the meeting be adjourned to reconvene on a future date.

Meeting reconvened at 6.00 p.m. on Wednesday 28th February, 2024

82. **Apologies**

Apologies were received on behalf of Councillors B. Allen, G. Flint, F. Hassan, A. Hussain, S.B. Hussain, P. Kaur, A. Parkes, T. Wilson

83. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 8th January, 2024 a copy having been sent to each member of the Council, be approved as a correct record subject to the following amends to committee seats:-

- Economy & Environment: Councillor Hicken to replace Councillor Cooper
- Scrutiny Overview: Councillor Waters to replace Councillor Bains.

84. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

85. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act, 1985 (as amended)**

Resolved

There were no items in private session.

86. **Mayor's announcements**

Come Dine with the Mayor

The Mayor welcomed all members to attend his 'Come Dine with the Mayor' event taking place on Sunday 3rd March 2023 at 6.30pm and asked members to inform the Mayor's office if they would like to attend.

Item 12b Portfolio holder briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

In the absence of Councillor Flint who had tendered his apologies, the Mayor sought the leave of Council to consider item 12b, Portfolio holder briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces to the April meeting, to which the Council consented.

87. **Petitions**

None submitted.

88. **Petition for a safer Chester Road at the Junctions with Stonnall Village.**

A report was submitted.

Mr Adrian Walters of the Stonnall Campaign About Roads (SCAR) presented the petition and thanked the Council for the opportunity to speak.

Mr Walters explained that SCAR was a road safety group with over 600 members and that the single largest topic amongst members were the dangerous junctions on the Chester Road, Main Street, Downes Gate, Lazy Hill Road and the junction of Gravelly Lane opposite Birch Lane.

He emphasised the dangers that motorists experienced and stated that that traffic moving on Chester Road was too fast to be able to pull onto the Chester Road or to cross it. Members of SCAR had noted that there was confusion over priority and frustration by drivers waiting too long to cross or turn into and out onto the Chester Road and their experiences had been collated into a report with both new and historical incidents.

Members had informed SCAR of the collisions they were involved in and witnessed and the loved ones who had been killed at the junctions. Residents living on the Chester Road, near the Gravelly Lane junction also reported on the difficulty they had entering and exiting their properties onto a 50mph road.

During SCAR's period of consultation. Alan Preston of Pelsall Cycling Club was tragically killed at the Lazy Hill junction in February last year. Mr Walters added there were three other fatal collisions at the same junctions in 2002, 2006, and 2014 in a six metre by six metre area. In 2018 there was another fatal collision in 2018, just a couple of hundred metres along the Chester Road. He believed

this to be the highest number of deaths on any road in Walsall during that period.

Mr Walters highlighted that the signatories did not all live in Stonnall, but included areas such as Birmingham, Bloxwich, Walsall, Aldridge, Pelsall, Lazy Hill and Walsall Wood.

In closing, Mr Walters emphasised that SCAR would welcome a reduction in speed limit on the Chester Road and for it to be enforced by fixed or average speed cameras. SCAR would also like consideration to the design of the junctions so the priority could be made clear when crossing the Chester Road or turning right in and out of the village.

Further to debate on the matter it was:

Resolved

That the petition be noted, and the report be submitted to Cabinet in March regarding West Midlands Local Transport Plan Settlement and Transport Capital Programme 2024/25.

89. Questions

(a) From the public: None

(b) From members of the Council:

Councillor Smith

Given the increasing media coverage on the subject of Artificial Intelligence (AI), can I ask the appropriate Portfolio holder to share with this Council and the public, information on:

- a) How AI is presently used by Walsall Council?
- b) What work has been/is being done by our Council's Political leadership and Senior Management as to the possible applications (opportunities and risks) of this type of technology to local Councils' decision-making processes and service provision and delivery in the future?
- c) What consideration is being given to the possible (maybe probable) impact of AI on the careers and jobs of the workforce, assuming that Councils like Walsall are allowed to exist for much longer, given Central Government's apparent determination to continue to starve them of funds?

Councillor Ferguson gave the following response:

The Council is currently using AI functionality through Microsoft's CoPilot technology, which is embedded in Office 365 Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and Teams. The AI built into these products gives users prompts, guidance, hints and improvements to grammar, layout and report writing.

Staff have already found this additional resource helpful and saves time. The next step is to introduce greater AI functionality through the full deployment of Microsoft AI Copilot licenses for key roles and tasks.

Artificial Intelligence will not replace human intervention, Copilot is designed to work alongside staff, simplifying repetitive tasks and speeding up processes to enhance productivity, improve job satisfaction, and value-added activities.

Business cases are being developed to justify further investment and benefits to introducing this technology. Opportunities include streamlining processes such as automating transcripts from voice to documents, automatic redaction of records to aid Freedom of Information and Data Subject Access Requests. As part of Smart Places work AI is being developed to analyse building use measuring footfall through council buildings.

This new technology is bringing changes to the way we work, and the council has developed an AI Standards Guide for staff and members. It is important that we consider the ethical impact of using AI on our customers and residents and this consideration will be an integral feature in the design and development of any solution.

AI is a tool that supports and does not replace our employees. Before publishing any AI-generated document, a member of staff will review it to ensure the accuracy and quality of the message.

AI is a complementary tool to enhance productivity, this will increase employee capacity, however increased capacity may in time allow for redistribution of resources to create greater value to Walsall's residents.

Councillor Cheema

Flytipping is currently blighting many of our wards, and in many cases, it is persistent with the same areas getting targeted time after time.

Can the appropriate portfolio holder inform me:

1. How many Fixed Penalty Notices (FPN's) have been issued in the last year?
2. How many FPN's have been paid to date and how much has been collected in the last year?
3. How many people have been taken to court for non-payment of environmental crime fines?

4. What are the operating costs of flytipping removal against the income generated from fines?

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

In terms of the action that we have taken in the last financial year 22 fly tipping Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) have been served, that is fly tipping of a larger scale. 609 litter based Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) have been served.

95% of fly tipping FPNs have been paid equating to £7400. The one remaining FPN is still within the time period allowed for payment. Of the litter FPNs we have received £49,195 in payments and because of the good percentage rate in collecting those Fixed Penalty Notices. There is one issue for us and that is vehicles with false or cloned plates and registered keepers who have moved address without notifying the DVLA and misidentification of the individual.

Because of the extremely high payment rate during 2023 no prosecutions have been taken to court, because of the high success rate in collecting the fines themselves. However, prior to 2023, a number of Fixed Penalty Notices relating to fly tipping had not been paid and were then taken to court and I will just run through some of those examples:

- 22 February 2023 Mr Michael Evans was prosecuted for fly-tipping and was issued with fines and costs of £455.80 and was made subject to a conditional discharge for 6 months. On 7 June 2023 he was prosecuted again for fly-tipping and was issued with fines and costs of £1097.30.
- 9 August 2023 Saifullah Khan of West Bromwich was prosecuted for fly-tipping and was issued with fines and costs of £2821.63.
- 25 October 2023, Mohammed Khan was prosecuted for fly-tipping and was issued with fines and costs of £928.
- 14 February 2024 Robert Andruskiewicz was prosecuted for fly tipping a fridge in Darlaston and received a Community Order for 12 months, 100 hours of unpaid work, Disqualified from driving for a period of 6 months, a fine of £100, victim surcharge of £95, and costs of £899 to Walsall Council.

The case of Robert Andruskiewicz was interesting because he had a reputation for repeat offences relating to fly tipping not just in Walsall but beyond and it was unusual for the Judge to list that many sanctions, but it was down to the hard work of our Legal Team to push that case as an example.

In terms of the twelve litter prosecutions that are outstanding, seven have now successfully been concluded and five are awaiting a court hearing. The seven successful cases that were concluded resulted in fines of £6357.78 which is around £900 per offender.

Moving on to the overall costs of fly tipping removal, we are spending currently £500,000 a year on removal costs associated with fly tipping. That has come down and before 2023 it was much higher, it was pushing towards £1,000,000. That has come down significantly and reduced the number of fly tipping cases by over 323, because of the proactive approaches that are being taken by the

Enforcement Team, including the investment that we promised in the last budget.

In terms of other enforcement activity relating to waste the following activity has taken place:

- 1 car seized for fly tipping offences in Dalkeith Street and the owners fined.
- 2 commercial vehicles previously seized were not claimed and were therefore crushed as an example of zero tolerance to fly tipping.
- £500 reward offered to anyone who could locate and identify a vehicle used for large scale tipping in Willenhall.
- 73 legal notices served on property owners requiring them to remove waste from their land. The rate of compliance for that is sitting currently at around 70%.

A key element in the fight against crime for the year ahead, the government has announced that we can increase the maximum level FPNs can be charged at for littering from £150 to £500 and fly tipping from £400 to £1000, and we will be doing that at the earliest opportunity.

In response Councillor Cheema, I looked at what £500,000 could pay for and I asked officers to come back to me, particularly focussing on my areas of responsibility. The £500,000 we have spent reducing other people's litter and fly tipping could have been spent on:

- 6500 pothole repairs
- Extending the garden waste collections by three months.
- 25 regular community classes across Walsall for English as a Second Language (ESOL)
- Quadrupling befriending services, book exchanges and warm spaces for isolated persons.
- LionHeart Challenges in every secondary school across Walsall around the safety of young people and positive activities programmes.
- Funding all the teachable moments in hospitals and in our communities to intervene with those involved in knife crime incidents for six years.
- 400 bleed kits and defibrillators in secure boxes across the Borough.
- Commissioned a perpetrator programme for those who commit domestic abuse, to prevent or reduce the number of incidents over several years.
- Building a new traveller site.

Councillor Cheema asked the following supplementary question:

You mentioned the increase in the fine limits set out by the government, I believe that the Council has had the opportunity to implement them from January this year. Has there been a delay as to why we have not implemented that yet. I know you have said that we will be doing that at some point in the future.

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

That is when the government said that we could do it, but you have to take it through an internal process which means a Cabinet report and a decision made by Cabinet which is in process.

Councillor Ward

I welcome the recent announcement that this council is to ban the release of balloons and sky lanterns which can have a devastating impact on animals and wildlife.

The noise fireworks create also causes issues for animals, wildlife and many residents.

The RSPCA say “Animals affected not only suffer psychological distress but can also cause themselves injuries – sometimes very serious ones – as they attempt to run or hide from the noise”

The National Autistic Society say “For some autistic people, the unexpected nature of displays can cause anxiety and stress, and for those with sensory issues, fireworks can be very distressing.

With this in mind, Can the portfolio holder confirm if this council uses quieter or silent fireworks at its public displays, if not why not?

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

For the past few years, the Healthy Spaces Team has undertaken consultation after the bonfire events and one of the questions asked is:

“Considering the negative impact fireworks can have on some people and animals, what are your thoughts on quieter firework displays with no bangs or music?”

For the last two years, just over 60% of the population think that this is a good idea, however, in 2022 only 46% said they would attend, in 2023 this number has increased slightly to 52%.

For the council to continue to provide bonfire and firework events, these events must cover their costs. For the last two years a small surplus has been made, but in 2019 there was a significant loss – with weather having the most impact on attendance.

There is a risk to changing the offer, but this is reduced, the greater the percentage of people suggesting that they like the idea and that they would attend.

Having investigated the option, low noise fireworks are not currently mass produced so, like for like size-wise, they are significantly more expensive. The display would not be as impressive as there are no 'large shells' available (up about 100ft), with them being limited to 30 – 40ft. As they are not as impressive, we would need more of them in the display which again, increases the cost.

We have also considered the use of drones, however, they cannot fly in windy weather and again, to put enough in the sky to create shapes or an image would run to £50,000 plus.

An option we are currently researching is the use of lasers. If this option is affordable, initially we would probably offer the display alongside fireworks to reduce the risk.

Councillor Smith

Could the appropriate Portfolio holder give me, this Council and the public, the Council's most recent information & figures in relation to:

- a) Outstanding Council tax owed to Walsall Council,
- b) Outstanding Business Rates owed to Walsall Council.

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

For the years 2015 to 2022 there is £27.2m still outstanding in council tax. This equates to only 2.5% of the total £1b that was billed for that period.

For the same period there is £6m outstanding for business rates. This equates to just 1.1% of the £531m billed.

The council continues to work with those with outstanding charges to find the best way forward to collect as much of the remaining balance as possible.

For further information, there is £21.4m council tax and £6.1m business rates outstanding for this financial year with the majority of the amount covered by instalments that have not yet fallen due.

Of the £27.2m outstanding in council tax, £12.7m is subject to instalments or covered by attachment of earning or deduction from benefit proceedings. £3m has been identified for write off mainly due to either bankruptcy or other insolvency proceedings and taxpayers absconding with no forwarding address found. £1m is currently with the council's enforcement agents.

Of the £6m outstanding in business rates, £1.4m is subject to instalments, £1.3 is with the council's enforcement agents and £1.8 has been identified for write off mainly due to either insolvency proceedings, companies being dissolved or the ratepayer leaving with no forwarding address.

Councillor Smith asked the following supplementary question:

Considering that a 1 percent increase in the council tax brings in about £800,000, it puts it in to perspective just what this outstanding amount is. Given that research has shown that in England and Scotland, probably in Wales and Northern Ireland too, low income and vulnerable households fall behind on their council tax bills at much higher rates than the rest of the population. Is there evidence to suggest that this is the case in Walsall and is it a case of they can't pay, or they won't pay.

Councillor Bird gave the following response:

Whilst I am not in possession of the answer to that question totally, what I would say is that it is self-evident to me, if you are on a low income and the council tax is there to be paid then effectively it may be bottom of your list if you are looking for food, heating, and lighting. I understand that, but sadly, the law is the law, we levy the council tax, and we are duty bound to collect it. If we don't pursue all people, no matter what level their income may be, then would it not be seen to be an unfair system. As far as I am concerned, I remember the poll tax and that was a fairer system where everybody paid and although that system was vilified by some, fairness of everybody paying their fair share is perhaps something that should be revisited. As a result, I think the council tax however regressive it may be, effectively is the only way at this point in time that we can levy it.

One thing I would say and is something I am working on now; you will have seen around the Borough where small two-bedroom bungalows are being pulled down are being replaced by six and seven-bedroom houses. Unfortunately, the people who do that pay their council tax at the two-bedroom rate until the house is sold. I am now talking to HM Revenue and Customs to come down on all those people in those six and seven-bedroom properties, because they are the people we should be tackling and should be paying the higher rate of council tax and then perhaps we would not have to levy the levels we do if they paid their fair share.

Councillor Ward

In February 2021, cabinet approved the construction of a temporary transit traveller site in Pleck. Since the site has opened, could you confirm how many times bailiffs have been used for any unauthorised encampments and how much has this cost?

As the site in Pleck was envisaged as a "temporary site" can you confirm what work has been done to identify a more suitable, permanent transit site?

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

As you will be aware the transit site opened in June 2022 it has a three-year planning permission that is due to expire in June 2025. It has regularly been used since that time. The majority of the Travellers using the site have done so

responsibly and have found being on the site a positive experience. We have been commended for the work that we have done in delivering the transit site and our combined efforts to reduce the impact of unauthorised encampments (UEs) across Walsall. Again, that is credit to the legal team because the way they have pursued and operated differently outside of expectations has resulted in some of the success stories we have seen in reducing the impact of UEs, particularly Javed and his team.

Since the opening of the transit site in June 2022, bailiffs have been instructed to respond to UEs across Walsall on 52 occasions with actual court appearances to gain an eviction order only required on 21 occasions. That means that they have either taken up residency within the transit site or they have moved on outside of the Borough. Most of these evictions were during 2022 with a steep decline in 2023. We believe that is due to the work and decision that we made to engage our bailiff from the very earliest opportunity. The bailiff who works on behalf of the council and whose staff carry out such work nationwide is of the view that due to that proactive stance, we saw that decline in 2023 as the travelling community acknowledged that the local authority had a proactive and robust stance when it came to managing UEs.

As you will be aware we have to carry out the relevant welfare checks using the issue of a section 77 notice (Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994), court summons and beyond. Bailiff costs in that 19-month period was £54,873.20.

At the time of this response, the site has been used on 12 occasions with an average of three caravans per family group using the site. As you are aware in the last fortnight there has been an additional two uses of the transit site, one I have to say who conformed to the expectations and the others a bit more challenging. Occupants have paid a deposit of £250 per caravan along with rent of £125 per week and contract regarding code of conduct during their stay is also signed.

We have done no further work at this stage regarding an alternative provision beyond June 2025, simply because we exhausted all options in the last three years before we made the decision for the current site itself. However, the Walsall plan is designed for people to have their say on appropriate use of land, which of course one of the examples will be the use of land for a housing provision for travellers.

Councillor Ward asked the following supplementary question:

Having the transit site brings additional powers and the police can then use their powers to move unauthorised encampments on. Are the police working efficiently with us or are they not using those powers.

Councillor Perry gave the following response:

Yes, they are and I think there has probably been one occasion over the last twelve months where a transit site has not been moved on by the police, usually

because of the operation of using the bailiffs and our own officers they move on, but the police have been excellent.

90. **Recommendations of Personnel Committee**

a) Pay policy statement and living wage 2024/25

The report to Personnel Committee held on 22nd January, 2024 was submitted.

It was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That:

- 1) The Pay Policy Statement for 2024/2025 be approved; and
- 2) the continuation of the living wage as detailed in the Pay Policy (section 6.5) and section 4.2, (option a) of the report (appended) be approved.

b) Designation of Section 151 Officer

It was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

Resolved

That the designation of the statutory post of Section 151 Officer be changed permanently to the Director of Finance, Corporate Performance and Procurement.

91. **Corporate Budget Plan 2024/25 – 2027/28, incorporating the Capital Strategy and the Treasury Management and investment Strategy 2024/25**

The report to Cabinet held on 7th February, 2024 was submitted.

The Monitoring Officer informed Members that a recorded vote would be required on the budget recommendation and confirmed that he had granted a dispensation to all members in order that the matter could be debated and determined.

It was **moved** by Councillor Bird, seconded by Councillor Andrew and:

That the following be approved:

3.3.1 Revenue

- a) The financial envelope of resources for 2024/25 as set out in **Section B - Part 1** “The Revenue Corporate Budget Plan and Capital Programme”.
- b) A Walsall Council net council tax requirement for 2024/25 of £152.03m and a 2.99% increase in council tax, plus a further 2% increase for Adult Social Care precept (total council tax increase of 4.99%).
- c) That the recommendations of the S151 Officer in respect of the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the budget calculations and the adequacy of reserves **be approved**, including the levels of central contingency and reserves and an opening general reserve of not less than £18.39m, as set out in the S151 Officer Section 25 statement in **Annex 11** of the Budget Plan.
- d) The final levies below for outside bodies:

LEVY	AMOUNT (£)
West Midlands Combined Authority Transport Levy	11,560,655
Environment Agency	87,443

- e) The following statutory determinations (references are to the Local Government Finance Act, 1992 as amended), and subject to any final changes arising from receipt of the final Fire and Rescue Authority precept, specific grant allocations and technical/legislative guidance:
 - I. **£777,287,884** being the aggregate gross expenditure, which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) (a) to (f) of the Act.
 - II. **£625,255,460** being the aggregate income which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) (a) to (d) of the Act.
 - III. **£152,032,424** being the amount, by which the aggregate at (e) (I) above exceeds the aggregate at (e) (II), calculated by the council in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its council tax requirement for the year.
 - IV. **£2,084.56** being the amount at (e) (III) above, divided by the council tax base of 72,932.78, calculated by the council in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year (average council tax at band D).
 - V. Valuation bands

Being amounts given by multiplying the amount at (e) (IV) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5 (1) of the Local Government Act 1992, is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the council in accordance with Section 30 and 36 of the Act as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect

of categories of dwelling listed in different valuation bands.

A	B	C	D
1,389.70	1,621.32	1,852.94	2,084.56
E	F	G	H
2,547.79	3,011.02	3,474.26	4,169.11

- f) The final Police and Crime Commissioner precept and draft Fire and Rescue Authority precept, issued to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act, 1992, for each of the categories of dwelling shown below. The final Fire and Rescue Authority precept will be substituted on the night of Council if the draft figures change to those shown below.

PRECEPTING AUTHORITY	VALUATION BANDS			
	A	B	C	D
Police And Crime Commissioner	143.70	167.65	191.60	215.55
	E	F	G	H
	263.45	311.35	359.25	431.10
Fire & Rescue	50.13	58.49	66.84	75.20
	E	F	G	H
	91.91	108.62	125.33	150.40

- g) That having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at (e) (v) and (f) above, the Council, in accordance with Section 30 (2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the amounts of council tax for 2024/25 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below. Final figures may be substituted subject to receipt of the final Fire and Rescue Authority precept.

A	B	C	D
1,583.53	1,847.46	2,111.38	2,375.31
E	F	G	H
2,903.15	3,430.99	3,958.84	4,750.61

- h) That notice **be given** of the council tax within twenty one days of it being set by publishing details of the same in the "Express and Star" newspaper circulating in the Authority's area.
- i) That the S151 Officer **be instructed** to take all necessary action in relation to council tax, community charge and national non-domestic rates, including, where appropriate, the signing of all documents, billing, the giving of notices and the taking of necessary steps to ensure collection thereof.
- j) That the S151 Officer **be given delegated authority** to make transfers to and from reserves in order to ensure that reserves are maintained as

necessary and in particular, adjusted when reserves are no longer required, or need to be replenished.

- k) That, pursuant to Section 52ZB and 52ZC of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the relevant basic amount of council tax for the Council is not excessive in relation to determining whether a referendum is required.

3.3.2 Capital

- a) The allocation of capital expenditure plans as set out in **Section B - Part 1** “The Revenue Corporate Budget Plan and Capital Programme” and that the capital and leasing programme as set out in **Annex 9 be approved** bearing in mind the principle that unless affordable from within current resources, specific projects funded by borrowing will not be commenced until a payback agreement is in place. Schemes funded from grant will commence when final allocations are published.
- b) That the S151 Officer be **given delegated authority** to determine how each source of finance is used to fund the overall capital programme and to alter the overall mix of financing as necessary, to maximise the flexibility of capital resources used and minimise the ongoing costs of borrowing to the council.
- c) That the S151 Officer, after consultation with the Leader (Portfolio Holder for Finance - Budget), be **given delegated authority** to release capital resources held back for any contingent items that may arise (earmarked capital receipts for essential or emergency spend), and also for any match funding requirements that may be required of the council in order to secure additional external capital funding (e.g. bids for government or other funding).
- d) The Capital and Investment Strategy set out in **Annex 8** of the Budget Plan **be approved**.
- e) The Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy set out in **Annex 10** of the Budget Plan **be approved**.

3.3.3 Treasury Management

- a) **Section B – Part 2A** – The Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2024/25 onwards, including the council’s borrowing requirement, borrowing limits, and the adoption of prudential indicators, **be approved**.
- b) That decisions to effect movements between conventional borrowing and other long term liabilities, such as leases, **be delegated** to the S151 Officer.
- c) That decisions to use capital receipts or borrowing within the framework of approved prudential indicators **be delegated** to the S151 Officer.
- d) **Section B – Part 2B** – Treasury Management Policies, **be approved**.

The following Amendment was moved by Councillor Nawaz, and seconded by Councillor K. Hussain:-

My proposal is to amend the income budget for EE&C Directorate and Operational Saving OP34 in relation to burial fees by a total of £124k, as follows:

- 1) Reverse the 7% increase in burial fees – at a cost of approximately £111k of lost income;
- 2) Reverse the 2024 increase in ‘out of hours’ burial fees as set out below in table 1 – at a cost of approximately £9k of lost income; and remove the new ‘same day burial administration charge of £146;
- 3) Reverse the 2024 increase in block lined and board lined fees as set out below in table 2 – at a cost of approximately £4k of lost income.

The impact of this is set out in the Chief Finance Officer’s advice overleaf and I propose that the cost of this proposal is managed by the use of general reserves for 2024/25, with any ongoing financial impact being added into the medium term financial outlook (MTFO) for 2025/26.

Table 1: Out of Hours Fee

Fee	2023 Fee £	2024 Fee £	% increase
Weekday April – September:			
• Resident	199	388	95%
• Non-Resident	394	582	48%
Weekend, Bank Holiday, Council Holiday			
• Resident	394	582	48%
• Non-Resident	786	873	11%

Table 2: Block lined and Board lined Fees

Fee	2023 Fee £	2024 Fee £	% Increase
Block Lined	466	605	30%
Board Lined	160	235	47%

Impact on the 2024/25 Budget

There is no impact on the statutory determinations as income lost through this proposal will be funded from the use of reserves as an alternative income stream in 2024/25.

All sections of the resolution recommendations in sections 3.3.1, 3.3.2, 3.3.3 remain unchanged by this amendment, including council tax.

Chief Finance Officer’s Advice

This proposed alternative budget is confirmed to have been discussed with the Chief Finance Officer (CFO).

The amendment as set out does not change the statutory determinations (gross expenditure and gross income), nor does it amend the council tax requirement, the level of council tax or the council tax bands from those proposed by Cabinet to Council.

The proposal includes removal of part of operational savings proposal OP34 and an amendment to the EE&C Directorate income budget for lost income. These changes are as set out in the table below. Whilst the net effect of these changes is zero, the proposal includes the use of alternative funding from one off sources, with the use of general reserves in 2024/25 of £124,257.

As the number of burials change from year to year, the estimated financial impact on the service has been calculated using an average of two years data.

Impact on	Description	Change £	Impact of Amendment on Statutory Determinations	
			Gross Expenditure	Gross Income
Saving OP34	Fees and charges – Active Living, Cemeteries	55,084	N/A	Reduction in income of £55,084
EE&C Cash limit	Reduction in the income budget for bereavement services.	69,173	N/A	Reduction in income of £69,173
General Reserves	Use of general reserves to fund the above	(124,257)	N/A	Increase in income of £124,257
	Total Changes	0	N/A	0

In relation to the proposals in this amendment, I can therefore advise as follows:

- 1) The implications for the statutory determinations

- Gross expenditure – no impact;
 - Gross income – a reduction in gross income of £124,257 from a reduction in saving OP34 of £55,084 and a reduction in budgeted income of £69,173 for bereavement services, offset by an increase in gross income of £124,257 from the use of reserves; a net zero change in gross income;
 - A net zero change overall to the council tax requirement.
- 2) Use of reserves – increase of £124,257: The current estimated closing level of general reserves as at 31 March 2024 is £18.702m. The recommended level of opening reserves for 1 April 2024 is £18.391m, a variance of £311k above that required, and which is currently planned to be transferred to earmarked reserves to manage financial risk going forward. After reviewing the budget risks, I can confirm that the use of general reserves to fund this £124,257 reduces the authorities’ flexibility in meeting unknown financial pressures (the figure represents c0.7% of the total level of general reserves available), however the opening level of reserves will be in line with those recommended by the CFO/S151 Officer for 2024/25.
- 3) Additionally, reserves should only be used on one-off items of expenditure and this amendment provides for ongoing investment. As the funding is one-off, the ongoing financial impact of £124,257 would need to be factored into the next update of the MTFO for 2025/26 onwards.
- 4) The amendment would increase the cash limit for the Economy, Environment and Communities by £124,257 and increase the use of reserves by £124,257 for 2024/25 within Section B – Part 1 “The Revenue Corporate Budget Plan and Capital Programme”.

Summary Chief Finance Officer advice

The Council is required to set the budget for the forthcoming year, which is 2024/25. The amendment as set out represents a balanced budget for 2024/25, with a small reduction in the overall reserves available to manage unforeseen pressures and an additional pressure to balance for 2025/26. However, opening levels of general reserves would be in line with the CFO/S151 Officer’s recommendations and the additional pressure for 2025/26 onwards could be built into next year’s budget process.

On being put to the vote **the amendment** was declared **lost** the voting being recorded as follows:

For the amendment – 9 members	Against the amendment – 36 members	Abstained – 0 members
Cllr: G. Ali “ H. Bashir “ S.K. Ditta “ N. Gultasib “ I. Hussain “ K. Hussain “ S. Nasreen “ A.A. Nawaz “ P. Smith	Cllr: A. Andrew “ C. Bott “ P. Bott “ M.A. Bird “ R. Burley “ S. Cheema “ K. Ferguson “ M. Follows “ N. Gandham “ A. Garcha “ P. Gill “ A. Harris “ L.A. Harrison “ A. Hicken “ C. Horton “ T. Jukes “ N. Latham “ E. Lee “ R. Martin “ R. K Mehmi “ E. Morgan “ K. Murphy “ J. Murray “ K. Pedley “ G. Perry “ L.J. Rattigan “ S. Samra “ K. Sears “ G. Singh Sohal “ C.A. Statham “ M.A. Statham “ C.D.D. Towe “ M. Ward “ V.J. Waters “ J. Whitehouse “ R.V. Worrall	

There being no further amendments, the Mayor put **the substantive motion** to the vote which was declared **carried**, the voting being recorded as follows:

For the motion – 27 members	Against the motion – 18 members	Abstained – 0 members
Cllr: G. Ali “ A. Andrew “ M.A. Bird “ K. Ferguson “ M. Follows “ N. Gandham “ A. Garcha “ P. Gill “ A. Harris “ L.A. Harrison “ A.J. Hicken “ I. Hussain “ E. Lee “ R. Martin “ K. Murphy “ J. Murray “ K. Pedley “ G. Perry “ L.J. Rattigan “ S. Samra “ K. Sears “ G. Singh Sohal “ C.A. Statham “ M.A. Statham “ C.D.D. Towe “ V.J. Waters “ J. Whitehouse	Cllr: H. Bashir “ C. Bott “ P. Bott “ R. Burley “ S. Cheema “ S.K. Ditta “ C. Horton “ N. Gultasib “ K. Hussain “ T. Jukes “ N. Latham “ R. K Mehmi “ E. Morgan “ S. Nasreen “ A.A. Nawaz “ P. Smith “ M. Ward “ R.V. Worrall	

Resolved

3.3.1 Revenue

- a) The financial envelope of resources for 2024/25 as set out in **Section B - Part 1** “The Revenue Corporate Budget Plan and Capital Programme”.
- b) A Walsall Council net council tax requirement for 2024/25 of £152.03m and a 2.99% increase in council tax, plus a further 2% increase for Adult Social Care precept (total council tax increase of 4.99%).
- c) That the recommendations of the S151 Officer in respect of the robustness of the estimates made for the purposes of the budget calculations and the adequacy of reserves **be approved**, including the levels of central contingency and reserves and an opening general reserve of not less than

£18.39m, as set out in the S151 Officer Section 25 statement in **Annex 11** of the Budget Plan.

d) The final levies below for outside bodies:

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Environment Agency	87,443

e) The following statutory determinations (references are to the Local Government Finance Act, 1992 as amended), and subject to any final changes arising from receipt of the final Fire and Rescue Authority precept, specific grant allocations and technical/legislative guidance:

VI. **£777,287,884** being the aggregate gross expenditure, which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) (a) to (f) of the Act.

VII. **£625,255,460** being the aggregate income which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) (a) to (d) of the Act.

VIII. **£152,032,424** being the amount, by which the aggregate at (e) (I) above exceeds the aggregate at (e) (II), calculated by the council in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act, as its council tax requirement for the year.

IX. **£2,084.56** being the amount at (e) (III) above, divided by the council tax base of 72,932.78, calculated by the council in accordance with Section 31B of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year (average council tax at band D).

X. Valuation bands

Being amounts given by multiplying the amount at (e) (IV) above by the number which, in the proportion set out in Section 5 (1) of the Local Government Act 1992, is applicable to dwellings listed in valuation band D, calculated by the council in accordance with Section 30 and 36 of the Act as the amounts to be taken into account for the year in respect of categories of dwelling listed in different valuation bands.

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h) The final Police and Crime Commissioner precept and draft Fire and Rescue Authority precept, issued to the Council in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act, 1992, for each of the categories of dwelling shown below. The final Fire and Rescue Authority precept will be substituted on the night of Council if the draft figures change to those shown

below.

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	263.45	311.35	359.25	431.10
Fire & Rescue	A	B	C	D
	50.13	58.49	66.84	75.20
	E	F	G	H
	91.91	108.62	125.33	150.40

- i) That having calculated the aggregate in each case of the amounts at (e) (v) and (f) above, the Council, in accordance with Section 30 (2) of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the amounts of council tax for 2024/25 for each of the categories of dwellings shown below. Final figures may be substituted subject to receipt of the final Fire and Rescue Authority precept.

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- h) That notice **be given** of the council tax within twenty one days of it being set by publishing details of the same in the “Express and Star” newspaper circulating in the Authority’s area.
- i) That the S151 Officer **be instructed** to take all necessary action in relation to council tax, community charge and national non-domestic rates, including, where appropriate, the signing of all documents, billing, the giving of notices and the taking of necessary steps to ensure collection thereof.
- j) That the S151 Officer **be given delegated authority** to make transfers to and from reserves in order to ensure that reserves are maintained as necessary and in particular, adjusted when reserves are no longer required, or need to be replenished.
- k) That, pursuant to Section 52ZB and 52ZC of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, the relevant basic amount of council tax for the Council is not excessive in relation to determining whether a referendum is required.

3.3.2 Capital

- a) The allocation of capital expenditure plans as set out in **Section B - Part 1** “The Revenue Corporate Budget Plan and Capital Programme” and that the capital and leasing programme as set out in **Annex 9 be approved** bearing in mind the principle that unless affordable from within current

resources, specific projects funded by borrowing will not be commenced until a payback agreement is in place. Schemes funded from grant will commence when final allocations are published.

- b) That the S151 Officer be **given delegated authority** to determine how each source of finance is used to fund the overall capital programme and to alter the overall mix of financing as necessary, to maximise the flexibility of capital resources used and minimise the ongoing costs of borrowing to the council.
- c) That the S151 Officer, after consultation with the Leader (Portfolio Holder for Finance - Budget), be **given delegated authority** to release capital resources held back for any contingent items that may arise (earmarked capital receipts for essential or emergency spend), and also for any match funding requirements that may be required of the council in order to secure additional external capital funding (e.g. bids for government or other funding).
- d) The Capital and Investment Strategy set out in **Annex 8** of the Budget Plan **be approved**.
- f) The Flexible Use of Capital Receipts Strategy set out in **Annex 10** of the Budget Plan **be approved**.

3.3.3 Treasury Management

- e) **Section B – Part 2A** – The Treasury Management and Investment Strategy 2024/25 onwards, including the council's borrowing requirement, borrowing limits, and the adoption of prudential indicators, **be approved**.
- f) That decisions to effect movements between conventional borrowing and other long term liabilities, such as leases, **be delegated** to the S151 Officer.
- g) That decisions to use capital receipts or borrowing within the framework of approved prudential indicators **be delegated** to the S151 Officer.
- h) **Section B – Part 2B** – Treasury Management Policies, **be approved**.

92. **Portfolio Holder Briefings**

Deputy Leader and Resilient Communities – Councillor Perry

Councillor Perry gave a presentation.

Members asked questions in relation to the presentation which were responded to by Councillor Perry

93. **Notice of Motion – Care leavers as a Protected Characteristic**

The following notice of motion was **moved** by Councillor Harrison on behalf of Councillor Elson who had tendered her apologies and seconded by Councillor Jukes.

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care headed by Josh McCallister published in May 2022 included a recommendation that:

“Government should make care experience a protected characteristic” and “New legislation should be passed which broadens corporate parenting responsibilities across a wider set of public bodies and organisations.”

At its meeting held on 9th January, 2024, the Councils Corporate Parenting Board received a report noting that whilst this had not been enshrined in law, over 58 councils have since introduced care experience as a protected characteristic, recognising the disadvantages faced by those with care experience when it comes to health, education, housing, employment, and criminality amongst other inequalities.

Making care experience a protected characteristic would provide greater authority to employers, businesses, public services, and policy makers to put in place policies and programmes which promote better outcomes for care experienced people. It will make the UK the first country in the world to recognise care experienced people in this way, which should be fully supported.

Council recognises that:-

- Every elected member and employee of this Council is a corporate parent to the children and care leavers in our care.
- We are all responsible for providing the best possible care, safeguarding and outcomes for the children who are looked after by us.
- That Councils have a duty to put the needs of vulnerable people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration.

Council notes that:-

- Care experienced people face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives;
- Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account;
- Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment and in the criminal justice system;
- Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support in different geographical areas;

- As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us as an Authority;
- All Corporate Parents should commit to acting as mentors, hearing the voices of looked after children and young people and to consider their needs in any aspect of council work;
- Councillors should be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies, such as Councils, to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.

Council requests that Cabinet receive a report to determine whether Care Experience should be a protected characteristic to include the following recommendations:-

- Recognise that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination.
- Recognise that Councils have a duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration.
- Agree that future decisions, services and policies made and adopted by the Council should be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic.
- Agree that in the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty the Council will include care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and the annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment.
- Agree that this Council will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic.
- Formally call upon all other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic until such time as it may be introduced by legislation.
- Commit to continue proactively seeking out and listening to the voices of care experienced people when developing new policies based on their views.

On being put to the vote, the motion was declared **carried** – the voting at the request of several members of the Council being recorded as follows:

For the motion – 42 members	Against the motion – 0 members	Abstained – 0 members
Cllr: G. Ali “ A. Andrew “ H. Bashir “ M.A. Bird “ C. Bott “ P. Bott “ R. Burley “ S. Cheema “ S.K. Ditta “ K. Ferguson “ M. Follows “ A. Garcha “ P. Gill “ N. Gultasib “ A. Harris “ L.A. Harrison “ A.J. Hicken “ C. Horton “ I. Hussain “ K. Hussain “ T. Jukes “ N. Latham “ E. Lee “ R. Martin “ R. K Mehmi “ E. Morgan “ K. Murphy “ J. Murray “ S. Nasreen “ A.A. Nawaz “ K. Pedley “ G. Perry “ L.J. Rattigan “ K. Sears “ G. Singh Sohal “ P. Smith “ C.A. Statham “ M.A. Statham “ C.D.D. Towe “ M. Ward “ V.J. Waters “ J. Whitehouse		

Resolved:

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care headed by Josh McCallister published in May 2022 included a recommendation that:

“Government should make care experience a protected characteristic” and “New legislation should be passed which broadens corporate parenting responsibilities across a wider set of public bodies and organisations.”

At its meeting held on 9th January, 2024, the Councils Corporate Parenting Board received a report noting that whilst this had not been enshrined in law, over 58 councils have since introduced care experience as a protected characteristic, recognising the disadvantages faced by those with care experience when it comes to health, education, housing, employment, and criminality amongst other inequalities.

Making care experience a protected characteristic would provide greater authority to employers, businesses, public services, and policy makers to put in place policies and programmes which promote better outcomes for care experienced people. It will make the UK the first country in the world to recognise care experienced people in this way, which should be fully supported.

Council recognises that:-

- Every elected member and employee of this Council is a corporate parent to the children and care leavers in our care.
- We are all responsible for providing the best possible care, safeguarding and outcomes for the children who are looked after by us.
- That Councils have a duty to put the needs of vulnerable people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration.

Council notes that:-

- Care experienced people face significant barriers that impact them throughout their lives;
- Despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account;
- Care experienced people often face discrimination and stigma across housing, health, education, relationships, employment and in the criminal justice system;
- Care experienced people may encounter inconsistent support in different geographical areas;
- As corporate parents, councillors have a collective responsibility for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us as an Authority;
- All Corporate Parents should commit to acting as mentors, hearing the voices of looked after children and young people and to consider their needs in any aspect of council work;

- Councillors should be champions of the children in our care and challenge the negative attitudes and prejudice that exists in all aspects of society;
- The Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies, such as Councils, to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.

Council requests that Cabinet receive a report to determine whether Care Experience should be a protected characteristic to include the following recommendations:-

- Recognise that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination.
- Recognise that Councils have a duty to put the needs of disadvantaged people at the heart of decision-making through co-production and collaboration.
- Agree that future decisions, services and policies made and adopted by the Council should be assessed through Equality Impact Assessments to determine the impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally share a protected characteristic.
- Agree that in the delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty the Council will include care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and the annual publication of information relating to people who share a protected characteristic in services and employment.
- Agree that this Council will treat care experience as if it were a Protected Characteristic.
- Formally call upon all other bodies to treat care experience as a protected characteristic until such time as it may be introduced by legislation.
- Commit to continue proactively seeking out and listening to the voices of care experienced people when developing new policies based on their views.

94. **Notice of Motion – Funding arrangements**

The following notice of motion was **moved** by Councillor Smith and seconded by Councillor K. Hussain that:-

This Council has been faced with years of reductions, mainly from 2010/11, in Central Government funds that has resulted in the loss of many millions of pounds which in turn has resulted in increases in chargeable services, cuts to service provision across a range of services and Council tax rises year on year. In a nutshell, the local residents and taxpayers of Walsall seem forever to be paying more Council tax and charges for decreasing levels of service.

This seemingly never ending cycle of Council tax rises and cuts to services have been justified by both Conservative and Labour controlled Walsall Council in past recent years on the grounds that legally the Council must vote through a “balanced budget”, and hence faced with central government reductions in support, there is little room to do anything other than cut services, increase chargeable services and raise Council tax.

Despite the financial pressures councils, like Walsall have faced since 2010/11, this Council has met its statutory responsibility to balance its books annually. But this does not mean that service provision and sustainability have not suffered: Services have changed and are not sustainable in the long run.

Council spending is increasingly concentrated in fewer services and on fewer people. There are growing concerns over the quality and scale of service provision. There are, arguably, increasingly unsustainable workforce challenges and there is reduced spend on preventative services.

If this seemingly never ending cycle continues in the future, and there is no sign from either the Government or the Labour Opposition that it will not continue, then the sustainability of Councils like Walsall will be under severe threat, possibly existential threat.

Councils like Walsall are being increasingly stricken by shrinking resources and the costs of rising demand for adult social care, child protection, homelessness and special educational needs provision.

Council tax rises, particularly the adult care precept, have never been the solution to the long term pressures faced by Councils like Walsall. This is particularly the case for social care where increases in costs and demand, do not align with the capacity to raise Council tax. Increasing Council tax raises different amounts of money in different parts of the country, unrelated to need.

Given the above,

This Council resolves to write to the appropriate department/s of Central Government to inform them of:

- * The Council's grave concerns about the present funding arrangements and the threat to future sustainability.
- * This Council's view that the present funding system is broken.
- * The Council's view that there is a need for an urgent review of what councils do and how local services are paid for, including an overhaul of outdated and regressive council tax.

Resolved

That:

This Council has been faced with years of reductions, mainly from 2010/11, in Central Government funds that has resulted in the loss of many millions of pounds which in turn has resulted in increases in chargeable services, cuts to service provision across a range of services and Council tax rises year on year. In a nutshell, the local residents and taxpayers of Walsall seem forever to be paying more Council tax and charges for decreasing levels of service.

This seemingly never ending cycle of Council tax rises and cuts to services have been justified by both Conservative and Labour controlled Walsall Council in past recent years on the grounds that legally the Council must vote through a “balanced budget”, and hence faced with central government reductions in support, there is little room to do anything other than cut services, increase chargeable services and raise Council tax.

Despite the financial pressures councils, like Walsall have faced since 2010/11, this Council has met its statutory responsibility to balance its books annually. But this does not mean that service provision and sustainability have not suffered: Services have changed and are not sustainable in the long run.

Council spending is increasingly concentrated in fewer services and on fewer people. There are growing concerns over the quality and scale of service provision. There are, arguably, increasingly unsustainable workforce challenges and there is reduced spend on preventative services.

If this seemingly never ending cycle continues in the future, and there is no sign from either the Government or the Labour Opposition that it will not continue, then the sustainability of Councils like Walsall will be under severe threat, possibly existential threat.

Councils like Walsall are being increasingly stricken by shrinking resources and the costs of rising demand for adult social care, child protection, homelessness and special educational needs provision.

Council tax rises, particularly the adult care precept, have never been the solution to the long term pressures faced by Councils like Walsall. This is particularly the case for social care where increases in costs and demand, do not align with the capacity to raise Council tax. Increasing Council tax raises different amounts of money in different parts of the country, unrelated to need.

Given the above,

This Council resolves to write to the appropriate department/s of Central Government to inform them of:

- * The Council’s grave concerns about the present funding arrangements and the threat to future sustainability.
- * This Council’s view that the present funding system is broken.
- * The Council’s view that there is a need for an urgent review of what councils do and how local services are paid for, including an overhaul of outdated and regressive council tax.

The meeting terminated at 8.40 p.m.

Mayor:

Date:

Council – 15th April 2024

Members Allowances 2024

1. Aim

To consider the findings and recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel.

2. Summary

A review of Members Allowances Scheme has been undertaken by an Independent Remuneration Panel. The findings of the review, along with recommendations, are provided in detail, to enable Council to make a determination on changes to the existing Scheme.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That, Council note and thank, the work of the Independent Remuneration Panel in producing their report.
- 3.2 That, Council consider each recommendation as set out in 4.7 and resolve to accept or reject any of the proposals.
- 3.3 That, subject to agreeing the payment of allowances the Council decide what, if any, backdating it wishes to apply.
- 3.4 That, subject to 3.2 above, the Director of Governance be authorised to amend the Council's Constitution in respect of Part 6, Members Allowances and publish the new scheme in accordance with Local Authorities (Member Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003.

4. Report Detail - Know

- 4.1 The current Member Allowances Scheme was adopted by Council on 25th February 2021, and is included at Appendix 2 of this report.
- 4.2 In November 2023, Council agreed to formally appoint independent members to the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) to consider specific issues raised in relation to the creation of a new Cabinet Support Assistant role and changes to other specific roles.
- 4.2 The Independent Remuneration Panel consists of three members who are entirely independent of the Council. They are Richard Hood, Company Secretary and Independent Local Government Consultant, and Philip Tart, former Director of Resources and Transformation and Change (Monitoring Officer), Dudley MBC, and Indra Cheema (retired teacher). The IRP were provided with full information concerning the Elected Members Allowance Scheme and met all of the current group prior to finalising their report.

- 4.3 Representations were also invited from all Members of the Council, either by phone or e-mail to the Chair. Four elected members attended the panel and made representations in relation to the scheme. The Panel concluded their analysis with substantial comparator information and drafted their findings report as set out at **Appendix 1** herewith.
- 4.4 The Panel's terms of reference allow for unfettered discretion to make recommendations upon the scheme of allowances for Elected Members. The Council has discretion as to whether or not to accept the recommendations made in whole or in part.
- 4.5 In undertaking their review the Independent Remuneration Panel were given full details of the Council's current political arrangements, provided with elected member job descriptions and provided with tabulated analysis of members allowance schemes for authorities in the Black Country, West Midlands, and those of our relevant CIPFA family of authorities.
- 4.7 The summary recommendations of the Panel are as follows:

i) Cabinet Support Assistants

The Panel recommends that the Cabinet Support Assistant include a special responsibility allowance, which is pegged at 10% to that of the Cabinet Portfolio Holder at £18,641. The Cabinet Support Assistant role is in addition to and does not affect the level of current allowances paid to the Cabinet Portfolio Holder role.

ii) Independent Chair of the Audit Committee

The Panel recommends that an annual allowance of £5,882 be payable to the Independent Chair of the Audit Committee that being equal to the special responsibility allowance paid to the Chair of the Standards Committee.

iii) Membership Allowances for Independent Members serving on both Standards and Audit Committees

The Panel recommends that an annual payment of £750 be payable to any independent member serving on either of the Standards or Audit Committees, with the exception of the Independent Chair of Audit Committee with the aforementioned annual allowance.

iv) Portfolio Lead Allowance Leader of the Council in respect of West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

The Panel recommends that as a recognition of the additional responsibilities of the West Midlands Combined Authority role as Portfolio Lead, the Leader of the Council's current special responsibility allowance be increased by £2,000.

v) Annual Uplift

The Panel recommends that annual updating of Member Allowances should remain linked to the employees' pay award except where council staff agree a

lower percentage rise, freeze or reduction. In circumstances, where the employees' pay award is a fixed value, rather than percentage, the annual updating will be actual percentage of increase received at scale point 43.

- 4.8 The changes proposed to the scheme by the Panel acknowledge different levels and complexities, and commitment to the roles undertaken by elected members.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 The power to have a Members Allowance Scheme is conferred by the Local Authorities (Members Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 made under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the Local Government Act 2000.
- 5.2 Under Part 4 of the above regulations the Council has to have regard to the recommendations made in relation to its Members Allowance Scheme by an Independent Remuneration Panel.
- 5.3 The Independent Remuneration Panel must produce a report making recommendations as to the responsibilities and duties in respect of the items contained between Section 21 (1) (a) to (g) of the said regulations.
- 5.4 There is a requirement for the local authority to publicise the recommendations made by the Independent Remuneration Panel as soon as reasonably practicable after receiving a report from the Panel setting out the panel's recommendations.

6. Consultation

- 6.1 In accordance with statute, the Council is required to consult with and receive recommendations from the Independent Remuneration Panel, who have substantial information concerning Councillors allowances, on which they base their recommendations.
- 6.2 All the political group leaders of the Council were invited to provide comments to the Independent Remuneration Panel for them to be considered as part of their deliberations in reviewing the current scheme of allowances. Individual Elected Members were also invited to make representations to the Independent Remuneration Panel.

7. Internal Financial Implications

- 7.1 The cost of the various proposals put forward by the Independent Remuneration Panel are set out in **Appendix 1**.

8. Property implications

- 8.1 There are no property implications to consider.

9. Health and wellbeing implications

9.1 There are no known health and wellbeing implications.

10. Reducing Inequalities

10.1 The Members Allowance scheme provides encouragement for wider and more inclusive political representation.

11. Staffing implications

11.1 There are no staffing implications to consider.

12. Climate Impact

12.1 There are no climate impact implications to consider.

13. Decide

13.1 That, the Council decide whether to accept, amend or reject the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel as set out in Appendix 1.

14. Respond

14.1 For Council to consider, approve, and implement the recommendations of the Independent Remuneration Panel.

15. Review

15.1 The Council is obliged to adopt a new Members Allowance Scheme every year. However, where an index is applied to the scheme, the Council can rely upon that index for up to 4 years without the need to review the scheme.

If the Council fails to adopt a new scheme (even if it is to re-adopt the existing scheme) before the existing one expires, then the Council will be unable to pay its members allowances thereafter until a new scheme is adopted. The Council will follow the legislative guidance as set out in reviewing the Members Allowance Scheme.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Report of the Independent Remuneration Panel – February 2024

Appendix 2 - Existing Members Allowance Scheme

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REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REMUNERATION PANEL (IRP)

MEETING ON 16 FEBRUARY 2024

1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report arises from an interim review of the current scheme and is not the product of a periodic review, the next being due in 2026. Instead, the Panel had been asked to convene to consider specific proposals being brought forward for the Panel's views and recommendation to Council.
- 1.2 These proposals relating to Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) and annual allowances to independent members are addressed in turn and recommendations given within section below.

2. ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Cabinet Support Assistants (CSAs)

- 2.1 The Council had agreed on 22 May 2022 to establish this role with a remit to support particular Cabinet Members requiring support in their day-to-day roles, such as providing briefings, research and assistance with policy development. In the evidence provided to the Panel, it was confirmed that, in practice, this would be limited to 3 - 4 CSAs with focus on supporting work in those portfolios with the most demanding workload. The benefits of these roles in developing talent, succession planning and deputising was acknowledged, although not strictly relevant to consideration of the level of allowance.

Recommendation 1

That these CSA roles attract an SRA, the amount of which is pegged at 10% to that of the Cabinet Portfolio-holder (currently £18,461). Note: that this is in addition to and does not affect the level of current allowances paid to the Cabinet Members.

(2) INDEPENDENT CHAIR OF THE AUDIT COMMITTEE

- 2.2 The Panel noted that currently there was no allowance payable for an independent chair of Audit Committee (i.e. a non-Councillor) and acknowledged the significant workload and contribution of this role.
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Recommendation 2

That an annual allowance of £5,882 be payable to the Independent Chair of Audit Committee - that being commensurate with the SRA currently paid to the Chair of Standards Committee.

(3) MEMBERSHIP ALLOWANCES FOR INDEPENDENT MEMBERS SERVING ON BOTH STANDARDS AND AUDIT COMMITTEES

2.3 The Panel felt it was appropriate to extend the availability of allowances to all independent members serving on the Audit Committee, should others be appointed in the future, to recompense them for time and trouble, and expenses associated with attending meetings. Independent Members on the Standards Committee and the Chair of the Audit Committee currently received an allowance of £750 and the Panel's view was to retain the allowance on its current level.

Recommendation 3

That an annual payment of £750 be payable to any independent member serving on either of the Standards or Audit Committees, with the exception of the Independent Chair of Audit Committee who will receive a Chair's allowance (see (2) above).

(4) PORTFOLIO LEAD ALLOWANCE FOR LEADER OF COUNCIL IN RESPECT OF WEST MIDLANDS COMBINED AUTHORITY (WMCA)

2.4 The Leader of the Council has taken on additional duties with the WMCA and that the WMCA's own IRP was recommending constituent authorities pay a 'top-up' to the Leaders of £9,500 to acknowledge the time commitment and responsibilities required for the role. The WMCA currently had no legal powers to pay allowances themselves.

2.5 The Panel was minded that the Leader's role with the WMCA arose by virtue of his leadership of Walsall Council for which he already received an SRA for fulfilling his wide role and representing the Council externally. However, the Panel considered that being a portfolio holder with the WMCA inevitably brought with it additional responsibility and workload.

2.6 The Panel noted the benchmarking information provided and thought it appropriate to follow the lead provided by Wolverhampton Council in considering this same issue. In the longer term, WMCA may be able to pay their own allowances at which point an increase agreed now can be reversed

Recommendation 4

That the Leader of the Council's current SRA be increased by £2,000 to recognise the additional responsibilities required from his role with the WMCA.

(5) ANNUAL UPLIFT

- 2.7 The Panel was asked to consider whether there should be any adjustment to the mechanism of linking the annual increase in the Basic Allowance to the award to staff in line with the National Joint Council (NJC). A complication had occurred in 2023 where a flat rate award of £1,925 had been paid to staff on NJC spinal points 2 to 42 whereas a 3.88% increase had been applied for staff on spinal points 43 and above.

Recommendation 5

That annual updating of member allowances should remain linked to the employees' award except where council staff agree a lower percentage rise, freeze or reduction. In years where the pay award is a fixed value (rather than a percentage) the annual updating of Members Allowances will be the actual percentage of increase received at scale point 43.

Note: whilst this is the preferred recommendation from the Panel, the Panel also considered that there was an alternative where the Members Allowances could be increased by applying the average increase across all grades (rather than linking to NJC Scale Point 43)

3. NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The Panel met on Friday 16 February 2024 receiving briefing papers from the officers on the five issues above.
- 3.2 Detailed benchmarking information was provided on allowances paid by other comparator local authorities, including constituent councils within the West Midlands.
- 3.3 The Panel received oral representations in person from eight Walsall Councillors.
- 3.4 The Panel carefully considered all of these inputs before determining their recommendations.
- 3.5 The Panel was unanimous in its decision making in its recommendations to the Council.

4. PANEL MEMBERS

Indra Cheema
Richard Hood
Phillip Tart

21 February 2024

P A R T 6

MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES SCHEME

Members' Allowances Scheme

The Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, in exercise of the powers conferred by the Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 made under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the Local Government Act 2000 hereby make this Scheme:

- 1.1 This scheme may be cited as "The Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council Members' Allowances Scheme" and shall have effect from 11th April 2017.
- 1.2 The existing Members' Allowances Scheme is revoked upon the coming into effect of this scheme.
- 1.3 This scheme may be amended at any time but may only be revoked with effect from the beginning of a year.

2. In this Scheme:

"Councillor" means a Member of the Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council;

"Year" means the 12 months ending 31st March;

"Yearly Allowance" is the allowance due for the year within which the term of office of the Councillor falls.

3. Basic Allowance

Subject to the provisions of this scheme, for each year a basic allowance as detailed in Schedule 1 shall be paid to each Councillor, this allowance includes the cost of telephones and travel and subsistence in the borough of Walsall.

4. Special Responsibility Allowances

- 4.1 For each year a special responsibility allowance shall be paid to those Councillors who hold the special responsibilities in relation to the authority that are specified in Schedule 1 to this Scheme.
- 4.2 Subject to the provisions of this scheme, the amount of each such allowance shall be the amount specified against that special responsibility in that schedule.
- 4.3 When a Councillor takes on special responsibilities which would entitle that Councillor to the payment of more than one special responsibility allowance from the Council, the Councillor will be entitled to receive only one special responsibility allowance per year. The Councillor will be entitled to receive the higher allowance for which he/she qualifies.

5. Carers' Allowance

- 5.1 In accordance with the Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003, allowances shall be paid in respect of such expenses of arranging for the care of members' children or dependants as are necessarily incurred in the attendance at any meeting of a type specified in the Regulations and set out in Schedule 2 to this Scheme or the Performance of any duty specified in the Regulations and set out in Schedule 2 to this Scheme.
- 5.2 That where any elected Member is required to pay a carer in order to attend official Council business, the reasonable actual costs of that care should be reimbursed up to a total annual maximum amount of £1100.
- 5.3 Payments can be made for the care of dependants including children, elderly persons or those with some form of disability.
- 5.4 Councillors may claim for care provided by relatives and others provided they do not live in the family home.

6. Travelling and Subsistence Allowance

6.1 Travelling and subsistence within the West Midlands County Area.

The cost of travel and subsistence within the West Midlands County area on official Council business shall be deemed to be included within the Basic Allowance and no further allowance shall be payable.

6.2 Travel and subsistence outside West Midlands County Area

- (i) That for all travel members should be encouraged to travel by public transport, the costs of which should be reimbursed or paid directly.
- (ii) That where public transport is not available or possible, the mileage rates applicable for travel by officers should be used.
- (iii) That where members are unable to take main meals in their normal place, the subsistence rates applicable for officers should be used.

7. Telephone Allowance

The cost of any charges related to the provision of a telephone by a Councillor, including call charges, incurred on Council related business shall be deemed to be included in the basic allowance. The cost of broadband connection can only be recoverable as an expense if it is a standalone expense and not a collateral contract forming a "free" additional package.

8. Co-optees' Allowances

No allowances shall be paid to co-optees on any of the Council's committees other than reimbursement of travel and subsistence expenses.

9. Renunciation

A Councillor may by giving notice in writing to the Chief Executive elect to forego any part of his/her entitlement to an allowance under this Scheme.

10. Part-year entitlement

10.1 The provisions of this paragraph shall have effect to regulate the entitlements of a Councillor to the basic or special responsibility allowance where, in the course of a year, this Scheme is amended or that Councillor becomes, or ceases to be, a Councillor, or accepts or relinquishes a special responsibility in respect of which a special responsibility allowance is payable.

10.2 Amendment of amount of allowances

If any amendment to this scheme changes the amount to which a Councillor is entitled, during the year, by way of basic an/or special responsibility allowance then the amount of the amended allowance each Councillor shall be entitled to, shall be in direct proportion to the number of days remaining in the year and the amended yearly allowance. Such entitlement commencing upon the date of the amendment coming into effect. Entitlement to allowances due prior to the amendment is in direct proportion to the number of days from the beginning of the year, in which the scheme was amended, up to the date immediately prior to the amendment coming into effect and the amount payable for that year to amendment.

10.3 Amendment to special responsibilities eligible for allowance

If an amendment to this scheme changes the duties specified as eligible for special allowance which are approved from time to time for payment of an allowance; then the entitlement to allowance shall commence when the duty is carried out. The amount to which each Councillor is entitled is in direct proportion to the number of days remaining in the year, commencing upon the date when the duty is first carried out and the amended yearly allowance.

10.4 Amendment to term of office – basic allowance

Where the term of office of a Councillor begins or ends otherwise than at the beginning or end of the year, the entitlement of that Councillor to a basic allowance shall be in direct proportion either to the number of days from the beginning of the year, to the date when the Councillor's term of office ends, or from the date when the term of office began to the end of the year; and the yearly allowance.

10.5 Changes in period of special responsibility

Where a Councillor has special responsibilities during part of but, not throughout a year that entitles him/her to a special responsibility allowance, then that Councillor's entitlement shall be limited to payment of such part of that allowance in direct proportion as to the number of days during which the Councillor has such responsibility bears to the number of days in that year. Where a Councillor's special responsibility straddles two different rates of allowance the Councillor's entitlement shall be in direct proportion to the number of days the special responsibility was/is performed and the allowance to that period of the year.

11. Payments

Payment of allowances shall be made in instalments of one-twelfth of the amount specified in the Scheme on the 28th day of each month or the nearest preceding working day. Payment will be by the Bacs system to the Councillor's nominated account. Where a payment of one-twelfth of the amount specified in this scheme would result in a Councillor receiving more than the amount to which he or she is entitled by virtue of paragraphs 3 and 4, the payment shall be restricted to such amount as will ensure that no more is paid than the amount to which he or she is entitled.

12. Record of allowances

12.1 A record of all payments made in accordance with this scheme will be maintained by the Head of Payroll and Pension.

12.2 The record will:-

- (a) specify the name of the recipient of the payment and the amount and nature of each payment;
- (b) be available at all reasonable times for inspection free of charge by any local government elector for the area of the Borough Council;
- (c) be supplied in copy to any person who requests such a copy and who pays to the Council such reasonable fee as it may determine.

13. Inflation increases

The criterion for the annual updating of members' allowances should be the NJC officers award, except when Council staff agree to a lower percentage rise, freeze or reduction, in which case that figure should be applied equally to members allowances.

14. Membership of more than one authority

Where a Councillor is also a member of another authority, that Councillor may not receive allowances from more than one authority in respect of the same duties.

15. Parental Leave Policy

Council approved a Parental Leave Policy which is set out in Schedule 3.

SCHEDULE 1

(a)	Basic Allowance	£13,128
(b)	Special Responsibility Allowances:	
	Leader of the Council	£36,647
	Deputy Leader of the Council:	£22,269
	*Other Group Leaders:	£12,270
	Cabinet members	£18,461
	Regulatory Committees Chairs:	
	Audit Committee	£9,404
	Personnel Committee	£5,882
	Planning Committee	£11,651
	Employment Appeals Subs	£5,662
	Licensing & Safety Committee	£11,092
	Taxi Licensing Sub-Committees	£5,882
	Standards Committee	£5,882
	Health and Wellbeing Board	£5,882
	Corporate Parenting Board	£5,882
	Scrutiny Committee Chairs	£11,899

* The Group must hold a minimum of 6 seats or 10% whichever is greater of the Council membership.

SCHEDULE 2

CARERS' ALLOWANCE

- (a) The attendance at a meeting of the authority or of any committee or sub-committee of the authority, or of any other body to which the authority makes appointments or nominations, or of a committee or sub-committee of such a body;
- (b) The attendance at any other meeting, the holding of which is authorised by the authority, or a committee or sub-committee of the authority, or a joint committee of the authority and at least one other local authority within the meaning of Section 270(1) of the Local Government Act 1972 or a sub-committee of such a joint committee, provided that members of at least two political groups have been invited;
- (c) The attendance at a meeting of any association of authorities of which the authority is a member;
- (d) The attendance at a meeting of the Cabinet or of any of its committees;
- (e) The performance of any duty in pursuance of any standing order made under Section 135 of the Local Government Act 1972 requiring a member or members to be present while tender documents are opened;
- (f) The performance of any duty in connection with the discharge of any function of the authority conferred by or under any enactment and empowering or requiring the authority to inspect or authorise the inspection of premises;
- (g) The performance of any duty in connection with arrangements made by the authority for the attendance of pupils at any school approved for the purpose of Section 342 of the Education Act 1996 (approval of non-maintained Special Schools) and
- (h) The carrying out of any other duty approved by the authority, or any duty of a class so approved for the purpose of, or in connection with, the discharge of the functions of the authority or any of its committees or sub-committees.

SCHEDULE 3

Parental Leave Policy for Councillors

1. Aim of the Policy

- 1.1 The objectives of this policy are:
- a. to ensure a supportive and non-discriminatory environment for councillors who have or are planning to have parental responsibilities;
 - b. to improve and retain a diversity of experience, age and background of councillors; and
 - c. to make public office more accessible to individuals who might otherwise feel excluded from it.
- 1.2 This policy sets out councillors' entitlements to Parental Leave (covering maternity, paternity, shared parental and adoption leave) and relevant allowances.
- 1.3 This policy has cross party support from all councillors.

2. Leave entitlement

- 2.1 Councillors, who are the designated carer, are entitled to up to 6 months parental leave from the due date, with the option to extend up to 52 weeks by agreement if required (see para 2.8).
- 2.2 A Councillor who adopts a child through an approved adoption agency shall be entitled to take up to 6months adoption leave from the date of placement, with the option to extend up to 52 weeks by agreement if required. For the purposes of this policy, surrogacy will fall under the definition of adoption and the Policy shall be applicable if a Councillor has applied for or be intending to apply for a Parental Order in relation to the child, in which case they shall be entitled to take up to 6-months leave with the option to extend up to 52 weeks by agreement if required.
- 2.3 In addition, where the birth is premature, the councillor is entitled to take leave during the period between the date of the birth and the due date. This is in addition to the 6 months' period as referred to in paragraph 2.1. In such cases any leave taken to cover prematurity of 28 days or less shall be deducted from any extension beyond the initial 6 months.
- 2.4 In exceptional circumstances, and only in cases of prematurity of 29 days or more, additional leave may be taken by agreement (see para 2.6), and such exceptional leave shall not be deducted from the total 52 week entitlement.
- 2.5 A councillor who has made Shared Parental Leave arrangements through their employment is requested to advise the Council of these at the earliest possible opportunity. Every effort will be made to replicate such arrangements in terms of leave from Council. In circumstances where no Shared Parental Leave arrangements are available the Council will consider an alternative pattern of leave.

- 2.6 Where both parents are councillors leave may be shared up to a maximum of 24 weeks for the first six months and 26 weeks for any leave agreed thereafter, up to a maximum of 52 weeks. Special and/or? exceptional arrangements may be made in cases of prematurity.
- 2.7 Any councillor who takes parental leave is still subject to the legal duty under the Local s85 Government Act 1972 to attend a meeting of the Council within a six month period unless there is agreement by Council to an extended leave of absence prior to the expiration of that six month period. In addition any councillor on leave is still subject to the provisions of the Councillor Code of Conduct.
- 2.8 Any councillor intending to take parental leave will be responsible for ensuring that they comply with the relevant notice requirements of the Council, both in terms of the point at which the leave starts and the point at which they return.
- 2.9 Any councillor taking leave should ensure that they respond to reasonable requests for information as promptly as possible, and that they keep officers and colleagues informed and updated in relation to intended dates of return and requests for extension of leave.
- 2.10 Absences from Council meetings during any period of Parental Leave will be noted as such, rather than being attributed to general absence.
- 2.11 If a Councillor wishes to have a keeping in touch day or attend a meeting (KIT day) then they should notify their Group Leader, although this will not affect any calculation of the leave periods or be taken into account for an extended leave period.

3. Basic Allowance and Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) During Parental Leave

- 3.1 All councillors shall continue to receive their Basic Allowance in full whilst on parental leave.
- 3.2 Councillors entitled to a Special Responsibility Allowance (SRA) shall continue to receive their allowance in full whilst on parental leave.
- 3.3 If a councillor holds a position that attracts a SRA it may be necessary to appoint a replacement. Where a replacement is appointed to cover the period of absence that replacement person shall receive a SRA on a pro rata basis for the period of the temporary appointment.
- 3.4 The payment of SRA, whether to the primary holder or the replacement, during a period of parental leave shall continue for a period of;
- a: six months; or
 - b: until the date of the next Annual Meeting of the Council; or
 - c: the Leader's decision on Cabinet appointments; or

d: until the date when the councillor taking leave is up for election whichever is soonest.

At such a point, the position will be reviewed, and will be subject to a possible extension for a further six month period.

- 3.5 Should a councillor appointed to cover for a councillor on parental leave already hold a remunerated position, the ordinary rules relating to payment of more than one SRA shall apply.
- 3.6 Unless the councillor taking leave is removed from their post at an Annual General Meeting of the Council whilst on leave, or by the Leader's removing them from their Cabinet appointment, or if the Party to which they belong loses control of the Council during their leave period, they shall return at the end of their leave period to the same post, or to an alternative post with equivalent status and remuneration which they held before the leave began.

4. Resigning from office and elections

- 4.1 If a councillor decides not to return at the end of their parental leave they must notify the council at the earliest opportunity. If they resign they must notify the proper officer of the council in writing of their resignation. All allowances will cease from the effective date of resignation.
- 4.2. If an election is held during the Councillor's maternity, paternity, shared parental or adoption leave and they are not re-elected, or decide not to stand for re-election, their allowances will cease from the 4th day after the ordinary day of election when they would legally vacate office.

5. Ward Duties

- 5.1 Councillors who take parental leave will be able to nominate another councillor to deal with local issues in their Ward, in consultation where applicable with the relevant Group Leader. It will be the responsibility of the councillor and Group Leader to hold discussions with their preferred nomination to arrange this.
- 5.2 Where a councillor has limited alternatives to nominate due to low political representation, the Leader will decide with the member the most appropriate way in which their ward duties can be covered.
- 5.3 Councillors are responsible for putting an out of office message redirecting queries to a designated councillor. However, if they still wish to respond to emails/correspondence whilst taking parental leave, they are at liberty to undertake this activity.
- 5.4 Democratic Services will provide help and advice where appropriate and arrange for officers in service areas to respond to enquiries.

6. Parental Bereavement Leave (miscarriage or still birth)

- 6.1 The council's policy for employees is extended to councillors.
- 6.2 Parental bereavement leave will be granted to parents or primary carers following the death of a child under the age of 18 or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy. Primary carers include adopters, foster parents and guardians as well as close relatives or family friends who have taken responsibility for the child's care in the absence of parents.
- 6.3 Parents or primary carers will be entitled to two weeks' leave.
- 6.4 Leave can either be taken in one block of two weeks or in two separate blocks of one week (but not as individual days), and can be taken within a 56 week period from the date of the child's death.
- 6.5 Leave can be taken without prior notice in the initial period (within 56 days of the child's death). Where leave is to be taken after the initial 8 week period, a minimum of one weeks' notice should be given to the relevant Group Leader, where possible. There is no requirement to provide the council with a copy of the death certificate.

Council – 22 February 2023

Annual Scrutiny Report for 2022-23

Service: Legal and Democratic Services

Wards: All

1. Summary of report

This is the annual report to the Council outlining the work of the respective Overview and Scrutiny Committees during the 2022-23 municipal year.

The report provides an analysis of the work undertaken by the Committees during this period.

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

2. Recommendations

That, subject to any comments Members may wish to make, the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2022-23 be noted.

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 effectively considered prior to implementation. The role of Scrutiny is defined in Article 6 of Walsall Council's Constitution.

4. Council Plan Priorities

This report reflects the Council Plan priority on *Internal Focus – Council services and customer focussed, effective, efficient and equitable* as reflection and evaluation on the previous year's scrutiny work enables lessons to be learned and taken forward.

Further to this the report is structured around the Council's five Council Plan priorities to demonstrate how scrutiny committees have contributed to the achievement of the organisations strategic plan.

5. Risk Management

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 overview and scrutiny committees, 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 overview and scrutiny committees 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 overview and scrutiny committees.

6. Financial implications

Overview and scrutiny committees continually monitor the financial position of the Council and undertake an annual scrutiny process of draft budgets. There are no direct financial implications from this report.

7. Legal implications

Article 6 of the Walsall Council Constitution requires overview and scrutiny committees to report annually to the Council on their working and to make recommendations for future work programmes and amended working methods, if appropriate.

8. Property implications

There are no direct property implications from this report.

9. Health and wellbeing implications

Work and reviews undertaken by overview and scrutiny committees seeks to have a positive impact on resident's health and wellbeing through influencing the service provision of the Council and its partners. There are no direct health and wellbeing implications from this report.

10. Staffing implications

There are no direct staffing implications from this report.

11. Reducing inequality

This report details all of the work that has been done 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 overview and scrutiny committees. This helps to ensure the delivery of the Council equality duties through promoting a thorough understanding of the needs of our diverse communities and supports the delivery of the Council's vision that: *Inequalities are reduced and all potential is maximised.*

12. Consultation

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

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Scrutiny Annual Report

2022/23



Walsall Council

PROUD OF OUR PAST OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

Foreword by Councillor John Murray, Chair of the Scrutiny Overview Committee

I am pleased to introduce to you the Scrutiny Annual Report for 2022 – 2023.

The report highlights the important work undertaken by scrutiny members during the municipal year, 2022-2023. It is not a comprehensive list of all the work undertaken by our five Overview and Scrutiny Committees; rather, it focuses on the priorities in the Council's Plan to demonstrate how scrutiny is contributing to its achievement. Further to this, the case studies are cross-referenced with the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's four principles of good scrutiny.

Examples of the excellent scrutiny activities undertaken by Members of the Council include a Working Group that was established by the Scrutiny Overview Committee on School Gate Parking.

Finally, I would like to thank my fellow Elected Members, Council officers, partners and members of the public who have participated in or attended, an Overview and Scrutiny meeting during this time.

Councillor John Murray
Chair – 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 2022 to April 2023. 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 centred 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 and customer focussed, 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 website.

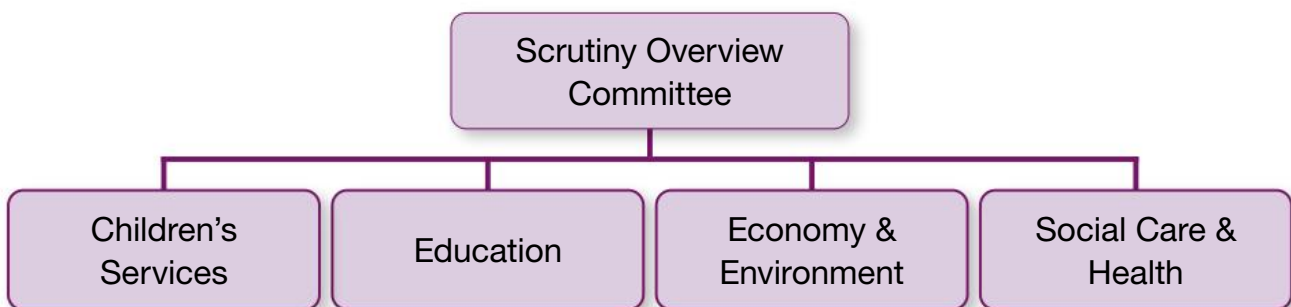
What is Overview and Scrutiny?

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 2022, 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.

During 2022/2023, the Scrutiny Overview Committee discussed the effectiveness of scrutiny in Walsall. Preliminary considerations focused on budget scrutiny, suggesting possible focus areas and approaches to enhance Members' understanding of the budget and their ability to scrutinise it. There was also a request for annual training to be provided to Members of scrutiny committees at the start of the municipal year.

To enhance this training, the Local Government Association (LGA) and an experienced Elected Member from Leeds City Council conducted a session on the effectiveness of scrutiny, which was well received. It was anticipated that similar training sessions would be available in the future to ensure all Members have an understanding of the scrutiny process and the confidence and ability to effectively conduct scrutiny in Walsall.

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

1. Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Railway Stations

Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Railway Stations

The Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussed the proposed train stations in Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge at their meeting on 13 April 2023.

Representatives from the West Midlands Rail Executive were invited to present an update on the development of the stations. They informed the Committee that there had been challenges throughout the process including concerns around land contamination, the extent of the required grouting of former mine workings and plans of the land not identifying some underground utilities installations/apparatus. The Committee heard that the Council was working closely with the West Midlands Rail Executive on these matters with monthly meetings taking place in which Council officers offered their local knowledge and visited the sites of the stations.

Members of the Committee asked questions in relation to the plans for the stations including parking facilities, line capacity and train services. In the case of Aldridge, Members asked about the potential for the future electrification of the Sutton Park Line to allow the station to be serviced by different types of trains. The Committee resolved to consider an update on the topic for the 2023 – 2024 municipal year work programme.

How did this item provide a critical friend challenge?

The Committee engaged with the West Midlands Rail Executive and used their local knowledge to comment and propose solutions that may be more beneficial for Walsall, its residents and businesses. They also provided feedback on options around future engagement activities with local communities and ensured that they would be kept up to date with future developments by continuing to receive updates on progress.

2. Social Housing Providers

The Scrutiny Overview Committee engaged with local social housing providers at its meetings held on 4 October and 12 December 2022. Members identified challenges, further partnership working and delivery strategies for residents.

Following presentations from Walsall Housing Group (WHG) and GreenSquareAccord, Members questioned representatives about their commitments to increasing housing stock sustainability and were advised that emphasis was placed on the retrofitting of existing housing stock. Whilst off-loading older, less efficient housing stock would increase providers' housing stock sustainability, in many cases these properties would be re-rented out unmodernised by private landlords, thus not improving the wider efficiency of Borough's housing supply.

The Committee investigated how the Council could assist social housing providers in mitigating the social housing shortfall within the Borough. Challenges were identified within the planning application process and recommendations were made to the Cabinet for a future report to consider delays in the planning process and possible competition in the social housing sector. At the subsequent meeting, the Head of Planning and Building Control responded to concerns and directly expanded on how the service was working with social housing providers to identify appropriate sites and assist them in progressing applications.

A discussion took place on how the Council could work with partners including social housing providers to address Borough-wide issues such as fly-tipping. Members were interested in new technologies being utilised by WHG to quickly resolve incidents of fly-tipping on their land. Further information and investigation was required on this topic and whether similar techniques could be adopted by the Council.

How did this item enable the voice and concerns of the public?

Customer service and the involvement of residents were key themes discussed by the Committee. There were concerns about the effectiveness of resolving case management issues raised by residents by Members. The Committee were reassured by housing providers that changes were being undertaken which would result in the appointment of dedicated area-based lead officers responsible for dealing with Member casework.

Providers were also questioned on the rights and abilities of residents to have their voices heard, both when issues arose and in shaping future policies. One such example was the consultation regarding proposed changes to the constitution of Watmos Community Homes. Members sought reassurances that tenants' voices on the governing board would be protected under the amendments. These discussions resulted in points of clarification being received, including confirmation that residents would never be in a minority in relation to board membership, prior to the constitution's submission to and approval by Council on 9 January 2023.

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

1. Access to GP Services

The Committee received several reports throughout the municipal year on General Practitioner (GP) Services and how accessibility had become difficult for residents.

Members first raised concerns about the number of face-to-face appointments being offered to residents and whether this was affecting the levels of care provided. There were reported difficulties for residents to book appointments in a timely manner and they were becoming increasingly frustrated with the morning rushes for an appointment. This often led to individuals waiting on the phone for lengthy periods or in some cases not being offered an appointment at all.

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) informed Members that a plan to standardise all telephone systems across GP Practices was being rolled out and this would help residents to book appointments timely and effectively. However, Members remained concerned that access had been limited since the COVID-19 pandemic and that this reduced access was having an impact on other parts of the NHS.

Members also received an update on GP contract renewals with a specific focus on the Harden/Blakenall Family Practice. Members were concerned that some GP practices were having their contracts renewed when they were known to be having problems fulfilling their contracts to a required standard. It was noted that the GP contract framework was historic and dated back to the creation of the NHS and that the ICB operated within a national framework. There was a commitment for the ICB to explore the possibility of adopting an alternative model to delivering primary care access.

Modality Partnership who ran the Harden/Blakenall Family Practice informed the Committee of the plans for the practice. Members of the Committee expressed their disappointment at the levels of care being provided by the practice but supported the practice reopening. Following a lengthy discussion, there was a consensus that following the reopening of the practice, it was hoped that patient outcomes would improve with the level of services offered.

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

The Committee successfully amplified the voices of residents on the issues surrounding access to GP services with open dialogue with NHS partners. Additionally, the challenge of current service delivery and planned changes helped to bring the experience of residents to the forefront of the debate.

2. Walsall Accident and Emergency and Urgent Treatment Centre (Walk-in-Centre)

The Committee received two reports on the Accident and Emergency (A&E) Department and the Urgent Treatment Centre (Walk-in-Centre) based at the Walsall Manor Hospital. In September 2022, the Committee received an update report on the new A&E/Urgent Treatment Centre from the Chief Executive of Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust, Professor David Loughton. Members were informed that the new building for the A&E/Urgent Treatment Centre would help the Trust to deliver more timely care to patients and improve its overall performance. Members noted that due to the delay of key medical equipment, the opening of the new building had been delayed.

Members were supportive of the work being undertaken to open the new building as soon as possible and were encouraged by the potential improvements that the new building would bring. At the meeting, an invitation to visit the new building was extended to the Committee.

On 26 January 2023, Members visited the new A&E/Urgent Treatment Centre and were taken around the site by Professor Loughton and other senior clinical staff. Members were impressed by the new facilities and the plans to utilise them to improve the service delivered to patients.



The Committee received a follow-up report in April 2023, where it was confirmed that the new building was hosting the Emergency Department and the Acute Medical Unit. The building would also accommodate the Paediatric Assessment Centre in the coming months.

Provide constructive “critical friend” challenge.

Whilst questions and concerns were raised over the delay of the aforementioned A&E, there was a reflection of the support for NHS partners which had established improvements in the delivery of healthcare within the Borough. The Committee praised the work of staff and Professor David Loughton in delivering further improvements and making the transfer from the old facilities to the new building a success.

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

1. Draft Revenue & Capital Budget 2023/24 to 2026/27

The Scrutiny Overview Committee considered the draft revenue and capital budget for 2023/24 to 2026/27. Members discussed the future use of the Civic Centre including hybrid working arrangements, enhancing the Council's registrar's offer and proposals to lease out space within the Civic Centre. The Committee were given assurances that the Council House and Civic Centre would receive investment from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme to deliver an air source heat pump. In addition, there were proposals to generate additional marriage ceremony income through the improvement of the registrar's office.

Members raised concerns about the reduction in grant funding provided to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) as this service was historically important for communities across the Borough. However, there was a view that CAB no longer supported local communities and that an alternative provider could be sourced to better represent communities. The Committee welcomed the proposal for a future report on the options for developing an in-house scheme or procuring a new provider.

The Committee made a number of recommendations including requesting the Cabinet review and consider the impact of the financial overspend within Adult Social Care and Children's Services and produce a robust action plan to deal with the overspend.

Provide constructive "critical friend" challenge.

The Committee provided constructive challenge to the Cabinet on several issues relating to the draft revenue and capital budget. Examples include scrutinising financial reserves and mitigation planning regarding rising prices of commodities, fuel and energy.

2. Attendance and Children not in School

The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee received reports on attendance and attainment on two occasions during the municipal year. There were concerns that since the COVID-19 pandemic, attendance in schools within the Borough had fallen. As a result, poor attendance had directly impacted educational attainment outcomes. In addition, Members raised concerns with the process of monitoring children not in school, in particular, safeguarding children and the quality of education they would receive.

A special advisor had been appointed specifically to help schools improve attendance, which was welcomed by the Committee. Additionally, a working group had been established by schools and the Council collectively to help improve attendance. Furthermore, the Council had strengthened its home education policy to include an initial meeting provision between the Council and parents to explain the responsibilities and requirements of home education.

Members were reassured that the Council had carried out its role effectively through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) about children being home educated, however, concerns remained that no national register for home-educated children existed.

How did this item amplify the voices and concerns of the public?

The Committee echoed the concerns of the public and the Borough's educators that the lower overall attendance, which had occurred since the Covid-19 Pandemic was damaging the effective education of children and young people within the Borough.

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

1. Child exploitation

The Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee received an overview of the issues relating to child exploitation, including child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation, modern slavery/trafficking and children involved in the supply of drugs via "county lines". The Committee noted that local authorities had an overarching responsibility for safeguarding all children in their area. Local agencies, including police and health services, also have a duty under Section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure they consider the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people when carrying out their functions.

The Committee was assured that the issue of child exploitation remained a priority for all key partners and the Local Safeguarding Partnership and Community Safety Partnership.

A wide range of partners attended the scrutiny meeting in April 2023 to assist the Committee to understand and scrutinise the issue, including:

- West Midlands Police.
- Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Board
- Street Teams.
- Walsall ICB.
- Violence Reduction Unit.
- Walsall Council.

The Committee heard that since 2019, the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership had an 'All Age' Exploitation Strategy' to tackle Exploitation. Regionally, as one of the seven metropolitan local authorities across the West Midlands Policing area, Walsall continued to be represented at various forums that feed into the Regional Strategic Exploitation Framework. The West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership continue to work jointly across the region to provide support in addressing exploitation across the West Midlands.

Details were provided about a 12-month pilot exploitation team which delivers bespoke packages of support to individual children who were being identified and selected through exploitation triage. The team consisted of social workers, and youth workers and engages with key partners such as health, police, education and the youth justice team.

Provides critical friend challenge to executive policy and decision makers.

The Violence Reduction Partnership was questioned on the action being taken to prevent exploitation of children, and the main challenges facing the Safeguarding Partnership in the future.

Following a challenge from the Committee, the Independent Scrutineer asserted that the Safeguarding Partnership in Walsall worked well together with a clear and shared understanding. There was a willingness to innovate and develop different initiatives, and to do more work and remain vigilant to the needs of young people. Members discovered that the future priorities of the Partnership were neglect, exploitation, and violence among young people.

In response to a series of questions from Members, the Chief Superintendent described the development of a new team to enable a higher level of surveillance and good regional arrangements to tackle county lines.

Members noted the absence of a health representative within the daily exploitation triage meeting and were assured that it was being considered as a priority, alongside the provision of a nurse to the hub, one day a week, on a trial basis. Detail was provided on the information sharing that took place with schools, and the education of parents. Training was being delivered to education providers in the Borough by street teams.

The Committee resolved that further consideration be given to online safeguarding training becoming mandatory in schools and the topic would be reconsidered in the next municipal year.

2. EHCPs (Education Health and Care Plans)

The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee received reports on Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP). The Committee was keen to maintain the progress being made to improving EHCP timescales and service satisfaction as this had been an issue for the Council historically. Members were encouraged by the progress that had been made by the EHCP team but desired further progress with EHCP timescale completions, improvements in the handling of more complex EHCPs and future planning to deal with increased demand.

Members also raised concerns, regarding the overspending within the EHCP budget due to the use of agency staff. Members were reassured that additional permanent posts were planned to reduce the use of agency staff and that the Council had modelled within its proposed budget for an increase in the demand for EHCPs.

Members were encouraged by the second update report during the municipal year which demonstrated that the majority of the EHCP backlog had been cleared and that over 80% of decisions for EHCPs were routinely being made within 20 weeks. The Committee were also supportive of the new permanent team in place for EHCPs. Concerns remained on the significant rise in the number of applications for EHCPs and wanted to see work done to strike a fair balance between the need of the Borough's children for EHCPs and alternative support to help manage the increased demand.

How did this item provide a constructive 'critical friend' challenge?

There was a continuous focus on EHCPs from the Committee. Over the course of many years, previous Committees had shown commitment to see improvements within EHCP delivery. The Committee provided effective challenges to ensure that those improvements were delivered promptly for the benefit of residents.

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. Off-road Biking

In November 2022, the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussed off-road biking and the issues associated with it.

The Committee noted that 85% of respondents to a survey advised they had experienced issues in relation to off-road biking, with 101 locations of activity being identified across the borough, both on green spaces and on roads. The Committee were informed of efforts made to make it more difficult for bikers to access green and open spaces in problem areas. They were also shown footage obtained from a trial using drone technology to track and record instances of off-road bike usage.

The Chief Superintendent from Walsall was in attendance and explained that this activity was completely illegal, and the Police experienced various difficulties in pursuing these types of offenders. He emphasised that West Midlands Police did not use tactical contact techniques in pursuits, as those riding the bikes often had no formal training on how to ride. This would mean that pursuing offenders would be dangerous. The Chief Superintendent stated that the use of stingers was also more difficult with two-wheeled vehicles. He advised that West Midlands Police had access to a drone, but this was shared across the region so could not be immediately responsive to any ongoing incidents reported.

Following discussions, the Committee recommended that the prospect of acquiring a drone for community protection be explored by Cabinet. It was suggested that further investigation was required about the cost of purchasing and maintaining a drone, any relevant training and licenses for an operative and partnership working with the Police. The Committee's recommendations were considered by Cabinet in March, where it was reported that partnership arrangements for the use of drones to prevent and detect crime had been agreed with the Police.

How did this item enable voices and concerns of the public?

The Committee enabled concerned voices and discussion on an issue highlighted by 85% of respondents to a survey relating to off-road biking. It also took into consideration the fears raised by local residents under the Council's We Are Walsall 2040 strategy in respect to crime and disorder.

2. School Gate Parking Working Group

The Scrutiny Overview Committee established a working group on school gate parking in June 2022. There had been concern at the levels of unsafe, unlawful and dangerous parking around schools as well as the levels of congestion raised by both Members and local parents.

Over the course of six meetings, Members of the working group were presented information from the Council from Highways team and the Education team. In addition, West Midlands Police also attended.

Members were supportive of the current work being undertaken by the Council but argued that more work was needed to ensure the safety of the Borough's school children and that the Council should take the lead on school gate parking issues with the support of partners. There was also support for the expansion of the legislative powers for local authorities in relation to school gate parking and wished to see that the current powers available to the Council were used to their maximum advantage.

In total, the working group made 16 recommendations around engineering, partnership working, education and enforcement. The final report was presented to Cabinet at its meeting on 19 April 2023. Following this meeting, the Cabinet agreed to progress the majority of the working group's recommendations and received an update on their implementation on 20 March 2024.

As several of the recommendations already aligned with existing Council policies, significant progress had been made, such as the implementation of moving traffic enforcement. Due to this policy change, the Council issued 2,556 enforcement and 432 penalty charge notices across ten school streets in the Borough during autumn school term in 2023. The Scrutiny Overview Committee will receive a formal response to each recommendation on 18 April 2024.

The work of group was carried by independent people who took responsibility for their role and who provided a critical friend challenge.

Through the detailed reports and discussions around the issue of the school gate parking, Members took an independent approach to matters raised and took the responsibility of their role seriously, with a particular focus on the safety of the Borough's school children. Through its work, the group also provided a critical friend challenge to both the Council's and partners' policies in relation to school gate parking. The work of the group was recognised by the Cabinet and enabled good policy development.

Resources and Transformation

Legal and Democratic Services

Walsall Council

Civic Centre

Darwall Street

Walsall

WS1 1TP

Web: www.walsall.gov.uk

Cabinet Member Briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces



Introduction

‘Our Council Plan’ – Priorities

The Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces portfolio covers the council’s health, leisure, and cultural services. By prioritising community wellbeing, promoting health and embracing diversity in our borough, they deliver against this council’s commitment to improve the lives of residents and create vibrant, inclusive communities. The portfolio covers a wide spectrum of services from free to access through to subsidised and paid for services, ensuring we provide according to need, recognising the barriers to access that people can experience.

Over the past year the team has established new and improved public health services, including a new wellbeing service “Be Well Walsall” and a new sexual health offer at the Heatherton Medical Centre. In addition, our leisure centres and green spaces have seen investment in their facilities and new programmes for residents and visitors, including the new BOX12 studio, launched at Oak Park in December.

The New Art Gallery, Walsall Arena, Leather Museum, parks and Arboretum have continued to offer programmes of events for residents and visitors of all ages. Music education has been provided to over 4,000 students and the Arena has continued to deliver a range of well-attended performances. The New Art Gallery has provided professional development sessions, art clubs and a range of exhibitions and events through the year including Vaisakhi, Eid a Fitr, the King’s coronation and Diwali. Finally, our teams, once again, excelled in their provision for the Holiday activities and Food programme, which was a great success during the school holidays.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

Our Service Delivery

Public Health

Children and Young People

The Public Health team has undertaken a range of important health initiatives, including redesigning a Children and Families Healthy Eating Programme, set to launch in April 2024, alongside detailed work with our Healthy Child Programme. The Healthy Child Programme 0-19 services reached 97% of pregnant women at 12 weeks, and provided a reinstated 6-week baby visit to 90.31% of families between July and September 2023. The team have improved accessibility through ensuring fully staffed 0-19 advice lines, and the Dadpad app reached the equivalent of 28% of new fathers in two months since its September launch. Consultation with young people on what impacts their emotional wellbeing was also undertaken with 192 individuals in the summer of 2023, and the Positive Outcomes Project expanded to a third hub, serving 384 users in the first 6 months of 2023/24. Finally, external NHS funding was secured for a new Oral Health Improvement team, and oral health resources, further demonstrating the council's commitment to community health.

Wellbeing

The One You Walsall Lifestyles service had a significant impact, generating 8000 universal and 2600 targeted support referrals. Notably, WHO-5 mental wellbeing scores increased from 51.9 to 60.5 within 12 weeks. Our new Wellbeing service “Be Well Walsall” commenced in November 2023, offering adult-focused support for smoking cessation (a digital stop-smoking pilot is also live), healthy weight, community NHS health checks, and mental wellbeing. Alongside this NHS Health Checks through primary care saw a 40% increase in activity between quarters 1 and 2 of 2023/24. As part of our wider commitment to physical activity, £37,000 pledges through Crowdfund Walsall's 'Tackling Inactivity Fund' generated £144,000 for 10 projects.

The Thrive mobile wellbeing unit continues to be successful, and supported 4759 individuals over the course of the year, with 495 people assisted through Citizen's Advice yielding a substantial financial benefit of £472,623 for Walsall residents. As part of our wider wellbeing commitments, a men's mental wellbeing programme has been established and a number of wellbeing grants issued to community sector partners. Additionally, the team completed a piece of research on workplace health with the National Institute for Health Research.

Sexual Health, Alcohol and Drugs, Health Protection

Cabinet approved the extension of Sexual Health services through Walsall Healthcare NHS Trust until 2027, inaugurating a new site at Hatherton Medical Centre. As part of wider service redesign work, primary care contraceptive services for 26 GP practices

Cabinet Member Briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

were also refreshed and brought back under council oversight within the Public Health team.

To support our ambitions around alcohol and drug misuse, Change Grow Live (CGL) unveiled a new hub in The Quarter in January 2024, having worked hard over the course of the year with partners to increase the numbers of adults in treatment. Additionally, CGL introduced a nationally-funded employment support service in October 2023.

The Public Health team also continue to meet our statutory requirements to deliver a health protection response to infectious disease incidents. In 2023, the team responded to 581 incidents involving over 1000 cases.

Leisure and Public Spaces

Healthy Spaces

In 2023, the council's Healthy Spaces Team achieved significant successes, emphasising the commitment to community well-being and recreational spaces. The Holiday and Food programme, active during Easter, Summer, and Christmas, featured successful events at multiple parks, including a boxing fitness programme at Reedswood Park. Noteworthy accomplishments include two successful bonfire events and a thriving School Games engaging 250 pupils from 21 schools.

Volunteer community participation increased by 14%, totalling 18,264 hours, valued at £190.3k, with litter volunteer activities reaching 6,000 hours annually. Further, the team secured £1.1m from 12 external funding sources and successfully obtained Levelling up funding for play equipment at Reedswood Park. Both Reedswood Park and Pelsall Common earned recognition among the 10 Green Flag parks, while The Black Country Geopark received UNESCO accreditation for an additional four years. These diverse achievements highlight the council's dedication to enhancing the community's well-being and recreational spaces.

Leisure Services

The installation of new fitness equipment and modernisation of fitness suites at all sites has offered our residents and visitors an upgraded service for 2023. In December, a service transformation plan at Oak Park Active Living Centre introduced the BOX12 studio in a remodelled office space, aiming to boost physical activity levels and revenue growth. Walsall Gala Swimming & Fitness Centre also received £262k from Sport England's Swimming Pool Support Fund to tackle escalating energy costs, and a completed decarbonisation scheme at Darlaston Swimming & Fitness Centre has been successful in achieving energy efficiency. In addition to these achievements, the 'Fitness Journey' programme and Pulse Trakk app supported 1800 customers in

Cabinet Member Briefing – Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

achieving fitness goals and over 15,000 customers registered for the Leisure Hub online booking system.

A strategic review of leisure services has delivered new service and business plans which will put the council in a strong position to grow and develop our offer to the people of Walsall. Plans for the future include continuing the aquatics apprenticeship programme and bursary scheme, which has helped to address recruitment challenges, with 17 individuals benefiting in 2023.

Walsall Arena and Arts

This year has been another exciting year at the Walsall Arena with over 70,000 visitors and 25,000 tickets sold to see over 150 performances. As we strive to embrace the talents of the borough's young people, the Walsall Music Education Hub has provided music lessons to over 4,000 children and teenagers, delivering 32 events with 2,200 participants, performing to a total audience of nearly 8,000.

The New Art Gallery

Throughout the year, the art gallery has hosted a breadth of learning and engagement activities. These have included family days for children with complex support needs, a creative careers day, events for Vaisakhi, Eid al Fitr and Diwali, World Book Day and formal learning opportunities for over 1,000 students. The Gallery also lent its support to the Knife Angel visit, opening its doors to host the unveiling and demonstrating our cross-council commitment to overcoming challenges that threaten the health and wellbeing of our communities.

Leather Museum

The Leather Museum achieved significant growth in the past year with a 45% increase in visitor figures and a notable 28.4% rise in total income, reaching just under £30k. Shop income surged by 15%, while workshop and activity income experienced over a 30% boost. Meeting room bookings saw a remarkable 75% increase, attracting new returning clients, and educational visits by children rose by an impressive 154%, hosting 1500 youngsters. The museum successfully hosted 50 events, including craft workshops teaching traditional skills, and ran 19 diverse activity sessions during school holidays, engaging over 2000 participants. Updates to display areas are underway, and collaborative efforts with The New Art Gallery Walsall aim to market a joint day visit package to groups outside the region as part of a new marketing strategy.

Bereavement Services

The council's cemeteries and crematorium at Streetly are continuing to work towards offering an enhanced standard of service to the borough's families and communities.

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Adaptations based on industry benchmarking and feedback also include increased chapel times, further site improvements, and early morning services. Burials remain popular, and the service is working to expand memorial choices and the reopening of Streetly reception will see the service offer continue to grow in 2024.

Registration Services

In 2023, the Register Office has continued to operate efficiently amid high service volumes for marriages, civil partnerships, and related legal activities. Despite elevated death rates, the team has maintained timeliness by fostering relations with medical establishments and adopting an agile approach to appointments. Notably, 82% of all deaths were registered within the 5-day target, the second-best figure in the West Midlands and a national average of 50% of deaths registered within that time.

Progress in digitalisation now allows online appointments for registering births and deaths, and self-serve check-in screens enhance customer experience. Plans to relocate the Register Office to the front of the Civic Centre, with new ceremony rooms offering flexibility and linked fees, are underway, reflecting the council's commitment to take a customer centric approach to service delivery.

Our Strategies

Strategies, Frameworks & Consultations

The council has made significant strides in well-being and mental health, supporting the launch of Walsall Together's Wellbeing Outcome Framework in July 2023. The framework aids partners in measuring the impact of services and activities. A wellbeing service directory, led by Walsall Together and Walsall Council IT, soft-launched in Jan 2024. Public health are progressing work with partners on a 10-year Mental Wellbeing Strategy and newly published 5-year Alcohol and Drug Strategy, while advancing its Health Protection commitments.

A strategic review of the council's leisure services presented an opportunity to validate the council's approach and explore areas for development. The completed review, service plan and business plan strive to deliver a continuously improving service that promotes active lifestyles, empowers visitors to make healthy choices and does so in a way that is financially sustainable for the long term.

Partnerships

Public Health efforts are characterised by collaboration, and partnership work. The team have: supported the Family Hubs programme (and lead the Infant Feeding workstream), reconvened the Walsall Sexual Health Alliance, and established a new Walsall Air Quality Alliance. Significant partnership activity will also be required to

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deliver on the Tobacco Control Plan, which was approved by Cabinet in December. Partnerships with housing and regeneration/employment colleagues have been strengthened, and as part of this, a proposal for a Healthy Levelling Up partnership was submitted to DHSC.

Our Projects

Our residents have told us that they recognise that their surrounding environment and access to green space is an important factor for their wellbeing. Opportunities for **rewilding** are now finalised and a refreshed grass cutting regime will be implemented from the spring.

The **play areas improvement** project has progressed well along with improvements to a number of our tennis courts.

The **Purple Horizons nature recovery** project received accolades and won the WMCA Local Authority Award.

Work is ongoing to develop a **town centre theatre**, offering a facility with conference space and a bar/café facility. Concept designs have been developed with the next step being development of funding opportunities.

Future works

Next year, I want to see enhanced visibility of our fantastic wellbeing, cultural, and green space offers. We have the skills and facilities at our disposal to celebrate the borough's diverse culture, improve health outcomes, create positive opportunities for our young people, and tackle social isolation.

We will be establishing new partnerships to boost physical activity, and will also be further developing our programmes linked to, food, air quality, and alcohol/drug challenges in the borough. Crucially, we will work with partners to realise the Smokefree 2030 ambitions, and refresh our efforts to reduce infant mortality. Whilst we look forward to seeing the benefits of our reconfigured sexual health services, and newly established wellbeing service, the Public Health team will also work hard to make sure we are meeting national ambitions for our alcohol and drug treatment services and increasing the numbers of people in structured treatment. The recent measles outbreak has also shone a light on the ongoing need for us to continue and intensify our efforts to increase childhood immunisation uptake rates in the borough, as the threat of communicable disease remains a present-day risk.

With a review of our leisure services completed, we will be continuing to develop our programme of activities in terms of both free to access and paid for activities.

Our drive to deliver a net-zero and more biodiverse borough by 2040 will continue. Investment in on-street vehicle charging will be delivered at over 30 locations,

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improvements to council buildings and fleet will reduce our own carbon footprint and management of our green spaces will provide access to nature for all.

We look forward to opening the new Registrar's office with a new venue for marriages, civil partnerships and citizenship ceremonies. A new reception at Streetly Crematorium and investment in our cemetery sites will also ensure we continue to grow our offer to residents and families, providing valuable services and fitting places to celebrate milestones and remember loved ones.

Over the next year, I aim to continue to improve the connectivity between our services, support the implementation of key strategies, and ensure a streamlined universal service offer for our communities.

Thank you

I would like to express my thanks to the teams involved in delivering what is essential work to improve the lives and wellbeing of our residents.

I have witnessed the incredible dedication of our council staff, active communities, and professional partners in promoting and supporting the health and wellbeing of Walsall residents. Our collective efforts have not only strengthened our delivery but have also contributed to building healthier and more resilient communities.



Councillor Gary Flint, Portfolio Holder for Wellbeing, Leisure, and Public Spaces

Cabinet Member Briefing – Councillor Ali, Customer Engagement






Introduction

‘Our Council Plan’ – Priorities

The Customer Engagement Portfolio delivers a wide range of services, it positively contributes to both our Council Plan and We Are Walsall 2040 vision in all areas.

Council Plan		We Are Walsall 2040	
Inequalities are reduced and all potential is maximised.		Walsall in 2040 will be the most improved borough in the region, a vibrant place where people are proud to live and residents in all neighbourhoods have the same life chances.	
People: Encourage our residents to lead active, fulfilling, and independent lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing.	X	Thriving and happy: Thriving and happy: By 2040 we will be a borough where all people feel safe, where communities and people do more to help each other and themselves, and children have the best start in life	X
Internal: Council services are customer focused effective, efficient, and equitable.	X	Healthy and well: By 2040 we will be a wellbeing centred borough where people are healthy and live full and active lives	X
Children: Have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.	X	Prosperous and innovative: By 2040 Walsall will be a place that it is easy to get around, where people are confident to access services digitally and the economy works for everyone.	X
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.	X	Proud of our borough: By 2040 we will be a borough known for having vibrant clean towns with quality green spaces that we all enjoy, a place where residents and partners take responsibility to respect the environment and are climate ready, and where communities come together to celebrate their heritage and culture	X

We strive to deliver on our Customer Promise to be “GREAT” detailed in our Customer Experience Strategy 2021-2026, this positively contributes to both the Council Plan and We Are Walsall 2040

G	Get things done quickly	
R	Respect our customers and the communities we serve	
E	Excellent customer service, first time, every time	
A	Align the way we work with customers, partners and internal services	
T	Tell people about our services and be clear about what we don't do	

Cabinet Member Briefing – Councillor Ali, Customer Engagement

Summary of key messages by service:

Customer Experience Centre (CXC)

CXC continued to grow in 2023 – Adult Social Care Initial Referral Officers were transferred to the CXC. We have seen improved speed to answer calls and using SMS functionality has improved no show rate for Occupations Therapy clinics.

We have implemented improvements to our telephony system, including call back function to hold a customer's place in the queue. Utilising SMS messaging to customers and improving service e.g. Building Control, halved call volumes by sending proactive messages for inspector visits.

Customer Satisfaction Survey is now enabled, able to send customers a survey proactively. Initial performance is very strong for both Net Promoter Score and Customer Satisfaction metrics.

Establishing a centralised corporate complaints team within the CXC during 2024. Improving quality and consistency of complaints handling across the Council.

Members Enquiries

Implemented the new Members Enquiry application in July 2023, enabling members to raise enquiries directly to services areas.

Further enhancements will be made during 2024 based on member's feedback received.

Benefits

Provided £59million in Housing Benefit payments to residents of Walsall and £960,000 in Discretionary Housing Payments helping to prevent homelessness.

Processing times for benefits applications and change in circumstances remains below the national average in Walsall. 12 days for new applications versus 19 days national average and 1 day for change in circumstances versus 9 days nationally.

Benefits administered £2million of Household Support Fund via application process and direct awards.

Revenues

Billed £166m in council tax and £70.5m in business rates for the 2023/24 financial year.

Created a focussed team to handle telephony enquiries where self-service isn't possible, this has radically improved customer experience. Average wait time from 16 minutes to 3 minutes 30 seconds.

Contacting residents via Email or SMS wherever possible, reducing cost and improving customer experience.

Collection of overdue taxes is done via an informed manner, choosing an approach that provides the best outcome for our residents and the Council. Proactively signposting residents to other support if appropriate.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Councillor Ali, Customer Engagement

Our Service Delivery

Customer Experience Centre including Members Portal

CXC

The Customer Experience Centre has expanded further over the last 12 months with Adult Social Care Initial Referral Officer team transferring to the CXC in July 2023. We have already decreased the number of abandoned calls from 9% to 5% on average month on month and reduced average speed times to answer telephone calls drop from 1 min 39 seconds to 56 seconds.

To further enhance the Customer Experience, we have enabled call back functionality on all service area queues so customers can keep their place in the queue without staying on the line and we also now send out SMS's to customers with information and links to our specific parts of our website. This has particularly benefited Building Control as we have seen call volumes halve by sending out inspection times by text message. We have also seen a significant reduction in no-show rates at Occupational Therapy Clinics which has been really positive for Adult Social Care.

Since July 2023 we also started capturing caller feedback by offering Customer Satisfaction Surveys. These currently are agent led and are offered at the end of telephone interactions. Our current Net Promoter Score is 75 and Customer Satisfaction is 92.41% which is in significantly higher than other Local Authorities.

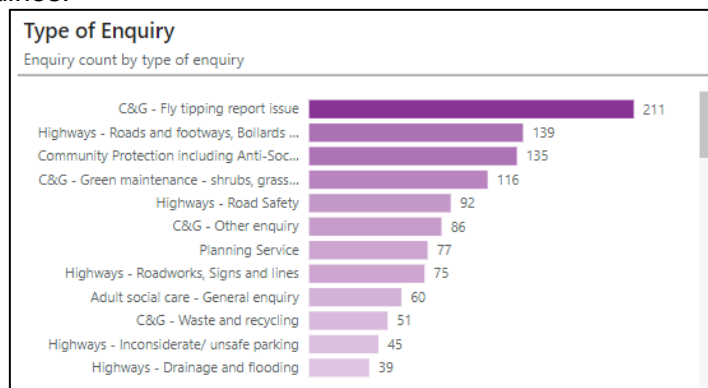
We have started to explore Speech and Text Analytics. We are capturing sentiment analytics on Adult Social Care and Clean and Green to gain further insight into the customer experience by analysing call transcripts to determine if the emotional tone of customer interactions is positive, negative or neutral. We are also using Topic Miner to identify specific phrases to identify trends so we can further understand our resident's needs. This will be rolled out to all other service areas in the coming months.

We have also enabled Work Force Management to increase productivity by automating the allocation of resources to improve efficiency by forecasting workloads and managing schedules.

Members Portal

The Member Enquiries Application was launched successfully in July 2023 and enables Members to independently raise enquiries via their mobile phone or desktop in order to ensure that there is a clear, consistent, and fit for purpose approach to enquiry handling. The application is used by both Members and officers, with the aim of providing a straightforward, transparent, and performance-led process. As at 20th March 2024, there have been 1,399 Members Enquiries of which 66.5% are resolved within 5 working days.

Top Types of enquiries:



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We are continually striving to improve the Member Enquiries application and we hope to see the first phase of technical improvements in July 2024.

Benefits Service

The Benefits Service provides Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction, Council Tax Hardship, Discretionary Housing Payments and since the introduction of Household Support fund has supported direct payments and 23/24 application process for customers struggling with the cost of-living crisis, providing additional support to the most vulnerable residents. The team have supported Household support fund phone calls in addition to benefits enquiries. The team have taken just over 24,000 calls this year, a focus since the start of the year to reduce waiting times and abandon rates while ensuring claims are processed has resulted in improvements to our customer service standards, 2024 shows average wait time as 2 minutes 51 seconds and abandon rate of 9%. This has been achieved without any impact on performance by analysing the data to provide extra support during peak periods, whilst providing a new motivation for staff with regards to customer service standards.

The team have provided nearly £59 million in Housing Benefit payments to support Walsall residents with their rental payments. In addition, £960,000 in discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness. The current Housing Benefit caseload is 10,718, of which 5543 are pensioners, Council Tax Reduction caseload is 26,759. Walsall has planned migration to universal credit for 24/25, this process began this month and will reduce Housing Benefit caseload during this year, creating additional demands from customers in the coming year.

Government set KPI's for the number of days to process Housing Benefit new applications and changes. Current performance is 12 days for new applications and 1 day for changes, the national average is 19 days for new applications and 9 days for changes. A further comparison of the team's performance is demonstrated with a comparison of West Midlands authorities, Walsall consistently has the lowest number of days to process a new application. Highlighting Walsall Benefit's team ensure customers receive the help when they need it.

The team have administered £1 million support for residents through the Household Support Fund application process and direct payments to households in receipt of Council Tax Reduction with children totalling £2,133,065.00 providing additional cost-of-living support to vulnerable customers.

The team have recently received excellent feedback from DWP in our quarterly performance review and received a clear audit from DWP ensuring no financial impact to the Council. The levels of accuracy across the team supports the 10 year plus clear audit record unlike many neighbouring authorities.

The team have a wealth of knowledge and experience providing not only advice for benefits but supporting customers to claim other identified benefits.

Revenue Service

The revenue service are responsible for the billing, collection and enforcement of Council Tax and Business rates. Walsall as over 118,000 properties subject to council tax and almost 8,500 subject to business rates, with the service billing £166m in council tax and £70.5m in business rates for the 2023/24 financial year.

To reduce the level of fraud and error in the system, the service carries out regular reviews of the different discounts, such as, reliefs, exemptions awarded and classification of empty properties. Residents and businesses can use a wide selection of on-line services to notify

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the council of changes and the service continues to extend the range of services that can be done on-line.

For those unable to access our on-line services a new team has recently been set up to improve the level of service to those contacting us by telephone. By adopting the Customer Experience Centre operating model, we have been able to radically reduce the wait time for customers to be able to speak to a staff member. Following 2 months of this revised approach the average wait time reduced from 16 minutes to **3 minutes 30 seconds** and the number of calls abandoned went from 34% to 9%. This team will form part of the CXC formally in the coming months.

The service has been at the forefront of contacting residents by text and email as a replacement to post and the service continues to develop this area to improve the service to resident at the same time as reducing costs.

With the continuing cost-of-living crisis and the demographics of the borough, collection of overdue taxes is done in an appropriate and informed manner. We use financial intelligence to assist in obtaining the best outcome for both resident and council. In addition, the service offers direct links in to local and national organisations for those residents that need more in-depth support.

Our Strategies

We intend to refresh our Customer Experience Strategy (2021 – 2026) and learn from our resident's feedback, to help us to continuously improve access to services, both through enhancing our online presence, but also by offering face to face and telephony assistance for those not able to connect virtually for whatever reason.

Our Projects

HSF

As part of the fourth round of the governments Household Support Fund Walsall Council was allocated £5.6m to administer support to vulnerable households throughout 2023/24. This support could be for assistance with energy and water costs, food, essentials linked to energy and water, wider essentials, housing costs and the provision of debt advice. The support provides was a mixture of pro-active targeted support and application-based support.

The support provided included direct payments to families in receipt of income based council tax reduction, Support through partners, local hubs and food banks, help to replace old and inefficient boilers and other energy related items, support to allow tenants in threat of eviction to remain in their homes, helps to care leavers and families through the council's early help team and the increased provision of debt advice.

There will have been around 35,000 awards individual awards from the fund to around 20,000 of the most vulnerable households in the borough.

The government have announced that the Household Support Fund will continue for a further 6 months from April 2024 until September 2024 with Walsall receiving £2.8 to cover awards and administration. The criteria for awards in the extended scheme remain the same as that for 203/24.

Development of a new Centralised Corporate Complaints Team

In 2023 we developed a revised approach to corporate complaints handling, this review was prompted due to a new Corporate Complaints Handling Code from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman and data showing inconsistencies in how we handle complaints

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across the Council. As a result, during 2024 there will be a new arm to the Customer Experience Centre that will handle corporate complaints centrally, aiming to improve customer experience and provide a consistent and professional service to our residents. As part of this work there will be a review of our Corporate Complaints Policy to ensure it is clearly documented and accessible to our residents.

Knowledge Base Development

As part of the development of the new version of the chatbot in the Genesys telephone platform, we are implementing Web Messaging, which will give customers the ability to communicate online with a CXC agent using chat. In order to support staff, we are creating knowledge base articles which will be available to CXC agents to enable them to easily provide answers to questions using 'drag and drop'. We are also planning to produce 'how to' videos that the CXC agents can share with customers. Both of these elements are intended to reduce the amount of typing the agent will have to undertake.

Free School meals

The benefits team are supporting the Free School meals team to take advantage of technology and data already held to maximise up take of free school meals while reducing manual resource requirements to deal with applications.

Thank You

Customer Engagement have worked very hard over the last 12 months ensuring that the services are delivered to our residents across the borough. The staff have worked to deliver new and improved services and continue to work collaboratively with other Council service and external organisations to best meet the needs of our residents. I would like to thank all the staff that have contributed and continue to contribute to the initiatives that have been delivered across the service area.



Signed



Cllr Ali
Portfolio Holder for Customer Engagement
27.03.2024

Cabinet Member Briefing – Street Pride



Introduction

Our Council Plan - Priorities

Our residents have told us that they want Walsall to be somewhere that is seen as “a thriving, safe and clean place to live.” Delivering cleaner, greener streets and open spaces is a key part of realising this aspiration and something that I am passionate about as the Street Pride portfolio holder.

Our Service Delivery

Over the past 12 months, our operational teams have continued to deliver efficient, high performing services.

Highway maintenance and parking services

The council maintains around 520 miles of local road network. Over the past year more than 4,000 defects have been repaired and 11 miles of road have been resurfaced. Around 37,000 drains have been cleaned and 10 miles of road markings have been refreshed. Throughout the colder months, our winter service team kept the roads safe, completing 25 gritting runs at all hours of the day and night. Reflecting the success of the service, in November, the council were shortlisted as a Best Performer in the APSE Performance Networks Awards for Roads, Highways and Winter Maintenance.

Over the past two years, the council have changed over 21,000 streetlights to energy efficient LED lanterns. The project has delivered significant energy savings and the implementation of a central monitoring system now allows us to identify issues remotely to ensure a timely response.

Road safety continues to be a priority and in July the council secured moving traffic enforcement powers. By September enforcement was underway at ten school street locations, helping to ensure that our school gates are safe places and, that our children and young people have opportunities to safety walk, cycle and scoot to school. The income generated by enforcement is now being reinvested to deliver more measures that will make our school gates and the surrounding roads safer.

Household waste collection

The reliability of our household waste collection services continues to exceed the national average with 6.5 million bin collections completed on time. Once again, we offered our residents fortnightly garden

Cabinet Member Briefing – Street Pride

waste collections throughout the summer season of 2023. The 2024 collections are now underway and once again, the services is free of charge to the borough's residents.

Street cleansing and grounds maintenance

This year the teams have continued to tackle litter and fly-tipping head on. Multi-agency working has included skip days and targeted operations to clear waste and educate residents and landlords about how best to dispose of their waste. The Environmental Crime Scene project has continued to go from strength to strength, representing a groundbreaking approach to tackling fly-tipping. In the worst affected wards, up to 73% of fly-tips targeted were removed before the council returned to clear the waste. This project has been hugely successful, engaging local communities and other stakeholders such as Walsall Housing Group, all working together to reduce environmental crime within Walsall.

As spring arrives, the council has resumed grounds maintenance services including the treatment of weeds on the highway, paths and in our town and district centres. Once again, the service will be embracing greener methods of working, using an electric quad bike to deliver the treatment of weeds. Introduced in 2023, this has already been noted within the industry with others looking to follow Walsall's lead.

As well as reducing our carbon footprint, we are working hard to tackle biodiversity loss. The council's grass cutting programme has been reviewed over the past 12 months. Over the coming year, residents will see a new regime being delivered around the borough that stives to balance aesthetic appearance with longer grass to benefit wildlife and offer improved access to nature.

Tree Inspections

The council maintain around 40,000 trees and various areas of woodland which enhance the boroughs street scene and create valuable biodiversity. A contract for tree inspections is continuing to operate successfully and ensuring that the borough's trees are checked and maintained in a timely manner and to a safe standard.

Our Staff

Some of the teams delivering the street pride portfolio were the first to engage with the council's fantastic apprenticeship programme 7 years ago. Since then, over 20 staff have successfully completed their HGV driver apprenticeship which is great for the individuals and great for the service. Additionally, this year, operational managers and team leaders have been some of the first to complete the council's new Connected Working management programme which promotes a learning and continuous improvement culture. The success of the programme has been such that the work at the depot has been shortlisted for a national award.

Our Strategies

Waste Strategy

To achieve our commitment to be a net zero borough by 2041 we will need to manage our waste in a sustainable way. A long-term waste strategy will provide a framework for achieving this and work to develop our strategic approach has continued this year.

Developed in line with new statutory duties, as set out in the Environment Act 2021, the strategy will set out how the council will work towards achieving the national target of recycling 65% of municipal waste by 2035 and to send less than 10% of municipal waste to landfill within the same timescale.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Street Pride

The strategy will set out the council's long term investment strategies necessary to deliver the required waste infrastructure to ensure that all waste is processed in the most sustainable way. Several of these exciting initiatives are already underway and the lessons learned throughout the implementation of the new materials recycling facility are informing how we approach future projects.

Finally, if we are to tackle some of our biggest challenges, we need to shift consumer behaviours. Over the past 12 months we have been engaging with our customers to better understand why they make the choice they do and how we can better promote the principles of reduce, reuse and recycle. As we look to the new year, this valuable input from our customers will shape the approach we take to promoting those behaviours that make the greatest contribution to carbon reduction and efficient resource management.

Our Projects

MRF Joint Venture – Sherbourne Recycling Limited (SRL)

In October, there was an exceptionally smooth transitional period as Sherbourne Recycling Ltd, a council part owned by the council, began processing Walsall's recycling. This new state of art waste facility will provide the Council with a long-term solution for disposing of dry mixed recycling materials and drive-up recycling rates. The materials recycling facility [MRF] is now fully operational and an excellent example of the council working with seven other local authorities to deliver the most advanced MRF in Europe using artificial intelligence to sort materials in the most cost-effective way.

Middlemore Lane – Waste Transfer Station (WTS) and a large Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC)

The design stage for the new waste transfer station and household waste recycling centre at Middlemore Lane was completed earlier this year following a revision to the planning permission in November. This new facility will enable the Council to future proof waste services and deliver a number of benefits to the residents of Walsall. There will be increase capacity for accommodate future housing growth, improved HWRC facilities, including a reuse shop, and the elimination of vehicles queuing at the HWRC site and surrounding areas. With construction due to start over the summer, this is will be a fantastic service improvement for the residents of Walsall.

Innovation in garden waste

Not only has the council been exploring ways to reduce waste and increase recycling, but we have also sought innovative opportunities to generate a financial return from the waste we collect. This year a project has commenced to explore the potential to turn our garden waste in energy using innovative pyrolysis technology. Feasibility work has progressed and we look forward to continue developing the opportunity in the year to come.

Food waste collection

In October 2023, the government announced that weekly collections of food waste will be introduced for most households across England and work is well underway to deliver this service in Walsall, commencing in 2026. Food waste collections will significantly reduce the amount of organic waste going to landfill and promote a more sustainable approach to waste management. As we develop our plans, we will consult with residents about how best to help them recycle their household waste, including food waste. Recycling rates are not where we would like them to be and therefore it is essential that we deliver this service in an accessible and convenient way to encourage active participation.

Cabinet Member Briefing – Street Pride

Thank you!

Finally, I want to conclude my report to Council by recognising the significant contribution made by our staff, our partners and our communities.

Highway maintenance and parking services strive to keep the road network safe and keep traffic on the move, providing access to work, education and leisure. Our frontline teams work hard throughout the year, in all weathers, to ensure that waste is collected on time, litter bins are emptied, streets are cleaned, and the council's soft landscape is maintained. A large proportion of our workforce are also our residents, and they demonstrate genuine commitment and passion as they carry out their daily tasks in a borough that they're proud to also call home.

The council cannot create a cleaner, greener borough in isolation. Over the past 12 months, collaboration with our supply chain and partners has continued to grow and is something we look forward to building on further in the year to come.

Finally, our community groups and volunteers do invaluable work to supplement the services the council provide. The council spend £1.5m tackling the problem of litter dropped by an inconsiderate minority. Our local volunteers do a great job giving their support to us in our fight against litter as a part of all our efforts to make Walsall an attractive place to live, work and visit.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kerry". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cllr Kerry Murphy, Cabinet Member - Portfolio Holder for Street Pride



THE BARR BEACON TRUST MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE



Annual Report May 2023 – April 2024

Council – 15 April 2024

1.0 Purpose of report

To present the work of the Management Committee for the period May 2023 to April 2024.

2.0 Recommendation

That the work of the Management Committee be noted.

3.0 Background

3.1 Barr Beacon is an easily recognised and well used landmark in Walsall and the Black Country, has strong local heritage significance and is a site of ecological importance for nature conservation due to its range of habitats and the wide variety of species that it supports. The land was conveyed to trustees in 1918 essentially to provide and maintain open space for the benefit of the local community for the purposes of physical exercise, recreation and leisure time to improve the conditions of life for the beneficiaries; and to keep in repair the War Memorial. Walsall Council became trustee following Local Government reorganisation in 1972.

3.2 The Council as Trustee established a Management Committee in February 2007 to deal with the regular administration of the Trusts affairs subject to the Trust being kept informed of the work of the committee by way of an annual report. The membership comprises the local ward councillors and relevant cabinet members

4.0 Site Management

4.1 The Council's Healthy Spaces and Countryside operations teams continue to focus resources on essential maintenance to ensure that the Council as Trustee fulfils its purposes and its obligations for the site as a Local Nature Reserve.

4.2 **Security:** As part of the major investment by the Trust and the Council, work is in progress to implement measures to prevent unauthorised access by installing power feeds across the site to enable provision of CCTV and electronic gates. The location of the site has meant some logistics delays requiring rerouting of the planned cabling and which may mean additional costs. Your committee will be updated on this at its next meeting.

4.3 **Site maintenance**

Potholes: The Council's infrastructure team has arranged for repairs to be made to at the entrance and exits to the sites following the appearance of a number of large potholes. Because of the associated risks and urgency to the repairs, the Council as Local Authority has funded the significant costs on this occasion, however in future, costs on this scale will need to be funded in a different way. This is currently being considered and a report will be submitted to your committee in due course.

Topography Disc: Following further damage to the war memorial topography disc as a result of the lighting of fireworks and disposable barbecues, your committee has funded a new disc made of robust damage resistant materials. This has now been installed.

Bollards: Your committee has funded replacements for the missing bollards near the memorial to prevent off road vehicles gaining access and churning the grass into mud.

Additional bins: Your committee enabled the installation of a number of larger sized bins in an attempt to combat indiscriminate littering. Installation will take place imminently in consultation with the Council's operations team regarding locations.

4.4 **Site improvements, events and activities**

During the year, your Committee has ensured that all activities on Trust land have been provided in accordance with the purposes of the Trust and have fulfilled Charity Commission Public Benefit requirements.

Your committee has supported the council's Healthy Spaces team to introduce a number of significant and exciting initiatives and opportunities for the development and promotion of the site for the benefit of local residents and visitors, these include:

Purple Horizons Habitat Restoration Project: The project is a collaboration between Walsall Council, Lichfield Council and the University of Birmingham with funding from natural England to conserve vulnerable species of bee and wasp in the West Midlands. This includes exposing sandy soils (Bee Beaches), as an experimental habitat for ground nesting bees, and enhancing wildflower availability on the site. The project has gained some positive media attention for Barr Beacon.

Tiny Forest: On 14 September, the Healthy Spaces team in partnership with Severn Trent ran an event to maintain the tiny forest installed last year. In total 25 people attended (including horticultural students who use the Lodge as a base) to care and nurture the forest and learn about wildlife the forest can support and environmental benefits.

Rewilding project: As part of the boroughs Rewilding Project, a seed gathering event was held on 27 September, to collect seeds which will be nurtured until ready for replanting as part of rewilding plans in Walsall. This is part of a boroughwide programme of Woodland Creation and Rewilding.

Remembrance event: The annual Wreath Laying Remembrance Ceremony this year took place on 10 November 2023. The event was well attended as usual by Committee members, the Mayor, the Council's Armed Forces Champion, local veterans, representatives of the local Combined Cadet Forces and local school children. The West Midlands Mayor also attended this year's event.

Potential food festival: An expression of interest has been made to the Council's Safety Advisory Group to hold a food festival on the Beacon sometime in July. Your committee has agreed to the use of Trust land in principle and is awaiting further detail from the Group.

5.0 **The Lodge**

The Lodge is used regularly by an adult learning organisation whose students and staff have been participating in horticultural activities based at the Lodge. The arrangement continues to work well for both the organisation and the Trust. Your committee has previously authorised essential interior refurbishment to be carried out to ensure that the building remains fit for purpose and the organisation occupying the lodge have additionally indicated their commitment to the arrangement by also undertaking a significant amount of internal refurbishment at their expense. Your committee has clarified the responsibilities regarding the payments for services to the building.

6.0 **Accounts**

6.1 The committee continues to be content for the council's finance officers to manage the accounts on behalf of the Trust and accordingly, a finance report has been received at each meeting. The Trust accounts are kept entirely separate from the accounts of the Council as local authority. The accounts are also independently examined.

6.2 The Trust currently holds COIF income shares (a specialist charity Common Investment Fund) via CCLA as the investment provider. This investment fund has a highly diversified and well-balanced portfolio designed to help meet growth and income requirements of charities.

At the request of the committee this year, the Council's finance officers have reviewed the performance of CCLA against other providers. The committee has received this information and has determined that the current provider remains the best value investment vehicle for the Trust monies.

- 6.3 The Trust's investments have a current market value of around £455,000. These are held as long term investments which helps to attract significant external funding for major projects on the Beacon and which provides an annual return, ordinarily around £12,000, which is used to fund day to day maintenance and activities on the site. The Trust holds some cash in hand which is carefully managed by the committee to be used for Trust purposes including maintenance of the lodge, site security and various community and commemorative events this year.
- 6.4 The committee has authorised expenditure for specialist insurance cover which includes public liability, property damage and trustee indemnity, to ensure that the Trust is adequately protected. This has been arranged through the Councils Risk and Insurance Team on behalf of the Trust.

7.0 Annual Return

The annual return required by the Charity Commission for the period of this report has been completed.

8.0 Conclusion

The committee continues to work closely with Council officers to make and plan improvements to the site and has recognised the significant contribution that the Council makes to maintain the open space and to support its future development so that the site remains an asset for the community to enjoy.

The activities on the site not only further the Trusts purposes but are also consistent with the Council's priorities to encourage people to lead active lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing; and to create safe and healthy spaces whilst building a strong sense of community. In addition, they align with the We Are Walsall 2040 vision to be a safe, healthy and green borough.



Councillor A. Andrew 3 April 2024
Chair, Barr Beacon Trust Management Committee

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