

Scrutiny Overview Committee

Thursday 9 November 2023, 6:00pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

**Committee Members
present:**

Councillor Murray (Chair)
Councillor Nawaz (Vice Chair)
Councillor Follows
Councillor Hicken
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor Sears
Councillor Waters

**Portfolio Holders
present:**

Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities
Councillor Ferguson – Portfolio Holder for Internal Services

Officers present:

Judith Greenhalgh - Interim Executive Director Resources
Michele Leith – Director of HR OD and Administration
Elise Hopkins – Director of Customer Engagement
Nicola Rickhuss – Head of Strategic HRM
Craig Goodall – Principal Democratic Services Officer
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Others in attendance:

Councillor Bayton – Chair of West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Councillor McNicholas - Chair of Transport Delivery OSC (WMCA)
Lyndsey Roberts - Principal Scrutiny Officer (WMCA)
James Hughes - Member Relationship Manager (WMCA)
Billy Dunlop - Governance Services Officer (WMCA)

27 Apologies

An apology was submitted on behalf of Councillor Ditta.

28 Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

29 Declarations of interest and party whip

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

30 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

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

31 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

(Annexed)

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28 September 2023, copies having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

32 **West Midlands Combined Authority Overview & Scrutiny 5th Annual Report 2022/23**

The Chair invited Councillor Bayton as the Chair of the WMCA Overview and Scrutiny Committee to present the fifth scrutiny annual report. Councillor McNicholas, Chair of the Transport Delivery Committee was also in attendance to support the work of the WMCA Scrutiny Committee.

(Annexed)

Members were informed that the primary role of the WMCA Scrutiny Committee was to hold the Mayor of the WMCA and Portfolio Leads to account. The Committee successfully held a number of public Mayoral Q&A Sessions which were structured around two themes on accountability and investment.

It was highlighted that a governance review had taken place which resulted in the establishment of the Transport Delivery Scrutiny Committee. This Committee had engaged with all Members on aspects relating to transport including bus delivery and safer travel plans. This work was championed by the Chair of the Transport Delivery Committee, Councillor McNicholas.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Proposed amendments to incorporate both Police and Crime Commissioner and Mayor of WMCA role, would not amend existing Scrutiny arrangements. Therefore, the Police and Crime Panel would remain active.
- There was awareness that the WMCA needed to improve communication with Councillors from all communities across the conurbation. There was a suggestion that the WMCA encourages the use of 'funded by WMCA' on promotional materials.
- The Government's commitment for devolution would increase focus on scrutiny arrangements and build good practice.
- WMCA was committed to engaging with local councils including Walsall to discuss local issues, crossover scrutiny work and upcoming projects. There was a suggestion that the WMCA Scrutiny Board engage with local scrutiny boards on issues that affect Walsall residents.

- WMCA regularly publish agendas and reports on it's website, which were available for public inspection. In addition, there were regular posts on social media on the work of scrutiny across the municipal year.
- There were a number of Boards at the WMCA which considered cross policy themes and Members from constituent and non-constituent authorities were able to participate in discussions and debate.
- WMCA reiterated their commitment to engaging with local Councils and encouraged a future invitation to present their work on projects or interventions affecting Walsall at a future meeting of the Committee.
- Leader of the Council confirmed that the WMCA needed to investigate an effective method of communicating with passengers using transport like real-time timetables.
- There was a view that transport in the West Midlands was categorically underfunded compared to areas such as Manchester and London.
- A Member recommended that representatives nominated by Council to the WMCA, Fire Authority, Transport for West Midlands and Police and Crime Panel be invited to present a report to Council on an annual basis for reasons of transparency and accountability.
- The Leader of the Council suggested that a standing item be added to each Council agenda to discuss a synopsis of the work of the WMCA and attendance record of Walsall Council representatives at each meeting of Council.

The Chair thanked representatives for their attendance and welcomed closer cooperation with the WMCA.

Resolved:

- 1. That the work of West Midlands Combined Authority representatives be noted.**
- 2. That those members appointed to the West Midlands Combined Authority, Transport for West Midlands, Fire Authority and the Police and Crime Panel provide an annual report to full Council.**

33 Recruitment and Retention

The Portfolio Holder for Internal Services presented the report on the Council's recruitment and retention proposals as part of the Council's Workforce Strategy.

(Annexed)

The Committee was informed that workforce and work relations were constantly evolving due to technological advancements, globalisation, competition and retention of talent and financial constraints. To address these challenges, the Council was required to design and implement a successful workforce strategy which was fit for purpose. The strategy focused on the following aspects:

- Create a positive and psychologically safe culture that encourages respect, trust, empathy, creativity, innovation and an engaged and supported workforce.

- Employer of choice, providing an inclusive working environment and attractive employment offer to support the recruitment and retention of our future workforce.
- Upskilling the workforce to meet future needs.
- Develop our future leaders.
- Promote equitable career progression for all employees.
- Embrace digital technology to aid automation and streamlining.
- Provide a positive work-life balance and flexibility.
- Provide coaching or mentoring and regular feedback to aid development, improve performance and encourage employees to feel valued.

It was hoped that the Workforce Strategy would improve customer and service user experiences through service efficiencies and quality improvements.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- The Council was reviewing the induction process for new starters including agency staff to ensure that the process was helpful and informative. There was a commitment for new starters to commence their induction prior to commencement of employment.
- All new internal and external vacancies including secondment opportunities were required to be advertised.
- Some of the hard to fill vacancies had been transformed into apprenticeships and graduates positions.
- The Council had successfully established staff networks for underrepresented groups which were crucial to encourage existing staff to fully realise their potential.
- A Member requested figures relating to internal promotions with a specific breakdown on ethnic backgrounds. In response, the Director of HR, OD and ABS confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.
- The Council used the West Midlands Jobs Board to locally advertise vacancies and tries to engage with local schools and Walsall College to sell career pathways in Local Government.
- There was a commitment to try and engage with local educational establishments to offer the right skills in order to target the right jobs.
- Electronic exit interview forms were provided to those employees leaving the Council. In addition, face to face exit interviews could be requested on demand as appropriate. A breakdown of the reasons and figures on exit monitoring would be provided to the Committee in writing.
- There was a view to strengthen contract management to ensure that contractors were procured at a statutory industry and good recruitment standard.

The Chair thanked representatives for their attendance and welcomed a future report on the implementation of the Council's Workforce Strategy.

Resolved:

That, the Council's recruitment, and retention proposals be noted.

34 Local Authority Control of Housing Waiting List

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities presented a report on the Council's control of administering the local housing waiting list.

(Annexed)

The Committee were informed that the Council had been notified in February 2023 by Walsall Housing Group (WHG) of their intention to close the waiting list to non WHG tenants, due to a significant number of applicants. As a result, the Council had the opportunity to undertake control of the waiting list. During this process, it became necessary for the Council to launch a new housing register to ensure individuals could still apply on the housing register. As part of transitional arrangements, WHG remained in control of the list whilst the Council worked to commence arrangements and in September 2023, the new housing register became operational. Transitional activities were due to end in January 2024.

As part of the nomination agreement, the Council reserved the right for 50% of nominations for all properties that become available for re-let each year.

The Director of Customer Engagement confirmed that the Council had worked diligently with WHG on transfer arrangements. As part of the review of the Housing Allocation Policy, the Council would look to introduce fairness, compassion and prioritisation of local connections. The breakdown of the housing nomination and customer demand were presented as follows:

- 1593 direct applications had been received to join the housing register;
- 3307 applications were waiting for transition arrangements from WHG to the Council's new register;
- 653 telephone calls had been received with 42 applications supported by Walsall Connected.

It was noted that whilst arrangements between WHG and Council had been executed effectively, there was a significant shortage of social housing in the Borough. Following the implementation of the new housing register, it was the intention of the directorate to review arrangements, consider any lessons learned and consult on the Council's new Housing Allocations Policy in 2024/25.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Most Housing Associations and Social Landlords did not have their own waiting lists and relied upon the Council review arrangements via internal transfer lists. It was the intention of WHG to keep their own housing waiting list to prioritise their own tenants.

- Members thanked the Director of Customer Engagement for the work of the team on the consultation exercise with Members on the new arrangements.
- 50% of the nomination rights were guaranteed for the Council as a statutory minimum.
- Homelessness caused a significant demand for the Council and therefore the new housing register would enable the Council to work more efficiently on allocations in this respect.
- There had been significant work on engagement of the transfer process with customers. Follow up consultation with individuals had commenced including social media targeting.
- Mutual exchange routing which allowed residents to move within social housing required more publicity and education with residents.
- A Member raised concerns regarding the lack of social media engagement in respect of the transfer from WHG.
- Prioritisation of individuals was based on circumstances and health requirements at the time of application.
- There were concerns of WHG engagement with tenants and resolving maintenance issues.
- The Council had upskilled internal staff to be able to advise applicants on the application process for the housing waiting list and the associated criteria.
- There was a plea for private landlords to engage with the Council on respective available properties.
- Social housing and landlords were required to carry out maintenance work to a specific standard of workmanship. However, the Council had statutory powers to intervene with any problematic landlords in respect of unsatisfactory work and repairs.
- A discussion ensued on the rights of tenants in respect of disrepair and notice of possession. It was agreed for information on this matter to be disseminated to all Councillors.
- Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities confirmed that the Council did not historically pay for WHG to maintain the housing register. However, the Council had invested £227k into a new team to maintain the register once transferred, which was welcomed by the Committee.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for their attendance and welcomed an opportunity to review the Housing Allocation Policy including costs and benefit of the service at a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved:

That, the Local Authority control of the housing waiting list be noted.

35 Feedback from Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Chair invited each Scrutiny Committee Chair to present their feedback since the last meeting of the Committee.

36 Recommendation Tracker

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

A discussion ensued in respect of Section 106 funding and how monies were spent in different areas in the Borough. There was a consensus that specific breakdowns of funding, should be raised with the Head of Planning and Building Control or raised on the Member Enquiry App.

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

37 Areas of Focus 2023-24

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. (Annexed)

The Chair informed the Committee that the last meeting of the calendar year would be focused on the Council's Draft Budget and Capital Programme as well as Q2 Financial Monitoring.

Resolved:

That, the areas of focus for 2023-24 be noted.

38 Date of next meeting

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 11 December 2023.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 8:26pm.

Signed:

Date: