

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

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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.

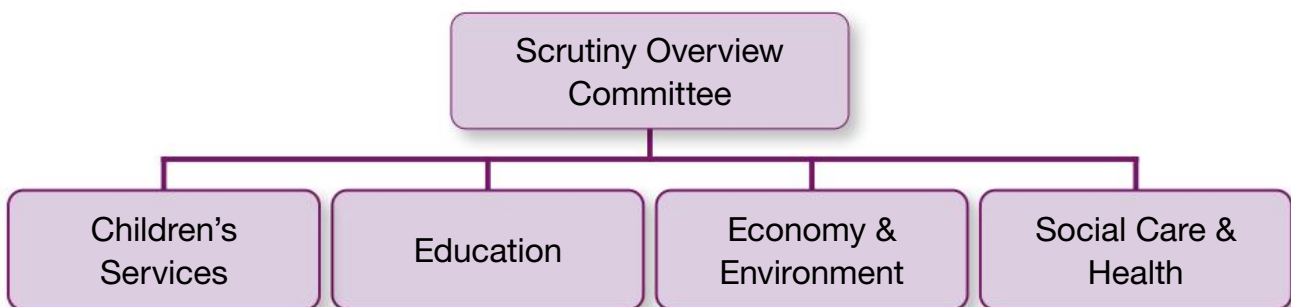
What is Overview and Scrutiny?

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