

# Scrutiny Annual Report 2021/22



**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 2021-2022.

The report highlights the important work undertaken by scrutiny members during the extended municipal year, 2021-2022. 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 Corporate Plan to demonstrate how scrutiny is contributing to its achievement. Further to this, the case studies are cross-referenced with the Centre for Public Scrutiny's four principles of good scrutiny.

Examples of the excellent scrutiny activities undertaken by Members of the Council include:

- Child exploitation;
- Domestic abuse;
- Primary care access;
- Electric vehicle charging;
- West Midlands Local Transport Plan;
- Scrutiny survey.

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 the period. This has been a challenging period for everyone that saw the Covid-19 become endemic, a return to in person meetings and the introduction of hybrid meetings. It is your efforts that have enabled us to carry on with this work and to recognise the successes that have been described in this annual report.

**Councillor John Murray**  
**Chair – Scrutiny Overview Committee**

## Contents

1. Introduction from Simon Neilson, Statutory Scrutiny Officer
2. Overview of Corporate Plan priorities and the four principles of good scrutiny
3. Economy
4. People
5. Internal focus
6. Children
7. Communities

## Introduction from Simon Neilson, Statutory Scrutiny Officer

By the time this report is published I will have left the authority but I am very pleased to introduce my final scrutiny annual report. I have been pleased to act as Statutory Scrutiny Officer since 2018. During those five years I feel that there have been many improvements to the function.

This has been borne out through the findings in the recent Corporate Peer Challenge which recognised that there was 'robust and appropriate scrutiny in place'. The peer reviewers noted the improvements in recommendation monitoring which has supported oversight and grip.

I would like to highlight that Elected Members at Walsall are very driven to seek continuous improvements in the way that scrutiny works and have never rested on their laurels. This desire to improve will drive forward the area in years to come.

Finally, I would like to thank members, Co-opted Members, Partners and Officers for the valuable contributions that they have made be it through asking questions, drafting reports or attending meetings to answer questions. It is with your valued and proactive assistance that we are able to move forward and make a valid contribution to the way in which the Council and the borough is governed.

**Simon Neilson**  
**Statutory Scrutiny Officer**

## 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 2021 to April 2022. 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 Authority's strategic direction by helping to create the golden thread from 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

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

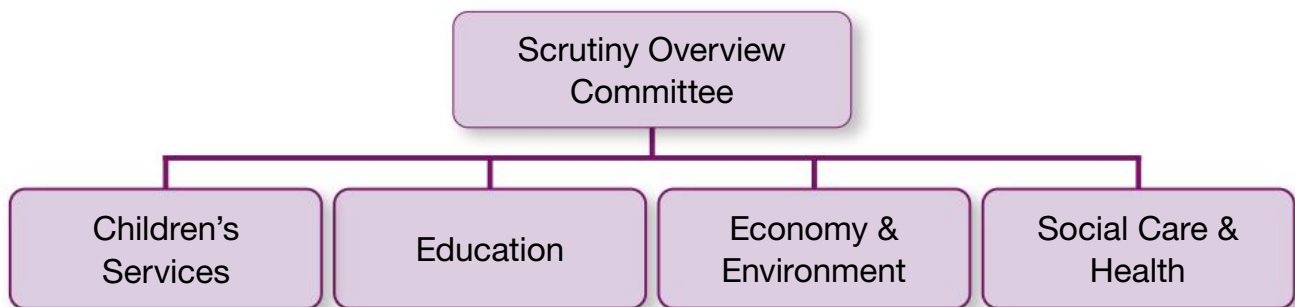
## What is Overview and Scrutiny?

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 voice 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 2017, 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 on at [www.walsall.gov.uk/scrutiny](http://www.walsall.gov.uk/scrutiny).

## Economic growth, for all people, communities and businesses

### 1. Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure

In the 21/22 municipal year the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee discussed electric vehicle charging infrastructure at their meetings held on 21 October 2021 and 14 April 2022.

At the first of these two meetings Members of the Committee acknowledged that due to the national policy of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 and the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030 it was expected that there would be an increase in the use of electric vehicles and therefore it was important that the borough was prepared for this. They also noted that the West Midlands region had set a more ambitious goal of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2041 and yet at present only 0.19% of vehicles registered in Walsall were electric. It was suggested that the installation of more on-street electric vehicle charging points may encourage those who do not have access to an off-street parking facility to switch to an electric vehicle and the Committee was informed that the council submitted a bid for funding from the On-Street Residential Chargepoint Scheme. At that stage Councillors asked questions about the proposed locations of the charging points, the use of Traffic Regulation Orders and the compatibility of the charging points with all electric vehicles and requested that a progress report return to the Committee six months later.

This progress report was received at the meeting on 14 April 2022. Councillors were informed that the council had been successfully awarded funding of £254,040 from the ORCS fund in October 2021 and the 35 proposed chargepoint sites had been consulted on with ward councillors and residents in the vicinity of each site. Members raised concerns about the lack of Traffic Regulation Orders and the chargepoints not being equally distributed across the borough. They also highlighted that it was of paramount importance that the charging points were universally compatible.

*How did this item drive improvement?*

Members commented on proposals and added their suggestions as to appropriate locations for charging points and best methods of engagement with local residents. They also provided input in the consultation process and made suggestions as to criteria to be considered in the procurement process, all of which will lead to a more successful implementation of charging points across the borough.



## 2. West Midlands Local Transport Plan

The West Midlands Local Transport Plan featured on the agenda of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee at two meetings held on 16 September 2021 and 3 March 2022. Members considered the Green Paper written by Transport for West Midlands and provided comments and views on the proposed vision and approach for the new West Midlands Local Transport Plan and what it would mean for Walsall. A key point of focus was the five 'Motives for Change' for transport:

- Sustaining economic success: Support the building of an inclusive and green West Midlands economy, through better use of existing infrastructure, land, technology and sustainable transport options.
- Tackling the climate emergency: Changes to where people travel to / from, reducing the frequency of travel and changing the vehicles we use to travel.
- Creating a fairer society: analysing land use, the availability and affordability of transport and the experience and usability of transport.
- Supporting local places and communities: Re-imagining local neighbourhoods, reducing dominance of transport and providing quick and easy access to key local services.
- Becoming more active: Enable safe, convenient and accessible walking and cycling opportunities and increase active travel for journeys.

The item returned on 3 March 2022 and Members asked a number of questions in relation to number of responses to the public survey, engagement with car users, the high-speed broadband roll out and the servicing of new housing developments with public transport such as bus routes.

*How did this item demonstrate scrutiny carried out by independent minded councillors who lead and own?*

Councillors demonstrated their desire under the wider West Midlands arrangements to interrogate what these plans would mean for Walsall and its residents. They challenged Transport for West Midlands on the consultation that had been completed and their plans for future improvements, highlighting areas of particular concern to the borough.



## People have increased independence, improved health and positively contribute to their communities

### 1. Primary Care Access

The Social Care and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the issue of Primary Care Access at several of its meetings across the municipal year. The Managing Director of Black Country and West Birmingham Clinical Commissioning Group attended to describe the challenges in primary care, which included increasing demand for services, a reducing workforce and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Members were assured that the current performance of GP practices was similar to the pre-pandemic levels and alternative methods of access were now offered, however demand for appointments had significantly increased. Assurance was provided to the Committee that work was being done with GP practices to improve access.

Members referred to the frustrations experienced by residents in accessing appointments, highlighting the difficulties in not having a set time for a phone call appointment with a GP. It was questioned by a Member how public confidence would be restored in primary care services. In response to one of the Committees recommendations, Members were informed that concerns (in relation to access) raised by the Committee had been fed back to GPs, and the concerns were discussed at the local commissioning board.

In response to concerns raised, a report was received detailing how the pandemic had and would continue to change service delivery within primary care. The Committee was informed that primary care access was also a significant national issue. The Committee was informed that every effort was being made to increase the number of appointments both face to face and virtually however, demand for primary care services was higher than the capacity available and the Clinical Commissioning Group had been working with primary care to increase the range of professionals available to see patients. It was noted that all GP practices had remained open throughout the pandemic and GPs had maintained the number of total GP appointments and delivered nearly 150,000 vaccination appointments. Independent assessment from the Care Quality Commission indicated that care was delivered to a high standard with most domains rated good or outstanding with no areas of inadequate performance. GP performance in Walsall was similar to England average.

Members questioned if additional funding would be received to help restore the number of GP appointments, they were informed that the Black Country and West Birmingham CCG received a total allocation of £6.2m from the Government to meet demand over winter. The Managing Director stated that an additional 14,000 appointments would be delivered through this extra funding. In response to challenge by a Member, the Managing Director stated that investment had been made in telephone systems and consideration was being given to the creation of a centralised telephone system.

This is an example of Members *enabling the voice and concerns of the public* due to the high levels of case work and queries that had been received.

## Internal focus, all Council services are efficient

### Scrutiny Survey

The Scrutiny Overview Committee has been creating a culture where scrutiny is owned and led by Members, and this has been a key driver in commissioning the scrutiny survey and driving forward improvements based upon its feedback.

The majority of respondents rated the following aspects very good or good:

- Scrutiny structure.
- Work programme.
- Forward plan.
- Frequency of meetings

*One comment received stated scrutiny committees were too far apart.*

- Effectiveness of working groups

*One comment received stated that working groups were difficult to set up.*

- Number of committee members.
- Portfolio Holder involvement.
- Length of agendas.
- Scrutiny work programmes.
- Cabinet / Portfolio Holder involvement.
- Report satisfaction.

In terms of areas for improvement SOC Members recommended:

- Enhancements to the Member Development Programme to include training on financial scrutiny, scrutiny legislation, chairing meetings and asking questions;
- A review of the scrutiny of the budget setting process;
- The development of a recommendation tracker to allow systematic follow up of recommendations made at Overview and Scrutiny Committees;
- Ensuring that agendas were manageable and focussed on issues for scrutiny rather than reports for noting.

The most immediate change that was introduced was a recommendation tracker which has been rolled out over all Overview and Scrutiny Committees. This has enabled committees to track progress with their work and increased grip on issues.

*Carried out by independent minded councillors who lead and own the scrutiny process*

The above self-reflection and planned improvements are an example of scrutiny being carried out by independent minded members who lead and own the scrutiny process. Further to the work described above the SOC quest for improvement continues into the current municipal year where further work taking forward the outcomes of the survey has been taking place.

# 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". Local agencies including police and health services had a duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure they considered the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people when carrying out their functions. A wide range of partners attended the meeting to assist the Committee to understand and scrutinise the issue, including:

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

The Committee heard that an all age exploitation approach had been taken alongside the development of an all age exploitation strategy. Walsall was involved with regional work and fed into the regional strategic exploitation framework. The West Midlands Violence Unit had worked jointly across the safeguarding partnerships to establish a data dashboard aimed at providing an overview of exploitation and abuse across the West Midlands.

Members were informed that in Walsall a 'hub' was operated which was a virtual multi-agency approach to identifying, screening, and sharing intelligence around those at risk of exploitation.

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

The partnership was questioned on the action being taken to prevent exploitation of children, and the main challenges facing the Safeguarding Partnership in the future. The Independent Scrutineer asserted that the partnership's biggest challenge was continuing the momentum of improvement. There had been big successes in shifting understanding of the role of different partners, ensuring a move towards genuine multi-agency work.

A key challenge identified by the Chief Superintendent was the challenge of post-18 transition, as frameworks and support often reduced as a child turned 18. The Violence Reduction Unit were engaged in a Transition project for 16-25 year olds and there were efforts to ensure those affected by exploitation were not pushed into the Criminal Justice system when they were also victims.

The Committee were informed that future plans included a 12 month exploitation pilot team to focus on delivering bespoke packages of support to individual children that would be identified and selected through exploitation triage. The work of the team would be trauma informed and would focus on the use of motivational interviewing as a way of disrupting the pattern of exploitation. Caseloads within the team would remain small, and work would be undertaken in line with the family safeguarding model – with a go live date of May 2022.

The Committee resolved that they endorsed what was being done to tackle the issues surrounding children at risk of exploitation.

## **2. Special Educational Needs and Education, Health and Care Plans**

The Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee focussed on oversight of the SEND Local Area Improvement Programme following concerns identified by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission.

Members were informed of the Written Statement of Action that was responding to the areas of concern and the agreed action to improve the quality and timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Members learned about the plans to transform the EHCP pathway by working with schools and parents to improve, co-produce and design a long-term proficient service centred on the best outcomes for Children.

*How did the Committee drive improvement in public services?*

Members were aware of the importance of securing improvements in this area and the backlog with EHCP assessments. Members sought further assurances that monitoring activities to ensure children not attending school were safe and well. By making this area a priority they were demonstrating their commitment to monitoring the implementation of the Written Statement of Action and ensuring that it was delivered expeditiously.

## Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion

### Domestic Abuse

The Scrutiny Overview Committee took oversight of the Councils plans to meet the requirements of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

Members learned that Domestic Abuse (DA) affects a significant number of people in Walsall every day. A Strategy was being developed to outline how a co-ordinated agency and community response, underpinned by national legislation, will challenge the causes and effects of domestic abuse across Walsall. The Strategy set out the collective priorities of the Domestic Abuse Strategic Group, and the key areas of action for the next three years. The strategy aligned with the wider priorities identified within the national and regional Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategies. It also recognised that there was a need to develop a broader response to domestic abuse and areas for improvement and development.

Members were supportive of the aims and objectives of the strategy and recognised how important it was to support residents of this type of abuse. Furthermore Members recognised that men could also become victims of domestic abuse and recommended that this was included as an addition to the new strategy.

As well as considering the draft strategy Members reviewed the support that was available to victims of domestic abuse in terms of temporary accommodation and advocacy. It was noted that consultation had been completed with a large amount of current service users to understand their needs, particularly focusing on those who need specific types of accommodation that are traditionally more difficult to source. Part of the feedback received has identified that some victims wanted to stay in the borough rather than flee to other areas. Members were pleased this important feedback had been sought and included as part of the new service design. In addition to this additional consideration of domestic violence and abuse was being included in the early help pathways to try and support families at earlier stages.

*How did the Committee drive improvement in public services?*

The Committee assisted in driving forward improvement in public services by reviewing the draft strategy and contracts to ensure that their comments could be fed into decisions before they were taken. They contributed by recommending amendments to the core strategy document and then followed through to seek reassurance that the practical support available was able to deliver the aims set out in the strategy.







**Resources and Transformation**

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