

Part A

Report to: **Council**

Date of meeting: **19 July 2021**

Report author: **Senior Democratic Services Officer**

Title: **Scrutiny annual report 2020-21**

1.0 Summary

1.1 The constitution requires that a report be presented to Council annually on the work of scrutiny during the preceding year. This report describes the work and process of the council's scrutiny committees and task groups during 2020-21.

2.0 Risks

2.1 There are no risks identified from this report.

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 That Council notes the annual scrutiny report for 2020-21.

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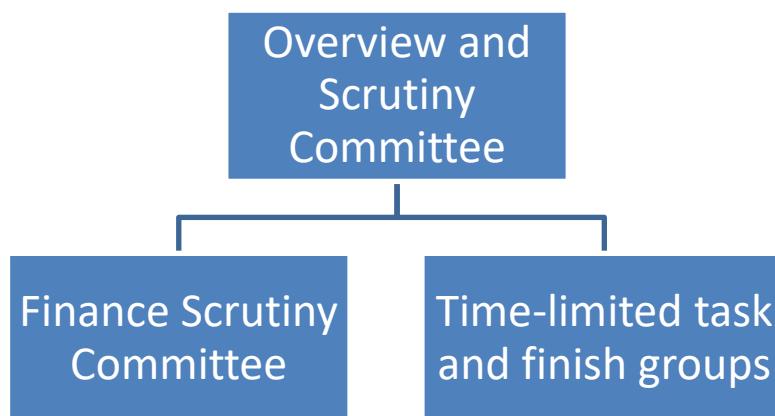
4.0 Scrutiny at Watford Borough Council in 2020-21

4.1 Purpose and structure of scrutiny at Watford Borough Council

4.1.1 Scrutiny is part of Watford Borough Council's democratic structure. It is led by non-executive councillors who check and challenge decision making to ensure that it is carried out in the best interests of Watford's residents. With a focus on optimising services for the local community, scrutiny members undertake three key areas of work:

- Reviewing and developing council policies to help shape the delivery of public services

- Scrutinising decisions made by Cabinet to check that the actions being taken are correct and that services are operating effectively
 - Examining external partners providing services which impact on the local community.
- 4.1.2 Watford Borough Council has two main committees: Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Finance Scrutiny Committee. In addition there is provision for up to three time limited task and finish groups per year:



- 4.1.3 During 2020/21, as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic, all scrutiny and task group meetings, including evidence-gathering sessions with witnesses, were held virtually. Members' commitment to this new way of working enabled meetings to continue to the agreed schedule and a full scrutiny work programme was carried out over the year. Indeed, streaming statistics for meetings show an increased engagement in scrutiny's work than in previous years, with significantly greater numbers following both live and on-demand after the event.

4.2 Scrutiny in numbers

- 4.2.1 During 2020-21:

- 18 out of the 30 non-executive councillors attended at least one scrutiny meeting or one of the two scrutiny task and finish groups
- 9 attendances by portfolio holders to a scrutiny committee or task group meeting to respond to questions on behalf of the Executive
- 22 substantive issues were scrutinised by members
- 20 public scrutiny meetings were held
- 2 in-depth task and finish groups were completed
- 26 partners and stakeholders provided evidence to scrutiny
- In excess of 150 hits were made to the website to view part or all of a scrutiny meeting, representing a substantial increase in engagement in scrutiny's activities.

4.3 Scrutiny training

- 4.3.1 Scrutiny training is compulsory for councillors sitting or substituting on scrutiny committees, or participating in scrutiny task and finish groups. It must be repeated every two years.
- 4.3.2 Nine councillors attended the training session run by the Senior Democratic Services Officer in June 2020. In addition, the Head of Finance held a bespoke training session on the role of the Finance Scrutiny Committee ahead of its first meeting.
- 4.3.3 External training on chairing skills for scrutiny meetings was also offered to scrutiny chairs and vice chairs, including those who had recently or were currently chairing scrutiny task and finish groups.

4.4 Overview and Scrutiny Committee

4.4.1 Membership

The council's overarching scrutiny committee comprised nine councillors:

Councillor Maggie Parker (Chair)

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Vice chair)

Councillors Dawn Allen-Williamson, Keith Crout, Peter Jeffree, Rabi Martins, Bilqees Mauthoor, Glen Saffery and Matt Turmaine

The portfolio holders for Community, Councillor Collett, Resources and Customer Service, Councillor Watkin and Client Services, Councillor Williams, also attended meetings in the course of the year.

4.4.2 Committee's work programme for 2020/21

Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on nine occasions during the year. No Executive key decisions were called in. The following summarises discussions on the substantive items considered by the committee:

- **Community Safety Partnership 2019/20 and 2020/21.** The purpose of this review was to evaluate the 2019-20 plan and consider objectives for 2020/21. Responding to the Community Safety Coordinator's commentary, Overview and Scrutiny Committee explored the effects of Covid 19 on local community safety priorities, particularly in regard to local youth violence rates and thefts from vehicles. Members questioned and provided feedback on the long-term strategy for rough sleepers in the town, issues relating to the Black Lives Matter protests and measures to counter anti-social behaviour in the town's parks.

Scrutiny returned to the Community Safety Partnership later in the year to evaluate the 2020/21 plan and review the objectives for 2021/22. Noting the ongoing impacts of Covid 19, members welcomed the significant 22% reduction in crime in Watford. Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed the continued need to focus on youth violent crime in 2021/22. In addition, the Community Safety Coordinator agreed to investigate concerns raised by scrutiny members about organised doorstep fraud in the borough.

- **Council performance updates.** Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook quarterly reviews of the council's performance against a range of indicators in order to monitor and challenge results. Following scrutiny members' feedback, additional metrics were added to the updates and clarifications made to the explanatory notes to aid the transparency of the council's reports published on the public website.
- **Council's Strategic Framework.** In July 2020, Watford Borough Council agreed a new Council Plan 2020-24 and Delivery Plan 2020-22; Organisational Development Strategy 2020-24 and Delivery Plan; and Covid-19 Road to Renewal Plan. Scrutiny members undertook regular reviews of this strategic framework with the aim of checking progress and providing feedback. Members closely examined measures to support staff wellbeing, particularly in regard to mental health. As a result of Overview and Scrutiny Committee's recommendation, mental health awareness training was introduced for all managers. The offer of training was also extended to councillors.
- **Mayor's Small Grants Fund in 2019-20 and 2020-21.** The purpose of this review was to scrutinise expenditure in the two years specified. Prompt scrutiny of the 2020-21 expenditure was possible because applications had been invited earlier than previously to respond to the coronavirus emergency. Members were particularly interested to establish that there had been equitable allocation of funds to groups supporting Watford's Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and, following a request for information, a detailed analysis was provided to satisfy this concern.
- **Voluntary Sector Commissioning Framework (End of 1 Year Report – 2019-2020).** Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the performance of the framework in providing a range of leisure and community services delivered by voluntary sector organisations on behalf of the council. Members sought to determine whether there had been sufficient monitoring of, and engagement with, under-represented and BAME communities in the town. Officers provided additional information to the committee to highlight the actions which had been undertaken. Scrutiny members expressed a wish to keep these issues under review.

- **Leisure Centre Management Contract (SLM/EA) (End of Year 2 Report – 2019-2020).** The purpose of this review was to examine the operation of the leisure centres in the previous year. It was noted that the last few weeks of the contract year had been significantly impacted by the national lockdown. Mindful of the effects of Covid 19 on the leisure centres, members focussed both on the practical steps being taken by SLM to ensure that the centres could reopen safely and the financial support being provided by the council. This included questions to the Portfolio Holder for Client Services about the financial arrangements which had been agreed with the leisure centre operator.
- **Watford 2020 Transformation Programme.** Scrutiny members undertook a final review of the council's transformation programme, including the ongoing financial savings to the authority. Commenting on the closure report, the Portfolio Holder particularly acknowledged the constructive challenge and oversight provided by Overview and Scrutiny Committee throughout the life of the programme.
- **Streets and Parks Contract (Veolia).** Overview and Scrutiny Committee invited Veolia to attend one of its meetings to answer questions on three key service areas: road sweeping during leaf fall season, street trees and street cleaning. A particular focus of members' questions was the planting and maintenance of street trees in the borough and how different wards might increase their tree coverage to improve the local street scene. Veolia agreed to consider this question when reviewing the planting priorities for 2021/22. Scrutiny members also queried Veolia's street cleaning schedules and plans for deep cleans and how this information was relayed to residents to ensure adequate access for operatives.
- **Scrutiny task and finish groups.** Overview and Scrutiny Committee established and oversaw completion of two significant task and finish groups reviewing issues relating to:
 - Watford Borough Council's relationship with Watford and Three Rivers Trust during the Covid-19 pandemic
 - Responding to the impacts of Covid 19 on Watford's BAME communities and the council's street naming policy.

In addition, following the cancellation of the final meeting in 2019/20 due to the coronavirus pandemic, Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the final report and recommendations of the Health Services for the Deaf Task Group from the previous scrutiny year. Progress on this task group's recommendations was also reviewed during the year.

Further details are provided below.

- **Watford Community Housing Task Group recommendations update.** Scrutiny members examined progress on the outstanding recommendations from the February 2019 task group questioning representatives from Watford Community Housing (WCH) to challenge a number of areas. The committee agreed that the tasks group's recommendations had been implemented in full and, as a result of the task group, the concerns of residents had been progressed and WCH's processes and procedures improved. It was further agreed that Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a continued role to play in ensuring that the council's relationship with WCH worked well and that the trust provided the best possible service to its residents.
- **Mental Health Task Group recommendations update.** Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed progress on the recommendations of its October 2019 task and finish group. Members welcomed the considerable work undertaken by the council's Health and Wellbeing Forum on this prescient issue. This had enabled momentum and direction to meet the growing challenge of mental health concerns – exacerbated by the pandemic – both in the council and local community. Since the task group's recommendations had been fully implemented, it was agreed that future oversight should remain with the Health and Wellbeing Forum.
- **Health Services for the Deaf Task Group update.** Scrutiny members examined progress on the task group's recommendations from March 2020, which had been accepted by Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee (as the lead authority on health matters). County Councillor Quilty, Chair of the county's Health Scrutiny Committee had written to the elected Mayor welcoming the task group's recommendations which he considered would improve the lives of residents with hearing impairment. He also forwarded the report to NHS organisations with whom the HCC's Health Scrutiny Committee engaged. The council's subsequent [press release](#) was translated into BSL to maintain the profile of the task group's work and improve accessibility to its progress for stakeholders.
- **Executive Decision Progress report.** In order to maintain transparency, scrutiny members regularly received details of all proposed and pending Executive key decisions, including information about any consultations with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- **Hertfordshire County Council's Health Scrutiny Committee.** The Chair updated the committee on the work carried out by the county's Health Scrutiny Committee, including in regard to progress on the recommendations of the Health Services for the Deaf Task Group. This proved slower than hoped and in March 2021, prompted by the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny

Committee, the Mayor approached Watford General Hospital directly to expedite one of the recommendations.

Full details of the Health Scrutiny Committee are available on the [County Council's website](#).

- **Updates from Finance Scrutiny Committee.** Verbal updates were provided as required from the Finance Scrutiny Committee chair in response to questions from members of Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- **Work programme reviews.** Regular reviews of the rolling work programme enabled members to add items to the forward programme and to amend sequencing to meet with changing priorities. As a result, a number of changes were made to the work programme during the year and several items were added to the 2021/22 scrutiny programme.

The reports and minutes for Overview and Scrutiny Committee are available on the [council's website](#).

4.5 **Finance Scrutiny Committee**

The scrutiny committee comprised:

Councillor Matt Turmaine (Chair)

Councillor Peter Kloss (Vice chair)

Councillors Dawn Allen-Williamson, Nigel Bell, Asif Khan, Jennifer Pattinson, Glen Saffery, Bill Stanton and Darren Walford

The portfolio holder responsible for Resources and Customer Services, Councillor Mark Watkin, also regularly attended meetings.

Finance Scrutiny Committee met on five occasions during the year. The following items were discussed:

- **The final outturn for 2019/20.** Noting that this report largely reflected the situation before the onset of Covid 19, Finance Scrutiny Committee considered in particular: the revised net revenue budget, projects requiring funds to be carried forward to 2020/21 and the council's reserves. The minutes of the discussion were forwarded to Cabinet.
- **Croxley Business Park.** Scrutiny members reviewed the performance of the Croxley Business Park after the council's acquisition the previous year. Particular attention was paid to vacancy rates, sectors occupying the park, debt issues and maintenance. It was agreed that additional metrics and reports would be produced in the future to assist members' scrutiny.

- **Property Investment Board.** The committee received a presentation on the current activities of the Property Investment Board. Members were particularly interested to understand Lambert Smith Hampton Investment Management's view of the long term impact of the pandemic on the council's business park investment in Croxley. A further Part B discussion was arranged to consider the work of the Property Investment Board more closely.
- **Impact of the Covid 19 pandemic.** Members closely monitored the council's finances as a result of Covid 19. Updates were provided on the evolving situation as it affected the council's income and expenditure in order to assist the committee's scrutiny of the authority's finances. The committee requested detailed responses to a number of pertinent questions relating to the financial impact of the pandemic to address areas of particular importance. Officers also provided members with a broader perspective on the similar pressures facing other local authorities and on feedback received from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.
- **Financial planning.** Members considered details of service level expenditure, funding and council tax levels for the medium term 2021/22 to 2023/24, including the use of reserves and the 2021/22 Council Tax calculations. Finance Scrutiny Committee's comments were forwarded to Cabinet. The Chair also tabled a number of expenditure suggestions to the committee for consideration.
- **The Finance Digest Budget Monitor** was reviewed regularly by the committee who sought clarification on various issues, including those relating to the council's commercial income, capital investments and local housing issues. Members noted that business rates and council tax receipts had not been as affected by the pandemic as anticipated.
- **Work programme.** Finance Scrutiny Committee's work programme was agreed at the start of the year, but remained open for new suggestions from members.

Details of the committee's agendas and minutes are available [here](#).

4.6 Task Groups

During the year, two task and finish groups were set up. One considered Watford Borough Council's relationship with the Watford and Three Rivers Trust (W3RT). A second looked at the response to the impact of Covid-19 on Watford's BAME communities and later reviewed the council's street name policy.

4.6.1 Watford Borough Council's relationship with Watford and Three Rivers Trust during the Covid-19 pandemic task group

Following a scrutiny proposal from Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a cross-party task group met between August and October 2020 to review how well the community and voluntary sector were supported during the council's response to the Covid 19 pandemic and to establish whether there were areas for improvement. Membership comprised Councillors Dawn Allen-Williamson, Amanda Grimston, Jennifer Pattinson, Glen Saffery (Chair) and Jagtar Singh Dhindsa.

The task group was keen to gather a wide range of views. To this end a series of witness sessions were held in September to hear from:

- Key representatives from Watford and Three Rivers Trust (W3RT)
- Officers from WBC and Three Rivers District Council involved in the councils' regular engagement with W3RT, as well as those seconded to help with the work of coordinating the local response to Covid19
- Voluntary sector organisations, including recipients of the Community Fund
- Watford Chamber of Commerce
- Hertfordshire County Council.

In parallel to these witness sessions, a survey of all those who had applied to the Community Fund, and other local voluntary groups, was undertaken to understand the experience of the application process and to ascertain if and where improvements might be made. The task group focussed both on the immediate term – in anticipation of a second wave of COVID-19 impacting the local community, and on the future – to harness the positive lessons learnt during lockdown in order to optimise the community and voluntary service for local residents.

The task group worked alongside a specially appointed Voluntary Sector Specialist who was undertaking a review of how the council interfaced with W3RT and the voluntary sector more widely. Some areas included in the initial terms of reference were captured in her review.

Drawing its conclusions, the task group grouped its recommendations into five key areas: W3RT's reach and profile in the community, fundraising, volunteering, working relationships and its interface with Watford Borough Council. The final report and recommendations were presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting in October 2020. It was forwarded to Cabinet, which accepted the task group's recommendations in full.

4.6.2 Responding to the impacts of Covid 19 on Watford's BAME communities and street name policy review task group

Overview and Scrutiny Committee proposed this task group, following two separate motions to Council from Councillors Ezeifedi and Khan. Membership comprised Councillors Dawn Allen-Williamson, Favour Ezeifedi (Chair), Peter Jeffree, Asif Khan and Jennifer Pattinson.

Beginning work in September 2020, the task group divided its investigation into two work streams; firstly focussing on the particular impact of Covid 19 on Watford's BAME residents and secondly looking at the council's street name policy.

In addition to drawing on the opinion of expert witnesses including the Director of Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council, the task group was particularly keen to understand the lived experiences of representatives from local BAME communities and the voluntary sector. A series of well-attended virtual town hall meetings were held. In addition, the views of all councillors were invited drawing on their interactions with Watford's residents as part of their ward work.

Concluding this part of its review, the task group made a series of recommendations addressing equalities issues, including the proposal that a council-led equalities forum should be established to promote engagement with Watford's diverse communities. The task group also referenced councillors' community roles, underlining their importance in promoting the take-up of Covid 19 vaccines as well as promoting wider health screening programmes.

Addressing the second work stream, the task group reviewed the policy documentation for street naming in the borough. The task group considered the council's existing policy guidance, an early draft for a full policy document and the priorities for renaming streets.

In drawing together its recommendations, the task group underlined the importance of promoting education and understanding around local street names which, it was suggested, should form the focus of a future exhibition at the Watford Museum. The task group also proposed a new street naming policy providing a better framework for considering street names in the future.

The task group's final report and recommendations were agreed in full by Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January and subsequently by Cabinet in March 2021.

4.6.3 Implementation of the two task groups' recommendations will be monitored by Overview and Scrutiny Committee during 2021/22.

5.0 Implications

5.1 Financial

5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no financial implications as a result of this report.

5.2 Legal Issues (Monitoring Officer)

5.2.1 The Group Head of Democracy and Governance comments that there are no legal implications in this report.

5.3 Equalities, Human Rights and Data Protection

5.3.1 There are no equalities, human rights or data protections implications as a result of this report.

5.4 Staffing

5.4.1 There are no staffing implications as a result of this report.

5.5 Accommodation

5.5.1 There are no accommodation implications as a result of this report.

5.6 Community Safety/Crime and Disorder

5.6.1 The council has a statutory duty to scrutinise the local crime and disorder partnership. Due to the cancellation of the final meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committee in March 2020, the Community Safety Partnership in 2019/20 and 2020/21 were both considered during the last year.

5.7 Sustainability

5.7.1 There are no sustainability implications as a result of this report.

Appendices

None

Background papers

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

- Reports and minutes of scrutiny committees, panels and task groups (all are available on the [council's website](#))