

Part A

Report to: Council

Date of meeting: 17 July 2022

Report author: Senior Democratic Services Officer

Title: Scrutiny annual report 2021-22

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 2021-22.

2.0 Risks

2.1 There are no risks identified from this report.

3.0 Recommendations

3.1 That Council notes the scrutiny annual report for 2021/22.

Further information:

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4.0 Scrutiny at Watford Borough Council in 2021-22

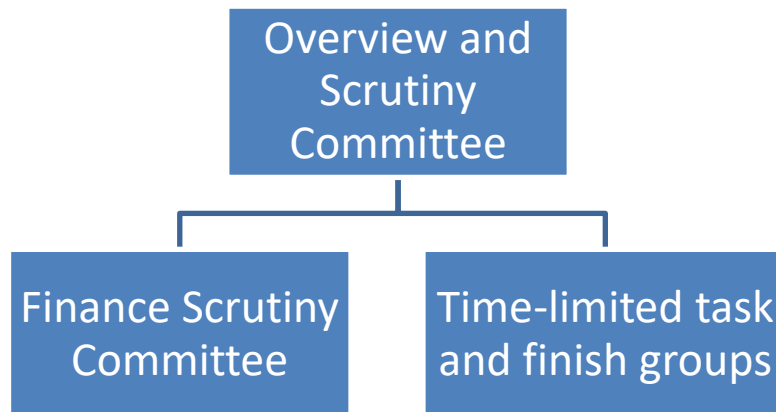
4.1 Purpose and structure of scrutiny at Watford Borough Council

4.1.1 Scrutiny is part of Watford Borough Council's democratic structure. It is led by non-executive councillors who check and challenge executive 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 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 scrutiny committees: Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Finance Scrutiny Committee. In addition, there is provision for up to three time-limited task groups per year:



4.2 Scrutiny in numbers

4.2.1 During 2021-22:

- 19 out of the 30 non-executive councillors attended at least one scrutiny meeting or one of the two scrutiny task and finish groups
- There were 15 attendances by portfolio holders to a scrutiny committee or task group meeting to respond to questions on behalf of the Executive
- 20 substantive issues were scrutinised by members
- 14 public scrutiny meetings were held, covering Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Finance Scrutiny Committee
- 2 in-depth task and finish groups were completed
- 7 partners and stakeholders provided evidence to scrutiny
- In total more than 200 hits were made to the website to view part or all of a scrutiny meeting across the year, representing an increase on the 150 hits made in the previous year.

4.3 Scrutiny training

4.3.1 Scrutiny training is compulsory for councillors sitting or substituting on scrutiny committees. It must be repeated every two years.

- 4.3.2 15 councillors attended the training session run by Tony Jackson, a trainer from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS). Following this, a further session was organised with the CfGS focusing on questioning skills which was attended by 11 councillors. In addition, the Head of Finance held a bespoke training session on the role of the Finance Scrutiny Committee ahead of its first meeting as well as a session on treasury management later in the year.
- 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 Amanda Grimston (Chair)

Councillor Jagtar Singh Dhindsa (Vice Chair)

Councillors Simon Feldman, Peter Hannon, Tom Osborn, Maggie Parker, Glen Saffery, Bill Stanton and Matt Turmaine

The following portfolio holders also attended meetings during the course of the year:

- Portfolio Holder for Commercial Property, Planning and Housing Services, Councillor Stephen Johnson
- Portfolio Holder for Transport and Sustainability, Councillor Ian Stotesbury
- Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services, Councillor Tim Williams
- Portfolio Holder for Community, Councillor Aga Dychton.

4.4.2 **Committee's work programme for 2021/22**

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:

- **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. Members kept a watching brief on the performance of the Revenues and Benefits service, challenging the performance as appropriate. The impact of staff secondments to test and trace was noted and a full briefing paper was provided by the Head of Revenues and Benefits during the course of the year. The levels of targets in a number of areas were also questioned to ensure that they were driving improvement.

- **Council’s Strategic Framework.** In July 2020, the council agreed a new Council Plan 2020-24 and Delivery Plan 2020-22; Organisational Development Strategy 2020-24; and the refreshed Covid-19 Road to Renewal Plan. Scrutiny members undertook regular reviews of this strategic framework with the aim of checking progress and providing feedback. During the year, members paid particular attention to ongoing work on staff wellbeing and recognition as well as the development of agile working approaches. Members retained a focus on consultation in their review of the strategic framework, seeking reassurance in a number of areas that views of a wide range of groups had been incorporated into different projects and initiatives.
- **Hospital redevelopment plans.** Representatives from West Hertfordshire Hospital Trust made a presentation to the committee on the Trust’s plans. Members sought clarity on the rationale behind retaining all three sites as part of the plans. Questions were also raised about whether an inter-site transport service would be beneficial to patients.
- **Homelessness Strategy.** Officers from the housing team made a presentation to Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy. Members commended the best practice model that had been established, the success of the Everyone In programme and the reduction in families in temporary accommodation. Reassurance was sought that appropriate resources were being put in place to ensure that targets continued to be met in times of high demand.
- **CCTV in Watford.** Following a petition to Council, Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the CCTV provision in Watford. Considering the forthcoming CCTV review, members made suggestions for locations that could benefit from additional provision. Responding to residents’ concerns around privacy, more data was requested around how CCTV had contributed to arrests and the reduction of crime and disorder in Watford. The committee expressed an intention to review the move of the CCTV control room to the new police station in the future.
- **Sustainable Transport Contracts – Beryl Bike Scheme.** The committee received an update on the bike hire scheme that had been in operation since March 2020. Given the council’s investment into the scheme, members suggested that increasing the council branding on the scheme would be desirable. The committee also provided feedback on the visual impact of the bays to ensure they were tidier. It had previously been agreed that consideration of the ArrivaClick demand-responsive bus service would be undertaken by the committee in summer 2022.

- **Impact of the changes to waste collections (Veolia).** Overview and Scrutiny Committee invited Veolia to attend one of its meetings to review the changes to the waste and recycling service. The committee noted the uptake of the chargeable green bin service and the increase in recycling levels under the new service provision. Members queried the fee levels, including concessions, and how these compared with other authorities. Officers undertook to provide figures for the income generated from the service.
- **Scrutiny task and finish groups.** Overview and Scrutiny Committee established and oversaw completion of two task and finish groups reviewing issues relating to:
 - The Sustainable Transport Strategy
 - Electric Vehicles

Further details are provided below.

- **Responding to the impacts of Covid 19 on Watford’s BAME communities and street name policy review task group recommendations update.** Scrutiny members examined progress on the outstanding recommendations from this task group undertaken in late 2020. Many of the recommendations had been completed and others were in progress. The committee noted the intention to finalise the council’s new Equalities Policy during 2022.
- **Watford and Three Rivers Trust (W3RT) task group recommendations update.** Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed progress on the recommendations of its October 2020 task group. The recommendations were reviewed alongside those made in a parallel piece of work on the voluntary sector strategy. Representatives from W3RT attended to speak to the report. Members welcomed all that had been achieved and focused on engagement with key groups including young people, older people and the business community. The committee agreed to review the work on the voluntary sector again in the future.
- **Community Safety Partnership 2021/22.** As part of the council’s statutory duty to undertake a review of the local community safety partnership, this item included a summary of the performance in 2021 and the proposed priorities for 2022. The scrutiny committee supported the proposed priority to ‘reassure and inform’ residents, intended in part to address the mismatch between perceived and actual crime levels. Members welcomed the work to ensure that the Police and Crime Commissioners’ precept reflected the demand in Watford. Officers supported the proposal for meetings with new police officers in Watford to aid their orientation. The partnership remained strong and effective in Watford.

- **Executive Decision Progress report.** In order to maintain transparency, scrutiny members regularly received details of all proposed and pending Executive key decisions.
- **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 data on Covid 19 and flu vaccinations. Members expressed some frustration with these meetings being cancelled and the nature of the items on the agenda. Full details of the Health Scrutiny Committee are available on the [County Council’s website](#).
- **Updates from Finance Scrutiny Committee.** Updates were provided as required from Finance Scrutiny Committee and the Chair of Finance Scrutiny Committee was also present to provide feedback as required.
- **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 proposed for the 2022/23 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 Karen Clarke-Taylor, Asif Khan, Rabi Martins, Maggie Parker, 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 2020/21.** Finance Scrutiny Committee considered in particular: the revised net revenue and capital budgets, the council’s reserves, identified losses of income, emergency funding granted to the council due to Covid 19 and the ongoing impact of Covid 19. 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. Particular attention was paid to vacancy rates, income/cashflow management and the effect of the pandemic. A further Part B discussion took place to consider the topic in more detail.
- **Property Investment Board.** The committee received a presentation on the current activities of the Property Investment Board. Members were informed by Lambert Smith Hampton Investment Management about the diversification of the council's portfolio since 2016 and how this affected the impact of pandemic on the core portfolio. A further Part B discussion took place to consider the work of the Property Investment Board more closely.
- **Impact of the Covid 19 pandemic.** Members discussed the council's finances as a result of Covid 19. Updates were provided on identified loss of income, additional expenditure, emergency funding and the distribution of grants to local businesses. The committee discussed whether it was possible to predict the return to pre-Covid financial activity and details on the take up of Covid grants by local businesses. The Portfolio Holder reported that in 2020/21 7930 grants were paid out to local businesses totalling £28 million and circulated the data to the committee.
- **Financial planning.** Members considered the latest working version of the Medium Term Financial Strategy and an update on the income charging policy with fees and charges for the following year. There was also detail on the Capital Strategy and the Treasury Management strategy. Particular attention was drawn to the increase in funeral costs and a discussion was had and a vote taken on freezing these costs; the motion was lost. There was also discussion of an increase in council tax rates and information on grants received by central government due to the pandemic.
- **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, staff vacancies and the potential impact of the Ukraine crisis. Members also sought clarification on updated expenditure of Covid grants from central government. The Portfolio Holder requested that a report detailing the usage of grants received during the pandemic be brought to the committee in a future meeting.
- **Budget proposals.** The committee Chair, Councillor Turmaine, brought a report to the committee detailing a list of budget proposals from the Labour group to be considered by the administration. After discussion, three proposals were agreed to be forwarded to Cabinet for consideration. These related to 'happy to chat' benches, fly-tipping and developing an age-friendly town.

- **Additional items** during the year included a Treasury Management training session delivered by the Head of Finance and a presentation delivered on the government's Levelling Up white paper.
- **Work programme.** Finance Scrutiny Committee's work programme was agreed at the start of the year, but remained open for new suggestions from members. The Portfolio Holder requested that a report detailing the usage of grants received during the pandemic be brought to the committee in a future meeting.

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 reviewed the forthcoming Sustainable Transport Strategy and the other focused on the council's approach to electric vehicles.

4.6.1 Sustainable Transport Strategy Task Group

Following a scrutiny proposal from the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability and Transport, a cross-party task group met in November and December 2021 to review the draft strategy. Membership comprised Councillors Simon Feldman, Amanda Grimston (Chair), Tom Osborn, Glen Saffery and Dennis Watling.

Given the substantial nature of the draft strategy, the task group agreed to focus on the following areas:

- **Neighbourhoods** including street traffic filters and mini transport hubs
- **Travel schemes** including the HERT link, uses for the Croxley rail line, the DRT and park and ride.
- **Community engagement** including reward schemes and wider engagement plans.
- **Monitoring** including oversight of the implementation of the strategy.

Members received presentations from officers from Watford Borough Council and Hertfordshire County Council. The task group undertook its work at pace, holding four meetings in a short time period to ensure the final report would be presented to Cabinet alongside the draft strategy.

Drawing its conclusions, the task group highlighted areas that should be considered priorities for the successful implementation of the strategy. These included a focus on minimising car use for journeys under 2 miles, ongoing joint working with neighbouring districts, developing travel plans for schools and the importance of

building confidence in travelling by alternative means than private cars. The [final report](#) and recommendations were presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 31 January 2022. It was then forwarded to Cabinet, who accepted the task group's recommendations in full.

4.6.2 **Electric vehicles task group**

This scrutiny proposal was also made by the Portfolio Holder for Sustainability and Transport and it sought to explore how the council could continue to support and enable electric vehicle use in the borough. Membership comprised Councillors Simon Feldman (Chair), Mark Hofman, Glen Saffery, Jessica Stiff and Dennis Watling.

The task group undertook its work during January 2022. At the first meeting, officers provided a presentation on the charging infrastructure programme. The task group was also provided with case studies of innovative projects to enable EVs as well as key work streams from across the council which supported electric vehicles. The second meeting included officers working on sustainability and transport more widely and allowed members to make conclusions and recommendations.

Drawing together the findings into a report, the task group highlighted a number of key areas, these included:

- Communications. This would ensure that residents could access pertinent information about facilities available to them as well as making the case for using EVs.
- Collaborative working. To continue to develop the charging infrastructure, particularly on-street, joint working with Hertfordshire County Council was vital to enable the needs of residents living in all areas of the borough were met.
- An electric vehicle strategy. This programme would benefit from a strategy to consider charging needs across the borough, capitalising on land owned by the council and other partners and to review the approaches to funding models and participating in trials of alternative technologies.

The task group's [final report](#) and recommendations were agreed in full by Overview and Scrutiny Committee and subsequently by Cabinet in February 2022.

4.6.3 Implementation of the two task groups' recommendations will be monitored by Overview and Scrutiny Committee during 2023/24.

5.0 Implications

5.1 Financial

5.1.1 The Shared Director of Finance comments that there are no financial implications arising from 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 and this took place in March 2022 and is scheduled again for February 2023.

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 are available on the [council's website](#).