

Cheshire West & Chester Council
Overview and Scrutiny

ANNUAL REPORT

2024 - 2025



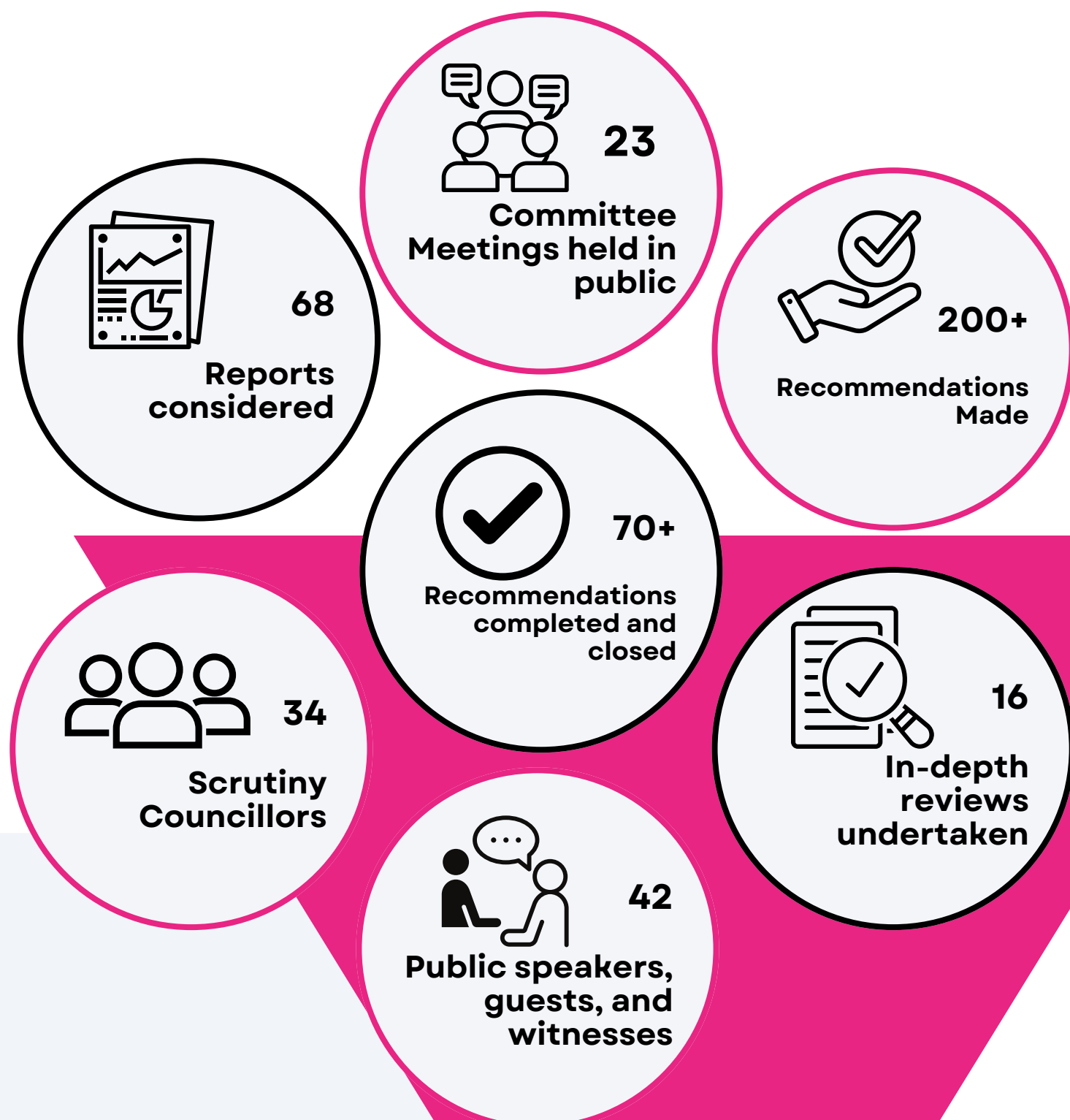
Overview & Scrutiny



Cheshire West
and Chester



SUMMARY OF THE WORK OF SCRUTINY FOR 2024-2025



Plus regular attendance from Health colleagues from; Integrated Care Board, Cheshire and Wirral Partnership, NHS, Countess of Chester Hospital Trust, Mid-Cheshire Hospital Trust, North West Ambulance Service.



FOREWORD

Scrutiny's focus for this year has been around increasing its impact together with ensuring that outputs are transparent and well evidenced. The outputs have been based around producing SMART (Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely) recommendations, which can then be implemented by Cabinet Members, with an additional focus on examining and questioning Cabinet decisions. Whereas its impacts have focused on ensuring that the recommendations made have a positive result for our residents and the services they receive.

Another priority for scrutiny has been around increasing public engagement in its work. On all scrutiny committee agendas, members of the public are invited to attend and address the Committee on matters relevant to the meeting. Whilst members of the public do attend scrutiny meetings, the numbers are not as high as scrutiny members would wish to see. Therefore, scrutiny has been focusing on other forms of engagement and has actively been seeking input from residents in its scrutiny exercises, such as via the new quarterly Scrutiny Newsletters; direct engagement via topic specific questionnaires with residents and key stakeholders and inviting key witnesses to input into scrutiny reviews. The Newsletter has enabled scrutiny to engage and articulate its processes with residents and key stakeholders, highlighting its rationale and impacts. As a result of these new initiatives, engagement has increased but more can be done and this focus will carry forward into next year.

Scrutiny Members were keen to take their fact-finding exercises outside of the Committee Room and a number of them visited the Countess of Chester NHS Foundation Trust Hospital in March 2025. This provided them with an excellent opportunity to improve their knowledge of the challenges being faced by the hospital, to experience first hand day-to-day operations and allowed doctors and nurses to share their stories with the members, all of which helped foster stronger relationships with the hospital. The Scrutiny Management Group have requested that for 2025/26 there are more opportunities for members to undertake site visits and fact finding exercises.

Scrutiny Committee membership has seen several changes throughout the year and the Scrutiny Team has delivered a number of internal training sessions to new members. These development sessions will continue into the forthcoming year. Local councils are facing increasing financial pressures along with an increase in demand in key services. Scrutiny has played a vital role this year in the Council's governance arrangement by holding Cabinet and Senior Officers to account over their decision and delivery of services. Scrutiny members have been able to articulate local concerns when key services have been under pressure, such as during the scrutiny review of SEND.



Parents, Carers and stakeholders were invited to share their experiences with the Council's SEND service and as a result forty-five recommendations were made.

The first Call-In for a while was heard by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which then prompted several awareness training sessions to be delivered to Senior Managers on the Council's Call-In Process. Whilst some Pre-Decision Scrutiny exercises are undertaken, Scrutiny Members are keen to undertake more. The Scrutiny Manager has been working with the Assistant Chief Executive to devise a mechanism where scrutiny can receive early notification of pending Cabinet Decisions.

At the time of writing this Combined Annual Scrutiny Report, the four Scrutiny Committees have been developing their Work Programmes for 2025/26. To help ensure that scrutiny is focusing on the right priorities and topics, the Scrutiny Team are exploring ways in which data, including performance data, can help inform these programmes. Currently, the Council's Performance Indicators are reported to the Council's Corporate Cheshire West and Chester Scrutiny Committee, but the two operational service Committees (People and Places) do not always have an integral link to this data. The Scrutiny Team is working with the Transformation and Performance Team to develop a mechanism whereby the Places and People Scrutiny Committees receive an oversight of relevant data and intelligence to help identify priority areas where services are under performing.

And finally, the Scrutiny Manager attended the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny Conference which was held in March 2025 in Birmingham. The Conference brought together a variety of speakers, Scrutiny Councillors and Scrutiny Colleagues where they were able to share best practices and attend thought-provoking workshops.

Key Themes & Takeaways:

- The importance of effective scrutiny in an ever changing local government sector.
- Issues other local authorities and NHS Trusts have experienced have centred around poor governance; in-effective checks and balances; and the absence of independent assurance and scrutiny on their decisions.
- The added value of scrutiny to provide and improve the above, which in turn helps to enable residents to have trust in the Cabinet's decision-making process.
- Scrutiny in the Combined/Strategic Authorities.
- Effective and the importance of Health Scrutiny

Penny Housley
Statutory Scrutiny Officer
Cheshire West and Chester Council



SCRUTINY CHAIRS



Councillor Martin Barker

Chair of Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Responsible for holding to account those who deliver services on a borough wide basis and cross-cutting issues impacting the Council and the Borough as a whole.



Councillor Gina Lewis

Chair of Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Responsible for reviewing any matter that has an impact on Statutory Scrutiny Responsibilities relating to Health Services.



Councillor Sam Naylor

Chair of Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Responsible for holding to account those who deliver all place-based services including environment, localities, regeneration, and growth.



Councillor Patricia Parkes

Chair of People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Responsible for holding to account those who deliver services based on individual need to children and adults, including health and wellbeing and education services.



CONTEXT

The scrutiny function is crucial in scrutinising the services and performance framework of Cheshire West and Chester Council. The Council operates four Overview and Scrutiny Committees, each focusing on specific areas aligned with the council's directorates and priorities outlined in the Borough Plan:

- Cheshire West and Chester (Corporate)
- Health
- People
- Places

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee also appoints Statutory Parent Governor Representatives, who contribute to education-related scrutiny matters. Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings are held regularly, they are open to the public, and broadcast live on the council's website. Officers, partners, local organisations, health professionals, and witnesses are often invited to share information and respond to members' inquiries. Members of the scrutiny committees play an important role in holding Cabinet Members accountable for their decisions. Scrutiny activities range from formal committee meetings, briefing notes and task groups/deep dives focusing on specific topics.

Local Authorities are required to publish an Annual Scrutiny Report to demonstrate their work. Each of the four Scrutiny Committees produces individual reports, culminating in this summary report.

The scrutiny function at Cheshire West and Chester Council is supported by the Scrutiny Manager, Scrutiny Officer, and Democratic Services Officers who are part of the Governance Directorate's Democratic Services Team. The scrutiny function also receives a lot of support from Senior Managers and Service Managers of the Council, along with partner organisations.

This year the scrutiny process had to be interrupted and paused several times due to the occurrence of a number of elections including the Police and Crime Commissioner in May 2024, General Election in July 2024 and most recently the Runcorn and Helsby by-election held in May 2025. These elections required scrutiny to suspend or cancel its meetings due to the rules around pre-election periods. Scrutiny has done its best to catch up after the elections and several reviews have had to be rolled forward to the next municipal year.



A YEAR IN REVIEW

One of the priorities of the Scrutiny team this year has been increasing the levels of engagement and participation from partners, external organisations, guests, witnesses, and residents of the borough. This saw the launch of several new features including a Scrutiny Newsletter which has so far had two issues circulated and will be sent on a quarterly basis to Councillors, Parish Councils, published on the Councils website, and distributed to any other interested parties.

Recent Scrutiny Reviews

Below you can find published reports that summarise recent in-depth reviews (sometimes known as Task Groups) undertaken by Scrutiny Councillors.

Colas Highways Contract

The Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinised the performance of the Colas Highways Contract when it had been embedded for a period of one year.

Scrutiny Review of the Colas Highways Contract - November 2024

Community Safety Partnership

The Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee has undertaken its annual review of the Community Safety Partnership with the focus of the 2024-2025 review being substance misuse.

Annual Scrutiny Review of the Community Safety Partnership 2024-2025

Cheshire West & Chester Council



Scrutiny Bulletin

Cheshire West and Chester Council's Quarterly Scrutiny Newsletter
Winter 2024/2025

Welcome to the new quarterly scrutiny newsletter for Cheshire West and Chester Council. Its purpose is to help inform residents, Councillors, Officers, and key stakeholders in Cheshire West and Chester on the work of the Councils' scrutiny function. Each edition will highlight the work of the scrutiny committees, include comments from the Scrutiny Chairs, and a preview of upcoming Task Groups and Spotlight Reviews.

Stay engaged with special features, interviews with scrutiny members, and opportunities to voice your opinions. The bulletin will keep you connected with the scrutiny that the committees undertake.

What is Overview and Scrutiny?

Overview and Scrutiny in local government is an essential part of a local councillor's role in representing local people. Those councillors, who sit on scrutiny committees, are there to hold the decision and policy makers of Cheshire West and Chester (and certain partner organisations) to account. Committee members take an in depth look at how local services are provided and delivered, and how the Council performs and spends its money. Scrutiny Councillors also seek assurance that the most vulnerable adults and children who live in Cheshire West are kept safe.

Similarly, the Scrutiny webpage on the Council's website has undergone a significant refresh with more information available on how residents can engage with the scrutiny process as well as hosting all the recent Scrutiny Task Group Reports so that we can better show our stakeholders the impact that Scrutiny is having.

Scrutiny has launched several improved guidance documents this year, including a handbook to guide Councillors through the scrutiny process and another to be used by Council Officers who are engaging with Scrutiny.

Another focus of the Scrutiny Team has been ensuring the focus of the scrutiny function aligns with, and adapts to, the Council's and resident's priorities. Each of the four committees have scrutinised high-interest topics including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and speed limits outside schools. Similarly, Scrutiny has kept up to date with the changing policies and strategies of the Council ensuring it has held to account decisions on changing services such as Household Waste Recycling Centres, Housing and Homelessness strategies, and Section 106 payments.

Scrutiny Councillors agreed over 200 recommendations this year, with 45 coming from the review into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities alone. Recommendations made by each of the committee this year have been targeted at making an impact and the Scrutiny Team regularly make requests to Cabinet Members for updates on their implementation.



THE COMMITTEES

Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny

This Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those who deliver services on a borough-wide basis and cross-cutting issues impacting on the Council and borough as a whole. This includes effectiveness and delivery of borough-wide services and strategies, Council owned companies, overall performance and the annual budget development and consultation process.

A Summary of work undertaken by the Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2024/25:

As with previous years, the Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook its annual reviews of the Council's budget, Compliments and Complaints, Council Companies, and financial and corporate performance. The Committee also saw the introduction of several new topics that will be returning as annual or bi-annual updates including an update on planning application processing and performance, section 106 payments, and a report relating to the performance against the property asset strategy. The Scrutiny Committee also took part in a scrutiny review into Registered Social Landlords and were able to meet with representatives from the Regulator of Social Housing, Muir, Sanctuary, and ForHousing.

The Committee made 39 recommendations this year, including amongst others several suggested improvements to the compliments and complaints process, a call for increased focus on Social Value in reporting methods, that member briefings and parish council briefings are better utilised by service areas to communicate the capital programme, and that Ward Members are more regularly updated on section 106 spending in the areas they represent.

Good progress has been made in actioning these recommendations within the municipal year with 21 being completed and closed, including the actioning of requests for topics or updates to return to the committee in the next municipal year.

Next year, the committee anticipates receiving items on the Councils capital programme, its Invest to Save strategy, how the Councils manages outstanding debt owed to it, and an update on various developing strategies and policies such as the Social Value Policy, second Climate Emergency Response Plan, and will as always undertake a diligent review of the Councils performance and financial management.





Health Overview and Scrutiny

This Scrutiny Committee is responsible for undertaking the Council's statutory scrutiny responsibilities relating to planning, provision and operation of health services across Cheshire West and Chester. This involves reviewing the work Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board, health providers other health sector organisations.

A Summary of work undertaken by the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2024/25:

The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee met on seven occasions, undertook one site visit to the Countess of Chester Hospital and considered eighteen topics during 2024/25. A variety of Health Colleagues attended the seven meetings and answered scrutiny's questions and Committee Members are extremely grateful for their time, contribution and engagement with the scrutiny process. The remit and responsibilities of Health Scrutiny are slightly different to the other three committee's in that it holds NHS commissioners, providers and bodies to account around their plans and performance rather than focusing predominantly on Council Services. The Health System is a complex and high-profile service, and as Scrutiny Councillors are not experts, they hope that as lay people, they have reflected their residents' concerns through robust and appropriate questioning.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee were repeatedly informed that the Health and Care System is overwhelmed nationally and locally, and that budget pressures and an ageing population are contributing to the increasing system pressures.

Scrutiny's main role this municipal year has been hearing from health and care professionals about the pressures and challenges they face along with the plans being implemented to address them, or to find alternative solutions to them. Scrutiny has also been focused on raising issues that their residents were facing with the professions and then, in turn, raising public understanding and awareness of the issues being experienced in the health and care system as a whole.





There have been a number of scrutiny topics this year that have straddled two scrutiny Committees (People and Health) and joint meetings have been held to consider them. These include mental health services and patient flow and discharge in acute hospitals.

The importance of building resilience in the health and care sector has been highlighted on many occasions to the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Committee learned that residents could be encouraged to do more to prepare themselves for later life. The Committee has spent time this municipal year asking questions about the local context of the resilience of the Health System. Improving the resilience and health of the borough's population will be an area for the Committee to focus on next year.

Budget and resource pressures, along with the raise in demand for health services will feature in 2025/26 work programme, along with the measures being implemented to try to improve the health and wellbeing of our residents. Increasing mental health issues and waiting lists for mental health services have been recurring themes this year but due to other priorities and several pauses in the scrutiny work programme, this topic will feature again in 2025/26. Patient flow and discharge within acute hospitals will also feature in next year's work programme along with the impact that this is having on social care budgets and resources.



People Overview and Scrutiny

This Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those who deliver services based on individual needs to children and adults. The committee reviews and makes recommendations for improvement to any matter that have an impact on the educational needs, safety or health and wellbeing of people in Cheshire West and Chester. This includes responsibilities in relation to education, social care and safeguarding, welfare rights, healthy life and lifestyle choices and integration of services with partner organisations. The committee is also responsible for reviewing performance relating to Children's and Adults Services such as OFSTED reports. The committee appoints statutory Parent Governor Representatives relating to education matters.

A Summary of work undertaken by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2024/25:

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee's key focuses have mirrored those included in the Council's Borough Plan – starting well and ensuring resilient residents are able to live their best lives. These reviews include Adults and Children's Safeguarding and Performance, Adult Social Care Quality Assurance and Market Oversight and the Annual Scrutiny Review of Education.

New items presented to the committee have included Apprenticeship Support for Children in Care and Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and the Care and Care Leavers Accommodation Strategy. The Committee has also responded to requests for scrutiny from the wider Council by establishing a Home to School Transport Task Group. In December, the Cabinet's decision relating to Extra Care and Care at Home Provision was Called-In and heard by the Committee.

Through its seven meetings and numerous Task Group sessions, the Scrutiny Committee have made 71 recommendations this municipal year (not including a further 45 recommendations made by the SEND Review Task Group). Many of these recommendations have been implemented this year, and the Scrutiny Team are following up on those still active.

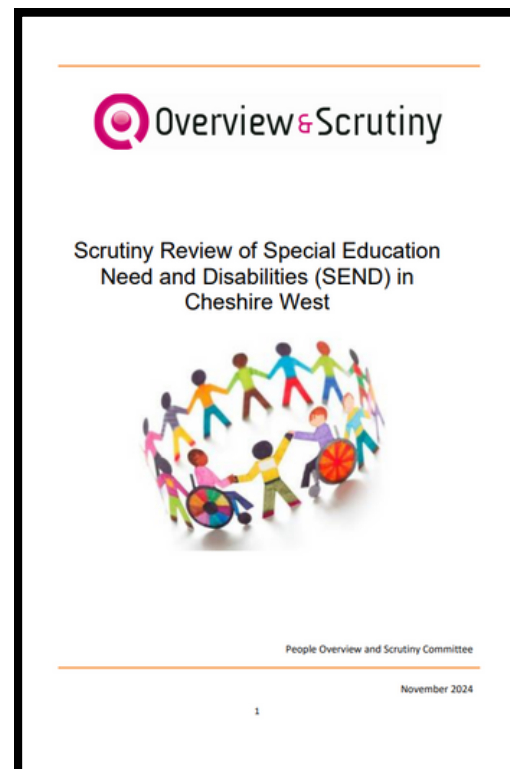
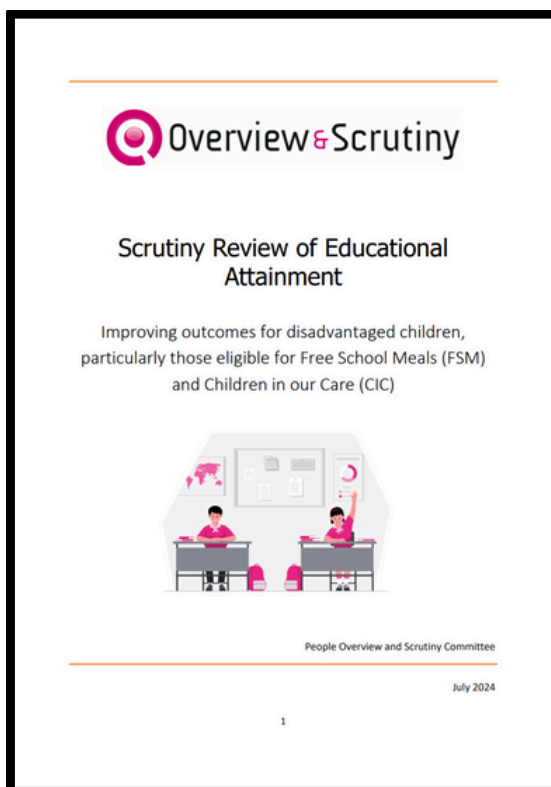
Oversight of the implementation of the Action Plan following Ofsted's ILAC Inspection has been a further priority for the Committee. The Committee has received and will continue to receive updates on progress made with implementing Ofsted's recommendations.





The Care Quality Commission's (CQC) new local authority assessments allow them to provide independent assurance to people of the quality of care in their local area. As part of Care Act (2014) Part 1, the CQC now assesses how local authorities meet their statutory duties in relation to adult social care and as part of Cheshire West and Chester Council's Inspection on 4 in February 2025, the Chair Councillor Patricia Parkes was interviewed by Inspectors about the work of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The main findings from the interview were ensuring that scrutiny's impacts and outputs were transparent and that decision makers are held to account over the implementation of scrutiny's recommendations.

Finally, this year saw the appointment of three new Parent Governor Representatives to the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. On behalf of all Scrutiny Councillors, the team would like to welcome **Kim Bilcliffe, Alexandra Hutchinson, and Nicola Lasikiewicz** and thank them for volunteering their time over the coming years to provide a valuable insight and apolitical voice on local education matters.





Places Overview and Scrutiny

This Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those who deliver all place-based services including environment, localities, regeneration, and growth. The committee reviews and makes recommendations for improvement in relation to any matter that has an impact on the physical, geographical, and economic needs of the borough. This includes flood management, crime and disorder, highways, street scene, locality working and regeneration and growth.

A Summary of work undertaken by the Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2024/25:

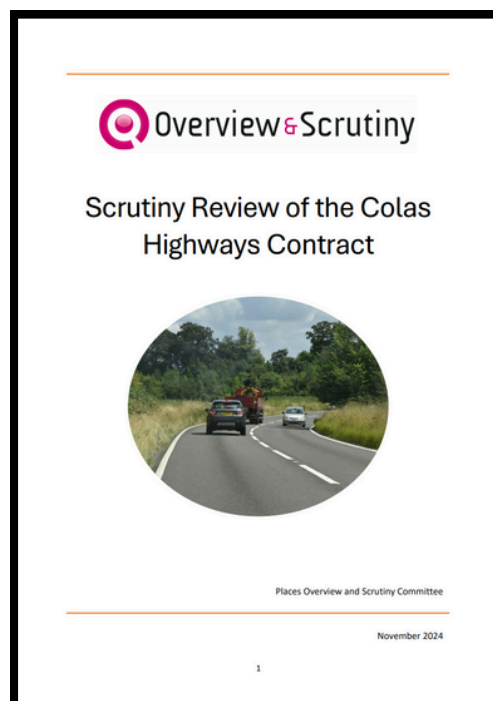
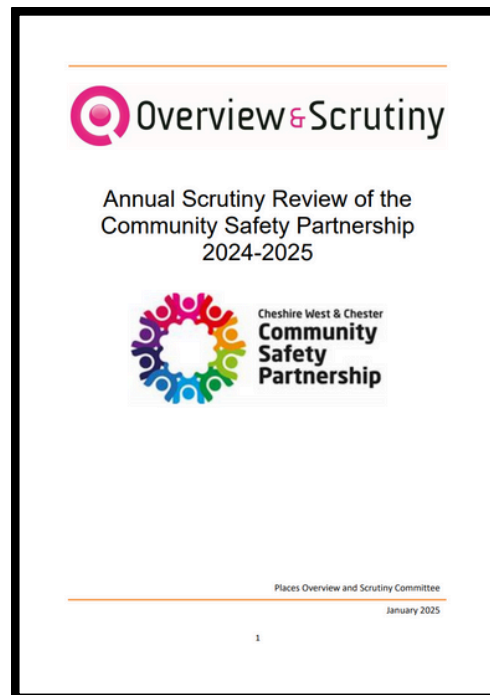
The Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee has seen several new and topical items come before the Committee including an update on how the Council's StreetCare team operates, an overview of the changes to Cheshire West Recycling, and several updates on developing policies and strategies in the areas of Homelessness and Housing provision in the borough. The Committee has also had the opportunity to undertake several in-depth reviews into subjects such as the new model of delivery for the Councils Household Waste Recycling Centres, the Colas Highways Contract, and its annual review of the Community Safety partnership in which this year's focus was substance misuse within the borough. Scrutiny Members have also been mindful of what residents of the borough want to see scrutinised. They have endeavoured to respond to these requests where possible, as seen through the recently started review into speed limits outside educational establishments, triggered through a petition by residents and subsequent Council motion.

Through its meetings, the Committee has made 39 recommendations this municipal year. These have included suggestions for improved communication between service areas and residents of the borough, a greater emphasis on carbon reduction in Council strategies and policies, the better use of community events to improve consultation engagement, and that a more varied approach to data sharing with elected Members is explored so that Ward Members have all the information they need to best represent the interests of their constituents.





Next year, the Committee anticipates scrutinising the developing Local Transport Plan, reviewing the Councils approach to contaminated land, receiving the results of the review into speed limits outside educational establishments, and undertaking a deep dive Task Group into knife crime as part of the annual review of the Community Safety Partnership.





SCRUTINY MEMBERS



Councillor Steve Collings

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee



Councillor Sherin Akhtar

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee



Councillor Stuart Bingham

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee



Councillor Hugo Deynem

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
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Committee



Councillor Keith Millar

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview and
Scrutiny Committee &
Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Mark Stocks

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview and
Scrutiny Committee and
Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Lucy Sumner

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee



Cllr Adrian Waddelove

Cheshire West and
Chester Overview
and Scrutiny
Committee



**Councillor Paul
Chamberlain**

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Tom Cooper

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Gillian Edwards

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Katie Kendrick

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Dan Marr

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee and
Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Gaynor Sinar

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Martin Beveridge

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Felicity Davies

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Olwyn Dean

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Michael Garvey

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Mike Jones

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Martin Loftus

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Margaret Parker

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Alan Smith

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor John Stockton

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Alex Tate

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Simon Eardley

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Matt Carter

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Caroline Ellis

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Katrina Kerr

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor John Roach

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



**Councillor Rachel
Waterman**

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Mark Williams

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



LOOKING FORWARD

As we look ahead to the forthcoming municipal year, it is essential to consider ongoing pressures on local council's finances and the increase in demand for services alongside the challenge of reduced resources.

The national context that local authorities operate within is evolving, with significant emphasis on financial sustainability, economic resilience, and having appropriate resources to deliver the Council's priorities.

An effective Transformation Programme is key for the Council to be able to achieve all its priorities and will help to inform Scrutiny's 2025/26 Work Programmes. As part of the transformation process, Cheshire West and Chester is placing increased emphasis on access to and efficient use of data. This improved access to data will be invaluable for scrutiny over the next municipal year and beyond in ensuring that scrutiny is not operating in a vacuum, and that relevant information is informing its work. The Council's priorities are set out in the Cheshire West and Chester Council Borough Plan 2024-2028 and will also be reflected in scrutiny's topic selection.

Local councils continue to face financial pressures. Rising costs of delivering services and shortfalls in funding, which has in some circumstances led to council's issuing Section 114 Notices, mean that Scrutiny has a key role in acting as a critical friend to improve the confidence and trust that residents have in the Council's Decision-Making process and governance arrangements.

The Scrutiny Team will be making more regular updates to the website as and when Task Group Reports are published and the continued rollout of the Scrutiny Newsletter will contribute to new opportunities to encourage residents and key stakeholders to engage with scrutiny.



GETTING INVOLVED

If you have any suggestions for topics that scrutiny or would like to contribute to a review could consider please do let us know.

All reports considered at Scrutiny Committees, along with the minutes and recordings of the meetings, are available at www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk.

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