

Cheshire West & Chester Council
Overview and Scrutiny

ANNUAL REPORT

2023 - 2024





SUMMARY OF THE WORK OF SCRUTINY FOR 2023-2024



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

The Local Elections held in May 2023 saw a high number of new Councillors elected to Cheshire West and Chester Council and this increase was reflected in the membership of the four scrutiny committees. Therefore, one of the immediate priorities for 2023/24 was to deliver a robust scrutiny training programme for new and returning Councillors, to ensure that they had the right skills and knowledge to undertake their roles. The first session was delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny with the next three were delivered in-house by our Scrutiny Team officers.

With budgets under significant and ongoing pressure and demand for services increasing, particularly in Adult and Children Services, scrutiny's focus for 2023/24 was around keeping a watching brief on council finances and performance. Scrutiny has had to be mindful of these pressures whilst also looking at how services are delivered across the wide variety of functions the council is responsible for. Scrutiny has played an active role in reviewing a diverse range of issues including: Qwest Services; Flood Management; River Pollution; Highways; and Disability Day Care Services. There has also been oversight of the Council's compliments and complaints, staff retention, recruitment and child exploitation. During 2023/24 Health Scrutiny has undertaken an active and vital role in engaging with health colleagues and NHS services and in particular looking at the issues of concern to residents such as ambulance wait times, hospital discharge, dental services, access to mental health services and general practice provision in the borough. We are fortunate in Cheshire West that scrutiny has a good working relationship with health colleagues, and they have all positively engaged with our scrutiny exercises.

To ensure that scrutiny's focus is balanced and effective, scrutiny activities have been broken down into sub-categories: improvements; prevention; best value; and holding to account. During the work planning exercises, each committee considered these categories when agreeing their work programmes for 2023/24 to ensure that its efforts were equally spread.

Effective scrutiny requires different approaches to different issues. In addition to considering reports and presentations in committee meetings a significant number of task groups/deep dives have taken place this year. These exercises really allow Councillors to fully understand the issues and make recommendations which have the greatest impact.

Another important element of good scrutiny is ensuring that questioning of Cabinet Members and other decision makers who attend meeting is done in an effective, well-planned manner whilst striking the right balance between challenge and evidence gathering. The Scrutiny Team has supported this process with the formation of suggested lines of enquiry and questions for scrutiny sessions.

Some of the most notable scrutiny events for 2023/24 were: the annual budget scrutiny exercise, holding the Cabinet Member for Finance to account regarding Council Companies, acting as a critical friend to local Health Colleagues and NHS services regarding their performance and CQC Inspections, challenging Cabinet Members for Adults Social Care and Children and Young People regarding safeguarding of the borough's most vulnerable people and contributing to the creation of a new Household Waste Contract.



There are a number of areas for improvement which have been identified including:

- increasing public engagement with scrutiny;
- greater promotion of scrutiny's role and impact;
- continuing to promote awareness of the scrutiny process to senior staff.

In addition, Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee currently scrutinises the finances and performance for the whole council, but to help improve the synergy between this Corporate Committee and the Service based ones (Places and Peoples) a new process is being developed to ensure that those Councillors on Places and People have a greater understanding of any areas of concern relating to their terms of reference.

These areas will be the focus for scrutiny during 2024/25 together with the continued oversight of the ongoing challenges faced by this council.

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 Co-optees, 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.

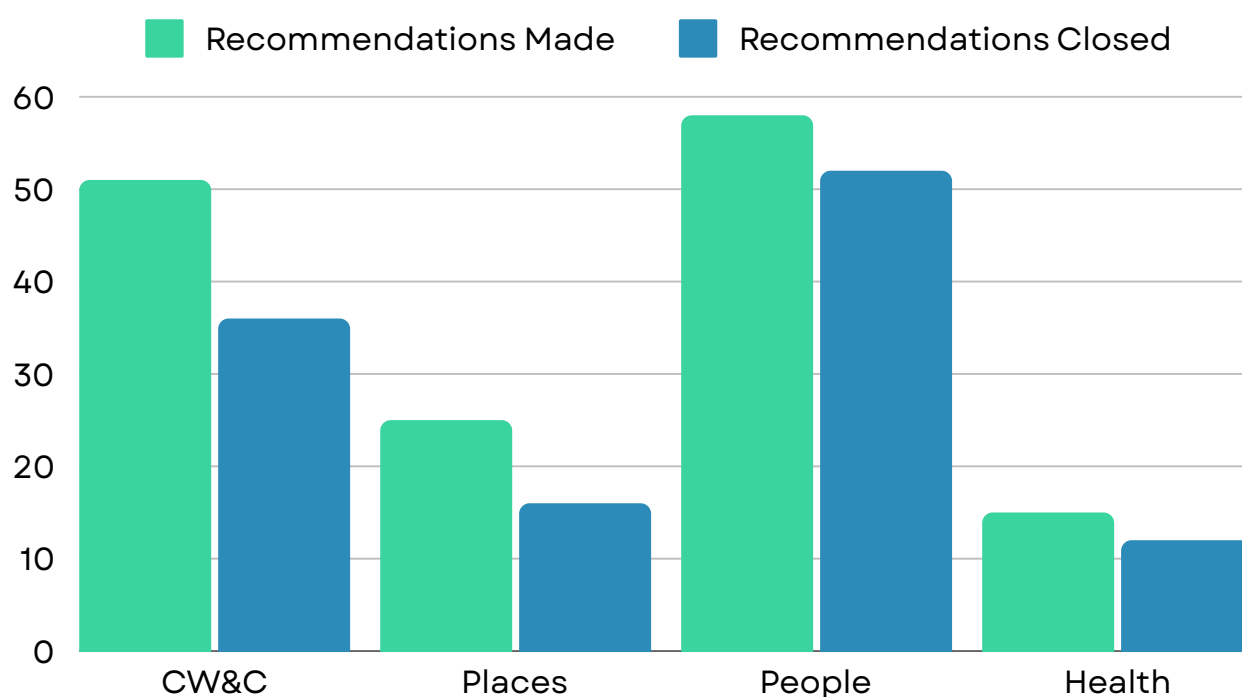
The scrutiny function at Cheshire West and Chester Council is supported by the Scrutiny Manager, Scrutiny Officer, and Democratic Services Officers who are part of the Governance Directorate's Democratic Services Team. The scrutiny function also receives a lot of support from Senior Managers and Service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



A YEAR IN REVIEW

In May 2023 the Local Elections saw 30 new Councillors elected to Cheshire West and Chester Council resulting in changed membership of all four Scrutiny Committees. From May onwards, a priority of the Scrutiny Team was ensuring that Councillors had the relevant skills and knowledge to effectively take on their new roles. A number of training sessions were hosted on the importance of impactful scrutiny and how to be an effective scrutineer.

After the elections had taken place and Members had settled into their role, the Scrutiny Committees commenced their work programmes and considered items on a range of topics including bus services, housing, primary care, safeguarding, and council recruitment and retention.



The year also saw 13 Scrutiny Task Groups created through which Councillors could take a more in-depth look at specific topics or service areas. These have included annual reviews such as social care compliments and complaints and the Community Safety Partnership, as well as new topics such as registered social landlords, and mental health provision.

Councillors were able to make a real impact in the year, seeing over 100 recommendations approved by Cabinet Members and subsequently actioned by Council Officers.



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 2023/24:

As part of its annual work programme, the Committee scrutinised a number of regular items, including the Annual Reviews of Council Companies, flood management, performance management reports, and the Councils budget. New to the committee's agenda this year was an item on corporate compliments and complaints which Members were able to interrogate in detail in a Task Group meeting in November resulting in recommendations that would lead to Councillors being able to play a greater role in the compliments and complaints process. Another new item was a review of the future of services delivered by Qwest, the Council's business management partner organisation. Through several meetings the committee were able to seek assurance that value for money, quality, and achievability were all considered as part of the exploration of a future delivery model.



The committee made 51 recommendations in 2023-2024, including suggestions for improved communication from the service area in relation to flood risk management and better ways to share information on costs and pressures in adults and children's social care with residents. The year also saw 36 recommendations actioned by officers including amendments to the performance reports, improvements to the customer service offering, and greater Councillor engagement in the consultation process.



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 2023/24:

The Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee received quality accounts from the 4 health care providers in the Borough – Acute Hospitals – Countess of Chester and Mid Cheshire: Northwest Ambulance Service and Cheshire and Wirral Partnership. The discussions centred on their performances, quality standards, successes and areas for improvements. The committee also received updates on primary care, with an outline given on how they were commissioned, provided, and monitored, and from discussion Councillors were able to request further scrutiny on general practice, dental services, and community pharmacy.

A new item on the Scrutiny Committee's agenda was on the intervention and prevention of falls after concerns were raised about the numbers of residents in the borough having damaging falls and sustaining serious injuries. Representatives from the Countess of Chester Hospital gave the committee an insightful presentation on what prevention methods were most effective.

The Countess of Chester Hospital also presented to the Scrutiny Committee an update on its recent Care Quality Commission Inspection Report. In October/November 2023 the hospital received a "Inadequate requires improvement" rating. The Director of Nursing was invited to highlight the CQC findings and the Trust's subsequent Action Plan to address the findings.

The Scrutiny Committee made thirty-one recommendations to health providers and these will be followed up during the next municipal year.





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 co-optees relating to education matters.

A Summary of work undertaken by the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2023/24:

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee scrutinised a breadth of topics across its core responsibilities including safeguarding, social care, education, and inspection and visit regimes. Through various spotlights on the Adults and Children's Social Care Services, the committee was able to make a number of recommendations for improvements. Likewise, the committee undertook its statutory annual review of education through which concerns were raised about attainment and the progress made by less advantaged children. This review led to the establishment of a Task Group to look into attainment on a more granular level so as to make suggestions for greater accessibility of the resources provided to assist children from disadvantaged backgrounds.



As members of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Councillors are given the opportunity to visit front line services, staff, and children's centres. Through these visits the committee were able to be assured that young people who use Council services receive the optimum care and support, and that the Council, as commissioners, was receiving value for money.

This year fifty-eight recommendations were agreed by the Scrutiny Committee, including updates to the Council website for greater transparency and ease of finding information for service users, and development of a training and guidance regime so that Councillors can better signpost residents to Council resources and services.



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 2023/24:

The Places Overview and Scrutiny Committee had a variety of reports brought to it by Council Officers including an in-depth item on the Council's highways asset management, digital connectivity and the bus service improvement plan. A particular focus for the committee was housing and Councillors were pleased to scrutinise the development of several new strategies and policies including the Housing Assistance Policy, the Council Housing Asset Management Strategy, and a review of the Housing Delivery Programme. These items allowed Councillors to be assured that consultation feedback had been considered, that Officers were delivering an appropriate strategy to combat the housing need in the borough, and that progress was being made towards housing delivery in line with the local plan policy.

As well as making 25 recommendations over the course of the year, Officers were also able to report to the Scrutiny Team that 16 recommendations had been actioned including the establishment of a Task Group to scrutinise the performance and management of the Colas Highways Management contract, that new approaches to public consultation are considered and trialled to drive a qualitative approach, and that the Cabinet approves the adoption of the housing policies received by the committee.





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 and
Scrutiny 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 Tom Cooper

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Gillian Edwards

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr (Prev) Mike Edwards

Health Overview and
Scrutiny Committee and
People 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 Martin Beveridge

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee
(from October 23)



Councillor Simon Boone

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee (to
October 23)



Councillor Felicity Davies

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Olwyn Dean

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Martin Loftus

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee
(from October 23)



Cllr Margaret Parker

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Gaynor Sinar

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee (to
October 23)



Councillor Alan Smith

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Peter Wheeler

People Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Simon Eardley

Places Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr (Prev) Andrew Cooper

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



LOOKING FORWARD

Like all local councils, Cheshire West and Chester Council continues to face significant pressures on its budgets and an increasing demand for its services. During the 2024/25 municipal year scrutiny will continue to play an important and active role in holding decision makers to account and helping to local improve services whilst being mindful of the financial position.

To help focus scrutiny's attention, its activities have now been broken down into sub-categories and this will help ensure scrutiny can focus on the right things at the right time. As the number of scrutiny topics is increasing, scrutiny will need to continue to focus its efforts effectively through a mixture of at committee scrutiny exercises, deeper dive task groups and briefing notes.

A number of areas have been identified to help raise scrutiny's impact and these will be a priority for 2024/25, as well as having oversight of the ongoing challenges faced by this council. A robust training programme for scrutiny members was delivered during 2023/24 but as the challenges and demands on local councils continue to grow, the Scrutiny Team will deliver further training and development opportunities to ensure that Councillors have up to date knowledge and skills. Scrutiny Councillors and the Team will continue to make the most of resources and training opportunities offered to them by Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and the Local Government Association. To help to continue to raise the profile and understanding of scrutiny within the authority, handbooks, newsletters, and improvements to the website are being developed. In addition, Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee currently scrutinises the finances and performance for the whole Council, but to help improve the synergy between this Corporate Committee and the Service based ones (Places and Peoples) a new process is being developed to ensure that those Councillors on Places and People have a greater understanding of any areas of concern relating to their terms of reference.

Cheshire West and Chester Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue to have oversight of the Council finance and performance information as well as undertaking reviews into new and topical issues such as the process for Section 106 payments, the Councils Cyber Security arrangements, and the Climate Emergency Response Plan refresh.



Places Overview and Scrutiny has a series of planned reviews including a Task Group on the performance of the Colas Highways Asset Management strategy and an item on the new Homelessness Strategy, together with concluding its review of River Pollution.

People Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue its oversight and focus in helping to protect the borough's most vulnerable children, young people and adults, together with scrutinising how the Council's SEND services are delivered. This committee will also conclude its oversight work of the new proposals for Disability Day Care services as well as having oversight of the implementation of the Action Plan to address the issues identified in the recent OFSTED Inspection of Local Authority Children Services. Adult Social Care will receive its first Care Quality Commission Inspection during 2024/25 and again, oversight of the findings will be a priority for the People Scrutiny Committee.

Health Overview and Scrutiny has a number of key priorities for 2024/25 including having oversight of progress being made by the Countess of Chester Hospital with its CQC Inspection Action Plan. Another priority for Health Scrutiny is to have oversight on how health and care services are working collaboratively to tackle and improve hospital discharge rates. The committee is aware that inadequate discharge is having a negative impact on a number of services including ambulance wait and hand over times, wait times at Accident and Emergency and the availability of hospital beds. Improving access to general practice services including GPs, dentistry and pharmacy is going to be pivotal for the Health Scrutiny Committee during 2024/25.

Finally, there are a number of emerging scrutiny topics which cross-cut several committees, so during 2024/25 there will be opportunities for some of the scrutiny committees to work collaboratively undertaking joint scrutiny review.



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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