

SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

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Introduction by Scrutiny Champion

My name is Councillor Frank Hemmings and I am a Councillor for the Chirk North ward. I am also the Council's Scrutiny Champion. My role requires me to guide and promote the scrutiny function both inside and outside the Council. Hopefully, this report will give you a better understanding of the important role that scrutiny Members play. We oversee the operations of the Council and our partners to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved for the people of the County Borough. The work of scrutiny continues to evolve to help the Council address the "big issues" it and the people of Wrexham face.

The period under review in this report is from June 2023 to May 2024. During the period under review Councillor Tina Mannering was Scrutiny Champion. I would like to take this opportunity to thank her for the work she has undertaken in this role.

This is the first year of the new Council Plan 2023-28 and our scrutiny work programmes have been reviewed to broadly align with the new priorities and will continue to develop as the delivery of the Plan progresses. We have also scrutinised service areas experiencing significant budget pressures during the year reviewed - children and adult social care, education and school transport.

Work undertaken during 2023/24 is outlined by each committee within this report. If you would like to see more detail of the work highlighted, each item includes the dates on which it was considered by that committee. The related reports and minutes can be viewed via the following link [Committee structure | Wrexham County Borough Council](#) .

As outlined scrutiny is an active process that does not exist in isolation from wider society. We continue to hope that, where allowable and appropriate, our processes are open, participatory and investigatory and that we adopt a flexible approach so we deliver positive outcomes. Adopting the right approach in the right circumstance is a key consideration in delivering the right outcome. Examples of this have included:-

- Informal workshop on priority ranking of school maintenance was held for Members of the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee at the new Welsh medium Ysgol Llan-y-Pwll primary school. This included a tour of the new school. This provided Members with a better understanding of how school maintenance and investment is prioritised, to inform their consideration of a new criteria for capital investment from the Welsh Government Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme.

- Hearing the views of people directly affected by the matters being considered. This has included headteachers in discussions around the roll out of the Curriculum for Wales, engagement with pupil voice and pupil well-being; representatives of the Ty Pawb Advisory Board and operators of a business school that has helped Wrexham businesses.
- Collaborative working with Members and Officers of Flintshire County Council in the development of a Flintshire and Wrexham Public Service Board and Scrutiny Compact agreement, and a joint workshop session with Flintshire County Councillors in May 2024 which included a practical guide to using the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015).

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those that have been involved in scrutiny during the year for their contributions in helping scrutiny deliver for the people of Wrexham.

GET INVOLVED!

How, When and Where?

Committees tend to meet each month. We invite decision-makers, interested parties and experts to help us with our discussions. We usually meet in the Guildhall. During the period of this Annual Report, we have continued to operate hybrid meetings, with a number of Councillors and Officers present in the room, as well as others who are joining remotely. Invited parties can also join these meetings either in person or remotely. Generally our meetings are open to the public, and our agenda and related reports are available via the Council's website. We also webcast most of our meetings and you can view these live or from our archives via the Council's website. We would like to know what you think?

“What issues are important to you and the people in your neighbourhood?”

“Did you know that the public can suggest issues for scrutiny committees to look at?”

“What issues do you think the Council and its partners should be tackling?”

Use the following link to help you to **GET INVOLVED!** [Get involved - Scrutiny in Wrexham](#)

GOT ANY QUESTIONS?

You can contact the **Scrutiny Support Team** by email: scrutiny@wrexham.gov.uk or via **your local councillor:** [Councillors](#) | [Wrexham County Borough Council](#).

OUR SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Council Plan 2023-28 sets out six priorities:

- Delivering Efficient Streetscene Services and Decarbonising our Environment
- Developing the Economy
- Ensuring Wrexham is a Fair and Safe Place
- Improving Education and Learning
- Promoting Good Health & Well-being (with a focus on Social Services and Good Mental Health)
- Supporting a Highly Skilled and Engaged Workforce, Focused on Delivering Services

The work of the Council's five Scrutiny Committees is focussed on supporting the following priority areas. The issues you would expect them to discuss are outlined below:-

- **Employment, Business and Investment** - To focus on Wrexham as a place where people want to live, work, learn, visit and invest; that businesses are supported to locate and grow here and that people are able to prosper as individuals in their communities. This Committee would discuss economic development and business support services, anti-poverty, tourism and culture, regeneration and rural & urban development;
- **Safeguarding, Communities and Wellbeing** - To focus on the people of Wrexham feeling safe and secure with sustainable, attractive settlements, neighbourhoods, buildings and spaces. To ensure that vulnerable children and adults are safeguarded and have good health and well-being. This Committee would discuss children and adult social services, child poverty, health, public protection services, leisure / library services and community centres, and crime & disorder and community cohesion matters;
- **Homes and Environment** - To focus on the delivery of homes that meet people's needs and aspirations in well - connected communities. To ensure that we are an environmentally responsible County Borough. This Committee would discuss homes (affordable housing, the council's housing stock and social housing, homelessness), waste management, energy efficiency, Street-scene services and the road transport network/highway maintenance;
- **Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance** - To ensure we are customer focussed and innovative, soundly organised, resourced and governed, in order to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people of Wrexham. This Committee would discuss performance management, Human Resources, equality issues, health & safety, customer contact (including the Contact Centre), the Council's finances and asset management arrangements, partnership and collaboration arrangements and the Council's democratic services;
- **Lifelong Learning** - To focus on areas that ensure that people have positive aspirations, education and potential. This Committee would discuss education issues (children and adult) and libraries.

EMPLOYMENT, BUSINESS & INVESTMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Place Making Plan (July 2023)

The Council's Placemaking Plan outlines an overarching approach for improving places and inspiring people to reimagine and influence how where they live, work, visit & invest looks, feels and functions. It provides principles for the whole County Borough and a framework for the Council's City of Culture 2029 ambitions. It specifically promotes better; Design, Development, More appealing land uses, Physical, cultural, and social infrastructure and Ongoing growth. The Committee considered the draft Plan prior to its approval. When considering the impact of the proposed Plan, the committee agreed to endorse the Plan for approval by the Executive Board, subject to proposed changes, including; that the proposed reference group include representation from the 3rd sector and that reference be made to community transport and connectivity, where identified in the Plan's objectives. In addition to comments on the plan the committee asked that the provision of smart technology be explored in relation to the proposed new signage for the County Borough, that the future report on the model of delivery for the Placemaking Plan, be considered by the committee prior to its consideration by the Executive Board, funding that had been identified for this purpose was still available, that an explainer film for the Placemaking Plan be explored and that public consultation on the Plan be continued as appropriate. These proposals were accepted when the Plan was approved and consideration of the delivery model for the Plan has been scheduled on the Committee's future work programme.

SMART Towns (September 2023 and May 2024)

A SMART Town is one where digital technology can support the collection of data that can be interpreted to support improved decision making by Councils, businesses, consumers and residents. The important role that such technology could play in the development of Wrexham was highlighted by work carried out by the Committee's Town Centre Regeneration Task and Finish Group. Their recommendation was that a further report on the development of the Smart Town Initiative, taking into account its positive impact on attracting visitors, creating the conditions for business development and informing business support; and performance improvement measures be developed using the data made available. A report meeting these requirements, with updates, was considered in September 2023. The Committee asked for updates on electronic information boards, incorporating sensor data into decision making, future fibre provision for Wrexham and supported pilot work, together with opportunities to bid for further funding. This report was considered in May 2024 and together with updates on the points previously raised the Committee were advised on developments in Connectivity, Visitor Information and Experience, Wrexham App, Profile and Awareness, Placemaking and the next steps for SMART Towns. The Committee acknowledged the increasing role that projects covered by SMART will have on capitalising on the world wide focus on the area and the need to ensure that the offer that the area provides meets the requirement of local people, together with national and international visitors. The Committee asked that any possible changes in CCCTV coverage take into account the position of new SMART street furniture, the Change and Decarbonisation Boards look at the opportunities developments in this area will have in their areas of responsibility. The committee also asked for further information in relation to the development and popularity of the VSTA app and feedback on information provided by the new digital infrastructure in the City Centre.

CUSTOMERS, PERFORMANCE, RESOURCES & GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Workforce Monitoring Reports (July 2023 and March 2024)

We continue to monitor absence, performance, training and sickness levels within the Council Workforce on a six monthly basis in order to establish any trends and with a view to reducing sickness absence and use of agency staff. Although sickness rates have increased since the Covid pandemic along with the national trend, the most recent report showed a slight reduction in the sickness compared with the same period in the previous year and a reduction in the cost of agency staff, particularly in Social Care and Environment Departments. It is hoped that this will continue to decrease, with the range of Health & Well-being Initiatives being implemented and the 'grow your own' internal recruitment campaign. Due to the significant budget savings which are being worked through by the newly formed Change and Efficiency Board, the Committee will continue to monitor this area to consider the impact of these changes on the well-being and performance of its workforce.

Flintshire and Wrexham Public Service Board (PSB) (December 2023)

Public Services Boards were established for each local authority area in Wales by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFG). It is a partnership body comprised of statutory members from Health, Local Authority, Natural Resources Wales, Fire and Rescue Authority and other non-statutory partners. The purpose of the Board is to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being in the local authority area. Sustainable development is the overriding principle of the Board's activities. This means acting in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The Board will ensure that everything it does is directed by the five ways of working (long term, prevention, involvement, collaboration & integration). This Committee has statutory powers to scrutinise the work of the PSB and meets annually with representatives. Following the merger of the Flintshire and Wrexham PSB's in January 2023, we took the opportunity to review the PSB and Scrutiny Protocol and developed a new PSB and Scrutiny Compact (an 'agreement to co-operate'). Having now had the experience of working through a 5 year cycle of the PSB's Well-being plan, the Compact has been shortened into a much more practical guide on how the PSB and scrutiny in Wrexham will work together. It sets out:-

- Roles and duties of scrutiny and the PSB
- Timetable for the development and monitoring of the PSB well-being plan
- Involvement of PSB, Scrutiny Committee, Chairs and support Officers during different stages of the process.

The Compact was agreed at the meeting of the Committee held in December 2023, along with a recommendation to hold an All Member Workshop on the five ways of working, to involve Flintshire Councillors. The workshop was held in May and is the start of some informal joint working between Wrexham and Flintshire scrutiny on the work of the Flintshire and Wrexham PSB. It is hoped that, in the interests of collaboration, the PSB and Wrexham Scrutiny Compact can also be adopted for Flintshire's scrutiny arrangements, to create some synergy in processes and timetable, whilst also maintaining local accountability.

HOMES & ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Decarbonisation Task and Finish Group and Decarbonisation Plan (June 2023 and December 2023)

Wrexham Council declared a Climate and Ecological Emergency in September 2019, and published a Decarbonisation Plan in May 2021, focussing on five key themes (Buildings and Energy, Transport and Mobility, Land Use and Green Infrastructure, Procurement and supply chain and Influencing and enabling change. The Annual report for the previous year reported that a Task and Finish Group would be established to look in detail at how Behaviour Change will drive decarbonisation, both inside and outside the organisation. The Group reported their findings to the Committee at the December 2023 meeting. The Group met on 5 occasions. The Council currently has a number of programmes and initiatives that are key in supporting behaviour change, both inside and outside the organisation, which will help deliver Decarbonisation. These were considered and reviewed by the Group with a view to identifying areas that could be added or where it was thought that additional focus could be made to drive behaviour change. Their report set out details of the information considered by the Group, their views on progress being made and resultant findings and recommendations.

The Group concluded that there was a wide range of work being undertaken to address this issue and that the existing outlined initiatives and programmes should be supported. No specific additional areas of work were identified and a number of possible future actions to existing programmes and initiatives are identified and supported for consideration. The role of a Task and Finish Group looks at specific areas in far more detail than a regular report, but in some instances its role is to ensure that the correct actions are being followed and that was the case in this instance. The six recommendations it did make, that identified focus and support on areas or programmes already underway were all agreed by the Committee.

Improving Public Transport (May 2023)

The majority of local bus services have still not returned to a level of patronage that matched pre-pandemic numbers. Recognising this, Welsh Government has allocated North Wales an additional £5.61m for 2024/25 in the form of Bus Network Grant. This is provided in addition to the existing Bus Service Support Grant, for the purpose of providing funding to maintain the bus network across North Wales, where operators have identified services that are no longer commercially viable. The Council has undertaken a procurement exercise during February and March 2024 to obtain submissions of timetable proposals to fill gaps identified within the commercial bus network. The Committee realised the important role that improved public transport has in a number of key areas, these included delivering decarbonisation of transport, improving quality of opportunity for residents that do not have their own transport, allowing economic development and improving the quality of life of people across the County Borough. The Committee welcomed the possible further expansion of services and their frequency and requested future information regarding current usage figures for routes, together with the funding position and any change in provision in for rural areas.

LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

School Transport – Budget Pressures (October 2023 and May 2024)

The Committee has been considering school transport issues over a period of 18 months relating to Post-16 transport, the problems in recruiting school escorts and school hazardous routes. By shining the spotlight on this service area, some of the problems and significant budget pressures have improved. These have included recruitment and retention of school escorts, a new role of Strategic Transport Lead, a new purchasing system which allowed closer contract and budget monitoring leading to a £700k reduction of the budget pressure during 2023/24. The school transport budget has been increased by £1,279,763 for 2024/25 to take account of the growth in demand, particularly Additional Learning Needs pupils, and we will continue to monitor this area of work, to include a review of school hazardous routes. Officers in the Environment and Technical Department are exploring the possibility of purchasing/leasing vehicles and creating a job description for drivers to be employed by the authority for some of our higher cost journeys. Consideration of a pilot is being considered by officers in WCBC's fleet and transport team, as it comes with a number of considerations around health and safety, licensing etc. If feasible this may also give the opportunity for other journeys to be supported outside of school drop-off and pick-up times.

Education Estate – Capital Investment (December 2023 and March 2024)

The Welsh Government Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme will transition away from fixed bands of funding to a more agile rolling programme of capital investment over a nine year period, consisting of a short, medium and long term plan of capital investment. We considered and supported a proposed scoring methodology and weightings to be used to prioritise schools for Band C. The remaining four Band B projects (St. Mary's Brymbo, St. Mary's RC, Specialist Provision and New Provision) will be delivered during years 1-3 of the Sustainable Communities for Learning Programme (phase 1). It was proposed that phase 2 of the programme would be based on the needs for Additional Learning Needs (ALN) provision, with a view to address the increased costs arising from out of county ALN provision for those with specialist need. Phase 3 would address the strategic drivers at that time but it was anticipated that this may include Welsh Medium. We also held a workshop for Members of the Committee at the new Welsh Medium School, Ysgol Llan-y-Pwll in November 2023 to develop Members' understanding of how school maintenance and investment is prioritised. Members now have a better understanding of the priority areas for future capital funding of schools and the public can be assured that there are no schools in category D (bad condition). The current situation is:-

- Primary Schools – 10 category A (good), 43 category B (satisfactory), 5 category C (poor)
- Secondary Schools – 8 category B, 1 category C

SAFEGUARDING, COMMUNITIES AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Improvements in Children's Social Care (March 2024)

A key piece of scrutiny work during the last few years has been the review of improvements in Children's Services, following failings identified in a Care Inspectorate Wales inspection of children's services in January 2020. During the course of this review, there have already been a number of key areas of improvement, for example:-

- Working conditions of social care staff and the new offices in the Wellbeing Hub at Crown Buildings.
- Development of a performance baseline to enable early warnings of areas of underperformance. A great deal of capacity has been built across a range of staff in terms of performance across the Council which will be of on-going benefit.
- Annual reporting schedule to scrutiny.
- Development of in-house provision to enable children to be placed locally and reduce dependence on expensive residential provision.

A performance evaluation inspection of the service by the Care Inspectorate Wales was undertaken in June 2022. We considered the findings from the inspection and acknowledged that, whilst there were still some challenges to work on, the Department had made good progress within children's services. A further Performance Inspection follow up was undertaken in November 2023. The CIW Lead Inspector assisted officers in reporting back to Committee in February 2024 and indicated that improvements had been and were embedded.

Agency Workers (April 2024)

The total spend on Social Care Agency staff in 22/23 was £7.7m, this has been reduced by £1.9m in year. This has been possible due to a reduction in actual agency staff employed by 30 members of staff. A number of agency staff have taken permanent posts whilst we have been successful in recruiting permanently in other areas. Furthermore, some reductions resulted from strengthened demand management allowing us to reduce numbers further.

Community Agents in the County (March 2024)

The Community Agents scheme (CAS) has been in place for 6 years funded through Welsh Government. The Service provides low level, information, advice and assistance to older people to prevent social isolation making use of local assets and developing them where gaps exist. Community Councils are contracted to deliver the service by the direct and legal employment of a Community Agent or by the employment of a third party via contract consortia. A standard grant is awarded to each Community Council area, providing funding to cover costs of the management of the Agent and employment of the Agent. Only six wards in Wrexham currently do not have a Community Agents Scheme In the last 6-12 months, these Councils have been engaged to ascertain their interest to work with Wrexham County Borough Council to have a provision in their ward. An evaluation undertaken previously found the service to be very valuable to the citizens it supports and greatly valued by its Community Councils. The programme is currently being reviewed and a new protocol is being rolled out which seeks to allow / encourage the inclusion of all Community Councils.

SCRUTINY COORDINATING GROUP

The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group (Chairs and Vice-Chairs of each of the 5 Scrutiny Committees) met 6 times during the period under review and considered a range of issues including:-

- Scrutiny training and development for Councillors following the May Elections. This specifically covered questioning skills. A video copy of the session was retained to allow for refresher training and for those who were unable to attend the live session.
- Annual Project Management Report. This highlights any areas of slippage in major projects across the Council and SCG considers any areas for possible referral to the relevant Scrutiny Committee. No issues, other than topics already scheduled on the work programmes, were referred this year.
- Annual Review of Audit and Scrutiny Protocol
- De-carbonisation – Update and discussion with Lead Member.
- Wales Audit Report - Arrangements for the Open Sharing of Information through Committees. Focused on how the Council shared information about the use of its revenue budget and its performance.
- Scrutiny Budget Monitoring Process. A process was agreed with support from the Chief Finance Officer and recommended to each of the five scrutiny committees to ensure regular budgetary communication between individual Scrutiny Committees and the Executive Board.
- An update on the work of the joint Public Service Board, notably the details of the new joint working compact across both Wrexham & Flintshire.
- A review of the Topic Selection Form currently used to allow new topics to be brought to the attention of relevant committees.

YOU SAID, WE DID –

School Escorts - Wrexham Council has been struggling to recruit escorts to accompany school children with additional learning needs on their journey to and from school. This has resulted in some children missing school and the Council has been unable to meet its statutory obligation to transport children to their appropriate place of education. This also affects the lives of parents as they cannot go to work because they have to stay at home with their child/children. Following a number of concerns raised by parents, a Member requested that the issue be considered by the Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee. This resulted in Officers from the Environment Department, Human Resources and Education Department working together to discuss a range of actions, including increased publicity and recruitment campaign around school escorts; fast tracking of recruitment of school escorts; use of teaching assistants. Although 9 school escorts either resigned or retired between July 2023 and May 2024, there had been 24 new recruits. Having a larger pool of escorts will allow more escorts to accompany pupils who are having to be accompanied by their parents (this has reduced from 12 to 10 as at the time of reporting in May 2024). By reviewing routes and provision,

there has also been a reduction in costs from £157,130 to £138,795 per annum. As recruitment in this area still remains a problem, scrutiny will continue to monitor this along with other areas of schools transport.

GP Recruitment and GP Practices - Due to a significant number of concerns from the public regarding access to GP services in areas across Wrexham, particularly in the areas served by the Hillcrest, Forge Road and Borrás Surgeries, the Safeguarding, Communities & Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee continue to invite representatives of the local Health Board (BCUHB) and the North Wales Community Health Council (NWCHC) to consider possible solutions to the problem. These have included the appointment of two additional GPs, additional Advance Nurse Practitioners and a new telephony Service. A local recovery plan is now in place for 2023/24 and the Committee will continue to monitor progress. This topic receives considerable local media coverage and helps to get the message out to local residents of the work being done to try and address the issue.

CONCLUSION

Scrutiny in Wrexham is, and will continue to be, an evolving process of support and challenge to Council and outside organisations to ensure that the people who live, work, or visit here get the best possible services within the resources available.

The work highlighted under each committee hopefully shows that we have as scrutiny Members concentrated on the big items that affect the people of Wrexham. Some of these are outlined in this report (eg, the increasing demands and budget pressures in Children's Social Care, the problems in being able to access GPs, the focus on schools and the wider Education and Early Intervention Department, improving public transport, decarbonisation). Other scrutiny topics which have been considered during the reporting year can be accessed using the link provided in the Introduction of this report.

Over this period we have accomplished some detailed work using task and finish groups, including the School Improvement Monitoring Group, Council owned farms and land Task and Finish Group and the Decarbonisation Behaviour Change Task and Finish Group.

Scrutiny also continues to consider the Council's work methods that have been adapted following the Covid pandemic. This includes a Customer Service Review, where there has been increased use of digital methods for service delivery. Many of these more modern ways of working are now becoming more embedded and scrutiny will continue to monitor progress to ensure that these changes lead to improved and more efficient services to the customer, whilst maintaining face to face contact for those vulnerable customers who need more support in accessing services.

We will continue to focus on new areas of concern and opportunity as we continue scrutiny work through the forthcoming year. Budget scrutiny is likely to feature more frequently with the increasing demands on services during a time of reduced funding.