

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

County Hall, Worcester

Thursday, 25 April 2024, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Tom Wells (Chairman), Cllr James Stanley (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Alastair Adams, Cllr David Chambers, Cllr Emma Stokes, Cllr Richard Udall
and Cllr Shirley Webb

Also attended:

Cllr Steve Mackay, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and
Families

Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Alyson Grice, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 January 2024 (previously
circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes.)

1358 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Councillor Brandon Clayton and Mr Tim Reid
(Church Representative).

1359 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

1360 Public Participation

None.

1361 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 29 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1362 Refresh of the Scrutiny Work Programme

The Board was invited to consider the draft Scrutiny Work Programme for 2024/25 prior to it being submitted to Council for approval.

By way of introduction, the Chairman reminded Board Members that the draft Scrutiny Work Programme would be presented to full Council on 16 May. In the past year, although scrutiny task group work had been limited, he felt that the performance of the overview and scrutiny panels had been excellent.

The Board discussed the draft work programme and the following main points were made:

Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

- The Board noted that an update on progress in implementing the recommendations of the Developer Funded Highways Infrastructure (Section 278) scrutiny task group was scheduled for June 2024. It was suggested that it would be helpful for this update to clearly show action (including timescales) against each of the scrutiny report's 19 recommendations. The update should show a snapshot of where the service currently was. The Chairman noted ongoing frustration in district councils at the time taken to receive responses to planning applications from the County Council Highways Department.
- In July the Leader and Chief Executive of the Council were due to update the Board on the Corporate Plan. At this point it would also be helpful to get their initial views on the emerging 2025/26 budget and seek a commitment that scrutiny should be involved in budget planning in the autumn in order to influence the medium term financial plan and the direction of the new budget. It was agreed that this would be added to the Board's work programme.
- The Chairman confirmed that he was no longer a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and therefore would be available to chair the Board's discussion with the LEP in September.
- With reference to the Annual Crime and Disorder meeting, the lead member suggested that the Board may wish to include a discussion on hate crime (and in particular transphobic hate crime) looking at the role of the County Council, both as a local authority and as an employer. It was agreed that he would look into this further and report back at a future meeting.
- It was agreed that the budget discussion in November should focus on emerging themes and issues.

- In response to a question about the issue of safety in parks and open spaces, it was suggested that this may be an area that could be considered by Corporate and Communities O&S Panel.
- Board Members were reminded that the scrutiny annual report would also be considered by Council on 16 May. The Chairman would ask Panel Chairman and Lead Members to respond to any detailed questions on their areas of responsibility.

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

- The Board was updated on amendments that had been made to the Panel's work programme since the OSPB agenda had been published. The number of items to be considered in May had been reduced with the update on Net Zero Policy having been moved to July.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

- A date for scrutiny of home to school transport was yet to be confirmed and, if necessary, the Panel would set up an additional meeting when relevant information was available. As the service was cross cutting, Members of Environment O&S Panel would be invited to attend the discussion.
- As a result of new Government guidance, statutory reporting deadlines for the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership's annual report had changed and the report would now be received in September rather than July.
- The Panel's July agenda would include an update on the outcomes of the Ofsted/CQC Area SEND inspection. Timing of the report on the sufficiency of SEND school places would be confirmed once the findings of the inspection were available.
- In response to a question about the likely timing of the discussion on home to school transport, the Chairman of the Panel confirmed that, since the Panel's last meeting, he and the Chairman of the Environment Panel had liaised with the Leader and the Chief Executive and he understood that information would be available imminently. It was agreed that the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the OSPB would write to the Leader and Chief Executive to support the Panel Chairmen's position in encouraging a scrutiny discussion on home to school transport at the earliest opportunity.
- The Chairman of the Corporate and Communities O&S Panel reminded the Board that she had recently attended a meeting of Children and Families O&S Panel to contribute to a discussion on vaping, an area which crossed the remits of both panels. She felt that the sharing of information in this way had worked well.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

- The Chairman of the Panel had been concerned to hear that the 'Here to Help' branding for volunteers working with the County Council was no longer in use as she felt the branding had been helpful in marketing the service.

- She suggested that the Council's policy on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) should be considered by the Panel and may be added to the work programme in due course.
- A Member of the Board expressed concern about the Council's consultation process in relation to moving all staff to 35 hour per week contracts and in particular the effect on individuals and the potential reputational damage to the Council.

Adult Care and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel

- The Board was updated on amendments that had been made to the Panel's work programme after the publication of the OSPB agenda. The discussion on Staff Vacancies and Retention had been moved from July to October.

The draft Scrutiny Work Programme 2024/5 would be amended as agreed and forwarded to Council for approval.

1363 Scrutiny Chairmen (and Lead Member) Update and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Panel Chairmen/ Lead Member provided an update on recent scrutiny meetings and activities and considered suggestions for future scrutiny task groups.

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Alastair Adams)

At its last meeting, the Panel had received an update on developments relating to the Environment Act including Biodiversity Net Gain which, the Chairman suggested, would be a major topic in the next 12 to 24 months. A further update would be received later in the year.

The Panel had also discussed the latest Performance Indicators. It was noted that a report on progress on the recommendations of the Developer-Funded Highways Infrastructure (Section 278) scrutiny task group was scheduled for the OSPB in June.

The Chairman of the Panel confirmed that the Highway Maintenance contract was due for renewal in 2026 and the Panel had asked to have an early input into the process.

The Chairman of OSPB expressed frustration that footways were sometimes repaired when there had been no local request for repairs and gave an example of where this had happened within his division. He suggested that it would be helpful to consult local members on which work was carried out, taking account of the condition of the footway and the amount it was used. The Chairman of the Panel agreed that transparency was the way forward.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr David Chambers)

In March the Panel had received a report on 2023 educational outcomes in Worcestershire. In general, outcomes were still below pre-covid levels but compared well to national figures. The Panel had also received a detailed report on the early education and childcare national expansion programme and had noted that sufficient early years places would be available at key dates as the programme was rolled out. In relation to Q3 PIs, it was noted that the number of children with SEND who required an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was rising dramatically.

The Panel Chairman also updated the Board on plans to recruit specialist foster carers. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families informed the Board that, in recruiting more foster carers, the aim was to improve outcomes for children as well as benefit the Council financially. Recent recruitment adverts had resulted in a considerable rise in enquiries which was a positive sign, although the conversion rate would be key. The Chairman of the Panel informed the Board that he felt the drive to recruit specialist foster carers was an exemplary programme which aimed to recruit carers for children with challenging needs. Carers would be well paid but the difference they would make would be invaluable and he congratulated the team on this initiative.

The Chairman of OSPB noted that all Members of the Council were corporate parents and as such had responsibility for looking after the most vulnerable children in the County. He also raised the issue of grandparents who assumed responsibility for children under kinship care arrangements, noting the financial implications for them of not having foster carer status. With reference to educational outcomes, he suggested that performing well against national averages was not ambitious enough and felt that there should be further challenge on this.

The Vice Chairman of the Board noted the importance of WCF's work with vulnerable children, both for the individuals concerned and for society in general. The Cabinet Member reminded the Board about the Valuing Care project which was looking at the individual needs of each looked after child to ensure the best placement for them. He agreed that the consequences of getting this wrong were felt throughout society including in the NHS and the criminal justice system. He went on to note that all councils nationally were experiencing similar issues in relation to the care of vulnerable children.

With reference to kinship carers, a Member of the Board noted that the organisation 'Kinship Carers UK' was based in Worcester and suggested that it may be helpful to invite a representative of the organisation to a future meeting of the Children and Families O&S Panel.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Emma Stokes)

The Panel had received an update on Hartlebury Museum and discussed Q3 PIs. Members were reminded about the forthcoming programme of Residents Roadshows and were encouraged to attend local roadshows if they were able.

Crime and Disorder (Cllr Richard Udall)

Cllr Udall confirmed that a conference about how partners worked together in Worcestershire to provide support to Sex Workers as victims was being organised by the Public Health Team.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Cllr Tom Wells)

In the absence of the Chairman of HOSC, the Chairman of OSPB (as a member of HOSC) updated the Board on recent meetings, noting the importance of comparing performance with similar authorities as well as national averages, and considering data over several years in order to identify trends.

Adult Care and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Cllr Shirley Webb)

At its last meeting the Panel had received an update on the role of adult social care in complex hospital discharges, covering joined up working, urgent care and reablement. The Panel had also discussed demand and efficiency management, including potential staff reductions and an increased focus on prevention.

Scrutiny Task Groups

The Board was reminded that, when ideas for topics to be scrutinised had previously been discussed, 'A Review of the Council's Spend on Consultants, Locums, Temporary and Agency Staff' had been agreed as the preferred topic to be taken forward. However, it had been suggested that this work should commence in the autumn when the ongoing structural review of the Council had been completed. As an initial step and in order to provide a snapshot of the current situation, it was agreed that the Vice Chairman (as lead member of the task group) would formally request data (on a confidential basis) showing the scale and costs of temporary staff across Council departments. An intensive select committee style hearing would be held in the autumn.

In response to a request for other potential topics for a scrutiny task group to run between May and September, the following suggestions were made:

- Section 38s (adoption of developer constructed roads by the local authority) following up on issues identified as part of the section 278 scrutiny report
- Local flood alleviation schemes
- Public health promotional activity including the use of social prescribing, keeping active and other prevention work
- 'Are we a listening council?' including consultations and responses, and hearing the views of hard to reach groups

Members were asked to indicate which of these topics would be their preference to take forward and it was indicated that Section 38s had the most support. It was agreed that the other items would be added to the Board's work programme for future consideration.

The meeting ended at 11.32 am

Chairman