

Overview and Scrutiny **Annual Report 2020**

January 2021

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Foreword

My first full year as Chairman, did not go as planned. Clearly the lockdown caused by COVID–19 was all consuming and it changed many of our plans and directions. Some of the issues we had planned to scrutinise could not happen, we have not forgotten those issues and we will return to them. However, our priority had to change due to the Pandemic, and we used the facilities available to us and targeted our resources to examine the County Council’s reaction to the COVID emergency.

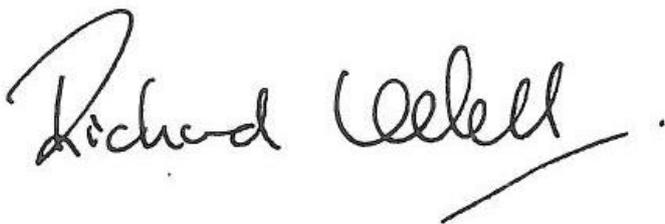
I would like to thank the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive for their full co-operation and support. They made themselves available to us for Scrutiny and we used every opportunity to question, challenge and examine their response to COVID and their future plans.

I believe Scrutiny in Worcestershire is effective, it’s a good example of cross party working which holds the Executive to account and dares to speak truth to power. This is not done for political advantage, but for the collective good of the Council, local residents and businesses.

We have a large backlog of work to complete next year, but it will be with a new Council and with new ideas and priorities, clearly some things will have to change. I hope we will be able to find time to examine some non-Council services in Worcestershire which are provided by outside agencies, this must be an important area of our work. I would also hope the area of policy development is expanded and Scrutiny Panels will identify areas in which they can help and support the Executive with new ideas, proposals and policies.

All Members who took part in Scrutiny during the year did so with their normal commitment and with a common endeavour to advance the County, I would like to thank my Vice-Chairman Liz Eyre, I fully depend on her wise counsel and advice, her support is appreciated, likewise sincere thanks to all Members of the Overview, Scrutiny and Performance Board, I believe we work well together and achieve results.

As always, I would always wish to record my heartfelt and sincere thanks to all the Scrutiny staff who work very hard on our behalf. Without their dedication and support we would not be able to be so effective.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Udall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Richard Udall
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Introduction

COVID-19 has meant unprecedented changes to lives across the globe. In the UK, on 23 March the Prime Minister asked the public to stay at home, to protect the NHS and to save lives. Schools were closed nationally from the end of Friday 20 March, whilst being required to provide a service for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

Following Government guidance, on 16 March 2020 the Council moved away from business as usual activity and established an emergency planning approach to developing and enabling its response to the pandemic, whilst continuing to meet statutory duties. As a consequence, Scrutiny was paused from this time until May when it started to plan for a phased return.

A significant change arising from the pandemic has been the operation of the Council's public meetings. The Government temporarily removed the legal requirement for local authorities to hold public meetings in person and issued temporary regulations to allow public meetings to be held online, visible to the public, whilst they could not take place at a specific place such as County Hall.

The Council quickly adapted and made use of the available technology to hold public meetings virtually, therefore continuing to make critical decisions on the delivery of its services for Worcestershire residents in a way that was both transparent and accessible to the public. Where appropriate, Scrutiny has continued to play a key role ensuring that democracy continued during this difficult time.

Unsurprisingly, much of the scrutiny focus during 2020 has been on the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's services and the recovery response going forward. This Report highlights some of the key pieces of work from the past year undertaken by the Scrutiny function of the Council. A diagram showing where Scrutiny fits in the governance of the Council is enclosed at the appendix. Details of the membership of scrutiny bodies and their [meetings](#) are on the Council's website.

Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB)

The primary role of the Board is to co-ordinate the work of the Scrutiny Panels. However, it has also considered a range of issues in 2020, generally focusing on strategic Council-wide matters.

Scrutiny Annual Work Programme for 2020/21

The Scrutiny Work Programme was drawn up following consideration by each Panel, so that their individual priorities could be taken into account. The work programme was endorsed by [Council](#) in September 2020

Scrutiny of Other Agencies

Usually, the Board meets each year with representatives of the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) to receive an annual update on the achievements of the WLEP over the last 12 months and to understand the strategic objectives for the forthcoming year. In 2020, the impact of the COVID pandemic meant that this was not possible and instead the Board has received a written update covering 2020/21.

Community Safety

The Board is the Council's designated statutory Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee. As part of this responsibility, the Board meets on an annual basis with Crime and Disorder partners, to discuss issues of mutual interest. Due to COVID-19 and the exceptional demands on partners in responding to this, the Annual Meeting was deferred. The Board was, however, provided with an interim report, setting out some of the current issues and summarising how key areas of work were being managed across the partnerships during the pandemic and how some activities had been adapting to help keep people safe.

During this discussion, it was noted that the Domestic Abuse Bill, which was currently going through the House of Commons, would place new duties on the Council to provide support to victims of domestic abuse and their children within refuges and other safe accommodation. At a later meeting, the Board considered the Council's preparations to be ready to implement these new duties with its key partners.

Budget 2021/22

The Board will collate views on the draft budget for 2021/22 at its meeting in February for consideration by Cabinet later that month. The Scrutiny function has maintained its approach to monitoring and challenging service and budget performance this year. Regular updates are included in each Panel's work programme and this has led to some 'deep dive' work being undertaken to follow up queries. This has helped Panel Members to be proactive when scrutinising the budget and to develop a deeper understanding of the services.

In November, the Overview and Scrutiny Panels started to look at the emerging budgetary pressures and challenges for services. These discussions will help to inform the Panels' scrutiny of the draft 2021/22 Budget.

Adult Care and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Much of the Panel's focus during 2020 in respect of COVID-19 has been on social care services for adults. Positive feedback from residents has been very reassuring to members, in particular the Here2Help community action response, which has been looked at in more detail by the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel has been interested to hear about how changes to ways of working during COVID, have in some cases brought positive results to some challenging areas. For example, the Panel has strived to understand how patients can be discharged from hospital more effectively to their own home with less admission to residential or nursing homes and has heard that this has improved during COVID through increased joint working and understanding.

The viability of the care home market is an area which the Panel has continued to monitor, including support provided by the Council during COVID. Regular updates on care homes was a recommendation of the 2019 scrutiny review of quality assurance of care and nursing homes.

Following the directorate restructure, the Panel has been keen to understand the new Director's Strategy for People and Communities and is supportive of its approach and objectives. In particular Members welcomed the aim to reach people earlier, thereby reducing the number requiring long-term services and enabling independence, for example through the new Reablement Service. The Panel recognised that the new Strategy seeks to address one of the main messages from the February 2020 Peer Review: the need for more targeted intervention at an earlier stage and the perceived need for a clearer overall vision.

The Panel has continued to monitor services and plans for those with learning disabilities (the focus of the Peer Review). This includes the review of day opportunities for people with a learning disability which aims to take account of learning in response to the challenges presented by COVID-19. These discussions have benefitted greatly from the contributions of Speak Easy N.O.W (self-advocacy charity) and Healthwatch Worcestershire.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

As with other scrutiny panels, the main focus of the Panel's work this year has been the response to COVID-19, particularly in relation to children's social care and education. Members were keen to understand the protocols that were put in place and the different delivery methods used to ensure that children were safeguarded and able to access education, while ensuring the safety of children, families and staff. They wished to compliment staff on their adaptability in response to an unprecedented situation.

The Panel received six monthly updates on plans for a new delivery model for medical education provision and looks forward to scrutinising the final proposals in January. Members have also received updates on educational outcomes and Ofsted inspections in Worcestershire schools, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities improvement journey, and provision for overnight short breaks for children with disabilities, as well as quarterly monitoring of performance indicators and in-year budget information.

Members have considered two services which are commissioned by the County Council and provided by the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care Trust. The Panel welcomed the way in which the Starting Well Service had responded to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic but wished to see further information on how the effectiveness of community projects was evaluated. In relation to the assessment pathway for children and young people who may have autism (the Umbrella Pathway), the Panel acknowledged the significant progress made. However, Members were still very concerned about the length of waiting times from referral to diagnosis and the impact on families and will continue to monitor the situation in 2021.

2020 was the first full year of operation for Worcestershire Children First, the company set up to deliver children's services on behalf of the County Council. Members had been concerned that the move to WCF would disrupt the flow of information to the Scrutiny Panel but have been pleased to note that this has not proved to be the case.

In November the Panel saw a change in Chairman with Councillor Tom Wells taking over from Councillor Fran Oborski. At its final meeting of 2020, Members of the Panel expressed thanks to Councillor Oborski for her hard work and leadership during her time as Chairman.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The Panel looked at the implications of COVID-19 with a particular focus on the Council's commercial activities including new contract requirements and a re-profiling of major contracts due for renewal. Also, of significant interest to Members was the Here2Help scheme including how the experience and knowledge gained would be used to provide a foundation for an Integrated Health and Well-being Hub Programme. Members were hugely appreciative of the efforts of all staff, both on the front line and in support teams, who had played their role in ensuring that residents were safeguarded and that critical services for residents were maintained.

The Panel has used the quarterly performance monitoring information it receives as a focus for some of its scrutiny. One such area was the Council's statutory and corporate complaints and compliments system. Members looked at this in some detail earlier in the year and the Panel has kept a watching brief throughout the year and will receive an annual report in future.

Members of the Panel welcomed plans for the introduction of a Member Query Case Management system and the benefits it could bring including enhancing the productivity of Councillors and enabling the Council's managers to gain an understanding of the levels and areas of demand. The detailed work for this was expected to commence in September 2020 and the Panel looks forward to hearing how it progresses.

The Panel was keen to understand how the Council handled Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Request (SAR) processes and how it complied with Data Protection legislation. Members gained a thorough understanding of the significant level of requests that the Council receives, the complex nature of many of these requests and the labour-intensive processes in place to ensure they are handled correctly. In order to scrutinise this activity going forward, the Panel has requested that details of these services are included in the quarterly Performance Monitoring report.

In March this year, the Council's Corporate Transformation Programme was paused due to COVID-19. The Panel received an update on progress in November and was told that, since August, opportunities had been explored to deliver some changes to enhance efficiency and effectiveness, as well as develop capability, without the need for major structural change. The Council is continuing to learn from current ways of working, identifying practices that will enable enhanced productivity and effectiveness when the response phase of the COVID-19 pandemic is over. The learning from the digital experience will be particularly valuable in this regard and the Panel will continue to monitor developments in 2021.

Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The condition and maintenance of Worcestershire's roads forms a considerable part of councillors' work with residents. The Panel was therefore keen to hear how new developments and efficiencies are benefitting roads in Worcestershire and this has been explored through two discussions with the Council's highways maintenance contractor and the Council's responsible officers, which the Panel found very useful.

2020 has undoubtedly been dominated by COVID-19. However, another major challenge for the Council has been two serious flood periods between October 2019 and March 2020. During its annual update with Council officers, the Environment Agency and Severn Trent Water, the Panel very much welcomed the flood alleviation work completed, and whilst appreciating the complexity involved, encouraged continued thought around ways to speed up development of future schemes. The Panel also requested more regular Member updates on the delivery of flood alleviation schemes.

Other topics considered by the Panel have included diversionary routes, streetlighting and an annual update on superfast broadband, which is a requirement of the Council's contracts with BT. The excellent achievements in extending superfast broadband so far were welcomed, and the Panel will continue to monitor the extension of gigabit capable infrastructure, which will be especially important with increased home working.

Online public meetings during COVID have meant increased public participation and the Panel has really appreciated input from the public to its discussions on active travel and the Council's work to tackle climate change. Moving forward, the Panel has requested an annual update on the Council's work to enable and promote cycling and walking.

Close attention is paid to the budget and performance monitoring reports and the Panel has identified developer funded highways infrastructure as a potential area for further scrutiny after the County Council elections.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)

The focus of the Committee's work this year has continued to be monitoring progress of acute hospital services in Worcestershire, and regular performance updates have been requested from Worcestershire Acute Hospitals Trust. In March, representatives from organisations across Worcestershire's health and social care sector were invited to a 'select committee' style meeting, where discussion with each organisation took place in turn, and this proved a very useful basis for future scrutiny. Committee members are delighted that the Trust is now out of special measures and will continue to monitor progress.

The COVID-19 pandemic has of course brought a new set of challenges and the Committee has recognised the enormous commitment of all the organisations across the health system in responding to COVID-19. From July, a new regular update was added to agendas to keep committee members informed about any temporary changes to services, how services are being restored and improvements arising from new ways of working during COVID. These discussions have also benefitted from feedback and reports from Healthwatch Worcestershire.

The Committee welcomed the news that some new ways of working have been very successful for some services and service users. For example, 40% of consultations for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services were now via video link with very good feedback. Nonetheless the Committee is very conscious of those members of the public who may not have accessed GP services during COVID, the importance of face to face consultation and the implications of unmet demand. The impact of the pandemic on mental health is also a great concern which has been added to the work programme for the New Year. In July the Committee had a specific update on access to GP services.

End of Life Care and Recommended Summary Plan for Emergency Care and Treatment (ReSPECT) was subject to discussion in September, and the Committee heard about the refocus taking place on the Personalised End of Life Care Strategy, including learning from COVID. An update has been requested for 2021 to hear about further progress, including out of hours provision and the challenge of ensuring all organisations have access to ReSPECT forms through electronic records.

Other topics looked at have included an update on the Herefordshire and Worcestershire Sustainable Transformation Partnership and the NHS Long-term Plan. More recently the Committee has considered the new 'NHS 111 First' national programme which is designed to help manage urgent care, COVID pressures and inappropriate use of walk-in Emergency Departments.

Scrutiny Task Groups

Care Work as a Career

In February 2019, the Council agreed a Notice of Motion asking the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care to consider ways in which the work of Worcestershire residents who worked in the care industry could be celebrated and encouraged, and how the importance of the care worker's role could be emphasised. The CMR subsequently suggested that a Scrutiny Task Group could look at how to develop the career pathway for care workers and how to promote care work as a career with justifiable rewards.

The Task Group was led by Mrs Tucker, Vice Chairman of the Adult Care and Wellbeing Overview and Scrutiny Panel. Its terms of reference were '*How the Council can promote and develop care work as a career and how the existing care workforce can be better supported and celebrated.*

The Task Group's report was completed just before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, which of course has shone a spotlight onto the commitment, determination and fortitude of employees in the NHS and the social care sector. The Task Group felt that the findings of their report were even more important and relevant as a result of the pandemic.

The Task Group made 12 recommendations, ranging from providing resources for a publicity campaign with the aim of promoting the care worker role, signing up to the Skills for Care 'I Care Ambassador' scheme and scaling up the numbers of care work apprentices to flow into adult social care. The Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care fully supported 10 of the recommendations, with a further one being partly supported. A report on progress in implementing the recommendations will be considered at OSPB in January 2021.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

A Scrutiny Task Group to look at Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was set up in early 2020 but was only able to meet once before the national lockdown in March. As health partners were required to focus on the response to the pandemic, the scrutiny was put on hold but remains on the scrutiny work programme.

The Council's Energy Purchasing Arrangements

This issue initially arose during a budget monitoring discussion at the Economy & Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel in November 2019, when attention was drawn to a cost pressure relating to street lighting. As a consequence, the Corporate & Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel (C&C Panel) was asked to look into the Council's energy purchasing arrangements. The C&C Panel received an initial report on the subject which led to some research being carried out by a small group of Panel Members.

In July 2020, it was agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB) that a Scrutiny Task Group would be set up, led by Councillor Adam Kent (Chairman of the Corporate and Communities O&S Panel). Its terms of reference were '*to review the Council's energy purchasing arrangements from West Mercia Energy (WME) to ensure best value for Worcestershire County Council.*

As at December 2020, the Task Group is reaching the end of its work and a final Task Group report will be presented to OSPB in January 2021.

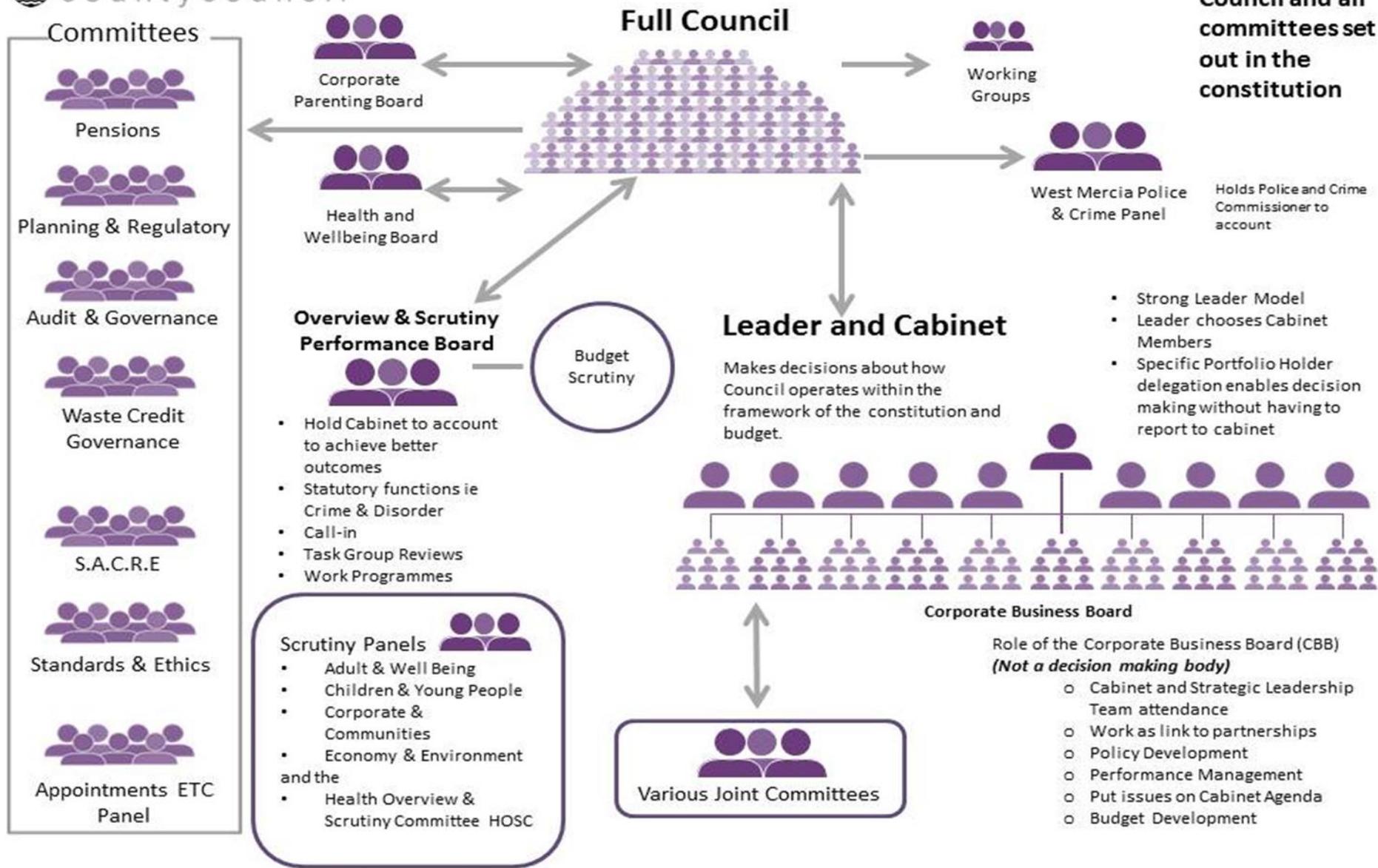
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Appendix 1



Governance Model

Role of Full Council and all committees set out in the constitution



Further copies of this report are available from:

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