

Overview and Scrutiny **Annual Report 2021**

January 2022

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Foreword

I am pleased to present this Annual Report for 2021 on behalf of the current Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board and its immediate predecessor before May's County Council Elections.

You will see that despite the pandemic and the elections, the Board and its panels have really hit the ground running since May. I pay particular tribute to the panel chairs who have quickly established excellent protocols in structuring their meetings and this has ensured useful and evidenced based outcomes.

As a Board we have sought to provide the necessary challenge to those who hold office here at County Hall, or in partner organisations, but to do so in a way that adds value to the decision making process. Crucial in achieving this will be healthy working relationships with all Cabinet Members.

I would like to thank the Chief Executive and the Leader for being receptive to the concept of the Board and its panels, where appropriate, assisting in framing future policy. I am also delighted that the Leader and the Chief Executive have agreed to come before the Board on an annual basis.

The vast majority of councillors are involved in Overview and Scrutiny at County Hall. It is important that we utilise their huge range of skills, qualifications and life experiences. One area where this is particularly relevant is in the creation of scrutiny task groups which are commissioned to carry out discreet pieces of work. I would encourage fellow members to get involved in these groups, for they provide an excellent opportunity to make a real difference and change things for the better.

Finally, I would like to record my appreciation to my Vice Chairman for his support.

None of this would be possible, if not for the very professional support provided by the small officer team who ensure that the scrutiny process here at County Hall is member led, which is of course as it should be.



Tom Wells
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 has continued throughout 2021 affecting people's daily lives and Worcestershire County Council has continued to support its residents and businesses through this emergency.

This Report marks the conclusion of the activities of Overview and Scrutiny over the last four years of this Council. It is therefore the appropriate time to thank the members who have served on Scrutiny during their time in office. Thanks also go to those members who have contributed to Overview and Scrutiny who did not stand or get re-elected in the May County Council election and this includes both Scrutiny members and members of the Cabinet who have supported Scrutiny.

Following the elections in May, Scrutiny welcomed a number of new Members and all but one of the Scrutiny Panels have new Chairmen/Vice-Chairmen.

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 2021, generally focusing on strategic Council-wide matters.

Induction

Following the County Council elections in May, a programme of induction and training was held for new and returning Scrutiny Members. The induction training was a mix of training provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) and in-house covering:

- Scrutiny essentials (for all scrutiny members)
- Chairing and Leading Scrutiny (for all scrutiny chairmen and vice-chairmen)
- Scrutiny of Adult Social Care and its relationship with Health Scrutiny
- Health Scrutiny and how it links to Integrated Care Systems (ICS), Health and Wellbeing Board and Adult Social Care.

The training was well received and has provided the back-drop for Scrutiny to get underway in the new Council.

Scrutiny Annual Work Programme for 2021/22

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 2021.

Scrutiny of Other Agencies

The Board met 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.

Community Safety

As the Council's designated statutory Crime and Disorder Scrutiny Committee, the Board meets on an annual basis with Crime and Disorder partners, to discuss issues of mutual interest. This year, the Lead Member for Community Safety, Cllr Richard Udall, led the Board in this meeting and in addition to considering the community safety issues affecting Worcestershire, there was also a focus on the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

At a later meeting, the Board also considered how the County Council could support its Councillors to empower communities to manage speeding.

Budget 2022/23

The Board will collate views on the draft budget for 2022/23 at its meeting in January for consideration by Cabinet early February 2022. 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 and initial comments have been submitted to the Cabinet for consideration.

Adult Care and Well Being Overview and Scrutiny Panel

2021 commenced with scrutiny of the Council's budget for 2021/22 and given the context of COVID-19, the Panel was reassured by the significantly improved budget position for Adult Services. The People Directorate is working hard to manage budgets through greater understanding and management of projections for demand for services as well as partnership working, although it will remain to be seen how the situation evolves as the country emerges from the pandemic. The panel is also very supportive of the People Directorate's review of the funding arrangements between Worcestershire County Council (the Council) and Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group to ensure that funding arrangements are appropriate, allocated fairly and follow national best practice.

Adult Services now forms part of the new Directorate for People and the Panel has therefore kept abreast of the Strategy and workstreams underpinning the new structure and is supportive of its approach and objectives.

Representatives from Healthwatch Worcestershire, Speakeasy N.O.W. and the wider voluntary and community sector have attended several public meetings including the discussions about services and plans for carers and the updates about the consultation and plans for day opportunities for those with learning disabilities - this has provided important feedback and helped to shape feedback to the Cabinet Member and Senior Officers. For example, when looking at the Worcestershire All Age Carers Strategy, the Panel took on board carers' requests that the final document be clear and accessible to carers.

Regular performance monitoring has continued to be a useful tool in helping to identify areas for further scrutiny. The Panel has chosen to add new data where appropriate such as on customer feedback and complaint monitoring. Through performance monitoring, the Panel has been pleased to see that the Council's expanded reablement service is starting to have an impact; the number of older people staying at home following reablement is linked to good reablement services and there is a reduction in numbers of people going into nursing and care homes.

Care work as a career was subject to in-depth scrutiny in 2020 and regular updates have been provided on the care market, which unfortunately is in an even more vulnerable position due to the pandemic and the Panel is very concerned that ongoing pressures and lack of recognition will lead to the loss of good, motivated care workers.

The Panel is pleased with the now well-established strengths-based approach to social work, which has removed unnecessary bureaucracy to enable social workers to work with and listen to people and find support for them within local communities. An example of support in the community is dementia centres, and the Panel has learned about the benefit they provide for people with mild to moderate dementia living at home, and some members have visited a local centre.

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The Panel's work this year has ranged widely and has covered both the education and social care aspects of its remit.

The Panel started the year by hearing about the continuing impact that COVID-19 was having on education across Worcestershire, with schools working remotely for the majority of children at the same time as providing on-site education for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, a situation that continued until March. Members were keen to understand the pressures on children, school staff and families and were concerned about the potential impact on the mental health of young people and teachers.

In order to further understand the situation in schools the Panel invited two headteachers (one primary and one secondary) to attend its March meeting. The insights given by the headteachers - which included the results of an informal survey of 71 primary headteachers - provided Members with a clearer view of schools' experiences through the pandemic and the impact of the support provided by Worcestershire Children First (WCF).

Following six monthly updates throughout 2020, the Panel considered the final proposals for the new delivery model for medical education provision ahead of final agreement by Cabinet. Members look forward to hearing about the implementation of the model in the coming year. The Panel also received the Annual Report of the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership and thanked the outgoing Independent Chair of the Partnership for his effective chairmanship and facilitation of partnership working.

As with other scrutiny panels, the Children and Families Panel saw a major change in membership following the County Council elections in May, with only two Members remaining from the previous Panel and a new Chairman appointed. The Panel has also welcomed a new Parent Governor Representative for the primary phase and a new Church of England co-opted Member, with the previous Church Representative (Bryan Allbut) having stepped down in September.

In the second half of the year, the Panel discussed the WCF Social Care Placements Sufficiency Strategy, the Year 1 Evaluation and Future Development Plans of Supporting Families First, the continuum of Early Help in Worcestershire, and developments relating to Vulnerable Learners (including Children Missing Education, Elective Home Education, young people who are at risk of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training, and Alternative Provision).

The Panel also welcomed colleagues from Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care Trust and the Council's Public Health Team to a meeting to discuss the 0-19 Prevention and Early Intervention Service (Starting Well), a service that the Panel has received regular updates on in recent years.

At its September meeting, the Panel heard from a member of the public about concerns relating to home to school transport. Two Panel Members were asked to look into the subject and they reported their findings back to the Panel once their investigations were complete. Throughout the year Members have closely monitored performance indicators and in-year budget information on a quarterly basis.

Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

This year, the Panel has looked a wide range of topics, including the Council's commercial and procurement work, apprenticeships, the Here2Help Scheme and how the Council has adapted work patterns and communication during the pandemic.

As the year opened with scrutiny of the 2021/22 Budget, the Panel congratulated the Finance Team on their hard work to achieve the budget in extremely challenging circumstances with COVID-19 and remote working. It was a clear Budget that was easy to understand and with a helpful focus on the exceptions.

Early on in the year, the Panel considered the changing arrangements for facilities management, following the dissolution of Place Partnership Limited. In particular, the Panel sought to understand the detail of the changes taking place, the benefits which the Council would obtain from the new arrangements and how the staffing issues were being handled.

The pandemic has meant a massive change to working environments for Council staff, with remote working becoming normal for the bulk of 2021. There are positives and negatives to this shift, but the Panel has taken the opportunity to highlight the potential significant reduction in the organisation's use of paper, with the digital means of communications readily available. It is understood that the Directorate of Commercial and Change will be seeking to retain the increased use of digital technology but needed to explore ways in which this could be achieved with resilient, productive and safe ways of working. The theme of smarter, greener and efficient working will continue on the Panel's work programme for 2022.

The Council's Here2Help Scheme has been very well received and the Panel is really pleased that it has evolved to offer advice, support and help on a wide range of services across Worcestershire. During an update this year, the Panel sought assurances around the increased reliance on the voluntary and community sector and made some suggestions about access to the Directory which it is hoped will be helpful moving forward.

The Panel has used the quarterly performance monitoring information it receives as a focus for some of its scrutiny, and recently this prompted a letter to Herefordshire and Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group to encourage timely completion of death certificates to help Registration Services meet its statutory target of registering deaths that are not referred to the Coroner within 5 days.

The Panel was interested to be updated on the Worcestershire Apprenticeship Strategy 2020-2023. Members learned that it was more difficult to attract external candidates to apprenticeships and therefore suggested that a promotional/information pack covering apprenticeships and traineeships could be developed for Councillors to share with local businesses. Moving forward, key performance indicators would also be included in the Panel's quarterly performance monitoring.

The Member Query Case Management system is a new facility for councillors which allows them to manage issues raised on behalf of residents and provide an oversight of progress made in resolving those issues. The Panel will continue to maintain oversight as the new system is used.

The Councillors' Divisional Fund is another councillor provision which the Panel is updated on, and the update in July indicated that the scheme continues to work well, and in general members have been very supportive and appreciated the opportunity to decide where to allocate funding. A guidance note on this scheme for councillors was requested, to provide advice in particular for new councillors.

The Panel received regular updates on performance monitoring of compliments, comments and complaints, and has this year requested further work to compare the Council's performance with other comparable local authorities and a further update on performance of Stage 2 Children's Social Care complaints completed inside 65 days and Stage 2 Corporate complaints in 25 days.

Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

The Panel has had an active year, despite the ongoing challenges of COVID-19. Early in the year, focussing attention on the local economy, the Panel had requested an update on the Council's support for businesses during the pandemic. The Panel was pleased to learn of the partnership working on a recovery framework and the level and range of support and grants that were available to local businesses. In September, the Panel followed this up with an evaluation of the impact of the pandemic on the economy and a more detailed review of the Council's wide-ranging work in continuing to help businesses to recover and grow. The Panel look forward to a further update in 12 months. The Panel also received an interim update on the rollout of superfast broadband and are looking forward to a full annual update in the Spring.

The Panel decided that a Budget Task Group would be established to drill down into budget variances over the last year and provide a detailed steer for the Panel for its approach to the scrutiny of the 2022/23 Budget. At the end of 2021, this work was coming towards an end, with a meeting planned in early January for members to formulate their approach to the scrutiny of the Budget proposals. Following its November meeting, the Panel recommended to the relevant Cabinet Members that the additional funding allocated this year for flooding, drainage and gully clearance works, as well as for repairs to footways and public rights of way, be continued next year.

The Panel received a Highways Operations update report which included plans for the additional expenditure for 2021/22 for highways, footways, and public rights of way. It also covered the cyclical drainage issue which been a key area of interest for the Panel. Members welcomed the development by the Directorate of an online gully mapping system and a 'Report It' function during the year and the Panel played an active role in the live trials for both. Members were encouraged that the new system would offer a much-improved customer service.

As part of the induction process, visits were arranged for panel members to EnviroSort (the sorting facility for recyclables in Norton) and EnviRecover (the energy from waste plant at Hartlebury). This enabled Members to gain a greater understanding of the County's waste management processes and facilities and was well received.

Worcestershire had experienced notable flood events in December 2020, January 2021, and June 2021, with the January flood being by far the most significant. An annual update on flood risk management was considered by the Panel along with partners from Severn Trent Water Ltd, South Worcestershire Land Drainage Partnership and North Worcestershire Water Management. The Panel had been encouraged by the work that had been able to be completed during the year which had been boosted by the additional funding that had been allocated for flooding alleviation and drainage gully clearance works.

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)

Throughout 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly continued to present a significant challenge to local and national health services. The Committee has recognised the enormous commitment of all the organisations across the health system in responding to COVID-19 and has been impressed with how the system is working together to restore services affected by the pandemic alongside the ongoing vaccine campaign.

The Committee has been very busy over the last year and has had additional meetings (where necessary) to meet its ongoing priorities. Some of the areas that HOSC has looked at this year are:

- Monitoring of temporary service changes to health services such as the changes to the opening hours of the County's Minor Injury Units' (due to staff redeployment) and the temporary relocation of the Garden Suite Ambulatory Chemotherapy Unit (from the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch to Kidderminster) to ensure ongoing chemotherapy provision
- The West Midlands Ambulance Service's (WMAS) Strategy in relation to community ambulance stations (CAS), in order to gain an understanding of the rationale behind the plans, which included the closure of a number of CAS. The Committee, whilst satisfied that ambulance operations and capacity would not be affected, expressed its concern that greater informal consultation with public about would have been helpful and reassuring
- The Worcestershire Covid vaccination programme which has been acknowledged to have been overwhelmingly successful. HOSC has sought assurances about provision for those residents who are housebound and the ongoing promotion of the booster
- Mental Health Services which is a continued concern for the HOSC, in terms of the potential impact of the pandemic. An initial update was provided about mental health services in general in September and while it is understood that early indications suggest a decline in average mental health (although an improving picture), mental health remains on the Committee's work programme – including dementia, the impact of Covid on children and young people, preventative measures (for example peri-natal mental health) and mental health needs assessments
- Maternity Services have come under scrutiny following an inspection which changed the overall rating for the Service from Good to Requires Improvement. While the HOSC was satisfied with progress made by the Acute Hospitals Trust to address the concerns, this remains on the work programme for further monitoring

- The likelihood of increases in referrals from unmet need during the pandemic and treatment backlogs for diagnosis and treatment. Pressures on GP services are national and concerning, however the HOSC was pleased to hear how cloud-based telephony systems will result in more telephone lines being available for the public to get through. HOSC was also interested to learn that many patients like the telephone/online appointments and without the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital transformation programme would have taken years to achieve
- Preparedness for winter pressure – the Committee heard about the plans for this year’s winter and was reassured about planning processes although it is clear that there are severe system-wide pressures, for example from workforce fatigue and pressures on the Emergency Department.

The final piece of scrutiny for 2021 examined the issue of significant ambulance handover delays at the county’s hospitals, which was highlighted to the Committee by the Ambulance Service itself and is recognised as an increasing national problem. 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 a summary report on findings is due to be finalised by the HOSC in the new year.

Feedback from Healthwatch Worcestershire has been very helpful over the year, for example on people’s experiences of accessing GP appointments, the vaccination programme and leaving hospital during the pandemic.

Looking ahead to 2022, the Committee will continue to keep abreast of the development of the Integrated care System (ICS) for Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

Scrutiny Task Groups

The Council’s Energy Purchasing Arrangements

At a budget monitoring discussion of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel in November 2019, the Panel was advised of a cost pressure relating to street lighting. Following initial research, it was agreed in July 2020 that a Task Group would be set up ‘to review the Council’s energy purchasing arrangements from West Mercia Energy (WME) to ensure best value for Worcestershire County Council’. The Group reported its findings in January 2021 to the OSPB and to Cabinet in February 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 with the terms of reference ‘to investigate access to and the availability of appropriate mental health services for children and adolescents’.

The Task Group was only able to meet once before the national lockdown in March 2020. As health partners were required to focus on the response to the pandemic, the scrutiny was therefore put on hold but remained on the scrutiny work programme.

In July 2021 OSPB refreshed its scrutiny work programme and agreed that the CAMHS Task Group should be re-started in the Autumn, after the proposal had been reviewed to ensure that it was still relevant.

A first meeting of the Task Group has just taken place in December, at which they received an overview of the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people in Worcestershire and the services available to support them.

The Task Group discussed some initial ideas and will now develop their schedule of activity to take this matter forward.

Developer Funded Highways Infrastructure

A Scrutiny Task Group is underway to look at developer-funded highways infrastructure, which is infrastructure which involves changes being made to public highways. Examples include new or changed access into a development site (i.e. a bell mouth, roundabout, signalised junction, right turn lane or a simple priority junction).

The Council's Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel has expressed concern for some time about the time taken for developer-funded highways infrastructure works to be completed and has monitored progress as part of the Panel's regular performance monitoring. Specific areas of concern include the length of the overall process and the time taken for the Council to approve planning submissions from developers.

The Directorate of Economy and Infrastructure is reviewing processes and the aim of the Task Group work *is to understand how these are progressing, and to make recommendations for further improvement.*

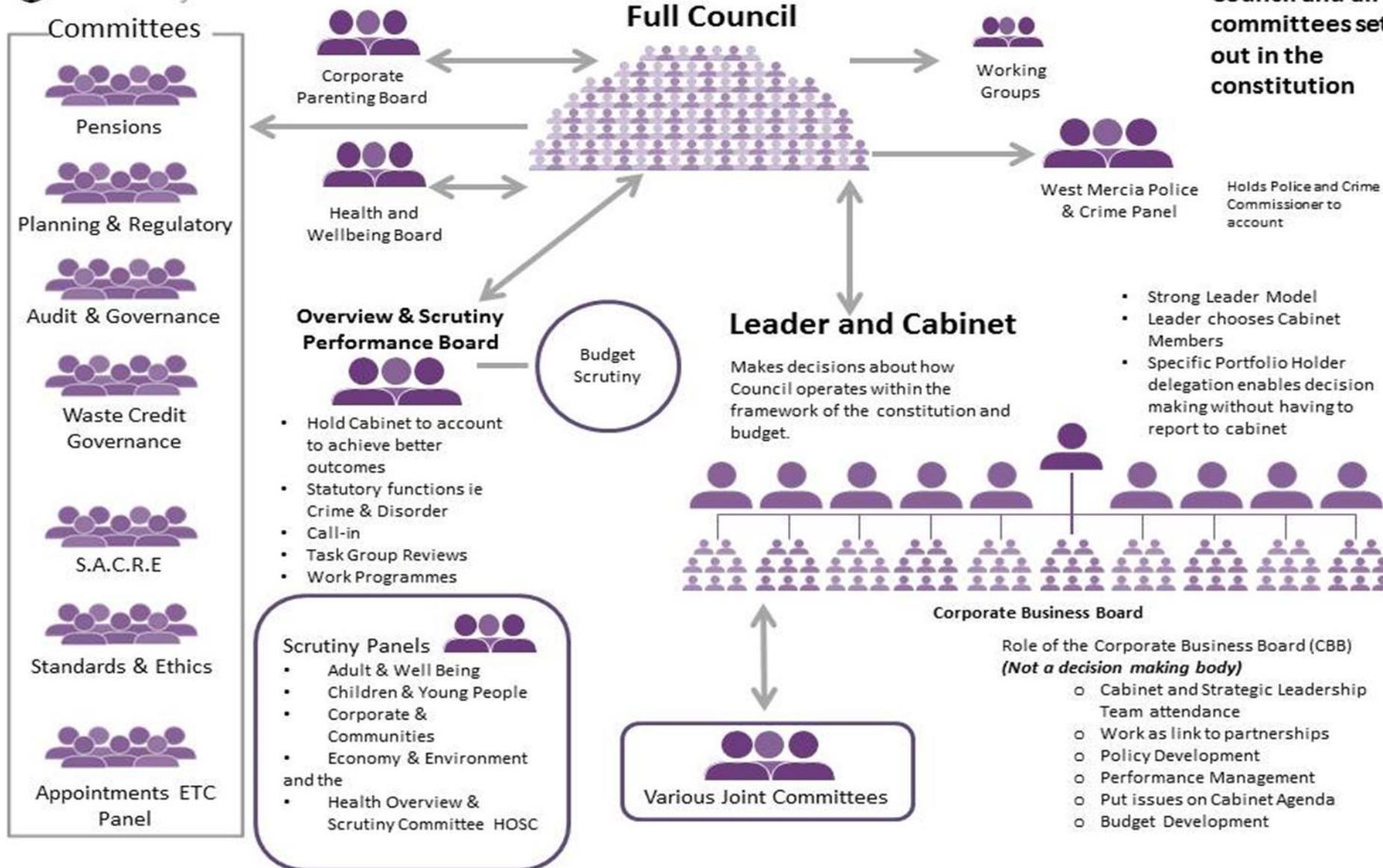
The delay in completing developer-funded highways infrastructure works impacts on local communities, road users and businesses, therefore this has identified this area as a priority for further scrutiny. Task Group members are gathering background information from the Council's development control officers, and the scrutiny will encompass discussions with developers, planners and other councils to look at best practice and what has helped elsewhere.

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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