

Annual Scrutiny Newsletter 2020/21

This newsletter gives an overview of scrutiny at West Sussex County Council in 2020/21, a year dominated by the Covid-19 emergency with scrutiny activity moving online and meetings held virtually. The County Council prioritises transparency and democratic accountability and so the scrutiny committees had a full programme of meetings, with a focus on decision preview and service improvement plans. The move to remote working has created the opportunity to develop new approaches, with more virtual briefings for councillors and engaging digitally with stakeholders and witnesses, learning things to be built into future scrutiny work plans.



Image of a virtual scrutiny committee meeting in action

Scrutiny at West Sussex County Council

Information on [Scrutiny at the Council](#) is available on the Council's website. For more information on each scrutiny committee, including membership, areas of responsibility, meeting dates, agendas, and minutes, use the links below.

- Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee ([CYPSSC](#))
- Environment and Communities Scrutiny Committee ([ECSSC](#))
- Fire and Rescue Service Scrutiny Committee ([FRSSC](#))
- Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee ([HASC](#))
- Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee ([PFSC](#))

THE SCRUTINY YEAR AT A GLANCE

13 external
witnesses
attended
meetings



28 meetings
held

All meetings
webcast live



50% increase
on webcast
views

21 key
decisions
previewed



2020/21

Best Practice



WITNESSES



Witnesses
included
teachers, West
Sussex Youth
Cabinet, Police
and NHS
Trusts

NEW WORKING



A new Fire &
Rescue
Service
Committee
was
established

TECHNOLOGY



Meetings
were held
virtually from
April 2020,

PARTNERSHIP WORKING



Partners and
witnesses
were able to
join meetings
virtually,

BUDGET



Scrutiny
ensured early
engagement in
the budget
process to
better reflect
councillor
priorities

COMMUNICATION



6181
webcast
views of
formal
meetings

PERFORMANCE



All scrutiny
committees
helped develop
KPIs for the
new Council
Plan'

TASK AND FINISH



Six TFGs set
up to carry
out in
depth
scrutiny

COLLABORATION



Scrutiny
worked with
the Youth
Cabinet on
mental health

Effective overview and scrutiny should:

- ✓ **Influence policy ideas or proposals before they are developed**
- ✓ **Spend time on matters critical to service outcomes for residents**
- ✓ **Provide meaningful challenge to the performance management of services**
- ✓ **Show the difference scrutiny makes to service outcomes for residents**

(WSCC Review of Scrutiny, 2019)

Scrutiny Impact

a) The value of scrutiny to the Council's business and its role in the County

Listen and engage: Across 28 scrutiny committee meetings 13 external witnesses were able to join virtually and provide a wider perspective and ensure different voices were heard. These included head teachers, Public Health England, Sussex Police, service users and voluntary and community sector representatives.

Open and transparent: Scrutiny continued throughout the public health emergency. The first formal meetings held virtually at the Council were scrutiny committee meetings. All were held virtually and webcast live. Only one meeting (HASC) was cancelled, due to the pressures on the health and social care sector at the time. Most meetings were reported via social media by the local democracy reporter ensuring good press coverage. Scrutiny chairs attended Cabinet meetings to comment on reports and proposals on behalf of their committees.

Keeping in touch: Councillors engaged with each other, with officers and witnesses and with service users using online platforms, enabling people to attend meetings who may have been unable to in person. More informal, virtual meetings were held, enabling councillors to be briefed and kept updated on issues and to help scrutiny work programme planning.

Working well in partnership: The West Sussex Youth Cabinet has a standing invitation to meetings of CYPSSC and, as well as participating in various discussions, they provided important feedback on the impact of home learning and the return to school for an item on the impact of Covid-19 on educational outcomes for children and young people. Healthwatch West Sussex, the independent local champion for people who use health social care services, played a valuable role through its membership of HASC, including reflecting on patient experiences throughout the public health emergency.

Learning and good practice: Training sessions by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny were provided to CYPSSC members and to scrutiny chairmen and vice chairmen to focus on effective scrutiny. There was also tailored training for members of the new FRSSC. Regular informal meetings of chairmen and vice chairmen have been held throughout the year to share best practice and review scrutiny effectiveness. Work programme planning by scrutiny committees has focused on priorities and outcomes and all reports to committees now include areas of 'focus for scrutiny'. Different ways of working have been explored, including holding informal pre-meetings to help build a collaborative approach. Informal briefings on topics of interest have helped councillors build their knowledge of the services they are scrutinising. The new FRSSC quickly established an effective and structured approach to performance monitoring.

Influence and impact: Scrutiny continues to focus on the examination of strategic proposals, with 21 key decisions previewed during the year. It also uses call-in when needed as an important part of the democratic process enabling scrutiny to challenge and influence decisions before commitments are made. In 2020/21, six call-in requests were received, with three of these accepted for review and the proposed decisions scrutinised by the relevant committee.

b) The value of scrutiny to the Council's service priorities – the focus of scrutiny

Children and Young People's Services

- The progress of the **Children First Improvement Programme** has continued to be a focus at each Committee meeting during 2020/21. This has enabled the Committee to monitor the performance against the improvement programme and to also have more focused reports on specific areas of work, for example Neglect.
- The Committee scrutinised the first year of implementation of the **West Sussex Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and Inclusion Strategy** as part of an item on the approach to Inclusion in West Sussex. The Committee heard from a Headteacher and the West Sussex Parent Carer forum to gain their views on the implementation of the Strategy and how this was improving outcomes for children and young people. As part of the debate, the Committee heard of the role of Special Support Centres (SSCs) in mainstream schools and, as part of its conclusions, suggested that the acceleration of the delivery of SSCs in West Sussex be explored.
- Committee Members have been encouraged to use their local member role to carry out **independent research and information gathering** in preparation for agenda items. Committee members gained feedback from schools within their divisions on the support and challenges they faced because of Covid-19 to inform an agenda item on the impact of Covid-19 on educational outcomes for schools and pupils. This allowed the Committee to better test the data provided and make conclusions which took into account the views and experiences from their communities - an important function for scrutiny, as highlighted by the CfGS training provided to the Committee in 2020.

Fire and Rescue Service

- **Performance Scrutiny:** The Committee has selected its own set of performance measures through the new Performance and Assurance Framework so that members monitor the information they feel is important at each meeting and arranged their meetings to ensure the information is timely.
- **Improvement Journey:** The Committee has been assessing measures taken to address the most significant aims of the Fire and Rescue Service improvement plan.
- As a new committee, starting its work virtually at the start of the pandemic it has quickly established effective ways of working and, without a BPG, is able to discuss and deliberate on its work programme in public as part of the main Committee meeting, therefore in a more transparent way with all members of the Committee able to contribute.

Health and Adult Social Care

- The Committee established a Task and Finish Group (TFG) to focus on the **West Sussex health and social care sector recovery planning and preparedness for a potential second wave of the virus**. The TFG had a series of evidence-gathering sessions providing verbal updates from relevant NHS and County Council officers, supported by evidence. This approach reflected learning from a Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) webinar attended by the Chairman and HASC support officer in June 2020 allowing members to undertake scrutiny without adding pressure on officers. Three evidence gathering sessions were held virtually during August and September 2020, followed by a final meeting to agree TFG outcomes.
- **Information sessions** have been arranged outside formal meetings to help equip members on topics that may require future scrutiny. This has been particularly useful for complex NHS services i.e. stroke services and NHS Trust mergers. Very positive feedback has been received from committee members on this approach.
- The Committee has used **themed meetings** to focus on one issue. In January 2021, the Committee had a single issue agenda on a strategic view of Adult Social Care.
- Members of HASC and CYPSSC came together with representatives from the West Sussex Youth Cabinet to discuss **Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing - Foundations for Our Future** and reflections from COVID-19. Information was provided to councillors ahead of the meeting to assist their evidence gathering and members worked in small groups with Youth Cabinet representatives and relevant officers. Feedback from the event was positive, especially the opportunity to interact with young people informally.

Environment and Communities

- The Committee scrutinised the **partnership approach to tackling serious violence**, in particular the threats, harms, risks and vulnerability that impact our communities and residents. In addition to hearing evidence from County and district/borough community safety officers, members heard from representatives of Sussex Police and the National Probation Service. Having considered the evidence, the Committee's output focussed on the impact of closing youth clubs and youth provision over the course of the preceding decade.
- Having acted as a critical friend to the **highways contract re-procurement process**, the Committee scrutinised how the first six months had gone – in particular whether the Service had dedicated sufficient resources and focus to the management of the contract(s). Members were keen to determine how the contracts were working in practice and the ability of contractors to deliver contract outcomes within agreed timeframes. The Committee further took the opportunity to examine the long-term strategy for the management of the County's highways assets, in the face of financial challenges.

Performance and Finance

- **Our Council Plan** (known as the Reset Plan during its development) – the Committee has been pro-active in scrutinising the plan at each stage of its development. This included use of the Committee's project day for an All Member session to familiarise Members with the aims, objectives and performance targets to be included within the Plan. The Committee

highlighted the need for more timely performance management by each scrutiny committee in 2021/22. The Committee also scrutinised the **2021/22 Budget** ensuring that the Plan and Budget were coordinated to meet the priorities for the Council.

- **Quarterly Performance Management** has been developed through the year to include better information on workforce KPIs and the corporate risk register, Children 1st Improvement Plan and FRS Improvement Plan to give a holistic picture of the Council. The report also includes a summary of the transformation programme and the impact of Covid. Service scrutiny committee chairmen also now provide the Committee with a brief summary of issues related to their portfolio responsibilities in order for PFSC to focus on strategic, rather than detailed service, issues.
- A number of **large scale property decisions** have been scrutinised through the year including the Horsham Enterprise Park, Broadbridge Heath Retail Scheme and the development of a Joint Venture property arrangement. The Committee recognised these as important to achieving the Council's economic priorities and considered how the risks associated with each of the schemes were recognised and actively managed.
- Pre-decision scrutiny has also been carried out through one-off TFGs for **the Business Management System** and **in-sourcing of the IT and Support Services contracts**. This ensured priority issues are scrutinised in the most efficient manner and that scrutiny takes place at the most appropriate time for the decision.
- **Sharing of information** virtually was used for important issues not considered a priority for committee time and to ensure formal meetings focus on strategic priorities. Members could direct questions to the relevant officers to ensure informal scrutiny took place. Examples of this approach include the 2019/20 Economic Growth Plan annual report, review of the Multi-Disciplinary Consultant and the Treasury Management mid-year report.

Scrutiny Evaluation 2020/21

Each committee held an informal review of the year in March 2021 to discuss what had worked well, what could be done better, what new committee members need to know as part of the induction arrangements after the elections and to identify any priority topics for the future work programme. Key findings are set out below:

What worked well: Aspects of virtual working including informal approaches such as information sessions prior to formal committees and pre-meetings. The more focused approach to work programme planning was seen as good practice for focused pre-agenda meetings. The cross-party approach of scrutiny and the ability to be non-political and reach consensus on key issues was welcomed. Other areas that were seen to have worked well included: external input through witness involvement and the co-optees on some committees; earlier engagement of councillors in the budget process; external training and officer support.

Areas for improvement: Agendas need to be short and focused to allow time for meaningful discussion. Information, papers, and reports could be more concise and focused. Further work could be done to ensure debates at committee meetings are strategic and collective and not operational or anecdotal. It is important to have information such as performance indicators and forward plan entries in a timely way so that scrutiny can have an early impact. Other areas for improvement include more external witnesses, exploring different methods (for example

TFGs) and enhancing the work members do outside meetings to build their knowledge of the service area through research, evidence gathering and training.

Key issues for member induction. The importance of members having some interest or knowledge of the portfolio areas covered by their committee was highlighted, as well as the possibility of returning members acting as mentors to assist new members with questions and guidance in relation to scrutiny. Comprehensive training is important for all members, including what good and bad scrutiny look like and how members should prepare for meetings. Briefings and training ahead of complex or contentious issues is helpful as well as providing copies of strategies and policies relating to the portfolio areas as part of the induction.

Future priorities: a range of specific issues were identified by councillors for future scrutiny, which will be shared with the relevant committees for consideration as part of their work programme planning. Overarching themes include the need for more effective scrutiny of performance and risk; more task and finish group-type work for complex and strategic issues; and for the whole committee to be more involved in work programme planning. There was also support for continued virtual working for informal meetings.



Future Plans for Scrutiny

Scrutiny in 2021/22 will focus on the induction and training for members following the elections. Training will be provided both internally and from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to focus on how to carry out effective scrutiny. The Committees will be focusing on setting their priorities as part of the work programme planning process through the autumn to ensure that they are focusing on the priorities within their portfolio areas and where scrutiny can make a difference to service outcomes for residents.

Through 2020/21 new approaches to scrutiny have been developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which will be built upon and established into the scrutiny ways of working during 2021/22. These include holding informal virtual briefings for councillors to engage with stakeholders, gathering information ahead of formal scrutiny and holding virtual pre meetings to identify key lines of questioning and focus for agenda items.

National Scrutiny Information

The [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) (CfGS) is a national centre of expertise which promotes good governance and scrutiny. It provides support to local government, the public, corporate and voluntary sectors in ensuring transparency, accountability, and greater involvement in their governance processes. It carries out an [annual survey](#) of local councils across England and Wales to assess scrutiny activity and highlight challenges and areas of good practice. [The initial findings](#) of the survey were published in March 2021, with the full results due to be published soon. Highlights include:

- In over half of the councils surveyed, scrutiny activity continued as soon as it was possible after regulations came into force permitting remote meetings
- Around 70% of the officers and councillors surveyed would like to see the rules allowing remote meetings made permanent
- A persistent area of interest is what enables scrutiny to be effective, and what inhibits effective scrutiny
- Overall, responses were positive on scrutiny's effectiveness in supporting the council and local people on matters relating to the pandemic
- Key components of effective scrutiny are a cross-party approach and a constructive relationship between scrutiny and the executive
- Issues to explore include how to involve and engage the public in the work of scrutiny, how best to ensure adequate oversight of council finances and an understanding of risk.

CfGS offer a range of training and guidance, including a [Good Scrutiny Guide](#) which provides advice to councils, councillors and officers on the operation and overview of scrutiny and which complements the Government's [statutory scrutiny guidance](#) published in May 2019.