
Scrutiny Annual Report 2023/24

This report provides an overview of scrutiny activity at the County Council and the work of the five scrutiny committees during 2023/24. It covers the main topics scrutinised during the year, outcomes of this work and future plans to enable an assessment of the effectiveness of the scrutiny function.

Scrutiny at West Sussex County Council

41 of the 70 county councillors currently sit on one or more scrutiny committee. Their purpose is to hold the Executive to account – to comment on proposals before decisions are taken, to input into policy development and to monitor performance against corporate priorities. The Council's approach to scrutiny aims to reflect the nationally recognised principles for good scrutiny, set out in [statutory guidance](#):

- provides constructive "critical friend" challenge
- amplifies the voice and concerns of the public
- led by independent people who take responsibility for their role
- drives improvement in public services

Information on [Scrutiny at the Council](#) is available on its website. For details on membership, areas of responsibility, meeting dates, agendas and minutes, use the links below:

- Children and Young People's Services Scrutiny Committee ([CYPSSC](#))
- Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee ([CHESC](#))
- 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

24 committee meetings held	65 topics scrutinised	5,151 views of meeting webcasts (a 42% increase on 2022/23)	2 task and finish groups for in-depth scrutiny	75 hours in committee meetings & task and finish groups
11% of topics on key decision preview	18% of topics on policy development	11% of topics monitoring the budget	46% of topics monitoring performance	33% of HASC work on health scrutiny (NHS)

2023/24 Overview

65 topics were scrutinised during 2023/24, excluding items relating to committee business such as appointments and work programme planning. Since 2022/23, all scrutiny committee work programmes have identified the category of work undertaken, to show the balance between key decision preview, policy development and performance monitoring as well as other work. This enables an assessment of the appropriateness of the balance of their work. The table below sets out the main categories of scrutiny activity, apart from scrutiny of NHS services carried out by HASC – which amounted to 33% of its activity during the year (compared with 10% in 2022/23).

	CYPSSC	CHESC	FRSSC	HASC	PFSC	Total
Key decision preview	2	2	1	0	2	7 (11%)
Policy development	2	4	3	2	1	12 (18%)
Quarterly scrutiny of the Performance and Resources Report (PRR)	4	4	4	4	4	20 (32%)
Service specific performance	3	3	0	0	3	9 (14%)
Improvement programme monitoring	1	0	1	3	0	5 (8%)
Budget scrutiny	1	1	1	1	3	7 (11%)

Compared with scrutiny activity carried out in 2022/23, the main areas of difference are:

- An increase in policy development, from 9% to 18%.
- A decrease in key decision preview from 17% to 11%, although HASC did consider two NHS proposals for substantial variation in service in its health scrutiny role (similar to carrying out pre-decision scrutiny).
- An increase in budget scrutiny from 3% to 11%, with all committees carrying out budget scrutiny unlike in 2022/23 when this was only carried out by PFSC.
- A decrease in service specific performance monitoring from 25% to 14% (these are services or projects identified for monitoring separate to the PRR).

Scrutiny input into policy development can provide opportunity for earlier influence than through key decision preview and scrutiny of policy development may mean that proposed decisions are not then identified for preview as scrutiny has already happened. Scrutiny committee chairmen assessed the balance of scrutiny activity as part of their end of year review and felt that it reflected the issues and challenges facing the Council during the year and that committees had prioritised topics appropriately. Their view was that scrutiny had been robust and constructive during 2023/24, but that it would be important for each committee to monitor the balance of their own work programmes.

Update on areas for development identified in 2022/23

More use of external witnesses

- Ten external witnesses provided input into scrutiny, compared with eight in 2022/23. These were NHS Trusts, the Local Dental Committee, Adur and Worthing Councils, a highways design consultancy, Carers Support West Sussex, local headteachers and the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum.
- The West Sussex Youth Cabinet attended and contributed to scrutiny of Special Educational Needs (SEND) service improvement at CYPSSC. The Youth Cabinet also has a standing invitation to attend and speak at CYPSSC meetings and is invited to input into the work of all scrutiny committees, particularly where this links with their own campaigns and areas of interest.
- Healthwatch West Sussex, the independent health and social care champion, has a seat on HASC and provided a report on dental services as part of the Committee's scrutiny of this topic.

More visits, information/briefing sessions and task and finish groups

- In 2023/24 there were two visits arranged for scrutiny (compared with none the previous year). These were to Family Hubs and the House Project (for care leavers) ahead of scrutiny relating to these topics by CYPSSC. Some visits arranged as part of the wider member development programme related to scrutiny areas of interest, including to a major highways scheme (Lyminster by-pass).
- HASC had informal briefings on Adult Services prior to formal scrutiny sessions. PFSC had informal briefings on the Smartcore Programme, Property Joint Venture and the proposed Centenary House Durrington development to ensure it was engaged in the development and progress of these projects. CHESC had briefings on the Violence Reduction Partnership and on anti-social behaviour. The member development programme has also arranged briefings for all councillors on topics relevant to the scrutiny work programme, including five Highways and Transport briefings, three Council Plan/Budget sessions, a school place planning session and an update on the Adults improvement programme.
- There were two scrutiny task and finish groups (TFGs) in 2023/24, compared with three the previous year. These were set up by CHESC to input into the proposed Library Service digital offer for customers and to scrutinise how the Council works with bus operators to develop and implement bus service improvement plans. Scrutiny chairmen considered the use of TFGs as part of their end of year review and felt that there has been less need for these as scrutiny is carrying out business in other informal ways, including evidence gathering sessions and briefings. Also, reports to committees and members' questioning have been effective, reducing the need to set up TFGs to drill-down into topics further.

More involvement by all committee members in work programme planning

- Scrutiny chairmen have been monitoring this during the year and actively encourage feedback from committee members on topics for scrutiny. Each scrutiny committee meeting continues to have work programme planning on its agenda, and updates are provided to all members between meetings. The overarching scrutiny work programme is shared with all councillors via the weekly Bulletin.

- The 'recommendations tracker' introduced in 2022/ has become embedded across all committees as the mechanism for monitoring recommendations and enables members to assess whether further actions or follow-up may be required.

Members confident in questioning and understand the level of background research and preparation required ahead of meetings

- A scrutiny training session in March 2024 included a refresher on the guidance available to members via the updated members' intranet (the Mine). This includes the Scrutiny Guide which provides information on preparing for meetings and questioning skills. As part of a training session provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, HASC members received guidance on questioning skills relating to health scrutiny.
- CYPSSC, CHESC and HASC all now routinely hold pre-meetings to help prepare for meeting, identify key areas of questioning and share background information. All committee reports provide a focus for scrutiny and key lines of enquiry, identified through the work programme planning process.

Enabling effective and timely scrutiny of performance reports

- Each scrutiny committee continues to carry out quarterly monitoring of the Performance and Resources Report (PRR), giving time for in-depth assessment and questioning by committee members.
- In November 2023, HASC had a training session on how to understand and drill down into the PRR. In March 2024 a half-day training session was held for all scrutiny members on effective performance monitoring. This was attended by 20 members and included an overview of the purpose of performance monitoring and the PRR; how members can use the information provided (and how to link performance with the budget/financial position); types of questions to ask about performance, budget and risk and how to identify performance-related matters for further scrutiny.

Other developments during 2023/24

- **Different ways of working** continue to be explored and include pre-meetings, informal briefings, task and finish groups, visits and informal evidence gathering. PFSC carried out informal virtual scrutiny of six topics where timing didn't allow for these to come to a scheduled meeting.
- **Scrutiny chairmen** meet regularly to share learning and best practice and meet quarterly with the Cabinet to highlight areas for early and timely scrutiny of policy development and proposals. **Cabinet Members** are invited to committee business planning discussions to help identify where scrutiny can add value and to raise awareness of issues coming up and which could benefit from scrutiny input. Chairmen regularly attend Cabinet meetings to provide feedback on matters scrutinised by their committees.
- **Changes to health scrutiny powers** were announced by the Government in January 2024, impacting on the HASC terms of reference. The ability to refer contested NHS proposals for substantial service change to the Secretary of State has been removed. Instead, health scrutiny committees and other interested parties can write to request that the Secretary of State consider calling in a proposal. In anticipation of this change, a health scrutiny training session was provided by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny in July 2023 to members of HASC, along with members of the East Sussex and Brighton and Hove health scrutiny committees.

Scrutiny impact and value to the Council's business

Key aspects of scrutiny activity carried out during 2023/24 are set out below, based on the four overarching objectives for effective scrutiny agreed by the Governance Committee and County Council in 2019.

Influencing policy ideas/ proposals before they are developed

- a) The **Council Plan and Budget for 2024/25** were scrutinised before approval by the County Council in February 2024. Three informal all-member sessions were held during the year to ensure all councillors were engaged and had opportunity to input into the development of the Plan and Budget at an early stage. Comments from these sessions were fed into scrutiny by PFSC, with its conclusions provided to the Cabinet. Feedback from members on the process was very positive, suggesting that it had enabled timely and valuable engagement and that they felt more involved in the process and that their comments had more impact.
- b) FRSSC revisited the recommendations made by a task and finish group on the recruitment and retention of **retained firefighters**. The Committee was able to influence the inclusion of a new performance measure relating to retained staff as well as more flexible working plans and training opportunities.
- c) In June 2023, CHESC scrutinised the **draft Active Travel Strategy** and commented on plans for stakeholder and public engagement. An Executive TFG involving three CHESC members had input into the development of the draft Strategy, which aims to support ambitions to deliver infrastructure enabling a reduction in car trips in favour of active travel (e.g. walking and cycling). CHESC recommended that ways to measure the use of new infrastructure should be investigated and that consideration be given to include in the Strategy ways to increase connectivity between different types of journey.
- d) PFSC carried out informal scrutiny of the **Digital Infrastructure Strategy, Visitor Economy and LEP Governance** to enable input and influence ahead of decisions being taken. This gave Committee members the opportunity to influence policy even though the decision timeline did not fit with the formal schedule of meetings.
- e) An important part of an effective decision-making process is the **call-in process**, through which councillors can request that proposed decisions be scrutinised before implementation. There were two call-in requests during 2023/24, compared with one in 2022/23. Of the two requests received, one met the criteria for review. This was a proposal to declare some Council-owned property (part of the Tangmere Airfield perimeter track) surplus to operational requirements. PFSC scrutinised this proposal in November 2023, and made recommendations to the Cabinet Member to consider when taking this and any further decisions relating to the site. It also recommended that the process for declaring assets surplus be reviewed to ensure it is clear and meets governance requirements, including effective consultation with local councillors and scrutiny.

Spending time on matters critical to outcomes for residents

- a) HASC was consulted on **NHS proposals for service change** including stroke services and the relocation of Haematology Inpatient Services, making suggestions for improvements to public consultation plans. It held the **University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust** to account following a challenging external

inspection by the Care Quality Commission, seeking assurance on its improvement plan.

- b) A temporary reduction in **NHS Memory Assessment and Dementia Services** in West Sussex was reviewed by HASC as an urgent matter in January 2024. More warning of similar decisions in future was requested, and the impact on social care services to be monitored. HASC's business planning group monitored this in February and was assured that all services would be resumed from April 2024.
- c) CYPSSC and HASC held a joint evidence gathering session in June 2023 on **mental health services for children and young people** to better understand how these services are provided, the responsibilities of the different organisations involved, service performance levels and plans to improve or review services. CYPSSC and HASC have different areas of responsibility regarding these services and plan to identify specific aspects where they might add value during 2024/25.
- d) FRSSC had early input into the **West Sussex Fire and Rescue Service Annual Statement of Assurance** to ensure robustness of this document, which sets out how an efficient and effective fire service is provided to the residents and visitors of West Sussex.
- e) Assessing the **improvement plan for children with SEND and preparedness for the SEND Area Review** was a key area of focus for CYPSSC during the year. It held a session on the SEND Improvement Plan in November 2023 with a particular focus on the timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). It heard from the West Sussex Parent Carer Forum and the Youth Cabinet on the impact on young people and their families and reviewed the key areas being planned for improvement. CYPSSC will continue to monitor this important topic through standing items at each meeting focusing on a particular aspect of the SEND improvement plan.
- f) In January 2024, CHESC assessed lessons learned from **major highways schemes**, with a focus on how completed schemes (such as the A2300 and A259) were undertaken, any identified learning and how that will be applied to future schemes. Members considered the challenges presented by major schemes, particularly due to the time lag between conception and construction and the robustness of the mitigations for these put in place by the Council.
- g) In March 2024 PFSC scrutinised a decision to **increase the capital budget** allocation for a new secondary school in Burgess Hill. The support of the Committee to the budget increase ensured work could continue to provide much needed education provision in the area.

Meaningful challenge to service performance management

- a) All scrutiny committees carry out quarterly performance monitoring in public at their formal meetings, through review of the Performance and Resources Report (PRR). The PRR includes information on performance targets, budget, workforce and corporate risk as well as a summary of the transformation programme. The PRR was improved during the year to better link to the Council Plan's key performance indicators and priorities and in response to requests from PFSC for additional workforce and staffing information to enable better scrutiny of corporate risks relating to staff retention and recruitment. Also, at the request of PFSC, an additional key line of enquiry has been added to the PRR relating to value for money.

- b) CYPSSC receives additional information on key performance measures as part of the **Children's Social Care continual practice improvement** to enable the committee to hold the cabinet member to account on the service improvement journey.
- c) HASC has had early input into preparation for the upcoming **Care Quality Commission inspection of Adult Services**, reviewing the self-assessment reports and deep dives into specific areas of the Service. It has continued to monitor the two-year **Adult Social Care improvement programme** to support delivery of the Adult Social Care Strategy 2022/25.
- d) In March 2024, HASC carried out a review of performance by the **South East Coast Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust** across its 999 and 111 services, concluding that services had improved in line with requirements set out in inspections by the Care Quality Commission.
- e) As well as reviewing key performance indicators for the **Fire and Rescue Service** in the PRR, FRSSC monitors organisational and operational performance through the Service's Performance and Assurance Framework (PAF). This sets out core measures directly aligned to the delivery of strategic commitments in the Community Risk Management Plan (CRMP).
- f) CYPSSC reviewed the areas of focus identified for Children's Social Care following the **Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services** (ILACS) in May 2023. It recognised the progress made and highlighted the importance of getting qualitative feedback on the quality of services and the experiences of children and families to demonstrate how practice is improving. The Committee was assured that the waiting list for NHS mental health services for children and young people is a priority for the service leadership team and that it is regularly monitoring the quality of all service provision. Monitoring service improvement will continue to be a key of work for the Committee into 2024/25.
- g) CHESC reviewed new processes introduced in 2022 for **Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) and Community Highways Schemes**. it was broadly content with how new processes were working and that initial concerns had been addressed, including more consistency in processes. Members requested that town and parish councils be made aware of the availability of Community Highways Schemes and Community TROs and sought assurance that the relevant local county councillor is kept advised of the outcomes of local applications so that they can better support their communities in future.
- h) In June 2023, CYPSSC scrutinised the implementation of the new **Early Help Service Model**. Visits to family hubs were arranged ahead of the meeting to give an understanding of the offer provided at the Hubs and members were encouraged to speak to their local schools to seek their views on the Early Help offer. Written feedback from service users and evidence from a secondary school were also provided to inform scrutiny. CYPSSC welcomed the progress made and particularly the good work of the work of the Dedicated Schools Teams. It highlighted the importance of early identification of pre-school age children and those not in school and asked to see feedback from children and families using the service.

Showing the difference scrutiny makes to outcomes for residents

- a) Over 30 members of the public attended CYPSSC in February when it considered the outcome of the informal consultation on the **proposals to relocate Jessie Younghusband Primary School and expand St Anthony's School in Chichester**. Recognising this was a key issue for local residents, the Committee scrutinised the consultation feedback and key issues raised by residents and sought assurance on how those issues raised would be addressed should the proposals proceed. The Committee provided further comments to the Cabinet Member for consideration ahead of the final proposal being developed including suggesting impact assessments for children at both schools as part of the decision-making process and the importance of having a clear safer route to school.
- b) CHESC has scrutinised several issues impacting on the Council's commitment to address or mitigate the effects of **climate change**. Progress against key performance indicators are reviewed quarterly through the PRR, and members continued to question the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change about delays to the **Halewick Lane Battery Storage project**. Scrutiny of the viability of this project has been added to the Committee's work programme for 2024/25. The Committee sought reassurance from the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport about the current and future **impact of climate change** on the condition of the highways asset – in particular the budget provision and staffing levels. Plans for spending additional funding to address the increased number of defects attributed to climate change were reviewed at the start and finish of the programme. When scrutinising the proposed **Highways Asset Management Strategy**, CHESC focussed on how to address network resilience in the face of climate change and was reassured to learn that climate change was planned to be at the heart of the Strategy.
- c) HASC has carried out scrutiny of key aspects of NHS service delivery in West Sussex, including through a review of **NHS dental services**. NHS Sussex, the organisation responsible for setting strategic priorities and resource allocation for all NHS organisations in Sussex, provided an update on actions to address access to NHS dental services for West Sussex residents and the Committee also heard from the chair of the West Sussex Local Dental Committee. It concluded that the national NHS dental contract is the cause of many of the problems facing NHS dentistry and needs to be reviewed. It agreed to lobby West Sussex MPs and the Secretary of State for Health about the renegotiation of the national dental contract and the rates for dental activity.

Scrutiny Evaluation 2023/24

Each scrutiny committee held an informal end of year review in March 2024 to consider what had worked well and less well during the year and to identify priorities for the future work programme. 35 committee members provided feedback as part of this end of year review, as summarised below:

What worked well

- The use of different ways of working alongside formal committee meetings, including pre-meetings, external witnesses, visits, informal briefings and background research to help inform scrutiny and manage committee time.
- Constructive challenge to the NHS, particularly on the improvement plans of specific NHS Trusts.
- Monitoring performance through the PRR.

- The honesty of service reporting on difficult issues.
- Flexible work programme planning, with effective prioritisation by BPGs and constructive liaison with services on timescales.
- Budget scrutiny was singled out as having worked well, including early engagement through all-member sessions and specific scrutiny updates.
- Members felt well supported by officers.

What could be improved

- Better management and timing of items for scrutiny, avoiding items over-running at meetings and agendas having too many items scheduled.
- Using the PRR to dig deeper into issues and understand financial implications.
- Enabling all members to contribute to work programme planning and ensuring scrutiny is able to influence in a timely way and has opportunities for early input into policy development.
- To support members to be good scrutineers, including through more effective and strategic questioning and the provision of background information/history on the topics being scrutinised.
- TFGs are not used enough (although it should be noted that scrutiny chairmen felt that different ways of working had reduced the need for TFGs).
- The Council Chamber can feel an adversarial environment for meetings (although this is the only venue that can enable both webcasting and hybrid meeting arrangements).

Cabinet Members and service lead officers were also invited to provide any comments on the effectiveness of scrutiny during the year. Their comments are summarised below.

Cabinet member feedback

- The prioritisation of topics for scrutiny is always a challenge.
- The content of the PRR is always under review and suggestions for ways of making it shorter and easier to understand are welcomed.
- There has been some useful scrutiny input into policy development.
- The FRSSC approach to performance monitoring works well, focusing on specific KPIs of interest.

Service officer feedback

Officers who play a lead role in the scrutiny process were invited to provide feedback, reflecting on how well scrutiny adds value to the Council's business; how good scrutiny committees are at planning their business; how scrutiny might work better and any specific examples of where scrutiny has worked well and had impact.

- Feedback was generally very positive in terms of **how well scrutiny adds value to the Council's business**. Comments included that committees function well, are well chaired, challenge constructively, with relevant questions that seem to come from a desire to see services improve and to understand them better. One officer commented that "in all the scrutiny committees I have been to there have always been questions and suggestions that have led us to look at doing things differently". Scrutiny helps provide members with more granular detail on the issues, challenges and limitations services work within. It allows officers to hear what is important from members' perspectives. Scrutiny of the PRR was seen as very useful, providing a helpful reflection point for services and enabling them to demonstrate how they are delivering on key Council priorities. Opportunities for informal member briefing sessions were seen as adding value to the scrutiny process.

- **Scrutiny work programme planning** was seen as working well most of the time, with opportunity for services to propose topics for scrutiny, although it was suggested that there are times when scrutiny looks at things prematurely. Scrutiny work programmes are flexible enough to respond to new issues that arise, and lead-in times are sufficient to enable proper preparation for meetings. Pre-agenda meetings with the committee chairman and vice chairman help to plan the management of business effectively. One comment was that focusing on the measures set out in the PRR can mean scrutiny misses some other areas where there are performance issues.
- Comments on **ways scrutiny could work better** included having sight of questions before meetings to be able to provide more accurate and succinct answers and for questioning by members to be less parochial and more strategic (e.g. scrutiny of highways matters).

Priorities for 2024/25

Subject to review by the Performance and Finance Scrutiny Committee in June 2024, key areas for scrutiny development in 2024/25 are set out below. These will be monitored by the scrutiny chairmen through the scrutiny development action plan:

- Continuing to provide robust scrutiny of the Council's budget plans.
- Monitoring service improvement plans including the outcomes of any external inspections.
- All scrutiny committee members to own and be part of the work programme planning process.
- Effective prioritisation of topics to support robust meetings management, helping to avoid the overrunning of meetings and topics being scrutinised when there is limited ability to influence outcomes.
- Ensuring scrutiny is open and transparent.
- Actively seeking more opportunities for early influence of policy development, including through the use of task and finish groups.
- Using the PRR to identify specific issues of strategic importance for further scrutiny.
- Ensuring the role of co-opted members on scrutiny committees is clearly defined and understood.
- Reviewing the effectiveness of scrutiny across the whole four years of the current administration and planning for a robust scrutiny induction programme for after the County Council elections in May 2025.
- As part of the end of year review in March 2025, to identify key topics for inclusion in the draft scrutiny work programmes for 2025/26.

Each scrutiny committee will review topics for scrutiny in 2024/25 arising from this Annual Report and through their end of year reviews. Work programmes for the year ahead are in progress and will be reviewed at each formal committee meeting. Further information on scrutiny activity is available on the [scrutiny section](#) of the Council's website.

Other useful information on scrutiny is available from the [Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#), including the results of its 2023-24 [annual survey](#) of overview and scrutiny in local government.