

1. Foreword from the Chair

To be provided by the Chair of Scrutiny Management Board.

DRAFT



Councillor Graham Lawman
Chair of the Scrutiny Management Board
North Northamptonshire Council

2. Foreword from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer

2023/24 has been a fulfilling year in the development of scrutiny at North Northamptonshire Council. Following a detailed review of scrutiny governance during 2022/23 I have been pleased to witness the enthusiasm of councillors and officers who have embraced our new structure, led by a dedicated Scrutiny Management Board that has provided clear and focussed scrutiny work planning. The Board has been complemented by an increase in the number of scrutiny committees from one to three that has provided a step change in focus and quality of scrutiny with a greater focus on areas of council business, more expansive budget scrutiny and an increased focus on external scrutiny, particularly through our new health scrutiny committee.

I have also been pleased to welcome our first dedicated scrutiny manager, on an interim basis, during 2023/24 and look forward to providing an expansion of this dedicated support during 2024/25 with the creation of two dedicated scrutiny officer posts. Development of a scrutiny-executive protocol, which is expected during the early part of 2024/25 will only reinforce the important role and relationship that scrutiny holds as a key part of our decision-making process at North Northamptonshire Council.

Ben Smith

Statutory Scrutiny Officer/Head of Democratic Services
North Northamptonshire Council

CONTENTS

Item No.	Description	Page No.
1.	Foreword from the Chair	1
2.	Foreword from the Statutory Scrutiny Officer	2
3.	Executive Summary	4
4.	Toplines for Scrutiny in 2023/24	5
5.	Introduction	6
6.	Corporate Plan 2021/25	5
7.	Enhanced Scrutiny and Scrutiny Management Board (SMB)	6-7
8.	Strategic Initiatives and Outcomes	8
9.	Corporate Scrutiny Committee (CSC)	8-9
10.	Budget Scrutiny 2023/24	9-10
11.	Health Scrutiny Committee (HSC)	10
12.	Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee (PESC)	11
13.	In-depth Scrutiny Reviews and Panels – Highlights	11-12
14.	Scrutiny Meetings – Key Statistics	12
15.	Training and Development	12-13
16.	Conclusion and Looking Ahead	13-14
17.	Appendices A, B and C capturing summary of annual activities of all scrutiny committees for the municipal year 2023/24	14 onwards

3. Executive Summary

The 2023-24 Annual Scrutiny Report offers a detailed examination of the scrutiny activities at North Northamptonshire Council (NNC), showcasing the strides made in enhancing governance since our transition to a unitary authority. This report highlights the integral role of scrutiny in reinforcing good governance, bettering resident outcomes and enriching NNC's performance monitoring processes. Throughout the year, scrutiny has exemplified resilience and collaborative spirit, steadfastly holding the Executive accountable and bolstering the delivery of NNC's strategic vision, corporate plan and priorities¹. Key points:

- △ **Comprehensive Work Programme:** A broad array of topics were addressed, encompassing finance, performance, health, social care and place-shaping, reflecting our commitment to multifaceted scrutiny.
- △ **In-depth Reviews:** Focused reviews on asset management, community levelling up and developer contributions have significantly supported NNC's objectives for Levelling Up and Regeneration.
- △ **Asset Rationalisation Review:** This review has led to substantial potential savings following a thorough evaluation of corporate buildings, demonstrating fiscal responsibility, value for money and strategic asset management.
- △ **Levelling Up Communities Review:** By engaging with various communities, this review has fostered the establishment of Local Area Partnerships and Neighbourhood Plans, enhancing local governance.
- △ **Training Programme:** A comprehensive training initiative for members was conducted by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS), ensuring our members have been well-equipped to perform their changed roles effectively in 2023/24 and beyond.

Moving forward, we aim to focus on targeted reviews on pressing issues, monitoring of scrutiny recommendations, effective pre-meetings and enhanced engagement. Our focus will remain on adding value through strategic, evidence-based and outcome-oriented scrutiny activities. Achieving these goals will necessitate unwavering support and collaboration from our senior leadership and the allocation of dedicated resources for an effective scrutiny function.

¹ [Corporate plan | North Northamptonshire Council \(northnorthants.gov.uk\)](https://www.northnorthants.gov.uk/corporate-plan)

4. Toplines for Scrutiny in 2023/24

- ▶ **Strategic Leadership:** The Scrutiny Management Board, in its four meetings, focused on strategic leadership aligning the scrutiny function with the council's corporate objectives and its statutory responsibilities.
- ▶ **Corporate Scrutiny Committee's Comprehensive Programme:** With seven public meetings, the Corporate Scrutiny Committee effectively scrutinised key proposals, including, inter alia, detailed scrutiny on budgets and key performance indicators reflecting its dedication to comprehensive analysis.
- ▶ **Place and Environment Initiatives:** Addressing vital sectors like regeneration and climate, the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee's seven public meetings underscored its extensive impact.
- ▶ **Health Scrutiny Engagement:** The Health Scrutiny Committee, through six public meetings, played a pivotal role in examining the Integrated Care System and other areas, contributing to help improving health and social care integration.
- ▶ **Value of In-depth Panel Scrutiny Panels:** Specialised and dedicated scrutiny panels on Asset Rationalisation and Use, Budget Scrutiny, ICT Value for Money, Developer Contributions and reappointments to Outside bodies have underscored the profound insights and value that dedicated reviews can bring to the council's operations.
- ▶ **Training and Development:** Enhanced training by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny and active network participation significantly boosted our members' scrutiny proficiency.
- ▶ **Increase in Scrutiny Meetings:** Over 100% increase with 43 meetings in 2023/24 compared with 2021/22 indicates a significant role and surge of scrutiny activity.
- ▶ **Demonstrated Scrutiny Strengths:** The scrutiny function has shown formidable resilience in financial monitoring, influencing executive decisions, impactful review panels and stakeholder engagement and comprehensive member training and development.

5. Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive overview of the scrutiny activities and outcomes at North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) for the 2023-24 period. Building on the progress from our first two years as a unitary authority, it underscores the critical role of effective scrutiny in fostering accountability, transparency and continuous improvement, all of which underpin NNC's strategic corporate plan and priorities.

6. Corporate Plan 2021/25

NNC's Corporate Plan 2021-2025 sets out six key priorities that articulate the Council's commitment to the community's well-being and sustainable development:

1. **Active, Fulfilled Lives:** Promoting health, well-being and active lifestyles.
2. **Better, Brighter Futures:** Investing in education and opportunities for all ages.
3. **Safe and Thriving Places:** Ensuring safety and prosperity in our neighbourhoods.
4. **Green, Sustainable Environment:** Protecting and enhancing our natural surroundings.
5. **Connected Communities:** Strengthening the bonds within and between communities.
6. **Modern Public Services:** Delivering efficient, user-centric public services.

The Corporate Plan Refresh 2022/23² reaffirms these priorities and introduces Levelling Up and Regeneration as pivotal themes, weaving them into the fabric of our strategic initiatives.

7a. Enhanced Scrutiny Arrangements

Post-review implementation in May 2023, NNC's scrutiny arrangements have been refined to bolster their effectiveness and impact:

- **Scrutiny Management Board (SMB):** Provides strategic leadership, ensuring that the scrutiny function appropriately aligns with the council's objectives.

² The Corporate Plan Refresh 2022/23 of North Northamptonshire Council

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24

- ▶ **Corporate Scrutiny Committee (CSC):** Concentrates on finance, performance and partnerships, serving as a watchdog for fiscal responsibility and organisational efficacy.
- ▶ **Health Scrutiny Committee (HSC):** With a focus on health, social care and public health, the committee addresses the priority of fostering 'Active, Fulfilled Lives', advocating for comprehensive and accessible health services.
- ▶ **Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee (PESC):** Monitors and scrutinises initiatives related to regeneration, housing, highways, climate and community safety, contributing to 'Safe and Thriving Places' and a 'Green, Sustainable Environment'.

Through these dedicated committees and the overarching SMB, NNC's scrutiny function is becoming more incisive and influential, ensuring that our actions and policies are thoroughly examined and aligned with our community's best interests.

7b. Scrutiny Management Board (SMB)

To provide strategic oversight, the SMB was established to strategically steer the scrutiny function, ensuring that it serves as a catalyst for improvement and accountability. Three new scrutiny committees were instituted, each with a clear and focused remit:

- ▶ **Corporate Scrutiny Committee:** Concentrates, primarily, on financial oversight and organisational performance.
- ▶ **Health Scrutiny Committee:** Addresses health, social care and public health matters.
- ▶ **Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee:** Oversees initiatives related to regeneration, housing and environmental sustainability.

In the 2023-24 municipal year, the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) at North Northamptonshire Council (NNC) displayed strategic leadership, building upon the foundational years of our unitary authority. The SMB's key activities and outcomes were characterised by a proactive and responsive approach to governance, aligning as closely as possible with NNC's strategic priorities and best practice.

8. Strategic Initiatives and Outcomes

- ▶ **Annual Work Programme Development:** The SMB, through stakeholder engagement, crafted a prioritised work programme that not only aligns with NNC's strategic priorities but also adapts responsively to evolving needs via member workshops and ongoing evaluations.
- ▶ **Executive Forward Plan Oversight:** With meticulous attention, the SMB reviewed the Executive Forward Plan, pinpointing key items for proactive scrutiny and demonstrating commendable oversight.
- ▶ **Community Engagement and Response:** The SMB addressed a sensitive call-in request concerning a proposed travellers' site with adherence to constitutional procedures, showcasing exemplary community engagement and supporting the 'Connected Communities' initiative.
- ▶ **Impactful Recommendations:** Notably, the SMB's recommendations from the Levelling Up Communities Review have led to the creation of Local Area Partnerships, yielding direct benefits for residents and reinforcing the council's Levelling Up agenda.
- ▶ **Committee Synergy:** The SMB ensured that the three scrutiny committees worked in unison, delivering well-rounded and focused programmes that comprehensively address NNC's strategic goals.
- ▶ **Call-in Procedure Adherence:** The SMB's handling of a call-in regarding a proposed Travellers Temporary Stopping Site exemplified its dedication to due process and community engagement.

Looking to the future, the SMB is committed to further elevating the role of scrutiny. Through strategic initiatives, innovative community engagement, and diligent monitoring of recommendations, the SMB aims to continue adding value with a focus on evidence-based results and impactful outcomes.

9. Corporate Scrutiny Committee (CSC)

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee, with its membership of 9 councillors, has over the course of 7 public meetings, demonstrated a commitment to rigorous financial and performance monitoring, ensuring that each session contributes to the council's continuous improvement, as well as holding the Children's Trust accountable.

Key Activities and Outcomes:

- ▶ **Focus on Key Areas and Performance Scrutiny:** The committee along with a dedicated panel held multiple and comprehensive sessions dedicated to budget scrutiny, addressing areas of concern such as pressures in Children's Services, Adult Social Care and reviewing progress on future priorities like the Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) transformation. More details of the budget scrutiny are highlighted in a dedicated section below.
- ▶ **Pre-decision Scrutiny:** Recommendations from reviews, including the Pay and Grading review and the Local Council Tax Support Scheme, were made to the Full Council and the Executive, showcasing the committee's influence on policy-making.
- ▶ **Partnership and In-depth Reviews:** The committee engaged in a thorough mid-year review of the NCT, examining financial risks and partnership arrangements and established the ICT Value for Money Scrutiny Group to ensure fiscal responsibility in technology investments.
- ▶ **Levelling Up Communities:** Levelling Up Communities Scrutiny Review has played a pivotal role in community engagement, leading to the creation of Local Area Partnerships and ongoing reporting to Executive.

10. Budget Scrutiny 2023/24

To assist the Corporate Scrutiny Committee in formulating its representation to the Executive on the 2024/25 Council budget, phase 1 and phase 2 budget scrutiny sessions were timetabled through a Budget Scrutiny Panel. These sessions were formulated around the main service areas of the Council with each session being attended by the appropriate senior officers from the respective service area and officers from Finance, as well as a dedicated session attended by representatives of the North Northamptonshire Children's Trust.

For phase 1, seven sessions took place during November 2023, which included consideration of budget monitoring information for 2023/24 with the current outturn projections for 2023/24, as well as an early indication of key issues to be taken into account in the formulation of the draft 2024/25 budget proposals. For phase 2, detailed scrutiny of the proposed 2024/25 budget took place, again with seven meetings taking place, each session comprising a presentation from officers relating to the respective service area, with

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24

a focus on the budget implications as contained in the draft budget proposals 2024/25.

Each session included an opportunity for questions and answers.

The work of the Budget Scrutiny Panel during 2023/24 was praised for its comprehensive nature, culminating in a [detailed report](#) and [clear, focussed recommendations](#) for the Executive to consider. The Leader of the Council thanked the Budget Scrutiny Panel and Corporate Scrutiny Committee for its time and effort in bringing its proposals and noted that the Executive looked forward to working with the committee to review its recommendations. It was further noted that it was beneficial to have an independent arm of the council to provide an overview of the budget setting process, with the Executive finding it useful to lean into the experience that the Panel provided. The Executive approved the scrutiny recommendations, submitting them to full council for consideration as part of the final stage of the budget setting process.

11. Health Scrutiny Committee (HSC)

The Health Scrutiny Committee (HSC) is predominantly externally focused and has strived to uphold its statutory role with diligence, actively engaging with key health partners and scrutinising the integration of health and social care services. Through its work, the HSC has endeavoured to support the council's priority of promoting 'Active, Fulfilled Lives'.

Key Activities and Outcomes:

- ▶ **Engagement with Health Partners:** The HSC's collaboration with entities like the Integrated Care Board and local hospitals has been central to its efforts in examining and improving health services.
- ▶ **Focus on Health Inequalities:** The committee has taken a proactive stance on addressing health inequalities, examining strategies for substance misuse and targeting areas where disparities are most pronounced.
- ▶ **Social Care Integration:** The HSC has reviewed the progress of the Integrated Care System, probing to ensure that health and social care services are effectively joined up to serve the community's needs.
- ▶ **Public Meetings and Communication:** A well-attended public meeting on NHS dentistry access has led to improved communication strategies, directly impacting residents' access to healthcare in North Northamptonshire.

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24

- ▶ **Education and Children:** Exclusions and Children's Health checks were recently raised and are expected to be on the list of topics to be reviewed in the next cycle.

12. Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee (PESC)

The Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee (PESC) has been a cornerstone in advancing North Northamptonshire Council's (NNC) strategic priorities, particularly in creating Safe and Thriving Places and fostering a Green, Sustainable Environment. With 11 meetings held, the highest among the scrutiny bodies, the PESC's extensive work programme has significantly contributed to policy development and strategic planning.

Highlights of the Year:

- ▶ **Pre-decision Scrutiny:** The PESC conducted seven pre-decision scrutiny reviews on critical policies such as the Home to School Transport Policy, Kettering Walking and Cycling Plan and the future of Kettering Leisure Village, with a several well-crafted recommendations made to the Executive.
- ▶ **Contract and Project Performance Review:** The committee reviewed key contracts and major projects, including Sustainable Urban Extensions, identifying opportunities for potential savings and improvements.
- ▶ **Policy Development:** The PESC provided valuable input on policies like the Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy, enhancing NNC's environmental impact and sustainability efforts.
- ▶ **Scrutiny Deep-dive:** Developer Contributions Scrutiny Panel; Asset Rationalisation and Use Scrutiny Panel; and Levelling Up Communities Review have all made a positive impact with scrutiny recommendations made to the Executive.

13. In-depth Scrutiny Reviews and Panels – Highlights

- ▶ **Asset Rationalisation and Use:** The dedicated panel reviewed corporate buildings, making recommendations for future use. Due to its success, it has been asked to continue to review carbon neutral and energy efficiency aspects in 2024-25. The endorsement of the recommendations from the Asset Rationalisation and Use Review have supported NNC's Regeneration and Levelling Up corporate priorities.

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24

- ▶ **Developer Contributions (S106):** *[Due to report its findings at end of April 2024, summary of outcomes to be inserted here].*
- ▶ **Continued Impact of Levelling Up Communities Recommendations to Executive:** Engaged three communities to examine data and propose levelling up actions, leading to the establishment of Local Area Partnerships and resident-led Neighbourhood Plans, endorsed by the Executive and regularly monitored.
- ▶ **Outside Bodies:** A review to consider and make appropriate reappointments to relevant outside bodies to ensure effective engagement on behalf of NNC with the relevant bodies.
- ▶ **ICT value for money:** On-going. To understand the overall value for money of ICT services at NNC; and to determine the value for money of ICT services provided by West Northamptonshire Council. A final report is scheduled for August/September 2024.

14. Scrutiny Meetings – Key Statistics

▶ Total Number of Scrutiny Meetings held in 2023/24:	43
△ Scrutiny Management Board:	4 meetings
△ Corporate Scrutiny Committee:	7 meetings
△ Health Scrutiny Committee:	6 meetings
△ Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee:	7 meetings
△ Budget Scrutiny:	7 meetings (Concluded)
△ Developer Contributions Scrutiny Panel (S106):	3 meetings (Concluded)
△ Outside bodies:	2 meetings (Concluded)
△ ICT value for money:	3 meetings (In progress)
△ Asset Rationalisation and Use:	4 meetings (Concluded, with a request to continue in the next phase in 2024-25)

15. Training and Development

An intensive training program delivered by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) has enhanced members' skills in effective scrutiny, chairing, financial scrutiny and children's

Draft Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-24

services. Participation in and a period of chairing the East Midlands Scrutiny Network, a network of scrutiny chairs and officers, has facilitated the sharing of best practices and learning among members.

Date	Topic
11 September 2023	The Essential of Effective Strategic Scrutiny
29 September 2023	Chairing and Leading Scrutiny Committees
2 October 2023	Council Finances, Budget, and Commercial Scrutiny
30 October 2023	Budget Scrutiny - Phase 1 (Children's Services)
9 November 2023	Scrutiny Training (Children's Services & Safeguarding)
<p>► Moreover, Scrutiny members were encouraged to attend the East Midlands Scrutiny Network which meets bi-monthly with a mixture of in-person and remote meetings. The former chair of Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee acted as chair for the network for much of 2023/24.</p>	

16. Conclusion

The 2023-24 period marked a significant development of the scrutiny function at NNC. Scrutiny's work has been instrumental in holding the Executive to account, supporting the delivery of NNC's priorities and driving tangible improvements for residents. Key strengths demonstrated include:

- △ Robust financial and performance monitoring.
- △ Effective pre-decision scrutiny influencing Executive decisions.
- △ Dedicated, high-impact review panels.
- △ Improved engagement, particularly by the Health Scrutiny Committee.
- △ Specialist member training and development.

Moving forward, we can't rest on our laurels – there is a lot more needs be done to sustain momentum and to effect further improvements.

17. Looking Ahead

Moving forward, our commitment is to continuous improvement. To maintain our positive trajectory and further enhance the effectiveness of scrutiny, our suggested focus is expected to be on the following key areas:

- ▶ Development of Scrutiny Annual Work Programme 2024-25.
- ▶ Development of Scrutiny-Executive Protocol (SEP)
- ▶ Development of a mechanism to monitor scrutiny recommendations and actions.
- ▶ Targeted reviews of high-priority issues.
- ▶ Engagement to improve public/stakeholder knowledge and use of scrutiny.
- ▶ Enhanced effectiveness in the use of pre-meeting planning activities to help achieve scrutiny meeting objectives.
- ▶ Dedicated scrutiny resource: Whilst the scrutiny function has received very good support throughout the year from officers and a recent appointment of a scrutiny manager on an interim basis is very welcome – the benefit of a dedicated scrutiny team working together under a specialist scrutiny manager is recognised as good practice and it is welcomed this will be implemented during the 2024/25 municipal year.

To effectively deliver aforementioned actions will require continued commitment and collaboration from all stakeholders; particularly senior leadership, council members as well as participation of residents.

Appendices:

- A. *Corporate Scrutiny Committee: Annual Activity Update 2023 with a summary table*
- B. *Health Scrutiny Committee Summary: Annual Activity Update 2023 with a summary table*
- C. *Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee Summary: Annual Activity Update 2023 with a summary table of meetings, topics and outcomes.*

Citations:

- [1] *Local Government Act 2000; Localism Act 2011; and Statutory scrutiny guidance for councils (2019)*
- [2] *Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (2019). The Good Scrutiny Guide.*
- [3] *North Northamptonshire Council (2021). Council Plan 2021-2025.*
- [4] *North Northamptonshire Council (2022). Corporate Plan Refresh 2022-23.*
- [5] *North Northamptonshire Council (2023/24). Scrutiny Committees: Agendas and Minutes.*