

Appendix A: Corporate Scrutiny Committee | Annual Activity Update 2023/24

The Corporate Scrutiny Committee delivered a comprehensive scrutiny programme, providing robust challenge and oversight as a 'critical friend' in line with its wide-ranging constitutional duties.

Leadership and Members:

- Chair: Councillor Lyn Buckingham
- Vice Chair: Councillor Lora Lawman
- Members: Councillors Martin Griffiths, Richard Levell, Paul Marks, Zoe McGhee, Steven North, Dr. Anup Pandey, Russell Roberts
(Councillor Jim Hakewill served until March 2024)

The cross-party membership of 9 councillors facilitated diverse perspectives and a robust yet consensual approach.

Terms of Reference

The committee's terms of reference were focussed on reviewing and scrutinising the following key areas:

- Undertaking the budget review process and ensuring rigorous challenge of budget proposals
- Revenue Budget, Capital Programme, and Housing Revenue Account
- Corporate performance data
- Council-owned buildings and resources
- Enabling services e.g. IT
- Outside bodies
- Customer services
- Complaints
- Northamptonshire Children's Trust
- Partnerships

Scrutiny Activities and Outcomes

Performance and Budget Monitoring

At all 7 meetings:

- Performance Indicators: Identified areas for future scrutiny work plan (Performance Monitoring) including identifying a training requirement for Committee members on KPIs, that the highways contractor be scrutinised over their performance and this was undertaken by the Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee on 19th December 2023. Also identified was workforce planning and vacancies, including agency spend and this has been added to the scrutiny work plan for early 2024/25.
- Budget Monitoring: Comments and critical friend challenge made around the measures put in place within adults services to deal with high demand for services but not affecting the standard of care provided and the support from staff to the move towards more single-handed care. The Executive Member for Finance and Transformation has also been challenged on how he and his Executive colleagues scrutinise the budgets of the Council. There has also been challenge around how risk was being managed due to the level of vacancies within the Finance and Performance Teams.
- Capital Monitoring on 29 June 2023, 12 Dec 2023 and 9 Apr 2024: Comments and critical friend challenge made on the significant underspend of £73m on the Capital Programme. The Committee has agreed that the Scrutiny Management Board be requested to include the capital programme and why it has significantly underspent on the Scrutiny work plan for further scrutiny.

Pre-decision Scrutiny

- 15 Aug 2023: Pay and Grading - Recommendations made to Full Council to approve the proposed pay structure and terms and conditions for North Northamptonshire Council. These recommendations were considered by Full Council on 31st August 2023 and accepted in full. The Committee is due to consider the implementation of the new pay structure and terms and conditions early in 2024/25 as part of the scrutiny work plan.
- 10 Oct 2023: Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/25 - Recommendation made to the Executive that the existing Local Council Tax Support Scheme be continued for 2024/25. This recommendation was considered by the Executive on 16 November 2023 where the recommendation was accepted.
- 10 Oct 2023: Indicative Budget Timeline and Scrutiny Process 2024/25 - Agreed timeline and arrangements (Budget Scrutiny) The Committee challenged how vulnerable residents would be affected due to the budget saving requirements. The Assistant Director of Finance and Strategy advised that a full Equalities Impact Assessment would be developed throughout the process to assess the impact on residents.
- 9 Apr 2024: Review of the Performance Management Framework – Recommendation made to the Executive to support the adoption of the Performance Management Framework and 2024/25 Key Performance Indicator set.

Partnership Scrutiny

- Northamptonshire Children's Trust:
 - 12 Dec 2023 Mid-Year Review: Comments, challenge and agreed to write to LGA and 3 MPs. The Trust has welcomed the challenge of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee to seek reassurance on the risk to the Council of the financial position of the Trust. The Committee has agreed to recommend to the Scrutiny Management Board that the Health Scrutiny Committee be requested to examine the partnership arrangements, including health, of the Trust to ensure that all partners are contributing appropriately.

Other Areas

- 15 Aug 2023: Revenues and Benefits Annual Report - Comments and challenge made (Performance Monitoring)
- 10 Oct 2023: Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Report 2022/23 - Comments and challenge made (Performance Monitoring)
- 12 Dec 2023: ICT Update - Comments and challenge made (Performance Monitoring). The ICT Value for Money Scrutiny Group will be reestablished and report to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee during Quarter 2 of 2024.
- 12 Dec 2023: Scrutiny Work Plan – the Committee challenged the process of how potential items for scrutiny were considered by the Scrutiny Management Board and how these decisions were feedback to the person referring it.
- 23 Jan 2024: Budget 2024/2025 - Recommendations made to the Executive (Budget Scrutiny) that the Corporate Scrutiny Committee considered:
 - (i) That Children's Services' remained one of the budget areas of greatest concern, especially as the deficit on the High Needs Block continued to grow each year, appreciating that the aftermath of COVID had generated a significant backlog in cases and development issues in younger children.
 - (ii) There was also significant concern with Adults, Health Partnerships and Housing service pressures of £19.947m in 2024/25, particularly in Adult Services of £18.648m, against savings of £4.217m. This would need to be monitored carefully in terms of maintaining a balanced budget for 2024/25.
 - (iii) Whilst noting the excellent progress made by the Council following its formation in difficult circumstances and during a global pandemic, to achieve best value, savings and equality of service availability for tax payers across North

Northamptonshire, it would be helpful for the Council to set clearly defined goals and milestones for the transformation and harmonisation of the remaining prior Borough and District based service areas.

- (iv) That, to ensure effective scrutiny of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT), Scrutiny should undertake a further review of the NCT's transformation work and its progress around the end of the second quarter of 2024.
- (v) That the budget scrutiny process around NCT commence earlier moving forward, so that recommendations may be put forward before contracts are agreed.
- (vi) That for future budget scrutiny sessions, Equality Impact Assessments be provided to enable effective consideration of the impact of proposals on our vulnerable residents.

These recommendations were considered by the Executive on 8th February 2024 where they referred them to Full Council for consideration as part of the Budget.

- 9 Apr 2024: Customer Services Operations - Comments and challenge made on the delivery of customer services following the implementation of two major transformation projects. The Committee has requested to visit one of the customer service centres to see the number and breadth of the calls received. The Committee has also requested a further update at a future meeting once the new Customer Management System has been implemented.

In-depth Reviews

Asset Rationalisation and Use Scrutiny Review

- Established in January 2022 to consider asset management challenges and develop an asset strategy, including Community Asset Transfer Policy, Asset Disposal Policy and Corporate Property Leasehold Policy.
- Dedicated panel of 6 members met 4 times and conducted site visits
- Submitted interim report on corporate buildings to Place and Environment Scrutiny Committee (25 March 2024) – developed a detailed knowledge of the council's corporate estate, why particular property was held and the approach to developing future management. 12 corporate buildings were reviewed, and the Panel considered potential opportunities for future use and recommended whether the buildings should be retained, exited or looked at for possible community use.
- To be reestablished for continued work including understanding the implications of future energy efficiency targets on the council's estate and to provide reassurance on the management and monitoring of the key risks associated with the council's commercial estate.

Levelling Up Communities Scrutiny Review

- Established to examine levelling up in 3 wards and develop an action plan
- Working group of 7 members engaged with communities and built consensus
- Final report considered by Executive (25 August 2022)
- Regular progress monitoring of recommendations by Executive. Key achievements have included the establishment of Local Area Partnerships and Community Wellbeing Forums as a systematic approach to community engagement and collaborative problem solving. The Well Northants programme has developed resident-led Neighbourhood Action Groups and Plans for the three left behind communities. Putting communities at the heart of levelling up is at the heart of the Well Northants programme, which takes an asset-based community development approach.

Effective Practices

- Continuity through relevant review panels that add value and provide effective monitoring.

Table of meetings, activities and outcomes

A table highlighting the topics, dates, brief description, outcome and type of scrutiny is provided as Appendix 1 (see overleaf) to this annual activity update for Corporate Scrutiny Committee.

Conclusion

The committee undertook a comprehensive scrutiny programme aligned with its terms of reference. It provided rigorous monitoring, pre-decision scrutiny, partnership oversight and strategic reviews, making recommendations to drive improvements. While demonstrating effective scrutiny practices, opportunities remain, subject to resources, to enhance reporting on qualitative impact, public engagement, coordination and continuous learning.

Appendix A1: Corporate Scrutiny Committee – Table of meetings, scrutiny activities & outcomes

| Topic | Date | Brief Details | Outcome | Type of Scrutiny |
|---|----------------------------------|--|--|------------------------|
| Performance Indicators | All meetings | Consideration of the Council's performance across a wide range of services. | Identified areas of future work for the Scrutiny work plan. | Performance Monitoring |
| Budget Monitoring | All meetings | Consideration of the Council's budget monitoring position. | Comments and challenge made. | Performance Monitoring |
| Capital Monitoring | 12 December 2023 9 April 2024 | Consideration of the Council's Capital position. | Comments and challenge made. Recommendation to the Scrutiny Management Board for further scrutiny on the capital programme and why it has significantly underspent. | Performance Monitoring |
| Revenues and Benefits Annual Report | 15 August 2023 | Consideration of performance. | Comments and challenge made. | Performance Monitoring |
| Pay and Grading | 15 August 2023 | Consideration of proposed pay structure and employment terms and conditions. | Recommendations made to Full Council. | Pre-decision Scrutiny |
| Indicative Budget Timeline and Scrutiny Process 2024/25 | 10 October 2023 | Consideration of the 2024/25 budget setting process and | Agreed the timeline for the setting of the | Budget Scrutiny |

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|--|------------------|--|---|------------------------|
| | | scrutiny arrangements. | budget and scrutiny arrangements. | |
| Local Council Tax Support Scheme 2024/25 | 10 October 2023 | Consideration of the proposed Local Council Tax Support Scheme. | Recommendation made to the Executive. | Pre-decision Scrutiny |
| Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman Annual Report 2022/23 | 10 October 2023 | Consideration of the annual Ombudsman's report. | Comments and challenge made. | Performance Monitoring |
| Northamptonshire Children's Trust – Mid Year Review | 12 December 2023 | To scrutinise the NCT Period 6 budget monitoring report. | Comments and challenge made. Agreed to write to the LGA and 3 MPs. | Partnership Scrutiny |
| ICT Update | 12 December 2023 | Consideration of an ICT update. | Comments and challenge made. | Performance Monitoring |
| Budget 2024/2025 | 23 January 2024 | Consideration of outcome of scrutiny budget sessions. | Recommendations made to the Executive | Budget Scrutiny |
| Northamptonshire Children's Trust | 9 April 2024 | Consideration of performance of Children's Trust | Recommendations made to the Scrutiny Management Board for further scrutiny. | Partnership Scrutiny |
| Customer Services Operations | 9 April 2024 | Consideration of Customer Services Operations following transformational activity. | Comments and challenge made. Further scrutiny to take place once further transformation has taken place. | Performance Monitoring |
| Annual Review of the Performance Management Framework | April 2024 | Consideration of the Performance Management Framework. | Recommendations made to the Executive. | Performance Monitoring |