

SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2020/2021

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Introduction by Scrutiny Champion



Welcome to the 2020/2021 Scrutiny Annual Report by the Scrutiny Champion.

My name is Councillor Sonia Benbow-Jones and I am a Councillor for the Cefn Ward. I am also the Council's Scrutiny Champion. My role requires me to guide and promote the scrutiny function both inside and outside the Council. The year under review was my fourth year in this role. Hopefully this report will give you a better understanding of the important role that scrutiny members play. We oversee the operations of the Council and our partners to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved for the people of the County Borough. The work of scrutiny continues to evolve to help the Council address the "big issues" it and the people of Wrexham face.

The period under review in this report is from June 2020 to May 2021.

There was no return to a full schedule of meetings until February 2021. From September 2020 onwards we operated a reduced number of scrutiny committees, at a rate of 2 per month. These meetings were focussed on the impacts of Covid on services and mitigation. Topics included; Modern Ways of Working and Workforce Covid Response, Covid recovery in Adult Social Care services including Care Homes, Impact of Covid on Education, Homelessness and Covid and recovery in the Town Centre.

A number of committees were also affected by the limitations imposed by the pre-election period of the Assembly elections.

Although there was a reduction in the total number of scrutiny meetings held over the period of review it has not stopped committees carrying out their role. Work undertaken in 2020/21 has included the setting up of a Children's Social Care Task & Finish Group which has met monthly to develop Members' understanding of the services and to monitor the improvements in response to CIW (Care Inspectorate Wales) Report; We also reviewed each of the Scrutiny Committee Work Programmes to align with the revised areas of focus in the Council Plan 2020- 2023. In the absence of a full Committee cycle of meetings, this was done via email with Lead Members, Chief Officers and Members of the Scrutiny Committees.

As outlined scrutiny is an active process that does not exist in isolation from wider society. We continue to hope that, where allowable and appropriate, our processes are open, participatory and investigatory and that we adopt a flexible approach so we deliver positive outcomes. Adopting the right approach in the right circumstance is a key consideration in delivering the right outcome.

This is the last full year review of the scrutiny work of this Council. As we go progress through the municipal 2021/22 towards the elections of May 2022 we must help ensure that we consider the issues that require addressing during this period whilst identifying matters that will require attention by the new Council.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those that have been involved in scrutiny during the year for their contributions in helping scrutiny deliver for the people of Wrexham.

GET INVOLVED!

How, When and Where?

Committees tend to meet monthly. We invite decision-makers, interested parties and experts to help us with our discussions. We usually meet in the Guildhall but we're flexible on this. During the period of this Annual Report, we have held virtual meetings via Zoom due to Covid restrictions. Generally our meetings are open to the public, and our papers available on the Council's website. We also webcast most of our meetings and you can view these live or from our archives via the Council's website. We would like to know what you think.

“What issues are important to you and the people in your neighbourhood?”

“Did you know that the public can suggest issues for scrutiny committees to look at?”

“What issues do you think the Council and its partners should be tackling?”

Use the following link to help you to **GET INVOLVED!** [Get involved - Scrutiny in Wrexham](#)

GOT ANY QUESTIONS?

You can contact the **Scrutiny Support Team** by email: scrutiny@wrexham.gov.uk or telephone: 292253/ 292258 or via **your local councillor**.

OUR SCRUTINY COMMITTEES

The Council Plan 2020 - 2023 sets out six priorities:

- Developing the Economy
- Ensuring Everyone is Safe
- Ensuring a Modern and Resilient Council
- Improving the Environment
- Improving Secondary Education
- Promoting Good Health & Well-being (with a focus on improving Children's Services):

The work of the Council's five Scrutiny Committees is focussed on supporting the key areas of focus within these priority areas. The issues you would expect them to discuss are listed below:-

- **Employment, Business and Investment** - To focus on Wrexham as a place where people want to live, work, learn, visit and invest; that businesses are supported to locate and grow here and that people are able to prosper as individuals in their communities. This Committee would discuss economic development and business support services, tourism and culture, regeneration and rural & urban development;
- **Safeguarding, Communities and Wellbeing** - To focus on the people of Wrexham feeling safe and secure with sustainable, attractive settlements, neighbourhoods, buildings and spaces. To ensure that vulnerable children and adults are safeguarded and have good health and well-being. This Committee would discuss children and adult social services, health, public protection services, leisure services and community centres, and crime & disorder and community cohesion matters;
- **Homes and Environment** - To focus on the delivery of homes that meet people's needs and aspirations in well connected communities. To ensure that we are an environmentally responsible County Borough. This Committee would discuss homes (affordable housing, the council's housing stock and social housing, homelessness, other housing such as Travellers' sites), waste management, energy efficiency, Streetscene services and the road transport network/highway maintenance;
- **Customers, Performance, Resources and Governance** - To ensure we are customer focussed and innovative, soundly organised, resourced and governed, in order to deliver the best possible outcomes for the people of Wrexham. This Committee would discuss performance management, Human Resources, equality issues, health & safety, customer contact (including the Contact Centre), the Council's finances and asset management arrangements, partnership and collaboration arrangements and the Council's democratic services; and
- **Lifelong Learning** - To focus on areas that ensure that people have positive aspirations, education and potential. This Committee would discuss education issues (children and adult) and libraries.

EMPLOYMENT, BUSINESS & INVESTMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

North Wales Economic Ambition Board

The North Wales Economic Ambition Board (NWEAB) was established in 2012 and in early 2019, the partnership was formally established as a joint committee striving to deliver the North Wales Growth Deal and Growth Vision. The Council are one of the partner organisations of the Board. The related Governance Agreement, includes a protocol to facilitate Scrutiny, which provides a basis for on-going updates to be presented to a Scrutiny Committee in relation to the work of the NWEAB. The Committee considered the NWEAB Annual Report together with related performance information. In realising the key role that the NWEAB will play in the economic recovery from Covid and the long term economic development of the area we asked that a future report by the NWEAB include updates on its structure, roles and responsibilities together with details of the monitoring and evaluation of the plan, and also provide a costing indicator.

Helping New Businesses and Community Enterprises in Wrexham

As the Council moved from the response to the recovery phase for Covid the committee requested a report that outlined how the Council provides Business Support, including assistance for new business start-ups and community enterprises; and the future focus of this service in light of COVID-19. Key components outlined included the operation of business support and their role in supporting applications for Non-Domestic Rates relief, government Staff Retention Schemes (furlough) and Self-Employment Income Support during Covid. Post Covid it was realised that access to the Shared Prosperity Fund, the mechanism that will replace EU funding is key and we requested that the Lead Member submit a future report outlining the vision for the future of this service and a policy to ensure that Wrexham receives a proportionate share of the Shared Prosperity Fund to support economic development.

Reduce Level of Empty Retail Properties

The changing face of Town Centres and their make - up is a trend that has been accelerated during the pandemic. We considered opportunities to target empty and problematic buildings in Wrexham Town Centre and other key settlements to improve occupancy and repurpose to meet changing needs of the economy. There is currently a high level of retail vacancies in the area, but it was noted that we had a strong independent retail sector. Encouraging growth in this sector, in the available premises was considered key in recovery. To help this process we have approached other North Wales Authorities for them to join us in lobbying the Welsh Government for a change in business rates, with a view to reducing those in Town Centres whilst increasing them for out of Town retail businesses.

CUSTOMERS, PERFORMANCE, RESOURCES & GOVERNANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Modern Ways of Working and Workforce Covid Response

We received an overview of the workforce considerations and arrangements put in place in responding to the coronavirus pandemic and the acceleration of implementation of parts of the Modern Ways of Working programme. We had also requested a staff survey during November 2020 to understand what has gone well and what might need to be done differently in the future. Some felt that members of staff working in the office in critical roles were under more pressure to undertake tasks in comparison to those working at home. With regard to working from home, feedback was mixed. Some felt that they were more productive due to the flexibility which also supported their work life balance and the lack of travel helped the environment. Others reported feelings of isolation and lack of social interaction and the effect this had on their mental health and wellbeing.

We made some suggestions which Offices agreed to take on board, including the need to have regard of the customer for certain digital service provision, for example, scanning in documents in order to apply for disability blue badges, and making better use of the Council's intranet as a means of storing background documents/briefing papers in order to achieve a "clear desk policy". We will continue to monitor the delivery of the Modern Ways of Working Programme to ensure that the Council has proper regard for the health and wellbeing of employees and to build a resilient workforce to deliver the best possible services for the people in Wrexham.

Impact of Brexit

We considered a report which outlined the impact of Brexit, the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement (the 'new deal') and the remaining risks to the Council. We noted that the Shared Prosperity Fund and other possible future funding options were likely to be allocated on a regional basis and we stressed the need to ensure that local plans were put in place to protect future funding of Wrexham's Economic Development Department. We were assured that Wrexham had a reputation for being supportive of local businesses and this would continue. The procurement rules which would impact the way in which businesses operate would not be implemented until 2024 and Wrexham would continue to operate within existing guidance until then by ensuring that local businesses felt fully supported. The number of applicants applying to the EU settlement scheme in Wrexham had exceeded the estimate and this could provide some assurance in terms of the need to protect the most vulnerable in the community. We have requested the Employment, Business & Investment Scrutiny Committee consider the specific issue of economic recovery at a local level having regard to the impact of Brexit and how Wrexham will benefit from the Shared Prosperity Fund in the short and long term, and we will continue to monitor this area of work to ensure that the remaining risks to the Council are minimised.

HOMES & ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Climate and Ecological Emergency – Our Decarbonisation Plan

Since declaring a Climate and Ecological Emergency in September 2019 there has been a goal for the total carbon emitted by the Council minus the total carbon absorbed from Council owned and operated land and services to equal zero by 31st March 2030. In addition we will aim to reduce our supply chain emissions alongside our internal service delivery. A key driver of this change will be the Decarbonisation Plan. As part of the development of the Plan, four key themes have been identified. These themes are: Buildings, Transport and Mobility, Land Use and Procurement, which echo the areas previously been highlighted by Welsh Government as having the highest carbon emissions, for public sector organisations. We have scrutinised and supported the Plan. In addition we highlighted the need for adequate internal resources to be made available to ensure the delivery of the Plan, requested that lobbying of National and Welsh Government be undertaken to provide adequate funding for delivery of the Plan and that involvement of Community Councils be encouraged via the Town and Community Council Forum to help realise the aims of the Plan. Due to the importance of the development of the Plan we have requested updates on progress on a 4 monthly basis.

New Welsh Government guidelines in respect of Homelessness and the legal obligations placed on the Council.

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, ending the need to sleep rough was a national and local priority. The Council has adopted a Rough Sleeper Strategy in association with a Homelessness Strategy and a regional North Wales Homelessness Strategy all of which have the common theme of ending homelessness in Wales and in the County Borough. To help prevent the spread of coronavirus, the Welsh Government had directed all local authorities in Wales to help all rough sleepers off the streets and to rehouse them in suitable covid safe accommodation. We considered the work undertaken to meet this requirement and welcomed the triage multiagency approach trialled at Glyndwr, and the intention to extend this to continue to provide help and support that homeless persons required, and that we ensured that all departments across the Council together with all external partners work jointly to share the load for homeless provision. We also urged the creation of additional Supported Living Accommodation in the County Borough to provide 24 hour help and support especially for those with the greatest complex needs and requirements, and that we approach WG for the necessary funding to finance this. Due to the impact on homelessness due to prisoner release from HMP Berwyn we also questioned the Ministry of Justice and Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board as to the help and support given by them to prison leavers with the greatest personal needs

LIFELONG LEARNING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Estyn PIAP – response to report and the future scrutiny of the PIAP

We considered the progress made against the four recommendations from the Estyn inspection of Wrexham Local Government Education Services which took place in October 2019, which was also informed by an improvement conference that had been held with them in November 2020. Although many of the reports considered by the committee addressed areas around the recommendations this report provided an overview across all. Having been advised of work undertaken we requested quarterly updates on the development of the PIAP and agreed that these focus on supporting delivery of the Plan, that the future role of the Committee with the Accelerated Improvement Board be explored, and that further consideration be given to the interaction between us and schools.

Proposal to revise the structure of Education and Early Intervention with a focus on supporting vulnerable learners and learners who have complex needs

We requested a report as to how the department currently provided support to ensure that all learners are appropriately supported and included; and to provide reassurance that the plans to re-structure the department will further strengthen support for inclusion and well-being. This addressed recommendations 2 and 3 of the Estyn report which required focus on the areas of wellbeing of learners, to ensure that all learners are effectively supported and are positively engaged in the education offer. It outlined a re-structuring of the service to ensure that all teams work in a joined up and collegiate to address priorities and effectively evaluate impact to ensure that all pupils achieve the best outcomes in a happy and safe environment. The use of additional funding and the future adoption of a team around the school was also referenced. We welcomed the operational direction of the Department and were reassured that the new targeted support team will support improvements against recommendations in the Estyn report. We will continue to monitor progress of future developments and their effects.

School Absences

We considered a report in relation to school absences which addressed recommendation 2 of the Estyn report, “that the Authority was to improve attendance, wellbeing and behaviour of secondary school pupils.” The report outlined the work undertaken to review Attendance Policy, set up ‘Concern and Action’ meetings at each secondary school, review the staffing structure ensuring capacity to support and challenge schools and improvements in data analysis. Other pieces of key work within the Education Department that are ongoing will have an indirect positive impact upon attendance levels and reduce rates of persistent absenteeism. This includes work to reduce exclusion rates and a review of the curriculum offer for 14-19 year olds. On considering this we agreed to support the draft policy ‘Success Starts at School, to advocate for its adoption at the schools for which we are Governors, welcomed the pro-active approach outlined for the educating parents campaign. We requested a future report be considered regarding progress in respect of school absences, together with relevant information in respect of home learning and measurable outcomes

SAFEGUARDING, COMMUNITIES AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Annual Adult Safeguarding Report with revised focus on activity during Covid 19

This was one of the priority areas we wanted to scrutinise as soon as Scrutiny Committees were reconvened in September 2020. We received details of the Adult Social Care Department's performance in relation to the protection of adults at risk from abuse, a current summary of activity and ongoing development. Despite the additional pressures of the pandemic, through adjustments to their working practices (eg staff working from home but with access to virtual meeting software, rota office visits, temporary redeployment of staff), the Adult Safeguarding Team maintained positive performance with 21 of the 24 Strategy Meetings taking place within 14 days of the referral (87.5%). Of the 308 referrals received since the pandemic began, 256 have had their enquiries completed within 7 days (83.1%). Maintaining good performance under such unprecedented circumstances is testament to the team's priorities of ensuring the most vulnerable are protected. We were therefore able to provide assurance to the public that Adult Social Care had adjusted their working practices appropriately during the period of the Covid pandemic.

Children's Social Care Budget 2020/21

We received a report detailing the in-year pressures within Children's Services which had contributed to a projected overspend within social care of £5.276 million for 2020/21 financial year. We noted that the most significant area of overspend was the increase in costs for out of county placements. The Covid pandemic had contributed to the current position but we were advised that Guidance from Welsh Government to claim back from the Covid hardship fund did not allow Wrexham Council to claim for the additional demand for child places. In view of this, we agreed that the Chair send an urgent request to Welsh Government for the COVID hardship fund to include budget provision for pressures in children's social care for the financial years 2020/21 and 2021/22. Welsh Government responded to confirm that Local Authorities are able to claim for additional costs, having taken account of any savings, relating to the delivery of services as a result of the pandemic, including costs for children's social care. Based on the content of the letter, a claim for the 3 Quarters of the year 2020/21 was submitted and the Council received a further £1.4m. Also, a Children's Social Care Improvement Task and Finish Group was established in September 2020 in response to a CIW Letter in January 2020 and has been meeting monthly. The findings will be reported back to Committee in January 2022 and will be included in the next Scrutiny Annual Report.

Covid 19 Recovery in Day Care, Care facilities, Respite Care and Admission to Care Homes from Hospital

As the Covid 19 Pandemic restrictions began to ease, we wanted to know the impact Covid 19 had on Adult Social Care provider services and the plans for recovery. We noted the significant impact on residential, day care and respite provision (some services being suspended and about a quarter of Care Homes initially being put into lockdown), but that some services were now beginning to reopen, albeit on a reduced capacity level for Covid safety reasons (eg In-house respite care for disabled adults and children, In-house Day Care provision for disabled adults). We noted that fortnightly COVID testing of care home staff was in place from 10th August 2020 and tests were also required to be carried out prior to discharge from hospital to a care home. Wrexham (and Flintshire) Adult Social Care is also insisting on negative COVID tests for discharge to a home care service. This has provided assurance to service users in Wrexham.

SCRUTINY COORDINATING GROUP

The Scrutiny Co-ordinating Group (Chairs and Vice-Chairs of each of the 5 Scrutiny Committees) met 8 times during the period under review.

Our initial role during this time was co-ordinating the scrutiny function, updating the scrutiny members via informal scrutiny and considering how to make progress within the confines of resource availability. Once an allocation of meetings had been agreed the Group then determined which items should be considered at each of the two Scrutiny Committee meetings available every month.

The review of 'How we do business', which had involved an All Member Workshop and a training session for Senior Leadership Team to consider executive and scrutiny arrangements and ways of engaging the public, was further considered. The feedback from the workshop was grouped into the following key themes:-

- Relationship between Lead Members/Chief Officers/ Chairs and Vice –Chairs
- Communication and Presentation of Information to Members
- Form and Frequency of Scrutiny Meetings

These were reported to a meeting of the full Council held in December 2020 where it was agreed to:-

- i. Support the development of a protocol for greater informal means of communication between Lead Members, Chief Officers and Chairs of Scrutiny Committees and Scrutiny Members.
- ii. Agree the additional dates for Scrutiny Committee meetings and to schedule monthly meetings for all 5 Scrutiny Committees starting in February 2021.
- iii. Support the recruitment of a Scrutiny Facilitator as recommended by the Democratic Services Committee.
- iv. Continue reviewing the way we do business including ensuring effective Scrutiny arrangements going forward and inform Members in advance of the purpose and proposed format of all member workshops.

We will continue to consider and inform new ways of working as we recover from the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

Like all functions of the Council scrutiny has adapted as, an Organisation, the Council has worked through both a response and recovery phase during the pandemic.

Despite the disruption to Scrutiny Committee meetings during this reporting period due to the Welsh Government Election and COVID 19, Scrutiny in Wrexham is, and will continue to be, an evolving process of support and challenge to Council and outside organisations to ensure that the people who live, work, or visit here get the best possible services within the resources available.

During the period of response scrutiny looked at key Council services to ascertain the impact that the pandemic had on their delivery. It gained assurance that Adult Social Care providers, Adult protection, and Children's Social Care, Education and Housing had continued to provide services whilst under the restrictions imposed to limit the spread of Covid.

As the Council transitioned from response into the recovery phase, scrutiny has looked at the impact that the pandemic has had. It has also considered work methods that had been adapted due to the Covid regulations. This involved undertaking a staff survey to obtain their views on working from home arrangements and increased use of digital methods for service delivery. Many of these more modern ways of working have now been adopted and will provide a new and better way of service provision. In these instances necessity has been the mother of invention.