







Scrutiny Annual Report 2021-2022

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Board**

1. Chair's Foreword



I am pleased to present this report describing the work of Scrutiny during the 2021 – 22 municipal year.

Over the past year, scrutiny has continued on its improvement journey and all boards have welcomed the opportunity to work closely with the Cabinet and the newly appointed chief officers as they lead the Council.

The return to face to face meetings in May 2021 brought some challenges with attendance but boards have continued to provide valuable and effective oversight for the Council, whilst providing input into policy development and service delivery, without need for any call-in of Cabinet decisions.

The boards have sought to focus on the critical issues for the Council and provide constructive input in finding ways to improve outcomes for residents.

I thank all Chairs and Vice Chairs for their help and support and working together on cross cutting issues and providing constructive challenge to the Cabinet, directors and partners.

I would also like to thank the wide range of officers who support all the boards and thank those external to the Council who gave up their time to attend meetings and who have contributed to the work of overview and scrutiny.

Cllr Luke Giles

Chair of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board (2021-22)

2. Introduction

This annual report gives you an insight into the work of the Council's five Scrutiny Boards and working groups over 2021-22 municipal year.

Our 2021-22 scrutiny journey started with a change in the Council's political makeup following the May 2021 elections. This created a new mix of experienced councillors with an institutional memory of what has gone before, and new opposition members keen to learn and ask questions, whilst also bringing new insights and experience into the Council.

We then saw the arrival of a new interim Chief Executive in the autumn, followed by a refresh of the Corporate Plan 2020-2025. In December 2021, the Council experienced a further change when Councillor Kerrie Carmichael was appointed as Leader.

In January 2022, our external auditor (Grant Thornton) published its findings following a Value for Money Governance Review, which had been carried out over the period August to October 2021. Whilst the report was disappointing, Grant Thornton also recognised that over the preceding few months, the Council had made progress towards resolving matters and improving the governance arrangements in place. In response, the Council approved an Improvement Plan in January 2022 to address all 45 recommendations in the report, as well as reporting mechanisms to ensure progress is managed effectively.

In January 2022 CIPFA undertook a review of the financial management and governance arrangements using the Financial Management Model. The report concluded that the Council is financially stable but lacks ambition and innovation and has a very traditional approach to financial management. The recommendations arising from the review have been incorporated into the Improvement Plan.

In late January/February 2022 we also received a visit from a team of peers from the Local Government Association. The report of the peer challenge team makes reference to the valuable contribution that scrutiny is making, including the positive relationships that the new Leader has developed with scrutiny chairs whilst also acknowledging the improvements that are still to be made. Again, the recommendations made in the final report have been incorporated into the Improvement Plan.

In March 2022, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities decided to appoint a team of commissioners, led by the Interim Chief Executive, now *Managing Director Commissioner*, to take the lead on governance and scrutiny of strategic decision making by the Authority and functions relating to the appointment and dismissal of statutory officers. Actions to address the issues identified by the government are also set out in the Improvement Plan.

Despite these significant changes, scrutiny has continued on its positive trajectory, with the good work taking place being acknowledged by chief officers, members and the commissioners. Scrutiny is a fundamental part of the reporting mechanisms in place to ensure that progress is being made against the Improvement Plan. The Improvement Plan also provides a further platform to promote the work and the value of scrutiny, and a new impetus to take forward the recommendations arising from the scrutiny review that took place in 2019.



3. The Principles of Good Scrutiny

The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CFGs) sets out four things that are essential to make scrutiny effective.

Provide constructive “critical friend” challenge

Scrutiny must be forensic and challenging – but it must also seek to support decision-makers to do their work better. We all have a collective responsibility to support high quality decision-making, and scrutiny is an integral part of the governance framework that works to make that happen.

Scrutiny isn’t about opposition for opposition’s sake, but in, democratic environments, it is inherently political. It involves scrutineers discussing matters of real contention and importance and, through debate, identifying novel solutions to complex problems. Being a “critical friend” involves understanding what decision-makers are trying to achieve and using evidence both to critique and refine these priorities and the methods proposed to achieve them.

Decision-makers also have to be friends to scrutineers, be open to scrutiny and create a culture which enables effective scrutiny to happen. The relationship is two-way.

Amplify the voice and concerns of the public

The use of new methods for public deliberation and participation have also increased the expectation of the public in how, where and when they will be involved.

Scrutineers have a dual job here. Firstly, to ensure that the public’s (and/or specific stakeholders) voice is heard generally in the way that decision-makers design and deliver services. Secondly, to improve the practice of scrutiny itself, by redesigning the way that we work so that we face outwards, looking at the issues that are important to local people in a way that makes sense to them, and using this relevance to improve our profile.

Be led by independent people who take responsibility for their role

Scrutiny is intensely political. Scrutineers, in the local government context, are politicians. But they have a unique perspective to bring to the scrutiny process, a different point of view which brings something distinct to both policy development and post-decision scrutiny. By setting their own work programmes and asserting their independence, these councillors can look at things from angles that might not be apparent to Cabinet members, or senior officers.

Drive improvement in public services

What is the point in scrutiny if it doesn't lead to any changes?

4. How Scrutiny Works

Scrutiny members can require officers, or representatives from partner organisations to attend Board meetings, working groups or inquiry sessions to provide information and respond to questions as part of in-depth reviews into issues that are important to local residents and businesses, or individual reports that boards request.

Scrutiny boards also carry out pre-decision scrutiny of forthcoming decisions, e.g. on draft new policies and those being reviewed, and refer comments and recommendations to the Executive to consider. Additionally, chairs attend Cabinet meetings to ask questions and challenge the key decision makers.

Work programming meetings took place remotely in June 2021, to minimise physical attendance as the pandemic continued. However, this did not impact on the quality of the work programmes developed and all boards developed varied and robust programmes, overseen by the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board.

The chairs and vice-chairs of the boards have continued to meet virtually on a monthly basis to discuss emerging issues and informally.

Since the review, scrutiny has continued to develop approaches and embed them. These include the chairs and vice-chairs sessions, refresh of the review process and tools used, question time and better use of social media to engage the public.

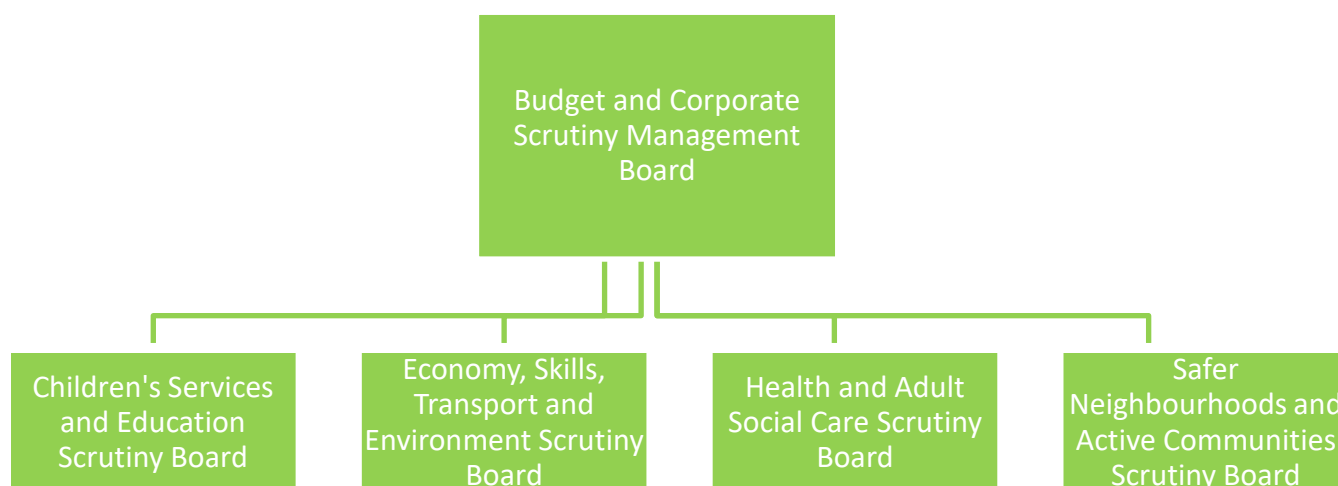
A review of the scrutiny function took place in 2019, however, the pandemic impacted upon the delivery of the recommendations arising from the review.

How Scrutiny Works – Scrutiny Structure

Overview and scrutiny is a key aspect of this Council's governance framework and is integral to decision making.

Scrutiny boards fulfil the statutory responsibility placed on local authorities to review and scrutinise decisions and actions taken in relation to the delivery of services, policy making and service shaping to deliver the Sandwell Vision 2030 ambitions and the Council's Corporate Plan ['Big Plans for a Great Place for the people of Sandwell'](#).

Each year the Council appoints members to a Scrutiny Management Board and four thematic Scrutiny Boards. Each Board has its own area of responsibility with topics cross-cutting directorate responsibilities.



The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board consists of a Chair and the four Chairs of the thematic Boards. Each thematic Board is made up of 11 non-executive members. Both Children's Services and Education and Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Boards also include co-opted members who serve on the Boards alongside elected members.

The scrutiny boards' terms of reference are approved by the Council and are set out in the Council's Constitution.

5. Scrutiny Activity Spotlight 2021-22

33

Scrutiny Board meetings held



2 Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny meetings held with Birmingham City Council

8

Review Working Group meetings



3

Reviews carried out

4

Pre-decision items considered



6. How does Scrutiny make a difference?

There are many ways that Scrutiny has an impact and adds value.

Holding a matter up for to scrutiny raises awareness.....

Makes comments and recommendations to decision makers based on evidence gathered.

Initiates 'the difficult conversation' between interested parties.

Tells us why we do something; the way things work and how we perform.

Helps to develop relationships between services and partners, public and officers.

Monitors and maintains oversight of issues that impact on residents and businesses of Sandwell.

Invites people into the same space to hold an open and transparent discussion.

Identifies good practice and shares this more widely.

Questions the issues, barriers or blockages.

7. What difference have we made?



One Council One Team - A Modern Council

Big Plans for a Great Place for the People of Sandwell

The Sandwell Plan 2020-25 sets out how the Council will deliver its part of Vision 2030 for the next five years focussing on six strategic outcomes: -

- The best start in life for children and young people;
- People live well and age well;
- Strong, resilient communities;
- Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods;
- A strong and inclusive economy;
- A connected and accessible Sandwell.

The outcomes cannot be delivered by one directorate alone, so would be delivered using a 'One Team, One Council' approach. This approach moves away from the previous system of individual directorate business plans and seeks to unite the Council as one team to deliver on the strategic outcomes.

Scrutiny submitted comments and observations relating to 'Big Plans for a Great Place...For the People of Sandwell' to the Cabinet in 2021/22 and the boards continue to align their work programmes to the strategic outcomes.

The Budget - *Monitoring the Corporate Purse*

The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board has maintained oversight and challenge of the Council's budget monitoring, business plans, outturns and proposed budgets throughout the year. This work has proven ever more vital in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Corporate Plan 2020-2025 - Refresh 2021

The Board reviewed the refreshed Corporate Plan, which informed how each directorate would spend the budget available to them. A series of engagement events consulting members, staff and partners took place to address issues affecting residents following the pandemic. It was identified that improving

standards of cleanliness and ensuring that people feel safe in their communities were borough wide priorities. The board subsequently proposed to go back to stakeholder, including all schools that had been visited during the consultation period to evidence that their feedback had shaped the plan. In particular it was suggested this represented an opportunity to develop a young person's version of the Corporate Plan. It was proposed that there would be greater member involvement to ensure that elements of the corporate plan would better serve individual wards and period reporting on the corporate plan to the Scrutiny board should be implemented.

Here are just some examples of the excellent work carried out by scrutiny in 2021-22. You can read more about the work of each of the scrutiny boards by viewing the reports, presentations and minutes from each of their meetings here:

<https://sandwell.moderngov.co.uk/mgListCommittees.aspx?bcr=1>

“Best start in life for children and young people”



Scrutiny Review – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transport Models (Children’s Services and Education)

The Board conducted an in- depth review of SEND Transport across the borough, analysing data, speaking to parents, and reviewing the costs of options both internally and transportation out of the borough. It was identified that there are multiple models available and that current procedures needed to be adapted. Following this consultation period, a number of recommendations were made by the Board and scrutiny continues to maintain oversight of this topic. .

Scrutiny Review – The impact of Lockdown on Children and Families (Children’s Services and Education)

The Board established a working group to conduct a detailed review of the impact of lockdown through the Covid- 19 pandemic. The group assessed the impact via speaking to mental health trusts and surveying parents throughout the borough. It was found that there were an increased number of referrals for children presenting with anxiety and struggling in social settings. The Board also found it had a highly detrimental impact upon educational attainment by pupils as a result of learning from home, in particular those from low income households experiencing digital exclusion as well as an increase in safeguarding concerns. The Board recommended that preparation is undertaken for the expected increase in Education, Health and Care Plan assessments.

Regional Adoption Agency Monitoring Report (Children’s Services and Education)

The Board was presented the annual report and noted that the service had now been in place for two years, it was found that the workforce had now stabilised which was deemed to be positive. The Board identified that there had been an increase of 24% of children receiving placements and that registrations of interests by potential adopters had increased by almost a third. It was suggested that the new agency was more effective than the previous in- house system, offering better support at a reduced cost.



Sandwell's Air Quality Action Plan (Economy, Skills Transport and Education)

The Board reviewed the implementation of green measures across the borough, including the introduction of air quality monitors and the vehicle strategy to reduce carbon footprint. Members assessed the progress made and identified Sandwell's biggest emission source was from refuse collection vehicles, as such they recommended that decided to look at the Council's fleet and options to make it more environmentally friendly. In addition, the Board proposed that the Council increase its lobbying activity with external stakeholders to ensure that it receives its fair share of funding towards improvements to highways infrastructure to support electric vehicles.

Smoke Control Area (Health and Adult Social Care)

The Board was consulted on proposals to establish a Smoke Control Area in Sandwell. Smoke Control Areas were already established in Birmingham and Dudley. It was proposed that the whole of Sandwell should become a Smoke Control Area, citing the many health benefits to those who live and work in the borough.

Access to Primary Care (Health and Adult Social Care)

The Board reviewed the access arrangements for Primary Care, acknowledging the implications upon healthcare practices of the covid-19 pandemic. It was identified that those waiting over a year for treatments had increased to 10,000 boroughs wide. The Board recommended that the Clinical Commissioning Group, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Adults, Social Care and Health establish a joint task force to communicate the variety of methods that residents can access care, other than through a GP, so that pressures upon GPs can be reduced.



Waste Services and Cleanliness of the Borough – Review (Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment)

An in- depth review of the Serco contract was conducted in response to concerns to ensure both high quality and value for money for the residents of Sandwell. Following reports from Serco senior management, engagement with community groups, speaking to Trade Unions and documenting the concerns of residents; several recommendations were made. Recommendations made were in relation to recycling rates, audit of operational capabilities and street cleansing.

Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy (Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities)

The Board reviewed Sandwell’s Domestic Abuse Strategy, in response to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which set out a statutory duty for local authorities to provide specialist support for victims of domestic abuse. It found that levels of documented psychological and financial abuse are rising and that there is an increase in victims of domestic abuse presenting with a need to access mental health supports. Covid is believed to have been a significant catalyst for these changes. Several recommendations were made by the Board, particularly focused on the needs of the victims, with further training required for commissioned providers being a key proposal.

Sandwell’s Anti- Social Behaviour Policy 2022 (Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities)

The Board was consulted on the new Anti- Social Behaviour Policy, which had been developed in partnership with West Midlands Police, prior to public consultation. The Policy built on the previous introduction of the ASB Portal and the hub- based approach. It was also noted that the Council have achieved its first prosecution via a Community Protection Notice. Several recommendations were made by the Board, including that procedural changes were yet to be incorporated into the revised policy and that data is to be collated from the ASB portal so that high risk areas within the borough can be identified and a higher level of support can be provided.

“Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods”



Black Country Plan Consultation (Economy, Skills, Transport and Education)

The Board reviewed the plan to ensure that it met the borough’s needs of ensuring that new homes were built, setting out planning framework whilst ensuring that factors including climate change mitigation measures and access to primary healthcare were placed front and centre. Following public consultation and engagement with stakeholder groups, the board identified that Sandwell has the biggest shortfall of housing land within the region and that funding would be required from the Combined Authority to make plans viable.

Review of Property Age Designation (Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities)

The Board analysed the current procedure whereby some council properties are restricted by age. It was agreed by members that removing the 25 year plus requirement for certain properties would assist in improving housing options for care leavers and noted that 74% of housing applicants surveyed believed more properties should be available to those under 40 years old. The Board recommended that there was a need to promote social and community cohesion within council tenancies and that the council should carefully consider the make-up of each block before individuals are allocated a property. In addition, it was recommended a multi- agency approach be developed to better respond to the needs of residents.

Review of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy (Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities)

The Board reviewed Sandwell’s strategy in dealing with homelessness. The council was dedicating more resources to preventing homelessness, to ensure people are supported before they end up in crisis. 88% of Housing First tenants in the borough had successfully maintained their tenancy. However, several recommendations were made, one being that the council uses its resources better and collaboration occurs across teams to pool assets. It was also recommended that the standard of support plans needs to be improved so that they are more tailored to the service user and is adapted to support with their specific needs.



Mowing Season (Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment)

Officers updated the Board with regards to the new tracking and performance system as well as raising issues related to the age of the machinery used. The Board considered the schedule for the 2022 season and identified that plans on rewilding and converting green spaces into meadow land should be actioned. It was recommended that stakeholders are consulted and the draft strategy for rewilding is presented to the board in a future meeting; with appropriate locations for the creation of green spaces identified.

Levelling Up Fund (Economy, Skills, Transport and Economy)

The Board was consulted on the Council's proposals in relation to the Government's Levelling Up Fund, which sought bids on three categories of investment – Transport, Cultural and Regeneration and Town Growth. Recommendations were made in relation to ensuring robust consultation with ward representatives.

Towns Fund Projects (Economy, Skills, Transport and Growth)

The Board was consulted on the Council's proposals in relation to the Government's Towns Fund programme. The Board recommended that business cases should have dedicated section devoted to climate change.



On Street Residential Electric Vehicle Charging Scheme (Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment)

The Board received details on proposals to allocate funding from the Department of Transport to deliver electric vehicle charging points across Sandwell in streets where there was no off-road parking available.

E Scooters Trial (Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment)

The kept a watching brief on the E- Scooter trial in West Bromwich. It was identified by members that the reception had been largely positive, with no major injuries being reported and the low carbon footprint generated via usage. However, members of the Board still had concerns around affordability and safety.

Youth Bus Service Provision (Children’s Services and Education)

The Board discussed and reviewed the Youth Outreach provision. It was they noted that the current Youth bus is 24 years old and is often unreliable due to its longevity of service. The Board recommended that an electric bus is purchased, it acknowledged the increased costs, both with procurement and adapting facilities for charging purposes, but it was felt this would show a commitment to the green agenda. It was further proposed that young people are surveyed on what facilities they would like to see incorporated and that Public Health should also be consulted with a view to multi- purpose outreach being workshopped.

7. Looking Ahead - Work Programme 2022-23

The scrutiny work programme this year and over the next few years will focus on some big topics as the Council and Cabinet have to make some difficult decisions on what services are provided and how they are provided.

New policies will be required, and old policies will need to be reviewed and refreshed in light of changes post Covid.

There will be a need to maintain oversight and monitor the finances, performance and risks to the Council Services.

Big issues on the horizon:

- The Impact of Covid on the Council and Health Services
- NHS and Social Care Reform – White Paper
- Climate Change Strategy Implementation
- Education Excellence Everywhere – White Paper
- Elective Home Education
- Children’s Mental Health

Some topics will also be rolled forward from previous work programmes and a public consultation exercise highlighted matters that are of concern to the public and businesses in Sandwell to be considered for inclusion in the work programme.

Good governance and scrutiny is at the heart of what we do.

It is about how the Council ensures that it is doing things right, in the right way, for the right people, in a timely, inclusive, open, honest and accountable way.

8. Summary of Topics Considered 2021-2022

Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board	Children's Services and Education
Financial Outturn	Review of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transport Models
Evaluating outcomes of the Corporate Plan	Sandwell Children's Trust Annual Review
Digital platforms for council services	Regional Adoption Agency Monitoring Annual Report
Budget monitoring 2021-22	Review of the Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families
Senior Management Structure	Elective Home Education
Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employee's productivity and well-being	Holiday Activities and Food Programme
Sandwell Leisure Trust Business Plan 2021-2024	Youth Facilities Review
Budget Proposals 2022-23	Temporary Accommodation Elm Tree Primary Academy at Connor Education Centre, West Bromwich
	SEND Operational and Strategic Boards and the Parent/Carer Forum
	Youth Bus and Service provision

Economy Skills Transport and Environment

Black Country Plan Consultation

Local Transport Plan (Movement for Growth) Review Green Paper

Black Country Ultra Low Emission Vehicle Strategy

Air Quality Action Plan

West Bromwich E-Scooter Trial

Towns Fund Programme

Fleet Management

Levelling Up Fund

Sandwell Civil and Mechanical Engineering Centre

Urban Greening

Emergency Active Travel Fund

2022 Mowing Season

Review - Performance and Management of the Waste Partnership Contract

On-Street Residential Electric Vehicle Charging Scheme

Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities

Review of Property Age Designation

Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy

Tenant Engagement and Participation

Upgrade and Expansion of the CCTV & Concierge Service

Review of Tenancy Conditions

Safer Accommodation and Homelessness Strategy

Community Safety

Safer Sandwell Partnership

Garage Rental Charges

Anti-Social Behaviour Policy 2022

Health and Adult Social Care

Healthwatch Sandwell Priorities 2021-2022

Smoke Control Area

Access to Primary Care

Community Diagnostic Hubs

Day Services Transformation Plan

West Midlands Ambulance Service Winter Plan 2021/22

Air Quality Action Plan

Phlebotomy Service

Targeted Lung Health Check Programme

Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Transformation Plan

Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Delivering Solid Tumour Oncology Services for Sandwell and West Birmingham

Primary Care Networks – Impact of West Birmingham Locality Move to Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care System

Black Country Provider Trust Collaboration

Report on Waiting Times for Elective Treatment

Midland Metropolitan University Hospital