



# Scrutiny Annual Report 2022-23

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# introduction

This report provides an insight into the work of Sandwell Council's five scrutiny boards over the 2022-23 municipal year.

The year was one of change, improvement and strengthening of not just scrutiny, but the entire governance arrangements as part of the Council's Improvement Plan. This saw reviews of key processes and procedures including the Scrutiny Procedure Rules, to build upon the scrutiny review that took place in 2019.

This work was carried out alongside the successful delivery of a programme of scrutiny activity covering in-depth reviews, pre-decision scrutiny and engagement with partners.

Overview and scrutiny remains a vital part of the Council's ongoing improvement journey, holding to account the decision makers and helping to identify where improvements can be made in policy and service delivery.



# what is scrutiny?

Sandwell Council is run by councillors elected by residents. A small number of those councillors form the Cabinet (also referred to as the executive) which sets the direction, determines the priorities and takes the important decisions. The scrutiny function fulfils the statutory requirement to have a mechanism in place to hold decision makers to account by reviewing these important decisions to ensure that they are taken based on good evidence including the views of those with an interest in the matter and they are in the best interests of the people of Sandwell. Scrutiny also contributes to the council's policy and budget development process. The purpose of scrutiny is ultimately to improve the lives of local people through improved public services.

The Council has appointed a Scrutiny Management Board and four thematic boards to deliver the scrutiny function. Additionally, the Council establishes arrangements with Birmingham City Council for the joint scrutiny of matters affecting residents of both Sandwell and the West of Birmingham, under the footprint of the Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust. Each Board develops a work programme at the start of each municipal year to prioritise its work and ensure that there is sufficient focus on key issues affecting the Council and the people of Sandwell. Work programmes remain flexible however, to ensure that scrutiny has capacity to respond to any new issues.

The boards carry out scrutiny activity in a variety of ways including in-depth reviews, receiving reports and presentations on singular items/decisions, undertaking site visits, conducting surveys, reviewing existing national/local data, and hearing evidence from expert witnesses. Scrutiny boards also have 'Call-In' powers to scrutinise Cabinet decisions before they are implemented and can make recommendations to the Cabinet that it must consider before the decision can be actioned.



# what is scrutiny?

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

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

**Initiates 'the difficult conversation', inviting people into the same space to hold an open and transparent discussion.**

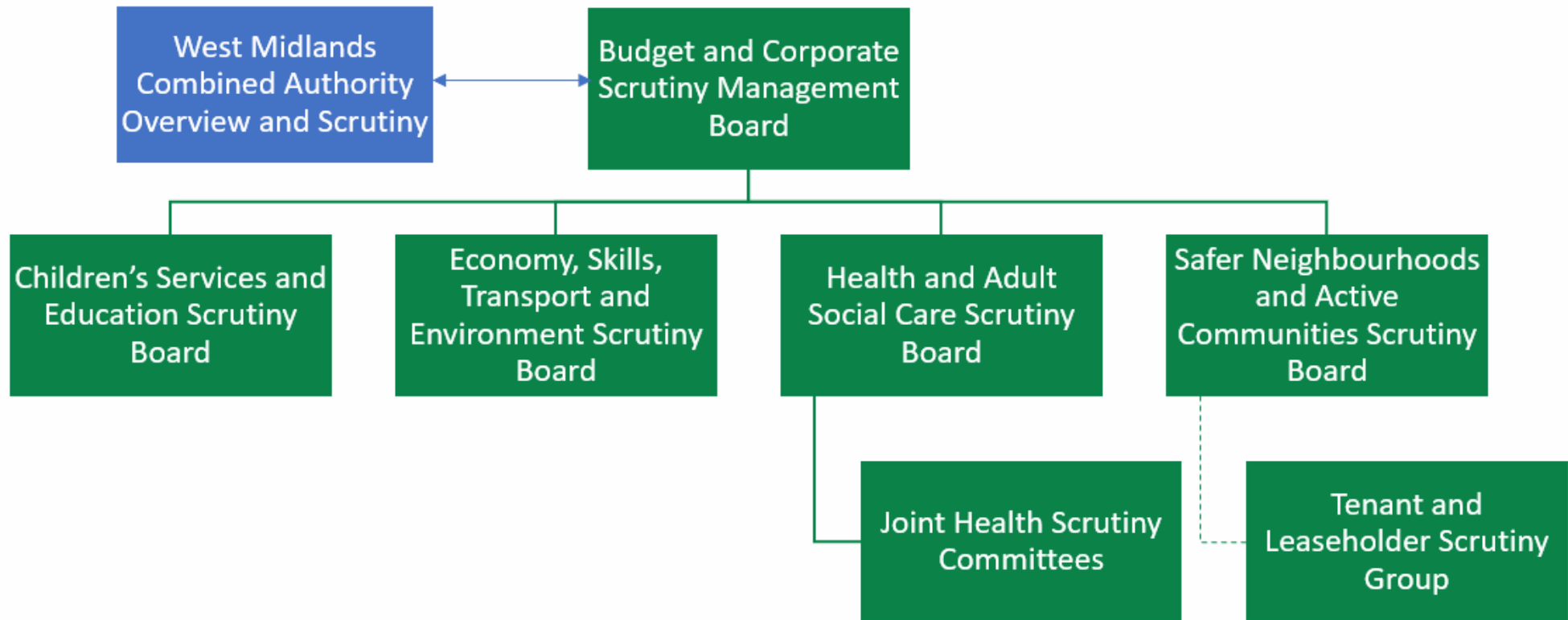
**Monitors and maintains oversight of issues that impact on residents and businesses of Sandwell.**

**Questions the issues, barriers or blockages.**

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

**Identifies good practice and shares this more widely.**

# structure





**Councillor Paul Moore**

**Chair: Budget and Corporate Scrutiny  
Management Board**



**Councillor Karen Simms**

**Chair: Economy, Skills, Transport  
and Environment Scrutiny Board**



**Councillor Elaine Giles**

**Chair: Health and Adult Social Care  
Scrutiny Board**



**Councillor Ellen Fenton**

**Chair: Safer Neighbourhoods and  
Active Communities Scrutiny Board**



**Councillors Ann Shackleton  
and Nicki Hinchliff**

**Chair: Children's Services  
and Education Scrutiny  
Board**



# foreword

This report illustrates the breadth and variety of issues considered by the various scrutiny boards in Sandwell, highlighting some specific pieces of work. Each board has looked to consider and challenge a number of key issues that are important to the Council, and residents.

Each year we consult the public and partners on what things scrutiny should look at .....

Sadly during 2022-23 Councillor Ann Shackleton, Chair of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board, passed away. Her contributions made overview and scrutiny in Sandwell better and her dedication to Sandwell was exemplary. She will be missed by all involved in scrutiny in Sandwell.

*Councillor Paul Moore*  
*Chair - Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board*





# activity overview



39 meetings

4 in-depth  
reviews



29 pre– decision  
items

10 visits



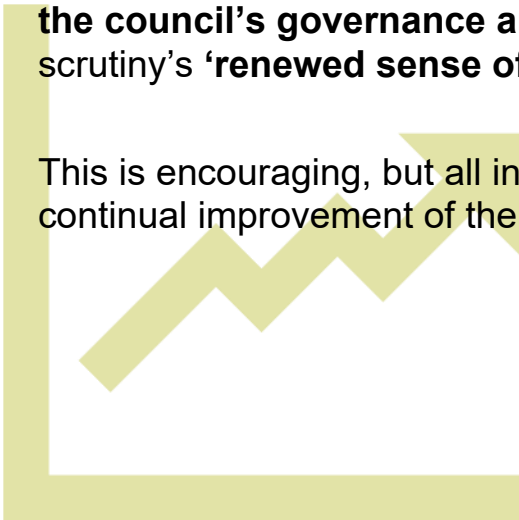
# an external view

As part of the ongoing Improvement Plan work the Council has engaged external organisations to review various aspects of governance. The feedback in the latter part of the 2022-23 municipal year has been particularly positive and reflects the work undertaken to strengthen and drive forward the overview and scrutiny function.

Grant Thornton, the Council's external auditor said **'Overall, positive progress has been made to improve the culture and professionalism of key Council committees, with the scrutiny function making particular progress.'**

The Local Government Association commented that **'it is clear from the people we spoke to that this key strand of the council's governance arrangements [scrutiny] is going from strength to strength'**. And commented on scrutiny's **'renewed sense of energy and drive'**.

This is encouraging, but all involved with scrutiny in Sandwell are keen to continue this positive trajectory through continual improvement of the function.



# constitutional update

Throughout 2022/23 work to refresh the overview and scrutiny function was carried out, including a complete review of the **Scrutiny Procedure Rules**; the key part of the Constitution governing the function.

The review also included the development of supplementary guidance relating to the **Call-In** and **Councillor Call for Action** processes.

This review of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules involved benchmarking as well as reference to best practice and guidance from respected national organisations such as the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.

These Procedure Rules will be kept under ongoing review to ensure that they continue to support an effective and efficient overview and scrutiny function.



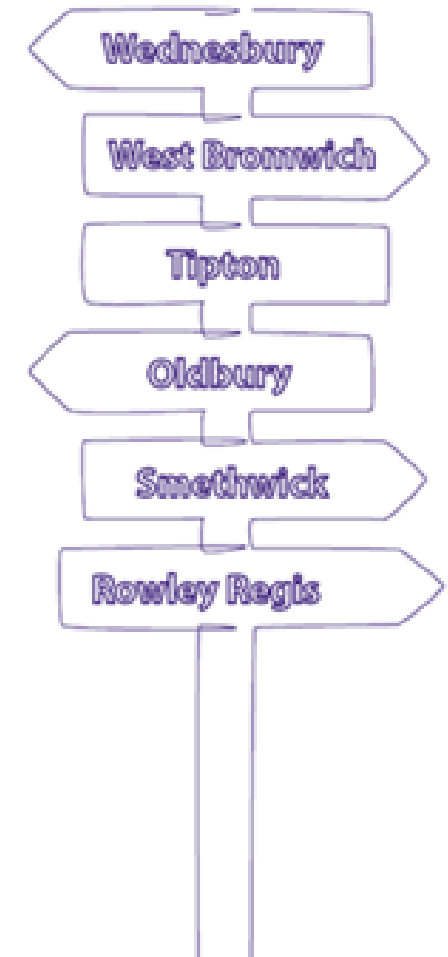
# case studies



All Overview and Scrutiny activity has to contribute to one or more of the objectives of the Corporate Plan. This covers six areas, all supported through a One Council, One Team ethos.

The following case studies highlight some of the work of the Scrutiny Boards throughout 2022/23. The case studies have been selected to share some of the different approaches that can be taken to deliver good quality scrutiny.

Of course, the scrutiny boards looked at a lot more than is covered in these case studies; at the end of this report you can find a full list of topics that were looked at during the 2022/23 municipal year. You can find further details, such as reports and minutes, on [the Council's modern.gov site](#).



## **Call-in of Decision on Brandhall Golf Course Options**

In response to significant public interest, the Cabinet's decision to pursue the redevelopment of the former Brandhall Gold Course with a replacement primary school, a new public park and a residential development was called in for scrutiny. The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board held a special meeting to examine the information and processes used to formulate the decision and ensure that the decision had fully considered both the financial impact on the Council and the effect on the communities living and working in Old Warley, Langley and Bristnall Wards.

The Board referred the matter back to the Cabinet for review, based on concerns that the information utilised by Cabinet in reaching its decision might have been incomplete in relation to the availability of the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment, consideration of site options for the replacement primary school and the evaluation of public consultation results. Having considered a comprehensive report addressing the concerns raised by the scrutiny board, the Cabinet was satisfied that no further action was required and implemented its decision of 20 July 2022.

# case studies

## One Council, One Team



### Scrutiny Review—Customer Journey

The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board carried out a review on the customer journey. The review analysed the Council's 2022 Resident's Survey to better understand the public's perception in relation to customer experience. In addition, site visits were undertaken to the One Stop Shop and the Council's Corporate Contact Centre to better understand how the Council delivers customer service on a day-to-day basis.

The review highlighted the need for all Council departments to work collaboratively, ensuring that systems were in place so that the best possible outcome was available to service users, especially when considering the vast array of responsibilities that a local authority holds. The Board therefore made a number of recommendations to the Cabinet around staff training, standardised internal processes and corporate guidelines, procurement of new customer relations management software, consolidation of three existing contact centres, and further promotion of digital access to services. The Cabinet approved the recommendations and the Board continues to monitor progress on implementation. The Board's recommendation regarding the reduction of response timescales was not approved due to a lack of resources required to implement it. However, the Cabinet undertook to review timescales at a later date.





## Best start in life for children and young people



### Early Help in Sandwell

The Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board carried out scrutiny of the work of Early Help intervention across Sandwell. The Board understood that without an effective Early Help offer and effective multiagency support, children and families will not receive the right interventions, in the right place at the right time, which could lead to problems escalating and more expensive and intrusive statutory interventions being required.

The Board was able to understand how partnerships and multi-agency working continued to contribute to the support and intervention offered to Sandwell residents. The Board received case study examples of how Early Help was targeting and delivering for children and families in Sandwell.

The Board obtained assurances on what was working well and what ongoing challenges were being addressed. It was encouraging that the range of officers present demonstrated the joined up approach of the support and intervention provided.

# case studies



## People live well and age well

### Scrutiny Review – Loneliness and Isolation

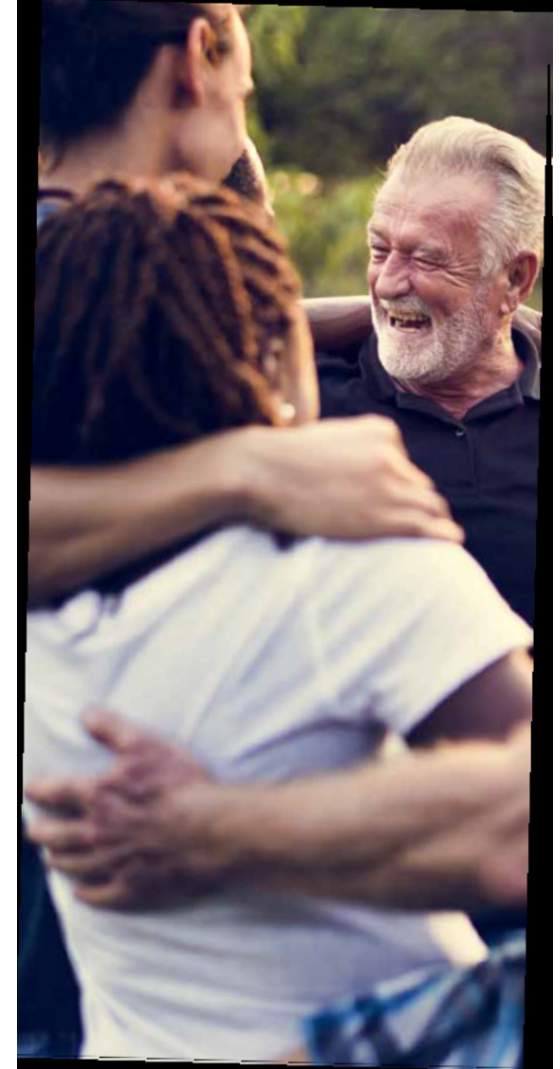
The Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board commenced a review to establish the degree of loneliness and isolation in Sandwell. The Board has gathered evidence from a variety of sources including Public Health, the voluntary sector, Neighbourhood Partnership Teams, West Midlands Police and Fire services and the private sector. Data from the 2022 Sandwell Residents Survey, has also been a key evidence source for this piece of work. However, due to the array of evidence available and further analysis of the data from the Residents Survey required, the review has continued and will conclude in 2023/24.

### Mental Health Transformation Plans

Following changes to NHS structures in July 2022, the Board also scrutinised the Black Country Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's transformation plan, which sought to address variations in service provision and make best use of collective strengths to address inequalities. The Board is continuing to monitoring the implementation of the Plan, and mental health continues to be a priority on the Board's work programme.

### Midland Metropolitan University Hospital

The Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee with Birmingham City Council has maintained oversight of the development of the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital and the associated service reconfigurations and will continue to do so until the hospital opens in 2024.







## Strong resilient communities

### Voluntary Sector Grants

The Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board considered the findings of a review carried out by the Director of Housing, which assessed all voluntary and community sector grants against their relevance to the Corporate Plan. The review had concluded that 91% of groups in receipt of grants added value to communities, however, there remained a need to identify savings whilst ensuring that communities are not negatively affected. The Board endorsed the

proposal to develop a more efficient funding process, with a digital management system that would enable online monitoring.



### Cost of Living

The Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board engaged with a number of external stakeholders, including Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (SCIPS) to build the wider picture of the impact of the Cost of Living Crisis on communities. A number of recommendations were made to strengthen the support available to residents, which the Board continues to monitor.

### Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy

The Board was consulted on the draft Delivery Plan that accompanies the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy. The Board was assured that individuals at risk of becoming homeless can access support in a variety of ways, at a variety of locations.



## Quality homes in thriving neighbourhoods

### Friar Park Urban Village Masterplan

The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board carried out pre-decision scrutiny on proposals relating to a masterplan for the Friar Park Urban Village, which was a joint proposal by the Council and the West Midlands Combined Authority, and would be the largest housing development in Sandwell, with up to 630 new homes.

Members engaged with a range of services including Education, Public Health and the NHS to gain assurances that local services could accommodate increased demand. Members also heard from local community representatives. Members acknowledged the concerns of the local community and sought assurances that feedback from the public consultation had been incorporated into the Masterplan.

A number of recommendations were presented to the Cabinet in relation to the proposals which were incorporated into the final report, notably on affordable housing and air quality.





## A strong and inclusive economy



### **Towns Fund**

The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board maintained oversight of the roll out of the £67m Towns Fund programme, to gain assurance that the programme was progressing in line with Government requirements and the agreed local assurance process.

### **Sandwell Development Plan**

The Board also considered the draft Sandwell Development Plan, which forms part of the hierarchy of plans that directs and informs what is built and where. Following the dissolution of the sub-regional plan, Sandwell had to urgently review its own local plan. The Board will maintain oversight of the development of and consultation on Sandwell's Plan, which is expected to be adopted in late 2025/early 2026.



## A connected and accessible Sandwell

### Black Country Cycling Infrastructure Plan

The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board carried out pre– decision scrutiny on proposals relating to the Black Country Cycling Infrastructure Plan during the consultation phase of the plan to run alongside the wider West Midlands and the localised Sandwell scheme.

Members acknowledged that environmental groups, including the RSPB and the Wildlife Trust had been consulted on all routes through nature areas. It was further noted that 34% of residents within the Borough did not have access to a car and therefore regeneration opportunities such as this increase social mobility options.

The proposed routes had been developed in line with the Council's policy objectives, including regeneration corridors, areas of congestion and air quality improvement areas.

Further work was conducted throughout the municipal year in relation to **bus service improvement proposals** and the **West Bromwich E– Scooter trial**.



# Scrutiny Visits

- Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service (STEPS Centre)
- Sandwell Valley
- Midland Metropolitan University Hospital
- Sandwell Children's Trust
- Sandwell Council Contact Centre
- Edward Street Hospital
- The Westminster School



# Scrutiny on a Page

Asset Management Investment Programme Energy Rebate Payments Update Adoption@Heart Annual Report 2021 Health and Wellbeing Health and Wellbeing Strategy Improvement Plan Progress Friar Park Urban Village Voids Property Review Pre & Post Dementia Diagnostic Support Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update Call-in of Brandhall Options Appraisal Primary Care Update Black Country Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan Cost of Living Employee Engagement and Organisational Culture Better Mental Health Programme Scrutiny Review of Elective Home Education Response Sandwell Development Plan Medium-Term Financial Strategy West Midlands Ambulance Service – Development of Winter Plan SEND Transport Performance Update Housing Needs Assessment Sandwell Safeguarding Adults Board Sandwell Transition Education Partnership Service Review of Voluntary and Community Sector Grants Towns Funds Full Business Cases Adult Social Care Contributions Policy Consultation Budget Monitoring Impact of the Lockdown on Children and Families Performance Management Framework Council House New Builds Programme Re-development of Edward Street Hospital Scrutiny Review Working Group Report and Recommendations Bus Services Improvement Plan Tenant Engagement and Participation Impact on Registration Related Services Review of Social Isolation and Loneliness Early Help in Sandwell Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan West Bromwich E-Scooter Trial Zone Review Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy 2022 – Update Empty Property Strategy SHAPE Survey and Youth Summit Feedback and Future Youth Involvement in Scrutiny Mental Health Transformation Plans Resident Engagement Customer Journey Scrutiny Review Sandwell Aquatic Centre Launch Plan Education investment Area and Priority Investment Area Developments Friar Park Masterplan Draft Housing Strategy Performance Framework