

Wiltshire Council

Overview and Scrutiny: Annual Report 2018/19



What is overview and scrutiny?

Wiltshire Council is run by councillors elected by the people of Wiltshire. A small number of them form the cabinet (also referred to as the executive) which sets the direction, determines the priorities and takes the important decisions. The councillors in the cabinet hold powerful positions and it is important that they are held to public account for their actions. This is done through a system called Overview and Scrutiny (OS) and is undertaken by the nonexecutive councillors.

This is common to most local councils. They ensure that decisions are taken based on good evidence including the views of those with an interest in the matter and are in the best interests of the people of Wiltshire. OS is selective in what it looks at so that it can add value to the most important services provided by the council, its partners and contractors. Wherever possible it helps to shape policy through early discussions as well as scrutinising proposals before they are finally agreed. A list of the matters which will be considered by OS is published in its forward work programme.

How do we do it in Wiltshire?

There is an OS management committee and three specialist select committees covering the following main service areas:

- Health (including the NHS, public health and adult social care)
- Environment (including highways, waste and transportation)
- Children (including education, vulnerable children, youth services and early years)

The management committee, as well as coordinating the work of the select committees, covers internal matters such as finance, performance and staffing. Most of the work is done by small groups of elected members from across the political parties reviewing single specific issues in detail. These groups then report to the select committees and make recommendations for improvement to the cabinet and others as necessary.

Focus

The work programme focuses on the commitments given by the council in its Business Plan 2017/27 and approaches its work in the following way:

- Better outcomes for the people of Wiltshire
- Adding value to the way decisions are reached
- Working constructively with the cabinet
- Challenging positively as a critical friend
- Basing its findings on good evidence
- Learning from others



Overview and scrutiny management committee

Councillor Graham Wright, Chairman of the Committee, said:

“ This year Overview and Scrutiny has continued to play a key role in developing council policy and holding decision-makers to account. It scrutinised around 70% of the decisions taken by the council’s Cabinet (compared with 50% last year), submitted 66 recommendations to decision-makers, and 82% of eligible Wiltshire councillors have taken part in OS in some form. In 2019-20 we will be focusing on encouraging even more councillors to contribute to the process, using their skills and experience to improve council policies and services for the good of Wiltshire’s residents. ”



Cllr Graham Wright
Chairman



Cllr Alan Hill
Vice chairman

Key items we have looked at

...and what we have achieved

Digital services

- Identified ways of saving public money without impacting on services through reducing the number of ICT programs used by the council.

Financial robustness

- Ensured that the council budget, and suggested amendments to it, were sound, and also explored potential impacts on services.

Military and civilian integration

- Explored ways of bringing new armed forces personnel and existing Wiltshire communities together as more military staff are rebased in the county.

Maximising Scrutiny’s impact

- Held councillor training on gathering and analysing evidence to help improve services in Wiltshire.

Health select committee

Councillor Howard Greenman, the Chairman of the Committee, said:

“Amidst huge local and national changes in the health and adult care sectors, Health Select Committee has remained committed to ensuring that the best possible services and support are available for Wiltshire residents.

In the coming year we will focus on Phase 2 of the council’s Adult Social Care transformation programme and we will consider the impact of the government’s forthcoming Care and Support Green Paper on Wiltshire. ”



Cllr Howard Greenman
Chairman



Cllr Gordon King
Vice chairman

Key items we have looked at

...and what we have achieved

NHS Health Checks

- Recommended ways to increase the take-up of NHS Health Checks, particularly amongst “harder to reach” groups.

Maternity

- Ensured the public consultation on changes to maternity services would inform residents and enable them to give their views before any changes were made.

Mental health services for the young

- Recommended that the mental health of children and young people be considered holistically, including in schools. Sought a reduction in the number of children and young people who reach a crisis point before receiving support.

Children's select committee

Councillor Jon Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee, said:

“ The committee has had a fulfilling year with our in-depth reviews leading to constructive recommendations in areas like Outdoor Education and SEND School Provision.

As OS councillors we have deepened our knowledge in topics like elective home education, knife crime and disadvantaged learners.

In the coming year we will be continuing this development in areas like alternative education provision, whilst keeping a focus on key topics such as SEND, families and children's services, and outcomes for disadvantaged learners. ”



Cllr Jon Hubbard
Chairman



Cllr Mary Douglas
Vice chairman

Key items we have looked at ...and what we have achieved

Special schools

- Following a detailed review of evidence and visits to special schools across the region, submitted 16 recommendations on the proposed restructuring of the Wiltshire's special schools.

Children's Centres

- Scrutinised proposals to transfer services from dedicated buildings to community settings. Recommended that a comprehensive plan be put in place to ensure current service levels are maintained and vulnerable groups continue to access support services.

Outdoor education for children

- Scrutinised the bids from organisations seeking to take over the provision of outdoor education for children in Wiltshire.

Youth democracy

- Appointed two new young Wiltshire residents as Youth Representatives on the committee to provide young people's voice in its debates.

Environment select committee

Cllr John Smale, Chairman of the Committee, said:

“ This year the Environment Select Committee has focused on matters associated with the environment. Most notably, following Full Council’s acknowledgement of a global ‘climate emergency’ we established a Climate Change Task Group that will explore how we can seek to make Wiltshire carbon-neutral by 2030. Additionally, the Committee played an important role in shaping the council’s Homelessness Strategy, and provided valuable input into how to monitor the quality of its Streetscene services. I am honoured to be Chairing this Committee, especially with all the good work that is conducted by the team”. ”



Cllr John Smale
Chairman



Cllr Bob Jones
Vice chairman

Key items we have looked at ...and what we have achieved

Homelessness

- Considered how the council could further reduce and prevent homelessness, through greater joined-up working with partners.

LED Street Lighting

- Recommended that the council consider extending the use of LED lights to additional council-owned areas such as car parks and public open spaces.

Waste

- Recommended that the council encourage the public to come forward with evidence of fly-tipping, to increase the number of convictions.

Taxi fares

- Reviewed late-night taxi fares across Wiltshire to ensure they are competitive with neighbouring counties. Recommended new ways of protecting passenger and driver safety and ensuring a sufficient number of wheelchair-adapted vehicles.

How is overview and scrutiny supported?

The council's non-executive councillors run OS, but are supported in their work by a small team of officers. They sit within the council's legal and democratic team, which supports all aspects of decision-making. The team ensures that the councillors have all the necessary information and evidence they need and can speak to those people that have a direct responsibility or interest in the matter. This can include making arrangements to hear from service users and going on site visits.

The team also undertakes research and writes reports on behalf of the select committees and task groups.

Events during the year

In October 2018 OS councillors attended a training workshop focused on making OS meetings more effective. Here councillors discussed topics such as choosing work priorities, preparing lines of questioning, effective chairing, inviting the right witnesses and forming impactful conclusions.

Throughout 2018 and 2019 officers attended regional and national OS networking events, while in December 2018 leading OS councillors attended the Centre for Public Scrutiny's annual conference. OS is open to learning and regularly speaks to others about how things can be done better.

In February 2019 OS councillors came together for a further workshop looking at gathering and using evidence. Effective OS is always based on the careful analysis of evidence rather than on anecdote, personal bias or party political views. This workshop highlighted a number of important areas, such as using a range of evidence sources, minimising the impact of bias and the value of 'taking scrutiny to the people' by meeting with service users.

Looking forward

Like most local authorities, Wiltshire Council continues to face financial and demographic challenges. In response the council has embarked on an ambitious programme of transformation and innovation, changing how it delivers services to increase their effectiveness and improve the lives of residents. As a 'critical friend' to the Executive, OS is closely engaged on all of the council's major projects, including adult social care transformation, families and children transformation, digitising services and taking a 'commercial' approach to make best use of the council's assets. This work is undertaken through a mixture of witness attendance at public committees, task and finish groups that undertake in-depth reviews and OS councillors sitting on project boards.

Central Government has just published new statutory guidance setting out how OS in local government should operate. Early analysis of the new guidance suggests that Wiltshire Council is already operating to 'best practice' standards in most areas, but OS will look closely at the detail to ensure all possible improvements are made.

These are challenging, but exciting and rewarding times for Overview and Scrutiny.

Want to know more?

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Information about Wiltshire Council services can be made available on request in other languages and formats such as large print and audio.

Please contact the council by telephone: 0300 456 0100, or email: customerservices@wiltshire.gov.uk