

Wiltshire Council

Overview and Scrutiny: Annual Report 2019/20



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

Getting involved

OS welcomes suggestions from councillors and members of the public regarding issues that could be investigated. If you would like to suggest an issue that OS should look into, please contact us via the details at the end of this report. Members of the public can also get directly involved by attending committee meetings, submitting a question before a meeting or giving notice to make a statement on an item on the agenda.

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 has scrutinised 64% of the decisions taken by the council’s Cabinet and submitted 130 recommendations to improve services. My thanks go to the councillors and co-opted members who lead the OS function, the scrutiny team that supports our work, plus all those decision-makers, expert witnesses and members of the public who have engaged with the process.

Overview and Scrutiny is now focused on contributing to the battle against COVID-19 by providing robust, constructive feedback on the ongoing incident response. Input from non-executive ‘scrutineers’ will be vital in highlighting the impact of the pandemic on residents, so the council and its partners can give them maximum support through these very challenging times. ”



Cllr Graham Wright
Chairman



Cllr Alan Hill
Vice chairman

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

COVID-19

- Implemented streamlined, virtual scrutiny of the council’s emergency response to COVID-19. Undertook detailed questioning of the senior leadership team, using councillors’ knowledge of the challenges being faced on the ground by residents.

Financial robustness

- Scrutinised council budget proposals in detail to ensure that they were sound and reviewed potential impacts on services.

Public consultations

- Improved the council’s approach to consulting the public on plans and changes to services. Recommended that the purpose of consultations and how they really can influence decisions are made clearer to the public.

Health select committee

Councillor Chuck Berry, the Chairman of the Committee, said:

“Even before COVID-19, the Health Select Committee had a busy year, with a great deal of change and innovation in the health and care sectors. We will now need to focus on the impact of the pandemic and the lessons we can learn in responding to it. However, we will also be exploring opportunities for joint scrutiny with the other South West councils; assessing how “dementia friendly” our county is, and we will be developing our knowledge of the fantastic work that takes place in our communities, starting with Dorothy House.”



Cllr Chuck Berry
Chairman



Cllr Gordon King
Vice chairman

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

Adult social care

- Developed relevant statistical indicators to accurately monitor the true performance of this vital service.

Redesign of maternity services

- Ensuring that the next community maternity hub pilots are in Trowbridge and Paulton.

Scrutiny of local acute trusts

- Enhancing working relationships with the NHS trusts that serve Wiltshire and monitored the delivery of their priorities.

Councillor Jon Hubbard, Chairman of the Committee, said:

“This year the committee has continued to look at FACT, a wide-ranging programme to streamline and improve the way the council and partners work with children and families. Moving forward we will be assessing the impact of COVID-19 on children and families and how public services can support their resilience and recovery. We will look at the ‘Whole Life Pathway’, which reduces the impact of transitioning from children’s to adult services; plus the vital recruitment and retention of foster carers. We also look forward to strengthening links with the Wiltshire Youth Union (WYU), Children in Care Council (CiCC) and the Care Leavers Forum.”



Cllr Jon Hubbard
Chairman



Cllr Jacqui Lay
Vice chairman

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

Outdoor education

- Examined the potential impacts of closing the Braeside and Oxenwood educational centres, with both facilities now continuing to provide valuable outdoor learning opportunities for young people.

Looked After Children (LAC)

- Recommended that improvements to supporting children in care were more clearly defined and were supported by appropriate metrics.

Children’s centres

Examined in-depth proposals to close some children centres and the public consultation on these. Made successful recommendations for improvement, including clarifying the rationale for the proposals and the alternative provision in place.

Environment select committee

Cllr Bob Jones MBE, Vice chairman of the Committee, said:

“The Environment Select Committee has had a busy year, notably with its dedicated task group working with the Executive and external witnesses to ensure that the council meets its carbon reduction targets. The Homelessness Strategy Task Group met with Rt Hon Andrew Murrison, MP for South West Wiltshire, to discuss preventing and reducing homelessness in Wiltshire.

In the coming year we will continue to concentrate upon the climate emergency, but we will also focus upon the impact of COVID-19 on areas such as public transport, homelessness, and the local economy.”



Cllr John Smale
Chairman



Cllr Bob Jones MBE
Vice chairman

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

Global Warming and Climate Change

- Explored how the Council could reduce carbon emissions through planning, transport policy, renewable energy, waste management and land use.

Housing Aids and Adaptations for residents with disabilities

- Recommended that the Council's planning policies encourage the development of more adaptable and affordable housing for people with disabilities.

Highways

- Reviewed how effective Community Area Transport Groups (CAT-Gs) have been in resolving highways issues for local communities.

Homelessness

- Recommended that the Council prioritise emergency accommodation and the support provided by its Rough Sleeper Outreach team.

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 Democracy team, which supports all aspects of the council's democratic 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.

Looking forward

Like local authorities across the country, Wiltshire Council is playing a central role in responding to COVID-19. It is working with its partners to ensure that communities are supported, local businesses receive government funding and critical services continue to protect people during an unprecedented and rapidly changing incident. To allow staff to focus on the operational response, Overview and Scrutiny has shifted to a streamlined structure and a work programme focused on maximising Wiltshire's resilience. We have set up a dedicated Wiltshire COVID-19 Response Scrutiny Task Group, holding fully virtual meetings where members can question senior decision-makers and raise live issues from their communities. We will continue to do this throughout the pandemic, but to add maximum value we will be focusing on how Wiltshire can recover as fast as possible and what new and improved ways of working may be found.

COVID-19 has placed significant new financial pressures on local authorities, on top of existing demographic challenges and rising costs of care for vulnerable children and adults. In Wiltshire, Overview and Scrutiny will contribute to meeting this challenge by acting as a 'critical friend' to decision-makers, supporting innovation in how the council and its partners deliver services and acting as the voice of the people when important decisions are being made.



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