



**ST HELENS**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT 2019-20



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# Chairman's Foreword

## **Commission Chairman 2019/20: Councillor Andy Bowden**

We are in unprecedented times for both local government and the country. Even before the current crisis Scrutiny recognises the challenging financial context in which decisions about service delivery and spending plans were to be developed. The end of the municipal year saw disruption and delay to Scrutiny's work, understandable in the context of national and world events, and was no reflection on the good work undertaken by Scrutiny Chairs, Members and Officers in the proceeding months, where much work was done.

The Commission and Scrutiny Chairmen have welcomed the opportunity to discuss and question the Council's plans throughout the year with Portfolio Holders and Chief Officers to understand the implications for departments and for service delivery.

In particular, Scrutiny appreciated the co-operation of Officers and Lead Members to the new approach to scrutinising the budget undertaken this year. It added value to the Council's budget setting process, and it is hoped that there will be wider participation of Members in this process in future.

Under new Chairmanship the Commission and other Scrutiny Committees have and will continue to play an important role as we continue to face the impact of both financial pressures on local government and the impact of COVID-19 on our communities, in particular the consequences of the pandemic for jobs, and the health and wellbeing of our residents.

I would like to thank all Members and Officers who supported the scrutiny process in my time as chair of the Commission, the Scrutiny Officers for their support and the Chairs and Members for their work over the year.

## **Commission Chairman 2019/20: Councillor Andy Bowden**

# Introduction

This report provides a comprehensive summary of the work undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Function at St Helens Borough Council during the 2019/20 municipal year. This has been a year of transition for the Scrutiny Function as well as the Council with many changes from 2018/19. Changes in Council Leader, Cabinet Positions and Scrutiny Chairs as well as changes to Scrutiny Manager and Scrutiny Support Officer have had an impact on the capacity and direction of the Scrutiny Function during parts of 2019/20. A number of changes within the Council's Organisational Structure – particularly at executive level – the snap General Election in December 2019 and the COVID-19 Pandemic have also led to some disruption within the scrutiny process. Despite this, there have been many positives in Scrutiny during 2019/20 and the Function is in a strong position moving into 2020/21.

New Statutory Guidance from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in May 2019 in relation to Overview and Scrutiny functions highlights best practice, much of which is already embedded in the way that we operate in St Helens, with good relationships between Cabinet and Scrutiny, sufficient resourcing, support from officers and effective work programming. Nevertheless, the opportunity has been taken to provide a number of training sessions for Councillors and Officers to ensure awareness of Scrutiny is high among those who are/could be involved. Training has also been provided to NHS partners to increase their understanding of Scrutiny and work has been done to improve relationships to ensure important health issues are reviewed effectively by Scrutiny.

This year, the Scrutiny Function has considered many issues that are important to members of the public, and some services that may not have been performing as well as intended, to ensure services are held to account to deliver the best outcomes for our residents. Work programmes have been developed to consider strategic and long-term issues but have also been flexible to enable Councillors to consider important issues at short notice such as Brexit Preparedness during September/October. The increased use of briefing notes to keep members informed about services has freed up time as Panel meetings for more substantive items with fewer reports included on agendas simply for noting.

Unfortunately, as with many aspects of life, the unprecedented global Coronavirus Crisis has adversely affected the Scrutiny Function's ability to bring its year to a satisfactory conclusion with the cancellation of some of the Panels' and the Commission's March 2020 meetings. However, the Commission meetings which took place in June and July have enabled the Scrutiny Function to complete the approval of Task and Finish Group Reports and this Annual Report.

## What is Overview and Scrutiny?

The purpose of Overview and Scrutiny (Scrutiny) is to hold decision makers such as Cabinet and Senior Officers to account for decisions they have made (or are planning to make), the performance of services and the outcomes delivered for the residents of the Borough.

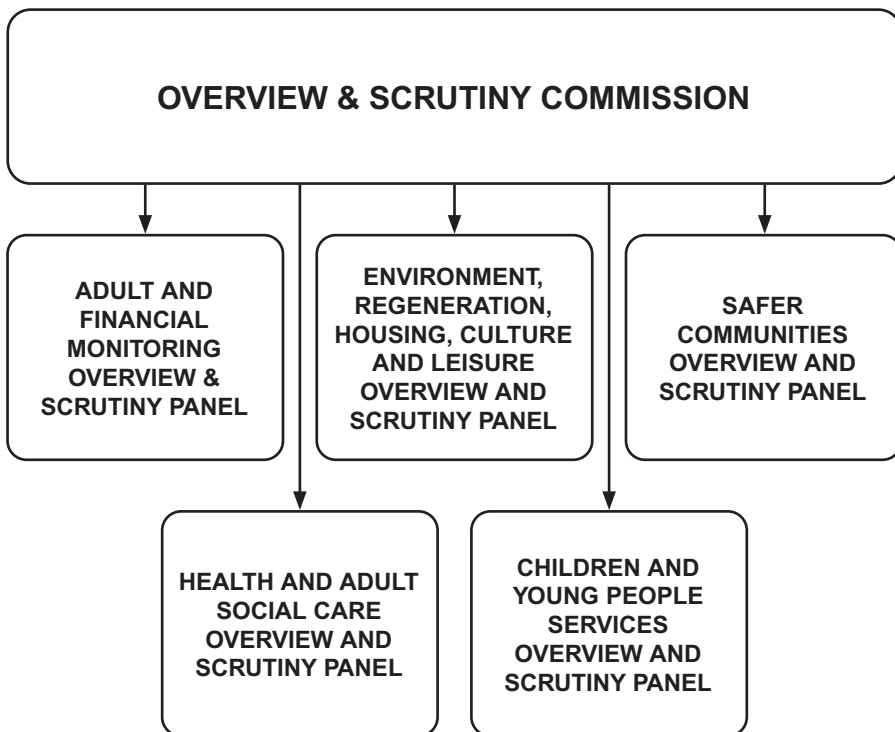
Scrutiny is a statutory requirement for local authorities that operate a Leader and Cabinet (Executive) model of decision making. As well as scrutinising the Local Authority, Scrutiny has a duty to scrutinise health service commissioners and providers and any decisions they make to substantially change services and community safety partners such as the Police and Fire Service.

Scrutiny is led by councillors who are not involved in Cabinet. As elected representatives of the residents of the Borough, councillors involved in Scrutiny can highlight the needs and concerns of the public with decision makers to ensure services are designed and operated effectively to meet those needs.

Members of the public can contribute to Scrutiny by submitting ideas for items to consider and raising concerns about the quality of service or if there's a lack of provision. The public can engage with the Scrutiny Function by contacting the Scrutiny Team directly using the details provided at the end of this report, speaking to their local ward councillor, attending one of our public meetings or visiting the Council's website.

# Scrutiny in St Helens

In 2019/20, Scrutiny at St Helens Borough Council was carried out by an overarching Overview and Scrutiny Commission (Committee) and five thematic Scrutiny Panels (Sub-Committees) with remits that ensure all aspects of the Council and relevant Partners are covered.



Scrutiny Committees and Sub-Committees can receive information and analysis regarding aspects of service delivery which are presented as reports to public panel meetings or via carrying out more in-depth scrutiny through task and finish groups. Chairs of the Commission and Scrutiny Panels also hold regular meetings with Cabinet Members and Senior Officers to share information and discuss work programmes. Scrutiny Panels are made up of Councillors who do not sit on Cabinet; with some Panels also having co-opted members representing other agencies or groups.

# Overview and Scrutiny Commission



**Membership:** Cllr Gomez-Aspron, Cllr Greaves, Cllr Haw, Cllr Jones, Cllr D Long, Cllr T Long, Cllr Maloney, Cllr McDonnell, Cllr O'Keefe, Cllr Osundeko, Cllr C Preston, Cllr L Preston, Cllr Sweeney and Cllr Wiseman

**Co-optees:** Mr D Thorpe - Church of England Rep  
Mr C Williams - Roman Catholic Church Rep

**Chairman: Cllr Andy Bowden**

## Remit

The Commission is responsible for all overview and scrutiny functions on behalf of the Council, including monitoring and supporting the work programmes of the five thematic panels. The Commission is also responsible for monitoring the Finance Portfolio and the Corporate Services, Estates and Communications Cabinet Portfolio. As the overarching committee, the Commission can consider any items that transcend the terms of reference of any of the Panels or would cover the remits of multiple Panels. The Commission scrutinises the Council's Budget Strategy and budget proposals made by Cabinet and approves any Task and Finish Group reports from Panels prior to submission to Cabinet.

## Task and Finish Groups

### Budget Scrutiny Task Group

The Budget Scrutiny Task Group held a series of meetings during January 2020 to review Cabinet's budget setting process for the 2020/21 Council Budget to ensure it was robust. The Task Group (made up of the Scrutiny Commission and Panel Chairs) met with Cabinet Members, with the support of Officers, to question them about how they had developed the budget proposals for their Portfolios. Based on its findings, the Task Group developed a statement on its views regarding the budget setting process which was submitted to Cabinet and Council for consideration during the decision to approve the proposed Budget.

### Communications Task Group

The Communications Task Group was set up to review developments to the way the Council communicates with the public and new ideas for the Council's branding. The Task Group worked with the Cabinet Members and Officers to provide their feedback on concepts for a new Council chest/logo and the process for rolling out the new branding as well as the draft Social Media Strategy and Policy to ensure the Council makes the best use of social media platforms to communicate with the public.

## **Young Carers Task Group**

The Young Carers Task Group was established to review previous recommendations by a Task and Finish Group which was carried out in 2013 to see whether they were still relevant and to examine how services were currently being delivered. The Task Group was due to meet officers and representatives of the Carers' Centre in March 2020 however the meeting was postponed because of the COVID-19 lockdown and will be rescheduled when possible.

## **Commission Activity**

The Commission has considered a number of key issues at its public meetings during 2019/20 including national issues which were affecting residents and businesses locally. In September the Commission considered a report about how the Council was preparing for the potential risks of the UK leaving the EU without an agreement which was considered a significant risk at the time. The Commission was pleased the Council appeared to be well prepared to deal with any issues within its control that may have arisen from a "No Deal Brexit".

In July 2019, Cabinet approved the ONE Council Modernisation Programme to initiate a series of developments and changes to the way the Council operates to improve efficiency and ensure services are operating effectively. The Commission received quarterly updates on the progress of the modernisation programme generally as well as considering specific projects within the programme. The Commission will continue to monitor progress as the modernisation programme continues into 2020/21. At its meeting in June 2020, the Commission also received a presentation on the Council's Reset and Recovery Strategy that, as well as plans to mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 and the lockdown, contains ideas for making the most of opportunities provided by the COVID-19 lockdown, many of which relate to the initiatives of the modernisation programme (e.g. agile working).

In January 2020 the Commission spoke to the Council Leader, Chair of the CCG Governing Body and the Director of Public Health about the People's Board. The People's Board had been established in 2016 by merging the Health and Wellbeing Board and Safer Community Partnership. The Commission wanted to discuss how effective the merger had been, what the successes had been, what challenges had arisen and what the priorities of the People's Board were going to be in future.

Also, at the January meeting, the Commission considered a report regarding Abuse of Staff by members of the public. The Commission was concerned that there had been too many examples of abuse experienced by members of staff and wanted to ensure the Council was doing everything it could to protect staff and to ensure the public understood the zero tolerance approach the Council took. The Commission was informed that a working group was being set up to review the Council's policies and procedures and the Commission will consider the outcomes of the working group's work when ready.

The Commission's March meeting was postponed due to the coronavirus lockdown. The Commission had intended to meet with the Council's new Chief Executive about the role of Scrutiny in the organisation, approve the task and finish group reports which were coming forward and discuss with officers how the Council was reacting to the Coronavirus Crisis and protecting vulnerable people at that time. The Commission was able to approve task and finish group reports intended for the March 2020 meeting at the July 2020 meeting and discussed some of the impacts on Coronavirus at the June 2020 meeting.

# Audit and Financial Monitoring Overview and Scrutiny Panel



**Membership:** Cllr Banks, Cllr Pearson, Cllr Reynolds, Cllr Smith, Cllr Sweeney and Cllr Uddin.

**Chairman:** Cllr Derek Long

## Remit

The Audit and Financial Monitoring Panel's remit is to monitor the Council's financial position by receiving the quarterly financial monitoring reports, as well as the Statement of Accounts, and consider both internal and external audit reports. This means the Panel operates differently from other panels in that it has a scrutiny agenda pre-determined by the audit and financial reporting processes. When a service receives a limited or minimal assurance internal audit then the Panel will request a representative of the service to attend a meeting to discuss the reasons for the audit outcome and response to rectify any issues identified. The Panel will also monitor when recommendations from audits are implemented and question services when recommendations have not been completed in the timescales agreed.

## Task and Finish Groups

At the beginning of 2019/20 the Report on the Review of the Collection of Council Tax Arrears was presented to the Panel for approval. The review had taken place during 2018/19 and was presented to Cabinet in July 2019. The Panel received the response from Cabinet in November 2019 and welcomed Cabinet's agreement with and implementation of all the recommendations.

## Panel Activity

At its June 2019 meeting the Panel reviewed the Annual Statement of Accounts for 2018/19 and the Corporate Financial Report to understand the outturn position for the year. The Panel considered the Financial Monitoring Reports for Q1, Q2 and Q3 during its September, November and January meetings respectively. The Panel has highlighted the good financial returns achieved by the Council's Treasury Management advisors and explored alternative scenarios. However, the Panel continues to be concerned at the mismatch between Council's statutory functions and the resources made available to it by Government.

Scrutinising the unprecedented strain on the Council's expenditure caused by responding to the COVID-19 outbreak and the impact of the lockdown on Council income streams, will be a key task for Overview and Scrutiny in the coming municipal year.

During 2019/20, the Panel examined 17 Internal Audit Reports, including:

- Business Rates; Housing Benefits; IT Service Desk; IT Procurement; Cyber Security; Business Continuity and Human Resources.
- The Apprenticeship Levy; Street Lighting; Church Square; Ways to Work Programme
- Care Management – Later Life Disability and Mental Health; Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards; Transition to Adulthood; Quality Monitoring – Adult Social Care and Liquidlogic Applications.

On a positive note, these audits have generally provided the Council with substantial assurance about financial control procedures. Where this has not been the case, the Panel have invited officers to answer questions on progress and pressed to ensure processes are improved.

During 2019/20, members of the Panel undertook a number of training sessions to support their understanding of their role on the Panel. Training was provided in relation to Internal Audits, how they were carried out and the implications of a limited or minimal assurance outcome. Training was also provided regarding the development and presentation of the Financial Monitoring Reports and the Treasury Management Strategy.

# Children and Young People's Services Overview and Scrutiny Panel



**Membership:** Cllr Gill, Cllr Greaves, Cllr Long, Cllr Maloney, Cllr McDonnell, Cllr C Preston, Cllr Sims

**Co-optees:** Mrs P Burke - Parent Governor Rep (Primary)  
Mrs P Lawson - Parent Governor Rep (Secondary)  
Mrs J Leybourne - Parent Governor Rep (Special)  
Mr D Thrope - Church of England Rep  
Mr C Williams - Roman Catholic Church Rep

**Chairman: Cllr Trisha Long**

## Remit

The Children and Young People Services Panel is responsible for scrutinising items relating to the provision of services to children and young people. This includes any services within the Developing Young People and Protecting Young People Cabinet Portfolios and relevant health services where they are provided predominantly to children and young people. As the Panel is responsible for scrutinising education issues, there are co-optees representing the three types of schools and two faith representatives as required by regulations relating to scrutiny.

## Task and Finish Groups

### Ofsted Action Plan 2020

In 2018/19, the Panel submitted a task group report to Cabinet about its response to Ofsted's Focused Visit in 2018 which was followed by a full ILACS Inspection by Ofsted in October 2019.

Following the outcome for the Inspection, the Panel established a further task group to review the Council's Action Plan to address the issues raised by Ofsted. Members gained assurances in response to a range of questions including; that all issues raised by Ofsted were covered within the action plan; that the wording of the action plan reflected the standard reporting mechanism to Government and that actions would be updated at each meeting of the Children's Improvement Board.

Key recommendations arising from the group were that the Action Plan should be published to create a wider sense of ownership within the whole Council and to consider the inclusion of more SMART targets that could be monitored by the Panel in future. The Panel was due to receive a verbal report on the updated action plan and the work of the task group at its March 2020 meeting.

### Apprenticeships for Children We Look After and Care Leavers

Successful completion of an apprenticeship can make an enormous difference to

a young person's life and be key to helping them to live a happy, successful and independent life. However, recent DfE figures show that nationally 39% of care leavers, compared to 12% of those who haven't been in care in the same age group, are not in employment, education or training.

As Corporate Parents, we have responsibility to change the lives of the young people we look after and our care leavers by ensuring better access to apprenticeship opportunities and providing the range of additional help these young people need to change their lives.

Therefore, following a review of Apprenticeships in 2016, and the importance of ensuring the best outcomes for the children we look after and our care leavers, the Panel agreed to set up a Task Group to review the current apprenticeship offer provided by the Council, schools, colleges and employers specific to these two groups and identify how support could be improved.

The first Task Group meeting was held in February 2020. Members were provided with information on the range of support the Council and employers already provide. Members asked a range of questions which resulted in key recommendations including:

- Use of Care Leaver outcomes information to established the effectiveness of current work;
- The production of a strategy detailing the goals, responsibility, resources and timeliness for support to improve access to apprenticeship opportunities;
- A review of apprenticeship opportunities offered by the Council and local employers;
- A review of Council website language to ensure its inclusivity.

The Task Group produced an interim report (which was to be presented to the Panel's March meeting) containing some initial recommendations and further work to be carried out as soon practicable. The report went to the July 2020 Commission meeting for approval and will be presented to Cabinet in September 2020.

### **Panel Activity**

One of the Panel's main focuses this year has been on the Council's Children Services Improvement process. The Panel questioned Senior Officers and Cabinet Members on progress and impact of the action plans arising from both the Ofsted Focused Visit of 2018 and the full ILACS Inspection during 2019, and on the steps taken to ensure all improvements would be sustained. Assurances were given by the Executive Director and Cabinet Member that timely and effective work had been completed and mechanisms were in place to ensure the sustainability of improvements made but that there was more to do.

Following on from this feedback, the Chair and several members of the Panel visited Children's Services to observe progress first-hand. Discussions with staff and managers evidenced the good progress made in key areas including staff changes, development of new policies and improved quality assurance auditing.

The Chair also attended an assessments audit meeting and was encouraged by the progress being made.

Due to the importance of the work to improve Children's Services, the Panel will continue to monitor progress on the Inspection action plan in each future meeting to be assured of progress and to identify issues. The Independent Chair of the Children's Improvement Board was due to attend the March 2020 meeting which was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, they will be invited to a future meeting.

CAMHS (Children and Adolescents Mental Health Services) has also been a key focus for the Panel this year. Concerns were raised by the Parent Carers Forum that many young people were having unsatisfactory experiences with CAMHS and that some were having to wait too long to receive support with their mental health issues. As a result, the Panel has questioned both St Helens CCG as the commissioner and North West Boroughs Healthcare NHS Trust as the provider of CAMHS about the performance of services, their plans to reduce waiting times, and the work being done in schools and colleges to develop and build the resilience of children and young people, at two of the Panel's meetings.

The Panel had requested an update at the first meeting of the new cycle for 2020/21 to establish the effectiveness of the strategy to reduce waiting time and to continue to hold the Commissioner and Provider to account. The July 2020 meeting did not take place however the CCG and North West Boroughs will be invited to a future meeting.

Waiting times for Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) is also an issue that members of the public reported to the Panel in May 2019 during consultation on the Work Programme for 2019/20. Timely completion of EHCPs is crucial to ensure young people with additional needs obtain the support they need to flourish. In response to the concerns raised, the Panel requested a report on these issues at its September 2019 meeting. Members were encouraged that, despite the increase in both the complexity of work to compile EHCPs as required by Government and the rising demand for EHCPs, they were being completed within required timescales by the Autumn as reported to Panel members in a January 2020 update note provided by officers.

The Panel also scrutinised the process by which funding is allocated to schools within the Borough. Members gained an understanding of the challenges schools face in the light of insufficient funding from central Government. There is clearly not enough money for schools due to Government austerity. There also appears to be anomalies within the formula for funding allocation which particularly affects smaller schools.

Special Education Needs and Disability services provide help to ensure that all children and young people with a learning difficulty or disability who require special educational provision are given the support to help them make progress. The Panel had intended to consider items on both the Borough's SEND Improvement Plan, following the Ofsted Inspection of 2018, and in relation to SEND Home to School Transport, at its March 2020 meeting. Unfortunately, this meeting was postponed.

# Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Overview and Scrutiny Panel



**Membership: Cllr Cunliffe, Cllr Hattersley, Cllr Haw, Cllr Mussell, Cllr Pearson, Cllr C Preston and Cllr Uddin**

**Chairman: Cllr Bisi Osundeko**

## **Remit**

The Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Panel is responsible for scrutinising items concerning borough-wide economic development, environmental services (such as grounds maintenance and waste collection), regeneration, housing, culture, tourism, leisure and libraries. The Panel is responsible for monitoring the Economic Regeneration and Housing, Environmental Services and Public Health, Leisure and Libraries (Excluding Public Health) Cabinet Portfolios and any external agencies responsible for issues within its remit.

## **Task and Finish Groups**

### **Council's Paper and Plastics Use**

The Panel agreed to set up a Task Group to look at reducing the Council's Paper and Plastics Use following a Notice of Motion to Council about Climate Change that was agreed in July 2019. The Task Group conducted research and met with officers from various services to develop ways to reduce paper and plastics use. The Task Group was pleased to find that there were many initiatives going on already but made several recommendations about how paper and plastics use could be reduced further. The Task Group's report was due to be approved by the Panel in March prior to the COVID-19 lockdown however the report did get approval from the Commission in July 2020 and will go to Cabinet for consideration in September 2020.

### **Road Safety Around Schools**

The Panel agreed to set up this Task Group following concerns raised by some Councillors and members of the public about parking and traffic around their local schools. The Task Group held an initial meeting with officers representing Highways, Parking, Road Safety and Schools. Members of the Task Group also attended a Crucial Crew Event attended by year 5 pupils to educate them about Road Safety as well as safety in parks, railways and online among other things.

The Task Group intended to continue its work by conducting site visits to see traffic outside schools at opening and closing time and work with the Youth Council to get their views. The Task Group's work has been delayed by the COVID-19 lockdown and closure of schools.

### **Panel Activity**

During 2019/20 the Panel has considered a variety of different items across its remit which the public have expressed concerns about. One of the main issues the Panel has focused on is Flood Risk Management following a particularly wet 2019 which lead to regular flooding issues on some key roads in the Borough. The Panel invited both officers of the Council and the Environment Agency to its January 2020 meeting to ask how flooding issues were being addressed and to provide the public with a greater understanding of how the Council and the Environment Agency shared responsibility for rivers and flood defence in the Borough. The Panel was pleased to hear schemes were being put in place to alleviate some of the issues raised and would continue to monitor the situation in 2020/21.

The regeneration of both St Helens and Earlestown Town Centres has been a concern for many members of the public as high streets across the country have continued to decline as the trend for online shopping grows. The Panel received an update on progress with plans for the Town Centres at its meeting January 2020 and following the announcement regarding the Council's Partnership with the English City Fund in March 2020 the Panel will continue to monitor progress in 2020/21. The Panel will also monitor the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy.

As well as holding Task Groups and Public Meetings this year the Panel conducted a site visit to the newly refurbished Newton Health and Fitness Centre in January 2020. During the Site Visit the Panel spoke with Officers and the Cabinet Member about the refurbishment process and about Leisure Services generally across the Borough. Councillors were impressed with the high quality of the changes made to the former Selwyn Jones Leisure Centre and were pleased with the outstanding success of the Centre since its official relaunch. The Panel plans to conduct further visits to other leisure sites in the Borough in future.

Other items considered by the Panel during 2019/20 include: Winter Maintenance of the Borough's roads; Highways Maintenance and how road works are scheduled; the use of Planning Obligations (Section 106 Agreements) to mitigate the impacts of developments and how funds from agreements are used; the performance of the Borough's Visitor Economy and how the Council supports it; and how the Council helped to arrange the 2019 Reminisce Festival and the improvements to planning and safety following the previous year's event.

At its March 2020 meeting the Panel had intended to consider items on Libraries, the Borough's Housing Needs and Recycling and Waste Collection. Although the March meeting was postponed the Panel will revisit these items in 2020/21.

# Health and Adult Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel



**Membership:** Cllr Cunliffe, Cllr Greaves, Cllr T Long, Cllr McQuade, Cllr Mussell, Cllr Osundeko, Cllr Pearl, Cllr L Preston, Cllr J Wiseman

**Co-optees:** Mrs B Smith - Healthwatch Rep

**Chairman:** Cllr Dennis McDonnell

## Remit

The Health and Adult Social Care Panel is the designated health scrutiny committee as required by regulations and is responsible for monitoring the Adult Social Care and Public Health, Leisure and Libraries (Public Health only) Cabinet Portfolios. The Panel is also responsible for monitoring the People's Board in relation to its Health and Wellbeing Board responsibilities. The Panel will respond to any consultations carried out by the CCG and NHS providers in relation to substantial development of health services in St Helens. The Panel will also lead on behalf of the Council in coordinating with other local authorities in relation to Joint Health Scrutiny Committees when required. The Panel is responsible for responding to items referred by Healthwatch St Helens; a co-optee from Healthwatch is on the Panel to foster good relationships between the Panel and Healthwatch.

## Task and Finish Groups

### Independent Living

The Independent Living Task Group was established to consider how the Council was providing services and effectively assessing and signposting service users to ensure they had the support needed to remain independent in their own homes for longer; thereby avoid the need for costly residential care as much as possible. The Task Group held meetings with officers to discuss the range of services currently available to support independent living and how the assessment process worked. The Task Group had intended to hold further meetings with officers to discuss the assessment process in more detail and consider case studies before the COVID-19 lockdown delayed the review.

## **Vulnerable Adults Board**

During the year, Panel Members considered whether there should be a body with a corporate parenting role for vulnerable adults, given that the Council was the corporate parent for vulnerable children (children in care/looked after). A Task Group was established in February 2020 that met with senior officers from Peoples Services and received a summary of the support provided as set out in the Care Act 2014. The Task Group was satisfied that support for vulnerable adults was already being provided and coordinated through the Safeguarding Adults Board function.

In April 2019 the Panel submitted two reports to Cabinet on the Kershaw Centre and Home Care Visits respectively. Cabinet provided a response to those reports in July 2019 and in January 2020 the Panel gave consideration to those responses. The Panel was pleased that the majority of recommendations were able to be agreed by Cabinet.

## **Panel Activity**

This year the Panel has considered a mixture of issues from both Health Services and Social Care and Public Health services.

One of the main items the Panel considered this year was GP Appointments to consider whether waiting times for an appointment were too long. This issue was considered following concerns raised by some members of the Panel about the experiences of some of their residents. Representatives of St Helens CCG attended the Panel's January 2020 meeting to explain how Primary Care services are commissioned and the way GPs operate. As private enterprises with a lot of independence in ways they operate it is difficult to compare their performances. The Panel did however wish to consider this issue further and was due to commence a Task and Finish Group prior to the COVID-19 lockdown.

In September 2019, the Panel also considered a report regarding the Council's Suicide Prevention Strategy. The Panel chose to consider this issue as suicide rates in St Helens had been among the highest in the country. The Panel was pleased to see that new data published just before the Panel's meeting showed that suicide rates were reducing, suggesting that Public Health initiatives were starting to have a positive impact. The Panel will revisit this issue when the latest data is published in 2020/21 to continue monitoring performance.

Other items considered by the Panel during 2019/20 include: considering the consultation by the CCG regarding changes to the Care in the Chemist service; an overview of the effectiveness of various Mental Health Services; a report on the waiting times in Wheelchair Services; and a report on the Evidence Based Intervention Review conducted by the CCG in 2019.

### **Other Activity**

As well as Task and Finish Group activity and reports at public meetings the Panel has received regular updates from Healthwatch about their activities. Healthwatch representatives have attended the Panel's public meetings and taken part in the Independent Living Task Group. The Panel will look to continue building its relationship with Healthwatch in 2020/21 to work closer together.

The Scrutiny Function has also been working to build its relationships with health services during 2019/20. In January 2020 the Scrutiny Manager provided representatives of the CCG and the major health service providers in the Borough with a training session on Health Scrutiny, the legislation and regulations governing health scrutiny and best practice working between health services and scrutiny. To support the strengthening of relationships the Scrutiny Team has been working with leaders from the CCG and providers to develop a Health Scrutiny Protocol which will provide guidance to all on the best ways to work together.

# Safer Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel



**Membership:** Cllr Banks, Cllr Gill, Cllr Gomez-Aspron, Cllr P Jackson, Cllr Lynch, and Cllr Pearl

**Co-optees:** Supt T Garvey-Jones - Merseyside Police Rep  
Mr I Mullen - Merseyside Fire & Rescue Services Rep

**Chairman:** Cllr Michelle Sweeney

## Remit

The Safer Communities Panel is designated as the responsible Panel to review and scrutinise crime and disorder issues, pursuant to the Police and Justice Act 2006. The Panel is also responsible for monitoring the People's Board in relation to its Community Safety Partnership responsibilities and items within the Community Safety Cabinet Portfolio. The Panel is able to request items for consideration from Community Safety Partners such as the Police and Fire and Rescue Service; to support good relationships and communication there are co-opted members of the Panel for Merseyside Police and Merseyside Fire & Rescue.

## Task and Finish Groups

### County Lines

The Panel conducted a Task Group Review of County Lines issues in St Helens following a national report by the BBC regarding County Lines issues which covered St Helens specifically. The Task Group met with officers from the Council and the Police and conducted research into the national response to this serious issue. Child Criminal Exploitation, especially through County Lines, is a serious and growing problem in the country, not just St Helens and all partners need to play a role in tackling the criminals taking advantage of our vulnerable young people. The Task Group was pleased that the Council and Partners are improving the way they work together to tackle this issue but there is still much more work to be done. The Task Group's report was due to be presented to the Panel at the March meeting prior to the COVID-19 lockdown but was approved by the Commission in July 2020 and will be submitted to Cabinet in September 2020.

## Panel Activity

This year the Panel has dedicated time at several of its meetings to monitoring the development of a new Domestic Abuse Strategy for the Council. At its September 2019 meeting the Panel held a discussion with the Cabinet Member, Officers and

Partners about the issues within St Helens in relation to Domestic Abuse. This was followed by a further update on the development of the strategy in January 2020 and an informal meeting of the Panel in March 2020 where members considered the draft strategy and provided feedback prior to the strategy being approved by Cabinet. The Panel was pleased to see that the strategy covered the many different aspects to domestic abuse, including child to parent abuse, coercive control, elder abuse and honour-based violence. The Task Group was reassured that targeted support would be provided to groups in society who were potentially more vulnerable to the different forms of domestic abuse and would require additional support to report such abuse.

The Panel also reviewed the Council's Taxi Licensing arrangements following concerns from the public about drivers licensed outside of St Helens operating in the Borough. The deregulation of taxi licensing by the Government in 2015 led to licensed drivers being able to operate anywhere in the country rather than just in the authority that gave them their license. Some local authorities do not have robust licensing arrangements leading to drivers whom St Helens Council may deem unsuitable being able to operate in the area. Those drivers operating here from outside the area may not know the area well enough to provide a good service to vulnerable residents, particularly those with visual impairment. The Panel approves of the Council's robust licensing arrangements and supports the Know Your Ride initiative to encourage the public to only use locally licensed drivers.

This year the Panel has also received reports regarding Knife Crime and efforts by the Council and its Partners to tackle this issue and Anti-Social Behaviour around Halloween and Bonfire Night to review the effectiveness of initiatives to reduce ASB and its negative impacts. The Panel praised all the really positive initiatives tackling Knife Crime and ASB and supports all those organisations and community groups who make them work. The Panel had also intended to receive a report at its March meeting regarding Homelessness in the Borough and the success of some of the Council's initiatives working with Partners to tackle homelessness and support vulnerable people.

Throughout the year the Panel has received updates from its co-optees from Merseyside Police and Merseyside Fire & Rescue Service about their activities and key statistics locally. The Panel thanks those representatives of the Police and Fire & Rescue who have contributed to Scrutiny and congratulates them on their successes this year.

## Looking Forward to 2020 -2021

Follow up and tracking of Task and Finish Group recommendations is something that Councillors on Overview and Scrutiny have raised as an area where more focus is required to ensure previous recommendations agreed by Cabinet and Officers were implemented. A new system for tracking recommendations and actions agreed will be developed and progress will be reported to Committees on a more regular basis with more in-depth discussions with Cabinet Members and Officers when required.

The way that Budget Scrutiny was conducted during 2019/20 varied from previous years since the Council was at the end of a three-year medium-term financial strategy and was going into 2020/21 with only a one-year settlement from Government given the implications of the UK leaving the EU. As Scrutiny Members, Cabinet Members and Officers had all been positive about the approach taken this year a commitment is given to considering how this approach can be further developed for 2021/22 where the Council will hopefully be able to plan further into the future.

The changes introduced this year to the way work programming is conducted have been welcomed by Councillors however further progress can be made to ensure work programmes are focussed on key issues and committees are prepared to consider items at an early stage in the municipal year. Consideration will be given to introducing work programming workshops for each committee to allow additional time at the start of the year to schedule and commence work.

As part of the Budget Proposals for the 2020/21 Council Budget a commitment was made to reduce the number of Scrutiny Committees and mirror the Council's current Organisational Structure. The Scrutiny Committee Structure has been consistent since the recommendations of a review in 2008 were implemented in 2009 and the Council has seen significant changes since then. The new structure reflects the decision taken within the Budget while maintaining best practice as outlined in the Statutory Guidance. The opportunity will also be taken to review how else the Scrutiny Function can adapt and modernise to ensure it is operating effectively.

One of the opportunities Scrutiny is presented with is utilising technology to hold virtual meetings, with Councillors and witnesses interacting through video calls and document sharing applications such as Microsoft Teams. The COVID-19 Pandemic has led to new regulations from Government allowing virtual meetings. While these regulations are temporary until May 2021 to help local authorities operate during the crisis, it is expected that the regulations will be retained in some form to allow virtual working as the use of technology evolves into the future. The Scrutiny Function will consider how best this opportunity can be used to engage Councillors, Officers, Partners and the Public more effectively.

## How to find out more about Scrutiny

The work of Overview and Scrutiny should be informed by the issues that matter to those who live or work in St Helens. A key component of how issues are prioritised within scrutiny work programmes is whether there is public interest in an issue

Help us to ensure the work programmes of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels reflect the priorities of the public by telling us what you think we should focus on in 2020/21. Our Panels have the ability within the rules governing overview and scrutiny to review anything affecting the Borough, this means more than just Council run services and includes health services, community safety (e.g. police and fire services), voluntary and community services, and regional/national services.

You can contact us by using the channels listed below or submit a suggestion for our work programme using the Scrutiny pages on the Council's website.

### Contact Us

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