

Scrutiny Annual Update 2024-2025



Introduction

Scrutiny is a vital part of the Council's governance arrangements; holding to account decision makers and helping to identify where improvements can be made in policy and service delivery.

In Sandwell there is a Scrutiny Management Board and four thematic boards to deliver the scrutiny function. There are also arrangements in place with Birmingham City Council for the joint scrutiny of matters affecting residents that live in the area covered by Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust.

This report highlights the breadth and depth of scrutiny activity and demonstrates the Council's commitment to transparency, accountability, and better outcomes for all who live, work and study in Sandwell.

How does Scrutiny work?

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.

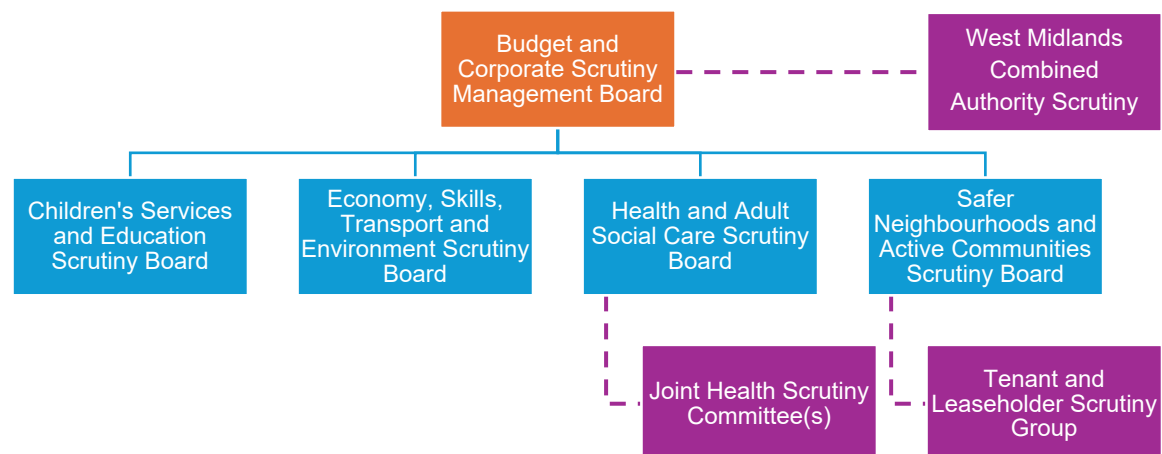


A particularly effective type of scrutiny is called “pre-decision scrutiny” which is where a Board looks at an important strategy decision before Cabinet makes any decision on it. This allows early involvement and the potential to influence the decision to make sure it is the best it can be. Additionally, scrutiny board chairs are invited to Cabinet meetings as part of holding key decision makers to account.

Scrutiny boards also have ‘Call-In’ powers to scrutinise Cabinet decisions after they have been taken by the Cabinet, but before they are implemented, and can make recommendations to the Cabinet that it must consider before the decision can be actioned.

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 Structure



Chair's Foreword

(Image and Link to video foreword by Chair of Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board)

Council Plan

Everything that the scrutiny boards consider, review and scrutinise connects to the [Council Plan 2024-2027](#). Scrutiny's work aims to support the overarching themes of the Plan, which are:

Growing Up in Sandwell

Living in Sandwell

Healthy in Sandwell

Thriving Economy in Sandwell

One Council One Team



Case Studies

Throughout 2024-2025 Scrutiny in Sandwell has worked hard to review and consider a wide range of topics and issues important to the people of the borough. This work falls within a few categories:-

Holding to Account

This is where Scrutiny Boards hold decision makers – such as Cabinet Members – to account for those decisions. It's a way of ensuring that decisions being made are the best possible ones for Sandwell.

Seeking Assurance

Sometimes there are concerns about the way in which services might be performing, or how certain issues might be impacting on the council and the borough. Scrutiny Boards can look into a topic to seek assurances on how things are going – and to identify any recommendations they may have to make improvements.

Policy Development

Scrutiny Boards also have a role in developing council policy – this can be through in-depth reviews of their own, or through pre-decision scrutiny of proposed policies.

Partnership Working

Not all scrutiny activity is focussed on the Council itself; scrutiny engages with a wide range of partners to ensure that the services they provide for the people and businesses of Sandwell are effective.

Holding to Account

Medium Term Financial Strategy

The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board supported the development of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS), providing critical oversight and challenge to ensure that the strategy was both realistic and resilient in the face of economic uncertainty. Through detailed analysis and engagement across multiple days with senior officers and Cabinet Members, the Board helped shape a financial plan that balanced ambition with prudence.



Housing Improvement and Transformation Plan

The Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board provided rigorous oversight of the Housing Directorate's improvement journey following a C3 Regulatory Judgement. Quarterly reviews focused on procurement processes, the repairs backlog, and compliance with key performance indicators such as electrical safety. The Board's scrutiny ensured that the Directorate remained accountable and responsive to residents' needs.



Adult Social Care Complaints

Members of the Health and Adult Social Care Board reviewed the annual complaints report for Adult Social Care, noting a rise in complaints due to national pressures and increasing complexity of needs of those accessing services. Members received assurances that improvement measures were being implemented, including a revised recruitment strategy and a new strength-based practice framework.

Seeking Assurance

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Transformation Programme

The Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Board commenced monitoring of the SEND Transformation Programme, focusing on its impact on service delivery and outcomes for children and families. As the programme progresses, the Board will continue to assess its effectiveness and alignment with the Council's strategic goals.

Poor Birthing Experiences and Inequalities

A review into maternal health outcomes was launched by the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board. The scope of the review particularly focused on inequalities in birthing experiences. This complex and sensitive topic will continue into the next municipal year, with the aim of identifying systemic issues and recommending improvements.



Customer Complaints Strategy

The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board reviewed statistical data on customer complaints, identifying trends and areas for improvement. It supported the development of a revised strategy aimed at reducing complaint volumes and improving service responsiveness.

Policy Development

Housing Policy

A working group of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board reviewed draft housing policies, leading to key amendments. These included waiving the 15% admin fee in the rechargeable repairs policy and enhancing the tenant sustainability policy with clearer affordability checks during pre-tenancy assessments.

Litter Bin Strategy

The Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board contributed to the development of a borough-wide litter bin strategy. Recommendations included a scoring matrix for new bin placements, a public bin colour scheme aligned with domestic waste bins, multilingual communications, and the use of QR codes for monitoring.

Sandwell Local Plan

A working group of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board carried out pre-decision scrutiny on the draft Sandwell Local Plan. Recommendations arising from the working group included suggestions around the potential use of co-operative ownership housing models, a commitment to supporting care leavers to access jobs via labour market provision, the impact of ward boundary changes on affordability calculations and consideration of traditional Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) routes when exploring potential sites for GRT communities. These were all accepted and included within the revised Plan.



Partnership Working

Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust

2024-2025 was a particularly important year for health in Sandwell, with the opening of the Midland Metropolitan University Hospital in Smethwick in the autumn of 2024

The Health and Adult Social Care Board, and the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee established with Birmingham City Council, devoted time to hearing from partners at the Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust about a range of factors including practical planning for the opening and transfer to the new Smethwick site for the Midland Metropolitan Hospital, as well as communication plans around changes to healthcare provision in Sandwell to ensure residents knew where and how to access different kinds of care

Sandwell Children's Trust, Forum for Independent Young Adults and Family Hubs



The Children's Services and Education Board conducted site visits to the Children's Trust, the Forum for Independent Young Adults and Family Hubs, engaging directly with staff and service users. These visits provided valuable insights into service delivery and informed future scrutiny topics.



Seven Trent and South Staffs Water Investment Plans for 2025-2030

Severn Trent Water and South Staffs Water attended a meeting of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board to discuss their respective investment plans for 2025-2030 and what that would mean for residents living in Sandwell. This included smart meter technology, initiatives to reduce water consumption by non-residential customers and education programmes. The Board asked the relevant Cabinet Members to work more closely with the water companies to develop collaborative approach to communicating with residents to disseminate key messages.

West Midlands Combined Authority

The Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Board hosted representatives of the West Midlands Combined Authority to hear about the work of the Authority's scrutiny function as well as build an understanding of the activities of the Authority within Sandwell.



Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group (TLSG)

The TLSG continued its positive and collaborative working relationship with the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board throughout the year. As a result of this relationship, TLSG members now received the same training as elected councillors. This helps strengthened tenant voice and scrutiny capacity of housing matters.



Glossary

Call-In

A formal mechanism that allows scrutiny boards to review decisions made by the Cabinet before they are implemented. This ensures transparency and provides an opportunity to challenge or amend decisions.

Corporate Parenting

The collective responsibility of the Council and its partners to ensure the wellbeing, safety and success of children and young people in care.

Council Plan

The strategic framework guiding the Council's priorities and actions from 2024 to 2027. Scrutiny work is aligned with its five themes: Growing Up in Sandwell, Living in Sandwell, Healthy in Sandwell, Thriving Economy in Sandwell, and One Council One Team.

Family Hubs

Community-based centres offering integrated support services for families, including early years education, health, and parenting support.

GRT (Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities)

Ethnic groups with distinct cultural identities that share a nomadic heritage.

Highway Asset Management Plan

A strategic document outlining how the Council maintains and invests in its highway infrastructure, using a risk-based approach to ensure safety, sustainability, and value for money.

Local Plan

A statutory planning document that sets out how land in the borough will be used and developed over time. It includes policies on housing, infrastructure, environment, and economic development.

Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

A strategic financial planning document used by local authorities and public sector organisations to align resources with priorities over a multi-year period.



Pre-Decision Scrutiny

A proactive process where scrutiny boards examine significant proposals or strategies before they are formally decided by the Cabinet. This allows for early input and potential improvements.

SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities)

Refers to children and young people who require additional support due to learning difficulties or disabilities. Scrutiny monitors services and reforms affecting this group to ensure equitable access and outcomes.

Scrutiny (also known as Overview and Scrutiny)

A key part of the Council's governance structure. Scrutiny boards hold decision-makers to account, review policies and services, and make recommendations for improvement.

Spotlight Session

A focused meeting or event where a specific issue is examined in detail by a scrutiny board, often involving expert witnesses, service users, or partner organisations.

Strength-Based Practice Framework

An approach in social care that focuses on individuals' strengths and resources, rather than their deficits, to support positive outcomes and promote independence.

Towns Fund

A government initiative providing funding to selected towns to support regeneration and economic growth.

West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

A strategic regional body formed to drive economic growth, improve transport, and coordinate public services across the West Midlands metropolitan area.

Working Group

A smaller, task-focused group formed by a scrutiny board to investigate a particular issue in depth and report back with findings and recommendations.



Scrutiny on a Page 2024-2025

Performance Management Framework Outturn and quarterly reports, **Financial Outturns and quarterly reports**, West Midlands Combined Authority Corporate Update, **Customer Feedback Annual Report**, West Midlands Combined Authority Scrutiny and Audit Annual Report, **Medium Term Financial Strategy**, Vacancy Management and Sickness Absence, **Consultation and Engagement Activity**, West Midlands Combined Authority Activity in Sandwell, **Procurement Board Update**, Oracle Fusion – Lessons Learned and Continual Optimisation, **Voluntary Sector Support and Grant Funding**, Adoption@Heart Annual Report, **Sandwell Children's Trust Performance Update**, Family Help Update, **Corporate Parenting Post 16 Opportunities**, Statutory Youth Offer in Sandwell, **Education Services: Priority Education Investment Area Plan**, Early Years – Implementing the DfE National Wraparound Programme and the Extended Entitlement Offer, **Child Friendly Sandwell Progress Update**, Planning and Delivery of Active Travel Projects (Walking & Cycling), **Bus Reform – Update by Transport for West Midlands**, Flood Mitigation Strategies, **Severn Trent and South Staffs Water Investment Plans for 2025-2030**, Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan, **Parking Review**, Midland Metropolitan University Hospital Assurance, **Communicating Changes to Healthcare in Sandwell**, Sandwell Winter Booklet 2024, **Sandwell Safeguarding Adults Board Annual Report**, Recommencement of Daycare Charges, **Update on Development of an Autism Strategy**, Midland Metropolitan University Hospital Update, **Adult Social Care Statutory Complaints Report**, Housing Repairs – Addressing the Backlog and Improving the Service, **Neighbourhood Working – Implementation of the New Model**, Housing Improvement and Transformation Updates, **Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy Update**, Draft Housing Policies, **Outcome of the Spotlight Session on the New Neighbourhood Model for Sandwell**, Outcome of the Spotlight Session on Housing Repairs, **Leisure Management**, Report of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group, **Tenant Satisfaction Survey Outcomes**, Corporate Contact Centre Update, **Implementation of Sandwell Community Safety Strategy 2022-2026**, Major Aids and Adaptations, **Outcome of the Working Group Session on Draft Housing Policies**, Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust – Midland Metropolitan University Hospital Update, **Patient Experience at Sandwell and West Birmingham NHS Trust Update**, Midland Metropolitan University Hospital – Benefits Realisation.

