

Scrutiny Commission Statement to Annual Council – 21 May 2024

Good scrutiny is an essential part of the Council's governance framework and is integral to decision making. Scrutiny Commission fulfils the statutory responsibility placed on local authorities to review and scrutinise decisions and actions taken, and they play a vital role in influencing services and shaping policies and plans which affect our residents and businesses.

Scrutiny should:

- Provide constructive 'critical friend' challenge.
- Amplify voice and concerns of the public.
- Be led by independent like-minded people.
- Drive improvement in public services.

Scrutiny has a range of statutory functions, and they can be the foundation of its work, scrutiny may look at any issues which affects 'the area or the area's inhabitants', scrutiny also has the power to:

- Access information.
- Require attendance of the Executive and senior Officers to be held account or give evidence.
- Require a response to its recommendations.
- Call-in the decisions of Executive Members.

Scrutiny 2023/24

Scrutiny Commission

Over the year Scrutiny Members' have contributed to policy development, reviewed, and scrutinised Cabinet Executive decisions. Scrutiny Commission has also considered the following work topics:

Monitoring of Council Complaints - Scrutiny was provided with an update on the complaints and compliments received under the Corporate Complaints Policy. This included improvements or changes to the way the Council delivers a service because of this feedback, as well as information about complaints that were referred to the Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman (LGSCO) during the same period. Previously, updates on complaints to Scrutiny were received a year in arrears, following a request by Scrutiny, the updates will now be brought within 3 months of the end of each financial year. Scrutiny thanks the

Performance and Information Service for accepting this suggestion, allowing Scrutiny to receive the latest information available.

Members provided comment on Stage 0 Complaints and retaining statistics on them and figures for waste operations. Scrutiny requested specific examples of complaints upheld (where the Council acknowledges fault) be included in future reports as a means to drive improvement.

iPlan – Members were introduced to the new Council performance management system as the Council worked towards improving the way it plans, reviews and reports on its work. Further information is provided below.

Economic Development Framework 2023-2026 – Scrutiny was consulted on the Framework before its adoption by Cabinet Executive. The Framework sets out the aspirations of the Council and provides a framework that brings together all economic development activities that are ongoing within the district and considers how they complement each other to maximise the benefits for our residents, businesses, and visitors. The framework aligns closely with other key strategies including the Blaby District Plan, Medium Term Financial Strategy, Business engagement survey, the Tourism Growth Plan and the Commercial Strategy.

Members questioned each priority theme for driving economic improvement, each with an associated action plan.

New Corporate Plan – Scrutiny was invited to provide feedback on the draft Blaby District Plan 2024-2028. Members considered the following new themes:

- Enabling our communities and supporting our vulnerable residents.
- Enhancing and maintaining our natural and built environments.
- Growing and supporting our economy.
- Keeping you safe and healthy.
- Ambitious and well managed Council, valuing our people.

Members questioned the consultation process and the key groups that were involved. Scrutiny looks forward to monitoring the progress of the Corporate Plan.

Transformation Strategy ‘Transforming Blaby Together’–

The Transforming Blaby Together Strategy sets out how Blaby District Council (BDC) aims to meet the needs, expectations, and aspirations of our residents, communities, and employees from 2024-2027. The Strategy is to be reviewed on an annual basis.

The Strategy presents a vision “to enable the authority to adopt a culture of continuous improvement to facilitate opportunities and different ways of working to drive operational effectiveness and build in cost effective efficiencies. Including but not limited to:

- We will ensure our core service is affordable and delivered efficiently, working with partners, and embracing digital solutions to reduce our costs.
- We will identify tangible savings to support delivering actions as identified in our Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

- We will transform our processes to improve the customer experience and deliver cost effective services, utilising our Transformation Programme to embed a culture of continuous improvement.”

Scrutiny was keen to explore the ‘transformation journey’ after receiving a brief update during budget meetings in January. Since then, Scrutiny has welcomed the Portfolio Holder and Officers where Members received a further detailed presentation on progress made and future ambitions.

Members were able to question Officers and the Portfolio Holder on the results of a staff survey; the impact of Transformation and how challenges were overcome; its priorities and focus for 2024.

Scrutiny will watch with interest outcomes of the transformation journey, the impact on service delivery for customers, developing the culture at Blaby as well as measures to monitor delivery of savings and efficiencies. Scrutiny requested ongoing involvement in the transformation journey to ensure successful outcomes.

Budget 2024/25 - In January a comprehensive overview session provided background and context to the Council’s draft Budget proposals setting the scene for robust questioning of Cabinet Executive Members.

Scrutiny noted that due to the short-term nature of the funding streams issued in the Settlement Statement for 2024/25, it is difficult to plan ahead with one year funding. Continued rigorous management and monitoring by the Senior Leadership Team, Cabinet Executive and Scrutiny will ensure the Council continues to be well prepared to respond to any challenges that may occur.

- Council Tax - Members fully considered the options provided to increase Council Tax and were supportive of a 2.99% increase given the current financial uncertainty that local authorities face. Members were concerned about the financial pressure that any possible raise in Council tax would have on residents. They noted long term reduction in funding from Government, which placed pressure on local authorities to raise this tax. Members emphasised the importance of maintaining quality services for residents, whilst also supporting those in need.
- Fair Funding & Longer-Term Financial Settlement - Members noted that the continued delay of the Fair Funding Review affected the Council receiving a multi-year funding settlement and as a result, it is not possible to assess the impact it may have on our future financial position.
- Health, Leisure and Tourism – Scrutiny highlighted the importance of encouraging physical activity in terms of both mental and physical health. The newly adopted Corporate Plan states that the Council has committed to fostering active and healthier lifestyles among our residents, inspiring people to embrace lifestyles that promote physical and mental wellbeing.

Members were concerned that funding from Public Health via Active Together has reduced by over 30% and that this would result in a reduction in an officer post and the Council’s offer of sports and physical activity. Scrutiny requested that the new offering of sport and physical activity be provided to Scrutiny, highlighting what changes are to be made and the likely impact.

Scrutiny will continue to be rigorous in providing constructive and supportive challenge to ensure that the Council is sustainable, drives improvement and the vulnerable are protected.

Scrutiny would like to thank Portfolio Holders for the comprehensive overview of their budget priorities and challenges and commend officers for their work on the budget planning process.

Task & Finish and Working Groups

The Chairman and Vice-Chairman led meetings which considered the following:

- **iPlan** - During the early briefings in 2023, Members were consulted on data measures, ensuring the data and information presented was clear and understandable. Since then, Scrutiny has set up an established working group which monitors progress against the Council's Corporate Plan and Priorities and are able to make recommendations to the Senior Leadership Team and Cabinet Executive and to raise questions where necessary. Members have been provided with self-service logins and are able to access live data to monitor service delivery. Scrutiny looks forward to continuing to develop and progress this work.
- **Parks and Open Spaces Strategy** – The new Strategy provides the Council with a strategic direction for the future of district council owned parks and open spaces and how they are managed through site specific management plans. Scrutiny considered and had a productive discussion on the 11 objectives of the Strategy. Members recommended that consideration be given to expanding the policy to include promotion of all parks and open spaces within the district regardless of ownership. Members requested and look forward to receiving an update in 12 months on the progress of the objectives.
- **Commercial Strategy** – Scrutiny was pleased to welcome the Executive Director (S.151) and the Shared Strategic Director - Commercial and Economic Development who provided an update on progress of the current 2022-2027 Strategy at Scrutiny's request. Members questioned investment opportunities, partnership arrangements with businesses and Parish Council's. Scrutiny also recommended that the provision of starter units for skilled enterprises be considered as an investment in the future of local commerce as well as an income stream and that a broader provision of accommodation, e.g. hotels in the district should be supported.
- **Graffiti and Littering** – Members considered the Council's approach to graffiti and littering in the district. Members were also consulted on updating the current policy and enviro-crime fixed penalty notice levels. Members are expecting to conclude this work when they are presented with a new draft policy for consideration later in the year.

Scrutiny Work Programme

The following items remain on the current work programme:

- Examination of contaminated land sites.

- Analysis of Net Zero targets.
- Conclusion of the HR Review.

Number of Meetings held

Over the course of the year Members took part in **19** meetings.

Developing Scrutiny at Blaby

To welcome new Members following the local elections in May 2023, Scrutiny took action to provide a robust training and development programme, which was supported by the Member Development Steering Group. Designed for all Members, including Cabinet Executive and Officers the programme ensured that the right culture and behaviours are the bedrock of effective scrutiny at Blaby District Council.

Scrutiny enlisted the support of the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny (CfGS) who delivered a comprehensive training programme which received positive feedback from Members and Officers. The training programme was designed to build on existing Members knowledge of Scrutiny, and to provide a strong foundation for newly elected Members.

Training was delivered on the following:

- The Essentials of Effective Strategic Scrutiny.
- Questioning Skills.
- Work Programmes, Setting Priorities and Focus.

Training was also delivered virtually on the following:

- Finance Scrutiny
- An Introduction to Scrutiny for Councillors

To make an impact Scrutiny must be confident that each of the following are in place and Scrutiny will continue to ensure that these guidelines are followed into the ensuing year.

- Prioritising the work programme and effective outcomes.
- Selecting the right methods to undertake work.
- Keeping focussed agendas.
- Asking the right questions.
- Ensuring capacity and resource is available.

Finally, we would like to thank all colleagues for their contribution to the work of Scrutiny Commission and its Work Groups this year.

Cllr. Nick Brown - Scrutiny Commission Chairman
Cllr. Roy Denney – Scrutiny Commission Vice-Chairman