

Scrutiny Commission Statement to Annual Council – 20 May 2025

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 2024/25

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:

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025- 2030 - Scrutiny was consulted on the new Strategy and concerningly noted:

- A steady increase in the number of homelessness cases.
- An increase in the number of people with a support need, particularly those with complex needs.
- The demise of the private rented sector (PRS) including lack of supply, unaffordability and lack of confidence has meant that access to the PRS for homeless households is now extremely limited.

- New affordable housing delivery has become an essential requirement for the Council to meet the current homelessness demand.

Members discussed solutions to the current housing crisis which included:

- Developing our own property management company
- Liaising with current private sector landlords
- Creating the council's own housing stock
- Managing empty properties.

Members noted the Council so far has made excellent progress in supporting residents in urgent need of temporary accommodation and housing, but the need for emergency housing keeps on rising. Against this backdrop, the Council has made great strides in purchasing properties to support our most vulnerable residents and Scrutiny is supportive of Cabinet's view that the Council should continue to do this. Continuing investment in housing ensures sufficient appropriate accommodation is available and reduces reliance on costly temporary accommodation.

Local Government Reorganisation - Following the white paper being published late last year, Scrutiny questioned all Cabinet Executive Members on how they intend to reprioritise their work, and implications on the Corporate Plan.

Cabinet Executive responded that it would reconsider projects and initiatives individually to determine whether there is the requirement or resources available to continue or pause work. Scrutiny noted Cabinet's response that it was too early to provide a reprioritised list of any projects, and that cost savings and resources will be rediverted to feed into reorganisation.

Scrutiny would welcome the opportunity to be consulted on any detailed local government reorganisation proposals as they emerge, including any requirement to increase resource to support the new Council.

Budget 2025/26 - 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 2025/26, 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 had a robust debate on the options available, with concerns being raised about the extra pressure an increase in Council tax would have on residents. Members also considered the impact of not raising Council Tax by the full percentage, however this was disregarded due to future challenges

that local government reorganisation, devolution and uncertainty around future funding may bring and the importance of maintaining a quality service for residents.

Members also noted future local government financial reform could potentially pose a risk to the Council, where Council's will be expected to raise Council tax.

- 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.
- External Funding - Health, Leisure and Tourism – Scrutiny learned that many health, leisure and economic development initiatives rely on grants or external commissions, that may be less secure in future.

Scrutiny noted that if external funding is reallocated or reduced there may be significant changes to consider on service delivery plans, which would have considerable impact on service users and staff.

Scrutiny looks forward to welcoming the Health, Leisure and Tourism Service later in the year to receive an update on external funding and the work of the service.

- Building Control - Scrutiny noted the impact of changes to Building Control regulations resulting in a significant reduction of fees and charges. The changes have also resulted in losing experienced members of staff as the new regulations place new burdens on the team.

Scrutiny would welcome Officers and the Portfolio Holder to a future meeting to discuss the Partnership and its priorities for the future in light of reduction of fees and the new regulations.

- Transformation - Scrutiny noted the positive work that has been undertaken by the Transformation team, including £108,000 worth of cashable savings, 430 hours working hours saved and over £23,000 of income generated.

Scrutiny would welcome a further update on their work.

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.

Call-in of Blaby District Council (Off-Street Parking Places) Order 2024

Scrutiny welcomed the opportunity to consider a call-in of an Executive decision in October 2024. Call-in provides Scrutiny Commission with the opportunity to delay implementation of a decision which has been made by Cabinet Executive., which it considers needs reviewing.

Call-in should only be regarded as a measure that is needed in exceptional circumstances and sits in a range of tools available at Scrutiny's disposal to influence decision-making.

The Blaby District Council (Off-Street Parking Places) Order 2024 report and decisions that were made by Cabinet Executive on 16 September 2024 were called in and considered by Scrutiny Commission on 8 October 2024.

The call-in was requested by Members who sought clarification on additional maintenance costs and enhancements planned to car parks.

Both the Chairman, Cllr. Nick Brown and Vice-Chairman Cllr. Neil Wright supported the call-in and requested that further information be provided on financial implications, including a forecast of income generated from levying charges on Bouskell Park and the cost of enforcement.

Scrutiny welcomed Executive Members Cllr. Terry Richardson and Cllr. Nigel Grundy to the meeting who reiterated that it was a priority to ensure that car parks are financially self-sustaining.

Members discussed the implications of introducing car park charges at Bouskell Park and the Executive Members responded that improvement works were due to be carried out imminently, and in order to maintain the car park, introducing charges was necessary.

Members also questioned data on car park usage, financial implications of maintaining car parks, projected income.

Following robust debate Scrutiny Commission Members decided that the decision of the Cabinet Executive was appropriate, allowing the decision to become effective immediately.

Task & Finish and Working Groups

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

- **iPlan** – 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 have worked closely with the Performance & Information Manager, regularly updating the Scrutiny Working Group Feedback Log which allows Members to raise questions, suggestions and concerns directly with the Senior Leadership Team.

Members have also had discussions around how Power Business Intelligence can be used effectively at Blaby District Council. The Working Group looks forward to continuing to develop and progress this work.

- **Recruitment and Retention of Staff** – Scrutiny carried out an extensive review into the Council's recruitment procedures and the examined the

reasons why staff were leaving the authority. Scrutiny considered data provided by Human Resources.

Scrutiny studied how authorities are experimenting with generative AI tools and automation to streamline the creation of job adverts and LinkedIn posts to expedite the recruitment process.

A key part of this work, which the task and finish group Members found insightful was considering evidence from Service Managers. All Service Managers were invited to a meeting of the task and finish group to provide their own experiences of:

- Recruitment
- Annual Progress Reviews
- Exit Surveys and Leaver Feedback
- Staff Benefits
- Apprenticeship Scheme
- Fixed Term Contracts

Scrutiny thanks all Officers and Members who supported this review. Scrutiny looks forward to receiving a response to the 17 recommendations listed in its report.

- **Blaby District Tourism Growth Plan** – Scrutiny was pleased to welcome the Executive Director and the Tourism and Heritage Team who provided an overview of the Tourism Growth Plan, highlighting the team's long-term ambitions and the importance of linking the Growth Plan to the council's wider economic growth opportunities and other strategies, e.g., the Active Travel Strategy.

Since the existing Tourism Growth Plan for 2020-2025 was commissioned in 2019, there have been considerable achievements and development of the Blaby District visitor economy, despite the backdrop of the Covid pandemic.

The latest available figures show that in 2023 tourism contributed £216.84m annually to the District's economy and supported over 2,000 local jobs

Members considered Blaby District's location as its key strength, making it an appealing destination for visitors. Scrutiny noted the Plan's wide-ranging initiatives which included a social media strategy, creative marketing campaigns, collaborating with local schools and developing and expanding new or existing walking and cycling routes.

- **Contaminated Land** – Scrutiny was provided with an update on the work Environmental Services was carrying out in managing contaminated land sites across the District.
- **Net Zero by 2050** – chaired by Cllr. Tony Deakin, the Task and Finish Group explored:
 - the Council's net zero targets and progress made
 - the Council's annual emissions level, which had seen a 78% reduction since 2018/19.
 - the net zero action plan

- consideration of a Climate Change Working Group

The Commissioners thank Cllr. Tony Deakin for chairing this meeting and invite other non-executive Members to express their interest in chairing task and finish groups.

Non-executive Members also took part and were consulted on the following work topics:

- Active Travel Strategy
- Feedback on resident's survey
- Corporate Parenting Responsibilities
- Environmental Health, Environmental Services and Community Safety Enforcement and Compliance Policy
- Environmental Crime Fixed Penalty Notices
- Gender Pay Gap
- Corporate Action Plan 25/26

Scrutiny Work Programme

The following items remain on the current work programme:

- Lightbulb – Examining current performance, achievements and challenges.
- Local Police – considering how local police communicates with and provides updates to Parishes and local councillors.

Number of Meetings held

Over the course of the year Members took part in **29** meetings.

Developing Scrutiny at Blaby

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. Neil Wright – Scrutiny Commission Vice-Chairman