

Scrutiny Annual Report 2024-25

(May 2025)

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Foreword

This has been another busy year for the Scrutiny Commission and Health Scrutiny Committee and their task and finish groups. In the following pages you will see a summary of the work of our committees, including our important work scrutinising the council's finances. In spring 2025, the council successfully applied for Exceptional Financial Support from central government and the Executive, supported by officers, is working hard to avoid the issuance of a section 114 notice. This makes effective financial scrutiny more important than ever.

Scrutiny Commission examined the growing challenge of trying to provide services within budget for the special education needs and disabilities High Needs Block. Increasing financial deficits in this service area are faced by all top-tier local authorities and will only be resolved by bold action from central government, but while we wait for that day to come it is clear that West Berkshire Council officers are working hard to meet our statutory obligations.

The Health Scrutiny Committee responded to residents' concerns and represented the needs of the local population with health service providers and commissioners. It brought together key organisations who support and provide health services such as for mental health and primary care to ensure that local needs were considered in service delivery and commissioning plans.

We would like to thank everyone who has played a part in the scrutiny process over the past 12 months including Members of the Scrutiny Commission and Health Scrutiny Committee, and backbenchers who have served on task and finish groups. The quality of scrutiny is only as good as the effort Members are prepared to devote to the task. We serve our residents by fulfilling our privileged role of challenging those with positions of power within the council and ensuring their accountability. We must act independently and transparently, and be seen to do so by residents, if we are to maintain their trust in scrutiny.

Our thanks also to the officers who have made such an important contribution to the scrutiny process, including Gordon Oliver and Vicky Phoenix. We would also like to thank external guests who have attended meetings to give evidence and submit their organisations' roles in service provision to scrutiny.

Councillor Carolyn Culver
Chairman, Scrutiny Commission

Councillor Martha Vickers
Chairman Health Scrutiny Committee

1. Key Information About Overview and Scrutiny

1.1 Scrutiny's Role

- 1.1.1 The role of scrutiny is to improve the lives of residents through improved public services and ensuring that public funds are spent effectively.
- 1.1.2 Scrutiny committees have the power to look at any issue which affects the area or the area's residents. This gives them a unique legitimacy to examine cross-cutting issues in a way that no other individual or organisation can.
- 1.1.3 Key roles for scrutiny committees include:
 - Holding the Executive and other decision makers to account;
 - Policy development and review;
 - External scrutiny;
 - Performance management.
- 1.1.4 The principles of good scrutiny are:
 - To provide constructive 'critical friend' challenge;
 - To amplify the voice and concerns of the public;
 - To be led by independent people who take responsibility for their role;
 - To drive improvement in public services.

1.2 Operation of Overview and Scrutiny in West Berkshire

- 1.2.1 West Berkshire Council currently has two scrutiny committees – the Scrutiny Commission and the Health Scrutiny Committee.
- 1.2.2 The Scrutiny Commission is responsible for reviewing the decisions, policies and services of West Berkshire Council and, in some cases, those of other organisations and partners. In particular, the Commission acts as the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee, undertaking scrutiny of the Community Safety Partnership.
- 1.2.3 It comprises of nine Members, reflecting the political composition of the local authority. During 2024/25, the Commission was chaired by Councillor Carlyne Culver. Other Members were Councillors Antony Amirtharaj, Dominic Boeck, Jeremy Cottam, Paul Dick, Ross Mackinnon, Justin Pemberton (prior to being appointed to the Executive), Erik Pattenden, Christopher Read, and Martha Vickers (replacing Justin Pemberton).
- 1.2.4 The Scrutiny Commission had five scheduled meetings in 2024/25, plus a special meeting focusing on scrutiny of the council's section 19 report into the winter flooding of 2024, and the work of Thames Water and the Environment Agency.
- 1.2.5 Topics were either considered at a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission or delegated to a time-limited task and finish group, with findings reported back to the Scrutiny Commission.

- 1.2.6 The Health Scrutiny Committee focuses on matters related to the provision of health and public health services within West Berkshire and fulfils the statutory health scrutiny functions.
- 1.2.7 In 2024/25, it comprised of five Members, reflecting the political composition of the local authority. It was chaired by Councillor Martha Vickers. Other Members who sat on the Committee in the last year were Councillors Nick Carter, Owen Jeffrey, Jane Langford, Justin Pemberton (prior to being appointed to the Executive), and Stephanie Steevenson (replacing Justin Pemberton). The Health Scrutiny Committee had four scheduled meetings in 2024/25.
- 1.2.8 West Berkshire Council also has two Members on the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (BOB JHOSC). For 2024/25, these were Councillors Martha Vickers and Stephanie Steevenson. The other Members of the BOB JHOSC are drawn from Buckinghamshire County Council, Oxfordshire County Council, Reading Borough Council and Wokingham Borough Council, with numbers reflecting the population of each local authority, as well as the political composition for each Council. The BOB JHOSC reviews activities relating to the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and the Integrated Care Partnership (ICP). Members attended one meeting in 2024/25.

1.3 Community Involvement

- 1.3.1 The Scrutiny Commission and Health Scrutiny Committee engage with a wide selection of groups, organisations and individuals when undertaking their reviews.
- 1.3.2 Healthwatch West Berkshire is invited to give an update at all Health Scrutiny Committee meetings to provide feedback from patients and service users. Other stakeholders are invited to give evidence in relation to specific reviews, either individually or collectively (e.g., via surveys).
- 1.3.3 All scrutiny meetings are open to the public and residents are welcome to come along and listen to the presentations and debates. Task and Finish Group meetings tend to take place in private, but their reports are made public and are discussed at the relevant scrutiny committee which agrees the recommendations to be referred to the Executive, relevant health body, or other external organisation.
- 1.3.4 Members of the public are able to suggest topics for scrutiny by [completing our online form](#). Members of the public are also invited to comment and inform Members' questions on Health Scrutiny Committee key agenda items to ensure that the voice of the local population is heard.

2. Scrutiny Work Programme

2.1 Complementing the Work of the Executive

- 2.1.1 The Scrutiny Commission seeks to complement the work of the Executive. Liaison is undertaken with Members of the Executive and senior officers to understand their priorities for the coming year and identify any areas where

there are concerns about performance. This helps to highlight areas where scrutiny could add value.

2.2 Pre-Decision Scrutiny

- 2.1.2 Pre-decision scrutiny (or policy development) can be highly beneficial. It reduces the need for call-in by helping back-bench councillors to develop an understanding of relevant issues. It also allows Members to be assured that public engagement has been properly carried out and alternative courses of action considered. The Scrutiny Commission regularly reviews the Executive's Forward Plan to identify where it could get involved in pre-decision scrutiny.

2.3 Post-Decision Scrutiny

- 2.1.3 Call-in is an important mechanism that allows back-bench councillors to hold the Executive to account. It allows for decisions made (but not yet implemented) by the Executive, an individual Executive Member, or an officer with delegated authority, to be put on hold so they can be scrutinised.

2.4 Scrutiny of Partners and Third Parties

- 2.1.4 The Council has statutory duties to undertake scrutiny of services delivered by particular external partners, especially around areas such as crime and disorder, education, and health. These parties are legally required to attend scrutiny meetings, provide the information as requested, and answer questions. In the case of health partners, they must respond to any recommendations made by the Health Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.1.5 Health partners are also required to consult the Health Scrutiny Committee on proposed substantial variations to services that would be likely to affect residents of West Berkshire. A Memorandum of Understanding has been developed with local NHS stakeholders to help inform this process.
- 2.1.6 The Local Government Act (2000) also gives scrutiny committees the power to investigate and report on any matter which affects a local authority's area or its inhabitants. This type of scrutiny brings its own challenges, as most other organisations are not legally obliged to participate in scrutiny reviews.

2.5 Prioritisation

- 2.1.7 Once potential review topics have been identified, it is important to prioritise them into a realistic work programme. The PAPER tool has been developed to help rank competing proposals. This considers the following aspects:
- Public interest
 - Area affected
 - Performance Issues / Local Priority
 - Effectiveness
 - Available Resources

3. Summary of Activity for 2024/25

3.1 Scrutiny Commission

3.1.1 The Scrutiny Commission met six times in 2024/25. Details of the topics considered are set out below.

Date	Topics
17/07/2024	Draft Waste Strategy
	2023/24 Performance Report Year End
	Revenue Financial Outturn 2023/24
	Capital Financing Report Outturn 203/24
	Annual Scrutiny Report 2023/24
24/09/2024	Crime and Disorder Committee - Community Safety Update
	Adult Social Care Complaints Report 2023/24
	Children's Social Care Complaints Report 2023/24
	SEND High Needs Block and Delivering Better Value
	Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group Report
17/10/2024	Winter Flooding 2024 Debrief
	Section 19 Flood Report
	Thames Water and Environment Agency
26/11/2024	Response to Faraday Road Football Ground Queries
	Unregistered & Unregulated Provision in Children's Social Care
	Early Intervention and Family Help
	MTFS and Revenue Budget 2025/26 Planning
11/02/2025	Investment and Borrowing Strategy 2025/26
	Medium Term Financial Strategy
	Capital Strategy, Financial Years 2025/6 to 2034/35
	Revenue Budget 2025/26
	Financial Year 2024/25 Quarter Three Capital Financing Performance Report
	2024/25 Revenue Financial Performance Quarter Three
13/03/2025	Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation
	Draft Waste Management Strategy

3.1.2 The Scrutiny Commission ran two Task and Finish Groups in 2024/25. The Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group concluded its review of the

Council's response to the Covid pandemic and subsequent recovery. Its findings were reported to Scrutiny Commission in September 2024, with recommendations subsequently presented to the Executive in February 2025.

3.1.3 The work of the Sports Hub Task and Finish Group is ongoing.

3.2 Health Scrutiny Committee

3.2.1 The Health Scrutiny Committee met four times in 2024/25. Details of the topics considered are set out in the table below.

Date	Topics
11/06/2024	Healthcare in New Developments Task and Finish Group – Final Report
	Public Health West Berkshire – Annual Report
	Update on the Diabetes Service
23/09/2024	Adult Mental Health
	Suicide Prevention
10/12/2024	Eastfield House Surgery Proposed Relocation
	All Age Continuing Care
	Access to GP Services
11/03/2025	Oral Health and Dentistry
	South Central Ambulance Service
	Social Care Inquests

3.2.2 The Health Scrutiny Committee undertook deep dives via task and finish groups. The Healthcare in New Developments Task and Finish Group reported its findings in June 2024, with recommendations going Executive. The Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Task and Finish Group is due to report to the September 2025 Health Scrutiny Committee.

3.2.3 The Health Scrutiny Committee maintains watching briefs on topics such as the Royal Berkshire Hospital Redevelopment, Hampshire Hospitals new hospital programme (both of which were recently pushed back until at least 2040) and Continuing Healthcare. Members engage with the relevant key partners through informal briefings and other mechanisms. The Committee also responds to notifications of proposed changes to NHS services.

3.3 Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3.3.1 The BOB JHOSC met once in 2024/25 to consider the following topics.

Date	Topics
22/11/2024	Primary Care Update
	Digital and Data Update

4. Scrutiny Highlights for 2024/25

4.1 SEND High Needs Block and Delivering Better Value

4.1.1 The Scrutiny Commission received an update on the High Needs Block (HNB) Deficit in September 2024. At that time the HNB deficit was forecast to reach at least £15M by the end of 2024/25 and £65M by the end of 2028/29. An update was also provided on work being done through the Delivering Better Value (DBV) programme to address the HNB deficit.

4.1.2 Contributory factors for the HNB overspend were identified as:

- The rising level of need
- Increasing complexity of high needs services
- Insufficient places available to meet the needs of increasingly complex cases
- Increased use of independent provision
- Extension of post-16 support to 25 for pupils with special education needs and disabilities (SEND)
- Increasing numbers of pupil exclusions
- NHS services, such as CAMHS, failing to keep up with demand

4.1.3 The DBV programme aims to help local councils and partners improve their support for children and young people with SEND and to ensure these are sustainable. It does this by:

- identifying changes that will make the biggest difference in getting better outcomes
- supporting the council to use their resources in the most efficient way
- providing limited additional grant funding to support this work
- regular monitoring of progress by the Department for Education (DfE) to assess impact.

4.1.4 Questions were asked about the following aspects:

- How the success of the DBV programme would be measured.
- How the Council would reduce the number of costly Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP) while still meeting the needs of service users.
- Where the Council was within the DBV process.

- What lessons had been learned from other local authorities who were further ahead in the DBV programme, and what positive outcomes had been delivered for pupils in these areas.
- The proposed restructure of Children's Services, the future of DBV temporary posts, and how the work of task groups would be embedded in the service.
- How the approach to pupil exclusions could be made more consistent across schools and whether the Council could get involved in exclusions from academies.
- Clarification in relation to changes to pupil funding banding arrangements.
- Reasons as to why educational psychologists employed by the Council were leaving, and what was being done to fill the vacancies.
- Whether the lack of educational psychologists was impacting on the support provided to pupils and expenditure on the HNB.
- Why EHCP annual reviews had not been carried out in all cases.
- When the next Ofsted SEND inspection would be due.

4.1.5 The Scrutiny Commission made the following suggestions:

- Officers should propose a formal programme at the national level to share findings/best practice relating to the DBV programme amongst all participating local authorities.
- Given the importance of the HNB deficit, for the Scrutiny Commission to receive further updates every 6 months, including details of the performance dashboard once this had been developed. (The March 2025 update was postponed until July 2025 because officers were focused on Ofsted inspections.)

4.1.6 Further details of this meeting can be viewed on the Council's website: [West Berkshire Council - Agenda for Scrutiny Commission on Tuesday 24 September 2024, 6.30 pm](#)

4.2 Covid and Recovery Task and Finish Group

4.2.1 The Scrutiny Commission set up a Task and Finish Group to undertake a review of the local response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent recovery and develop recommendations for lessons learned that could be applied to similar future events.

4.2.2 The review focused on five core areas:

- Local resilience and preparedness for the pandemic
- Public health and emergency community support
- Support for local businesses
- Support for the education sector
- Support for the care sector

- 4.2.3 The Task and Finish Group met seven times between October 2023 and June 2024 to hear evidence from expert witnesses in relation to all five aspects of the review. These included Council officers/former officers, and representatives from partner organisations who supported in delivery of the local response.
- 4.2.4 Members were keen to get the perspectives of representatives from organisations who were recipients of the services provided by the Council to understand how they viewed the response. Witnesses were interviewed from the business, education and adult social care sectors.
- 4.2.5 The Task and Finish Group also undertook primary research via online surveys of the local business community, headteachers, and town/parish councils and community groups.
- 4.2.6 Through evaluation of this evidence base and with technical support from officers, Members were able to highlight a number of issues and pinpoint where potential improvements could be made, or where further work would be beneficial.
- 4.2.7 The Task and Finish Group report was presented to the Scrutiny Commission on 24 September 2024. The Scrutiny Commission resolved that the report's recommendations be referred to the Executive for consideration, with minor amendments.
- 4.2.8 Councillor Patrick Clark, the portfolio holder for Adult Social Care and Public Health, provided a formal response to the report's 22 recommendations, at the meeting of the Executive on 13 February 2025. In summary:
- Ten of the recommendations had already been implemented by the date of the meeting
 - Eight recommendations were accepted or partially accepted
 - Four recommendations were rejected due to challenges related to practicality of implementation, uncertainties unique to each pandemic, and decisions being outside of the role of the local authority.
- 4.2.9 Implementation of the report's recommendations will help to ensure that the Council is better prepared for a future pandemic event.

4.3 Budget Scrutiny

- 4.3.1 The Scrutiny Commission received a report in November 2024 on the Medium Term Financial Planning forecasts, which set out the significant level of savings that would be required for the 2025/26 budget. The report also outlined proposals to deliver the required savings, which were the subject of a public consultation exercise between 11 November and 23 December 2024. This allowed Members to have earlier involvement and provided an opportunity to help shape the budget for 2025/26, which was welcomed.
- 4.3.2 Members challenged a number of points in relation to the public consultation exercise, particularly in relation to proposals to switch off street lighting between 12 – 5am, and Downlands Leisure Centre.
- 4.3.3 In addition, there was discussion about:
- The impacts of applying for Exceptional Financial Support

- Risks associated with inflation
 - The impacts of future increases in employers' NI contributions
 - The cost of children's social care
 - The government's approach to the High Needs Block
 - The impacts of proposed cuts to mobile libraries
 - The appropriate balance of short-term vs long-term borrowing
 - The potential impact of additional Council Tax contributions
- 4.3.4 Further details of this meeting can be viewed on the Council's website: [West Berkshire Council - Agenda for Scrutiny Commission on Tuesday 26 November 2024, 6.30 pm](#)
- 4.3.5 There was also an opportunity for detailed scrutiny of the budget in February 2025, before the budget went to Executive and onwards to Council for final approval.
- 4.3.6 This provided Members with a detailed explanation of the process that had been followed in developing the budget and an opportunity to challenge the underlying assumptions and allocations to ensure they were robust.
- 4.3.7 The Scrutiny Committee reviewed the following:
- Investment and Borrowing Strategy 2025/26
 - Medium Term Financial Strategy
 - Capital Strategy, Financial Years 2025/26 to 2034/35
 - Revenue Budget 2025/26
- 4.3.8 Key points arising from the debate, included:
- Concerns about the impacts of the High Needs Block deficit and exploration of measures being used to address this.
 - Contingency plans to avoid breaching the Capital Financing Requirement in 2027/28 if the Dedicated Schools Grant override is withdrawn.
 - Questions related to the Council's investment risk profile and liquidity position.
 - Use of artificial intelligence to reduce costs.
 - Concerns about increasing costs associated with spend on social care and home to school transport.
 - Discussions about how emergency financial support would be used.
 - Reasons for the collection fund deficit.
 - Likely impacts of future changes to the local authorities funding formula.
 - Risks and benefits of the proposal to develop and operate a solar farm.

- Concerns about the Council potentially breaking its own best practice rule whereby annual capital financing costs was forecast to exceed 10% of net revenue.
- 4.3.9 Scrutiny of the budget was welcomed by both officers and Members of the Executive.
- 4.3.10 Further details of this meeting can be viewed on the Council's website: [West Berkshire Council - Agenda for Scrutiny Commission on Tuesday 11 February 2025, 6.30 pm](#)
- 4.4 Children's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Task and Finish Group**
 - 4.4.1 The Health Scrutiny Committee set up a Task and Finish Group to undertake a review of children's mental health and emotional wellbeing.
 - 4.4.2 The scope of the review focussed on three key areas:
 - Assessment of the current needs and provisions in West Berkshire.
 - The system approach to prevention, early intervention and mental health support for young people.
 - Extensive, evidence informed treatment and crisis services.
 - 4.4.3 The Task and Finish Group held five sessions between November 2024 and May 2025 to hear from key stakeholders. These included Council officers and representatives from the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board (BOB ICB), Berkshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, Berkshire Youth, Time to Talk, Swings and Smiles, and local schools.
 - 4.4.4 To understand the local landscape of needs and provisions in West Berkshire, the Task and Finish Group convened witnesses from public health, youth services, counselling services and health. Members were provided with public health data, youth survey results and best practice guidance.
 - 4.4.5 To drill down on the experiences of young people and the provisions available for early help and support, the Task and Finish Group brought together witnesses from a local primary and secondary school, the Local Authority's Mental Health Support Team, and the Emotional Health Academy. Youth services, health, education and voluntary sector colleagues supported the conversation. The evidence shared included overviews of the approach by services and schools, as well as the local opportunities and constraints faced.
 - 4.4.6 Health colleagues shared with Members detailed evidence on the wide-ranging services provided by Berkshire Healthcare for supporting children and young people with more complex mental health needs. Members reviewed detailed reports provided on service delivery, performance, concerns and barriers faced.
 - 4.4.7 During the sessions, partners shared experiences and expertise with Members and colleagues. Through the discussions partners collaborated, shared ideas and learnt from one another. This has helped to build relationships and generate ideas and actions for change.
 - 4.4.8 The Task and Finish Group report will be presented to the Health Scrutiny Committee in September 2025 which will highlight the key findings and recommendations for improvements.

4.5 Eastfield House Surgery

- 4.5.1 The Health Scrutiny Committee were contacted by a number of local residents concerned about the relocation of a local GP surgery, Eastfield House, from its current location near to Newbury town centre to a purpose-built practice on land south of Newbury College.
- 4.5.2 In October 2024, Members of the Health Scrutiny Committee visited Eastfield House Surgery to meet with GPs and the Practice Manager to understand the challenges faced by the surgery at their current location and their plans to relocate.
- 4.5.3 The Health Scrutiny Committee invited representatives from Eastfield House surgery to provide information on their proposed move and to answer Members questions at a public meeting in December 2024. There was discussion on:
- The consultation process and engagement activities with patients, residents and other stakeholders.
 - The constraints and limitations currently faced by Eastfield House surgery.
 - The opportunities arising from a health hub with purpose-built facilities.
 - Concern was raised that the new location may be difficult to access for patients who did not have access to a car and that it would particularly impact people with limited mobility.
- 4.5.4 The Health Scrutiny Committee made the following suggestions:
- Eastfield House to consider the impact of increased travel for patients most affected by the move to the new location.
 - Consultation with patients to continue as the plans progressed.
 - Eastfield House Surgery to continue to engage with the Health Scrutiny Committee.
- 4.5.4 Further details of this meeting can be viewed on the Council's website: [West Berkshire Council - Agenda for the Health Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 10 December 2024 1.30pm](#)
- 4.5.5 This is a notifiable reconfiguration that affects a large number of patients and is a substantial variation in service. The Commissioners (BOB ICB) must therefore formally notify the Health Scrutiny of this change and so this will remain in view of the committee as the plans progress.

4.6 Stakeholder Engagement and Monitoring Outcomes

- 4.6.1 The Health Scrutiny Committee work with service providers and commissioners outside for public meetings to review and monitor progress where concerns have been highlighted. These included Continuing Healthcare, Access to GP services, Dementia services, and South Central Ambulance Service. Oral Health and Dentistry has been highlighted for review in 2026.
- 4.6.2 Of particular note, the Health Scrutiny Committee has kept in view concerns raised by residents that approvals for patients in Berkshire West (which includes West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham) for Continuing Healthcare have

been consistently amongst the lowest in England, and significantly lower than those in other parts of the BOB footprint. NHS Continuing Healthcare (NHS CHC) is a package of care for adults aged 18 or over which is arranged and funded solely by the NHS. During the last year, Members of the Health Scrutiny Committee met representatives from the BOB ICB and Adult Social Care informally outside of Committee meetings. These informal check-ins enabled scrutiny and oversight of the transformation programme and organisational change that the BOB ICB were undergoing. The BOB ICB were also requested to provide evidence and answer Members questions on their progress at a Health Scrutiny Committee in public in December 2024 and June 2025. This will continue to remain under review by the Health Scrutiny Committee.

- 4.6.3 Further details of this meeting can be viewed on the Council's website: [West Berkshire Council - Agenda for the Health Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 10 December 2024 1.30pm](#)

5. Call-In of Decisions

- 5.1 The call-in process is used to hold the Executive to account. The purpose of a call-in is to scrutinise the decisions taken by the Executive, Individual Executive Members, or Senior Officers making delegated decisions.
- 5.2 The process enables further public debate to be held on the subject. The Scrutiny Commission can then consider whether, in their view, the decision was appropriate or if it wishes to make recommendations back to the Executive on potential changes.
- 5.3 No decisions were called-in during 2024/25.