

Scrutiny Annual Report 2019/20





Chair's Foreword

Councillor Bill Wearing

I am delighted to present this report describing the work of Scrutiny during 2019 – 2020. It includes a wide range of information about the work elected Members have undertaken over the past year; and most importantly the impact this has had.

Scrutiny continues to play a vital role in Cumbria County Council by holding decision makers to account; developing and reviewing policy; as well as considering how the Council is delivering on its commitments to the residents of Cumbria.

Over the past year all Scrutiny Advisory Boards and Scrutiny Committees have welcomed the opportunity to work closely with the Cabinet and Senior Officers as they lead the Council. The Boards have sought to focus on the critical issues for the Council and provide constructive input in finding ways to improve outcomes for residents.

A warm thank you goes to the Chairs and Vice Chairs as they continue to bring energy and enthusiasm to their roles. Under their leadership, Boards are working together on cross cutting issues; and consistently providing constructive challenge and recommendations for the Cabinet, Executive Directors and Partners. I would also like to note my thanks to my Vice Chair Cllr Mark Wilson for his support over the past year; and the wide range of officers who support all the Boards with particular thanks to our excellent team of Policy and Scrutiny Officers lead by Helen Blake.

I look forward to another year of working through Scrutiny to help ensure improved outcomes for all customers, residents and businesses within Cumbria.



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Introduction

Purpose of the report

This Annual Report of Cumbria County Council's Scrutiny function looks at the work programme which was undertaken in the year 2019-20 by the Council's Scrutiny Advisory Boards. Within the report, the Chair of each Scrutiny Advisory Board has provided a brief overview of their role in scrutiny, as well as any key successes.

This Annual Report also outlines three case studies that demonstrate the positive impact of scrutiny in improving outcomes for communities within Cumbria. As well as looking to the future of scrutiny and how Cumbria County Council can continue to utilise its role in effective policy and decision-making.

What is Scrutiny?

Ultimately, public scrutiny is the means by which Cumbria County Council's Cabinet can be held to account so as to protect the public interest and to ensure high-quality public services. Scrutiny acts as a 'critical friend' to policy and decision-makers through careful consideration of the effectiveness of both existing and future policies. With each Scrutiny Board being expected to provide a constructive challenge in order to improve decision-making.

What are the different scrutiny boards?

Within Cumbria County Council, it is the Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) that has the overall strategic responsibility for the Overview and Scrutiny function. SMB is supported by three main Scrutiny Advisory Boards, and the Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee. The respective Boards and Committee scrutinise the Council's functions in relation to outcomes and services within the Board's remit. Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee reviews and scrutinises matters relating to the planning, provision and operation of health services in Cumbria. The Scrutiny Boards are:

- Children and Young People Scrutiny Advisory Board
- Adults Scrutiny Advisory Board
- Communities and Place Scrutiny Advisory Board
- Health Scrutiny Committee

What can the Scrutiny Boards do?

Three of the key roles for Scrutiny are policy review, policy development and scrutiny of decisions and performance. In relation to these, Scrutiny Boards may:

- Review and scrutinise the decisions and performance of the Cabinet and/or Committees and Council Officers, both in relation to individual decisions and over time;
- Assist the Council and the Cabinet in the development of its Budget and Policy Framework by in-depth analysis of policy issues;
- Conduct research, community and other consultation in the analysis of policy issues and possible options;
- Review and scrutinise the performance of the Council in relation to its policy objectives, performance targets, and/or particular service areas;
- Question Members of the Cabinet and/or Committees and Executive Directors about their decisions and performance, whether generally in comparison with Service Plans and targets over a period of time, or in relation to particular decisions, initiatives, or projects;
- Review and scrutinise the performance of other public bodies in the area, and invite reports from them by requesting them to address the Scrutiny Board and local people about their activities and performance
- Make recommendations to the Cabinet and/or appropriate Committees and/or Council arising from the outcome of the scrutiny process.

Reflections from the Chairs of Cumbria County Council's Scrutiny Function

Scrutiny Management Board



Councillor Bill Wearing, Chair of Scrutiny Management Board

Over the past year, Scrutiny Management Board has had oversight of a wide ranging work programme across all the Boards focusing on many of the critical issues for local communities, customers and the Council.

I have been pleased to see Boards working together on areas of shared interest and trying new ways of exploring issues as well as continuing to use our well established Task and Finish Group approach.

In terms of particular areas of focus for Scrutiny Management Board, the Board has kept under review the delivery of the Customer Strategy; with a focus on telephony and digital developments through the service centre. Consideration of the Council's approach to commercialism and enterprise has been explored as well as the management of absence through a task and finish group.

Scrutiny Management Board has once again led Scrutiny's engagement in the Strategic Planning Process, facilitating the engagement of non-executive Members in this process, making a formal response to the proposals Cabinet consulted on. We have seen greater early engagement in work that will support the Council to be financially sustainable and we look forward to more proactive engagement from the Executive again over the coming year.

Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Strategic Planning
- Customer Strategy
- Management of Absence
- Scrutiny Development

Scrutiny Management Board has also dealt with two Call-Ins this year which are detailed later in the report.

The Scrutiny self-assessment undertaken last year has led to a development plan which will help ensure we continue to operate a modern, fit for purpose scrutiny function.

Performance Working Group

Scrutiny of Performance has been undertaken through the Performance Working Group (PWG), as a sub-group of Scrutiny Management Board. This provides a dedicated forum for consideration of the delivery of the Council Plan Delivery Plan and allows for in depth discussion with Assistant Directors and Senior Managers where performance is off target.

The Group has welcomed a varied and diverse programme of activity with a particular focus on performance within the Council's People's Directorate. Importantly, Scrutiny Performance Working Group continues to provide value by working closely with the Director of Finance to challenge areas of performance which are creating budgetary pressures for the Council. This includes the numbers of Children Looked After, rates of Delayed Transfers of Care, placements for adults with complex needs and home to school transport for young people with SEND. The group has also explored other areas of Council business such as performance across the Economy & Infrastructure directorate and Cumbria Fire and Rescue Service.

Moving forward, the PWG looks to continue to challenge and understand the drivers of underperformance in recognised areas which impact on financial delivery, whilst considering variances as they emerge. In addition, the PWG will continue to add value by strengthening links with the rest of the Council's scrutiny function to ensure scrutiny activity is informed by performance.



Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- SEND Local Area Inspection
- Safeguarding

Children and Young People's Scrutiny Advisory Board



Councillor Val Tarbitt, Chair of Children and Young People's Scrutiny Advisory Board

I am pleased to have chaired the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Advisory Board during the last year.

Our main focus has been the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Local Area Inspection. This is a joint Inspection between Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission to examine how all organisations in the local area are working to meet the needs of children who need SEND support.

Scrutiny's role was three-fold:

1. To scrutinise preparations for the Inspection (which we did at the May Board).
2. To scrutinise the Inspection Report and the response of the Council and partners (which we did at the September Board).
3. To scrutinise progress in implementing the recommendations across the different Workstreams (which we did in the December Board).

Overall we have been assured that appropriate action is taking place to address the findings of the Inspection and we will continue to scrutinise progress during the following year.

Contextual Safeguarding has been another focus. This builds on the Board's previous work around Child Sexual Exploitation. Contextual Safeguarding is a broader approach that includes: Child Exploitation; Trafficking; County Lines and Missing Children. The key to Contextual Safeguarding shifts the focus of safeguarding from the family and school to young people when they are in Community Settings.

In July, the Board hosted a session on County Lines which was delivered by Chief Superintendent Dean Holden from Cumbria Police.

The event was co-ordinated with the Police and Crime Panel and we invited all Elected Members. A follow up session on Contextual Safeguarding is planned for March 2020.

Following this we will explore how to work with Local Committees to understand and address Contextual Safeguarding issues as part of Area Working. Some changes to the Board: Welcome to Cllr Phil Dew who was appointed Deputy Chair in November 2019 and our new Parent Governor and Diocesan Representatives who joined us this year.



Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Highways customer service
- Highways safety and inspection arrangements
- Waste reuse and UK policy following Brexit
- Cumbria Fire & Rescue Service Inspection
- Social and physical infrastructure

Communities and Place Scrutiny Advisory Board



Councillor Stan Collins, Chair of Communities and Place Scrutiny Advisory Board

The Communities and Place Scrutiny Advisory Board has completed a varied programme of work over the last year, seeing some previous work produce positive outcomes and beginning to explore some important future challenges in Cumbria.

Changes to the Council's services for people using the county's highways has been a focus for the Board over the last 12 months. Members have seen the improvements made to the digital offer for highways customers and have provided feedback to the service from their local area on the future improvements that could be made. We have also closely monitored the planning and early implementation of new safety and inspection arrangements on our highways to ensure they deliver the planned improvements for people travelling on our highways network. Board Members have also provided input into the planning for the Council's new Permit Scheme, and will follow up in the coming months to ensure the new Scheme is implemented and achieves the intended benefits for local communities.

Members were keen to see the report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services on Cumbria's Fire and Rescue Service in December 2019, following their work during 2018 and early 2019 with the Service to strengthen inspection preparation and self-assessment work. The Board is now moving forward with engagement in the planning and delivery of activities to address the areas of improvement and build on the strengths identified by the Inspectorate.

The Board has followed up on implementation of the actions recommended by Task & Finish Groups that Members have commissioned over the last 3 years. The delivery of the Council's Equality Action Plan, which was put in place following recommendations made by the Scrutiny Task & Finish Group on Equality Objectives, has resulted in improvements for customers, communities and the Council's workforce. These include improvements to the quality of equality impact assessments carried out when changes are being made to services, to customer training for staff, a strengthened offer to young people experiencing homelessness, to the gender pay gap for Council staff, and to future housing provision for vulnerable adults.

Measures to increase reuse of goods that would have previously been disposed of at Household Waste Recycling Centres have been put in place following the Board's Waste and Third Sector Task & Finish Group's recommendations to Cabinet last year. Improving and communicating reuse has been a focus of engagement with Members through Local Committees, funding opportunities for communities for activities to increase reuse have been promoted, and work has begun on producing a map of local reuse organisations as a result of the Task & Finish Group's work.

Also this year, the Board has begun to explore some of the major challenges and opportunities facing Cumbria over the next few years. We have begun to understand what the Post-Brexit world might mean for managing waste in the future, and the wider implications for Cumbria as a largely rural county. We have also been kept up to date on the Council's involvement in the 'Britain's Leading Edge' initiative – an advocacy network with other largely rural upper tier authorities.

Looking towards 2020/21, the Board is establishing a Task & Finish Group to explore in more depth how we can ensure that the planned housing growth and other new development in Cumbria is supported by the right physical and social infrastructure. This builds on work we have carried out this year on understanding the Council's approach to specific planning agreements. Continuing to look ahead, the Communities and Place Board's broad remit means that our work programme is evolving quickly with some major topics emerging. These include climate change, new UK policy and the impact of Brexit on the local landscape and economy, and the future of transport in the county.



Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Delayed Transfers of Care
- Adult Social Care Restructure
- Assistive Technology
- Learning Disability and Autism
- Promoting Independence Programme
- Safeguarding Adults

Adults Scrutiny Advisory Board



Councillor Mark Wilson, Chair Adults' Scrutiny Advisory Board

The Adults Scrutiny Board is the bridge between the Council's policies and the Cumbrian public. We bring scrutiny to the areas that interest those most, with a particular focus on Safeguarding issues.

There has been considerable amount of work this year on the effectiveness of the redesigned 'front door' approach to the adult social care service and the adequacy of the proposed staffing structure. The new structure moves us towards single points of contact, with immediate access to an enhanced social worker and an experienced occupational therapist in order to delay, prevent and reduce service use. The Kendal office was operating under this system and I welcomed the chance to visit to see it in operation and speak to the staff operating the 'front door'.

The Delayed Transfer of Care figures continue to be a shared concern between various Health Trusts and CCGs, and as such will continue to be tracked closely by the Board along with the actions being undertaken and planned to bring the figures down.

The Board has welcomed the continuation of the Joint Advisory Group with the Health Scrutiny Committee for a further twelve months. This is a useful mechanism to consider those many issues which cut across our areas of responsibility and prevents duplication.

This Board acknowledges the hard work of staff who have supported its work, thanking those who have moved or left, welcoming those who have joined.





Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Mental Health Services
- Creation of the North Cumbria Integrated Care Trust
- Podiatry Services
- Cancelled Operation
- Digital Records
- Recruitment and Retention

Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee



Councillor Claire Driver, Chair Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee

In the past year the Committee has challenged, questioned and worked with system leaders to ensure health services are effective and safe.

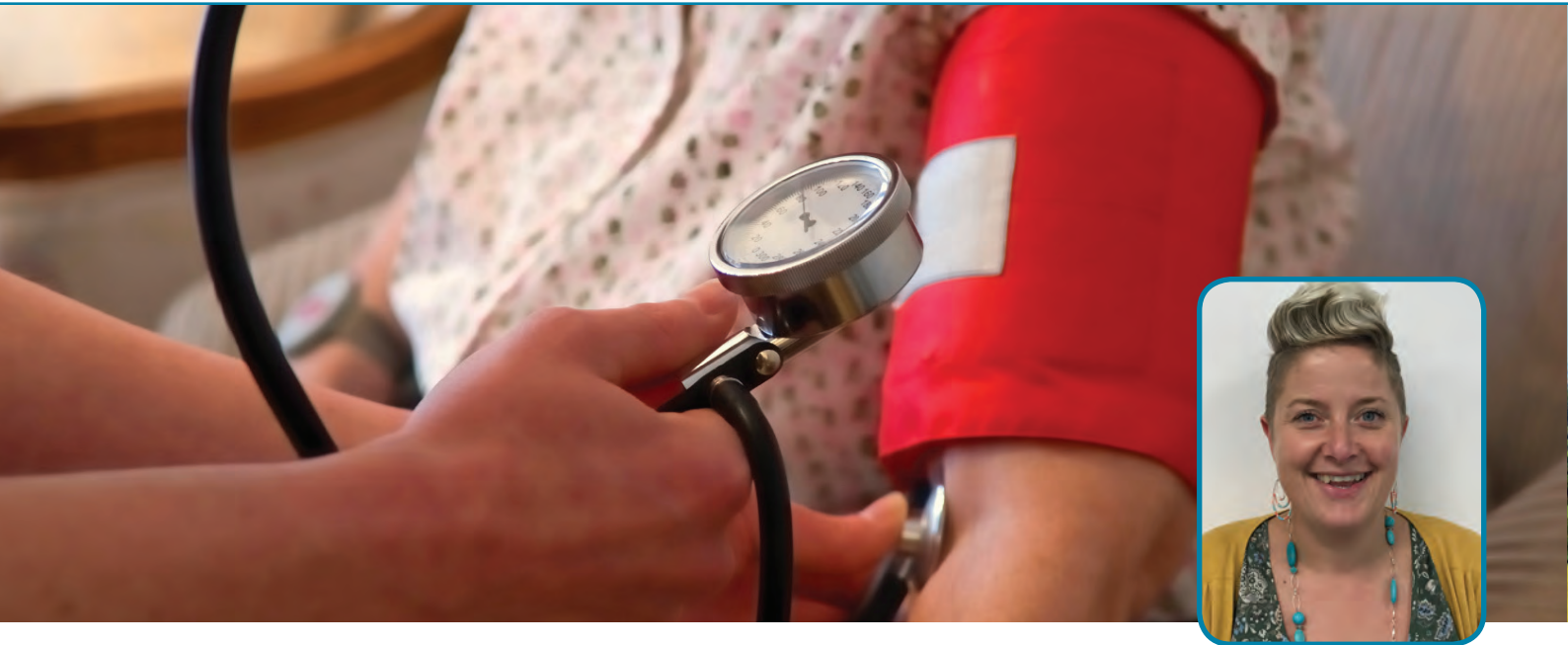
Earlier in 2019 the Committee was heavily involved in the changes to Mental Health Services across both North and South Cumbria, the change of providers will continue to be monitored very closely with any changes to service provision undergoing rigorous scrutiny.

I'm grateful that Members will continue to work together through the Joint Advisory Group between Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee and Adults' Scrutiny Advisory Board to ensure system leaders are working collaboratively.

We have been working with our colleagues in Lancashire, both on the Joint Cumbria and Lancashire Health Scrutiny Committee to consider changes coming through from the Bay Health and Care Partners, and the establishment of a System wide Joint Committee for the whole of Lancashire and South Cumbria which involves colleagues from Blackpool and Blackburn.

I am keen to ensure Cumbria Health Scrutiny Committee continues to play a key role in holding system leaders and partners to account. This will help to ensure that services are of the highest quality for the people of Cumbria.





Cumbria Health and Adults Joint Advisory Group

**Councillor
Claire Driver,
Chair Cumbria
Health Scrutiny**

Following a first successful year, Members agreed to continue to provide joint oversight and alignment of Health and Social Care Integration activity, so that it continues to serve the needs of communities across Cumbria.

In order to achieve this and ensure that the Advisory Group continues to add value, the original aims of the group will continue to be worked towards. These aims are:

- Provide joint investigation by both scrutiny boards into strategic and operational challenges across Health Services and Adult Social Care;
- Probe and hold relevant senior officers across the Health and Adult Social Care system to account over the development and implementation of projects & initiatives that will underpin the integration agenda.

Throughout the past year, the Advisory Group has enjoyed a diverse and stimulating programme of work. This includes consideration of the Integrated Care Partnership Plans for North Cumbria and Morecambe Bay, Cumbria's emerging action plan for Adverse Childhood Experiences and Cumbria's Dementia Profile.

The group has also welcomed discussions with a range of system leaders from across the boundaries of Lancashire and South Cumbria, and North Cumbria and the North East. This engagement has ensured Cumbria's two emerging health and care systems develop based on the needs of communities.

Moving forward, the Chairs and Members of the Advisory Group look forward to their continued collaboration, making recommendations to ensure that the maturing health and care systems carry on working towards the needs of communities across Cumbria.



Councillor Bill Wearing, Chair of LEP Scrutiny Board Committee

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Scrutiny Board

After a number of development sessions with our colleagues in the Local Enterprise Partnership, the Board has had its first round of public meetings this year.

I have been pleased to see Members working together on areas of shared interest and trying new ways of exploring issues, particularly welcoming the contribution made to the Board by our District Members. In terms of particular areas of focus for the Board, I was interested to see the contribution Members were able to make to the development of the People, Employment and Skills Work Programme for Cumbria's Local Industrial Strategy.

Whilst there is an opportunity to look at the delivery of specific projects and schemes being delivered by the LEP, the focus of the Scrutiny Board has been and will remain at a strategic level. I've welcomed the opportunity to speak regularly with the Chief Executive of the LEP, Jo Lappin, to plan the Board's engagement in the LEP plans and strategies. I would therefore like to thank her and Lord Inglewood the Chair of the LEP for their recognition of the valuable input Scrutiny Members can provide.

I am confident that the Board will continue to build on the strong groundwork it has established this year.

Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Cumbria LEP Delivery Plan
- Identification of new LEP Projects
- Priorities of the Local Industrial Strategy



Councillor William McEwan, Chair Cumbria Police and Crime Panel

Other Scrutiny Bodies

Cumbria Police and Crime Panel

The Police and Crime Panel is a joint committee comprising Members from the County Council, all of the District Councils and independent members. The role of the Panel is to hold the Police and Crime Commissioner to account for the delivery of Policing and Community Safety in Cumbria.

The Panel carries out a wide range of activity that has contributed to the delivery of a safe and secure Cumbria. One of the Panels main activities is to scrutinise both the Commissioners budget and his Police and Crime Plan. This Panel provides robust challenge contributing towards the Commissioner delivering a period of efficiencies within the Constabulary which has prioritised services to the people of Cumbria.

The Panel has a number of statutory functions which include:

- Annual Scrutiny of the Police and Crime Commissioner's Precept;
- Dealing with both compliments and complaints about the Police and Crime Commissioner;
- Holding a confirmation hearing on the appointment of the Chief Executive and other senior positions within the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner.

The Panel has continued its own programme of development during the past year. The national PCP conference was held in November and was attended by Members and officers from Cumbria. The conference provides an opportunity to share ideas with other areas and panel Members and officers. A number of important challenges were identified including the ongoing financial pressure facing police forces across the county, the increasing demand around unseen policing such as tackling cyber-crime and counter terrorism.

The Police and Crime Panel also produced its first ever Annual Report in 2019 which offered an opportunity to bring together the years achievements in one place for the first time. This document is available to members of the public as well as partner organisations. The Panel has focussed on a number of areas over the past 12 months including emerging issues for the Commissioner such as serious and organised crime and county lines. These will continue to be challenging areas for policing over the coming year.

Key areas of focus during 2019/20

- Serious and Organised Crime and County Lines
- Cyber and Digital Crime
- Development of the Police and Crime Commissioner's priorities within the new Police and Crime

The Panel is aware of the significant challenges facing the Commissioner going forward. Policing will need to adapt and evolve to these challenges. The Panel will continue to work closely with the Commissioner as the Cumbria Police and Crime Plan starts to be refreshed during 2020.

Case Studies

Whilst Scrutiny is regularly engaged in the overview and challenge it delivers through Advisory Boards and Committees, Members also have the opportunity to share their insight on thematic or specialist issues which may have a particular impact on the Council's strategic or operational approach.

A number of case studies are provided in this report to illustrate the type of work Scrutiny is involved in.



Children and Young People's Scrutiny Board – Children and Young People with Autism

The Autism Champions Group was set up on the initiative of Elected Members who have life experience of family members with autism. They had taken part in a Scrutiny Task and Finish Group during 2015, which had recommended that Elected Members in Local Committees champion the needs of people with autism.

This case study helps to demonstrate the positive work that has happened as a result of Scrutiny's input.

What has been the impact for Cumbria?

Members found a number of challenges relating to the experience of people with autism. These ranged from length of time for an assessment, community awareness, awareness in workplaces and educational institutions.

How has Scrutiny responded?

Scrutiny recommended that Local Committees have Autism champions. With the support of Area Teams the champions would focus on how to raise awareness and take action in their local area to address the issues that scrutiny found.

The Champions now meet as a group with officer support and have been developing a programme of work within their communities but also internally within the Council as an employer.

The groups' achievements include:

1. Developed resources within libraries to make them more accessible for people with autism. This includes purchase of specialist materials, stock, putting on groups, sensory areas and other changes to the way libraries operate.
2. Promoted autism awareness through Members leading awareness raising in the community, and through partnership working in local areas to make high streets more autism friendly;
3. Worked with People Management to produce the Council's first neurodiversity policy for staff and e-learning to support it. This raises awareness of neurodiversity and provides guidance to managers on how to make reasonable adjustments for staff with autism, dyslexia and a range of other neurodiversity conditions.

Comment on impact of the group from a Community Development Worker:

“Having the Member Champions group has provided a greater level of steer and direction for the work in communities, and has also brought out wider information such as the Self-Assessment and links into the Autism and Learning Disability Partnership Board. Whilst area working is necessary to respond to the varying needs in communities around Cumbria, all too often we can work alone and without learning and appreciation of good practice. The Members appear to value the group too, but I’m conscious that we work on community and general awareness, but being a Champion does open Members to difficult issues such as special school place allocations. Our future agendas may need to include this type of briefing and support.”

Comment from employee in People Management in developing the Neurodiversity Guidance:

“Having the board has been incredibly helpful to me. As I do not have any training or professional background on Autism/Neurodiversity being able to access a group (which is filled with individuals who are not only knowledgeable and educated but also committed to making improvements) who I am able to take ideas and suggestions to was essential, they helped me to shape the guidance and ensure we’re getting the best support in place for our workforce. This will be extremely useful going forward as we continue to develop our resourcing strategies and look to be more accessible as an employer.”

Since then...

The next steps for the Member Champions will be to inform the Council's 2020-24 Equality Plan and Equality Objectives to set out their priorities for autism and neurodiversity.





Police and Crime Panel – Serious Violent Crime and County Lines

What are County Lines?

Over the past few years, criminal networks have been using ‘county lines’ as a means of supplying class A drugs throughout the country. They use the experience gained within the bigger cities to enter rural communities in search of new customers and for places to store drugs. County lines have also been linked to an increase in serious violence due to the fact that the more experienced criminal networks use their violent reputations to intimidate and dominate existing drug networks. This has resulted in police in rural areas now having to deal with turf wars, homicides and serious violence.

What is the impact for Cumbria?

Intelligence identifies that victims of county lines are being exported into rural Cumbrian towns in order to deal drugs on behalf of the bigger criminal networks in urban cities. They are trafficked into the county, accommodated with vulnerable drug users, and forced to deal drugs from their property. The threat then posed for the local drug user is that they are unaware of the true identity of their supplier, and the level of violence they will impose if the user becomes indebted to them.

What did Scrutiny do?

Given the devastating impact that county lines and serious violence can have on individuals, families and communities, the Police and Crime Commissioner now considers it a priority within his Police and Crime Plan. Thus, the Police and Crime Panel (PCP) have a duty to make assurances that the Commissioner is addressing the issues accordingly. At the July 2019 Police and Crime Panel meeting, Members led a deep dive session into the current actions and future plans to address the county lines problem in Cumbria. Panel provided challenge to the Commissioner on the effectiveness of the actions taken to tackle the rising threat posed by county lines and serious violence within Cumbria and looked at ways that this could be fed into the development of the next Police and Crime Plan.

In order to tackle serious crime and reduce offending, funds were made available that assist in setting up projects like the Wellbeing Hub at Egerton Court in Barrow. The Wellbeing Hub, which was established in January 2019, offers support to those who are recovering from drug and alcohol addiction through the use of therapy, employment training and social activities. The latest data shows how strong the partnership is between the Wellbeing Hub and Egerton Court, and the positive impact it is having on its residents:

- From 30th January 2019 to May 29th 2019, 129 residents received support, 35 of which were engaging with support services for the first time;
- The number of repeat victims who contacted the police had fallen;
- From November 2018 to January 2019, the Constabulary received 28 calls for service compared to 84 during November 2017 to January 2018;
- The Constabulary works with the Wellbeing Hub to ensure any repeat victims are supported as well as ensuring that the behaviour of those who offend is managed and controlled.

The Wellbeing Hub has been a particular success within Cumbria and is an effective model in demonstrating how the police are working to reduce the threat of county lines and serious crime.

The Panel agreed that the work to tackle county lines was and would continue to be a priority for the police force. The Panel welcomed the level of engagement and resource put to this agenda and set out that progress would continue to be monitored.

Given that a number of those individuals affected by county lines are children and young people, Children's Scrutiny Board asked for the Commissioner to share this information with other Members so that it can also be considered from a young people's perspective.

Members of both the Police and Crime Panel and the Children's Scrutiny Board requested that further engagement and awareness sessions be held around the county. In response, the Commissioner hosted a session outlining the key issues that police and partners are dealing with in Cumbria.

Since then...

- The Commissioner's office has provided an awareness raising event for all Members which highlighted the prevalence of serious crime and county lines within Cumbria. Thus allowing the issue to be considered from different angles;
- The Local Government Association has carried out a peer review into Contextual Safeguarding in Cumbria, which considers the issues surrounding serious crime and county lines from a young people's perspective – including human trafficking and child exploitation;
- The Children's Scrutiny Board are planning to hold another awareness raising event for all Members, this time focusing on Contextual Safeguarding.

It is clear that tackling serious crime and county lines has been identified as a priority within Cumbria, and given the impact it has on a diverse range of people, this case study highlights how the different scrutiny boards can work together on a single issue that cuts across a number of different priorities.





Scrutiny Management Board – Absence Management of Council Staff

Why is absence management important?

Nationally, there has been a move towards acknowledging that organisations with positive, dynamic and supportive cultures are more likely to have healthier, happier staff with lower rates of absence, turnover and more commitment to their work. This has coincided with a greater recognition of the importance of mental health, normalising conversations about mental health issues and workplaces putting in place initiatives like mental health first aid training.

Cumbria County Council has been putting in place health and wellbeing initiatives that focus on both physical and mental health. Activities include establishing workplace wellbeing champions, a voluntary role taken on by staff to help support initiatives like the Better Health at Work Award, Time to Change and Mental Health First Aid Awareness training. There are currently over 100 staff carrying out the various volunteer roles across the organisation.

There have been various different campaigns that have ran throughout the year, including the annual flu vaccination campaign, a campaign focusing on the menopause, and workplace health and wellbeing days.

What did Scrutiny do?

Scrutiny Management Board (SMB) has been monitoring County Council staff absence levels at regular intervals over the last few months. However, despite the range of health and wellbeing initiatives being put in place across the organisation, some service areas remained a particular concern. As a result, a Task and Finish Group held a one-day session on staff absence management in November 2019.

The Task and Finish session enabled Members to carry out more detailed deep dive activity into those service areas with the highest levels of absence – to look at them from the perspective of senior managers, operational managers and employees. This included a focus on organisational development, on culture, capacity and the confidence of managers.

Based on the current absence data, Members agreed to hear from the Assistant Directors from Customer and Community Services, Integration and Partnerships, Adults and Provider Services about their action plans for managing absence. This included deep dives into the data on absence for their areas of responsibility, including the causes and numbers of absences for 2018/19, demographic factors and the key issues in the relevant service areas.

Members also considered a range of information in advance and during the session. This included corporate and service area specific data and trends, benchmarking information, examples of internal and external good practice, and pieces of national research on approaches to absence management.

This led to findings and five recommendations based on ensuring health and wellbeing conversations are happening across the organisation at all levels, with a particular focus on reviewing the mental health support available. There was also an emphasis on streamlining administration processes for managers to make managing absence as simple as possible, and that the People Management team are fully resourced to address the challenges of absence management.

Since then...

Cabinet accepted all five recommendations from the group at their meeting in January 2020, and the Scrutiny Management Board will receive an update in six months' time as to how the absence management work is progressing.

Overview of Activity

Scrutiny's Engagement in Strategic Planning

Scrutiny's engagement in the 2020/21 Strategic Planning process has been an ongoing dialogue which has focused around two sessions. The first of which took place on the 29th July 2019 at which Members had the opportunity to question the Chief Executive and Director of Finance about the challenges facing the Council and direction of travel required.

The second session took place on the 26th November 2019. Members received an update from the Chief Executive, Executive Director for Corporate Customer and Community Services and the Director of Finance on the policy and financial context for the council. The Director of Finance set out the proposals for delivering a balanced budget for 2020/21 as presented to Cabinet earlier in November and as reflected in the Budget Consultation.

On the 27th November, Scrutiny Management Board agreed at their meeting three specific recommendations for Cabinet:

1. To provide assurance that opportunities will continue to be offered for pre-scrutiny and non-executive input with proposals as they emerge through the year, prior to decisions being taken.
2. To continue to work together with partners to lobby on behalf of Cumbria in the run up to the 2020 spending review.
3. To receive a review of the schemes in the Enterprise Framework particularly those identified by Members, with an assessment of their success, this then to be communicated to the Council as a whole.

All three of these recommendations were accepted by Cabinet at the December 2019 meeting.

Call In

In 2019-20 SMB received two Call-Ins. The first Call-In was about the decision to award the contracts for the 0-19 Services and the second was about the decision to close The Abbey care home in Staveley.

The purpose of a Call-In is for Members to challenge key decisions made by Cabinet or other Council decision making bodies. The process includes a clarification meeting to see if it is possible to settle the issues without having to go to a full Call-In. If a full Call-In meeting is held by Scrutiny Management Board, they can only decide on whether or not to refer the decision back to Cabinet.

The Call-In around the 0-19 services was resolved at the clarification meeting. The Call-In Members were satisfied that the Council had acted legally and would not be able to change its decision if referred back to Cabinet. The Members also had reassurances that the Council would work with communities in West Cumbria during the changeover period to a new provider. Finally it was agreed that there would be a lessons learnt task and finish group in Spring 2020. This is a good example of the clarification meeting being a vital stage in the process.

The Call-In around The Abbey resulted in the decision being referred to Cabinet, which reaffirmed the previous decision.

Going Forward: The Scrutiny Development Plan

The Scrutiny Development Plan draws on key themes from the scrutiny self-assessment, headlines from research undertaken into Scrutiny practice in other authorities, and the new national guidance. Key planned activities include: raising the profile of Scrutiny to help illustrate the value it brings; making the most of the expertise of Scrutiny members and providing opportunities for development through a training programme; changing the way work is resourced and planned through a more proactive approach; and improving stakeholder engagement with customers, communities, residents, partners, third sector organisations and other senior officers internally.

Also by enhancing the relationship between the Audit & Assurance Committee, Scrutiny Management Board and the Performance Working Group, this will help to promote collaboration and improve links with the Council Plan Delivery Plan.

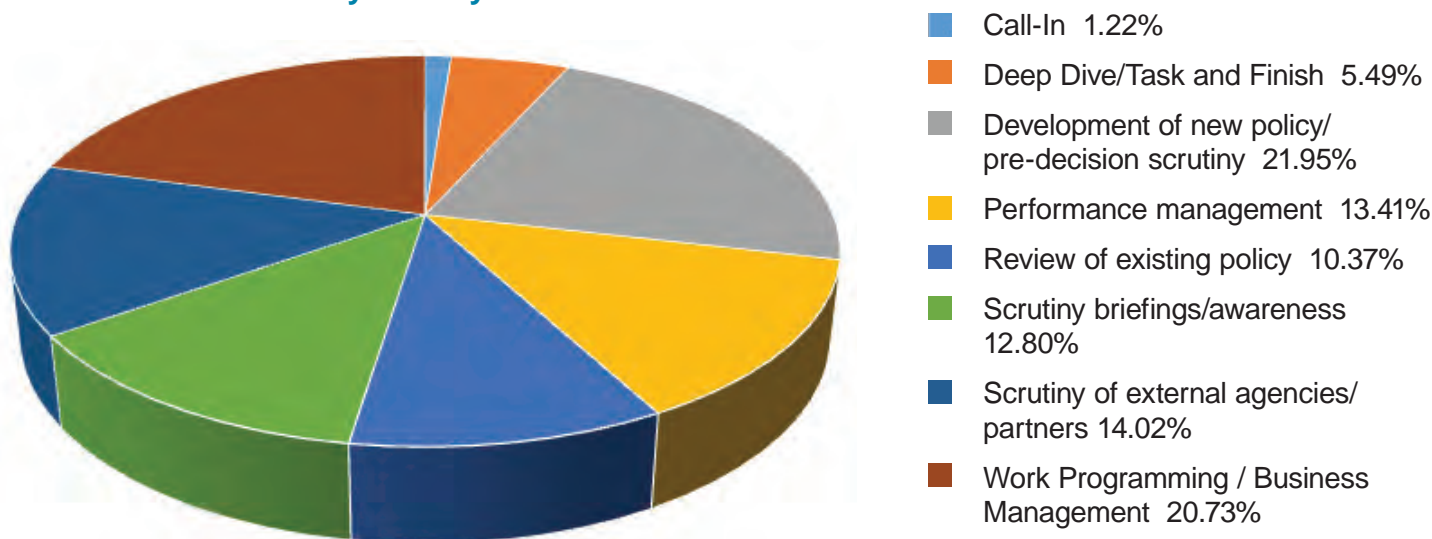
We have begun work on how to utilise the Council’s Social Media platforms and other communication channels to raise Scrutiny’s profile, we will use some of the case studies in this report as the basis for this initially. Individual Boards will also consider how their reports are launched for an audience wider than the Council.

Scrutiny Chairs have begun discussions with Members of their Board/Committee to understand how their knowledge and connections can contribute, in particular where Members sit on other bodies & Governing Boards and how this can be fed into planning the work programme.

Scrutiny Members are keen to have early input into the development of Council Policy and effective Scrutiny at a Strategic level. To enable this focus, work has been undertaken to understand the balance of activity by Scrutiny Boards to allow reflection on which areas should be a priority over the coming months.

The following chart illustrates the nature of Scrutiny Activity across all Scrutiny Boards including the Performance Working Group and Joint Health & Adults Advisory Group:

Breakdown of Scrutiny Activity 2019/20



As the chart shows above, a lot of the work Scrutiny undertakes includes the development of new policy / pre-decision scrutiny, as well as business and performance management, scrutiny of external agencies and partners as well as reviewing existing policy.

Going forward, the Scrutiny Development Plan will help to support Members to continue to prioritise the needs of the community throughout all Scrutiny activity

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