

Overview and Scrutiny Commission Annual Report 2023-2024

Foreword from the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission



Overview and Scrutiny Commission Chair: Councillor Georgia Pickering

I am delighted to present Bracknell Forest Council's Annual Scrutiny Report 2023-2024. This year has seen a period of huge change for the scrutiny function within Bracknell Forest, as well as the whole Council.

The local election in 2023 saw a very different political makeup returned to the Council which has meant many adjustments. For those of us taking on the scrutiny mantle it has meant lots of training on how to carry out our scrutiny duties; working together across political party boundaries to create a new four-year work plan and embracing new challenges.

Thematic scrutiny reviews have proved successful in the past, so I wanted to retain the essence of how scrutiny had been carried out over the past four years, but also review how scrutiny can evolve. In particular, I would like to involve more residents in scrutiny over the next three years.

2023-2024

The Commission met nine times this year. As members of the Council we attended numerous training sessions and specific ones on scrutiny. These sessions proved crucial as Overview and Scrutiny plays a vital role in performance management at the Council by linking the planning and delivery of services to the experiences of, and impact upon, local people. Understanding how to use the data presented to us is essential to making sure we get scrutiny right.

Key data

Until the end of April 2024 the O&S Commission has been holding the Executive to account against the old Council themes. At the end of each quarter the Chief Executive provides a high-level summary report of performance across all services to the Executive, known as the Corporate Performance Overview Report (CPOR) to identify achievements, as well as areas of concern. This year, for the first time, the O&S Commission received the CPOR prior to the Executive and were able to make recommendations to the Executive about the areas where they should focus their attention. A few of the highlights during the past year are set out below.

Community Safety

In November the Commission considered the performance of the Community Safety Partnership and the priorities in the Community Safety Plan for the coming year.

Budget

In January the Commission considered the council's draft budget proposals for 2023/24. They heard that more residents than ever had engaged with the public consultation and considered their responses before making recommendations to the Executive.

Health

In February, witnesses from Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust and NHS Frimley Integrated Care Board (ICB) provided an update on the progress being made in relation to rebuilding Frimley Park Hospital.

The Commission recommended to Council that a Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Commission (JHOSC) be set up in partnership with two other local authorities being consulted - Surrey County Council and Hampshire County Council. It also recommended Councillors Egglestone and Virgo be the representatives on the JHOSC and promote the voice of Bracknell Forest residents at these meetings.

Parent Governor Representation

The Commission benefited from an experienced parent governor representative being part of our number, Victoria Stageman, who, as well as attending Commission meetings, is Chair of the Bracknell Parent Carer Forum. We will also be seeking a new secondary school representative as it is important to us that the voices of parents are heard in scrutiny.



Overview & Scrutiny Commission February 2024

Residents

O&S benefits from a wide range of experience and viewpoints. The Commission welcomes input from residents and local organisations via its public participation scheme. Panel reviews have involved a variety of residents and service providers in their reviews, but I would like to see an increased impetus placed on publicity and attracting the public to participate in Commission meetings. I plan to make this a feature next term to attract broader opinions on the council's performance. We meet in the Council Chamber which is accessible to the public.

We have a public participation scheme so please follow this link if you wish to get involved: [Get involved in overview and scrutiny | Bracknell Forest Council \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](https://bracknell-forest.gov.uk/get-involved-in-overview-and-scrutiny)

Thankyou!

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers and staff, from all organisations who have maintained a high level of support for our scrutiny work this year. My thanks in particular to Councillor Welch, Vice Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission, who has ably assisted me in my new role.

Introduction from Kevin Gibbs, Executive Director: Communities, acting as Statutory Scrutiny Officer

The role of Overview and Scrutiny



Kevin Gibbs, Statutory Scrutiny Officer

The principal power of Overview and Scrutiny is to influence the policies and decisions made by the council and other organisations involved in delivering public services.

The Commission and its Panels gather evidence on issues affecting local people and makes recommendations based on its findings.

Overview and Scrutiny is an essential element of the governance of the council. Good governance is achieved by having efficient and effective decision-making processes and systems. The use of appropriate policies and accountability frameworks enable councillors to focus on strategic rather than operational issues.

Governance failures can happen at service level, within a function, a duty or within the culture itself. In terms of lessons from other councils that have had problems, detailed in their public interest reports, the lack of ethical standards often leads to

Kevin Gibbs corporate failures of governance. In addition, there is a common theme of a lack of understanding and appreciation of why governance matters and how scrutiny can address this issue. Overview and Scrutiny Commission, with its statutory officers are a key function in maintaining the good governance of the council.

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission, therefore, has two roles in ensuring that the council has good governance. Firstly, the Commission has statutory powers to scrutinise decisions the Executive is planning to take, those it plans to implement, and those that have already been taken/implemented. This is primarily via the annual consultation on the proposed budget of the council. Also, in reviewing the performance of the council, via quarterly reviews of the council's Council Plan Overview Report (CPOR). Secondly, by undertaking reviews into policy, in public, facilitating a variety of stakeholders to provide a rich set of evidence for the topic. This evidence serving as the foundation for recommendations to decision makers on developing new policies and making improvements in policies already implemented.

This report feeds into the overall assurance statement, issued by the council and captured in the council's Annual Governance Statement (ensuring openness and comprehensive stakeholder engagement), prepared by the council's Monitoring Officer.

Overview and Scrutiny – Statutory Scrutiny Officer assurance to council:

The statutory Scrutiny Officer is required to give assurance to the council that proper arrangements are in place for the function and to certify this fact annually. This report fulfils this requirement.

Kevin Gibbs – Executive Director of Communities (**Acting as Statutory Scrutiny officer**)

The role of Statutory Scrutiny Officer

The role of a **Statutory Scrutiny Officer** is defined in s9FB of the Local Government Act 2000 (having been incorporated into that Act by the Localism Act 2011). The regulations state that this statutory officer will:

- **Promote the Overview and Scrutiny Role:** The statutory scrutiny officer is responsible for promoting the role of the authority's overview and scrutiny committee(s). This involves advocating for the importance of scrutiny within the council.
- **Support Overview and Scrutiny Committees:** The officer provides support to overview and scrutiny committees. This includes assisting with their functioning organising meetings and ensuring effective communication.
- **Advise Officers and Members:** The statutory scrutiny officer offers advice to both council officers and members regarding overview and scrutiny committees. They help clarify procedures, legal requirements, and best practices.

Additionally, councils in both England and Wales designate a Monitoring Officer responsible for ensuring legal compliance within the council. These statutory officers collectively contribute to good governance and protect the scrutiny function within local authorities. If questions or concerns arise about scrutiny operations, they play a crucial role in interpreting the law and resolving issues.

Statutory Scrutiny Officer Report 2023-24

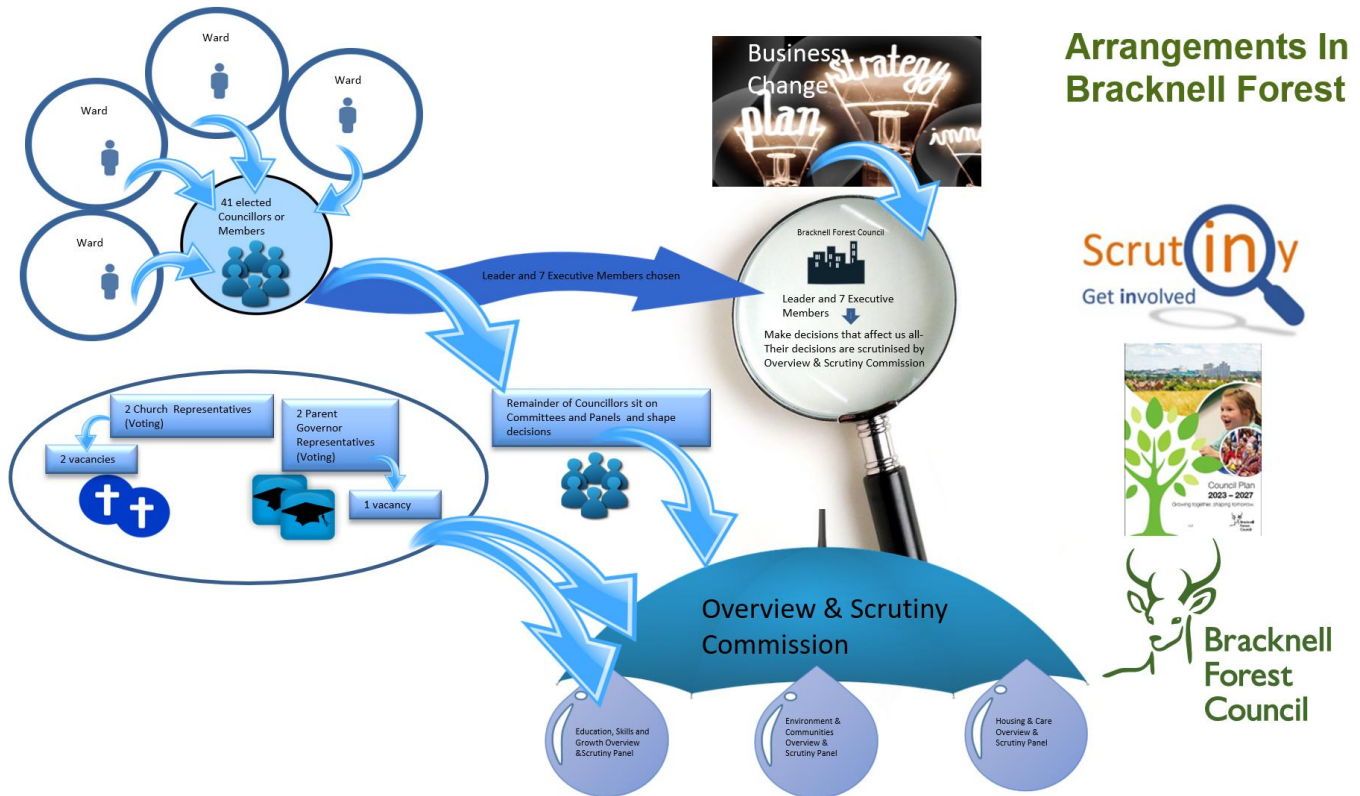
As the Statutory Scrutiny Officer my focus this year was to make sure:

- The resources provided to scrutiny were sufficient to undertake the function.
- Training for Members of the Commission and its Panels was of a high quality and integrated into councillors' overall training and induction programme.
- That the positive relationship between scrutiny and the Executive remained strong, driven by a clear understanding of the value of scrutiny's role and its independent responsibilities.
- Ensuring that the function had timely access to appropriate, high-quality information.
- Good cross-party relationships between scrutiny members.

This municipal year, following the borough elections, the priority for the function was managing the transition. All Members holding Panel Chair responsibility, within the O&S Commission, were new to the role of Commissioner. This was also true of the Commission Chair and Vice Chair. However, as we end the year, the key activities required to meet our obligations were completed.




There were two completed Panel reports that, had been approved by the last Commission but hadn't been presented to the Executive. These were the reviews into the council's [Enforcement Strategy](#) (Link to Environment and Communities Panel Enforcement Strategy) and a review of [Child Criminal Exploitation](#) (Link to Education, Skills and Growth Child Criminal Exploitation Strategy). These were re-approved this year by the Commission and presented to the Executive on the 17 October 2023. The Executive noted both reports and referred the recommendations to the Executive Members for Culture, Delivery and Public Protection and Children, Young People and Learning, for taking forward.

As a transition year, the Commission's four-year work programme could only be concluded once the Council had adopted a new Council Plan. The Council plan was agreed at Council on the 29 November 2023. Therefore, the work programme agreed by the Commission covers the remaining three years of the administrative term.



Commission work programme report 2023-27

The Commission adopted its work programme on 29 February 2024. A number of candidate review topics were discussed, and the O&S Commission agreed the O&S Panels would be commissioned to carry out the following scrutiny reviews:

The three Council priorities are:			
 <p>Engaged and healthy communities</p> <p>Our role is to help create opportunities where people can succeed, be happy and feel safe.</p> <p>Explore our community priorities</p>		 <p>Thriving and connected economy</p> <p>The local economy includes many different aspects, such as businesses, jobs, skills, accommodation, and services.</p> <p>Explore our economic priorities</p>	
 <p>Green and sustainable environment</p> <p>Our environment includes everything around us, our parks, our cycleways and our road networks.</p> <p>Explore our environmental priorities</p>			
Education, Skills and Growth Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transition Skills Gap Looked After Children (LAC) 		Health and Care Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexual Health Access to Brant's Bridge Urgent Care Centre Sufficiency and availability of services within the Adult Social Care marketplace. 	
Environment and Communities Panel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thames Water Scrutiny Review Housing TBC 			

The Overview and Scrutiny Commission, commissions the panel's reviews and acts as sponsor and quality assurance, to the work product. The Commission also holds capacity for both additional panel reviews and reviews that it conducts itself, such as the review that led to the commissioning of the [Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee \(JHOSC\)](#). The Commission holds a strategic reserve capacity for new and emerging issues which may develop throughout the term.

The role of the Commission in overseeing workloads, managing the programme and ensuring that the staff resources are used productively, has been at the core of the effectiveness of the work programme. The thematic structure of the panels, gives them the remit to investigate any issue which affects the local area or the area's inhabitants. However, effective scrutiny work relies on scrutiny's 'soft' influencing power, as it has no formal power to compel anyone to make changes. Therefore, reviews must not only keep in mind scrutiny's legal powers but also about how to build a positive working relationship with those who are the subject of scrutiny's recommendations.

The new themes in the council plan can be found at [Council Plan 2023 to 2027 | Bracknell Forest Council \(bracknell-forest.gov.uk\)](#) key objectives for 2023-2027.

Work programme 2024-2025

2024-25	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	January	February	March	April
Commission	23 - CPOR - Annual report - Panel Chair Feedback ES&G SEND update		4 - H&C Sexual Health Report - Panel Chair Feedback JHOSC update Exec Member update - Finance & Business Change + Adult services, Health and Housing + Culture, Delivery and	29 - CPOR - Fire service/ ambulance? - Panel Chair Feedback - ES&G SEND update		17 - LGSCO Annual Complaints Report E&C Review of old reviews report JH&C HOSC update Exec Member update - Economic Devel & Regen + Environment & Communities + CYP & Learning	14 - Draft Budget - Panel Chair Feedback - ES&G SEND update Exec Member update - Leader	5 - CPOR - Police & Crime Commission - Panel Chair Feedback JH&C HOSC update	9 - Budget meeting	27 - CPOR - Strategic Health - Panel Chair Feedback ES&G - Transition review report - ES&G SEND update		

Statutory Guidance on Overview and Scrutiny in Local and Combined Authorities

The role that Overview and Scrutiny can play in holding an authority's decision-makers to account makes it fundamentally important to the successful functioning of local democracy. Effective scrutiny helps secure the efficient delivery of public services and drives improvements within the authority itself. Conversely, poor scrutiny can be indicative of wider governance, leadership and service failure.

It is vital that councils know the purpose of scrutiny, what effective scrutiny looks like, how to conduct it and the benefits it can bring. This guidance aims to increase understanding in all four areas (**Minister for Local Government - 2019**)

The requirement for local authorities in England to establish overview and scrutiny committees is set out in [sections 9F to 9FI of the Local Government Act 2000](#) as amended by the Localism Act 2011. The Statutory guidance "[Overview and scrutiny: statutory guidance for councils and combined authorities](#)", sets out that as each council is a "democratically-elected body", it is for each council to determine how it sets out its arrangements to meet the requirement of the Act. Therefore, in line with this guidance, the arrangements in Bracknell Forest Council were revised in 2019, taking on board the feedback from the council's own commissioned review of its arrangements, and the issuing of the statutory guidance (May 2019).

Overview and scrutiny at Bracknell Forest Council

The current Overview and Scrutiny structure, which has an overarching O&S Commission and three O&S panels, has served the council well for the last five years. By aligning activity areas with strategic themes, O&S has focussed on topics that closely supported the council's objectives. Following a review of the Council's themes each panel is responsible for one theme from the Council Plan.

These arrangements recognise that scrutiny is most effective when operating the task and finish group model rather than as sub-committees of the Commission. Panels are able to work flexibly to carry out focussed enquiries and deep dive reviews across a wide range of topics in support of the council's objectives. Panels meet as required to deliver the work programme rather than on a pre-agreed fixed cycle.

The format is also flexible, and activities range from a single scrutiny panel meeting on an issue to a three - six month focussed review. In addition to the core panel membership, all non-Executive councillors can take part in any review work. This enables the O&S function to tap into the skills and knowledge of councillors across a wide variety of topics. It also means that councillors who need to balance external responsibilities can be involved effectively based on their availability, interests, and knowledge.

The importance of non-Executive councillors' involvement in policy development and pre-decision input and scrutiny is recognised by this approach, ensuring that scrutiny not only provides challenge but actively contributes to the work of the council.

Overview and Scrutiny Commission

Membership:

Councillor Pickering (Chair), Councillor Welch (Vice-chair)

Councillors Barnard, C Eberle, Egglestone, M Forster, Haffeggee, McKenzie-Boyle, McLean, Thompson, Watts, Webb

Responsibilities:

- Create a focussed work programme to ensure scrutiny activity contributes effectively to the Council Plan objectives
- Continually manage the work programme to ensure the best use of resources, accommodating any necessary extensions or urgent short-term issues
- Act as sponsor for panels as they undertake deep dive reviews or support policy development
- Consider the recommendations from panels' scrutiny activity and, where they are supported, refer to the appropriate decision-maker
- Scrutinise the council's budget proposals
- Hold the Executive to account for council performance according to the Corporate Performance Overview Report
- Carry out the council's crime and disorder responsibilities and strategic health responsibilities.
- Strategic theme: Value for money
- Manage call in (the process to scrutinise Executive decisions).
- Review the policy framework.

Education, Skills and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Panel	
Panel membership: Councillor C Thompson (Chair), Councillor Watts (Vice-chair) Councillors Barnard, Ejaz, Gaw, Penfold, Smith, Webb Parent governor representatives (voting): Victoria Hill	Strategic themes: Education, skills and economic resilience

Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel	
Panel membership: Councillor C Eberle (Chair), Councillor M Forster (Vice-chair) Councillors Brown, Cochrane, Ejaz, Haffeggee, Hayes, McKenzie-Boyle, O'Regan, Watts	Strategic themes: Communities and protecting and enhancing our environment

Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel	
Panel membership: Councillor Egglestone (Chair), Councillor Welch (Vice-chair) Councillors Cochrane, Collings, S Forster, Harrison, Watts, Virgo, Webb	Strategic themes: Caring for you and your family

O&S activities are supported by officers from the Overview & Scrutiny Team within the wider Democratic and Registration Services function, providing 56 hours of support per week.

Team Lead: Overview & Scrutiny	0.68 FTE
Overview & Scrutiny Officer	0.68 FTE
Head of Scrutiny & Democratic Services	0.3 FTE



Ann Moore Assistant Director: Democratic & Registration Services

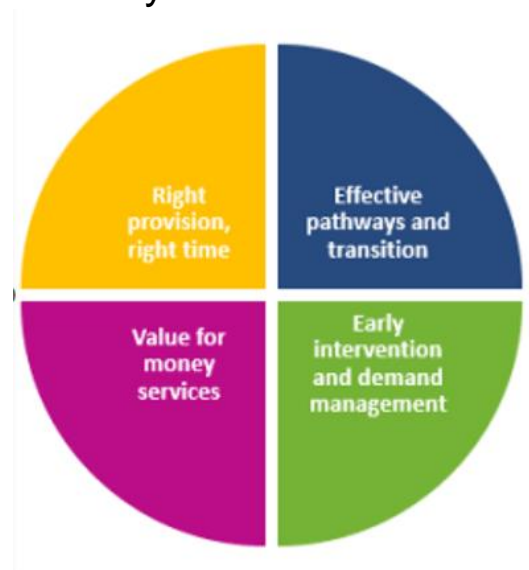
Scrutiny Councillors have benefited from increased support from the Executive Director: Community and Assistant Director: Democratic and Registration Services this year to support them during their first year in office. The Team Lead: Overview and Scrutiny facilitates O&S Commission meetings and, along with the Scrutiny Officer, works across all three panels supporting review work. Moving support between panels ensures sharing of good practice and increases collaboration and understanding across strategic themes. It avoids siloed working and provides a balance of opportunities for councillors and officers to develop and share their skills.

Education, Skills and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Panel



Chair: Councillor
Cath Thompson

Vice-Chair:
Councillor Jodie
Watts



The Panel had several meetings last year to consider the areas of priority and selected the following three topics to scrutinise as reviews over the next three years: transition from children's to adult services; the skills gap in the borough and Looked After Children (LAC). However, we appreciate priorities may change over time and there is also flexibility in the programme to carry out a short review if an urgent issue arises.

We are aware Special Educational Needs and Disabilities is an area of significant investment and work for the Council. There is much scrutiny of this work stream by both national and local bodies but we want to ensure we are holding senior leaders to account in this area so intend to request quarterly updates to the O&S Commission, which I will present as Chair of this Panel. This is because the Council was invited by the Department for Education (DfE) to participate in its Safety Valve Intervention Programme 2023/24 in July 2023. The Safety Valve programme aims to agree a package of reforms to local education systems for pupils with

special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) through which the systems will become financially sustainable within the level of grant provided by the Department for Education, while improving the experiences of children and young people. Bracknell Forest is one of five authorities invited to participate in the programme this year, due to its large and rising deficit.

Monitoring reviews is standard practice and we intend to review the scrutiny reviews undertaken by previous Panel members to assure ourselves the recommendations have been implemented from previous reviews, as well as future scrutiny reviews.

Environment and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel



Chair: Councillor
Christoph Eberle



Vice-Chair: Councillor
Michael Forster

Approach for Thames Water Review:

- Identify the interfaces between BFC, the parish councils, and residents with Thames Water and other agencies
- Reach out and identify local and regional stakeholders to start/ engage with a cross borough forum for coordination with Thames Water
- Establish an overview over the regulatory framework in which BFC and other stakeholders operate regarding Thames Water

Councillor Christoph Eberle

We began our scrutiny review following a recommendation from Council in July to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission that a review be undertaken into Thames Water and water quality. This was the first review to be undertaken by new Commission members and the panel members worked very well together. The review report has recently been finalised and Panel members wanted to express concerns about the unacceptable situation with water quality currently, recognising there are no simple answers to the complex regulatory and ownership situation surrounding utilities. This panel has evaluated evidence to derive recommendations aimed at making Bracknell Forest a better place to live. We will be reviewing one of the recommendations we have requested of the Executive in 3 months and the rest in 6 months.

We have also discussed different scrutiny topics to review and recognise the need to be agile when deciding what topic to choose. The purpose is to scrutinise how services are being delivered and whether they meet the key objectives. The process requires research and information which increases the influence of scrutiny and therefore allows Councillors to make a greater contribution on behalf of residents. Part of this process will require the Panel to review any recommendations made have been implemented on time and are successful. This part of the new process is vital for scrutiny to be effective.



Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Panel



Chair: Councillor
Caroline
Egglestone



Vice-Chair:
Councillor
Cherise Welch



The Health and Wellbeing O&S Panel focuses on the Council's work addressing health and social care needs of the local community.







Following identification of the areas we wanted to focus on we selected Sexual Health as our first scrutiny review topic. We have held several meetings as part of this review which involved interviewing key witnesses such as managers of the Tier 3 sexual health clinic based in Slough; carrying out mystery shopper exercises to assure ourselves about how services are run and listened to feedback via Public Health representatives from young health champions in Bracknell. The review is almost complete and we are shaping recommendations to the Executive about how the service can broaden its reach to young people in the Borough. Our next scrutiny review will be Adult Social Care.

The other key plank of our work this year has been setting up a Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (JHOSC) to scrutinise the redevelopment of Frimley Park Hospital. In partnership with two other local authorities who were being consulted by Frimley Healthcare NHS Trust, Surrey County Council and Hampshire County Council, the JHOSC has been established and an inaugural meeting will take place on 17 May. The two Bracknell Forest Council representatives on the JHOSC will be myself (Councillor Egglestone) and Councillor Virgo. It is exciting that Bracknell residents will benefit from a new hospital, but it is also vitally important their views are heard about what new services residents would like to see in the new hospital and we ensure the new build meets the needs of the future population. That is our intention over the coming years until the new hospital is up and running in 2030.

Councillor Caroline Egglestone



Insights into O&S activities in 2023-24:

Activity overview by council theme		
 <p>Value for money</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 2 hours Pages of evidence: 0</p>	 <p>Caring for you and your family</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 6 hours Pages of evidence: 56</p>	 <p>Economic resilience</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 2 hours Pages of evidence: 0</p>
 <p>Protecting and enhancing your environment</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 8 hours Pages of evidence: 78</p>	 <p>Education and skills</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 2 hours Pages of evidence: 0</p>	 <p>Communities</p> <p>Time in panel meetings: 2 hours Pages of evidence: 0</p>

Summary of witnesses 2023-24:

Commission	6 Officers	5 External	2 Executive members
Panels	2 Officers	3 External	1 Executive member
Total	8 Officers	8 External	3 Executive members

Getting involved

Overview and scrutiny activities benefit from a wide range of knowledge, experience and viewpoints and the Commission is keen to encourage wider participation. Review recommendations help shape the services we deliver for residents and officer input is essential, as the quote below highlights.

“The prioritisation Councillors have given to scrutinising the Corporate Performance Overview Report (CPOR) is vitally important to ensure leaders are aware of areas achieving their aims and areas where there are concerns. Good governance and scrutiny will help the Executive achieve the high standards of support and provision for all of our residents.”

Katie Flint, Policy and Performance Lead: Communities and Policy

Find out more about the [overview and scrutiny work programme](#). If you would like to be involved in future activities, email committee@bracknell-forest.gov.uk.