



**Cumberland Council**  
**Overview and Scrutiny**  
**Annual Report**  
**2023-24**

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## Overview and Scrutiny - what is it?

Overview and Scrutiny is a process to ensure that decisions taken by the Council reflect the needs and priorities of communities in Cumberland. Scrutiny is carried out by Councillors who understand and promote the concerns of the people who elected them, connecting decision makers to local communities.

Overview and Scrutiny is the opportunity to look at the wider implications of decisions, develop policy and provide space to think about the overall strategy of the Council.

Council decisions can be made by Council Officers, by the Council's 'Executive' (the political leadership) and by full Council (all Councillors).

Overview and Scrutiny Committees are made up of Non-Executive Councillors who work together, across political parties, to influence key policy development, understand why decisions are made and how the Council is performing to deliver the best possible outcomes for Cumberland and its people.

Overview and Scrutiny Committees do not have decision-making powers; their role is to challenge and make recommendations that influence decision makers. They were created at the same time as the new executive structures (Local Government Act 2000) and designed to be a counterweight to the Leader and cabinet system.

## Overview and Scrutiny arrangements at Cumberland Council

Cumberland Council currently has five Overview and Scrutiny Committees (OSC):

- Business and Resources
- Place
- People
- Health
- LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership)

Over the year each Committee has run a work programme that reflects council priorities and functions that fall within their remit. Chairs have looked carefully at overview and scrutiny work programmes, working with senior officers and Executive to ensure that their scrutiny activity is targeted at the most important issues and decisions that are facing the council.

From 1 April 2024, Cumberland Council will act as the Delivery Authority and Accountable Body in respect of current Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership (CLEP) functions and programmes. As a consequence of this change, LEP Overview and Scrutiny Committee will not be required from the next civic year 2024-25 onwards. The Constitution will be changed at Council on 30th April 2024 to reflect this change in overview and scrutiny arrangements.

# Chairs report: Councillor Joseph Ghayouba, Chair of Business and Resources OSC and LEP OSC

## Business and Resources OSC

Due to a change on the Executive I became Chair part way through this year. The priority for the committee has been to familiarise ourselves with Cumberland's inheritance from legacy councils and the impact on the budget and general operation of Cumberland Council. This has highlighted a number of challenges which the council will need to address next year, if it is to realise the savings required.



The dominant subject has been the budget - monitoring reports and the budget setting process. Budget scrutiny this year has been challenging due to difficulties in aggregating and disaggregating budgets from different legacy councils and untangling necessary information from several different IT systems. The committee has worked hard to advocate a strong Overview and Scrutiny role in the budget process. But we have had to accept that, due to operational and resource challenges, specific budget proposals were not available for scrutiny in advance of full Council this year. The committee instead considered headline figures on savings requirements at directorate level. This pragmatic approach was necessary under exceptional circumstances of challenges within the first year of operation for the council, with our organisational priority focus on ensuring that Cumberland Council did set a balanced budget.

I fully anticipate that although many challenges remain, we will be able to follow a best practice budget setting process for the next year. Business and Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be fully engaged in the budget process, with time to consider full proposals and provide meaningful recommendations to Executive.

Committee Members have been provided with training and workshop sessions, which have been of great help to understanding the budget setting process and how local government finance works generally. This is especially helpful for newly elected Members. I would like to see more training, particularly around budget scrutiny, next year to make sure our understanding of the material and terminology remains high.

Business and Resources OSC set up a task and finish group to look at the second homes premium and possible exemptions. The task and finish group concluded that introducing a levy of 100% on second homes was the "right thing to do" and would raise vital revenue at a time where council funding is a challenging environment. The task and finish group also identified criteria where homes should be exempt from this levy. Conclusions this will be presented to the Executive in April 2024. I would like to thank the members of the task and finish group, Cllrs Wernham, Patrick and Pegram, for their input and I would also like to thank the officers for their support in this work.

The other area of note is that the Committee received a presentation on the properties and assets that we have at Cumberland. There is currently a strategy in development and decisions will be required on which assets we dispose of, re-purposed and which we keep. This will be a very important part of addressing budget challenges.

A lot of committee work centred around fact finding and improving our understanding of issues, which has been important to a new committee in a brand new council. I am optimistic that in the coming year we will address the challenges I mention above. I would like to thank Cllr Patrick who stepped down as Chair and has been very supportive and helpful in the handover process. I would also like to thank Cllr. Moore for his work as Vice Chair.

## LEP OSC

LEP Overview and Scrutiny Committee has met twice this year, as scheduled. This has impacted on the nature of the work and recommendations that have been delivered, alongside wider issues due to the governments continued support for LEPs being withdrawn. The first meeting of the year, prior to confirmation that LEPs would no longer receive government funding, focussed on providing committee members with an overview of LEP activity. In particular, we focussed on understanding which of these activities were relevant to the Cumberland area.

Government confirmed halfway through the year that LEPs will no longer receive funding. LEP functions will now either come into Cumberland Council or sit in a Joint Executive Committee with Westmorland and Furness Council. This meant that LEP OSC had little opportunity to mature; the second and final meeting was largely formality.

There have been some activities which should be a high priority for future scrutiny of activity that the LEP led on. Grid connectivity upgrades and skills boot camps are vital in our aims to bring new industry to Cumberland. Although the national economy has grown very slowly in recent years, growth in the green sector has been circa 9% and it is in this sector where the future of our economy (and our planet) lies.

I would like to thank Cllr Perry as Vice Chair and Members of the committee for their engagement.

My thanks my scrutiny officers for their support and hard work with both Business and Resources and LEP Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

## Chair's report: Councillor Tony Markley, Chair of Place OSC

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee has a wide remit that covers issues such as economic growth, communities, housing, transport, environment and regeneration.

It has been important that we have taken an overview of the many major projects that the council is progressing, such as work on the Borderlands Growth Deal, place projects in our town centres that use levelling up and future high street funding and St Cuthberts Garden Village.

We have also undertaken scrutiny work around the council's relationship with key stakeholders; discussing plans for the future relationship that Cumberland Council could have with the nuclear sector and Tullie House.

We have scrutinised the development of the Climate and Nature Strategy; I would expect that as Cumberland Council becomes more established, scrutiny will play a greater role in the development of high priority strategies such as the Economic Strategy over the next year.

A recurring theme for the committee this year has been the recognition that transport issues are a complicated challenge for Cumberland. We have made a resolution that Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee will undertake a transport task and finish group. We have begun work on identifying the scope for this work, which will report to Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee in summer 2024.



## Chairs report: Councillor Chris Wills, Chair of People OSC

The People Committee oversees Children and Family Wellbeing Services and Adult Social Care. As a member new to these services, I and my colleagues have been on a steep learning curve this past year.

Our meetings have taken the form of a deep appreciative enquiry as we examine topics that range from migration programmes to educational attainment, from Special Educational Needs provision to adult social care inspection frameworks.

Some of our topics, such as child exploitation, are highly sensitive and Members have benefitted from the expertise and leadership of the officers who have presented to us.

As we go into our second year, I look forward to chairing the Committee as we shift from overview and briefing to active contribution in developing the Council's policy position in this sensitive area.



## Chairs report: Councillor Carni McCarron-Holmes, Chair of Heath OSC

The committee has oversight of the NHS and the Councils Public Health department. This aligns with the council's principal commitment to 'put health and well-being at the centre of everything we do'.

This being the first year of Cumberland Council, the committee set out to build long term relationships with each of the major units of the NHS operating in Cumberland and understand the health landscape.

Cumberland has NHS services provided by two of England's 42 NHS Integrated Care Systems (ICS). The area of Millom is served by the Lancashire and South Cumbria ICS. The remaining area of Cumberland is served by the North East and North Cumbria ICS.

In May and early June of each year the committee looks at the Quality Accounts produced by the major NHS Trusts and makes formal comments which are included in the published Accounts that are sent to the Secretary of State.

The committee has had core introductory presentations with questions and answers from each ICS; North Cumbria Integrated Care NHS Foundation Trust; Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust; North West Ambulance Service NHS Trust and the Director of Public Health for Cumberland.

Councillors have been concerned about mental health and how residents with mental health issues receive services, including when in crisis. This has been a national issue with significant changes in the way that the police support the NHS in this regard. It is expected that further work will be done on this issue in the coming year.

The Committee set up a Task and Finish Group to look at the pressing issue of Dentistry and made a set of specific recommendations that were informed by hearing from expert witnesses and desktop research. Recommendations were made to the regional NHS Integrated Care Board who commission these services around the need to maximise their flexibility in securing dentistry provision. Members of Parliament for Cumberland were asked to take up the issue of making the national dentists contract fit for purpose. MPs were additionally asked if they considered dentistry to be a universal service or one that should be targeted at children and vulnerable groups. Replies are included in the papers for the April 2024 meeting.

Healthwatch has been invited to every meeting of the committee because of their important statutory role as local health champions, commissioned to undertake this important work by Cumberland Council.



## Overview and Scrutiny activity during 2023-24

A key challenge for overview and scrutiny committees during this first year of Cumberland council has been building a work programme that reflects priorities of the council and developing understanding of the key issues. The overview role of the committees has been important in building this foundation.

Overview and scrutiny committees have engaged with a range of the most important issues for the council such as workforce development, budget setting and financial planning, Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy, child exploitation, Cared for Children and Care Experienced Strategy, adult social care, housing and major capital projects and regeneration schemes for town centres.

During the year, Overview and Scrutiny has engaged in a number of matters in greater depth, including:

- Task and finish group on council tax discounts, exemptions and premiums – made recommendations to Executive that a council tax premium of 100% for second homes from April 2025 should proceed, noting that there may be some exceptions to this and further work may be required on discretionary discounts pending guidance from the Secretary of State.
- Task and finish group on dentistry – the Committee wrote to the Integrated Care Board (ICB) for North Cumbria, Cumberland MPs and appropriate Government and Shadow Ministers highlighting report recommendations. Replies were received from the ICB and local MPs who all reference the governments 'dentistry recovery plan' published on 7 February 2024.
- Call-in of The Wave Maryport Future High Street Fund – resolved that Executive be asked to look again at the decision not to proceed with a swimming pool at the Maryport Wave Centre, following engagement with the Maryport Community Pool Trust.

Partner engagement is an important aspect of overview and scrutiny. By engaging with partners on issues that are strategically important to the council, committees can build relationships and advocate council priorities. During the year scrutiny committees have engaged with a range of partners including: North West Ambulance Service, Healthwatch Cumberland, Integrated Care Board (ICB), housing providers, Environment Agency.

Overview and scrutiny committees have recognised the importance of training and development and have undertaken a number of training and briefing sessions:

- Virtual introduction to scrutiny
- Facilitated workshop: Developing Scrutiny at Cumberland Council
- Meet the Housing Provider (Place Scrutiny hosted event for all Members)
- Approach to developing the Council's Budget

## Overview and Scrutiny development

Robust and effective scrutiny is challenging to achieve; it is difficult to quantify and requires a range of different skills and support, from Scrutiny Members, Executive and officers.

For a new council that is establishing organisational culture, strategic priorities and dealing with a range of challenges; good scrutiny is particularly important to achieve strong, transparent decision making and good governance. We have placed a high priority on development of the overview and scrutiny function and skills at Cumberland.

Scrutiny Chairs and Vice Chairs have met regularly over the course of the year to co-ordinate activity and ensure that there is a focus on continuous improvement. The Chairs and Vice Chairs have established a scrutiny development plan to support their work by focussing on five areas:

- Training
- Communication and engagement with Executive and senior officers
- Strategic focus and promotion
- Good co-ordination between committees
- Review, evaluation and improvement

Scrutiny Chairs have found that the Scrutiny Development Plan is a useful tool and have recommended that the plan should be refreshed with new targets for 2024-25.

An Executive and Scrutiny Protocol has been developed as a commitment to good practice and good governance between the Executive and Scrutiny. Both Executive and Scrutiny have endorsed this protocol, which is published on our website: [Executive and Scrutiny ethos protocol \(cumberland.gov.uk\)](https://www.cumberland.gov.uk/scrutiny/protocol)

## Looking forward to Overview and Scrutiny in 2024-25

Strong work planning to ensure strategic focus, continued development of skills and good practice and building the role of scrutiny in policy development will all be key themes activity for overview and scrutiny in 2024-25.

A challenge for scrutiny will be to move from the establishing stage to taking a stronger role in policy and service development, ensuring that scrutiny focus is aligned to strategic priorities and greatest challenges.

During 2024-25 overview and scrutiny committees will establish a stronger role in the Council's approach to strategic planning with a focus on performance and budget monitoring, and progress in delivering the Council's transformation programme. Scrutiny Members will engage early in the development of strategy and policy on key issues such as health and wellbeing, prevention and early help, economic growth, housing and social care.