

Annual Report of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee

Chair - Councillor Samuel Smith Vice Chair – Councillor Andrew Wells



Members (2024/25)	Appointed for 2024/25 municipal year	Retirement from Committee
Samuel Smith (Chair)	May 2024	
Andrew Wells (Vice-Chair)	May 2024	
Gareth Coates	May 2024	
Marion Couchman	May 2024	
Helen Hadley	May 2024	
Ken Norchi	May 2024	
Ben Price	May 2024	
Martin Summers	May 2024	
Janice Wadrup	October 2024	
Thomas Jay	May 2024	October 2024

Chair's Overview

Welcome to the annual report of the Corporate Scrutiny Committee, which convened seven times during the 2024/25 municipal year. Stepping into the role of Chair was both an honor and a commitment I embraced wholeheartedly. My ambition was clear from the outset: to invigorate our oversight functions and amplify the impact of our collective efforts.

The first meeting of the committee set the tone for a productive year ahead. We appointed Councillor Andy Wells as Vice-Chair, and although from different parties we ensured a collaborative approach to our responsibilities. I took a moment to acknowledge the contributions of the previous Chair and committee members, emphasising the continuity and dedication that define our committee's work.

Building upon the groundwork laid by my predecessor, we continued to address the pressing concerns of damp and mould in council housing. Our persistent advocacy underscored the urgency of the issue and ultimately led to the Council implementing a damp and mould policy. This collaborative effort highlighted our commitment to improving living conditions and safeguarding public health.

In our initial meetings, we also discussed recommendations to the Cabinet concerning housing voids, focusing on reviewing costs, recovering damages, and improving void turnaround times to enhance the efficiency of housing services. These issues have a direct impact on residents awaiting housing and the Council's financial health, making our scrutiny vital.

Understanding the value of focused and collaborative discussions, I suggested utilising our committee meetings for longer in-depth deliberations rather than establishing separate working groups. This approach was intended to streamline our efforts, maximise output of each committee, and enhance the effectiveness of our scrutiny.

We proactively updated our work plan, adding critical items such as a report on the Leaseholders Collaborative Working Group meeting, the ICT Strategy, Housing Repairs Performance, and further developments on the Corporate Plan and Vision. This comprehensive agenda set us on a path to address the multifaceted challenges and opportunities facing our Council.

In our subsequent meetings, we continued to tackle a range of critical issues resonating deeply with our community:

Strategic Leasehold Review

We conducted a thorough review of leasehold service charges, scrutinising communication challenges with leaseholders and the financial intricacies of lease agreements. The committee supported the necessity for a robust service improvement plan to enhance transparency and foster stronger relationships with leaseholders. Our goal was to ensure fairness, clarity, and mutual understanding in all leasehold matters.

Enhancing Customer Service and Embracing Technology

In September, we turned our attention to bolstering customer service and harnessing technological advancements. Discussions on reopening the reception area at Marmion House highlighted our commitment to improving face-to-face interactions—the heartbeat of effective service delivery. We also explored relocating committee meetings to Marmion House to create a more accessible and integrated approach.

The review of our ICT Strategy marked a pivotal step. We were briefed on the transition to cloud-based systems, enhanced security measures, and the critical role of data-driven decision-making. Embracing modern technology isn't just about efficiency; it's about empowering our constituents with improved services and accessibility. We affirmed our support for these initiatives, emphasising the necessity of continuous innovation.

Public Safety and Heritage Preservation

Public safety and the preservation of our town's rich heritage were also at the forefront of our discussions. Concerns about safety in public spaces prompted deliberations on measures to enhance security. Simultaneously, we explored innovative ways to honor and promote our historical legacy. The proposal of a heritage trail emerged—a promising initiative to boost tourism and celebrate the unique cultural identity of our community.

Financial Oversight and Policy Development

In November, our examination of the Quarter Two Performance Report for 2024/25 underscored our commitment to fiscal responsibility. Engaging in robust discussions about financial variances, rent arrears, and the budgetary impacts of services like the Assembly Rooms and the Joint Waste Service, we raised critical questions about financial strategies. Our comments aimed to enhance financial resilience and ensure prudent resource management.

We also scrutinised the Tenancy Management Policy, focusing on succession rights, fixed-term tenancies, and support for tenants facing eviction due to under-occupancy. Balancing efficient use of housing stock with compassion for tenants' circumstances was paramount. By addressing these policy elements, we aimed to foster fair and supportive housing practices responsive to our community's needs.

Confronting Evolving Challenges

In February, we confronted emerging challenges with renewed determination. The Leader presented the LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Report, highlighting areas for improvement, including the need for an action plan to address financial challenges and enhance member engagement. We delved into discussions on the Asset Management Strategy, emphasising prudent management to avoid undue burdens on taxpayers.

Community engagement was a critical theme. Addressing concerns about the Council's responsiveness to community events, we stressed the importance of honest conversations and building genuine connections with residents. Reviewing the

Corporate Plan 2025-2030 consultation responses, we acknowledged the imperative of aligning our strategic vision with community aspirations through improved communication.

Our assessment of the Quarter Three Performance Report identified concerns about rising outturn variances and complaint response times. Recognising these as areas requiring immediate action, we emphasised the need for swift corrective measures to maintain accountability and enhance service quality.

Throughout the year, collaboration remained a cornerstone of our approach. Inviting Cabinet Members and Officers to our meetings enriched our discussions and informed our recommendations. Engaging directly with department leaders allowed us to delve deeper into issues and foster meaningful dialogues about potential enhancements.

The Council's Forward Plan served as a vital guide, enabling us to identify areas for pre-decision scrutiny or post-implementation reviews. This proactive strategy amplified our effectiveness and promoted a culture of continuous improvement within the Council's operations.

Reflecting on the past year, I am immensely proud of the strides we've made. We have achieved tangible improvements that positively impact our residents' lives. Our diligent oversight has bolstered transparency and accountability, strengthening public trust in our governance. We've championed fiscal responsibility, advanced customer service, embraced technological progress, and deepened community engagement—all in steadfast service to those we represent.

I extend my deepest gratitude to the committee members whose expertise and passion have driven our achievements. I also thank the officers and stakeholders who shared their time and insights—their knowledge has been integral to our success.

As we look to the future, I am filled with optimism and enthusiasm. The coming year presents new challenges and opportunities, and I am confident that together, we will continue to make significant contributions to the well-being of our community. Let's embrace the journey ahead with the same vigor and dedication that have defined our work this past year.

Kind regards

Cllr Samuel Smith

Chair of Corporate Scrutiny

Committee's remit and function (Terms of Reference)

The Constitution sets out the Committee's remit which can be summarised as to provide effective scrutiny of the achievement of the Council's strategic priorities by scrutinising the performance of the Executive. Particular areas of focus include reviewing and scrutinising matters relating to: -

- Forward Plan
- Quarterly performance reports
- Corporate plan
- Major Council led projects
- Investment Strategy
- HRA function
- Bi-annually review and scrutinise matters relating to the Local Authority Trading Company's activities and performance

Quarterly Performance Reports

The quarterly performance update is scrutinised by the Committee before it is taken to Cabinet. The report provides the Committee with an overview of the Council's performance for the specified quarter of the financial year. Reporting on the Council's position in relation to progress with strategic corporate plan projects and updates on the financial position, corporate risks, audits, information governance and complaints.

June 2024 - Quarter 4 2023-24

The Committee received the report for the final quarter of the municipal year 2023-24 in June. When reviewing the report, the Committee were concerned with the increasing outturn variance and the red marker against financial stability. The Committee asked for clarification around the risks associated with the Future High Street Fund project; whether leaseholders were being kept up to date with the review of Leaseholder services and what happens to departmental budget underspends.

The Committee also considered the Councils **Sustainability Strategy and Productivity Plan at this meeting**. The Committee asked questions including where the Stability plan was? What the main drivers for the increasing deficit were? How the peer review was initiated and clarification around savings and what impact interest had.

August 2024 Quarter 1 2024-25

In August, the Committee received the quarter 1 report, and it was highlighted that this was in a new format to be more user-friendly. The Committee sought clarification around figures for St Georges day ticket sales; the impact of Castle Bridge repairs on the upcoming fireworks; performer costs for the Assembly Rooms and the shortfall in ticket bookings; the number of press releases as well as why Marmion House was not being used for committee meetings.

The Committee expressed concerns over the number of tenants on Universal Credit and in rent arrears and why this was not the same for Council Tax.

November 2024 Quarter 2 2024–25

The Quarter two report was reviewed by the Committee in November prior to Cabinet in December. The Committee discussed the compliance of funeral directors and how communication was being shared to market traders around the works being carried out in the town centre.

The Committee were concerned with the upward trend in rent arrears as well as the with the general fund and unfavourable variances shown within the report, and key areas of overspends were discussed. A recommendation was moved for an update on recovery proposals for the key overspend items to be brought to the next meeting. A discussion was had around how the Councils plans were preparing for future risks to funding.

Discussions were also held around financial planning, community cohesion; the role of the climate change officers; cyber security; data breaches; audit recommendations and responses to complaints

February 2025 Quarter 3 2024-25

The Committee received the Quarter three report in February 2024. The Committee were concerned that the outturn variance had continued to rise. It was noted that updates had been provided on the key items requested and that a piece of work was ongoing around the Assembly Rooms. Concerns were raised around the rise in the figures for responses to stage one complaints. The Committee requested more detail around the number of evictions and hardships payments made before endorsing the contents of the report for Cabinet.

Spotlight Item – Corporate Projects

Corporate Project Updates

In June 2024 the Committee received a presentation from the Corporate Project Officer to update them on the current position and timeline for delivery of the corporate plan as well as an update on the then upcoming peer challenge. The Committee were interested in how residents were being engaged with during the process; the role of Councillors; time frames and the strategic priorities.

Vision and Corporate Plan Update

In August 2024, the Committee received an update on the developing vision and corporate plan. The Committee sought clarification over timelines, including for the Members workshop. The Committee highlighted that terminology needs to be consistent and asked for an update on consultation responses.

Corporate Peer Challenge Action Plan and Report

In February 2025 the Committee received on the 'Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge Report and action plan.'

The Committee acknowledge that the report noted that the Council were doing well.

The Committee were concerned at how long it been since the previous review. Discussions were held around the lack of engagement from Members that was noted in the report. The Committee were concerned with how the Council were going to manage their assets to ensure there was no more burden on the Council and the taxpayer as well as the time that it was taking the Council to respond to the events in the town in August 2024. Discussions were also held around the impact of devolution on Council resources.

The Committee acknowledged the committed and hard-working staff involved and moved a motion to acknowledge this.

Corporate Plan 2025 – 2030

At the meeting in February the Committee received a report to advise Members of the consultation responses that had supported the development of the priorities of the corporate plan 2025 to 2030 and advise on the development of the draft annual delivery plan which would support these being achieved.

The Committee welcomed the smaller, more streamlined document. They were interested in what the Councils heritage offer would be. Concerns were discussed around the lack of responses from residents to the survey and a discussion was held around how the issue of people feeling safe could be addressed. The Committee highlighted the importance of communicating to residents what Tamworth Borough Council were responsible for and what the county council was responsible for.

The Committee also reviewed the below items:

1. August 2024 - Update on Strategic Leasehold Review

Following work by the Committee in the previous municipal year and a motion at Full Council, a Strategic Leasehold Review was held which was presented to the Committee. The Committee sought clarifications around the recommendations from Campbell Tickell and the Officers; the ongoing cost implications of the review; whether the Council benefited from keeping the leasehold properties and whether there were any options to dispose of them; the stock survey and the suggested life span of the roofs and how a first-tier test-tribunal case work? They asked what the next steps were and highlighted the importance of communication.

The Committee moved an amendment to two recommendations and proposed a further two recommendations to be presented to Cabinet.

The Committee requested a further update which was provided at the October meeting before the report was due at Cabinet. The Committee addressed each Cabinet recommendation individually expressing concerns around the assessment of people's ability to pay charges and the letters used to communicate payment options. The Committee welcomed and commented on the service improvement plan. They asked for clarification around varying costs of works required and around the suite of letters being used.

The Committee made an amendment to one of the recommendations for Cabinet and moved an additional recommendation.

2. September 2024 - Marmion House Reception and Committee Meetings

The Committee received a report providing an update on the proposals to reopen Marmion House, and to locate committee meetings to Marmion House and to update audio visual equipment. The Committee expressed concerns that the Council were turning their back on the town's heritage by using the town hall budget and asked whether a piece of work would be done to look at what could be done with the town hall and the possibility of its inclusion on a heritage trail. There were concerns noted around personal safety when using the town hall as a location and it was highlighted that a petition with over 1000 signatures had been previously submitted for the opening of the front desk. Clarification was sought over how estimated figures for the number of expected enquiries were reached and where the decision sat for this project. The Committee endorsed the recommendations being present to Cabinet.

3. September 2024 - ICT Strategy Progress Update

The Committee received a progress report against the Council's 5-year ICT strategy approved in 2021 and sought clarification around the governance of the decision-making process for the new systems at Marmion House as well as the Council's data security. They highlighted the importance of usability, reporting and

integration of systems as well as the importance of being data driven to be effective. A query was raised around the wording within the report around the implementation of a new system at Marmion House.

4. September 2024 - Update on Commercial Lease Negotiations

The Committee were due to receive two updates in August that were delayed until September. These were considered as exempt items and the recommendations were endorsed.

5. October 2024 - Update on Housing Repairs Contract

The Committee received an update on the Council Housing Repairs Contract – this was heard as an exempt item.

6. October 2024 - Social Housing regulatory Update

The Committee reviewed this item to prior to it being considered by Cabinet for approval. They were concerned, and asked for clarification around the number of breaches in electrical inspections, as well as why the Council were not where they wanted to be with repairs. They also asked for clarification around the 'continuous learning' identified and for more information about the proposed tenant advocate. The Committee asked what the Council's relationship with the regulator was like and what impact the report would have on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) before endorsing the recommendations being proposed to Cabinet.

7. Council Housing Tenancy Management Policy

In November 2024 the Committee received the Tenancy Management policy to review before it went to Cabinet.

Discussions were held around succession rights for tenants; how the Council supported tenants to move to suitably sized properties; how the Council supports tenants with rent arrears; evictions when there is illegal activity taking place; and the reasoning behind the tenancy review. The Committee were interested to hear if there had been any significant changes to rent arrears when fixed term tenancies were previously introduced and how the Council would make sure the adoption of the new policy was cost effective and would not impact services. The Committee requested feedback on the recent training received by the team before endorsing the recommendation for Cabinet.

8. Asses and Plans

to update following March meeting

9. Update on Housing Voids

to update following March meeting

10. Local Government Reorganisation

to update following March meeting

Working groups

The Committee chose to focus on items being heard at the main meetings and therefore no working groups were established this year

Recommendations made to and responses received from Cabinet

Recommendations were made to Cabinet on the following Reports and Cabinet's response is highlighted:

Scrutiny meeting item recommendations	Responses received
<p>13th August 2024</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strongly recommended that Cabinet adopt the recommendations of the report produced by Campbell Tickell. 2. This Council further develops a Service Improvement Plan, and this come back to the Corporate Scrutiny Committee. 3. The Portfolio Holder and Officers devise an appropriate goodwill payment using industry standards as a small gesture from this Council to these residents in light of the inconvenience and worry caused during this period and seek approval from this Scrutiny Committee for this. 4. That Cabinet consider the adoption of a plain English crystal mark or similar alternative across the board for all Tamworth Borough Council communications. (The other recommendations within the report were endorsed) 	<p>Cabinet 29 August 2024</p> <p>Cabinet thanked the committee for the recommendations and agreed to look at the recommendations when the report is presented at Cabinet on 10th October and provide a written response to Corporate Scrutiny</p> <p><i>The Committee then requested an update for the meeting on the 9th October</i></p>
<p>9th October 2024</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cabinet approve the process for remedial works based on the completed surveys and utilising the QLTA approach. A detailed cost breakdown must be submitted to the next available Corporate Scrutiny committee as a briefing note. Both these costs and the final invoices require approval from the 	<p>Cabinet 10th October 2024</p> <p>The recommendations from Scrutiny were not moved.</p>

Portfolio Holder for Housing, Homelessness, and Planning 2. Review and revise the payment plan criteria including the statement of means to ensure fairness and consistency.	
The following recommendations were also moved.	
19th November 2024 An update on the recovery proposals for the key items that we need budgetary control over are brought to the next Scrutiny meeting.	An update formed part of the QPR 3 report that was presented to the Committee in February
6th February 2024 The Committee acknowledged the committed and hard-working staff and moved a motion to: Extend thanks to all staff who have presented Tamworth in a positive light during the recent peer review.	Recorded as part of the minutes

Members Attendance to be updated

Member	Number of meetings attended
Samual Smith (Chair)	
Andrew Wells (Vice Chair)	
Gareth Coates	
Marion Couchman	
Helen Hadley	
Ken Norchi	
Ben Price	
Martin Summers	
Janice Wadrup	
Thomas Jay	

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