West Yorkshire Combined Authority | Tracy Brabin Mayor of West Yorkshire

Annual Report 2025/26

Scrutiny Committee

July 2026

Contents

Chair's Foreword 3
Introduction 4
Membership 5
Workplan 6
Impact of Scrutiny 7
Recommendations to Mayor and Combined Authority 7
Mayoral 'Soft Power' influence 7
Governance and decision-making 7
Committee structure changes 8
White Rose Rail Station issues 8
Bus Franchising progress 9
Devolution readiness 9
Other matters Scrutiny made an impact on: 9
Next Steps for 2026/27 11
"Local Scrutiny Committees" in Devolution Act 2026 11
Find out more and get involved 12

Chair's Foreword

The Scrutiny Committee has built on the positive impact made last year, in its second year of existence as a single overarching committee, as outlined in this report.

A new streamlined and focused workplan was introduced this year, aiming to make sure Scrutiny remains focused on a more manageable number of high-impact topics to deliver high-quality scrutiny enquiries. These topics were split into Scrutiny, Overview and Task and Finish activities, ensuring the aim and purpose of each scrutiny enquiry was clear, focused and deliverable. The committee achieved and delivered on most of the scrutiny enquiries and topics set in its initial new work plan, proving that a more limited but focused approach is more effective.

New approaches trialled last year to direct scrutiny and questioning of the Mayor and council leaders continued effectively to ensure there is political accountability for policy development and decision-making, so the public can see that they are being challenged on delivery. A lot of the most impactful scrutiny is "soft power" and takes place in private as scrutiny members challenge and monitor activities in between meetings. However, it is important the residents of West Yorkshire see challenge in public too. That has been a top priority of my chairmanship.

This approach was extended in the Scrutiny Committee's first-ever 'call-in' of a decision, with the Deputy Mayor and Transport Committee Deputy Chair scrutinised and held to account for the decision to approve a new school travel policy for the region. Whilst the Scrutiny Committee decided to ultimately release the decision, the session helped further establish the position of Scrutiny, push for greater and more robust challenge of decision-making and learn useful lessons for potential future "call-ins".

The committee this year made greater use of formal recommendations to the Mayor and Combined Authority to further establish its voice, view and suggestions to decision makers. All recommendations made by the Committee to either the Mayor or the Combined Authority were accepted and continue to be monitored for implementation.

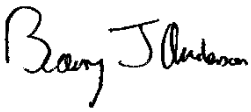
I'm satisfied that the progress made this year is further embedding the role of scrutiny within the Combined Authority and effectively challenging policy and decision-making by the Mayor, Council Leaders, Committee Chairs and Officers.

This will be my final year as the Scrutiny Committee Chair, as I am due to retire as a Councillor at the election in May.

I would recommend to my successor that they continue with the approaches established this year, using formal recommendations and a streamlined focused workplan to ensure scrutiny continues to deliver and make an impact year on year. The importance of scrutiny in democratic governance cannot be stated enough.

As always, I would like to thank all Members of the Committee for their dedication and hard work over the year, especially outside of meetings, as well as officers for their diligent support, advice and guidance. I leave the Committee in good hands.

Cllr Barry Anderson
Chair, Scrutiny Committee



Introduction

This annual report provides a general summary of "overview and scrutiny" work undertaken by the Combined Authority's Scrutiny Committee during the 2025/26 municipal year.

Scrutiny is a vital piece of accountability in a democratic system as a key 'check and balance' on decision-making at the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

It holds the Mayor and other decision-makers accountable for the decisions they make, the policies they adopt, the money they spend and the services they provide.

The Scrutiny Committee **investigates**, **influences**, **reports**, and **recommends** ways to:

- strengthen policies,
- improve services,
- ensure best value for money and
- secure long-lasting positive outcomes for local people.

Although Scrutiny does not have the power or duty to make, 'greenlight' or block any decision of the Mayor or Combined Authority, it does have the power to:

- 'call-in' decisions (i.e. delay them) to make a case for them to be reconsidered or changed
- oblige the Combined Authority to respond to its recommendations publicly within two months
- require any member (or officer) of the Combined Authority to appear before it or report
- request any information or data held by the Combined Authority relevant to its enquiries

The Scrutiny Committee also questions the Mayor of West Yorkshire multiple times a year at public committee meetings on her impact as Mayor and delivery of her electoral pledges and the Combined Authority's priorities.

Membership

The Scrutiny Committee is made up of 15 cross-party 'backbench' councillors from across West Yorkshire and 1 from York who are not members of any authority's 'cabinet', executive board or a decision-making committee.

The Committee is chaired by Cllr Barry Anderson (since 2023) who's supported in his work by Vice Chairs Cllr Richard Smith (since 2021) and Cllr Matt Edwards (since 2024).

The members for this municipal year were:

Council	Member	*Deputy*
Bradford	Cllr Ralph Berry	*Cllr Safina Kauser*
	Cllr Paul Godwin	*Cllr Carol Thirkill*
	Cllr Bob Felstead	*Cllr David Nunns*
	Cllr Matt Edwards	*Cllr Anna Watson*
Calderdale	Cllr Joe Thompson	*Cllr Jonathan Timbers*
	Cllr Peter Hunt (until February)	*Cllr Geraldine Carter (until January)*
Kirklees	Cllr Harry McCarthy	*Cllr James Homewood*
	Cllr Richard Smith	*Cllr Mark Thompson*
	Cllr John Lawson	*Cllr Andrew Marchington*
Leeds	Cllr Kate Haigh	*Cllr Pauleen Grahame*
	Cllr Hannan Bithell	*Cllr Jordan Bowden*
	Cllr Barry Anderson	*Cllr Matthew Robinson*
	Cllr Andy Rontree	*Cllr Mahalia France-Mir (until January)*
Wakefield	Cllr Richard Forster	*Cllr Julie Craig*
	Cllr Betty Rhodes	*Cllr Deb Nicholls*
York	Cllr Dave Merrett	*Cllr Jason Rose*

Note: Each member is assigned a deputy member who they work with as a partner to support them. Their deputy may substitute for them at meetings (as can any other member from the same council and party as them).

Workplan

The Scrutiny Committee determines its own workplan independently at the beginning of each municipal year. Members choose which items from previous years to continue, and which new items and tasks to accomplish in the year ahead.

To decide its workplan, the Scrutiny Committee reviews a list of key pieces of work and decisions planned for the year from the Mayor, the authority's officers and the Corporate Plan – which is the ambitions and targets for the Mayor's 4 year term of office to achieve the long-term 'missions' of the West Yorkshire Plan:

1. ***A prosperous West Yorkshire*** *- an inclusive economy with well paid jobs*
2. ***A happy West Yorkshire*** *- great places and health communities*
3. ***A well-connected West Yorkshire*** *- a strong transport system*
4. ***A sustainable West Yorkshire*** *- making lives greener*
5. ***A safe West Yorkshire*** *- a region where all can flourish*

Summary of topics

This year, 2025, the Scrutiny Committee started from scratch so its workplan is more focused on a smaller number of bigger 'strategic' issues and on tasks capable of being completed within a year, leaving behind the much larger workplan inherited from the now-merged previous three scrutiny committees.

The Committee agreed to focus on "devolution readiness" as a theme and split the topics into:

- Scrutiny topics – for discussion at committee meetings
- Overview topics – to be monitored outside of meetings and brought to meetings if needed
- Tasks – one-off reviews or workshops on a single topic

The **Scrutiny Topics** were:

- Governance and partnership
- Staff and technology
- Performance and delivery
- Budget and strategy

The **Overview Topics** were:

- Mayoral soft power and pledges
- Bus Franchising (including bus station assets)
- Mass Transit delivery
- Local Growth Plan delivery
- Climate & Environment Plan delivery
- Local Transport Plan

The **Tasks** were:

- Scrutinise the issues in the White Rose Station project
- Maintain oversight of the Governance Review and other recommendations

Impact of Scrutiny

This section highlights the impact Scrutiny has made this year. The Committee makes an impact on decision-making and delivery in many ways including through challenge at public meetings, formal recommendations to decision-makers they must respond to and through what's known as "soft scrutiny" – providing advice and challenge in private follow ups between meetings, which influences decisions, processes and approach.

Recommendations to Mayor and Combined Authority

This year the committee made several recommendations to the Mayor and Combined Authority based on information and testimony heard in committee and workshop sessions.

All recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee were accepted by the Mayor and Combined Authority and implementation of these recommendations remains ongoing. The Scrutiny Committee monitors and, if necessary, challenges, their implementation over time.

Mayoral 'Soft Power' influence

The Mayor took questions at the 2 May 2025 committee meeting on how she:

- engages with the region's residents and elected councillors.
- manages the differences between local and national priorities.
- uses her "soft power" to influence government decisions and policy, get more funding for the region and tackle regional issues.
- brings partners together to tackle persistent and cross-cutting issues like how health and transport overlap with skills and the economy.
- intends to use the new powers, freedoms and responsibilities she's expected to get in new government legislation.
- Intends to work with scrutiny to ensure good value for money.

Recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee to the Mayor covered:

- Communication and leadership of the devolution agenda.
- Effectiveness and depth of engagement with local councils and councillors.
- Evidencing outcomes achieved from Mayor's "soft power" activity and public profile e.g. trade missions and representations to central government.
- Ensuring there is accountability for persistent, unresolved local issues which impact West Yorkshire as a whole.

The full recommendations report and subsequent responses from the Mayor are published on the Scrutiny website here.

Governance and decision-making

On 24 July 2025 the Combined Authority approved a new School Travel Policy aiming to ensure there is a consistent, affordable and sustainable approach to managing school bus services to secondary schools in the future ahead of Bus Franchising.

This decision was "Called In" by Members of the Scrutiny Committee due to concerns about the consultation process and decision-making pathway which, in the opinion of the petitioners, did

not sufficiently consult with impacted residents or the Combined Authority's Transport Committee membership, a member of which referred the matter to the Scrutiny Committee.

The Call-In session was held on 22 August 2025 and, whilst the decision was ultimately released for implementation by the Committee, discussion and evidence highlighted several concerns around the Combined Authority's governance, committee structures, decision-making pathways, report clarity and consultation and engagement approach.

The Scrutiny Committee submitted several recommendations on:

- Embedding and removing barriers to pre-scrutiny
- Conducting a review of the committee structure and related governance processes
- Reviewing committee meeting cadence and schedules
- Improving clarity on how decision and governance pathways are reported and monitored
- Improving engagement with ward councillors when a decision impacts their wards and improving reporting of consultation exercises.
- Strengthening the political accountability of the mayor and lead members overseeing policy development.

The full recommendations were published on the Scrutiny website here.

Committee structure changes

The Combined Authority accepted Scrutiny's recommendation to review its committee structure and meeting schedule to ensure the Authority is prepared to deliver its new responsibilities under the Devolution Act (which became law in Spring 2026).

A joint working group of Scrutiny and Audit Committee members were consulted throughout this review process to provide testimony and evidence and challenge the different options and ideas presented.

The review concluded that a more streamlined structure with fewer committees – a reduction from 10 to 5 committees – overall and three key decision-making boards chaired by the Mayor to make mayoral and non-mayoral function decisions was the most efficient and accountable way to exercise new powers under the nine "areas of competence" and Integrated Settlement devolved funding model outlined in the Devolution Act.

White Rose Rail Station issues

The new station project was approved in November 2021, with construction beginning in Spring 2022 for a 2024 finish. The station is in South Leeds, adjacent to White Rose Shopping Centre and Business Park, and aimed to improve accessibility and connectivity to the area.

Construction was halted in Spring 2024 due to escalations in forecasted costs and other issues with delivery partners. The station was 70% complete, but with none of the allocated funding remained to complete the project.

In mid-2025, the Combined Authority Members asked the Scrutiny Chair to look into the matter and report back to the Combined Authority. The Chair established a small working group to hold a workshop with officers to understand the challenges experienced in the project, reasons for the escalation in costs, options to finish the station and lessons that can be learnt for other current and future station developments delivered by the Combined Authority.

Scrutiny members submitted a series of conclusions to the Combined Authority and these were addressed in the update report (linked here) to the Combined Authority in January 2026.

Bus Franchising progress

In March 2024, the Mayor decided to exercise her mayoral function powers to bring the bus network under the control of the Combined Authority through a Bus Franchising regime to improve reliability and efficiency of bus services in the region.

Since the decision was taken, a scrutiny working group has successfully scrutinised confidential and commercially sensitive information in closed session and maintain an overview of the Bus Franchising programme's progress and challenges, including oversight and scrutiny of the Fleet, Lotting, Depot, Procurement and Ticketing strategies, the Outline Business Case and the cross-border 'Service Permit Regime'.

Due to commercial sensitivity, these meetings were held in private, with key non-confidential summary updates frequently reported back to the Committee by the Chair.

Devolution readiness

The Scrutiny Chair and a scrutiny working group assessed how ready the Combined Authority was for further devolution, including maintaining oversight of:

- negotiations with government on their Outcomes Framework,
- negotiations on Integrated Settlement funding levels,
- new powers being sought for mayors and combined authorities under "Right to Request"
- development of the Combined Authority's own internal outcomes framework (i.e. Key Performance Indicators and targets).

The Scrutiny Committee's concerns about the Outcomes Framework and Integrated Settlement negotiation and development process were raised by the Chair directly with the Mayor and Chief Executive to pass onto government directly.

These included that:

- The insistence on targets set through an Outcomes Framework to receive devolved Integrated Settlement funding was not quite in the spirit of autonomy and devolution.
- The outcomes proposed by government in the Outcomes Framework were too general and don't quite align with the region's ambitions.
- Challenges for combined authorities' ability to plan budgets and work due to consistently missed deadlines by government to provide updates and information.
- The tight timescales not allowing enough opportunity for elected members – both scrutiny and Combined Authority members – to be sufficiently involved in developments.

Other matters Scrutiny made an impact on:

- **Scrutiny of the 2026/27 Budget & Integrated Settlement:** Each year, the Scrutiny Committee scrutinises the draft budget for the next year. This year, the Scrutiny Committee was satisfied that the budget development process was robust and that funding challenges and risks were addressed and mitigated as much as possible in the challenging context of

drawing up a budget while the full funding amount from central government was still not known.

- **Local Nature Recovery Strategy:** A working group of scrutiny members helped shape and develop the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy through joint workshops with the Climate and Environment Committee members, including academics, experts, and other partners.

- **Climate and Environment Plan Implementation**: Following the conclusions and policy suggestions that a scrutiny working group suggested last year, the Scrutiny Committee scrutinised progress on the Climate and Environment Plan after one year, questioning Climate and Environment Committee's lead members on delivery and implementation to date and suggesting several actions.

Next Steps for 2026/27

"Local Scrutiny Committees" in Devolution Act 2026

The Devolution Act 2026 introduces a new "Local Scrutiny Committee" system strengthening Scrutiny powers and accountability arrangements. to go live from 1 April 2027 for combined authorities designated as "Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities" ('EMSAs'), like West Yorkshire.

The next municipal year will be a "transitional" year focused on preparing the scrutiny function to implement reconstitute as a "Local Scrutiny Committee" from April 2027, providing scrutiny with the following new powers and responsibilities:

- Staffing: Requirement for two dedicated scrutiny officers for each combined authority.
- Petitions: Residents able to petition to trigger Scrutiny Committee discussion or action.
- Experts: Duty for Scrutiny to retain and use a pool of experts for formal reviews.
- Value for Money: Duty and right to commission VFM assessments on investments.
- Escalation: Ability to submit reports to central government and public agencies for response and intervention.
- External scrutiny: Extension of requirement to cooperate with Scrutiny to external contractors and partners defined as "key persons".
- Sanctions: Financial penalties (up to £5,000) for non-compliance with Scrutiny requests, not answering questions, not providing requested information, misleading the committee or not attending meetings invited to; the Mayor and Commissioners are automatically dismissed from office if a certain number of scrutiny meetings are not attended within 12-month period.

The government intends to consult widely within the scrutiny sector to develop additional secondary legislation, regulations and statutory guidance on how "Local Scrutiny Committees" are expected to exercise the above new powers by the end of 2026.

Other new powers were conferred by the Devolution Act 2026 more immediately from April 2026 including:

- A requirement for scrutiny committees to conduct hearings for anyone nominated by the Mayor to serve as a Mayoral Commissioner (to be known as "deputy mayors") and;
- A power for scrutiny committees to recommend a Mayoral Commissioner's appointment is terminated via a 2/3rds majority vote by the Combined Authority vote.

Find out more and get involved

Find out more about scrutiny at the Combined Authority and to view agendas, reports, and minutes, please visit the website here**:** https://westyorks-ca.gov.uk/
Scrutiny committee meetings take place in public and everyone is welcome to attend.

Get in touch

Scrutiny is keen to hear from members of the public on issues of concern in the West Yorkshire area that relate to the functions and responsibilities of the Combined Authority.
You can contact Scrutiny:

By email: scrutiny@westyorks-ca.gov.uk

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