

To: Council

Date: 8 February 2016

Report of: Chair of the Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Scrutiny Briefing

Purpose of report: To update Council on the activities of the scrutiny function

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Scrutiny work programme 2015/16

Appendix 2 - Scrutiny Recommendation Tracker November 2015 to January 2016

Introduction

1. Scrutiny has recently been engaged in its annual budget review. The oversight and constructive challenge of this review helps to provide assurance that the Council's budgetary proposals are balanced, robust and deliverable, as well as engaging all political groups in the process. This is particularly important at a time when the Council faces a backdrop of significant risks and uncertainties, such as the unknown impacts of national policy changes on the Housing Revenue Account. The findings of the Budget Review, which include independent commentary on the proposals and recommendations, will be set out in a report to the City Executive Board and Budget Council.
2. My previous report to Council highlighted some of the tangible financial benefits that an effective scrutiny function is bringing to the organisation. This must continue over the coming years as funding from government tapers away and the Council's operations become fully funded by income generated locally from Council Tax, Business Rates, trading, commercial property income and fees and charges, as well as successful bids for external funding.
3. In January the Committee had a detailed look at the Revised Oxpens Delivery Strategy decision in a session lasting an hour and a half. The Committee

expressed its support for the strategy and made four recommendations, which were all accepted by the City Executive Board.

4. To date this year 75% of scrutiny recommendations have been agreed by the Board, 13% have been agreed in part and only 12% have not been agreed.

Work programme

5. Scrutiny continues to progress through its work programme and remains very busy pursuing ideas generated by members as well as scrutinising decisions to be taken by the City Executive Board. There will potentially be as many as nine pre-scrutiny reports on the Board's agenda in February.

Current Activity

Guest Houses Review Group

6. The Guest Houses Review Group, led by Councillor Van Coulter, spoke to various guest house proprietors and enforcement agencies before recommending that the Council should intervene in this sector with the aim of improving the safety of vulnerable people. The Review Group's report, which provides a number of suggestions as to what form this intervention could take, was presented to the City Executive Board on 17 December. The Board is expected to respond to the fourteen recommendations when it meets on 11 February.

Equality and Diversity Review Group

7. The Equality and Diversity Review Group meets on 9 February to review a range of equalities and staff survey data with the aim of helping to identify, and find ways of overcoming, barriers faced by under-represented groups on the Council's workforce. The Review Group, which is chaired by Councillor Tom Hayes, aims to conclude its evidence gathering and produce a report with recommendations within the current Council year.

Budget Review

8. The Finance Panel has examined the Council's budget proposals in detail over a series of meetings with the Chief Executive, Executive Directors, Head of Financial Services and other senior officers. The Panel found that the General Fund is generally in good shape but that the Capital Programme has not fared so well, being badly hit by Government policy changes. The Panel agreed 24 recommendations which will be put to the City Executive Board on 11 February. These recommendations focused on; the presentation of the budget proposals, maximising income, increasing efficiency and mitigating pressures and risks in the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account. I'd like to thank members of the Finance Panel and Housing Panel for contributing to this work, as well as Council officers for their extensive support.

The Scrutiny Committee

9. The Committee approved the report of the Guest Houses Review Group and reviewed a mid-year corporate performance report in December. The Committee has also pre-scrutinised the following City Executive Board decisions - the

numbers of recommendations made to the Board and of those agreed (either in full or in part) are in brackets:

- Oxpens Revised Delivery Strategy (4 / 4)
- Resettling Syrian Refugees in Oxford (6 / 6)
- Community Centre Strategy (7 / 6)
- Asset Management Plan 2016-2020 (4 / 4)

Housing Panel

10. The Housing Panel met in December to look at rent performance (2 / 2) and proposed changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme (3 / 3). The Panel meets on 1 February to pre-scrutinise the Private Sector Housing Policy and Externally Leased HRA Properties – Rent Setting decisions and receive a presentation on the Review of Older Persons Accommodation.

Finance Panel

11. The Finance Panel has been busy with the Budget Review and also met on 28 January to pre-scrutinise reports on Council's Capital Strategy, Treasury Management function and Energy and Water supply contract, making recommendations on each.

Looking Ahead

12. Scrutiny will soon be inviting suggestions from Members for topics and services to be included in next years' scrutiny work programme. I would encourage Members to come forward with ideas.
13. In the meantime the Committee aims to complete as much of its current work programme as possible, although some topics may need to be carried forwards in to next year. The priority in terms of review work is to conclude the work of the Equality and Diversity Review Group, which is expected to report in April. The Committee won't be establishing any new Review Groups in the current year.

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