



2015/16 Annual Report of Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

Foreword by the Chair and Vice Chair

Noted Victorian historian Lord Acton, well known for his progressive views on democracy, freedom and the operation of government, once wrote that ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely’.

In this short sentence Acton effectively summed up the reasons why scrutiny is so important. Without effective checks and balances, there is always a risk that those wielding power will not respect the tenets of good governance.

In Oxford, we are glad to report that Councillors from all parties have supported and embraced the concept of scrutiny. This can be seen, most clearly, in the number of scrutiny recommendations that have been accepted by City Executive Board and the way in which Scrutiny, through its panels and review groups, has challenged the Council to improve the efficiency with which it operates and the quality of the services it delivers.

When our Scrutiny committee offers helpful challenges to thinking and plans, our Council gets more things right and delivers the best possible value for money for local taxpayers. During tough financial times for authorities all around the country, it's critically important that Oxford seizes every opportunity for saving and generating funding. Our Scrutiny Committee is working hard to create the greenest, healthiest, and best educated city, with support nets for the most vulnerable, by searching for - and in many cases, exploiting - these opportunities.

Councillor Craig Simmons
Chair, Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Tom Hayes
Vice-Chair, Scrutiny Committee

“After my second year as Chair of Scrutiny, it is time to stand down and hand the reigns on to another Councillor. I would like to thank the Vice Chair, Cllr Tom Hayes, for his support and the officers from Democratic Services for their guidance and advice. I would to extend my thanks to all members who have participated in this importance process. The Council is measurably better as a result”. – Councillor Craig Simmons, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee

Summary of scrutiny activity during 2015/16

Meetings

41 meetings in total:

- 11 Committee meetings
- 7 Housing Panel meetings
- 4 Finance Panel meetings
- 6 Guest Houses Review Group meetings
- 5 Budget Review Group meetings
- 4 Equality and Diversity Review Group meetings
- 2 Cycling Review Group meetings
- 1 Flooding Panel meeting

- 1 PSPO Panel meeting

Items

70 items considered:

- 35 City Executive Board decisions (including 1 call in)
- 35 Other issues prioritised by Scrutiny

Reports

49 reports to CEB including major reports on:

- Combatting Inequality
- Supporting City Centre Businesses
- Cycling
- Guest Houses
- Budget Review

Recommendations

207 recommendations:

- 148 (71%) Agreed
- 32 (15%) Agreed in part
- 27 (13%) Not agreed

About Scrutiny

Most major City Council decisions are taken by the City Executive Board, which is made up of ten elected Councillors from the controlling political group. In operating this form of decision making arrangement the Council is required by law to have a dedicated Scrutiny Committee made up of elected Councillors who are not on the Board. Their role is to provide a check and balance function that holds the Board to account and provides a formal means for 'backbench' Councillors to contribute to Council decision making, similar to the role of Select Committees at the UK Parliament.

Scrutiny is empowered to question council decision makers and to make recommendations to them about their decisions or about any issue affecting the local area or its inhabitants that Scrutiny has chosen to investigate.

The work of Scrutiny helps to provide assurance that the Council is performing well, providing value for money and taking the best decisions it can to improve public services and the quality of life for people in Oxford. It also helps to open up Council decision making and promote public engagement in democratic processes.

Scrutiny at Oxford City Council

Oxford City Council has a well-established scrutiny function led by a 12-member Scrutiny Committee that meets in public 10 times per year. Meetings are timed to enable the Committee to make recommendations about selected decisions before they are taken by the Board.

The Committee has cross-party membership and is chaired by an opposition Scrutiny Councillor who is elected at the first meeting of the Council year.

The Committee also agrees a work plan at the start of each year including determining which of the long list of topics and issues that Councillors have highlighted should be prioritised for scrutiny during the year. Some of these issues are delegated to two standing panels, which meet approximately five times per year, and to time-limited review groups, which can look at certain topics in detail over a series of meetings. The work plan itself is reviewed at each Scrutiny meeting to ensure that it remains current.

Call in

Call in is a statutory function that enables Councillors to challenge decisions that have been taken before they are implemented. If a call in request from any 4 Councillors or the Chair of Scrutiny is deemed valid the Scrutiny Committee will hear both sides of the argument and decide whether or not to refer the decision back to the Board with reasons why it should be re-considered.

Get involved

There are many opportunities for members of the public and representatives of groups and organisations to get involved in the work of Scrutiny. You can:

- Attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, Standing Panels and some review groups, except in instances where confidential information is to be discussed. Details of these meetings are displayed in the Town Hall and on our website.
- Speak on any agenda item with the prior agreement of the chair by emailing democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk. Please give at least 24 hours' notice. The chair will decide how long you can speak for.
- Suggest a topic for the Scrutiny Work Plan by completing and submitting our [Suggestion Form](#).
- Raise issues with your local City Councillor and request that Scrutiny consider this as part of a Councillor Call for Action.
- Watch out for consultations, surveys and requests for evidence by registering at <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation>.

Scrutiny Committee

Membership:

Councillor Craig Simmons (Chair)
Councillor Tom Hayes (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan (to September)
Councillor Van Coulter
Councillor Roy Darke
Councillor James Fry
Councillor Andrew Gant (from September)
Councillor Sam Hollick
Councillor David Henwood
Councillor Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan
Councillor Jennifer Pegg (from December)
Councillor Linda Smith
Councillor Sian Taylor
Councillor Louise Upton (to December)

The Scrutiny Committee is responsible for the overall management of the Council's scrutiny function and decides which topics, issues and decisions will be considered at Scrutiny meetings. These items are all listed in an annual work plan which is agreed each summer and reviewed regularly during the year to take account of any emerging issues and upcoming decisions.

The Committee also sets the remits and membership of two standing panels, which are themed sub-committees that consider all issues and decisions within their given remits. This year the Committee agreed to continue with the Finance Panel and Housing Panel and membership of the Housing Panel was increased from four to six Councillors to provide opportunities for more Councillors to get involved in Scrutiny.

A small number of issues prioritised by the Committee are delegated to review groups for more detailed scrutiny over a series of meetings. Review groups often engage with partner organisations and expert witnesses before producing substantial evidence-based reports with recommendations. This year review groups were set up to look at safeguarding practices in guest houses and issues of equality and diversity in the Council workforce. A review of the Council's annual budget and medium term financial strategy was delegated to the Finance Panel. The Committee also established one-off panels to scrutinise efforts to reduce sewerage flooding in Oxford and a proposed Public Spaces Protection Order covering Oxford City Centre.

Approximately half of all items listed on the Scrutiny Work Plan were considered at meetings of the Scrutiny Committee. These include items on preventing elderly isolation, taxi licensing, discretionary housing payments, and the work of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, which is a joint committee of the six councils in Oxfordshire that facilitates collaboration on economic development, strategic planning and growth. The Committee also scrutinised various Council decisions through the year, including decisions on grant allocations to community and voluntary groups, resettling Syrian refugees in Oxford, the redevelopment of the Oxpens area, and the Council's Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy. In many cases, these items resulted in reports and recommendations to the City Executive Board.

Scrutiny also has a role in monitoring Council performance and received quarterly reports on a set of selected performance indicators. This enabled Scrutiny Councillors to track Council performance in key areas and, where necessary, hold the organisation to account for under-performance against targets.

Guest Houses

Membership:
Councillor Van Coulter (Chair)
Councillor Michele Paule
Councillor Gwynneth Royce
Councillor Craig Simmons

A high profile investigation into suspected serious sexual offences against children in Oxfordshire revealed that a guest house was one of a number of premises where offenders took young girls to have sex. Scrutiny Councillors raised concerns that the regulatory framework and powers available to the authorities to intervene in guest

houses were inadequate, and exploring these issues was the highest priority for the Scrutiny Committee in 2015/16.

The Guest Houses Review Group was chaired by Councillor Van Coulter and sought to understand what was already being done to prevent exploitation in guest houses, and to consider the case for further interventions, including the introduction of a voluntary code of practice for guest house owners to sign up to.

The Review Group met six times from August to December 2015 including four evidence sessions where Councillors spoke in confidence with a range of witnesses. These included people who own or run guest houses in the City, an independent trauma advisor who works with victims of exploitation, and representatives of the various agencies involved in regulating guest houses, such as the police, fire authority, trading standards, environmental health and community safety.

During their deliberations the Review Group concluded that there was a strong case for the introduction of a voluntary code of good practice for guest house owners to sign up to. This proposal was found to complement other initiatives aimed at improving standards in guest houses. It would also provide assurance that guest house owners are committed to operating their premises in accordance with good practices that can help to deter, prevent and disrupt criminal activities. The Review Group identified a number of good practices that were not routinely practiced across the sector and suggested that these should be included in the code. No one the Review Group spoke to objected outright to this proposal and amongst guest house owners there was an acknowledgment of the problem and a willingness to co-operate.

The City Executive Board agreed in principle to the introduction a voluntary code of good practice and the Scrutiny Committee will monitor progress after 12 months.

'It is clear some offenses of exploitation have taken place within a number of Oxford's guest houses. Some owners of guest houses already work to very good standards, sharing suspicions and incidents with the police and having various measures in place that can deter potential perpetrators. Owners of other establishments accepted they have had little oversight of who comes and goes from guest rooms, but each showed a willingness to improve standards' – Councillor Van Coulter, Chair of the Guest Houses Review Group

Agreed recommendations called for:

- The introduction of a voluntary code of good practice
- Targeted promotion of the code to institutions based in the City
- Better signposting to advice and guidance for guest house owners
- Prompt attention to requests for assistance at guest houses

Equality and Diversity

Membership:

Councillor Tom Hayes (Chair)
Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan
Councillor Sian Taylor

Councillor David Thomas

The second scrutiny review of the year had a more internal focus on exploring issues of equality and diversity in the Council workforce. A Review Group led by Councillor Tom Hayes was tasked with identifying barriers faced by under-represented groups in recruitment and career progression at the Council, and understanding how the Council prevents and addresses instances of discrimination, including specifically discrimination against LGBT employees.

The Review Group began by examining employee equalities data held by the Council and comparing this with information from the most recent Oxford census. This enabled Councillors to make a number of observations about the profile of the Council workforce and identify under-representations of minority ethnic groups, women, people with disabilities and LGBT groups in different parts of the Council workforce.

A number of possible explanations for the under-representation of different groups were considered in discussions with Council officers and trade union representatives and further measures were identified that could help to reduce barriers experienced by these groups. Instances of reported discrimination were found to be very low but the Review Group felt that more could be done to prevent unconscious bias and make the workplace more inclusive of diverse groups, and in particular, transgender people.

Agreed recommendations called for:

- Job vacancy advertising in community settings
- A more targeted approach to talent management
- Unconscious bias training for recruiting managers
- Adding the gender-neutral title 'Mx' alongside existing options on Council forms

'When our Council gets diversity right and looks more like the communities we serve, our Council gets more things right and delivers the best possible value for money for local taxpayers. Further improvements are possible, and we offer concrete accounts of the gaps that need filling and our thinking on the measures that can best fill them' – Councillor Tom Hayes, Chair of the Equality and Diversity Review Group

Inequality

A review group was set up in the previous year to examine how the Council could maximise its impact in combating social and economic inequality in the City. Councillor Van Coulter chaired this wide-ranging review. The Review Group's 21 recommendations were informed by evidence from members of the public, social researchers and representatives of numerous partner organisations, including; Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, Citizens Advice, Age UK, the Child Poverty Action Group, Asylum Welcome, Healthwatch Oxfordshire and the Living Wage Foundation.

The Review Group made recommendations about, amongst other things, boosting the supply of affordable housing including keyworker housing, further interventions to improve standards in the private rented sector, closer working with health partners and continued efforts to combat financial exclusion.

The City Executive Board responded to the recommendations in October 2015, agreeing over two thirds in full or in part. The Committee will receive an update report in order to track progress and implementation in autumn 2016.

Local Economy

In 2014/15 the Local Economy Review Group, led by Councillor James Fry, focused on support for independent retailers during a period of major redevelopment in the City Centre. In June 2016 the Committee received a 12 month update report to enable Councillors to track progress.

Developments one year on included progress in supporting businesses to draw up proposals for a Business Improvement District for the City Centre. A long term strategy for the City Centre was also in development but the Committee heard that it might not be possible to progress some of the priorities identified by the Review Group, such as encouraging distinctive 'local quarters' in and around the City Centre, due to a resource-intensive review of the Council's Local Plan.

The Committee restated its support for the Review Group's recommendations, welcomed progress in some areas and urged officers to implement outstanding recommendations, such as doing more to facilitate the temporary use of empty retail premises for things like pop-up shops.

Cycling

The Cycling Review Group, led by Councillor Louise Upton, was also established in 2014/15 but concluded its work during summer 2015. The Review Group made the case for having an overall cycling strategy and a dedicated Cycling Officer for the City. The Review Group also highlighted opportunities to ensure the Council's planning policies support its vision for Oxford to become one of the great cycling cities of Europe.

The Board responded positively to the Review Group's nine recommendations in September, agreeing six in full and three in part. The Board agreed to explore the scope for an innovative partnership approach with major employers that would deliver the objectives behind the suggestion for a dedicated Cycling Officer at lower cost. The Committee will be monitor progress and implementation during the year ahead.

Waste Water Flooding

Former Councillor Roy Darke convened a second meeting with Thames Water Utilities (TWU) in July 2015. This enabled Councillors to monitor the progress of a substantial long-term catchment study of Oxford's sewerage system, which is intended to identify issues and priority improvement works.

TWU reported that during their initial investigations they came across a number of serious problems, which they had been dealing with on a find and fix basis. The next phase of the study would involve developing predictive 3D modelling of the sewerage system in order to manage flows in real time and prevent instances of sewerage flooding.

The Panel recommended that the Council continues to engage proactively with TWU at a senior level through the Oxford Area Flood Partnership and other channels, and this recommendation was agreed by the Board.

‘The Scrutiny Committee pushed for this study and I’m delighted it’s now happening and progressing well. We originally thought it would be some years before we saw noticeable improvements so the find and fix system being actively pursued by TWU is particularly pleasing. The removal of fatbergs and other obstructions will be making an immediate difference and we are already seeing less sewage flooding in parts of the city’. – Former Councillor Roy Darke, Chair of the Waste Water Flooding Panel.

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs)

The Scrutiny Committee has kept a close watch on Council proposals to utilise new powers aimed at tackling anti-social behaviours in the City Centre and on the Oxford Waterways. The proposed PSPOs generated public and media interest and a number of residents took the opportunity to address Councillors when these decisions came to Scrutiny.

The Committee tasked a one-off Panel, Chaired by Councillor Andrew Gant, with questioning Council decision makers and scrutinising the City Centre PSPO decision in detail before reporting back to the Committee with their findings. Despite differing views on the inclusion of certain behaviours in the PSPOs, the Committee made a number of suggestions for strengthening the proposals which were agreed by the Board.

After the City Centre PSPO decision was taken, four Councillors exercised their right to call it in for further scrutiny. At the call in meeting the Committee agreed by a majority vote that the decision should stand.

Later in the year the Committee scrutinised proposals to consult on a PSPO covering the Oxford Waterways. The Committee considered submissions from members of the public before recommending that the documentation should be revised and improved prior to the start of a formal consultation. This recommendation was agreed by the Board and the start of the consultation was delayed.

Finance Panel

Membership:

Councillor Craig Simmons (Chair)

Councillor James Fry

Councillor Jean Fooks

Councillor Tom Hayes

The Finance Panel is responsible for overseeing and scrutinising the Council's financial performance. It does this by monitoring spend throughout the year, looking at selected financial issues and decisions and conducting a detailed review of the Council's annual budget and medium term spending proposals.

This year the Panel engaged with representatives of several external bodies in considering a number of financial themes. These included exploring the case for borrowing or investing in the Municipal Bonds Agency, assessing opportunities for the Council to utilise alternative funding models such as crowd-sourcing, and examining the provision of credit union services in the City. The Panel also requested a report on the numbers and costs of different Council Tax exemptions and discounts, welcoming the use of additional tools and resources to crack down on fraudulent claims.

The Finance Panel conducted an in depth review of the Council's budget proposals over the New Year period, questioning senior managers on budgetary changes and testing assumptions about spending levels, income targets and financial pressures. Councillors were pleased to conclude that the General Fund remained in good shape but had significant concerns about the impacts of government policy changes, such as annual reductions in social rents, on the Housing Revenue Account. The Panel made 24 recommendations to the Board aimed at strengthening the proposals and maximising the Council's financial position. 21 of these were agreed in part or in full.

Other financial decisions scrutinised by the Panel included decisions on the Council's Capital Strategy, Treasury Management Strategy, Debt Policy and energy and water contracts. The Panel also received an update report following recommendations made to the Board last year on maximising the benefits of European Funding. The Panel was pleased to see their recommendations being actioned and making a difference.

'We cannot spend what we do not have. Thus sound finances must form the basis of any well run organisation. The role of Finance Panel is to keep a watchful eye on the Council's finances, to check that they are robust, as well as looking for revenue-raising opportunities and innovative means of making savings without compromising on the quality or quantity of the services the Council delivers.' – Councillor Craig Simmons, Chair of Finance Panel

Housing Panel

Membership:

Councillor Linda Smith (Chair)

Councillor Elise Benjamin

Councillor David Henwood

Councillor Sam Hollick

Councillor Gill Sanders

Councillor Liz Wade

Geno Humphrey (tenant co-optee)

The Housing Panel is tasked with scrutinising strategic housing and landlord services, issues and decisions. The lack of affordable housing is a big issue in Oxford and a number of major housing-related decisions were taken by the Council during 2015/16, so the Panel had a busy year.

Members of the Housing Panel joined with the Finance Panel in considering the implications of national policy changes on the Housing Revenue Account, and in scrutinising a decision to establish a Council-owned housing company. Other housing decisions considered by the Panel included decisions on the Oxford Growth Strategy, the allocation of homelessness prevention funds, a major investment in homelessness properties, the extension of a houses in multiple occupation (HMO) licensing scheme and a new Private Sector Housing Policy.

The Panel also monitored the performance of the Council's housing function and considered a number of other issues prioritised by Councillors, including the refurbishment of five tower blocks, the Council's great estates investments, security in communal areas of tower blocks and changes to the Choice Based Lettings scheme for the allocation of social housing.

In April the Panel held a joint meeting with the Tenant Scrutiny Panel dedicated to the topic of tenant involvement. The Panel welcomed the Council's achievement of a tenant engagement accreditation and together with tenant representatives made 14 recommendations for building on recent improvements, which were all agreed or agreed in part by the Board.

“Building more affordable homes, providing a first class service to our existing tenants, improving standards in the private rented sector and fighting homelessness are high priorities for this council. The Housing Panel acts as a critical friend to scrutinise the efforts being made in these areas to help ensure that, whatever policies and budgets come from national government, Oxford City Council will continue to deliver the best possible results” – Councillor Linda Smith, Housing Panel Chair

The year ahead

The Scrutiny Committee has elected Councillor Andrew Gant as Chair for the 2016/17 Council year. The Committee also has four new members in Councillors Jamila Azad, Nigel Chapman, Marie Tidball and Ruth Wilkinson, who replace Councillor Linda Smith, Councillor Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan and former Councillors Roy Darke and Sam Hollick.

The new Committee has prioritised reviews into devolution proposals for Oxfordshire and the impacts of English language schools in the City, including safeguarding concerns around under-18s studying at language schools being accommodated in the private sector. The Committee will continue to scrutinise selected CEB decisions and a number of other issues affecting the City have been included in the Scrutiny Work Plan. These include; air quality, workplace parking levies, the Local Plan review, graffiti prevention and educational attainment. The Committee has also re-appointed to the housing and finance standing panels and referred a number of issues and decisions to them for consideration.

In 2016/17 the Committee will receive update reports following recent scrutiny reviews into Inequality, Cycling and Guest Houses, and will continue to monitor the implementation of all agreed Scrutiny recommendations.

Housing Panel will be chaired by Councillor David Henwood this year after Councillor Linda Smith was appointed to the Board. The Panel plans to engage with representatives of the two universities about their approaches to land management in the City. The Panel will also look at issues around rough sleeping, how to reduce under-occupation in the Council's housing stock and the impacts of major housing investments such as the refurbishment of five tower blocks.

Councillor Craig Simmons remains Chair of the Finance Panel, which will undertake the detailed annual review of the Council's budget proposals early in the New Year. The Panel has also agreed to look at the financial impacts of Brexit, the Council Tax Support Scheme and alternative ways of funding affordable housing. The Finance Panel and Housing Panel will join together in considering the progress of the new Council-owned housing company and in scrutinising the Housing Revenue Account business plan.

Contact us

Scrutiny Officer, St. Aldate's Chambers, 109 St. Aldate's, Oxford, OX1 1DS; tel: 01865 252230; email: democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk