

Supplement for

Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 1 September 2020

6.00 pm

Scrutiny Annual Report

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**2019/20 Annual Report of Oxford City
Council's Scrutiny Committee**

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Chair and Vice-Chair's Foreword

Like everything else, the work of Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee has been affected by the Covid crisis and its consequences. However, we were one of the first strands of the Council to resume our work remotely, and I would like to record my thanks and appreciation to officers in IT, legal, democratic services and other areas who handled the transition smoothly and professionally. Many other councils did not move as quickly.

The range of topics covered by Scrutiny has continued to increase, as made clear by the detailed and comprehensive report which follows. Review groups continue to be an important and constructive forum for focusing on particular issues, though capacity was slightly limited this year by changes among officers, an expected period of purdah leading to the elections scheduled for May 2020 (though these did not of course in the event take place) and the Covid crisis.

Guidance and advice from central government continues to stress the importance of the Scrutiny function to good decision-making. The Parliamentary Select Committee of December 2017 on Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government made clear that a key to success is the willingness of senior officers and Cabinet members to engage, attend meetings and make information available. That willingness has always been abundant in this council, and I would like to thank all those who have attended our meetings, often quite late into the evening.

Finally, I would like to thank officers who have provided reports to Scrutiny, often in addition to the considerable demands of their regular duties, our committee clerk John Mitchell, and in particular our Scrutiny officer Tom Hudson for a seamless transition and for maintaining the high standards of officer support we have been lucky enough to enjoy under a succession of Scrutiny officers.



Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair, Scrutiny Committee 2019/20



Councillor Joe McManners, Vice Chair, Scrutiny Committee 2019/20

Introduction

The dominant theme of 2020 has been Covid-19 pandemic where, in March, the country entered lockdown. Whilst the pandemic has, along with all other aspects of life, had a significant impact on the Scrutiny function it is important to remember that for the majority of the 2019/20 civic year, Scrutiny was unimpacted by the pandemic. It is inevitable that the fundamental societal changes which have been wrought by the pandemic will be people's key focus. Nevertheless, over the last year the Scrutiny function has contributed towards the positive working of the Council and achieved some significant successes. This report seeks to highlight and put on record the contribution.

About the Scrutiny Committee

Most major Council decisions are taken by the Cabinet 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 Scrutiny Committee made up of elected councillors who are not on the Cabinet.

The Scrutiny Committee acts as a counterweight to the Cabinet, empowering twelve cross-party 'backbench' councillors to hold the Cabinet to account for the decisions they take, and contribute to council decision-making. The Scrutiny Committee can also investigate any issue that affects the city or its residents, regardless of whether it is within the direct responsibility of the Cabinet.

The work of Scrutiny helps to provide assurance that the Council is performing well, delivering value for money, and taking the best decisions it can to improve public services and the quality of life for the residents of Oxford.

Committee meetings are scheduled almost every month and residents are encouraged to attend and address the Committee on any issues on the agenda. Generally, the Committee considers a balance of forthcoming decisions to be made by the Cabinet, and a number of other issues that are not necessarily the subject of a forthcoming decision, but merit further investigation.

The Committee agrees a work plan at the start of each year which sets out the various topics and issues that councillors have chosen to focus on. Some of these issues are delegated to themed standing panels, which meet approximately five times each year, and to topical review groups where more detailed scrutiny is required over a series of meetings.

The Scrutiny function is supported by a Scrutiny Officer. Tom Hudson was appointed to this role in August 2019 following the departure of Stefan Robinson.

Making the case for change

Importantly, for the Committee to be effective, it must produce well-reasoned evidence based recommendations to the Cabinet concerning service improvement. The Committee has no power to require that decisions be revised, but a robust argument for change will go a long way in persuading the Cabinet to review their decisions.

Summary of scrutiny activity during 2019/20

Member engagement

A total of eighteen non-executive members from across all political parties were involved in the Scrutiny function, which equates to almost half the total available.

Meetings

In a year truncated by lockdown measures: 33 meetings were held in total:

- 9 Scrutiny Committee meetings
- 3 Housing Panel meetings
- 5 Finance Panel meetings
- 4 Budget Review Group meetings
- 5 Companies Panel meetings
- 7 Climate Emergency Review Group meetings

Items

61 substantive items were considered:

- 27 Cabinet items
- 17 Reports from council companies
- 17 Reports on other issues prioritised by Scrutiny

Reports

Not including the reports arising from Scrutiny Review Groups, 24 reports were presented to the Cabinet.

Recommendations

The total number of recommendations put to the Cabinet and responded to in-year was 105, with almost four in five (79%) being agreed.

Agreed	82	79%
Agreed in part	14	13%
Not agreed	9	9%

This represents a 20% increase in the number of reports made in comparison to the previous year, and over 30% more recommendations. Given that Covid 19 has delayed the responses to the 55 recommendations made via the Climate Emergency Review Group marks a steep increase in activity by Scrutiny.

Shareholder and Joint Venture Group

In addition to the reports heard by Scrutiny and recommendations made to Cabinet, reports and recommendations also were made by the Companies Panel to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, which is made up of the same councillors as Cabinet but acting in a different capacity, that of shareholder. A further 3 reports were sent to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, containing 7 recommendations. Two of these reports, containing 6 recommendations, however, were not considered in-year due to Covid-cancellations, and the other was put into practice before the meeting of the Shareholder Meeting.

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, then the Committee will hear both sides of the argument and decide whether or not to refer the decision back to the Cabinet, individual councillors in the case of decisions about the use of ward member budgets, or officers for key decisions delegated to them, with reasons why the decision should be re-considered. During 2019/20 many important Cabinet decisions were subject to pre-decision scrutiny and there were no call-ins.

Get involved

Though pandemic precautions mean Scrutiny looks a little different to normal, for getting involved this may actually be a boost. There are many opportunities for members of the public and representatives of organisations to get involved in the work of Scrutiny. The Committee would welcome an increase in the number of people attending to speak at its meetings, which are held at 6pm on Zoom. There are multiple ways of getting involved in the work of Scrutiny:

- Attend virtual meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, standing panels and review groups or view via our youtube channel, except in instances where confidential information is to be discussed. Details of these meetings are displayed on our [website](#).
- Speak at a meeting on any agenda item with the prior agreement of the Chair. Please email democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk and give at least 24 hours' notice.
- Suggest a topic for Scrutiny to consider by completing and submitting a Work Plan [Suggestion Form](#).
- Raise issues with your local City Councillor and request that Scrutiny considers this as part of a 'Councillor Call for Action', a mechanism by which members of the public can have issues of concerned given consideration by the Scrutiny Committee.

- Watch out for consultations, surveys and requests for evidence by registering at <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation>.

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Scrutiny Committee

Membership:

Councillor Andrew Gant (Chair)	Councillor Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini
Councillor Joe McManners (Vice-Chair)	Councillor Alex Donnolly
Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan	Councillor James Fry
Councillor Lubna Arshad	Councillor Richard Howlett
Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers	Councillor Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan
Councillor Tiago Corais	Councillor Craig Simmons

The Scrutiny Committee is responsible for the overall management of the Council's Scrutiny function. It decides which topics, issues and decisions will be considered and how. 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 Cabinet decisions. An up to date copy of the Committee's Work Plan can be found on the [Council website](#).

The Committee also sets the remits and membership of its standing panels, which are themed sub-committees that consider all issues and decisions within their given remit.

The Committee has agreed to continue with the Finance Panel and Housing Panel, which have been running for a number of years and are well established. In early 2017, the Committee chose to set up a Companies Panel to oversee the Council's arm's length trading and housing companies, and the Committee opted to continue this arrangement for 2019/20.

A small number of issues prioritised by the Committee can be delegated to review groups for more detailed scrutiny. Review groups actively engage with partner organisations and expert witnesses before producing substantial evidence-based reports with recommendations. This year, two review groups were held, the Climate Emergency Review Group (full details below), as well as the annual review of the Council's budget and medium term financial strategy. As the commissioner of this work the Committee approved the reports of the review groups for submission to Cabinet.

Carbon Reduction

Owing to the Council's commitment to delivering a 'Clean and Green Oxford' the Committee's work included scrutiny of a number of items relating to this issue, including the Council's response to the feedback from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, held in late 2019, plans for the Zero Emissions Zone, feedback on a Go Ultra Low project (a pilot project identifying the challenges of increased kerbside electric charging points prior to wider rollout) and the Annual Air Quality Report. No recommendations were made in response to the Citizens' Assembly,

largely because of the existence of the Climate Emergency Review Group, which ultimately made 55 recommendations. Key areas of discussion focused on how the Council might bring on board those more sceptical of the need for significant action, and the opportunities and challenges afforded by the particularly energising effect on Assembly Participants of the topic of biodiversity and 'greening' the City. On the Zero Emissions Zone the Committee raised questions over the impact of the charging schedule on blue badge holders, and the efficacy of not using fixed cameras for enforcement. Recommendations were made in relation to these, but were not accepted by Cabinet. A recommendation concerning the use of technology to improve the reductions in emissions by hybrid vehicles was accepted. For the Go Ultra Low project, the Committee successfully sought a broadening of the electric transport matrix to ensure electric bike charging would be included within future planning. Concerning the Air Quality Update, the Committee made practical recommendations which were accepted on improving air quality in high-risk areas – around boats, schools and idling vehicles.

Planning and Development

Though the Housing and Finance Panels meet on average five times a year, the Scrutiny Committee meets almost monthly meaning at times where timing, or sometimes simply the weight of the issue at hand, means an issue relevant to a particular Panel is instead considered by the Scrutiny Committee. This year, Scrutiny considered a number of important planning and development-related issues, including proposals for specific sites. The Annual Monitoring report is one of those weighty issues, for it is where the Council reports against its progress against its Local Plan. Though no recommendations were made, the need to balance the access of local residents to housing with allowing the local universities to grow, and the amount of social housing delivered were identified as the key challenges. The Committee also considered the working of the CIL charging schedule, the contributions developers make towards supporting the infrastructure their developments will require. The Scrutiny Committee successfully sought to standardise and tighten exemptions to prevent them being used as loop holes. The Committee also heard a report on the Strategic Direction of the Council's Housing Companies, making recommendations around environmental standards and ensuring the company was resourced and positioned to take advantage of any opportunities for land acquisition as they may arise.

The Scrutiny Committee also considered three specific development proposals, in Blackbird Leys where in wide-ranging discussion recommendations were made to support greater social value arising from the contract, greater carbon reductions and to ensure the continuity of services running from the Leisure Centre during the development. A second major project considered was in regards to the Council's proposals at Floyds Row, the key plank in the Council's increased commitment to addressing rough sleeping in the City. The Committee made successful recommendations concerning cost-management in instances where external factors, such as government grant deadlines, made the Council's project planning processes

impossible to apply, and around increasing the monitoring of outcomes arising from the work commissioned from the service.

Whilst membership of Scrutiny is drawn from all the parties represented on the Council, Scrutiny is apolitical. As a mature function, there is a recognition amongst members of the benefits to the Council of being a 'critical friend', and Scrutiny is recognised as conducting its business in a collegiate manner. Whilst there is generally consensus, on rare occasions this is not the case. For example, the Committee was split over whether to make a recommendation not to proceed with plans for the extension Seacourt Park and Ride, which where it was decided by the Chair's with a casting vote to recommend that the extension not proceed.

Communities and Leisure

Another key strand of the Council's strategy is nurturing 'Strong and Active Communities'. The Scrutiny Committee has considered a large number of reports, seeking to improve further the Council's outcomes in this area. One of the most visible contributions by the Council towards this aim is the provisions of the Council's leisure centres, which are managed by a social enterprise partner organisation called Fusion Lifestyle. Scrutiny recommended greater outreach efforts be made to amongst the most deprived areas within the City to further encourage the use of local leisure facilities, and that there should be a robust action plan for increasing participation in these communities. Later on in the year, the Committee also considered proposals for updating the complex concessionary scheme in light of changes to benefits. The Committee made a series of recommendations trying to prevent a cliff-edge for those whose concessionary benefits were being changed as part of the modernisation programme.

Oxford's Waterways are much more than simply a leisure asset, contributing to the City's economy, its biodiversity and cultural heritage also. The Council has led on bringing key stakeholders together on Oxford Waterways Project to maximise the potential of the Waterways and to safeguard the needs of those who reside on the water. The breadth of issues covered were reflected by the number of recommendations made by the Committee, nine in total, the highest of any single Committee report. Recommendations were made in regards to areas where it was felt that the Council could benefit from coming to a considered and formal position as to how the waterways fit into wider city-strategies, and specific steps to maintain and or maximise the amenity of the waterways in the future, particularly around access, biodiversity and recognising their contribution to local history and heritage.

Oxford City Council also supports communities through its grant-giving process. In addition to the £1,515, 043 awarded by the council leveraged a further £4,264,575 of funding for the sector, or nearly £3 for every £1 invested, supporting approximately 200,000 people (some people may have benefitted multiple times, others from outside the City). The Committee's consideration of the Grants Programme

reinforced to all present the variety of organisations and communities the Council supports through the programme. The focus of discussion and recommendations were around ensuring the Oxford lottery was sufficiently publicised internally and externally, and ensuring organisations outside the current recipients – including social enterprises – were enabled to apply for grant funding on an equal footing to existing groups.

Citizen Engagement

An important thread running through the Scrutiny Committee's work this year has been in regards to how the Council engages with its residents. Indeed, whilst not taken forward, this was posited as a potential Review Group theme. Nevertheless, Scrutiny gave particularly strong thought to it when looking at the Council's draft Council Strategy 2020-24, and the Customer Experience Strategy, which considered the relationships and challenges of wanting to provide an increasingly digital offer to residents and customers, whilst also recognising that the needs of vulnerable people must be safeguarded. The Committee explored the relationship between customer engagement and wider citizen engagement and made recommendations requesting that the considerations of the Strategy be extended to the Council's companies, that specific measures be taken to protect the vulnerable, greater targeting be made on the basis of the types of the Council's customers, and steps taken to extend the engagement by citizens in Council decisions. Recommendations around the Council Strategy tended to focus on making explicit positive aspects of the Council's activity that through familiarity may have become normalised or taken for granted: its work engaging residents, the 'Oxford Model', and the drive to reduce inequalities underpinning the Council's work, as well as comments to improve clarity for readers.

Equalities

A shared concern across the Council has been to look at the way the Council engages with stakeholders from minority groups, and to promote access and equality for them. This work included a review of the physical accessibility of the Town Hall but also addressed other issues. One important issue was that of the impact of Universal Credit, the challenges of which fall disproportionately upon women and disabled people. Whilst a function administered by central government and only partially within the gift of the Council to influence, the Committee made recommendations around areas it could influence, notably the adequacy of its Discretionary Housing Payments to support those in need.

Equality for and within the staff was also considered, with reports on the level of the gender pay gap, and a more general equalities report considered also. The Annual Gender Pay Gap report highlighted the two main causes of the Council's pay gap. Firstly, the greater proportion of men in higher-paying roles, and secondly, the significantly higher proportion of women working part time. The main area of discussion was over parenting responsibilities and their impact predominately falling

upon women. Scrutiny's recommendation was made in relation to increasing the number of men taking shared parental leave. The Committee also had significant discussion around the Annual Equalities report, welcoming the progress made to date and recognising the work still to do. The key areas around which its recommendations clustered were structural issues around BAME and female recruitment and promotion, means of engaging BAME communities, the duties of the Council as a shareholder to Oxford Direct Services, examining more closely the reasons for non-disclosure of sexuality amongst staff, and preparing the Council to be able to build on successful models in the future.

The Committee also monitored Council performance on a quarterly basis and held the organisation to account for underperformance when required, as well as seeking to improve the standard and accessibility of the performance data. Key performance indicators that the Committee monitored related to customer care, job creation and training in the local community, carbon-reduction and capital spending within the Communities portfolio of the Council, heavily used by the BAME community.

Thanks

The Committee would like to thank everyone who has played a part in the Scrutiny process this year including Scrutiny councillors, members of the Cabinet, council officers, representatives of partner organisations, expert witnesses and the public.

The Climate Emergency Review Group



“Though the threat posed by Climate Change has been apparent to the scientific community for decades, the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 2018, which starkly laid out the consequences of failing to prevent temperature rises of above 1.5C, was a catalyst for public and institutional action. In Oxford, over 10,000 people participated in Climate Strikes, whilst the City Council held a Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change to consider the appetite amongst residents for the trade-offs necessary to reduce carbon emissions to zero at a faster pace than central government’s target, and developed a response in light of the positive feedback arising from the Assembly.

Within that context, the Climate Emergency Review Group was established to provide independent Scrutiny on the Council’s approach and to generate new ideas. With such a huge topic it was necessary to reduce the scope, meaning the group focused on the largest cause of Oxford’s emissions, buildings (over 80%), and an area over which the Council has influence via its Planning powers and its role as a housing developer and landlord. A total of 55 recommendations were made, touching on almost every Cabinet portfolio within the Council.

I would like to thank the significant number of highly informed and willing guests, who were prepared to share with us their views and ideas. In particular, thanks to local company Greencore Construction, who hosted the Review Group and other councillors and officers at their net-zero development in Southmoor. I also wish to commend the work and dedication of officers and Review Group members.

Usually Cabinet would have responded to a Review Group’s recommendations by this stage. However, due to the wide range and complexity of the recommendations it was agreed that cabinet take more time to do so thoroughly. Unfortunately Cabinet’s response has been understandably further delayed by COVID. We now look forward to members exploring the issues carefully for their response in November.”

***Councillor Richard Howlett, Chair of the Climate Emergency Review Group
2019/20***

Following the Council’s decision to declare a Climate Emergency in January 2019, the Oxford Citizens’ Assembly on Climate Change was held to explore whether, when demographically representative members of the city were informed of the consequences and trade-offs, there was support to bring forward central government’s target of 2050 for the city to become net zero. The response was

unambiguously in favour, with the majority of Assembly Members (37 out of 41) feeling that Oxford should aim to achieve 'net zero' sooner than 2050 and a widespread belief that Oxford should be a leader in tackling the climate crisis.

The Climate Emergency working group was established to look primarily at the Council's influence over Oxford's built environment. An estimated 81% of all Oxford's emissions relate to buildings and the activities within them. The Review Group sought to examine the opportunities in its role as a commercial and residential landlord, as a house builder and developer, and as a planning authority and other regulatory functions. In addition, however, it was recognised that the Council is only one of a number of key stakeholders in addressing local emissions, but it has an outsized ability to communicate, convene and influence. It is estimated that although it is responsible for only 1% of local emissions, the Council has a degree of influence over 66%. The Review Group, therefore, sought to look at the opportunities for bringing other stakeholders together in addressing emissions also. Finally, although the primary focus was on buildings, biodiversity had emerged from the Citizens' Assembly as a particular concern for residents, so wider themes around carbon reduction were also touched upon.

Key issues the review group sought to explore included:

- Understanding the Council's current ambitions for retrofitting its Council properties
- Considering the particular issues relating to retrofitting
- Looking at the Council's planning and regulatory frameworks to see if there are ways to improve building efficiency within the City
- Considering options for the specifications of the Council's own housing development, and looking at how it approaches non-housing development in regard to energy efficiency
- How can the Council reduce the emissions from staff transport?
- What can the Council do to protect and improve biodiversity in the City?

Oxford is fortunate to count amongst its residents a disproportionate number of leading experts, including in the field of construction and carbon reduction. A total of 15 external contributors shared their expertise, from Dr David Hancock, Construction Director at the Infrastructure and Projects Office, to Oliver Smith, from 5th Studio (responsible for the retrofit of a Grade 1 listed building for Trinity College, Cambridge), from Oxford's Low Carbon Hub to a local zero-carbon construction company, Greencore Construction. Review Group members were also invited to visit Greencore's local development, a net-zero development of passivhaus standard properties in Southmoor to see first-hand the potential of net-zero construction.

The Review Group learned of the challenges faced by the Council in raising the energy efficiency of its housing stock, with huge varieties of construction methods and building-types sitting within the Council's ownership, a high proportion (between 40 and 50%) of which would never be able to be retrofitted to zero carbon standards

but also learnt of alternative financing models, such as the 'comfort payment' used by Nottingham City Homes, to use energy bill savings from efficient homes to part-pay for energy efficiency measures. Recommendations were made in relation to this, carbon efficient redevelopment of houses beyond retrofit, and enabling actions to ensure retrofitting is done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Looking at house-building and development, the Review Group was heavily influenced by the success of Greencore Construction in being able to develop houses at a similar or lower price per sq m compared to other developers of their scale. Recommendations were made in regards to means of building homes to passivhaus standards, but also considered wider issues such as supply-chain development and influencing behaviour in home purchasers.

Regarding its planning and other regulatory functions, the Review Group learned that the Council operated in a challenging environment, where national legislation limited, or threatened to limit, requirements for greater energy efficiency. In terms of its building inspection regime, the Council already faces competition with the private sector with a number of legal disadvantages, making simply increasing the strictness of inspections impractical, as well as unhelpful. For Planning Policy, the Review Group made recommendations around future Local Plan aspirations, documents to encourage good practice and addressing particular issues of frustration by developers, specifically around clarifying requirements when conservation and energy efficiency requirements conflicted.

Recognising the concentration of expertise in Oxford, and its eminence in low carbon transport, the Review Group made recommendations around ideas to generate momentum at regional and national levels also. At the same time, it also made a number of recommendations to support existing local groups through promotion and grant funding, involve parish councils, and provide education to young people.

In its non-building related considerations the Review Group made recommendations to establish an offsetting scheme to balance efficiency of offsetting with delivering local, tangible benefits. A number of recommendations around reducing staff emissions whilst commuting and travelling for work were made, as well as steps such as shower and change gym memberships to encourage greater use of bikes for commuting amongst non-Council workers. Following the interest in biodiversity and 'greening the city' expressed in the Citizens' Assembly, the Review Group made recommendations around strategic planning to protect and enhance biodiversity, fauna-friendly planning policies, and supporting local efforts to increase tree planting through advice and practical support.

In total, 55 recommendations were made, relating to nine out of the ten Cabinet portfolios. Due to breadth and complexity of the recommendations, it was requested by Cabinet and agreed by the Scrutiny Committee to defer Cabinet's response until March. However, the Council's Covid response rightly took priority in March, and,

due to the challenges on resources at the Council, a date of November has been put forward.

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Companies Panel

Membership:

Councillor James Fry (Chair)

Councillor Tom Landell Mills

Councillor Chewe Munkonge

Councillor Craig Simmons



“Unlike many local authorities facing reduced income from central government and checks on the potential to raise revenue through local taxation, Oxford City Council’s response has sought not to cut services. Instead, through the ‘Oxford Model’ it seeks to increase revenues through trading in order to fund the services on which our residents rely. To deliver these revenues, and the wider ambitions of the Council around the services it wishes to deliver to the City, it is the sole shareholder in two companies: Oxford Direct Services, providing street cleaning services, waste and recycling services, building construction, repairs and maintenance, civil engineering and motor transport services, and Oxford City Housing Limited, established to build much-needed social housing in the City. In addition, the Council is engaged in two joint ventures, the regeneration of the area around Oxpens Road, in partnership with Nuffield College, and a housing development with Grosvenor Estate in Barton.

Given the relative nascency of these businesses alongside the major role they are intended to play in generating surpluses for the Council, the Companies Panel has provided oversight of their business plans, governance and finances to ensure returns to the Council, and services (notably by ODS) to residents are maximised. COVID-19 has inevitably harmed the profitability of these companies and joint ventures, and this has made the monitoring of their response to the crisis an important aspect of the Panel’s work.”

Councillor James Fry, Chair, Companies Panel 2019/20

The Companies Panel was established in 2017 to scrutinise the decisions of the Shareholder for the Council’s two wholly owned groups of companies; Oxford Direct Services and the Housing Group. Since then, its remit has expanded to accept progress reports on the Council’s participation in the development undertaken through Barton Park LLP, and the regeneration of the west end of the city centre through the Council’s equal partnership with Nuffield College, referred to as OxWED, or Oxford West End Development.

The Shareholder is the members of Cabinet acting as the owner of the Council’s companies. Due to the commercial nature of information before the Panel, much of the Panel’s work is undertaken in private session and is only provided in outline detail here.

The Companies Panel received quarterly update reports from the Council's Housing Companies, which afforded the opportunity to provide detailed scrutiny in a wide number of areas. The draft and agreed business plan were subjected to particular examination, with financial statements and models being rigorously tested. The response of the company to changes in government policy to enable greater house building within the Housing Revenue Account, and scrutiny over governance, timelines of delivery, overall build quality and carbon reduction targets were all areas brought up on multiple occasions by the Panel. As referenced in the summary of Scrutiny activity section above, two reports were sent to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group. One recommendation was made in regards to the practical steps for appointing a Chief Executive, which was undertaken before the recommendation was considered at the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group. The other made recommendations around energy efficiency, encouraging the Shareholder to take a closer look at different models of funding energy efficiency measures and seeking greater clarity on the trade-offs involved in increasing the efficiency of homes built by the company. This item was delayed due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The Panel's scrutiny of Oxford Direct Services (ODS) involved quarterly performance updates. Key issues presented and raised included governance, business development, transition plans (particularly in relation to IT and a new depot), staff and absence management, accounts and performance. The Panel submitted one report, making recommendations which would make clarity over the success of the company's business development clearer, and a suggestion to work with the Council in regards reinvigorating the toilet scheme made available by shops in the City Centre.

From September 2019, the Companies Panel also began to consider reports relating to the Council's participation in the Barton Park LLP. Over the course of the year three update reports were received, with the Panel following updates around house-building, sales, traffic management, and infrastructure – public transport, school and sporting facilities. No recommendations were made.

At the same time as reports on Barton Park LLP, the Companies Scrutiny Panel also began to receive regular reports from Oxford West End Development. Reports heard largely outlined the strategy of the partnership. Though it did not make any recommendations, the Panel raised questions in regards to valuations, returns, the workings of any future development partnership and how the Council's green ambitions might be embedded within the development at an early stage.

Finance Panel

Membership:

Councillor James Fry (Chair)
Councillor Chewe Munkonge
Councillor Craig Simmons
Councillor Roz Smith



“Whilst announcements over grant cuts to local government have receded from the news, the Council, in line with local government more generally, is still faced with the dwindling revenues arising from the damage to the local economy from COVID-19 and the major shortfall in the compensation offered by Central Government towards the costs imposed upon the Council by the crisis. Seeking to maintain or, in the case of the Council’s response to the Climate Emergency, enhance the Council’s service levels requires additional income to be generated. Unlike government grants, however, the remaining options for revenue-raising by the Council are not risk-free, making the work of the Finance Panel in providing independent scrutiny on value for money, risk and returns on investment all the more critical in ensuring the public’s money is managed to ensure maximum public benefit. This year the Panel has devoted particular attention to the Council’s Treasury Management, Property Investment and management of its Capital Programme, where new procedures have been implemented to prevent the slippage that has been a major issue in the past. In this context, it is important that the Panel has added the monitoring of Performance to its scope. However, it has also taken an active interest not simply in maximising the resources available, but ensuring those resources are spent well and where they are most needed, looking at, for example, maximising social value through the Council’s procurement processes and the terms of the Council’s local Council Tax Reduction Scheme, where the Council is one of the few maintaining its full scheme, despite financial pressures.”

Councillor James Fry, Chair, Finance Panel 2019/20

The Finance Panel has a role in overseeing and scrutinising the Council’s financial performance and budgetary proposals. The Panel monitors Council spend throughout the year, considers selected financial issues and decisions, and conducts a detailed annual review of the Council’s budget and medium term spending proposals.

The Panel conducted its annual review of the Council’s budget proposals over the New Year period, questioning senior managers about budgetary changes and testing assumptions about spending levels, income targets and financial pressures. Underpinning its 25 recommendations were a push for greater investment in efficiency measures, particularly digital efficiency, greater clarity for the public on the amount of money being spent on areas of public concern such as green spending

and rough sleeping, and clarification around the Council's approach towards property investment. Of the 25 recommendations made to Cabinet, 19 were agreed in full, with another three agreed partially.

Other financial decisions scrutinised by the Panel included decisions on the Council's Treasury Management Strategy and investment property development opportunities and the proposed changes to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, a scheme which provides up to 100% relief in Council Tax for those in financial need. The Panel also reviewed the Council's quarterly financial and risk reports to monitor spending and progress against savings targets, holding officers to account for delays in capital spending.

The Panel also sought an update on the progress made on a topic it had previously championed, embedding socially valuable traits – be they apprenticeships, good conditions for staff or low carbon – within the Council's procurement process. It was pleased to note that the Council is now applying a social value weighting on all contracts above £25,000, far below the government-mandated minimum of approximately £150,000. The Panel has pushed for the Council to learn from other leading councils to balance the need for ensuring stated benefits are realised without becoming overly bureaucratic, and from key stakeholders (including small and medium sized enterprises) on what challenges they are experiencing.

Housing Panel

Membership:

Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers (Chair)

Councillor Michael Gotch

Councillor Richard Howlett

Councillor Sian Taylor

Councillor Liz Wade

Councillor Dick Wolff



The remit of the Housing Panel is extremely wide, covering issues as diverse as strategic planning, the Council's functions as a landlord and rough sleeping and reflects the multi-faceted nature of the housing challenge in Oxford. Over the last year, the Housing Panel has devoted particular attention to issues around rough sleeping, monitoring the Council's step-change efforts to ensure that nobody should need to sleep rough on the streets of Oxford. I would like to commend all the work undertaken

throughout the Council in making this happen.

The Housing Panel has been supported in its scrutiny of the Council's by a number of external advisors from the Lived Experience Advisory Forum. Having people with direct experience of the issues being discussed has proven extremely valuable to the Panel, and to the wider Council. It has also provided an opportunity for stakeholder groups to influence Council policy, and hearing the voices of these stakeholders is something I am keen that we continue to do in the year ahead.

I would also like formally to welcome Tony Buchanan to the Housing Panel, following his appointment as a tenant co-optee. Tony has provided pertinent challenge and wise contributions in his time thus far and we are pleased to have him on board.

Finally, working closely with the Housing and Homelessness teams, I have seen and wish to commend the dedication and relentless effort made during the course of the pandemic to ensure all rough sleepers in our City were housed.

Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers, Chair, Housing Panel 2019/20

The Housing Panel was the hardest hit of the elements of the Scrutiny function by Covid-19, with two out of its five scheduled meetings falling victim to lockdown. On the back of last year's influential No Local Connection Review Group, the Housing Panel devoted a lot of time following up on the delivery of actions arising from that report. Two updates reports were received, in June and November and also reports on the progress of the Housing and Homelessness Strategy and on the results of the Trailblazer project, aimed at preventing homelessness in at-risk groups. With the actions taken by the Council, particularly in regards to its commissioning of Floyds Row, the ability of rough sleepers to receive the support they need to get off the streets has been hugely increased, driven in part by the recommendations of the

Scrutiny Review and continued interest of Housing Panel members. In relation to the Housing and Homelessness Strategy, three recommendations were made around improving the understanding of the support provided by commissioned providers of supported housing, deepening the relationships between the Council and Oxford's Lived Experience Advisory Forum, and embedding homelessness prevention across the Council more widely.

The recommendation around the Lived Experience Advisory Forum is one which arose from the Housing Panel's own experience of seeking the views of key stakeholders from outside the Council. For that item, three ex rough sleepers shared their stories and views and provided a new and valuable avenue of challenge for the Council. Members of the Oxford Influencers, a group of tenants in housing association properties also attended and addressed a Housing Panel meeting for the first time. External representation on the Housing Panel comes not only via groups speaking to relevant items, but through the membership of the Panel itself, where the Council has a tenant co-optee member. The longstanding co-optee on the Housing Panel, Geno Humphrey, decided to step down after four years. Working with the Council's Tenant Involvement Team, however, Tony Buchanan was appointed in his stead.

Beyond homelessness-related issues, the Housing Panel also conducted reviews of regular housing performance, and heard a report on plans for a Community Led Housing project in Champion Way. The Panel learned a lot about broader Community Led Housing models, the possibilities and the Council's existing support for these projects, including providing land for their development. In their recommendations made in response to the report, the Panel sought to expand access to the benefits of community led housing, seeking the Council to promote the potential amongst demographic groups not regularly associated with communal living, and to increase the level of support provided by those who have experience of living in such an environment.

The year ahead

The Scrutiny Committee has re-elected Councillor Andrew Gant as Chair for the 2020/21 Council year and Councillor Joe McManners as Vice-Chair. The Committee also welcomes a new member of the Committee in Councillors in Councillor Shaista Aziz and a returning former-member in Councillor Pat Kennedy. Returning members to the Committee from last year are Councillors; Mohammed Altaf-Khan, Lubna Arshad, Tiago Corais, Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, James Fry, Richard Howlett, Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan and Craig Simmons.

The civic year 2020/21 is clearly one which will be shaped by the Covid pandemic. Most noticeably, following changes to legislation to allow remote meetings, the Scrutiny Committee and its Panels have been meeting virtually over Zoom. This is anticipated to remain the case for the rest of the year. The pandemic also has had more subtle, but more important impacts. A large number of Council plans, decisions and services have been fundamentally jolted by the pandemic, requiring the taking of both short term mitigation measures and longer term reassessments of their suitability in light of the 'new normal'. The Scrutiny Committee has agreed to limit, though not eliminate, non-Cabinet issues in light of the pressures on staff and the number of important Cabinet items needing to be processed.

The Committee has also re-appointed the Companies, Finance and Housing Standing Panels for another year, though the latter two with updated names and remits. The Finance Panel has become the Finance and Performance Panel, with responsibility for overseeing performance management. And whilst its remit already included Homelessness, the Housing Panel has been renamed the Housing and Homelessness Panel officially to reflect the importance of that element of its remit.

Councillor James Fry has been reappointed as Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel. The Panel will again undertake a detailed annual review of the Council's budget proposals early in the New Year and will monitor financial and other performance and decisions through the year. The Companies Panel is also to be chaired by Councillor James Fry and will continue to consider the progress of the Council's wholly owned companies in a time of significant challenge and upheaval.

The Housing Panel will be chaired by Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers, with vice-Chair Shaista Aziz providing updates to the Scrutiny Committee. Over the year, the Panel will scrutinise a number of important housing-related issues, including: Council proposals for HMO and Selective Licensing, the contribution of Housing towards the Carbon Reduction agenda, Rough Sleeping and the impacts of Covid-19, and monitoring Council tenant satisfaction.

As referenced in the Housing Panel section above, last year Scrutiny trialled inviting key stakeholders and those whose lives are directly impacted by Council decisions to participate. The Scrutiny Committee will seek to build on that, both as a means of canvassing information from relevant people, but also as a means of providing an

additional door through which to allow citizens to have an impact on decision-making.

Contact us

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NB - Photographs of 2019/20 membership to be included

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