

To:	Council
Date:	9 February 2017
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 plan – January 2017

Appendix 2 - Scrutiny recommendation tracker – December 2016 to January 2017

Introduction

1. The devolution review has now concluded and the City Executive Board has responded very positively to the report, agreeing all 19 recommendations (see Appendix 2). The Finance Panel's review of the budget is also well underway, with a report going to the City Executive Board on 9 February. The completion of these two major pieces of work mean it is a particularly busy time of year for Scrutiny and I would like to thank all the members, officers and witnesses who have contributed to these reviews, as well as all those who have attended committee and panel meetings over recent weeks.

Work plan

2. The latest Scrutiny work plan can be found in Appendix 1. Scrutiny will be considering a number of interesting and important issues over the coming months, including the council's approach to rough sleeping in the city and proposals for a workplace parking levy. The Committee has capacity for another piece of review work from March-onwards and the topic of that review is yet to be decided.

Current Activity

The Scrutiny Committee

3. The Scrutiny Committee met in December and considered the following items. A special meeting was also held on 12 January where the Committee approved the report of the Devolution Review Group. The numbers of recommendations submitted to the City Executive Board and those agreed (either in full or in part), are shown in brackets.
 - Commissioned Advice Strategy (0 / 0)
 - Safeguarding Language School Students (1 / TBC)
 - Cycling Progress Report (2 / TBC)
 - Sustainable Energy Action Plan (SEAP) for Oxford (0 / 0)
 - Devolution Plans for Oxfordshire (19 / 19)
4. Although the discussion on the Commissioned Advice Strategy didn't result in any recommendations, the Committee did provide some general feedback on the tone and language of the report. The decision on the Strategy was subsequently delayed so that this feedback could be acted upon.

Devolution Review Group

5. The Review Group were asked to look at which governance structures can provide the strong accountable governance to deliver a devolution deal for Oxfordshire while balancing cost savings and stable, high quality long term service delivery.
6. The Review Group's report highlights that a strong case can be made for Oxfordshire to be given devolved powers and funding that would enable the city region to maximise its economic growth potential by investing in transport infrastructure, housing and workplace skills. The Review Group have recommended that all Oxfordshire councils in partnership with the LEP should prioritise securing a devolution deal with government as soon as practicably possible within the current potential window of opportunity.
7. The Review Group recommended that the mayoral combined authority model represents the best basis for moving forwards with an updated and refocused devolution proposal in the context of what was known about government policy on devolution and in the absence of a consensus on around a preferred model of unitary government. The report goes on to discuss how a combined authority could be governed and how the powers of an elected mayor could be constrained, drawing on examples such as the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority.
8. The Review Group also said if local government remains on its current financial trajectory and pressure on services continue to mount then the issue of reorganisation will need to be addressed at some point in the future. The Review Group have produced an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of different proposed governance models, which can help to inform such debates. The Review Group also supported the work taking place to unlock efficiency savings through joint working between the county and district councils.

Housing Panel

9. The Housing Panel held an informal meeting in December to reflect on discussions with representatives of the two universities about the council's planning policies. The Panel will be producing a report with recommendations to feed this into the Local Plan review process. The next Housing Panel meeting is on 1 March 2017, when members will consider issues of homelessness and rough sleeping in the city.

Finance Panel and Budget Review

10. The Finance Panel met in December to consider the budget monitoring report for quarter 2, the treasury management annual report, and a proposal to build a waste transfer station in the city, which members supported.
11. The Panel have since held a further four meetings as the Budget Review Group, including meetings with the Chief Executive and each Executive Director, to focus on the draft budget and medium term financial plan. The Panel found that despite the City Council and local government more generally facing an increasingly challenging financial situation, meaning that budgeting is becoming tighter, the council's finances generally remain in good shape. The Panel's conclusions will be presented to the City Executive Board on 9 February.

Looking ahead

12. The Committee meets on 30 January to scrutinise leisure performance and decisions on grant allocations, the Corporate Plan and the Carbon Management Plan. In late-February the Committee will be speaking to a County Council officer about air quality in the city and a proposed workplace parking levy.
13. The Committee is appointing to a one-off panel chaired by Councillor Coulter to review the report of the Independent Commission on Health Inequalities and consider the council's role in taking their recommendations forwards.
14. The Committee will also agree the topic of its next piece of review work and would welcome suggestions from members.

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