

Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

Annual Report 2016/17

Agenda Item 17

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Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

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**Councillor
Andrew Gant**

Chair, Scrutiny
Committee



**Councillor
Tom Hayes**

Vice-Chair, Scrutiny
Committee

Foreword by the Chair and Vice-Chair

The Local Government Act 2000 is clear about the importance it attaches to good, regular scrutiny of the Executive function. This is particularly the case where the authority adopts the Leader and Executive model, as we do.

The phrase 'critical friend' is often used about the role of scrutiny. To do this we rely on the quality of the advice we receive, and we are lucky, indeed privileged, in the level and quality of support we receive from officers. Our discussions often end with a recognition of the dedication and commitment of the officers before us, sometimes with a round of applause. Our own scrutiny and democratic services officers are exemplary.

We also rely on the attendance of Board members, and we would like to thank all those who have contributed to our meetings.

The Act does allow us to 'require' the attendance of board members, and puts a 'duty' on them to comply, and it clearly makes our work better when they do.

Speakers from outside the council attend on a voluntary basis, and add immeasurably to our work. We are extremely grateful to them.

Scrutiny represents all non-Executive councillors, and we are delighted at the range of members serving on our committees. Members have proposed a range of important topics for detailed consideration, which shows the importance members attach to what we do. This is welcome, and we would encourage all backbench councillors to use the process.

A test of our effectiveness must be robust and inclusive debate. We have had plenty of those, often with forensically detailed knowledge of a particular topic from individual members of the committee. I would like to thank colleagues who take the trouble to bring such detailed preparation for our meetings.

Our example here is our friend Van Coulter. The committee misses him enormously, but his example is always with us.

**Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair and Councillor
Tom Hayes, Vice-Chair (May 2014 to May 2017) of
the Scrutiny Committee**

September 2017

Summary of scrutiny activity during 2016/17



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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 Scrutiny Committee made up of elected councillors who are not on the Board.

Scrutiny acts as a counterweight to the City Executive Board, empowering 'backbench' councillors to hold the Board to account and contribute to council decision-making. Scrutiny can also investigate any issue that affects the city or its inhabitants, whether or not it is the direct responsibility of the City Executive Board.

The work of Scrutiny helps to promote wider engagement in Council decision-making and 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.



Scrutiny at Oxford City Council

The Council's scrutiny function is managed by the 12-member Scrutiny Committee, which has cross-party membership. The Committee is chaired by an opposition councillor who is elected at the first committee meeting of the Council year.

Committee meetings are held in public and are timed to enable the councillors to consider and make recommendations on selected decisions before they are taken by the City Executive Board.

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 per year, and to review groups for more detailed scrutiny over a series of meetings.

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 Scrutiny Committee will hear both sides of the argument and decide whether or not to refer the decision back to the City Executive Board, with reasons why the decision should be re-considered.

Get involved

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

You can:

- Attend meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, standing panels and 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 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. The chair will decide how long you can speak for.
- Suggest a topic for Scrutiny to consider by completing and submitting our Suggestion Form.
- Raise issues with your local City Councillor and request that Scrutiny considers this as part of a Councillor Call for Action.



Witnesses provide evidence to the Inequality Panel in March 2015



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The Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Andrew Gant (Chair)
Councillor Tom Hayes (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jamila Azad
Councillor Nigel Chapman
Councillor Van Coulter (to March)
Councillor James Fry
Councillor David Henwood
Councillor Jennifer Pegg
Councillor Sian Taylor
Councillor Marie Tidball
Councillor Craig Simmons
Councillor Ruth Wilkinson

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 by Scrutiny 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 City Executive Board 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. 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.

A small number of issues prioritised by the Committee are 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 a review group was set up to look at devolution plans for Oxfordshire and the Finance Panel conducted a detailed review of the Council's budget proposals. The Committee also established one-off panels to consider recycling rates, health inequalities and the business plan of the Council's new housing company.

Approximately half of all the items Scrutiny has looked at this year were considered at meetings of the Scrutiny Committee. These included topical issues prioritised by councillors such as safeguarding language school students under the age of 18 living in private accommodation, educational attainment, graffiti prevention and removal, the use of Public Spaces Protection



Orders (PSPOs), air quality and the development of proposals for a workplace parking levy and congestion charging scheme in the city. The Committee was grateful to County Council officers for attending discussions on the latter two items.

Various City Executive Board decisions were also considered by the Committee, including annual decisions on the Council's Corporate Plan, Discretionary Housing Payments Policy, safeguarding assessment, grant allocations to community and voluntary organisations, and the annual service plan for Fusion Lifestyle, which runs the Council's leisure centres. Other notable decisions considered by the Committee included the Council's Commissioned Advice Strategy, Digital Strategy, Carbon Management Plan and proposals to address anti-social behaviour on the city's waterways. The Committee had previously recommended that proposals for a PSPO covering all of the city's main waterways should be revised and welcomed the new approach of using a range of interventions to tackle anti-social behaviour in specific problem areas.

The Panel also monitors Council performance on a quarterly basis and as well as holding the organisation to account for performance where required, has been proactive in suggesting improvements to how the Council monitors its own performance.

The Committee would like to thank everyone who has played a part in the scrutiny process this year including scrutiny councillors, members of the City Executive Board, council officers, partners and the public.

Tribute to Councillor Van Coulter

Councillor Van Coulter sadly passed away unexpectedly in March 2017, having served on the Scrutiny Committee for several years. He was a very engaged scrutiny councillor who always remained focused on making real improvements to peoples' lives. Van chaired a number of high profile scrutiny reviews with distinction, including a major wide-ranging review of inequality in 2014/15, a more recent health inequality panel, and a sensitive review of safeguarding practices in city guest houses. An impeccably observed minute's silence was held at the Scrutiny Committee meeting on 27 March 2017. He will be sorely missed.

“Van was a first-class scrutiny councillor. His interventions were always meticulously prepared, scrupulously backed up by evidence, and always seeking to make things work better for real people, not just score points. He was patient and courteous in committee, and an efficient and businesslike chair. The place I got to know and admire his skills was as a member of the Inequalities Panel, which he chaired. It was a master class. That report continues to resonate. This committee will miss him, but we are certainly better for having known him as a colleague.”

*Councillor Cllr Andrew Gant,
Chair, Scrutiny Committee*



Devolution Plans for Oxfordshire

Membership

Councillor Marie Tidball (Chair)

Councillor Van Coulter

Councillor Andrew Gant

Councillor Tom Hayes

Councillor Craig Simmons

“Our city and the wider county have international significance as a result of our high concentration of human capital, knowledge and innovation. These factors drive economic growth in our region. However, this growth must be matched by public services, housing and infrastructure that meet our population’s needs and aspirations. Devolution would bring substantial financial benefits to Oxfordshire and provide the opportunity to bring governance closer to the people, ensuring that high-quality services better reflect the local needs of the places where our constituents live and work.”

**Councillor Marie Tidball,
Chair, Devolution Review Group**

The Scrutiny Committee prioritised the issue of devolution on the basis that it was one of the biggest issues facing the City Council and local government in Oxfordshire at the time. The Government had actively offered areas in England the chance to have additional funding and devolved powers in exchange for elected mayors or streamlined governance structures. All Councils in Oxfordshire had agreed a joint proposal to put to Government back in February 2016 aimed at unlocking £1bn of funding for infrastructure to realise the local growth potential. In response, Government advised that a deal hinged on strengthening the governance arrangements. However, there was no consensus amongst the six Oxfordshire councils about how the governance arrangements should be strengthened.

The Devolution Review Group was led by Councillor Marie Tidball and set out to examine which governance structures could meet Government requirements and provide for high-quality public services in the county. This included looking at different models of unitary government that could replace the current ‘county and district’ model, as well as the option of having a directly elected mayor for Oxfordshire.

The Review Group considered two independent reports commissioned to examine unitary options for Oxfordshire. The Review Group also heard evidence from a number of key witnesses including the Leaders, Chief Executives and senior officers from Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford City Council, the chairman of Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (a partnership between local authorities and businesses), a representative of Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, consultants from PwC and a consultant who had a leading role in securing a devolution deal for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The Review Group drew on all this evidence in producing an independent assessment of the pros and cons of the different governance options. Their report also highlighted key priorities for Oxfordshire that any future

governance structure would need to support and enable over the longer term.

The Review Group concluded that there was a strong economic case to be made for Oxfordshire to be granted new powers and devolved funding in order to maximise the growth potential of the local economy. Scrutiny councillors also highlighted a potential window of opportunity in which to secure a deal with Government in light of its emerging industrial strategy, the priority being given to a new Oxford to Cambridge 'expressway', and the UK's decision to leave the European Union.

The Review Group found there was an emerging consensus on the option of a directly elected mayor for Oxfordshire and an absence of consensus around a preferred model of unitary government. The Review Group concluded that an elected mayor and combined authority (which brings together council leaders and key partners) represented the best basis on which to move forwards with an updated devolution proposal to present to Government. Their report explores the types of powers that an elected mayor and combined authority for Oxfordshire could have and how they could be held to account effectively.

Key agreed recommendations called for:

- The prioritisation of a devolution deal for Oxfordshire that secures new powers and devolved budgets for transport infrastructure, housing (including social and affordable housing), planning and skills.
- An elected mayor and combined authority for Oxfordshire to exercise these devolved powers in the absence of a consensus around a preferred model of unitary government at this stage
- Continued joint working between the Oxfordshire councils aimed at unlocking efficiency savings.
- A new relationship with Government to ensure that Oxfordshire is forefront in government thinking in terms of trade and inward investment post-Brexit.



Shareholder Panel

Membership

Councillor James Fry (Chair)

Councillor Andrew Gant

Councillor David Henwood

Councillor Craig Simmons

“The creation of the two new wholly Council-owned companies is an important element of the City Council's response to cuts in budgetary support by Central Government and restrictions on the Council's development of Council housing. The formation of the Housing Company is already having tangible benefits in terms of the provision of extra affordable housing. The trading company plans to build upon the commercial success of Direct Services by growing external revenues and returning value to the Council. The Panel is awaiting further details of the business plans of the two companies during the course of its scrutiny role in the 2017/18 Council year.”

Councillor James Fry, Chair, Shareholder Panel

The most significant change affecting the scrutiny function this year has been the establishment of new Council-owned



companies. A Housing Company has been created to deal with certain housing matters and the Council has begun the process of establishing a trading company, which will provide a range of services directly to the Council and compete with the private sector for work in the wider city economy.

While the companies are wholly-owned by the Council, each company is managed by a board of directors operating independently. Strictly speaking the companies are not open to scrutiny in the same way as the Council's own service areas. However, the decisions taken by the Council as the owner of its companies are open to scrutiny and the Scrutiny Committee has established the Shareholder Panel to perform this function. The new Panel was made up of the chairs of the Scrutiny Committee, Finance Panel, Housing Panel and Audit and Governance Committee.

The Shareholder Panel met for the first time in March 2017 to consider the Housing Company's business plan before it was presented to the Shareholder (the members of the City Executive Board meeting as a 'Shareholder Group'). The business plan set out how the Housing Company planned to meet the city's housing need by building new housing on Council-owned land, while also providing a financial return to the Council. Despite having limited time to digest the paperwork, scrutiny councillors were supportive of the broad aims of the Housing Company and able to satisfy themselves that the business plan was based on prudent assumptions. The Panel asked for a sensitivity analysis in order to better understand how different factors such as interest rate changes could affect the business plan in future, as well as modelling of different tenure mix options (the balance between social rent, shared ownership and market housing that the company could build). The Panel's findings were presented to the Shareholder Group before it formally endorsed the Housing Company's business plan.



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Health Inequalities

Membership

Councillor Van Coulter (Chair)

Councillor Sian Taylor

Councillor David Thomas

Councillor Liz Wade

Following on from a major wide-ranging scrutiny review of inequality in 2014/15, the Committee set up a Health Inequalities Panel, also chaired by Councillor Coulter, to consider the findings of a report by the independent Oxfordshire Health Inequalities Commission. The Commission had held a number of public meetings and taken evidence from a wide range of organisations and individuals before producing a substantial report with sixty recommendations to public bodies including health commissioners, providers and local councils.

The Panel reviewed the Commission's report and spoke to the chair, Professor Sian Griffiths OBE, as well as the Council's Older Person's Champion and officers from Council services that affect health and wellbeing, such as Housing Services.

The Panel identified ten recommendations that would enhance the work of the Council in tackling health inequalities and all of these were agreed by the City Executive Board. Since the meeting the Council has also allocated £100k (on the basis that it would be matched by Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group) to support targeted interventions to tackle health inequalities and deliver better health outcomes in the city.

Key recommendations called for:

- Better monitoring of the impacts of key council services on health and wellbeing.
- Taking health and wellbeing impacts into account in Council decision-making.
- The delivery of more health services in community facilities.
- Wider promotion of the Oxford Living Wage.

Recycling

“The Recycling Panel has supported the City Council’s initiatives to boost the rate of recycling, but with the city’s high population turnover, notably of students, there is always the need to educate newcomers on the need to recycle more of their household waste. Therefore the Panel pressed for a budget for educational door-to-door visits by officers and the extension of food waste collections to blocks of flats. These have achieved tangible benefits, but further work will be needed to increase the recycling rate further.”

Councillor James Fry, Chair, Recycling Panel

A Recycling Review Group led by Councillor James Fry in 2013/2014 recommended that the Council invested in targeted recycling education campaigns and trialled a community incentive scheme to encourage residents to recycle for



charity. Following this review, the Council successfully bid for a government grant to be used on a recycling incentive scheme covering the whole city. Scrutiny has continued to monitor the Council’s progress in boosting recycling rates and the success of the incentive scheme, the ‘Blue Bin Recycling League’.

In November 2016 a group of Scrutiny Committee members visited the Council’s Cowley Marsh depot to consider recycling rates data and the impacts of the Blue Bin Recycling League. Members found that the Council is in the top 10% of English local authorities for recycling and is one of the best urban authorities in the country. The Blue Bin Recycling League had achieved almost 5,000 pledges, £4,800 in charitable donations and increases in collection rates across the city of between 4.28% and 11.70%. After the meeting the Scrutiny Committee recommended to the City Executive Board that every effort should be made to continue funding for recycling education campaigns after the grant funding ends in October 2018.



Finance Panel

Membership

Councillor Craig Simmons (Chair)

Councillor James Fry

Councillor Jean Fooks

Councillor Sian Taylor

“Reductions in central government funding are forcing local councils to think differently about how they fund frontline services. In Oxford, we saw the writing on the wall and have been proactive in transforming our services to be more financially self-sufficient. During my three years as Chair of Finance Panel I am proud to have helped make this happen.”

*Councillor Craig Simmons, Chair, Finance Panel
(2014–15 to 2016–17)*

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.

In June 2016 the Panel considered the Council's approach to supporting credit union services in the city and met with representatives of Oxfordshire Credit Union (OCU). The Panel welcomed the progress made by OCU in becoming financially self-sustaining but regretted that a proposed merger with Blackbird Leys Credit Union had fallen through. The Panel encouraged OCU to apply for funding for a part time development officer to promote OCU services much more extensively on the ground. The Panel also recommended that information about OCU and other financial services should be made available to Council staff.

Another key priority for the Panel this year was to track the impacts of the UK's decision to leave the European Union on the Council's finances and the wider Oxford economy. The Panel found that the main impacts on the Council were related to treasury income (due to interest rates being reduced), property fund values and an income target that was measured in Euros. The Panel's discussions on the impacts of Brexit resulted in three recommendations to the City Executive Board.

The Panel conducted an in depth 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. The Panel found that financial planning had been very difficult due to uncertainties about a number of important factors such as pay, devolution, Brexit, national housing policy and future changes to the Business Rates regime. In the circumstances, the budget proposals including the Council's large programme of capital investments were considered to be sound. The Panel made 16 recommendations aimed at strengthening the proposals and improving their presentation, and all but one were agreed by the City Executive Board.

Other financial decisions scrutinised by the Panel included decisions on the Council's Treasury



Management Strategy, Council Tax Support Scheme and the financial case for developing a waste transfer station in the city. The Panel also considered the outcomes of internal reviews into a number of Council services aimed at identifying best practice and financial saving

Housing Panel

Membership

Councillor David Henwood (Chair)

Councillor Angie Goff

Councillor Jennifer Pegg

Councillor Gill Sanders

Councillor David Thomas

Councillor Liz Wade

Geno Humphrey (tenant co-optee)

“Over the past year the Housing Panel has scrutinised key reports on homelessness, empty buildings and tower blocks, and also hosted meetings with Oxford’s universities. The latter item saw the cross-party panel make twelve recommendations to the City Executive Board, forming a catalyst for change both in policy and outcome. Key to our success has been the Panel’s ability to work cohesively together for the benefit of our community. Last year Geno Humphrey continued to be the Panel’s valued tenant co-optee, and when we considered the issue of tower block cladding following the Grenfell disaster, we heard from residents from the city’s tower blocks to better understand the pressures those families face. The insight they provided was truly invaluable.”

David Henwood, Housing Panel Chair

Housing Panel is responsible for scrutinising all housing services, issues and decisions. Oxford is one of the least affordable cities in the UK in which to rent or buy a home, so housing is a



huge issue in the city. The Panel considered a range of topical issues related to social housing, private sector housing, student accommodation and homelessness. Most of the Panel’s work this year was initiated by scrutiny councillors although the Panel also considered City Executive Board decisions on the Council’s Private Sector Housing Policy and a review of the Lord Mayor’s Deposit Guarantee Scheme, which aims to help local people in housing need on low incomes to afford and sustain a move into privately rented housing.

In November the Panel met with representatives of both universities based in the city about their accommodation requirements. The University of Oxford said that the Council’s affordable housing policies prevented the building of employee housing schemes, such as new accommodation for post-doctoral researchers. They also argued that this group should be exempt from the target of no more than 3,000 Oxford University students living outside of university provided accommodation. Oxford Brookes University said that nursing and teaching students should also be exempt from this target and asked that additional sites be allocated for new student accommodation. The Panel recommended that the City Executive Board considers 12 specific suggestions as part of the Council’s local plan making process. These included rebalancing the student limits and excluding priority groups, allocating specific sites for new student



accommodation and providing flexibility on these sites for employee housing schemes without social rent obligations. Many of the Panel's suggestions have since been taken forwards by the Council in the local plan 'preferred options' consultation.

Other topical housing issues prioritised for scrutiny included the licensing of houses in multiple occupations (HMOs), Council support for Housing Benefit claimants accessing the private rented sector, services for rough sleepers, and efforts to bring empty properties back into use. In terms of the Council's own housing stock, the Panel looked at the issue of under-occupation, tenant satisfaction, the Council's Great Estates investments, and plans for the Council's garage assets and former garage sites. The Panel also monitored a selection of housing performance measures, rent collection rates and progress of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's review into a tower block refurbishment project.

The year ahead

The Scrutiny Committee has re-elected Councillor Andrew Gant as Chair for the 2017/18 Council year and Councillor Nigel Chapman has been elected Vice Chair. He replaces Councillor Tom Hayes, who has joined the City Executive Board. The Committee also welcomes six new or returning members in Councillors Mohammed Altaf-Khan, Mark Ladbroke, Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan, Mark Lygo, Steve Curran and David Thomas. They replace Councillors Tom Hayes, Craig Simmons, Sian Taylor, Marie Tidball, Ruth Wilkinson and the late Van Coulter.

The new Committee has prioritised a review focused on implementing the Oxford Living Wage across the city, which will be led by Councillor Mark Ladbroke. The Committee will continue to scrutinise decisions of the City

Executive Board and a number of other issues affecting the city have been included in the scrutiny work plan, including air quality, the use of restorative justice practices, the impacts of the new Westgate Shopping Centre and elderly isolation. The Committee has also re-appointed to the finance and housing panels and has reconstituted the Shareholder Panel, which will meet as required to consider issues and decisions relating to the new Council-owned companies.

Councillor James Fry has replaced Councillor Craig Simmons as Chair of Finance 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 performance and decisions through the year.

Housing Panel will be chaired by Councillor David Henwood. The Panel will look at a number of important housing decisions such as the Council's emerging housing and homelessness strategy and tenancy strategy. The Panel will revisit a number of housing and landlord issues such as the tower block refurbishment programme, the Council's Great Estates investments, and empty garages. New items on the Panel's work plan include the impacts of absent owners on housing availability, the management of void properties and the impacts of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The Shareholder Panel is also chaired by Councillor James Fry and will continue to consider the progress of the Council's new housing company and trading company.



Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

Annual Report 2016/17

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