

To:	Council
Date:	23 April 2018
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 – April 2018

Appendix 2: Scrutiny recommendation tracker – April 2018

Appendix 3: Extracts from the Communities and Local Government Select Committee report into the Effectiveness of local authority overview and scrutiny committees (December 2017)

Introduction

1. Since my last update, the Scrutiny Committee, Housing Panel and Companies Panel have all met for the last time in this council year. Several items that have slipped on the work plan have been rescheduled for the early part of next year due to officer capacity and slippage in the Executive Boards Forward Plan. The new Scrutiny Officer, Stefan Robinson, is now in post and the scrutiny function is once again fully resourced.
2. Scrutiny recently concluded an important review into the Oxford Living Wage and presented recommendations to the Executive Board in March 2018. I am pleased to note that many of the recommendations were accepted, and I wish to place on record my thanks to Councillor Ladbrooke for leading this work. It will be the role of the new committee to review progress made against our recommendations in 2019.
3. Progress with the Council's Trading and Housing Companies, together with increased reporting to the Shareholder, has generated an increased demand for scrutiny and oversight. In the new year, the Committee will need to agree how it will scrutinise these arrangements, which is a function currently carried out by the Companies Scrutiny Panel.

Work Plan 2018-19

4. The Scrutiny Officer has already gone out to members for suggestions for the 2018/19 work plan, and I would encourage members to submit any issues that they feel Scrutiny is best placed to address. These should be issues that are of an immediate and significant interest to the public, and that the Committee can have influence over.

5. The Committee will consider a longlist of all the new suggestions, together with proposed annualised items, on 5 June where it will agree an indicative work plan for the year. Please submit any suggestions to the Scrutiny Officer, Stefan Robinson (srobinson@oxford.gov.uk) by Monday 21 May 2018.

Recent and Planned Activity

Scrutiny Committee

6. Since my last Council update, the Scrutiny Committee has held meetings on 6 February, 6 March and 5 April 2018. The following items have been considered by the Committee:
 - Children and Young People Strategy
 - Update of the Corporate Plan 2018
 - Community Grants
 - The use of Community Protection Notices
 - Devolution in Oxfordshire – 12 month progress update on recommendations
 - Workplace Equalities
 - Report of the Oxford Living Wage Review Group
 - Q3 Monitoring Report
 - Health Inequalities – 12 Month progress update on recommendations
7. The next Committee meeting will be held on 17 May where the Committee will elect a Chair and Vice-Chair and agree its operating principles. We are also expecting to consider a selection of CEB reports on 17 May, including the Sustainability Strategy, Fusion Lifestyle's Annual Service Plan, and the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy. The Committee have also commissioned a report on raising the profile and accessibility of the Town Hall.

Housing Panel

8. The Housing Panel met on 8 March 2018 to consider the following items:
 - Quarter 3 Housing performance
 - Allocation of homelessness prevention funds in 2018/19
 - Oxford City Council's Tenancy Strategy and Policy
9. The Panel's next meeting is on 5 July where it will be considering work to develop or improve garage sites in the City. In the new council year, the Panel has also asked to receive an update on progress made following the City Conversation event, and the proposed establishment of a homelessness charter.
10. Once further guidance is issued from HM Government, the Panel will consider the implications of introducing mandatory Flexible Fixed Term Tenancies for new tenants which are being brought in as part of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. This conflicts with the Council's currently policy of offering lifetime tenancies.

Finance Panel

11. The Finance Panel has not met since the budget review in February 2018 as a planned meeting in March was cancelled due to lack of business. Looking forward, the Panel are due to receive a bi-annual report on the implications of Brexit for the local economy, and convene a discussion on how the council can best monitor social value.

Companies Panel

12. The Companies Panel met on 14 March to consider the following items:
 - Housing Group Policies: Rent and Lettings; Debt Recovery
 - Housing Group Business Plan 2017-18 update
13. Oxford Direct Services has now gone live under a company structure (1 April 2018), and the Companies Panel will be keen to review the quarterly performance reports of the Company in the new year. The Panel will also want to scrutinise the Trading Company's spending and financial controls.

Oxford Living Wage Review Group

14. In 2017, the Scrutiny Committee resolved to set up a review group to consider how the Council could promote the implementation of the Oxford Living Wage (OLW) across the City. The review was established amidst concerns that significant parts of the local economy continued to pay low wages that do not reflect the high cost of living in Oxford. This comparative low pay has the potential to exacerbate other negative socio-economic factors including poverty, poor housing standards and ill health.
15. Public Health data shows that 20% of children in Oxford live in poverty, which is higher than the average for England, rising to 25% when adjusted for housing costs. The review concluded by bringing forward 15 recommendations, the majority of which were accepted by the City Executive Board.
16. The Review Group's findings and recommendations were informed by contributions from a range of witnesses including low paid workers and their representatives, local employers, faith groups, academics and other interested parties. The Review Group also carried out a survey, a literature review and desktop research. They heard first hand from residents who are paid below the OLW, and about the positive impact the OLW could have on their quality of life.
17. Key recommendations submitted to and accepted by the City Executive Board related to:
 - The need to promote the 'Real Living Wage' to local businesses as a step in the right direction towards committing to pay the higher OLW;
 - The need to appoint a designated member and officer to lead on promoting the OLW;
 - The Council's continued commitment to pay its directly employed and agency staff the OLW;
 - The need to promote the OLW among local employers and place requirements on external suppliers to the Council to pay the OLW;
 - Encouraging the Economic Growth Steering Group, which operates under the Oxford Strategic Partnership, to address the OLW issue as a priority.

Parliamentary Select Committee Report into the Effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government

18. In December 2017, the Department for Communities and Local Government Select Committee concluded its review into the effectiveness of Overview and Scrutiny in Local Government by publishing an extensive report with recommendations. The majority of the recommendations were directed to what is now the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and called on the

Department to revise and reissue guidance to local authorities. Some organisations are still seeking to influence how the new guidance might look, and it is likely that it will be some time before new guidance is available.

19. In reviewing the recommendations, it is clear that Oxford's Scrutiny arrangements broadly align with best practice, particularly concerning; resourcing, access to information, the esteem afforded to scrutiny and the use of external experts. However, the council should note that the new guidance may advise on new ways of working that are not consistent with current practice. Principally, the proposal that scrutiny should report its recommendations through Full Council instead of the Executive Board.

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