

To Council

Date: 29 April 2019

Report of: Chair of the Scrutiny Committee

Title of Report: Scrutiny briefing

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To update Council on the activities of the scrutiny function
Key decision:	No
Corporate Priority:	Strong and Active Communities; An Efficient and effective Council
Policy Framework:	Not applicable
Recommendation: That Council resolves to note the update report.	

Appendices

Appendix 1: Scrutiny work plan – April 2019

Appendix 2: Scrutiny Committee Response to Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Consultation.

Introduction

1. Since my last update, I can report that the Budget Review Group has concluded its review into the draft budget, and that a number of its recommendations were accepted. Importantly for scrutiny in 2019/20, the Review Group highlighted in particular the need to keep the homelessness reserves spend under close review, as the reserve will be virtually exhausted by the end of the current four year plan. More details on their recommendations are featured in this report.
2. The Scrutiny Officer is currently collating a long list of suggestions for the Scrutiny Committee's Work Plan, which will be considered by the Committee for prioritisation on 2 June 2019. There are various administrative functions that need to be undertaken as we enter the new council year, and these are summarised below:

13 May 2019: Annual Council appoints Committee membership

15 May 2019: Committee meets to adopt revised operating principles
Committee re-establishes its standing panels and Chairs

4 June 2019: Committee appoints membership of Standing Panels
Committee sets an indicative work plan for the year

2 July 2019: Committee establishes its first review group for the year

Scrutiny Committee

3. Since my last update, the Committee has held three meetings, at which the following items were considered
 - The Oxford Rent Guarantee Scheme
 - Graffiti prevention and removal
 - Report of the Budget Review Group
 - A presentation from Oxford Direct Services concerning recycling in Oxford
 - An update on progress against the Corporate Plan
 - The Council's approach to Public Space Protection Orders
 - Fusion Lifestyle Quarter 3 performance and audit
 - Quarter 3 Council Performance Report
 - Oxford Living Wage Review Group 12 month update
4. One of the more detailed discussions had by the Scrutiny Committee focussed on the Council's consultation on acceptable behaviours in the City, following the expiration of the City Centre Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) in January 2019. There was general, but not unanimous support for undertaking a consultation on acceptable behaviours, but there were a number of reservations expressed about the use and appropriateness of PSPOs. The Committee subsequently made a number of recommendations to the City Executive Board to ensure that the consultation on acceptable behaviours reached out to vulnerable groups, and was conducted in an open and objective way. Assurances to this effect were given by officers and the City Executive Board. The Committee also recommended that subsequent reports on the matter set out other alternative methods to PSPOs in dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
5. The Committee also made recommendations in relation to a graffiti and street art report which it requested. The Committee welcomed the new approach of offering free graffiti removal to residential property owners, whilst charging larger commercial ventures. The Committee made a series of recommendations to ensure there was wide consultation on street art projects, and that more consideration be given as to how 'large' commercial ventures would be defined, for the purposes of charging.
6. A final report that generated recommendations from the Committee was the Rent Guarantee Scheme. The Committee welcomed the principal of the Scheme and its work to date, noting that there had been success in retaining all of the landlords that entered into the Scheme since it was initiated. It was noted with regret that the increasing need for this Scheme was driven by cuts made by Central Government and the County Council concerning housing benefit, the Supporting People Fund and social care services.
7. As a recent study published in the British Medical Journal explains, "Austerity policies have meant that, since 2010, the funding available for supporting vulnerable people with their housing has been cut by 59% in real terms."¹ The Committee resolved to recommend that the Council looks at options to extend the Scheme so that it applies to at-risk single people and couples, and that this expansion is integrated with the Lord Mayor's Deposit Guarantee Scheme.

¹ Fransham, M. and Dorling, D, 2018. Homelessness and public health, The British Medical Journal. (p.3)

8. Following consideration of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 (part 1) Consultation Document on 21 January, the Committee subsequently resolved on 5 March to submit a formal response to the consultation, which can be found at appendix 2.

Housing Panel

9. The Housing Panel has met twice since my last update, and has considered the following issues:
- Options for a Council Owned Letting Agency
 - A review of the operation of the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)
 - Quarter 3 Housing Services Performance Report
 - Breaches in building regulations and enforcement rates
 - Homelessness prevention funds allocation 2019/20
 - Proposals for the Floyd's Row Homeless Shelter.
10. The Panel noted that in the present housing market, it would not be appropriate for the Council to pursue the establishment of a Council owned lettings agency, in light of the saturated market and the legislative withdrawal of certain tenant fees from June 2019. The Panel also noted that the feedback from the SWEP surveys, which it previously recommended be distributed, was broadly positive.
11. The Housing Panel's consideration of a report concerning building control enforcement led to two recommendations. These principally concerned ensuring that properties coming into the Council's (or its housing company) ownership were of high quality and good value. The recommendations also raised the importance of employing and training apprentices within the Building Control Service.
12. The Floyd's Row Homeless Shelter proposal was recently discussed, and the Panel noted that there were many challenges associated with delivering this project to a good standard in a very compressed timeframe, particularly as full funding was yet to be secured. There remains a continued need to secure further funding from Central Government to plug a capital funding shortfall for the project.

Companies Panel

13. The Companies Panel met on 28 February 2019, and considered the following items:
- Oxford Direct Services (ODS) Quarter 3 Performance Report
 - A verbal update on the development of the revised ODS Business Plan.
14. The Panel heard that ODS continues to perform well against its key performance indicators, and continues to build its capacity. In reviewing customer feedback, the Panel noted that satisfaction scores in relation to public toilets was low (an average of 2.74 out of 5), and this has similarly been raised by external partners as part of the Tourism Management Review Group's work.
15. The Panel also noted that parking income would no longer be used as a performance indicator, given that the ambitions of the Council were more aligned to promoting alternative and more sustainable transport options than personal car use. The next meeting of the Companies Panel will be consider the revised ODS Business Plan. At the time of writing, the date for this meeting was to be confirmed.

Finance Panel / Budget Review Group

16. The Budget Review Group, made up from the membership of the Finance Panel, recently reported its findings and recommendations to the City Executive Board and Full Council. The report set out that in spite of various challenges for local authority funding at a national level, the City Council has remained resilient in its budget setting. However, the Review Group raised a number of issues that it believes should be kept under close review, including:
- The Council's rate of delivery against its Capital Programme, which is expected to increase from ~70% to 80% in the short term, with the introduction of the new Project Management Office.
 - The rate at which the Homelessness Reserves are depleting. The Budget forecasts a drawdown on the Homelessness Reserves of £1m in 2022/23 to £796,843, down from £3,234,369 in 2019/20.
 - Maintaining effective scrutiny of the Shareholder function in relation to the Council's two wholly-owned companies.
 - The potential for the 'Fairer Funding' Review to have a negative impact on the Council's current financial position.
17. The Finance Panel and Scrutiny Committee were pleased to note the City Executive Board's agreement to recommendations concerning social value in procurement. The recommendations sought to introduce a 5% social value weighting for smaller contracts that are not bound by European regulations. Recommendations were also made to speed up payments from the Council to smaller businesses and voluntary organisations, and to heighten environmental standards for commissioned works; both of which were accepted.

Tourism Management Review Group

The Tourism Management Review group met recently to consider its draft recommendations, following extensive engagement with 32 local and national representatives across a total of six meetings. The report and recommendations of the Group will be presented to the Scrutiny Committee on 15 May for endorsement, and subsequently to the City Executive Board on 22 May for decision.

Councillor Andrew Gant – Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Email: cllragant@oxford.gov.uk; Tel: 07545122560

Stefan Robinson – Scrutiny Officer
Email: srobinson@oxford.gov.uk; Tel: 01865 252191