

**To:** Council

**Date:** 25 November 2019

**Report of:** Chair of the Scrutiny Committee

**Title of Report:** Scrutiny briefing

| <b>Summary and recommendations</b>                                      |  |
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| <b>Purpose of report:</b>   | To update Council on the activities of the Scrutiny function |
| <b>Key decision:</b>  | No   |
| <b>Corporate Priority:</b>  | An Efficient and Effective Council                           |
| <b>Policy Framework:</b>  | Not applicable   |
| <b>Recommendation:</b> That Council resolves to note the update report. |  |

### **Appendices:**

Appendix 1: Scrutiny work plan – November 2019

Appendix 2: Table of Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from Cabinet meetings of 11 September, 3 and 9 October

### **Introduction**

1. With the focus of the previous update report being on the draft Scrutiny annual report, this update focuses on the activity of Scrutiny in September, October and November 2019.
2. Following a period over the summer without a Scrutiny Officer, a new Scrutiny Officer, Tom Hudson, came into post in late August and the function is now fully staffed. Though a number of items on the Scrutiny work plan have slipped, good progress has been made overall with full agendas and worthwhile items being considered. It is expected that the volume of issues considered by Scrutiny will increase in December and January as the Committee considers previously deferred items in addition to its existing work.
3. Scrutiny has now agreed the topic, membership and scope of its Review Group, which is on the Climate Emergency. The Review Group will particularly be focusing on buildings - the Council's internal plans to reduce energy use in buildings, but also how it can contribute to reducing building-related emissions across the city.

Other areas of relevance, such as energy generation, transport and carbon-offsetting will be considered in the context that they are relevant to the central theme of buildings. There will also be one meeting scrutinising the Council's spending plans in regards to climate change considerations. In recognition of the fact that the Council cannot, on its own, address the Climate Emergency even on a local level there will be a thread throughout the whole review, continually asking how the Council can enthuse other stakeholders to join in.

4. The first substantive meeting of the Review Group will be on 28 November.

### **Scrutiny Committee**

5. Between September and November the Scrutiny Committee has held three meetings, on 3 September, 1 October and 5 November. The following items were considered at these meetings:
  - Monitoring the Community Grants Programme (two recommendations made to 11 September Cabinet, both agreed)
  - Performance Monitoring (six recommendations made to 9 Cabinet, all agreed)
  - Annual Air Quality Report 2018 (three recommendations made to 9 Cabinet, all agreed)
  - The Commissioning of Services at Floyds Row (report made to 3 October Cabinet with three recommendations, all agreed)
  - Modernising Leisure Concessions (report made to 9 October Cabinet with two recommendations, both partially agreed)
  - Performance Monitoring 2019/20 Q1
  - The impact of Universal Credit on the Council's finances and on residents (report due to go to 19 December Cabinet)
  - The Annual Workplace Equality report and update on Equalities Action Plan (report to 13 November Cabinet with eight recommendations)
  - The Oxford Waterways Project (report due to go to 19 December Cabinet)
6. 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.
7. At its meeting on 1 October 2019, the Committee also considered reports arising from its 3 September meeting, endorsing the nine recommendations subsequently made to 9 October Cabinet regarding Performance Monitoring and Air Quality, all of which were agreed. The recommendations focused on improving the measures of success for the Council, and steps to reduce emissions near schools, waterways and by idling vehicles.
8. The Committee's focus in its recommendations regarding Floyds Row concerned suggestions to streamline project management processes to enable fast but robust project development when faced by short central government deadlines, and suggestions on information that might usefully be shared by the contractor to the Council to ensure quality and effectiveness.

9. Regarding Modernising Leisure Concessions, the Committee's focus primarily lay in trying to prevent a cliff-edge for those whose concessionary benefits were being changed as part of the modernisation programme.
10. The Committee's discussion of Universal Credit focused on two key areas – the impact of Universal Credit on recipients, particularly with regards to budgeting in light of mistakes elsewhere in the benefit system, and the personal and workload implications on staff of managing the consequences of mistakes made elsewhere. Recommendations focused on the adequacy of the Council's Discretionary Housing Payments to meet existing need in light of central government reductions.
11. The Committee 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.
12. Consideration of the Waterways was a broad-ranging and interesting discussion, taking in issues from the position of boats as housing to biodiversity and capital investment. The Committee's recognition was that Oxford's waterways contribute to the City in multiple ways, but do require consideration to maintain their contribution and fulfil their potential. To that end, a number of 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.
13. The next Committee meeting will be held on 3 December and will consider its response to the draft Corporate Strategy 2020 – 2024, the Annual Monitoring Report 2018/19, and the outcome of the Citizen's Assembly on Climate Change. Further, a Scrutiny-requested report on Public Participation in Decision-Making and Citizen Involvement will be considered, alongside Performance Monitoring Q2.

## **Housing Panel**

14. The Housing Panel has met twice in the reporting period, on 3 October and 7 November.
15. The Housing Panel has been supported for the last four years in its decision-making by a housing-tenant co-optee, Geno Humphrey. In the summer Geno decided to step down. The Housing Panel has expressed its gratitude for the time and commitment shown by Geno Humphrey in contributing to the decision-making of the Panel, which is reiterated here. Appointed into the vacant position is Tony Buchanan.
16. At the same time as the appointment of a tenant co-optee the Panel also considered extending representation from other groups through co-option, such as the private rented sector and housing association representatives. Following discussion it was decided not to make other formal appointments through co-option, but to invite representatives of key, non-Council stakeholders to Panel meetings. In October, six representatives of the Oxford Influencers attended and

contributed to discussion on how best to involve housing association tenants. At the November Panel, three people with recent experience of homelessness and homelessness services in Oxford were identified to feed in to discussion with the support of the Lived Experience Advice Forum. These three attended the meeting and formed a significant part in very fruitful discussions about, in particular, the Housing and Homelessness Strategy.

17. The full list of topics considered at the October and November meetings are as follows, with two reports making recommendations to Cabinet:

- Housing Performance Q1
- Appointment of a tenant co-optee
- Community Land Trusts (two recommendations made to 13 November Cabinet)
- Housing and Homelessness Strategy mid-point update (report expected to go to 19<sup>th</sup> Dec Cabinet)
- No Local Connection review
- Homelessness Trailblazer analysis

18. The Panel has begun running a number of additional briefings for its members prior to the start of the Panel itself. Before its October meeting Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing Services, and Dave Scholes, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager ran a briefing to members on Housing Needs. Immediately prior to the November meeting, Ian Wright ran a briefing session looking at the Council's relationship with landlords and tenants in both the private rented sector and housing associations and the opportunities for the Council to raise standards for those in rented accommodation.

19. The next meeting of the Panel is on 5 March, where it will consider:

- Quarter 3 Housing Services Performance Report
- Private Rented Sector Housing

### **Finance Panel**

20. The Finance Panel met on 5<sup>th</sup> September and considered the proposals for the Council's forthcoming Council Tax Reduction Scheme, and the Treasury Management Report. Though no recommendations were made, an all-member briefing on the workings of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme has been scheduled for 18 March 2020 following the meeting.

21. The Finance Panel's next meeting is scheduled for 5 December, where it will consider:

- Integrated Performance Report for Quarter 2
- Budget Review 2019/20 – recommendations update
- Property Investment Portfolio Analysis and Strategy Report

22. In January the Finance Panel will also be undertaking the Budget Review Group to scrutinise the draft budget for 2020/21.

## **Companies Panel**

23. The Companies Panel met on 19 September making no recommendations, and in November, after this report was authored.
24. The Companies Panel's next meeting is on 6 March.

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

Tom Hudson – Scrutiny Officer  
Email: [thudson@oxford.gov.uk](mailto:thudson@oxford.gov.uk); Tel: 01865 252191

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