

**To:** Council

**Date:** 20 July 2020

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

**Title of Report:** Scrutiny briefing

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To update Council on the activities of the Scrutiny function
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2020-24
<b>Recommendation:</b>	That Council resolves to note the update report.

<b>Appendices</b>	
Appendix 1	Scrutiny work plan: July 2020 – September 2020
Appendix 2	List of agreed Scrutiny topics for inclusion within work plan
Appendix 3a	Table of Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from Cabinet meetings of 22 January, 12 February, 11 March 2020, 08 June, 24 June 2020.
Appendix 3b	(Restricted): Table of restricted Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from the Cabinet meeting of 12 February 2020
Appendix 4	Table of Shareholder and Joint Venture Responses to Scrutiny Recommendations from meeting of 24 June 2020

## Introduction

1. Due to the disruption caused by Covid-19 Scrutiny has not provided an update to Council since 27 January 2020. Consequently, this update is fairly lengthy as it covers the activity of Scrutiny from mid-January to 07 July 2020.
2. As with all Committee meetings held by the Council, Scrutiny and its Panels were suspended from mid-March 2020 in light of the spread of Covid-19 and, following the change in the law to permit virtual meetings, resumed remotely on 02 June 2020.

3. The pre-lockdown period was particularly busy for Scrutiny with the completion of its two Review Groups on the Budget and the Climate Emergency and the publication of their reports and recommendations.
4. Post resumption, the number of reports considered at each meeting has been reduced, with a specific focus on Cabinet reports. This has reflected a number of things – the reduced capacity of the Council to produce Scrutiny-commissioned reports whilst responding to the pandemic, the challenges of becoming acquainted with the new format of meetings, and most importantly the weight of the issues considered. Since resumption Scrutiny has considered and made recommendations relating to the financial impacts of Covid-19 and the Council's Covid recovery programme as well as, amongst others, the Corporate Strategy and the Local Plan.
5. Owing to the disruption caused by Covid-19 Scrutiny's development of its work plan has been delayed. A work plan covering the period to early September has been developed and is attached as Appendix 1. Beyond that, Scrutiny has agreed the list of topics to consider over the course of the year, but the dates have not been agreed with relevant officers. The list of topics is included as Appendix 2.
6. With the new civic year having commenced, Scrutiny has agreed its Operating Principles. Largely, the work of Scrutiny remains the same, but the Housing Panel has been renamed the Housing and Homelessness Panel to reflect the focus and concerns of the Panel, and the Finance Panel has taken on overall responsibility for performance monitoring and has become the Finance and Performance Panel.
7. One further change Scrutiny hopes to see next year is the greater involvement of external experts and relevant stakeholders in Scrutiny discussions. Making use of the ample external expertise in our city is an approach taken by Scrutiny within its Review Groups and has proven extremely valuable. Furthermore, Scrutiny has the potential to be a gateway for residents to communicate with high levels of the Council making important decisions, and Scrutiny wishes to enable that increased engagement in the coming year.

### **Scrutiny Committee**

8. Since the last Scrutiny update to Council the Scrutiny Committee has held meetings on 04 February and 03 March, 02 June, 17 June and 06 July 2020. Furthermore, due to its proximity to the previous Council meeting, the outcomes of recommendations made by Scrutiny to Cabinet at the meeting held on 14 January 2020 were not reported in the previous update and are instead included here.
9. The following items were considered at the meetings during this period:
  - 06 July
    - Local Growth Funded Workspaces (1 recommendation). The response of Cabinet will be reported in the following update.
    - Local Development Scheme (no recommendations).
10. Discussion over the proposals for Local Growth Funded Workspaces mainly concerned timescales for spending, the size of the market for such workspaces and whether Covid would be likely to increase entrepreneurship or decrease it, and means of safeguarding current tenants at Cave St. A recommendation was made to

clarify the area included within the Cave St development site, and that the options available could include residential use as well as commercial.

11. No recommendations were made in relation to the Local Development Scheme, but the Committee's questions covered issues such as the harmonisation between Local Plan dates for neighbouring authorities, the potential impact for significant government changes to the planning system, CIL levels, and the role of Supplementary Planning Documents and Technical Advice Notes within the wider Planning framework.

17 June

- Covid Recovery Programme (5 recommendations, four agreed, one partially agreed)

12. The entire meeting of Scrutiny was dedicated to consideration of the Council's proposals for its Covid Recovery Programme. The financial impacts were discussed separately at the Finance and Performance Panel, which is detailed below.
13. In a wide-ranging discussion, which took in the eligibility of language schools for rates relief, predicted levels of unemployment, lessons learnt from the 'Everyone In' policy towards rough sleepers, the suitability of home working for staff, and safe management of protest, five recommendations were made to Cabinet. These related to the need for a digital strategy, specific economic responses relating to community wealth building principles, and measures to safeguard the health and wellbeing of local residents.

02 June

- Scrutiny Operating Principles
- Corporate Strategy 2016-20 Update (1 recommendation, agreed)
- Adoption of Local Plan (no recommendations)

14. The main changes outlined by Scrutiny to its Operating Principles have been detailed above.
15. Discussion of the Corporate Strategy focused on the possibility and desirability of setting targets for the future Council Strategy on the number of employers paying the Oxford Living Wage. However, it was agreed that this was not a preferable way to proceed. Instead, a number of amendments were suggested to the text of the update concerning the Council's response to the Climate Emergency, highlighting the contribution of the Climate Emergency Review Group and clarifying a measure which could easily be misinterpreted.
16. Whilst no recommendations were made in regards to the Local Plan, the Committee discussed ideas around the viability of increased environmental protections within future Local Plans.

03 March

- Blackbird Leys Development Detailed Design (7 recommendations, 5 agreed, one partially agreed, one rejected)
- Annual Gender Pay Gap report (1 recommendation, agreed)
- Performance Monitoring Q3 (2 recommendations, not yet taken to Cabinet).

17. Much of the discussion around the Blackbird Leys Development Detailed Design proposals were made in confidential session due to their commercial sensitivity. The recommendations made were to support greater social value arising from the contract, greater carbon reductions and ensuring the continuity of services running from the Leisure Centre during the project.
18. The Annual Gender Pay Gap report highlighted the two main causes of the Council's pay gap. Firstly, the greater proportion of men in higher-paying roles, and secondly, the significantly higher proportion of women working part time. The main area of discussion was over parenting responsibilities and their impact predominately falling upon women. Scrutiny's recommendation was made in relation to increasing the number of men taking shared parental leave.
19. Two issues in particular were the focus of Scrutiny's discussions over performance monitoring – staff absence levels, and staffing levels. It was recommended that for the next year, a breakdown between long-term and short-term absences be provided given that these have very different causes and remedies, and that each service area should report on the number of posts available, and the percentage of those filled. With Covid-related disruption this has not been taken to Cabinet yet.

04 February

- Customer Experience Strategy (5 recommendations, 4 agreed and one partially agreed)
- Corporate Strategy 2020 – 24 (no recommendations)

20. In its consideration of the Customer Engagement Strategy report the Committee considered the relationships and challenges of wanting to provide an increasingly digital offer to residents and customers, whilst also recognising that the needs of vulnerable people must be safeguarded. The Committee also explored the relationship between customer engagement and wider citizen engagement. The Committee made recommendations requesting that the considerations of the Strategy be extended to the Council's companies, that specific measures be taken to protect the vulnerable, greater targeting be made of the types of the Council's customers, and steps taken to extend the engagement by citizens in Council decisions.
21. Little discussion was held over the Corporate Strategy, largely because it had previously come before the Committee. No additional recommendations to those previously made were agreed.

14 January

- Planning for the 2020 Zero Emissions Zone (5 recommendations, 4 rejected and 1 agreed)
- Go Ultra Low Pilot: Outcomes and Next Steps (1 recommendation, agreed )
- Performance Monitoring: Quarter 2 (6 recommendations, all agreed )

22. The ambition of the Zero Emissions Zone was lauded by the Committee in its consideration of the report. However, a number of technical issues were raised as to its practical application. The Committee raised questions over whether the initial 'red' zone might be extended more quickly, the relevance of the name, the impact of the charging schedule on blue badge holders, and the efficacy of not using fixed cameras for enforcement. Recommendations were made in relation to these, but were not accepted by Cabinet. A recommendation concerning the use of

technology to improve the reductions in emissions by hybrid vehicles was accepted.

23. The Committee was particularly complimentary about the work undertaken by the Go Ultra Low Pilot and commended the excellence of the research and the clarity of the recommendations. Much of the discussion concerned changing attitudes and busting myths in regards to electric vehicles. One recommendation was successfully made, seeking the Council to broaden its definition of electric vehicles so that chargers for electric bikes would also be considered within future plans for electric vehicle infrastructure.
24. Scrutiny made a large number of suggestions in relation to Performance Monitoring, varying from reducing an unrealistic target for the Welfare Reform team, to adding indicators on the amount of spend with local businesses, time taken for leisure centre repairs to be made, and total carbon savings achieved, and clarification around the wording of unclear indicators.
25. Cabinet also made responses to the following reports considered by Scrutiny in November during this reporting period:
  - Waterways (9 recommendations, all agreed)
26. Scrutiny's Budget Review Group report and Climate Emergency Review Group report will be reported on separately at the end of this update.

### **Housing Panel**

27. No meetings of the Housing Panel have taken place since the previous Scrutiny update report to Council. The March and April 2020 meetings were cancelled due to lockdown.
28. One report considered previously by the Housing Panel has, since the last update, been taken to Cabinet. Scrutiny made three recommendations around the mid-point update for the Housing and Homelessness Strategy having heard input from the Lived Experience Advisory Forum on their members' experience of homelessness locally. Scrutiny's recommendations, accepted by Cabinet, will increase the Council's understanding of the impacts of the supported housing commissioned by the Council, ensure greater involvement of service users and those with lived experience in service design, and embed homelessness prevention responsibility across the Council.

### **Finance and Performance Panel**

29. The Finance and Performance Panel convened twice before lockdown, on 29 January 2020, and 25 February, and twice after, on 16 June and 07 July 2020 considered the following reports:

07 July

- Integrated Performance Report Q4 (one recommendation, the response to which will be reported on in the next update)
- Performance Monitoring Q4 (no recommendations)

30. The areas of discussion by the Panel regarding the Integrated Performance Report Q4 were over the level of capital spending over the last year, levels of reserves and specific areas of significant variance between outturns and budgeted figures, the majority of which were bringing forward spend in multi-year projects. One recommendation was made to review service charge levels to ensure the Council was not overcharging tenants.
31. With the effects of Covid-19, it was reported that Performance Monitoring would be challenging; it was necessary to revisit both the Council Business Plan for 2020/21 and the budget and medium term financial strategy to factor in the disruption of Covid, decisions during which necessarily would have impacts on performance targets. As such, no new KPIs would be set until the new financial year. However, the Finance and Performance Panel will continue to receive updates on its previously-selected KPIs so long as they were not now irrelevant in the context of Covid, and will also receive update reports against the progress of the Council's 2020/21 business plan.

16 June

- April Financial Monitoring Report

32. The April Financial Monitoring Report considered the financial impacts on the Council of Covid-19. Discussion was wide-ranging, taking in issues including the impact of the proposed pausing of some capital projects on the Council's companies, the process for unpausing such schemes, rate relief eligibility for language schools, anticipated levels of unemployment, the potential benefits of being able to capitalise losses and the impacts and opportunities of having housed all rough sleepers in the city during the pandemic.
33. Two recommendations were made. The first, underlining the Panel's support for the Council's existing work to lobby government to allow capitalisation of deficits in order to enable spreading them over a longer period, and the second a request that, due to a specific window of opportunity existing, that the Council not pause its investment in cycling infrastructure.

5 February

- Monitoring Social Value (two recommendations made, responses to be reported on in next briefing)
- Integrated Performance Report Q3 (no recommendations made).

34. The report on Monitoring Social Value was approved at the meeting on 7 July 2020 and has therefore not yet been to Cabinet. It will be reported on in the next briefing to Council. However, the Panel did request that congratulations to the officers involved in implementing the Council's Social Value considerations in procurement be given. It is felt that this is clearly a complex and challenging area, but sufficiently important to persevere with. The officers are to be praised for the progress made to date.
35. Particular discussion was devoted in the Integrated Performance Report Q3 scrutiny to the capital programme and current spend versus the budgeted spend at the start of the financial year. However, no recommendations were made.

29 January

- Treasury Management Strategy (no recommendations)
- Capital Strategy (two recommendations, both agreed)

36. No recommendations were made in regards to the Treasury Management Strategy, though discussion was devoted to the planned growth in the Council's borrowing position and the impacts, risks and opportunities related to this. On the back of this discussion a report has been agreed for a future Finance and Performance Panel meeting to consider the strengths and weaknesses of different sources of external borrowing, including the Public Works Loan Board, Municipal Bonds, Social Impact Bonds and the option of setting up the Council's own bond.
37. Concerning the Council's Capital Strategy, the Panel discussed one particular capital project in particular - the rationalisation of the ODS depot - and made one recommendation, which was accepted by Cabinet, that proposals for the project should be subject to consultation beyond simply those embedded within the Planning system. Staff, elected members and nearby residents will now be given the opportunity to share their views on any future proposals. A second recommendation was made, also subsequently accepted by Cabinet, to address a situation where the Council might be overlooking suitable properties on the basis of their current energy efficiency standards, rather than their potential future standards subject to possible retrofits.

### **Companies Panel**

38. The Companies Panel met on 06 March and 22 June 2020 and heard the following reports:

22 June:

- ODS 2019/20 End of Year report (1 recommendation, agreed)
- OxWED update (no recommendations)
- Barton Park Q3 report (no recommendations)
- OCHL Appointments and Governance Update, Performance Update

39. Though all papers considered were update reports, and backwards looking, discussion invariably focused on the impacts of Covid-19 and the mitigations required. The recommendation made to the Shareholder and Joint Venture group related to this issue, noting that the Council's decisions to pause certain capital projects which may have been undertaken by ODS would have impacts on its ability to make returns to the Council. It was sought that this and other social value impacts would be considered as criteria when deciding whether or when to unpause capital projects.

06 March:

- ODS Q3 and YTD report, including Street Cleansing customer service overview (3 recommendations made, all agreed)
- OxWED Update report (no recommendations)

- Barton Park Q3 report (no recommendations)
  - OCHL Governance Update, and Q3 performance report (2 recommendations made, one agreed and one partially)
40. Recommendations regarding ODS concerned working with the Council to maximise the benefit of any new or reinvigorated City Centre Toilet Scheme, and two suggestions on how it might target recording of the key information it requires to track its success in growing the business. All three were agreed, but it was noted that in regards to any City Centre Toilet Scheme the primary driver of any such scheme would be the Council, rather than ODS, and that their primary focus was on ensuring high standards and safety in the toilets already provided.
41. As with the recommendations made to Cabinet in the Blackbird Leys, the Panel's recommendations regarding OCHL reflected the recommendations of the Climate Emergency Review Group in endorsing the use of a scheme to divert tenant money spent on energy efficiency towards investing in greater energy efficiency measures instead, and seeking clarity on any potential trade-offs between Council priorities if energy efficiency of the Housing Company's builds were to be increased beyond its current business plan. The latter of these was agreed, and the former was agreed to be within the Council's gamut of options for delivering energy efficiency measures in its housing.

## **Scrutiny Review Groups**

### *Budget Review Group*

42. The Budget Review Group provides an independent layer of challenge and oversight to the Council's proposed Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan. Following meetings with Executive Directors and Heads of Service the Review Group's report, containing 25 recommendations, was agreed by the Scrutiny Committee on 04 February and referred to Cabinet for its 12 February meeting.
43. Of the 25 recommendations made, 19 were agreed in full, 3 in part, and 3 were rejected.
44. Recommendations accepted from the Scrutiny report include: prudent steps to ensure any excess external grant homelessness-related funding is used to support the homelessness reserve, ensuring that the Council considers the social value impacts of its new ways of working programme suggestions, obtaining clarity around the Council's spending on decarbonisation programmes, and suggestions about how to develop offsetting schemes which will maximise efficiency with tangible local benefits.

### *Climate Emergency Review Group*

45. The Climate Emergency Review Group was convened to consider how, particularly in relation to the built environment, the Council might respond to the learning from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, which indicated public support for local measures to reduce carbon emissions at a faster rate than those required by central government. It did, however, also consider issues relating to biodiversity and transport as well. In support of the Review Group's work the Council was fortunate to draw on the significant levels of expertise locally, with input from

Councillors at neighbouring Vale of the White Horse District Council, Transition by Design, the Low Carbon Hub, Greencore Construction, Dr David Hancock Construction Director at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority of the Cabinet Office, Oxford Friends of the Earth, Oxford University Sustainability Team and Oxfordshire County Council. As part of its work, senior officers, Cabinet Members and Review Group Members also attended a visit organised by the Scrutiny Officer to the Springfield Meadows development in Southmoor on 24 January 2020, a zero-carbon housing development.

46. The Review Group held seven meetings over December 2019 and January 2020, and the draft report and 56 recommendations were agreed by Scrutiny on 03 March 2020. Whilst the recommendations of the Climate Emergency Review Group were presented to Cabinet in March 2020, owing to the number, breadth and importance of the recommendations it was agreed that a response would be made by Cabinet at its June meeting. However, this date has been further delayed by the impacts of Covid-19 and a formal response is now anticipated in October.

#### *Future Review Groups*

47. The Scrutiny Committee will select its chosen topics for Review Groups at its meeting on 04 August. Of the following, one will be selected for review in addition to the annual Budget Review:
- Citizen Engagement and how the Council can include the public more in the Council's decision-making and activities
  - Domestic Abuse and the sufficiency and suitability of existing services, particularly for BAME women
  - Climate Emergency, considering alternative areas that had to be omitted by the previous scope due to capacity restraints, and feeding into the desire to 'build back better'.

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

This page is intentionally left blank