

1. Climate Emergency Review Group

- Rationale

The Scrutiny Committee agreed in the last civic year to establish the Climate Emergency Review Group. This group met and submitted its report (though due to an agreed delay and then Covid no response has yet been made to the recommendations). Due to the enormity of the topic the Climate Emergency Review Group focused on a relatively narrow scope, primarily considering buildings. The areas of focus considered at the Citizens' Assembly, those needing to be addressed in order to respond to the Climate Emergency, were far broader than simply the built environment. Consequently, there remain significant areas which remain unconsidered by Scrutiny.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also ushered in significant changes – some positive, such as increased interest in walking, cycling and appreciation of the outdoors, greater powers to local authorities around implementing sustainable travel measures without extensive pre-consultation, home working and reduced traffic. However, in addition to its public health impacts it has also brought other major negative impacts, particularly financial. As such, there is a challenge and opportunity for the council to 'build back better,' in which environmental improvements would be expected to play a major role.

However, there are also greater financial pressures also, meaning the Council's existing position, as well as Scrutiny's recommendations require cost-assessing, and a prioritisation exercise of previous recommendations and new opportunities to be undertaken in light of the constrained financial environment.

- Key Lines of Enquiry

Speaking to previous Review Group members and relevant officers the main areas of focus are:

- The opportunities afforded by new local authority powers in regards to sustainable transport
- Monitoring progress of minimal-cost items announced by the Council and recommended by the Climate Emergency Review Group, particularly the development of Technical Advice Notes and Supplementary Planning Documents.
- Ways to 'build back better' including greening the city and the potential of living streets in improving quality of life, sustainable transport, and learning from the C40 Mayors' Covid Taskforce
- Learning from the Council's work on retrofitting and pilot project of pre-fabricated, zero carbon buildings
- Setting target KPIs for the Council to assess its success in responding to the Climate Emergency
- Considering the priority of new and existing proposals by the Council and Climate Emergency Review Group in light of the Council's financial situation

- Integration with other Council work
A report is expected to come to Cabinet in November or December outlining the Council's proposed changes to the Climate Change agenda in light of the significantly altered post-Covid environment. Cabinet responses to the original Climate Emergency Review Group are expected at this time also. In January the Council will consult on its proposed budget. These would all be expected usefully to contribute to the work of the Review Group.
- Pre-establishment lead member:
The Review Group was proposed by Councillor Simmons. However, an alternative Chair may need to be sought.

2. Domestic Abuse Review Group

- Rationale
Though the stresses of Covid-19 have increased incidents of domestic abuse and lockdown policies have exacerbated the danger by removing the pressure valve of leaving the house, domestic abuse is not a new issue. Prior to its raised profile during Covid, it was estimated that just under 6% of adults aged 16 to 74 suffered domestic abuse in 2019,¹ with an estimated third of all women aged between 16 and 59 expected to experience it in their lifetimes, and two women a week being killed by current or former partners in that year.² Prevalent and deadly before Covid, the pandemic has led to vastly increased incidences of domestic violence, with the charity Refuge reporting in May increases of 957% for visits to its website.³ It should be noted, however, that this was not replicated in police reports or reports to local domestic abuse services across the country.

For victims of abuse, leaving their abuser often involves leaving their home. Women's Aid's Annual Audit (2019) found a shortfall of refuge bed spaces of 1,715 in England, and that over 30% of service providers had had to cut staffing due to reduced funding. Amidst a capacity shortage of refuge spaces, therefore, fleeing domestic violence can mean homelessness for victims of abuse. One class of people fleeing abuse, however, face an even more acute challenge, those without recourse to public funds for the government does not consider such people to be eligible for what refuge capacity is available. Eligibility criteria for recourse to public funds rely on whether a person is

¹[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2019#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Crime%20Survey,last%20year%20\(Figure%201\).&text=The%20remaining%2057%25%20\(746%2C219\),as%20domestic%20abuse%2Drelated%20crimes.](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesoverview/november2019#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Crime%20Survey,last%20year%20(Figure%201).&text=The%20remaining%2057%25%20(746%2C219),as%20domestic%20abuse%2Drelated%20crimes.)

²<https://www.refuge.org.uk/our-work/forms-of-violence-and-abuse/domestic-violence/domestic-violence-the-facts/>

³<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-52755109>

subject to immigration control, meaning having no recourse to public funds is an issue experienced by members of BAME communities (though not all BAME communities). As an ethnically diverse city, where even in 2011 almost 20% of residents were born in non-EU countries, the link between domestic violence and homelessness, and the limited role the Council can play in addressing this in light of legislation around recourse to public funds is particularly pertinent.

An issue to be noted is that due to the complexity of domestic abuse as an issue, with multiple causes, expressions and impacts, responding to it is not the responsibility of one single body. Locally, a network of parties – City and County Councils, Police and Health Services, charities and community groups – all have an active part in working together locally to respond to domestic abuse. Though the City Council is not the body primarily responsible for coordinating the response to domestic abuse, in two particular areas it is the lead body: homelessness prevention, and its work with BAME communities. It is possible, therefore, to conduct a well-focused review group on the topic on areas in which the Council can have a meaningful impact.

- Key Lines of Enquiry

Speaking to those members who have expressed an interest in the review group and key council officers the broad issues for consideration would include:

- Understanding the variety and experience of domestic abuse, and its impacts on those who suffer it
- Exploring the links between homelessness and domestic abuse, means of prevention and the effectiveness of the Council's response, particularly the Sanctuary Scheme
- The particular issues and challenges facing BAME sufferers of domestic abuse, in particular those with no recourse to public funds
- The support required by BAME communities in recognising and supporting victims of domestic abuse and what good practice can be learnt from successful schemes elsewhere
- The robustness of the Council's own processes in identifying and supporting victims of domestic abuse
- Opportunities for training and awareness raising to prevent or reduce the impact of domestic violence
- Consideration of the Safeguarding Families Plus approach, and broader measures to reduce the environmental factors in which domestic abuse might take place

- Integration with other Council work

The proposed Key Lines of Enquiry touch on a number of important areas of the Council's work:

- Homelessness prevention, particularly in relation to the Council's sanctuary scheme
- The Council's safeguarding duty

- Grant funding of community and charitable groups, and communities work
 - A review report is being written currently on a recent Home Office-funded BAME experience project, in which violence against women featured as the key strand
- Pre-establishment lead member:
The Review Group was proposed by Councillor Aziz

3. Citizen Engagement Review Group

- Rationale
The theme of citizen engagement has previously been put forward for consideration by Scrutiny, though not selected.

As most recently instanced in the divisiveness of the management of the Brexit vote, unclear or conflicting advice over Covid-19, and controversy over the handling of Dominic Cummings' trip to County Durham during lockdown, public faith in political institutions is low currently. Research has shown a significant decline in the public's trust of politicians, with 32% stating that they almost never trust government, up from 11% in 1986 (NatCen 2012). This has the potential to affect social cohesion among local communities, as faith becomes lost in the political system.

This trend has not yet extended to local councils, with research showing that 74 per cent of residents trust their council to take decisions about the local area – compared to just 15 per cent who cited central government.⁴ Whilst the corrosion of faith in local government does not reflect that of national government, maintaining and improving engagement in local democracy is vitally important. Local councils have a unique role to play in maintaining local esteem by becoming bastions of local democracy. A recent [LGA report](#) on engagement highlights:

“It has been said that engagement is everybody’s responsibility in a local authority, but all too often it ends up being nobody’s. There can be a temptation to think it is an abstract process that somebody deals with. In reality, good dialogue with residents and securing mutual trust between the council and the community needs to be part of the whole council’s DNA (p.4)”⁵

Councillors believe every person in Oxford should know how, and be able to, effect change within the Council. Though the Council can clearly benefit from its access to world experts on multiple topics on its doorstep, the lived experiences of stakeholders who will be impacted by decisions are of even

⁴ ‘Polling on resident satisfaction with councils’, LGA, October 2016, p.12

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/New%20Conversations%20Guide%2012.pdf>

greater importance. By ‘co-producing’ policy with citizens there is an opportunity to make more informed decisions and build a more cohesive and empowered society.

Whilst generally believing councils to make decisions in their interests, citizens nationally often perceive engagement by local government as tokenistic, overly formal and unlikely to make a difference. Through research,⁶ we understand that many people are unaware of the Council’s decision making process, and how best to engage and influence. Other councils, such as Kirklees Borough Council, are leading the country in terms of local authority democratic innovation. Their cross-party Democracy Commission recent review succeeded in engaging over 1000 people in shaping their future democratic structures. Lessons can be learnt from them and others.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also forced the Council to adapt the way it runs and delivers services for its residents, such as the provision of its Hub services, the establishment of a 5000-strong group of volunteers, and the movement to online Committee meetings. This brings with it challenges, but also opportunities to maximise the benefits of these adaptations.

- Key Lines of Enquiry
 - Auditing all current opportunities for Oxford residents to input into council decision making. What are they? What is the take up? How does this compare to national averages?
 - Evidence gathering of best practice from other local authorities, such as Kirklees Borough Council’s Democracy Commission. What ideas have others trialled and found successful? What have the impacts been?
 - What innovative methods to better connect with citizens exist, and how they might operate in Oxford, and what level of resources are available within the Council to deliver on such activities? These methods may include: community mapping, public meetings, focus groups and workshops, web based consultation, citizens’ juries, citizens’ panel, street stalls, questionnaires and surveys, local community meetings.
 - Scrutiny of the recent engagement review undertaken by the Communities team, the initial impact of the Residents’ Panel, and Covid-related changes to identify greater and more valuable citizen engagement.

- Integration with other Council work

As referenced above, engagement is a cross-cutting theme in the Council’s delivery of its functions. However, areas of particular relevance include:

 - Public involvement in committees
 - Statutory and non-statutory consultations

⁶ Kirklees Democracy Commission, 2017. Available at: <http://www.democracycommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Kirklees-Democracy-Commission-full-report-June-2017-WEB.pdf>

- Advisory groups – Citizens’ Panel, Tenants’ Panel
 - ‘User’ feedback on services
 - Community governance review
- Pre-establishment lead member:
This Review Group is carried over from last year, when it was proposed by Councillor Howlett. Councillor Howlett is unable to Chair the Review Group should it be set up. Councillor Gant has offered to do so.