

**To:** Council

**Date:** 25 January 2021

**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
Appendix 2	Table of Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from Cabinet meetings of 09 December 2020 (no reports from Scrutiny were submitted to 20 January 2021 Cabinet).
Appendix 3 (Confidential)	Table of Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from Shareholder and Joint Venture Group meeting of 16 December 2020

## Introduction

1. Though relatively few Scrutiny Committee or Panel meetings have taken place in the period from 14 November 2020 to 15 January, this period marks Scrutiny's busiest period of the year with the majority of its Review Group work being undertaken. The Review Groups are a crucial function of Scrutiny, devoting significantly more time than can be allocated normally to issues of particular importance to the Council and local residents. This year's topics are the annual Budget Review, which has taken on greater significance in light of the financial challenges thrown up by Covid, and Domestic Abuse, particularly focusing on those

areas the Council over which the Council has significant responsibility or influence – housing, BAME communities, and its own internal processes.

### **Scrutiny Committee**

2. Since the last Scrutiny update to Council the Scrutiny Committee has held meetings on 01 December 2020, and 12 January 2021. Responses were also made to previously made recommendations on the Scrutiny report on the Waterways.
3. The following items were considered at the meetings during this period:
  - 01 December
    - Draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire (1 recommendation, agreed)
    - Annual Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement (no recommendations)
    - Workplace Equalities and Action Plan (5 recommendations, all agreed)
4. The Draft Strategic Vision was an unusual item for Scrutiny to consider in that the underlying document was a reflection of the collective ambitions and common interests of its participant member-Councils, rather than the City Council alone. With that in mind, the recommendation made sought the Council to seek to bring greater attention to a number of key areas in future drafts, including around broadening consultation amongst low-participant groups, economic, health and racial inequality, and active transport.
5. Though no recommendations were made regarding the Annual Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement the Committee engaged in fulsome discussion on house-building targets and the impact of Covid-19, the amount of student accommodation provided by the City's universities, and plans for particular sites.
6. The Council produces a statutory report on its gender pay gap, which the Committee heard alongside wider equalities issues and the Council's plans on addressing issues of concern. The Committee strongly endorsed the Council's decision to publish information on the ethnicity pay gap, and its future plans for intersectional analysis between protected characteristics. The Committee made multiple recommendations around how better to understand the issues faced by minority members of its workforce, as well as suggestions on how to attract a more representative mix of applicants for upcoming roles.
  - 12 January
    - Citizen Engagement
7. Citizen Engagement was a topic shortlisted as a topic for consideration as a Review Group and received its own meeting. The Committee delved into multiple aspects of this topic, making recommendations about formalising how Councillors might form part of the consultation process, groups that should be consulted with more regularly, ways to empower citizens, and suggestions on how to improve engagement overall and amongst minority communities. The report to Cabinet containing these recommendations has not been taken to Cabinet at present and will be reported on in the next update.

Waterways Report (response provided by Cabinet within this reporting period)

8. Reflective of the cross-cutting nature of the subject matter, the Committee made a large number of recommendations relating to the Waterways report. These included ideas on the Council's role in driving partnership working to address the complex issues surrounding the Waterways, the availability of services for boat-dwellers, the management of moorings, and the recognition of boats as homes within the Council's planning policy. Of the eight recommendations made, six were agreed, one partially agreed and one not agreed. The latter concerned the geographical focus of waterway development.

### **Housing and Homelessness Panel**

9. The Housing and Homelessness Panel has not met during this period (though it has contributed to the Housing element of the Budget Review Group). A response from Cabinet, however, to the Panel's recommendations on the Hidden Homelessness report made in November has been received. The Panel made two recommendations to encourage the Council to take steps to learn more about the needs of the cohort of people who do not meet the threshold of homelessness, but are nevertheless living in housing situations which are sufficiently sub-optimal as to be detrimental to their wellbeing in order better to support them. The recommendation was met with partial agreement, on the basis that to undertake the work as put forward by the Panel, external consultants would need to be commissioned but that the Council would seek to do what it could within its resources.

### **Finance and Performance Panel**

10. The Finance and Performance Panel convened on one occasion during this period, on 03 December and considered the following reports:
  - Treasury Management Mid-Year Review (no recommendations)
  - Integrated Performance Report Q2 (no recommendations)
  - Site of the former Boswell's Department Store (no recommendations)
  - Integrated Performance Report Q2 - Commercial Property (no recommendations)
11. The Treasury Management Mid-Year Review is an update report on the Council's returns on investment, primarily property and multi-asset funds, and money-market lending. The Panel gave particular scrutiny to the risks and returns within the Council's property funds, the impact on returns of an increased need for liquidity, and the likely changes to interest rates and their impact on lending returns.
12. The primary focus of the Integrated Performance Report, a report against the Council's finance, performance and risk metrics, was on the financial situation arising from Covid-19. This was actually significantly better than had been anticipated, due to partial government reimbursement for lost sales, fees and charges, anticipated to be in the region of £5m. The Panel discussed the possible variance of that figure, and other major areas of budgetary variance.
13. Owing to their commercial sensitive content, the discussions regarding the Boswell's site and Commercial Property were discussed in confidential session and no summary is provided.

## **Companies Panel**

14. The Companies Panel met on 14 December 2020 and heard the following reports:
- OxWED update (One recommendation, agreed)
  - OCHL update (One recommendation, deferred – see below)
  - Barton Park quarterly report (no recommendations)
  - ODS update (no recommendations)
15. Owing to the confidentiality of the topics discussed no summary of the discussion is provided. The response to the Panel’s report on OxWED is available in confidential appendix 3.
16. In its response to the recommendation made in relation to the OCHL update report, the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group noted the similarity between the recommendation made and that made to the Cabinet from the Climate Emergency Review Group, which is due to be responded to shortly. It was agreed that the response to the recommendation of the Companies Scrutiny Panel would be deferred and made along with the response to the Climate Emergency Review Group.

## **Scrutiny Review Groups**

### *Domestic Abuse Review Group*

17. The Domestic Abuse Review Group held all but one of its scheduled substantive meetings before Christmas but is now on hold due to the time-sensitivity of the Budget Review Group. It will recommence at the end of this month, with its final substantive meeting, the draft being written in February 2021 with the expectation of submitting to Cabinet in March 2021.

### *Budget Review Group*

18. The Budget Review Group has now held its three substantive meetings at which Directors and some Heads of Service were invited to present the budget proposals for their service area, and respond to pre-submitted written questions and follow ups. The report from the Review Group is currently being drafted and will presented to Cabinet on 10 February 2021 and thereafter to Council on 17 February 2021.

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