

To: Council

Date: 22 March 2021

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
Corporate Priority:	All
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation:	That Council resolves to note the update report.

Appendices	
Appendix 1	Table of Cabinet responses to Scrutiny recommendations from Cabinet meetings of 10 February and 10 March 2021.
Appendix 2	Cabinet Response to the Budget Review Group

Introduction

1. Despite a relative paucity of meetings, the period from 16 January to 12 March has marked some of Scrutiny's most significant contributions to the work of the Council in the form of its Review Groups. In a year which has seen the sharpest economic contraction to the economy since the 18th century, and where central government support has fallen short of promises made at the start of the Covid pandemic, the Budget Review Group's work in checking and challenging the assumptions for income generative activities, cost savings and allocations to priority areas has been crucial. Likewise, the pandemic has also increased demand for many domestic abuse services nationally, so the conclusion of the Domestic Abuse Review Group, which has considered how the Council can meaningfully support victims and survivors of domestic abuse, is particularly timely. With over 70 recommendations made to Cabinet between them, the contribution of the Review Groups is a vital part of shaping Council policy and delivery in key areas.

Scrutiny Committee

2. Since the last Scrutiny update to Council the Scrutiny Committee has held meetings on 02 February 2021, and 02 March 2021. Responses were also made by Cabinet to previously made recommendations on the Scrutiny report concerning Citizen Engagement.

3. The following items were considered at the meetings during this period:

02 February

- Council Tax Reduction Scheme (no recommendations)
- Zero Carbon Council (five recommendations, none agreed)

4. Whilst no recommendations were made in response to the report detailing the Council's proposals for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (the reduction provided for those who do not have sufficient means to pay it), the continued commitment to having a 100% reduction banding was welcomed by the Committee. Other issues explored included the impact on partners (such as the County Council and Thames Valley Police), ensuring issues relating to the possibility of central government's increases to Universal Credit had been considered, and seeking clarification of terms within the scheme document itself.

5. The name of the Zero Carbon Council report reflects a step change in the aims of the Council, from carbon reduction to achieving zero carbon. The Zero Carbon Council report explains the steps the Council will take to achieve that goal. In its scrutiny of this issue recommendations were made to bring the Council's zero carbon ambitions into line with existing standards, to prioritise those carbon reduction measures which are fastest or cheapest, and to take steps to ensure that the carbon impact of all Council proposals is considered as part of the decision-making process. The recommendations were not agreed by Cabinet, although the commentary indicated a closer level of agreement on some areas than stated in the response. As such, Scrutiny requested this disconnect be pointed out to Cabinet, which it was at the March meeting of Cabinet though no changes to the Cabinet's original response to the recommendations was made.

02 March

- Business Plan 2021/22 and Business Plan 2020/21 Update (four recommendations, three agreed)
- OxWED Update (no recommendations)

6. The Business Plan is the Council's high-level plan of the actions it will take in order to further its corporate priorities in the coming year. The Committee's recommendations focused on aligning the Council's activity in relation to carbon reduction with the recommendations of the Climate Emergency Review Group and the policies of the Local Plan, the addition of a commitment towards developing the circular economy locally, and clarifying terms used in the document. Discussion was also devoted to how the KPIs for the Business Plan's actions might be improved.

7. Owing to its commercial sensitivity, the OxWED Update report detailing the Council's plans for taking forward the OxWED project to its next stage were taken in confidential session and no summary is provided here. Despite a fulsome discussion, no recommendations were made.

Citizen Engagement Report

(Scrutiny report to Cabinet and response provided by Cabinet within this reporting period – 9 recommendations, 5 agreed, 4 partially agreed)

8. Though the report was considered in the last reporting period, the subsequent report from Scrutiny was submitted to Cabinet and responded to in this period. This topic was one shortlisted by Scrutiny for consideration as a Review Group though not ultimately selected. The report spurred much conversation, with a total of nine recommendations made to Cabinet covering new ways to engage residents, such as through participatory budgeting and co-production, suggestions for drawing in less-engaged demographic groups, and building on existing engagement – including the formalisation of member representation of their wards.

Housing and Homelessness Panel

9. The Housing and Homelessness Panel met once during this period, where the allocation of homelessness prevention funding was considered. Key issues discussed included the implementation of a county-wide approach to homelessness and issues arising from that, the shape of day services following a decision to retender and ensuring Covid-safety of services. No recommendations to Cabinet were made.

Finance and Performance Panel

10. The Finance and Performance Panel convened on one occasion during this period, on 27 January, and considered the following reports:
 - Capital Management Strategy (no recommendations)
 - Commercial Property Strategy (no recommendations)
11. The Capital Strategy is the document which explains the principles the Council will follow in its capital programme, the methodology by which schemes will be included within the Capital Programme, how those schemes will be managed, and identifies the schemes to be undertaken within the next four years. The Panel mainly focused its discussion on management of capital schemes and how the Council ensures value for money, and clarifying some of the complexity around projects delivered for neighbourhood fora using CIL monies. Although no recommendation was made, it was suggested that the Panel might wish to review the Council's value for money assessments of some capital projects as part of its Scrutiny function in the next civic year.
12. Owing to their commercially sensitive content, the discussions regarding Commercial Property were discussed in confidential session. Only a brief summary is provided. The Panel considered the Council's suggested proposals in regards to the changes necessary to its previous Commercial Property Strategy following government's changes to lending criteria from the PWLB. No recommendations were made in response to this report specifically, but instead fed into the recommendations of the Budget Review Group.

Companies Panel

13. No meetings of the Companies Scrutiny Panel took place during this period. However, the main Scrutiny Committee did consider a report to Cabinet regarding the next phase of the OxWED development as detailed above. The final meeting of the civic year is scheduled to take place on 15 March 2021, which falls just outside the reporting window of this update.

Scrutiny Review Groups

Domestic Abuse Review Group

14. The Domestic Abuse Review Group concluded its report in February, and the report was sent to Cabinet on 10 March. With almost 50 recommendations, many cross-cutting the functions of the Council, no response was made by Cabinet, but it was agreed that the Cabinet's responses would be provided at its June 2021 meeting, in combination with the County Council.
15. The most fruitful area the Review Group found related to Housing. This is not to imply that the Council's Housing provision to those facing domestic abuse is particularly poor; it is not. However, having a safe and secure home environment is an area of extreme importance to victims and survivors, and one which the Council leads on. Other areas, particularly around translation and interpretation services and those with no recourse to public funds, create huge barriers to those seeking to flee domestic abuse but it is difficult to make big changes when central government policy remains unsupportive. The Review Group nevertheless, made a number of recommendations in these areas to mitigate this hostile policy environment as much as the Council reasonably could. Preventing domestic abuse from occurring, by increasing resilience and changing underlying attitudes was also reviewed, with the Group making a number of recommendations seeking to involve those voluntary groups who receive grants, and those companies whose goods and services are procured, in working towards improving the health of family relationships. Finally, the Review Group sought to build on the Council's recent motion to introduce a domestic abuse at work policy in order to ensure HR practices are supportive of those employees facing domestic abuse.

Budget Review Group

16. The Budget Review Group completed its work for this year during the reporting period and its final report was signed off by Scrutiny and submitted to Cabinet on 10 February 2021. As a commercial council, which relies on its Oxford Model of trading to underpin service budgets, Covid's financial impacts have been experienced more acutely at the Council than in many other tier-2 authorities.
17. With the Council facing such a tight squeeze on its finances, and having to make long-term decisions in a context of considerable uncertainty, the work of the Review Group this year was more important than ever. As with the Budget itself, the key area of focus of the Review Group was on exploring ways of improving the Council's financial situation, with deep consideration and recommendations made around income-generation, including PWLB-funded investments and the returns from the Council's own companies. The Review Group explored the viability of

saving plans, including building on the digitalisation of interaction with the public since lockdown and the rental of parts of St Aldate's Chambers rendered unnecessary owing to remote working. Finally, areas of expenditure linked to key strategic priorities, such as the Council's Floyds Row facility for reducing rough sleeping, were subject to close scrutiny.

18. A lower proportion of the 24 recommendations made by the Review Group were agreed than normal, with the rate running at 50%. This is likely as much to be reflective of the importance of issues being raised, the starkness of the trade-offs required by the Council's straightened circumstances, and the overall uncertainty as a fundamental disagreement between the Review Group and the Cabinet, although the Review Group did retain a scepticism over the Council's planned commercial property investments. Many of the issues and concerns of the Review Group had been looked at and considered, even if different conclusions were reached on how to respond to them.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

19. As throughout the Council, the restrictions of lockdown over the past year have required Scrutiny to adapt to new ways of operating. At the same time, Covid has made its role more crucial than ever as the Council has needed to confront many difficult challenges and decisions in light of the pandemic. This transition Scrutiny has managed seamlessly, with members and officers adapting quickly to the new operating environment.
20. Change, however, is afoot. Progress is being made with the vaccine roll-out programme and a roadmap for the end of lockdown measures has been published. The Council faces all-out elections in May, by which time clarity will have hopefully been provided by central government as to how official Council meetings should take place. During this purdah-related break the Scrutiny Officer will be using the time available to speak with members and officers to explore options around managing the work that comes to Scrutiny more effectively, how Cabinet is asked to respond to the recommendations made to it by Scrutiny, the areas it chooses to devote particular attention to through its Panels, and how it would wish to conduct its meetings – in-person, virtually or as a hybrid – if it were given the option to choose.
21. The approaching all-out Council elections will also mean changes in the membership of Scrutiny next year. A number of Scrutiny members are choosing not to stand again in the election, and the Scrutiny function would like to put on record its thanks for their contributions, particularly in light of the elections of last year being delayed meaning an unanticipated additional year of public service. The electorate too will have its say on who its elected representatives will be, and those who are returned for further service may not end up being involved in the Scrutiny function. It is an appropriate point, therefore, to put on record appreciation for the commitment and expertise demonstrated by all members to the Scrutiny function, and by extension to better serving our residents.

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