

To: Council
Date: 26 July 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 meeting of 16 June 2021.

Introduction

1. Although Scrutiny's last update report to Council was made a relatively long time ago, on 22 March 2021 the timing of the Council elections in May means there have been few meetings. This is largely a consequence of purdah preventing discussion of many topics prior to the election, leading to cancelled meetings, and the time required to allow the Council's decision-making to run its course in appointing new Committee members. As such, this report is relatively short.

Scrutiny Committee

2. Since the last Scrutiny update to Council the Scrutiny Committee has met twice, on 08 June and 14 July 2021. As timetabling prevents the Cabinet response to the recommendations made from the 14 July 2021 meeting being included in this update only the earlier meeting will be included here.

08 June

3. As it was its first meeting of the civic year the Scrutiny Committee undertook some necessary administration. A new Chair, Councillor Liz Wade, was appointed to take on the role from Councillor Andrew Gant. Councillor Nigel Chapman was appointed vice-Chair. The Committee also agreed to establish the same three Scrutiny Panels as in previous years: Housing and Homelessness, Finance and Performance, and Companies Scrutiny, with the latter two having their membership increased from four members to six.

The memberships of the Panels are as follows:

Housing and Homelessness

- Councillor Linda Smith (Chair)
- Councillor Lizzy Diggins
- Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers
- Councillor Laurence Fouweather
- Councillor Liz Wade
- Councillor Chris Jarvis

Finance and Performance

- Councillor James Fry (Chair)
- Councillor Duncan Hall
- Councillor Amar Latif
- Councillor Andrew Gant
- Councillor Tom Landell Mills
- Councillor Chris Jarvis

Companies Scrutiny

- Councillor Nigel Chapman (Chair)
- Councillor James Fry
- Councillor Edward Mundy
- Councillor Katherine Miles
- Councillor Tom Landell Mills
- Councillor Lucy Pegg

4. In addition to the administrative element, two substantive reports were considered at this meeting:
 - County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless (four recommendations, three agreed, one partially agreed)
 - Annual Safeguarding Report (two recommendations, one agreed, one partially agreed)
5. The background to the report on the County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless is the work the Council has been doing with its neighbours to work together in a more formal and deeper way to tackle the issues of homelessness, particularly through pooled budgeting. The Committee particularly explored issues around homelessness prevention in light of the challenge of the recent end to the eviction ban. The other key area of discussion was over issues pertaining to new commissioning arrangements. These issues were the sources of the Committee's recommendations. Cabinet accepted a

recommendation to learn from homelessness prevention work in Derby, as well as suggestions that the Council and its partners should seek out the best advisors when embarking on what is a high-profile and challenging venture. With new services being commissioned, the Committee was also keen that opportunities for the skills within the Council and its companies to deliver these services be kept open, a sentiment with which the Cabinet agreed. The only area of partial disagreement was over the recommendation for an increase in the political accountability within the governance structure, which the Cabinet supported in principle but – as part of a wider structure – did not have the power unilaterally to implement.

6. The Council, through its many and various ways of working, comes into contact with a significant number of vulnerable people, and has a statutory duty to keep them as safe as possible. In order to do that, its safeguarding processes are reviewed annually and that audit is made public. This report was considered by the Committee. Issues such as safeguarding work in the pandemic, the death of street homeless people and the prevalence of neglect in Oxford were discussed at length. Two recommendations were made by the Committee in response to the report and in light of the discussion held. One, that given the successes of the Council in achieving green ratings in all categories in its recent audit, that greater contextual data be provided in the public report to allow readers to understand not just the outputs of the Council's work but also its effectiveness. This was agreed by Cabinet. The other recommendation, that the Council's City of Sanctuary pledge be extended to ensure that information shared about those suspected of being victims of human trafficking not be used for immigration enforcement was partially agreed on the basis that the overriding priority of the Council and its City of Sanctuary pledge was the safety of its residents; whilst in very limited circumstances it was theoretically possible information could be shared with immigration enforcement, there was no evidence of such sharing taking place. As such, it did not wish to commit to full agreement on the grounds that doing so could impair support provided to the victims of human trafficking.

Housing and Homelessness Panel

7. The Housing and Homelessness Panel has not met during the reporting period.

Finance and Performance Panel

8. The Finance and Performance Panel convened on one occasion during this period, on 08 June 2021, and considered the following reports:
 - Integrated Performance and Outturn Report 2020/21 (no recommendations)
 - Performance Monitoring (no recommendations)
9. The Cabinet considers a quarterly report detailing the Council's delivery concerning finances, risk and performance each quarter. This report looked at the year-end performance. Although no recommendations were made in response to the report it was discussed in detail, with time devoted to a number of issues, particularly income losses arising from Covid, the trajectory of their anticipated recovery, the level and duration of government support, the level of reserves and the Aeron QL implementation.

10. In addition to those performance monitoring reports Cabinet requests, Scrutiny also commissions reports on its own selection of corporate and service level performance indicators. These were agreed as part of the Performance Monitoring report. One issue worth mentioning is that the Finance and Performance Panel has agreed to consider this as a standing item for every meeting. However, rather than being presented by one officer trying to represent all the different owners of the KPIs, should the Panel wish to raise questions they will either seek a written response to their question or invite the relevant officer to present at the next Finance and Performance Panel meeting.

Companies Panel

11. The Companies Panel met shortly before purdah prior to the election, on 15 March 2021 to consider reports regarding Oxford Direct Services, Oxford City Housing Limited and the Barton (Oxford) LLP development. As is almost always the case, commercial confidentiality prevents a summary being provided. No recommendations were made to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, but thanks were given to Mike Day, Managing Director of the Housing Company, for his work and sorrow expressed at the news of his departure.
12. A meeting of the Companies Panel is scheduled for 20 July 2021 which, although prior to the meeting of Council, falls too closely to it to be reported on here.

Changes to Scrutiny

13. The Council's 'Oxford Model', whereby the Council trades in the market to earn money which supplements services and supporting its corporate objectives is uncommon within local authorities. As a consequence, it has a more complicated structure than most, particularly relative to its size. The Council's auditors identified improvements to the governance of this complex structure, in response to which the Council has developed a set of proposals. A consequence of this is that Scrutiny has had to decide how it would continue its Scrutiny of the Council's companies.
14. The changes mean that Scrutiny now gets 'a seat at the table' at Shareholder and Joint Venture Group meetings, with all members of the Companies Scrutiny Panel being invited to attend in a non-voting capacity. Scrutiny will therefore be provided at the meeting directly, rather than the longer and rather convoluted process of agreeing reports of the Companies Scrutiny Panel to be presented at the Shareholder meeting. Real-time scrutiny taking place at the point of decision-making is expected to improve the effectiveness and standard of scrutiny of the companies.

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