

# Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

## Annual Report 2020/21

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# Participants in Scrutiny 2020/21

Alphabetical order



Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan



Councillor Lubna Arshad



Councillor Shaista Aziz



Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers



Councillor Tiago Corais



Councillor Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini



Councillor James Fry



Councillor Andrew Gant



Councillor Michael Gotch



Councillor Richard Howlett



Councillor Pat Kennedy



Councillor Tom Landell Mills

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# Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

## Annual Report 2020/21

## Contents

**Foreword by the Chair 2**

**Introduction 3**

**About the Scrutiny Committee 3**

**Summary of scrutiny activity during 2020/21 5**

**The Scrutiny Committee 6**

**Domestic Abuse Review Group 12**

**Housing and Homelessness Panel 14**

**Finance and Performance Panel 19**

**Companies Panel 21**

**The year ahead 22**



**Councillor  
Andrew Gant**

Chair, Scrutiny  
Committee

2

## Foreword by the Chair

It is illustrative to reflect on just how unusual the last year has been by considering the fact that the Scrutiny function has delivered an entire year of work, the complete contents of this annual report, without officers or members having shared a room with one another. Emergency powers granted under Covid-related legislation allowed for the first time Council meetings to be undertaken virtually and, along with other meetings of the Council, Scrutiny transitioned to meetings via the Zoom platform, and livestreamed meetings to youtube to enable the public to watch.

Holding meetings via Zoom has precipitated some new experiences for Scrutiny, with the hitherto unknown phrase 'you are on mute' entering standard parlance, councillors developing new appendages – blue and legacy hands - and the welcoming of unscheduled participation in meetings by children and pets.

Although requiring some adaptation by all involved, the move to virtual Scrutiny has been absolutely vital. The urgency of the pandemic crisis response has required far greater change in

a far shorter time-scale than would otherwise have occurred in 'normal' circumstances. Virtual meetings have ensured that urgency has not unduly precluded scrutiny of these very significant changes. In addition to the emergency Covid response, Scrutiny has been able to shape the Council's budget-setting and bring about changes to prevent and mitigate the impact of domestic abuse through its Review Groups, to contribute to multiple strategic plans and business plans, and to input heavily into a number of topics vital for our residents, such as Citizen Engagement, the Waterways, and Air Quality.

It is a credit to the Council and its different parts – Scrutiny members, Cabinet members and officers – that amidst such a turbulent year everybody has worked together to maintain the smooth functioning of Scrutiny and the value it provides to Council decision-making. I would particularly like to thank officers who have provided reports to Scrutiny, especially in light of the extraordinary demands of their other duties over this period, our committee clerk John Mitchell, and in particular our Scrutiny officer Tom Hudson.

**Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair, Scrutiny  
Committee 2020/21**



## Introduction

The dominant theme of 2020 has been Covid-19 pandemic where, in March, the country entered lockdown. It is inevitable that the fundamental societal changes which have been wrought by the pandemic would be the key focus. Nevertheless, over the last year the Scrutiny function has contributed towards the positive working of the Council and achieved some significant successes. This report seeks to highlight and put on record the contribution.

## About the Scrutiny Committee

Most major Council decisions are taken by the Cabinet which is made up of ten elected councillors from the controlling political group. In operating this form of decision-making arrangement, the Council is required by law to have a Scrutiny Committee made up of elected councillors who are not on the Cabinet.

The Scrutiny Committee acts as a counterweight to the Cabinet, empowering twelve cross-party 'backbench' councillors to hold the Cabinet to account for the decisions they take, and contribute to council decision-making. The Scrutiny Committee can also investigate any issue that affects the city or its residents, regardless of whether it is within the direct responsibility of the Cabinet.

The work of Scrutiny helps to provide assurance that the Council is performing well, delivering value for money, and taking the best decisions it can to improve public services and the quality of life for the residents of Oxford.

Committee meetings are scheduled almost every month and residents are encouraged to attend and address the Committee on any issues on the agenda. Generally, the Committee considers a balance of forthcoming decisions to be made by the Cabinet, and a number of other issues that are not necessarily the subject of a forthcoming decision, but merit further investigation.

The Committee agrees a work plan at the start of each year which sets out the various topics and issues that councillors have chosen to focus on. Some of these issues are delegated to themed standing panels, which meet approximately five times each year, and to topical review groups where more detailed scrutiny is required over a series of meetings.

The Scrutiny function is supported by a Scrutiny Officer. Tom Hudson was appointed to this role in August 2019 following the departure of Stefan Robinson.

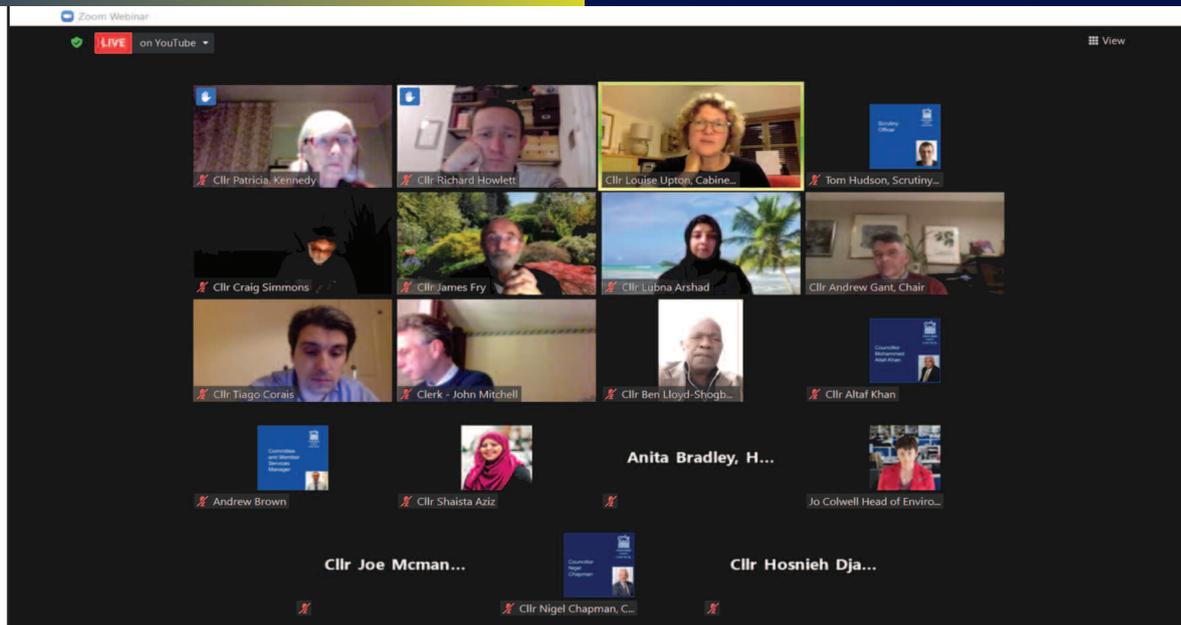
### Making the case for change

Importantly, for the Committee to be effective, it must produce well-reasoned evidence based recommendations to the Cabinet concerning service improvement. The Committee has no power to require that decisions be revised, but a robust argument for change will go a long way in persuading the Cabinet to review their decisions.

### Shareholder and Joint Venture Group

In addition to the reports heard by Scrutiny and recommendations made to Cabinet, reports and recommendations also were made by the Companies Panel to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, which is made up of the same councillors as Cabinet but acting in a different capacity, that of shareholder. A further three reports were sent to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, containing seven recommendations. Two of these reports, containing six recommendations, however, were not considered in-year due to Covid-cancellations, and the other was put into

Scrutiny committee in session on-line 2021



4

practice before the meeting of the Shareholder Meeting.

## Call in

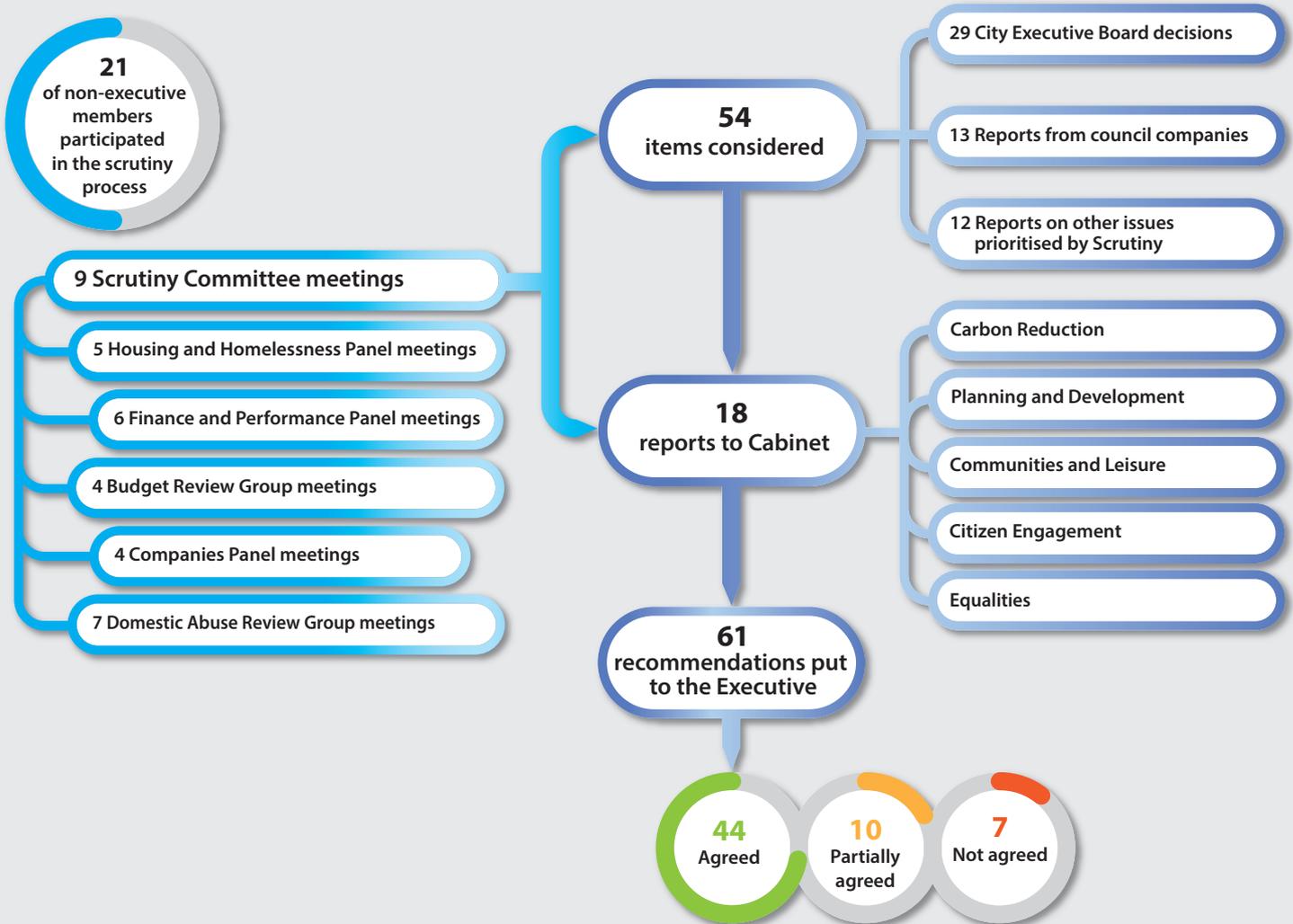
Call in is a statutory function that enables councillors to challenge decisions that have been taken before they are implemented. If a call in request from any 4 councillors or the Chair of Scrutiny is deemed valid, then the Committee will hear both sides of the argument and decide whether or not to refer the decision back to the Cabinet, individual councillors in the case of decisions about the use of ward member budgets, or officers for key decisions delegated to them, with reasons why the decision should be re-considered. During 2020/21 many important Cabinet decisions were subject to pre-decision scrutiny and there were no call-ins.

## Get involved

Though pandemic precautions mean Scrutiny looks a little different to normal, for getting involved this may actually be a boost. There are many opportunities for members of the public and representatives of organisations to get involved in the work of Scrutiny. The Committee would welcome an increase in the number of people attending to speak at its meetings, which are held at 6pm on Zoom. There are multiple ways of getting involved in the work of Scrutiny:

- Attend virtual meetings of the Scrutiny Committee, standing panels and review groups or view via our youtube channel, except in instances where confidential information is to be discussed. Details of these meetings are displayed on our website.
- Speak at a meeting on any agenda item with the prior agreement of the Chair. Please email [democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk](mailto:democraticservices@oxford.gov.uk) and give at least 24 hours' notice.
- Suggest a topic for Scrutiny to consider by completing and submitting a Work Plan Suggestion Form.
- Raise issues with your local City Councillor and request that Scrutiny considers this as part of a 'Councillor Call for Action', a mechanism by which members of the public can have issues of concern given consideration by the Scrutiny Committee.
- Watch out for consultations, surveys and requests for evidence by registering at <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/consultation>.

## Summary of scrutiny activity during 2020/21



5

### 6 major work streams totalling 35 meetings

These figures represent a slight decrease in the number of recommendations being accepted by Cabinet (79% to 72%). Whilst useful in determining whether Scrutiny is generally making reasonable recommendations, within a range a lower batting average is not necessarily a bad sign; indeed it can be positive, with Scrutiny showing itself willing to engage in both elements of its role as a 'critical friend'. Indeed, compared to the previous year Scrutiny has made 25% fewer reports and 40%

fewer recommendations, a function of mainly considering Cabinet reports, but also potentially suggestive in combination with its reduced rate of agreement that it has tended to hold its own counsel until matters of significant importance emerged. Although a reduction in activity compared to the previous year, Scrutiny's output is in line with historical norms and compares favourably considering extraordinary circumstances under which it was delivered.

## The Scrutiny Committee

### Membership

Councillor Andrew Gant (Chair)  
Councillor Joe McManners (Vice-Chair)  
Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan  
Councillor Lubna Arshad  
Councillor Shaista Aziz  
Councillor Tiago Corais  
Councillor Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini  
Councillor James Fry  
Councillor Richard Howlett  
Councillor Pat Kennedy  
Councillor Ben Lloyd-Shogbesan  
Councillor Craig Simmons

The Scrutiny Committee is responsible for the overall management of the Council's Scrutiny function. It decides which topics, issues and decisions will be considered and how. A provisional work plan is provided, based on agreed priorities by the Committee, but is liable to change as new issues arise and Cabinet reports are rescheduled.

The Committee also sets the remits and membership of its standing panels, which are themed sub-committees that consider all issues and decisions within their given remit.

The Committee agreed to continue with the Finance Panel and Housing Panels, which have been running for a number of years and are well established. The Finance Panel has, however, seen an extension of its remit to include performance management, becoming the Finance and Performance Panel. The Housing Panel has also had a name change, to the Housing and Homelessness Panel, which is to make its name more accurately reflect its existing remit. In early 2017, the Committee chose to set up a Companies Panel to oversee

the Council's arm's length trading and housing companies, and the Committee opted to continue this arrangement for 2020/21.

A small number of issues prioritised by the Committee can be delegated to review groups for more detailed scrutiny. Review groups actively engage with partner organisations and expert witnesses before producing substantial evidence-based reports with recommendations. This year, two review groups were held, the Domestic Abuse Review Group (full details below), as well as the annual review of the Council's budget and medium term financial strategy. As the commissioner of this work the Committee approved the reports of the review groups for submission to Cabinet.

The following is a summary of the themes and activity the main Scrutiny Committee has engaged with over the last year.

### Covid Recovery

A special meeting of Scrutiny was called early in the civic year dedicated to considering the Cabinet's proposed response to Covid, and its plans to mount a Covid recovery. 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. The topic of finances was not considered in depth, which instead was considered by the Finance Panel separately.

### Strategic Plans

Scrutiny's year was bookended by reports pertaining to the Council's own Corporate Strategy. At its first meeting, it was introduced to



the draft of the 2020-24 Corporate Strategy, laying out the high level aims of the Council over the following four years. At the end of year, it looked at a report on the progress against the Council's Business Plan, annual actions to realise the aims of the Corporate Plan, and the set of new actions for the forthcoming year which would form the new Business Plan. Scrutiny's discussion over 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 desirable 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. For the Council's Business Plan, 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.

As a tier-two authority, Planning is one of the Council's key functions. The production of a Local Plan is a legal requirement, with a legal process needing to be followed as part of the adoption process. The Council had been working on the 2036 Local Plan for four years prior to the meeting and had received the support of the Inspector by the time of the Scrutiny meeting, meaning changes were unable to be made. However, acquaintance with the Local Plan is important, as each year the Committee also hears the Annual Monitoring Report, where the Council reports on its progress against the Local Plan. Although no recommendations were made in this instance, 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. Although recommendations are the primary 'currency' of Scrutiny, there is often significant

value simply in providing a platform for Cabinet members, Scrutiny members and relevant officers to discuss issues, even when recommendations are not deemed necessary.

Whilst mainly Scrutiny considers reports pertaining to the City Council, the Council does not operate on its own but works strategically with its neighbouring councils as well as the County Council. One of the fruits of this partnership working was the development of the draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire, which Scrutiny had the opportunity to comment on, despite being an unusual item for Scrutiny to consider owing to the fact 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 asked the Council to seek to bring greater attention to a number of key areas in future drafts, including broadening consultation amongst low-participant groups, economic, health and racial inequality, and active transport.

### **Supporting the Vulnerable**

One of the clearest ways in which the Council intervenes to support its most vulnerable residents is through pecuniary support in the form of benefits. In a challenging environment where the Council faces cuts to its income, but where residents also face significant financial pressures the approach to those benefits is very important. Over the course of the year Scrutiny considered two reports on benefits: the Discretionary Housing Payment Policy and the Council Tax Reduction Scheme.

Concerning the first of these, the Committee was generally in favour of the proposals put forward but raised concerns around access to this support, particularly in relation to the challenges of non-English speakers, and the impact of such challenges in take-up by those eligible. The Committee made three recommendations, around increased translation support for non-

English speakers, identifying via monitoring the demographic groups not accessing the support available, and wider promotion of Discretionary Housing Payment through partners. All were agreed by Cabinet. No recommendations were made by Scrutiny concerning the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, although similar issues were explored and the Council's commitment to maintaining a 100% reduction for eligible residents was welcomed.

Though fulfilling a statutory duty, the Council's Air Quality Action Plan goes significantly beyond statutory requirements, with a goal to reach 30 micrograms of NO<sub>2</sub> by 2025. A significant driver in this greater ambition is the recognition that poor air quality does not impact all residents equally, with residents who are older, disabled, poorer or from ethnic minority backgrounds liable to bear the greatest burdens. This issue was considered by Scrutiny, which agreed with the intention to go beyond statutory requirements, but did note that the Council was yet to achieve the statutory level. Scrutiny primarily focused on the equalities aspect of air quality, textual clarifications and amendments, emitters outside the scope of the Clean Air Act (such as canal boats), the financial implications of the AQAP, issues on consultation and engagement, and suggestions on practical steps for the Plan on transport issues. In total, ten recommendations were made, which focused on textual clarifications with a view to the expected use by other councils wishing to follow Oxford's lead, communication around air quality issues, and specific suggestions relating to traffic. All were agreed by Cabinet. The following month Scrutiny also considered the Annual Air Quality Status Update report, a regular feature at Scrutiny, but having made a large number of recommendations a month previously no further recommendations were made. Another report was considered by the Committee in a similar area – Zero Carbon Oxford. However, whilst there was very full discussion the Committee's five recommendations were all rejected by Cabinet.



## Equalities and Engagement

Each year the Council is under a statutory duty to report on its gender pay gap. The Scrutiny Committee heard this alongside a report on wider internal equalities issues and the Council's plans on addressing issues of concern, such as the number of women and BAME representatives in senior positions. 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.

As referenced above, each year Scrutiny considers topics for Review Groups. More topics are put forward for consideration than can be taken forward. In this year, one of the topics of great interest to members but which was not

taken forward was that of Citizen Engagement. Owing to its importance, an entire meeting of Scrutiny was dedicated to understanding how the Council engages with its citizens, and how it might improve on that engagement in order to give greater ownership to residents. The Committee delved into multiple aspects of this topic, making nine 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. Cabinet accepted five recommendations fully, with the other four partially.

Scrutiny's work involves both routine reports, which tend to return to the Committee on a regular basis, and novel ones, which are one-off. It can be tempting to imagine that the scrutiny of routine reports is of lesser importance, given the layers of previous scrutiny that have already been undertaken. This year, however, showcased



the importance of revisiting topics periodically to ensure they remain suitable in light of a changing external environment. Normally, the Street Naming and Numbering policy may not be thought of as a high priority, but with the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been a growth in awareness of the pervasiveness in the present environment of an inequitable past. Statues have clearly been the primary area of discussion, but street names are also influential in shaping the tone of an area. Whilst it did not make any recommendations, Scrutiny discussed in detail about public support for change and the circumstances in which street names might be altered.

### **Tourism and Waterways**

Scrutiny Review Groups are major pieces of work, and whilst typically they are reviewed the year after the response from Cabinet to their recommendations has been made, where there is ongoing interest the recommendations of a Review Group can act as a good template for further updates. Covid did disrupt activity in this regard, but areas of particular interest were in

relation to how the recommendations fitted with the impacts of Covid on the tourist economy, and the Committee expressed keenness to hear more about the Council's emerging City Centre Vision before the end of the year. Other issues considered included air quality issues relating to tourist coaches, toilet facilities, increasing 'tourism' by local people, and the steps being taken by employers to pay the Oxford Living Wage.

An important element of the Tourism Review Group's recommendations related to the Waterways, given their importance as a heritage, cultural and tourism asset. However, the Waterways also provide homes for people within the City, as well as being a vital environmental resource. Work in this area is coordinated by a specific Waterways Officer, and Scrutiny has tended to request a report on progress each year, as occurred this year. The main areas of discussion and recommendations were around 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.

### **Business Opportunities**

Although the universities and colleges in Oxford are better known for their influence as land owners in Oxford, the Council has an important role. When opportunities arise it enters into ventures which will not only support its income streams, but also realise wider goals. For reasons of commercial sensitivity little can be reported of the details of the first meeting, but Scrutiny were involved in discussions over the next phase proposals for the Oxford West End Development proposals, redeveloping the Oxpens Road area, with a view to extending the city centre to the west. It also heard proposals to make available workspaces to businesses which would reflect the trend towards greater flexibility. 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 one of the prospective sites 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, which was agreed by Cabinet.

### **Thanks**

The Committee would like to thank everyone who has played a part in the Scrutiny process this year including Scrutiny councillors, members of the Cabinet, council officers, representatives of partner organisations, expert witnesses and the public.

## The Domestic Abuse Review Group

### Membership:

Councillor Shaista Aziz (Chair)  
Councillor Mohammed Altaf-Khan  
Councillor Mark Lygo  
Councillor Craig Simmons  
Councillor Sian Taylor  
Councillor Liz Wade



Councillor Shaista Aziz, Chair  
of the Domestic Abuse Review  
Group 2020/21

“The Covid-19 pandemic has rightly dominated the news over the last year, which, to date has claimed over four and a half million lives, and has seen many more people’s lives have changed forever. For too long, however, there has been what the UN refers to of the ‘global shadow pandemic of violence’ against women and girls and a parallel pandemic of domestic abuse, a crime primarily perpetrated against women.

In the UK, two women are dying every week due to violence carried out by an intimate partner or a former partner. At the same time, the criminal justice system is seeing a backlog of cases with victims and survivors of sexual assault having to wait longer than ever to access justice and support. For many the barriers and challenges to justice are insurmountable and unaffordable.

Each year the Scrutiny function undertakes two Review Groups, which are opportunities to take a much deeper dive than normally afforded at Scrutiny meetings into issues of particular importance. One of these is determined by the

Former secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan is correct in saying that ‘Violence against women is perhaps the most shameful human rights violation and it is perhaps the most pervasive.’

Kofi Anna’s comment is true in that class, education, religion nor ethnicity do not insulate against domestic abuse; it pervades all sections of society. What makes it particularly shameful is that its severity is compounded by the systemic equalities that exist in society. Women are more likely to face domestic abuse, but they are also less likely to be working and earning, and therefore less able to escape their abusive environment. Members of the BAME community, particularly non-English speakers, face far more barriers in accessing and maximising the benefit of the support that is available. These challenges are far more extreme for those with no recourse to public funds who, at a national policy level, are barred from receiving support from the state that would enable them to find safety, other than for a few exceptional cases.

Sitting at a cross-roads between public health, gender and racial inequality, the way domestic abuse is approached and victims supported is a microcosm of a statutory body’s wider attitudes, and an effective litmus test for those with progressive ambitions to protect the vulnerable. Faced with rising rates of domestic abuse during the pandemic, the Domestic Abuse Review Group sought to work internally and with national level experts to understand what the Council could do to reduce the incidence, and mitigate the severity of local abuse through its own functions.”

Council’s constitution, a review of the Budget and Medium Term Financial Plan proposals. The other is open for members of Scrutiny to decide. In light of the steep increase in cases of domestic abuse nationally, Scrutiny selected as its topic



the prevention and mitigation of Domestic Abuse.

Key issues the review group sought to explore included:

- What support is available for those suffering domestic abuse?
- What can we learn from other local authorities?
- What issues arise for those fleeing domestic abuse in regards to housing; how does the Council address those needs and does it do so successfully?
- What are the specific challenges faced by members of BAME communities when facing domestic abuse?
- How can the Council leverage the money it spends on voluntary sector grants and its overall procurement to contribute towards addressing domestic abuse?
- What changes internally can the Council make to ensure that it is a supportive working environment for those experiencing domestic abuse?

In addition to Council officers briefing members, a large cast of local and national experts also supported Review Group members with their knowledge and advice. These external members were:

- Amna Abdullatif, Children and Young People's Lead (Women's Aid), Councillor at Manchester City Council
- Sobia Afridi, Trustee (Oxford Against Cutting)
- Kate Agha, Director (Oxford Against Cutting)
- Laura Clements, Head of Service: Family Solutions (Oxfordshire County Council)
- Jonathan Cruz, Team Leader (Oxfordshire Domestic Abuse Service)
- Huda Jawad, Faith and Communities Programme Manager (Standing Together Against Domestic Abuse)
- Jameelah Shodunke, Community Engagement Officer (AFiUK)

- Trish Walsh, Manager (Reducing the Risk)

In what was at times shocking and harrowing evidence, the Review Group was informed of the particular challenges faced by (overwhelmingly) women when fleeing domestic abuse, particularly in regards to the choices they are forced to make around accommodation, as well as the windows of opportunity for intervention. Major recommendations to seek that the Council implement a particular pathway for those facing or fleeing domestic abuse were made to ensure that the particular challenges that those fleeing face are allowed for and supported, and that nationally-recognised accreditation to that effect is sought.

These issues are compounded by different forms of vulnerability, often intersecting with one another – the presence of children, lack of money, coming from a BAME background, insecure immigration status, or not speaking English. Failure to escape abusive situations can be fatal. Multiple recommendations were made to make culturally-sympathetic support more widespread.

The Review Group also looked at how it, as one part of a web of statutory bodies responsible for reducing the incidence and severity of domestic abuse worked with partners, mainly the County Council and the voluntary sector. It also considered what the Council, as an employer with over 500 staff, could do to ensure its HR policies were supportive of any individuals facing domestic abuse, rather than inadvertently contributing to their vulnerability by making work a non-supportive area. The key recommendation made was the adoption of a policy for managing the particular issues and needs of staff facing domestic abuse.

In total, 48 recommendations were made, relating to nine out of the ten Cabinet portfolios. Owing to the complexity of issues raised and the timing of the election a response was made by Cabinet in September 2021, with 28 recommendations agreed, and a further 11 partially so.

## Housing and Homelessness Panel

### Membership:

Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers (Chair)

Councillor Shaista Aziz

Councillor Michael Gotch

Councillor Sian Taylor

Councillor Liz Wade

Councillor Dick Wolff



Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers, Chair, Housing and Homelessness Panel 2020/21

“The Covid-19 pandemic has meant that we have all spent much more time in our own homes. Whilst there have been challenges for many of us - sharing our space with children and partners, and setting up to work at home – a secure home has been also been a place of sanctuary, a base to retreat to as life outside became more dangerous. Sadly, not all members of our community have had access to such sanctuary. True, and rightly, those sleeping rough on our streets have been provided with accommodation through the

‘everyone in’ programme, but Covid has placed many incomes under stress, and loosened the bonds of already-insecure tenancies. Consequently, the Housing and Homelessness Panel has paid particular attention to issues around the Private Rented Sector, and its cross-over with homelessness. The Panel has commissioned reports and presentations on the impact of the pandemic on the private rented sector, rough sleeping and hidden homelessness, and has also added value to discussions over Cabinet’s selective licensing proposals by inviting external stakeholders to share their views.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the work of the Housing team, who have risen to the challenges of the last year commendably. I would also like to thank our external guests, representatives from ACORN, the CAB, College and County lettings agents, and the Oxford Tenants Union for sharing their knowledge us. Tony Buchanan, the tenant representative co-optee on the Panel has consistently provided insightful challenge, and my thanks are given to him for his time, freely given. The time and effort of my fellow Panel members I also wish to recognise, particularly of Councillors Mike Gotch and Sian Taylor, who have now stood down from the Council. Whilst I have stood down as Chair for the forthcoming year, I remain on the Panel, and look forward to seeing 2020/21’s strong work continue.”

Of all the areas within the Scrutiny function, the Housing Panel had the fewest Cabinet reports to consider, allowing it to explore a greater number of issues it specifically wanted to address. Approximately half the reports considered were commissioned by Scrutiny. In combination with the Cabinet reports this led to a particularly well-balanced suite of issues and reports coming to the Panel.

Although often dealt with at the main Scrutiny Committee owing to their importance to the

City, strategic housing and planning issues do also form part of the remit of the Housing Panel. In August 2020 the Panel considered the Housing Delivery Plan, a plan mandated by central government for councils under certain conditions to demonstrate how they would ensure that the required number of houses would be delivered. The Council had opted to develop such a plan of its own volition, owing to the narrow margin for error in hitting development targets. The Housing and



Homelessness Panel members were impressed at the lengths gone to in order to support development. The impact of Covid had, inevitably, slowed this work, and the Panel's one recommendation was that, following the lifting of lockdown, activities in the plan should be given new dates for completion as a way of ensuring the good work was kept on track. This recommendation was agreed by Cabinet. Later in the year, in October 2020 the Panel also considered an update report concerning central government's proposals around reform to the Planning system. As an information-only paper on how officers planned to respond to the government's consultation, the Panel made no recommendations. However, it explored in depth the potential dangers lying in the government's current proposals, particularly in relation to the ability to deliver additional social housing, maintaining environmental standards and ensuring a suitable balance of developments.

With estimates that almost half of all homes in Oxford are privately let (49.3%) conditions within the private rented sector hold an outsize importance in Oxford compared to elsewhere. In

light of this, therefore, the Housing Panel sought to hear the views of stakeholders from outside the Council, as well as from Council officers. At its first meeting of the year, in August 2020 the Panel invited Oxford Tenants Union in to the Panel to present on the impact of Covid on the private rented sector locally. They key issues were around social distancing from landlords, responsibility for rent following the departure of a housemate and with others not moving in, and management of rent arrears in light of Covid-related income reductions. In response to the briefing and following discussion the Panel made recommendations around ways to increase knowledge of tenants' rights, to support at-risk tenants by ensuring sufficient emergency accommodation in case of a spike in homelessness and using environmental health powers to ensure let homes remained habitable during any winter lockdown, and to work with landlords, tenants and government to try and address the systemic issues and pressures on the private rented sector which led to such acute outcomes for tenants. Four of the five recommendations were agreed, with the other partially so.



On the back of its discussions about the impact of Covid, the Panel requested a briefing on the Council's own attitude towards rent arrears in light of Covid. It was reassured to hear that although arrears rates were somewhat up on the previous year, they were still trending within a normal range and were ahead of the figures of two years ago. This success had largely been down to a proactive change in approach, which was reaping dividends, of softer, earlier engagement with tenants.

One of the biggest steps the Council has proposed to take to uphold standards in the private rented sector is through selective licensing, the licensing subject to meeting certain safety conditions of (almost) all premises used for private rental. When the Cabinet report came to the Panel, it provided an opportunity to hear the views of other stakeholders in the process, and the Panel heard presentations from the CAB, ACORN (the union), and College and County estate and letting agency on their responses to the proposals. Though each approached the issue from very different perspectives – raising standards of protections

for vulnerable tenants, and not being undercut by landlords unwilling to abide by basic standards – the proposals were supported by all external speakers. Panel enquiries on the subject included: the responsibilities on landlords regarding the antisocial behaviour of their tenants, whether licenses were of the landlord or of the property and the financial implications arising from that, the efforts being made by the Council to engage in consultation with those groups impacted by low housing standards but unlikely to come forward, in particular those in insecure accommodation and non-English speakers, Council staff's interaction with non-English speaking landlords, the potential to outlaw 'no DSS' policies through licensing conditions. The strongest theme of discussion, on which the only recommendation was made, was in relation to the fact that the most vulnerable – for reasons of language, fear of reprisal, unawareness or hiddenness – were the most likely not to participate in any consultation, and yet those were the people who would most benefit from a selective licensing scheme. The recommendation, that the Council take special measures to ensure that such people in the



'shadow' rental market be heard in consultation, was agreed. Support from all participants, external and internal, was partially based on the success of the Council's HMO licensing scheme, which had been shown to improve standards in the sector. The Panel also considered a report, giving its support, to renewing the scheme.

Perhaps crowded out by other events, the pandemic saw what is a remarkable achievement, the provision of housing for all rough sleepers under the 'everyone-in' policy. In November 2020, the Panel heard a commissioned report to give greater detail on the Council's activities in relation to rough sleeping since the start of the first lockdown in March. They received updates on the 'everyone in' policy, successful bids for government funding for move-on accommodation, and the development of the Severe Weather Emergency Policy. In its scrutiny, the Panel asked questions about how feedback of rough sleepers was heard, relations with neighbouring districts (where it was encouraged to hear of the progress in developing a county-wide approach and joint working), the current status of provision for

those with no recourse to public funds, the impact of providing additional homes for former rough sleepers on the overall housing stock and the practicalities of delivering the SWEP in a socially distanced way.

The Panel's biggest area of concern was for those with no recourse to public funds, who might be put off from accessing emergency accommodation for fears over whether by doing so any issues with their immigration status may be passed on to immigration officials. The Panel sought, successfully, to ensure that the Council would commit to accommodating such individuals without passing their details on to immigration officials, though this was caveated by the need to follow any future legal requirements.

Rough Sleeping is, however, only one form of homelessness, and indeed it is often the more visible form. Living in overcrowded accommodation, or sofa surfing is an experience more regularly experienced but less regularly seen. The Panel were informed that although the pandemic had meant an increase in the number of people coming forward for housing support



in the region of 20%, it was clear that there exists a pathway for those with insecure tenancies to seek help from the Council. 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 Panel also heard the Council's proposals around its Homelessness Prevention spending in March 2021, but made no recommendations.

The only other report heard during the year was a Housing Performance update to which the Panel made three recommendations. These focused on ensuring specific vulnerable groups were not prevented from accessing emergency accommodation when rough sleeping, with assurances sought that those without recourse to public funds would be housed over winter, the number of women being housed monitored in order to ensure those fleeing domestic violence were not being under-served, and ensuring the suitability of accommodation for vulnerable users. All three recommendations were agreed.



## Finance and Performance Panel

### Membership:

Councillor James Fry (Chair)

Councillor Chewe Munkonge

Councillor Craig Simmons

Councillor Roz Smith



Councillor James Fry, Chair,  
Finance and Performance  
Panel 2020/21

“Although clearly a health crisis first and foremost, the responses required to manage the pandemic have had an astonishing economic impact, with the country experiencing its most severe contraction in 400 years. The Council has not been immune to this. Indeed, as an enterprising Council whose ‘Oxford model’ relies on successful trading in the open market to generate the income that underpins services to our residents, it has been more exposed than many others. Thankfully, previous sound

financial decisions have meant that Council has held sufficient reserves to ride out the storm and not face the same fate as other exposed Councils, such as Croydon, which effectively declared bankruptcy after their income streams were deeply impaired during the pandemic.

The post-mortem of what has happened at Croydon, following its s.141 notice, indicates however, that the Covid could not be solely blamed. Here, and at another Council making the news recently in unwelcome fashion, Liverpool, a key factor was the lack of scrutiny over financial decision-making. This highlights the crucial importance that the Finance and Performance Panel holds in its oversight of the Council’s financial decision-making for the long-term wellbeing of the Council and its residents.

In addition to its crisis response, both immediate and through the 2021/22 budget setting process, the Panel has provided this oversight through consideration of the Council’s annual Business Plan, its Procurement Strategy, Treasury Management, Capital Strategy, Commercial Property Strategy, as well as looking in greater depth at how the Council’s social value aims can be realised through the ways in which its procurement is undertaken.”

The Finance and Performance Panel has a role in overseeing and scrutinising the Council’s financial performance and budgetary proposals. The Panel monitors Council spending throughout the year, considers selected financial issues and decisions, and conducts a detailed annual review of the Council’s budget and medium term spending proposals.

The Panel conducted its annual review of the Council’s budget proposals over the New Year period, questioning senior managers about budgetary changes and testing assumptions about spending levels, income targets and

financial pressures. Underpinning its 25 recommendations were a push for greater investment in efficiency measures, particularly digital efficiency, greater clarity for the public on the amount of money being spent on areas of public concern such as green spending and rough sleeping, and clarification around the Council’s approach towards property investment. Of the 24 recommendations made to Cabinet, 12 were agreed in full, with another seven agreed partially.

The Finance and Performance Panel year began with a monitoring report setting out the



Council's forecasts of its financial situation in light of lockdown measures. Covid-19 raised expenditure, whilst reducing income streams. Largely in favour of the Council's proposed approach to halt planned additional spend and to use reserves to cover costs to the new budget, the Panel did make recommendations which were accepted around the desirability of capitalising deficits (a request that was rejected by Central Government), and the importance of maintaining funding for cycling infrastructure at a time when interest in cycling had increased substantially.

More so than in other areas the Finance and Performance Panel tends to consider similar reports on an annual basis, scrutinising the same areas of financial performance in different circumstances. Consideration was given to the Business Plan, Capital and Treasury Management strategies, as well as a number of Quarterly Performance Reports amidst very unusual circumstances. Most reports were noted without recommendation, the exception being concern that that the Council satisfy itself leaseholders were not being overcharged for services.

New issues that were given consideration included the Council's plans for the site of the old Boswell's department store, and more importantly, its wider strategy around commercial property following the government's decision to alter the purposes for which PWLB loans, a key source of borrowing to fund the Council's Commercial Property Strategy. The Panel welcomed a greater focus of strategy towards local regeneration, as it had previously recommended. No recommendations were sent to Cabinet on either report, although much of the discussion on Commercial Property was integrated into the Budget Review Group report.

In addition to what is spent, and why, the Panel also understands that how the Council spends its money can have a significant impact on the City and its residents. A report was commissioned to present the Council's largely successful, if relatively nascent, efforts to integrate social value considerations into its procurement processes.

## Companies Panel

### Membership:

Councillor James Fry (Chair)

Councillor Tom Landell Mills

Councillor Chewe Munkonge

Councillor Craig Simmons



Councillor James Fry, Chair,  
Companies Panel 2020/21

“Oxford City Council participates in the open market with what is a dual purpose: to generate surpluses through trade which pay for the services which benefit our residents, but also to do this in a way which furthers the Council’s wider objectives. Oxford is one of the least affordable places to live in the country, with house price to wage ratios outstripping even London, making the provision of affordable housing a particularly

The Companies Panel was established in 2017 to scrutinise the decisions of the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group for the Council’s two wholly-owned groups of companies; Oxford Direct Services and Oxford City Housing Limited and its subsidiaries. Since then, its remit has expanded to accept progress reports on the Council’s participation in the development undertaken through Barton Park LLP, and the regeneration of the west end of the city centre through the Council’s equal partnership with Nuffield College, referred to as OxWED, or Oxford West End Development.

The Shareholder and Joint Venture Group is the members of Cabinet acting as the owner of the Council’s companies. Due to the commercial

high priority, and much of the Council’s commercial activity is therefore centred around housing development, house building, and maintenance. These are all areas of the economy which have been particularly disrupted by the pandemic via challenges of access due to lockdowns, staff absences and recruitment challenges, and shortages of raw materials. Although hard to disaggregate its effects, Brexit also has contributed to the acutely challenging trading environment for these companies.

Much of the work of the Panel this year, therefore, has been seen through this prism, with the Panel seeking to ensure reasonable and considered responses to the immense pressures created by the pandemic. The Panel has also, however, worked on other areas, giving its views on strategic approaches to the Council’s OxWED joint venture with Nuffield College in order to maximise not only returns to the Council, but wider social, environmental and regenerative benefits, as well as overseeing the transfer of the first properties from developers at Barton Park to the Council for affordable housing.”

nature of information before the Panel, much of the Panel’s work is undertaken in private session and is only provided in outline detail here.

Over the course of the year the Panel heard quarterly updates from the different companies, weighing the responses to the pandemic, including giving consideration to revised business plans. Most of the companies suffered staff turnover, some in key areas, but were able to achieve the development of improved governance structures, issues which the Panel oversaw. For Barton Park, with the furthest progress of the companies’ projects, focus was given to issues such as traffic, connectivity and leisure. The Panel was involved in discussions with OxWED, which is a project at a much earlier



22

stage with the ability to influence future strategy. Panel recommendations were fairly rare. Those that were proposed tended to be about exploring more environmentally friendly approaches to the planned activities of the companies, or approaches creating greater social value, rather than disagreements over overall strategy.

## The year ahead

The end of the 2020/21 civic year was marked by all-out elections, creating considerable changes in personnel and roles across the Council, including Scrutiny. After five years Councillor Andrew Gant has stood down as Chair of the Scrutiny Committee and from the Committee itself, and is succeeded in the role by Councillor Liz Wade. That Scrutiny's views are so valued is in

no small part down to Councillor Gant's leadership, dedication and geniality. Likewise, vice-Chair Joe McManners decided not to stand for election again and has been replaced by Councillor Nigel Chapman. Councillor Chapman is one of three members of last year's Cabinet to join Scrutiny, the others being Councillors Linda Smith and Marie Tidball. Continuity is provided by returning members Councillors James Fry, Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini and Tiago Corais, with Councillor Dick Wolff joining the main Scrutiny Committee. The Committee also welcomes four newly appointed members, Councillors Paula Dunne, Christopher Snowton, Imogen Thomas and Naomi Waite and hopes that their fresh perspectives and concerns will enable Scrutiny to continue asking useful questions.

Partially owing to the number of new faces, Scrutiny has expanded the number of members on its Finance and Performance and Companies Scrutiny Panels from four to six, allowing both experience and exposure for new members to coexist. Finance and Performance Panel will continue to be chaired by Councillor James Fry,



with a largely unchanged remit from last year. The Panel will again undertake a detailed annual review of the Council's budget proposals early in the New Year and will monitor financial and other performance and decisions through the year.

Whilst Finance and Performance Panel is largely unchanged, alterations to the Council's governance of its companies have necessitated significant changes to the format of how the Scrutiny function operates in relation to those companies, if not the purpose. Members of the Companies Scrutiny Panel are now invited to participate as non-voting members of the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group meetings, with the Companies Scrutiny Panel typically acting as a forum for discussion of issues to raise and coordination of questioning. These changes equate to a reduction in duplication of officer time, and more direct communication between Scrutiny and the Executive, which are both beneficial. Further, changes to the Council's Constitution relating to the governance changes mentioned do mean that the Companies

Scrutiny Panel can, unlike previously, commission and consider reports on issues relating to the Council's companies should it wish to do so.

The Housing and Homelessness Panel is the remaining Panel to have been established by the Scrutiny Committee for the year ahead. It will be Chaired by Councillor Linda Smith with an unchanged remit from last year. One innovation, however, is that the Panel will be looking at different elements of a particular theme at each meeting, with a final report at the end of the year, effectively a mini-Review Group. The issue being considered is tenant involvement, how the Council involves its tenants in decision making and how it might empower them further in making decisions about their home environments.

Scrutiny has also selected its topic for its annual Review Group, which is to be on child poverty, a topic particularly pushed for by Councillor Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini. Because of the particularly close relationship to issues for which the County Council is responsible discussions are

taking place as to whether it is possible to organise a joint review, producing a more holistic and joined-up response.

Aside from changes to membership of the Committee and remits to the Scrutiny Panels, Scrutiny will have to navigate the transition to working in a post-lockdown environment. For the Scrutiny Committee itself, the failure of central government to pass legislation allowing remote meetings to continue means it will meet in person. Like the experience of countless others, Scrutiny will not simply be returning to the status quo ante from before the pandemic. The Scrutiny Panels are not subject to the legal requirement to meet in person, and a hybrid solution is expected, with Finance and Performance Panel meeting in-person, whilst Companies Scrutiny Panel and Housing and

Homelessness Panel will continue to meet virtually.

In recognition of the exceptional demands placed on the Council during the pandemic last year Scrutiny did not add to the workloads on officers by commissioning reports on topics it considered important. Whilst the Council still faces challenges, the situation is less acute, enabling Scrutiny to consider a number of topics through commissioned reports. Issues that are expected to be looked at by the Scrutiny function over the course of this year include: Tourism and the Covid recovery, reviews of actions taken arising from the Domestic Abuse Review Group and the Climate Emergency Review Group, the Waterways, Housing's contribution to carbon reduction, and the procurement process.

## Participants in Scrutiny 2020/21 (continued)



Councillor Mark Lygo



Councillor Ben Lloyd Shogbesan



Councillor Joe McManners



Councillor Chewe Munkonge



Councillor Craig Simmons



Councillor Roz Smith



Councillor Sian Taylor



Councillor Liz Wade



Councillor Dick Wolff



# Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee

## Annual Report 2020/21

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