

To: Council
Date: 31 January 2022
Report of: Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Scrutiny briefing to Council

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 the reporting period.

Introduction

1. This report covers the activity of Scrutiny during the period from 20 November 2021 to 29 January 2022. However, it also includes updates on a number of prior reports for which responses were not immediately available.

Scrutiny Committee

2. Since the last Scrutiny update to Council the Scrutiny Committee has met twice, on 08 December 2021, and 18 January 2022. This later meeting, however, did not consider any Cabinet reports, with the consequence that the reports arising from it are yet to be agreed and taken to Cabinet. They will, therefore, be included in the next update. As referenced above, the outcomes of two previously considered Scrutiny reports were not reported on in Scrutiny's previous update to Council and are included here.
3. Although the reports of the meeting of 18 January 2022 are not reported, it is worth mentioning that in light of rise of the Omicron variant, the members of the Scrutiny

Committee have agreed to meet informally online until March. This does not meet the requirements of a legally constituted committee meeting for the purposes of the Local Government Act 1972, meaning the members are not legally meeting as the Scrutiny Committee. However, the Leader of the Council has agreed that any recommendations arising from these informal meetings will be treated in the normal way.

08 December

4. Three substantive reports were considered at this meeting:
 - Annual Monitoring Report (no recommendations)
 - Workplace Equalities and Action Plan (six recommendations, all agreed)
 - Strategic Grants Review (two recommendations, both rejected)

5. From a Scrutiny perspective, the Annual Monitoring Report is largely a backwards looking report which provides an update on the Council's performance against its Local Plan targets. It tends towards a general discussion of strategic planning issues, and few recommendations arise. The Committee's consideration of this report was typical in this regard. Issues discussed at length included student accommodation provision in the City, how CIL monies are spent, sustainable transport concerns, and ways to ensure that land identified as being for development in the Local Plan is built out. No recommendations were made, but a number of clarificatory amendments were added to the report.

6. The Council's Workplace Equalities Report is its response to a statutory duty; its action plan is not, but explains what the Council plans to do in order to bring about a workforce more representative of the community it serves. Over the last year, the number of people changing jobs slowed with the pandemic. Fewer people changing jobs means fewer opportunities to address the Council's gender pay gap and its relative absence of individuals from minoritised communities amongst its senior staff. Pleasingly, the targets previously set for applicants from BAME communities had been exceeded, and the gender pay gap had decreased. The Committee's input spent a lot of time exploring whether a similar report could be made by the Council's companies, particularly ODS as the far-larger of the employers. Two recommendations to ensure this will take place were made and agreed by Cabinet. The Committee was also keen that the Council should promote the positive action it is already taking as a way of increasing applications from minoritised communities, that it more closely monitors the proportion of applicants from minoritised communities to different services areas, and that it takes steps to ensure the quality of the equality data of its staff is improved. All these also were agreed by Cabinet.

7. The Council's commitment to its local community as expressed by being one of a minority of Councils still providing voluntary sector grants is a source of pride. The financial impacts of Covid, which precipitated the worst decrease in economic output in over 400 years, are unavoidable however. To this end, the Council has had to reduce its grants, and the Strategic Grants Review explains how it intends to achieve a £200k reduction whilst mitigating the effects of that reduction. At the meeting, a number of non-City Centre advice centres presented, explaining the impacts of a proposed annual cut of £25k to their budgets. This was listened to by the Committee, but referred to the Budget Review Group to consider as part of its deliberations. The Committee's areas of discussion focused primarily on the

tension in the proposals between flexibility for the Council in adjusting the strategic priorities it wishes to fund, accessibility for groups to funding, and the benefits of long-term funding for some groups in terms of providing stability. On this issue, a recommendation was made to Cabinet that 3-year funded groups should be able to apply for a further three years after just one year, allowing the horizon for their funding to remain no less than two years ahead. This recommendation was considered by Cabinet but rejected on the basis that it would unduly tie up funding and prevent new groups from accessing it, and also that it would stymie the Council's flexibility to respond to new priorities. A further recommendation was made to support purchases of the Oxford lottery tickets, but whilst this was looked on favourably by the Cabinet there were legal reasons why it was not practicable.

Previous Reports

8. The following reports were considered by Scrutiny in the previous reporting period but not responded to and are therefore detailed below:
 - Air Quality Action Plan (five recommendations, none rejected)
 - Tourism Management Review Group Update (four recommendations, three agreed, one partially agreed)
9. Each year the Council publishes a report to the government on its air quality, and alongside that it makes a plan on how it will address the issues arising from it. The year 2020 was very atypical in terms of traffic, the main contributor in Oxford to poor air quality. Lockdowns meant few people used their cars, meaning the Council's readings were within all long term and short term legal limits for the first time since recording began. With absolute limits being less problematic, the Committee devoted significant discussion to wider issues such as i) understanding air quality impacts arising from Low Traffic Neighbourhood schemes ii) ways to work with other stakeholders – strategic and community - to improve air quality, and iii) suggested functionality for the upcoming air quality website, making five recommendations. The majority of these recommendations were already underway and none were rejected.
10. The Tourism Management Review Group Update was a Scrutiny-requested report, using the recommendations of the Tourism Management Review Group as a basis for looking at Tourism issues more generally, particularly in light of Covid. Discussion was broad-ranging, including issues such as the Waterways, city centre hotel provision and partnership working. The key issues identified as requiring recommendations, however, were four. Firstly, a strategic point that the Council should be focusing its efforts on attracting domestic tourists, who are more flexible and quicker to return than international tourists. This work is largely already being undertaken and was agreed, though it was noted that there is a huge degree of pent up demand from the USA in particular, which should not be overlooked. The Committee also felt that it was important that increased effort should be made to work with partners to encourage environmentally sustainable methods of getting to the City, another issue which is already underway and was agreed. The paucity of public toilets in the City Centre is an issue identified by the Committee as one in need of addressing, suggesting that the Council follow through on a previous agreement to reinstitute a partnership with city centre shops to provide toilets which

was halted by Covid. Finally, the Council has undertaken a lot of work to reposition its strategy in light of Covid, with the development of its Economic Strategy and City Centre Plan. The Committee suggested that because of the changing circumstances the Council should review and update its original responses to the Review Group recommendations in light of these new strategic documents. This recommendation was partially agreed; rather than the new documents informing new responses to the recommendations, the recommendations had informed the thinking of the new document.

Housing and Homelessness Panel

11. The Housing and Homelessness Panel has met once during the reporting period, on 16 December. The final of the reports held back from previous updates to Council, as mentioned in the introduction, is also reported here.

16 December

12. Two substantive reports were considered at this meeting:
 - Housing Performance Q2 (no recommendations)
 - STAR Tenant Satisfaction Survey (no recommendations)
13. Although Housing Performance reports provide a cross-service view of the activity of Housing, typically discussion is focused on a number of key areas. In this instance, much discussion was held over the suitability of the Council's KPIs around rough sleeping, a measure on which the Council has been failing to meet its targets. More information was requested on whether this meant that the target was too stretching, or the team was not performing. With an area such as rough sleeping, where outcomes are dependent on multiple agencies, it is difficult to disentangle the Council's own activity. The view of the Panel is that the Council is certainly undertaking sufficient efforts to meet this target, but that a target which is more directly attributable to the Council's work would be more effective. Such a target is under development and as such no recommendation was made.
14. The second report was based on the responses to the Council's first tenant satisfaction survey since 2015 and formed the penultimate part of the Panel's ongoing investigation into Tenant Engagement and Empowerment. Owing to the fact that the write up of this investigation will be made at its conclusion no recommendations were made. The results themselves were difficult to decipher. Few real comparator Councils have undertaken satisfaction surveys since the beginning of the pandemic; a number of housing associations have, and have seen precipitous falls in satisfaction levels. Given the Council's services to tenants, such as repairs, were curtailed during lockdowns, its overall satisfaction rate of 85% appears to be reasonable. However, the Panel did investigate a number of particular issues arising, including the level of dissatisfaction amongst younger tenants, which is far higher than average, tenant frustrations with outcomes arising from reports of anti-social behaviour, and planned improvements to the repairs service, which is the greatest contributor to both satisfaction and dissatisfaction amongst tenants.

Previous Reports

15. At its meeting on 06 October the Housing and Homelessness Panel heard a report on the contribution of the Housing service area to reduce carbon emissions. The principal contribution is through a plan to ensure that 95% of its housing stock is rated no less than a 'C' EPC rating by 2030. Its other major contribution is in the design of the homes it is building, which are to be delivered to a standard 70% more carbon efficient than current Building Regulations. The Panel's primary concern over this agenda was the potential impact on tenants; some energy efficiency measures are not seen or noticed at all, some (such as new doors or windows) have cosmetic impacts. Some, such as heatpumps or internal insulation impact the way the house is lived in. Three recommendations were made, seeking that the Council ensures that early engagement with tenants on changes is undertaken, and that special support be provided to tenants with disabilities, or whose upgrades may mean lifestyle or technology changes, to ensure that the benefits of these upgrades are realised. All recommendations were agreed by Cabinet.

Finance and Performance Panel

16. The Finance and Performance Panel convened on two occasions during this period, on 07 December 2021 and 24 January 2022. The latter meeting was held only to formalise the agreement to the draft of the Budget Review Group report to go on to Scrutiny for final sign off meaning there is little further to report.

07 December 2021

17. Three substantive reports were considered at this meeting:

- Integrated Performance Report Q2 (no recommendations)
- Treasury Management Mid-Year Report (no recommendation)
- Asset Management Strategy (one recommendation, agreed)

18. The Integrated Performance Report is one which the Panel regularly considers, detailing finance, performance and risk across the Council. Capital slippage and the reliability of the Council's predicted financial outturn figures were discussed, as well as the specific risks of Omicron. Concern was also raised over the Council's failure to meet its rough sleeping target, an issue which was referred to the Housing and Homelessness Panel for further discussion (details above). No recommendations were made.

19. The Treasury Management Mid-Year report looks at the performance of the Council's treasury investments. To date, the Council has complied with all its prudential indicators and its returns are exceeding budget forecasts by £211k. Issues investigated included the potential issues arising from changes to the Minimum Revenue Provision (a sum set aside to offset any potential losses from investments), and the social, ethical and governance policies of those companies the Council invests in. No recommendations were made.

20. The Asset Management Strategy is the Council's strategic document guiding how it will manage its non-HRA stock over the coming decade, which is scheduled to include a £20m investment in regeneration in Oxford. The Panel explored in detail different options for regenerative investments but made no recommendations in this area. However, a more prominent feature of the Strategy is how it will contribute to the Council's overall response to climate change. The Panel welcomed this, but did identify one area where a mismatch existed between aspiration and delivery, recommending to Cabinet that the Council should aim to phase out in the medium to long term the use of gas in its non-HRA stock as a strategic waymarker to responding to the climate emergency. This recommendation was accepted by Cabinet.

Companies Panel

21. There have been one meeting of the Companies Scrutiny Panel, on 24 November 2021, since the last update. Owing to the commercially sensitive nature of the discussions little detail is provided here, but two reports were considered. Firstly, following the request from the main Scrutiny Committee, the Panel heard a report from ODS on its tree management operation. No recommendations were made but discussion was held over service levels, tree ownership and responsibility, the costs of tree management, and staff capacity relative to future demands. The second report considered was an update report from ODS, which covered a wide-ranging discussion including the company's income and pipeline of work, efficiencies, its environmental standards, recruitment and retention, and physical and digital infrastructure. The key points, including suggested recommendations around environmental standards and key infrastructure were taken forward and presented to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group, with both recommendations receiving positive responses.

Review Groups

22. Scrutiny's annual review of the consultation budget has concluded, with the draft report to be signed off and submitted, with its recommendations, to Cabinet in February.
23. Scrutiny's other review, on Child Poverty, has met for its first meeting, with substantive meetings to be held from 09 February onwards.

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