

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 2 July 2024



Committee members present:

Councillor Miles (Chair)	Councillor Corais (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Altaf-Khan	Councillor Henwood (<i>substitute for Councillor Stares</i>)
Councillor Jarvis	Councillor Latif
Councillor Mundy	Councillor Ottino
Councillor Qayyum	Councillor Regisford

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement
Vicki Galvin, Senior Programme Manager for Customer Experience
Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy
Clare Keen, Policy and Partnerships Officer
Tom Bridgman, Executive Director (Development)
Chris Bell, Green and Blue Spaces Development Manager
Hagan Lewisman, Active Communities Manager
Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer
Celeste Reyeslao, Committee and Member Services Officer

Other Members present:

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies
Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnership Working
Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Malik and Stares sent apologies.
Substitutes are shown above.

9. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

10. Chair's Announcements

The Chair had no announcements. The intended process to be followed during consideration of items at the meeting was explained.

11. Minutes

The Committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the informal remote meeting held on 05 June 2024 as a true and accurate record, subject to an amendment to Minute 5, "Adult Exploitation" to be corrected to "Adult Exploitation and Modern Slavery" and "Tourism Review Group Update" to be corrected to "Tourism".

The Committee agreed to consider items 7, 8, 9 and 10 next on the agenda, followed by items 5, 6 and 11.

12. Citizen Experience Strategy Progress Report

Cllr Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies introduced the report from the Executive Director (Corporate Resources) which provided a comprehensive update on the delivery of the Citizen Experience (CEX) Strategy. An overview of the strategy was provided and the overall positive progress since its implementation was highlighted. Cllr Chapman reported some key achievements over the previous year, including the launch of the Comments, Complaints and Compliments system, the relaunch of the Resident's Panel, improvements to the Council website, and the introduction of Customer Service Officers into community larders.

Cllr Chapman drew attention to the performance of telephony and digital services which had consistently ranked within the top 10 out of 30 local authorities. Key areas of focus for 2024/25 included improving online payment services, maintaining a balance between self-service and face-to-face services, and ensuring alternative provisions for those who were digitally disadvantaged.

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement added that the strategy implemented was broad in scope. Feedback would be used to improve digital access and automation with ongoing efforts made to enhance coordination within services, ensuring early intervention and proper citizen support. Overall, the strategy aimed to foster a culture that prioritised citizens and communities at the core of Council operations.

Vicki Galvin, Senior Programme Manager for Customer Experience also attended the meeting to speak to the item and answer the Committee's questions.

During discussions, the Committee noted the following:

- Council websites historically struggled with online usability due to the constant need to improve navigation for better user experience and the ongoing development necessary to enhance features and functionality. There remained a significant challenge in the lack of online payment options for services such as bulky waste collection, which had caused frustration for users. Addressing this issue was crucial for improving the online performance ratings.
- The Council's face-to-face services had relocated to the Westgate Library in January 2022, operating three days a week alongside Citizens Advice Oxford, and received over 400 visits per month. This service had since moved to a more defined space within Westgate Library in July 2023, with partitioned areas to

ensure confidentiality and a designated waiting space. Feedback collected from service users indicated high satisfaction levels of around 90%.

- Co-locating with Citizens Advice Oxford allowed the benefit of a more coordinated service provision: with both organisations signposting citizens to each other for real-time, specialist advice or queries.
- A Digital Café had recently been launched at Westgate Library in partnership with the local Integrated Care Board. This aimed to alleviate digital barriers including the lack of internet connectivity and varying levels of digital skills.
- Customer Services Officer presence had been introduced into community food larders as part of community outreach work, in recognition of the fact that not everyone wanted/was able to come into the city centre for face-to-face services.
- A survey was conducted, in conjunction with Activate Learning in Blackbird Leys, to assess community needs in relation to digital access, leading to plans for a training course tailored to cover issues relating to access and usage, including mobile device skills and utilising digital terminals available across the city; officers were working to secure a date and location for the course.

The Committee requested an update report on the online payment system rollout, including how the system was working and any teething problems. The Committee requested that the Scrutiny Officer liaise with officers to schedule this update into the Work Plan.

The Committee noted the report; there were no recommendations.

Cllr Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies, Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement and Vicki Galvin, Senior Programme Manager for Customer Experience left the meeting and did not return.

13. Oxford City Council Corporate Strategy 2024/2028

Cllr Susan Brown, Leader of the Council introduced the report from the Head of Corporate Strategy which sought Cabinet approval for the Corporate Strategy 2024-2028. She indicated that the document represented important updates guiding the Council's proposed strategy for the next four years, building upon the previous Council Strategy 2020-24. The key priorities had largely remained unchanged but reflected ongoing relevance. The strategy incorporated feedback from the Local Government Association Peer Review and the previous recommendations from the Committee on the pre-consultation draft of the strategy, along with community input on issues such as affordable housing.

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy mentioned that Corporate KPIs were not included in the submitted report but would be developed and presented for Cabinet approval in August. The Corporate KPIs would incorporate robust tracking over the strategy's four-year span. He highlighted that the comparative work requested by the Committee in a recommendation on the pre-consultation draft of the strategy had been undertaken, which would be circulated to the Committee outside of the meeting via the Scrutiny Officer. He also outlined engagement with external stakeholders during the consultation process, which began in June 2023, including individual sessions with political groups and extensive discussions with internal staff.

Clare Keen, Policy and Partnerships Officer also attended the meeting to speak to the item and answer the Committee's questions.

During discussions, the Committee noted the following:

- The Corporate Strategy 2024-28 focused on the Council's strategic direction rather than detailed coverage of all statutory services and other areas. These would be included in departmental business plans aligned with the strategic priorities outlined in the document.
- The reference to decarbonise 'other council buildings' included all non-residential properties owned by Council, ranging from community centres and leisure facilities to significant structures like the Town Hall.
- The Strategy aimed to outline an overarching direction rather than committing to specific initiatives. Whilst there had not been specific efforts that focused on Oxford becoming a child-friendly city, work to develop an age-friendly city was recently initiated and found that improving accessibility for older people also benefitted younger children.
- Engagement with the Children and Young People Partnership was integral to the development of the proposed strategy.
- The decline in the number of children in the city was attributed primarily to housing affordability issues. In response, the Strategy proposed to focus on increasing the supply of affordable homes and raising standards in the private sector. The Council currently offered extensive provisions such as play parks, leisure centres, and affordable leisure activities for children and families, including free swimming and summer play schemes, which indicated there were no significant gaps in relation to these services.
- In terms of deliverability, the Strategy aimed to prepare plans to enable the quick implementation of ambitious goals once funding became available. Despite financial limitations, these ambitions were tempered with responsible financial management practices and the Council's active pursuit for funding through initiatives such as the OxWED development, its wholly-owned companies, and grant funding opportunities from the Government and other sources.
- Resources were allocated to drive forward the Council's zero carbon priorities. The draft Strategy proposed to expand the Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership (ZCOP), which had so far attracted nearly £1m of funding, into a county-wide partnership.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation on the report to Cabinet:

1. That the Council includes a priority within the strategy to have an age and child friendly city, noting that the detail would sit in other supporting strategies such as Oxford's Economic Strategy, the City Centre Action Plan and the Thriving Communities Strategy, to ensure that inclusivity of all ages is at the forefront of the Council's approach.
2. That the Council includes specific reference within the strategy to the work of the Child Poverty Review Group and adoption of the Socio-Economic Duty to demonstrate the Council's commitment to working to reduce inequality at every level.
3. That the Council makes more explicit reference within the strategy to activity which is funded versus activity that is dependent on securing funding; and references prioritisation processes to ensure that activity is undertaken on the basis of having maximum impact when considering cost/benefit and value for money.

Cllr Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy and Clare Keen, Policy and Partnerships Officer left the meeting and did not return.

14. Update of Byelaws for Parks and Open Spaces

Cllr Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford introduced the report from the Executive Director (Development) which sought Cabinet approval for progressing the submission of the proposed byelaws for parks and open spaces to the Secretary of State for approval following public consultation. He noted that the Council's existing byelaws had not been reviewed in over 25 years. The proposed update would aim to establish a more focused set of byelaws to ensure the safety and wellbeing of users, remove outdated restrictions such as the prohibition of ball games and tree climbing, and introduce new provisions addressing issues relevant to the present age.

Cllr Munkonge outlined some of the key findings of the consultation, which ran from February to April 2024, including the public's reception to the lifting of the blanket ban on cycling in parks.

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director (Development) clarified that the proposed draft byelaws were scheduled for Council consideration at the July meeting, before submission to the Secretary of State for approval. Upon return, they would undergo a further public consultation and again be presented to the Council for final approval, completing the necessary steps to repeal the outdated byelaws.

Chris Bell, Green and Blue Spaces Development Manager also attended the meeting to speak to the item and answer the Committee's questions.

During discussions, the Committee noted the following:

- The proposed draft byelaws received clear public support for enhancing safety and user consideration. Although lifting the blanket ban on cycling in parks was identified as one of the more controversial issues with particular challenges related to its enforcement, the consultation indicated that the public felt the positives outweighed the negatives.
- Clarification on bicycle regulations was needed to avoid discriminating against cyclists and e-bike users. The goal was to encourage considerate cycling without imposing strict rules, recognising that e-bikes had made cycling accessible to more people, especially older adults. Balancing enforcement and flexibility was acknowledged to be challenging.
- The revocation of old byelaws pertaining to tree climbing focused on public safety and consideration. It neither encouraged nor banned the activity, but ensured that updated byelaws were in place to manage related safety concerns.
- Accurate definitions were crucial for finalising the byelaws. It was highlighted that legal advice was required for any changes to the document due to potential implications.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation on the report to Cabinet:

1. That the Council includes a speed restriction within the byelaws related to cycling.

2. That the Council displays information in parks (e.g. on notice boards) for the public on how to report anti-social behaviour.

Cllr Latif left the meeting.

15. Leisure Investment Programme

Cllr Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford introduced the report from the Executive Director (Communities and People) which sought Cabinet approval for a programme of improvements at the City Council's leisure facilities. He highlighted the successful transition to More Leisure as the new provider and reported that the mobilisation had now progressed to contract management and initial teething problems continued to reduce day-by-day.

Cllr Munkonge outlined the need to improve facilities within leisure centres, the ice rinks, and swimming pools to ensure they met operational standards. The Leisure Investment Programme was initially allocated £2 million from the capital budget. Following tender invitations for the improvement projects, an additional £1.04 million was necessary to fully meet the requirements for enhancing these facilities.

Hagan Lewisman, Active Communities Manager advised that collaborative efforts with More Leisure had resulted in an exciting programme prepared for Oxford City Council's leisure centres. The recommendations in the cabinet report were informed by expert opinions of More Leisure, were subject to a thorough procurement processes and involved the City Council's leisure officers undertaking the necessary due diligence. The improvements promised significant positive impact across Oxford facilities, enhancing access to physical activities, reducing inequalities, and ensuring long-term sustainability, while providing a Council return on investment.

During discussions, the Committee noted the following:

- Daytime usage of the sports hall at the Leys Leisure Centre was considered low, prompting opportunities to reorganise schedules and optimise space.
- Recognising that some of the standard sports offered did not appeal to younger people, efforts were aimed at broadening the appeal of leisure centres to non-traditional activities to enable new users, whilst also addressing impacts on existing groups.
- Active user groups were encouraged to engage in constructive dialogue and potential partnerships to drive necessary changes to the current leisure programme. Whilst outcomes could not be guaranteed because of the long-term nature of this process, the focus would remain on continued conversations and identifying alternatives for these groups where possible.
- Providing leisure services was not a statutory obligation for local authorities and many other local authorities had closed swimming pools and leisure centres. The Council's procurement process prevented any closures of leisure centres, however there was recognition that some changes would affect certain groups. In response, ongoing suggestions for programme improvement were welcomed by leisure centres, with More Leisure expressing willingness to address impacts resulting from these changes.
- Gaining popularity of court activities such as padel tennis and pickleball prompted discussions with the tennis provider in relation to the incorporation of these activities on both indoor and outdoor courts.

- Athletics activities were closely coordinated with the Oxford athletics club with efforts made to integrate these into the services offered by More Leisure to ensure a variety of usage opportunities were available.

The Committee requested that the Scrutiny Officer liaise with officers to schedule the following items into the Work Plan:

- The follow-up report requested as part of the Committee's previous recommendation on the Leisure Services Contract Award: '*That the Council reports back to the Scrutiny Committee as soon as possible with an update on the arrangements established for the effective commissioning, delivery and management of the leisure services contract – including the arrangements established to ensure a smooth transition to the new provider.*'
- A progress review of implementation of the Leisure Investment Programme at the appropriate point, including an update on progress on the programme/project delivery, whether it is on target, and key performance indicators linked to programme/projects.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation on the report to Cabinet:

1. That the Council undertakes a thorough analysis of the Leys Leisure Centre sports hall usage during all opening times, paying particular attention to evening usage, to understand the impact that the proposal would have on user groups; actively engages with users regarding appropriate alternative provision; and ensures that appropriate mitigations are put in place to protect against disproportionate impacts of the Leys Leisure Centre sports hall proposals on active user groups.
2. That the Council publishes high-level information on the Leisure Investment Programme and progress on its delivery in a prominent place on the Council's website in order to provide public reassurance and transparency.

Cllr Jarvis left the meeting.

Cllr Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford and Hagan Lewisman, Active Communities Manager left the meeting and did not return.

16. Matters exempt or part exempt from publication and exclusion of the public

The Committee resolved that under Section 100A(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of Appendix 4 to the 'Leisure Investment Programme' report on the grounds that their presence would involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

a) Leisure Investment Programme - exempt appendix

The Committee asked questions in relation to the information contained in Appendix 4 to the report.

17. Public Session

The Committee resolved to return to public session for the remaining items of business.

18. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Committee was advised that the Adult Exploitation and Modern Slavery item had been scheduled for March 2025; a date was yet to be confirmed for the item on Tourism but this would be scheduled in due course.

The Committee noted the Forward Plan.

The Committee reviewed the Work Plan set out in the agenda and noted that no reports were currently expected for the August meeting.

The Committee agreed the following Scrutiny-commissioned items for consideration during 2024/25, noting that exact scope and timescales may be dependent on resource capacity:

- Anti-Social Behaviour
- Business Rates Non-Payment and Systems Management
- Report back on arrangements from Leisure Contract Award
- Adult Exploitation and Modern Slavery
- Tourism

The Scrutiny Officer confirmed that suggested items which were not selected for 2024/25 would remain on the list of Scrutiny-commissioned items for consideration in 2025/26.

During discussion, clarification was sought regarding the grass mowing schedule in terms of which body was responsible for it (including what each involved body paid for), the schedule and individual verge ownership across the City. The Scrutiny Officer advised that she would follow-up with the relevant officers after the meeting and request that information was re-circulated to all Members.

The Committee noted that it would be helpful if a map showing responsibility for grass verges and other land across the city was published on the Council's website, so that the public could contact the correct body first time about issues related to grass mowing and litter, for example.

The Committee:

1. **Agreed** the Work Plan as set out in the agenda pack.
2. **Agreed** Scrutiny-commissioned items for consideration in 2024/25, as set out above.
3. **Requested** that the Scrutiny Officer liaise with relevant Cabinet Members and officers to schedule Scrutiny-commissioned items into the Work Plan.

Cllr Corais left the meeting.

19. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

In response to a question raised at the previous meeting in June, the Committee was advised that 'scrutiny' would continue to be a standing item on Shareholder and Joint Venture Group (SJVG) agendas, the same way as scrutiny was at Cabinet meetings. Recommendations relating to companies scrutiny would be submitted to SJVG (rather than Cabinet) and the Finance and Performance Panel Chair or relevant Scrutiny

representative would have the opportunity to present recommendations under that specific item. Exact arrangements were still being determined, but it was likely that Scrutiny would have a standing invite to SJVG meetings to observe (i.e. without speaking rights), however this invitation could be revoked if needed (e.g. for confidentiality reasons).

The Committee noted that on 12 June 2024, Cabinet considered recommendations related to ten reports, responses to which were set out in the agenda pack:

- Tree Management Policy 2024-2032
- Framework for the Installation of Renewable Technologies in Council-owned Properties
- Biodiversity Net Gain
- Citywide Retrofit Strategy
- Tree Planting
- Energy Generation/Solar Potential on Council Buildings
- Integrated Performance Report Q3 2023/24
- Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment
- Implementation of Selective Licensing
- Adult Exploitation

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the Climate and Environment Panel had met on 11 June 2024 and considered three substantive items: Tree Management Policy 2024-2032; Framework for the Installation of Renewable Technologies in Council-owned Properties; and HRA Energy Efficiency Projects 2024/25. The Panel made a number of recommendations to Cabinet in respect of the Tree Management Policy 2024-2032 and Framework for the Installation of Renewable Technologies in Council-owned Properties items, responses to which were set out in the agenda pack.

The Committee requested that the Scrutiny Officer develop a recommendation tracker incorporating all Scrutiny Committee recommendations from 2023/24 onwards.

20. Dates of future meetings

The dates of future meetings were noted.

The Committee agreed to cancel the next Scrutiny Committee meeting scheduled for 06 August 2024 due to no business, unless the Corporate Strategy Key Performance Indicator item/other relevant items were added to the Forward Plan.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.52 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 6 August 2024

*When decisions take effect:
Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired
Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued
All other committees: immediately.
Details are in the Council’s Constitution.*

This page is intentionally left blank