

**To:** Council  
**Date:** 27 January 2025  
**Report of:** Chair of the Scrutiny Committee  
**Title of Report:** Scrutiny Committee Update Report

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To update Council on the activities of the Scrutiny function
<b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>	Councillor Katherine Miles, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	All
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Council Strategy 2024-28
<b>Recommendation:</b>	That Council resolves to note the update report.

<b>Appendices</b>
Appendix 1 – Recommendations to Shareholders and Joint Venture Group (Exempt)

## Introduction

1. This report provides an update on the Scrutiny Committee and its Panels since the previous update to Council on 7 October 2024. This report covers the period from 1 October 2024 to 14 January 2025.
2. During this reporting period, the Committee met five times on 8 October 2024, 4 November 2024, 18 November 2024, 2 December 2024 and 14 January 2025.
3. In addition, there have been five Panel meetings:
  - Housing and Homelessness Panel – 10 October 2024, 7 November 2024 and 27 November 2024;
  - Climate and Environment Panel – 20 November 2024;
4. Finance and Performance Panel – 4 December 2024.
5. A summary of each meeting is set out below.

## Scrutiny Committee – 8 October 2024

6. At its meeting on 8 October 2024, the Committee considered one substantive item:
  - Local Government Association Corporate Peer Review
7. The **Local Government Association Corporate Peer Review** noted the Council's request to have external oversight and to formulate plans to improve services in the city. An Action Plan had been drafted, with areas of focus being partnerships, communication around regeneration work and improved technology for use by Officers and Councillors and was reviewed by the Committee.
8. The Committee asked a range of questions, including the focus on Community Engagement, the ambition of the Council regarding the collaborative work with external organisations and the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team.
9. The Committee also asked for clarification of improved governance and scrutiny of the Council-owned Companies and the ongoing challenges and priorities of the Town Hall.
10. There were **no recommendations** for this report.

#### **Housing and Homelessness Panel: 10 October 2024**

11. At its meeting on 10 October 2024, the Panel considered two substantive items:
  - Temporary Accommodation and Homelessness Update
  - Housing Complaint Handling Annual Report 2023/24
12. The **Temporary Accommodation and Homelessness Update** report provided the panel with the latest with the Council's ongoing work with preventing homelessness within Oxford.
13. The Panel noted the primary factors driving increased homelessness in the city were largely beyond the Council's control such as evictions from private rented sectors linked to high rental inflation and cost-of-living pressures.
14. In addition, the local challenges faced by Council included rehousing asylum seekers from hotels and the city's disproportionately high number of domestic abuse cases. There had also been statutory changes which lowered the threshold for priority needs and intentional homelessness decisions reducing eligibility for temporary accommodation.
15. Particularly, Oxford rehousing efforts extended to surrounding Oxfordshire towns through reciprocal agreements between local authorities. Comprehensive suitability assessments were conducted and residents' preferences for outside-city housing were considered to ensure appropriate placements in these units.
16. Finally, the Council received a Homelessness Prevention Grant, allowing for the expansion of staff without adding pressure to the general budget. This funding was crucial for delivering services, and the authority was awaiting confirmation of the grant for 2025, hoping for guidance from the Autumn statement or December announcements.
17. There were **no recommendations**.
18. The **Housing Complaint Handling Annual Report 2023/24** was a report due for Cabinet on 16 October 2024 to agree the content of the report.

19. The Panel asked a range of questions, including the numbers of complaints reviewed compared to the number of tenants within Council homes, response times to repairs completed by Oxford Direct Services and any communications issues between tenants and the tenancy management officer.
20. There were **no recommendations**.

### **Scrutiny Committee – 4 November 2024**

21. At its meeting on 4 November 2024, the Committee considered three substantive items:
  - Update on the development of Oxford River Charter
  - Leisure Update
  - OX Place – OCH(I)L Recovery Plan
22. The **Update on the development of Oxford River Charter** provided the Committee with the latest on the Council's engagement with Thames Water, noting two consecutive years of poor water quality and the Council's intent to conduct a detailed investigation into pollution sources.
23. The Committee asked questions to clarify Council and Environment Agency responsibilities, particularly in relation to gaps in oversight of local waterways and flooding risks. Queries were also raised about the status of water quality initiatives, road runoff management, and the council's role in regulating domestic water misconnection issues.
24. The Committee sought updates on the Council's ongoing communication with Thames Water and discussed ways to strengthen stakeholder engagement to address resident concerns more effectively.
25. The Committee noted the need for clearer boundaries in responsibility between the Council and other agencies, as well as legislative gaps in water management and environmental protection. The Committee highlighted the importance of maintaining regular and meaningful engagement with Thames Water, particularly regarding water quality and sewage flooding. The Committee also discussed the impact of deregulation on water companies and raised concerns about road runoff as a pollution source, suggesting areas for Council action to support overall water quality improvements.
26. In addition, the Committee discussed issues of river pollution due to misconnected properties, emphasising the Council's environmental health team enforcement responsibilities including within its own housing stock and those that it regulates such as in HMOs and selective licensed properties, as well as in housing association properties. Reviewing and clarifying the Council's role in this area, and learning from good practices elsewhere in the country, would better position it to prevent future misconnections, establish proactive measures to identify and take action to reduce domestic pollution sources, to safeguard local water quality.
27. **Three recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 13 November 2024, one was accepted fully, one was accepted in-part, and one was rejected.
28. The **Leisure Update** report provided the Committee with the latest from the leisure investment programme and leisure contract clienting arrangements in line

with the recommendations from Scrutiny Committee that were approved at Cabinet on 24 January 2024.

29. The Committee asked wide ranging questions, including questions about the progress and reassurance of improvements made by the new leisure supplier, as well as the level of accountability held by the supplier for facility conditions. Discussions based on these questions covered various aspects such as the sufficiency of ongoing renovations, particularly at the Ferry Leisure Centre and Oxford Ice Rink, and whether sufficient steps were being taken to address issues inherited from the previous supplier.
30. The Committee sought clarity on specific actions demonstrating the new supplier's commitment to improved standards, noted efforts made on recruitment for essential roles, and commented on the state of some facilities, particularly the changing rooms at Barton, which were noted to appear less than satisfactory since the transition to the new provider.
31. Recognising that the transition process requires time to fully address inherited issues, the Committee acknowledged and welcomed the new practice of a dedicated officer responsible for overseeing facility conditions and ensuring issues are picked up on a timelier manner.
32. Further key points were noted by the Committee in relation to facility enhancement and resource planning, including an 18-month improvement roadmap which prioritises essential upgrades to facilities in Barton Leisure Centre, including the installation of improved ventilation and retrofitting of changing rooms.
33. In particular, the Committee proposed exploring a business case for year-round access to the lido, leveraging the existing water source heat pump to support eco-friendly operations, and prioritisation for enhanced ventilation in changing rooms to ensure air quality and safe environment for all facility users, aligning with health and safety standards.
34. In reflection on past experiences and lessons learned, the Committee identified that regular, structured financial reviews would enable the Council to monitor the supplier's financial health and address any emerging concerns early on.
35. **Three recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 13 November 2024, two were accepted and one was rejected.
36. The **OX Place – OCH(I)L Recovery Plan** was reviewed by the Committee.
37. **One recommendation** was sent to Shareholder and Joint Venture Group on 06 November 2024, which was accepted.

#### **Housing and Homelessness Panel: 7 November 2024**

38. At its meeting on 7 November 2024, the Panel considered four substantive items:
  - Furnished Tenancy Scheme
  - Implementation of Refugee Resettlement in Oxford
  - Housing Performance Monitoring (2024/24 mid-year)
  - Housing Complaints Handling Performance (Q1 & Q2 2024/25)

39. The **Furnished Tenancy Scheme** was a report due for Cabinet on 13 November 2024, to approve the procurement of a contract at a value of £4,300,000 over a 5-year period for a supplier or suppliers to provide household furniture, white goods, and carpets as part of a Furnished Tenancy Scheme.
40. The Panel asked a range of questions, including questions relating to the scheme's uptake within Oxford compared to national averages, the flexibility of the contract in accommodating growing demand, and how well it meets the needs of local tenants. Questions also focused on the extent to which the Council could support tenants without placing undue financial pressure on them, particularly given rising costs of living and inflationary pressures on service charges.
41. The Committee sought clarity on items like carpets, which are unique to Oxford's scheme, and on the process for repairs, replacements, and storage of furnished items across tenancies.
42. In discussion, the Committee noted the benefits for tenants and the Council, including the scheme's flexibility to allow tenants to choose from various furnishings, thus promoting a sense of ownership and belonging. Financial advantages for tenants were also noted, particularly that the scheme's service charges were covered by housing benefits, effectively eliminating out-of-pocket expenses for eligible tenants. This set up was noted as being mutually beneficial, given that the scheme operated on a cost-neutral basis funded by the HRA, avoiding additional pressure on the Council's resources. The Committee also noted the economic challenges, which has emphasised the scheme's role in preventing tenants from resorting to high-interest credit sources to furnish their homes.
43. The Committee discussed the disposal and potential wastage of furniture under the scheme, noting that whilst some furniture were recycled or stored for future use such as emergency housing, there were opportunities for local organisations to repurpose that furniture. The Committee emphasised the value of collaborating with external organisations such as charities to minimise waste through creative reuse and recycling channels.
44. **One recommendation** was sent to Cabinet on 13 November 2024, which was accepted.
45. The **Implementation of Refugee Resettlement in Oxford** provided the Panel with the annual update regarding the Council's work as part of the Government's refugee resettlement schemes since 2015.
46. The Panel asked a range of questions, including communication between those accessing and leaving the resettlement scheme, the operations for securing additional properties and the ongoing support refugees receive from the Council.
47. There were **no recommendations**.
48. The **Housing Performance Monitoring** provided an update to the Panel regarding the ongoing challenges faced by the Council, including homelessness and the inclusion of higher prevention targets.
49. There were **no recommendations**.
50. The **Housing Complaints Handling Performance** provided the Panel with an update to the ongoing performance of the Council's complaints handling for the

first two quarters of 2024/25 in terms of volume, outcome and timeliness of the responses.

51. There were **no recommendations**.

### **Scrutiny Committee – 18 November 2024 (Extraordinary)**

52. At its extraordinary meeting on 18 November 2024, the Committee considered the call-in for the Cabinet Decision of the Disposal of Land at Foxwell Drive, Headington.
53. The Committee heard from a member of the public and asked a range of questions to the Officers present relating to the Council's governance processes, the professional and independent handling of planning applications, including those involving Council-owned land.
54. The Committee decided to support the decision made by Cabinet on 16 October 2024.

### **Climate and Environment Panel – 20 November 2024**

55. At its meeting on 20 November 2024, the Panel considered four substantive items:
- Net Zero Masterplan
  - Eco-moorings Project Update
  - High-level challenges and constraints impacting on the deliverability of solar opportunities at Council car parks
  - Local Nature Recovery Strategy
56. The **Net Zero Masterplan** provided the Panel with an updated to the Council's actions over the next two years to achieve its two carbon targets: a Net Zero Estate and Operations by 2030 and a Net Zero City by 2040.
57. The Panel asked a range of questions, including the training for businesses and ongoing recruitment for external contractors for the planning and strategic elements of the biodiversity project.
58. There were **no recommendations**.
59. The **Eco Moorings Project Update** provided the Panel with the latest on the project, which would be delivered on a particular stretch of the canal in Aristotle Lane, noting that this area had historically received a lot of smoke nuisance 25 associated with solid and diesel fuel burnings, and causes health implications to local residents and boaters alike.
60. The Panel asked a range of questions, including clarification on the types of cables to be used and whether they would be compatible with standard equipment. Questions were also raised about the availability of moorings for temporary users, the management of potential overstays, and how rental boat companies are being engaged to address smoke and pollution issues. The Panel sought assurance that cables would not pose a hazard along the towpath and inquired about plans for community engagement to support the project.

61. In particular, the Panel discussed learning from Islington's similar eco-moorings project, which demonstrated significant increases in usage and reductions in smoke nuisance complaints through a period of active engagement. It was noted that the data and practices from Islington would be reviewed to guide implementation of eco-moorings at Aristotle Lane.
62. The Panel highlighted the need for clear strategies to manage overstays and ensure accessibility.
63. There was also a discussion on the scalability of the project and its potential to secure future funding based on its success. Cllr James Fry, attending in his capacity as ward member, commended the project, citing its potential to improve air quality and its value as a pilot for wider adoption across Oxford's waterways.
64. The Panel further discussed engagement with different segments of the community, noting that the closure of the towpath had already prompted queries from constituents in Walton Manor and neighbouring wards such as Summertown. It was noted that a communications strategy was in development, including plans for a dedicated webpage to provide boaters with key information on eco-moorings operation, available grants for retrofitting, comparisons of various heating systems, and other relevant resources, as part of the work being undertaken by the newly appointed Sustainability Engagement Officer. Building on this discussion, the Panel suggested that Council communicates these plans by distributing letters to local residents and boaters, as well as keeping ward councillors informed, to ensure transparency and effective management.
65. **One recommendation** was sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, which was accepted in-part.
66. The **High-level challenges and constraints impacting on the deliverability of solar opportunities at Council car parks** provided the Panel with a high-level overview of the challenges involved in delivering solar canopies at Council-owned car parks. The report highlighted engagement with the Low Carbon Hub and outlined that the project was still at an early stage, with options for the offtake yet to be fully explored. Key challenges included the significantly higher cost of installing solar canopies, which was estimated to be two to three times more expensive than rooftop installations of similar size, and the potential for additional costs related to other needs of the car parks.
67. The Panel acknowledged the merit of the initiative and discussed the challenges and costs associated with the project. Clarification was sought about which car parks were owned or managed by the City Council and were large enough to meet the criteria of the scheme. It was noted that the City Council owned the Redbridge and Seacourt Park and Ride, while others, such as Peartree, were leased or managed on behalf of the County Council. The Panel agreed that the report should be updated to include a comprehensive list of Council-owned car parks meeting the viability criteria for the scheme.
68. The Panel highlighted the importance of exploring alternative uses for car parks as part of the feasibility assessment. The Panel noted examples such as Redbridge, which already hosts an EV charging hub, and discussed how some sites, such as Oxpens, were being repurposed for redevelopment. The Panel supported progressing with the feasibility assessment, including engagement with the Greater South East Net Zero Hub to identify alternative revenue-

generating opportunities and ensure alignment with the Council's wider sustainability goals.

69. The Panel also discussed collaborating with the County Council, particularly car parks owned by County but are managed by the City Council. It was suggested that the City Council pursues engagement with the County Council, leveraging its influence in managing these sites to explore joint projects for County-owned car parks, with the aim of maximising opportunities and ensuring alignment with shared sustainability objectives.
70. **Three recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, all were accepted.
71. The **Local Nature Recovery Strategy** provided the Panel with an update to the Council's plan for Biodiversity Net Gain and the continued collaborative efforts with councils across Oxfordshire.
72. The Panel asked a range of questions, including the use of the mapping tool of identify green networks, the inclusion of allotments, community growing spaces and other greens areas, and the different geographies within the County.
73. There were **no recommendations**.

#### **Housing and Homelessness Panel – 27 November 2024 (Extraordinary)**

74. At the extraordinary meeting on 27 November 2024, the Panel considered three substantive reports:
  - HRA 40 Year Business Plan
  - HRA Asset Management Strategy and 5 Year Investment Programmes
  - Tenancy Engagement and Management
75. The **HRA 40 Year Business Plan** was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024; to adopt the plan and show the Housing Revenue Account would be able to fund the planned expenditure as set out in the 2025/26 budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy proposals.
76. It was noted by the panel the key challenges in Oxford, including, the increasing homelessness in the city and issues with temporary accommodation faced by the council; a new, tougher regulatory regime for the HRA partly influenced by post-Grenfell reforms; and ongoing challenges related to tenant engagement with the council.
77. The Panel asked a range of questions, including the balance of medium to long term investments and the risks of slippage in the programme.
78. There were **no recommendations**.
79. The **HRA Asset Management Strategy and 5 Year Investment Programme** was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024. The report establishes the foundation for the Council's long-term approach to planning, investing, and improving its housing stock, alongside a five-year investment programme outlining the planned delivery of works. Both were informed by tenant surveys and existing asset data.



80. The Panel asked a range of questions, including those about the setting of tenant satisfaction targets, and how demand-led aspects of the programme would be managed given the unpredictability of future needs. Questions were also raised regarding the management of the transitional period for implementing the investment programme, and whether mechanisms would be in place to address urgent issues that fall outside expected lifecycles.
81. The Panel discussed measures considered to manage the unpredictability of demand-led aspects of the programme, noting the importance of data trends and joint working to predict and address future needs, particularly for issues like repairs and adaptations. A proactive approach to managing demands was underscored, and the Panel was reassured that current delegation arrangements allow for flexibility in budget allocations, enabling resources to be effectively redirected to priority areas in response to under or overspending.
82. Another key focus of discussion was the importance of ensuring that tenant satisfaction targets were ambitious enough to drive continuous improvement, particularly in areas such as repairs and placemaking. Acknowledging the necessity to benchmark against national standards for comparability, the Panel was of the view that there are other opportunities to enhance satisfaction levels through increased face-to-face engagement, aligning with the Council's commitment to delivering better outcomes for its tenants.
83. **One recommendation** was sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, which was accepted.
84. The **Tenancy Engagement and Management** was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024. This report noted the key outputs from the Grenfell report which informed a new approach, including improved tenant engagement, clearer governance structures, enhanced communication of performance data to tenants, and the development of a comprehensive strategy. In addition, the reorganisation of the landlord services, planned for the next calendar year, aims to better respond to tenant needs and deliver a more cohesive and effective service.
85. The Panel asked a range of questions, including why the Young People's Forum was proposed as a separate group within the tenant engagement structure, given concerns about their underrepresentation and distinct needs as a demographic. Questions were also raised seeking clarity on how the Young People's Forum would integrate with other engagement mechanisms, and how these structures would address the unique challenges faced by younger tenants (such as mobility and differing engagement styles).
86. The Panel also queried how the new approach to tenant engagement would differ from the current model. The Panel was particularly interested in understanding how the new model would allow for earlier identification of issues and vulnerabilities within the tenant community. It was noted that the new structure aims to shift from reactive work to more responsive approaches, focused on meaningful contact with tenants to address concerns before they escalate into more significant problems.
87. The Panel refocused its discussion on the engagement of younger tenants, noting that though they represent a smaller proportion of the Council's tenant population, their unique needs and perspectives are crucial to consider. The Panel highlighted the value of bespoke initiatives, such as interest-based activities and youth-focused programmes, to foster greater participation and

engagement among this demographic. Recognising that traditional forms of engagement may not resonate with younger tenants, the Panel suggested reconsidering the approach to ensure their voices are effectively represented within the tenant engagement structure.

88. **One recommendation** was sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, which was accepted.

### **Scrutiny Committee – 2 December 2024**

89. At its meeting on 2 December 2024, the Committee considered two substantive items:
- Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2023/24
  - Thriving Communities Strategy Update
90. The **Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2023/24**, a report, due at Cabinet on 13 December 2024 to authorise the statement for publication.
91. The Committee asked a range of questions, including those related to the use of existing student accommodations, the broader implications of student housing on private rental sector, and about financial and policy issues, including the potential for levies on higher education institutions to offset costs associated with students living out of student accommodations. Questions were also raised about the impact of policy gaps in the Local Plan post-2026, strategies to maximise housing targets, barriers to delivering extra care facilities and the effective use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funds.
92. In particular, the discussion centred on the need for better data and monitoring of student accommodation use, specifically in relation to the extent of unmet demand and the reliance on family housing and HMOs for student accommodation. The Committee highlighted concerns about the pressures this demand places on the private rental market and the associated loss of family homes. The Committee was of the view that universities need to take greater responsibility for addressing accommodation needs, including making better use of their existing land holdings.
93. The Committee recognised that addressing unmet student accommodation demand requires transparency and robust data. The Committee felt that including comprehensive information on unmet demand and sites identified or proposed by universities in the Authority Monitoring Report would enhance accountability and enable better planning, reflecting the Committee's commitment to ensuring that the Council has a clear understanding of accommodation needs and the measures being taken to meet them.
94. In addition, the Committee expressed concerns about the effective use of university owned land, particularly at or near city boundaries, to address accommodation needs. The Committee highlighted the universities' role in alleviating pressures on the private rental market by utilising their land assets strategically. It was therefore suggested that Council collaborates with these institutions to ensure their land holdings, including those near city boundaries, are used effectively to meet unmet accommodation demands, and that Council

should encourage the universities to disclose their future development plans for leveraging these land assets to support this objective.

95. **Two recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, one was accepted, and one was rejected.
96. The **Thriving Communities Strategy Update** was a report due for Cabinet on 11 December 2024 to note the update on the delivery of the Thriving Communities Strategy.
97. The Committee asked a range of questions, including the practicality and clarity of the measures outlined in the strategy, particularly where baselines or specific targets were unclear, and whether all measures were equally useful or specific enough to monitor progress. Questions were also raised about the use of data to provide comparative analysis overtime, identify demographic disparities, and refine interventions.
98. The Committee expressed concerns about residents' awareness of and access to programmes, particularly in areas of deprivation, and how strategic coordination between the Council and its partners support both social and financial goals. In addition, the Committee queried how the locality plan aligns with broader Council priorities and the importance of applying lessons learned to improve future strategies.
99. In particular, the Committee discussed the significance of targeting health inequalities by prioritising walkability in areas with the greatest deprivation in physical activity, suggesting that specifying this focus within Measure of the Strategy would strengthen its alignment with the motion passed by Full Council on 25 November 2024 to create a truly walkable Oxford. The Committee believed that doing so would emphasise the Council's commitments to improving accessibility and health outcomes, particularly in communities where the need is most acute.
100. Further discussions highlighted the value of incorporating comparative data over time to provide a clearer picture of the Strategy's impact. Recognising that the Strategy is still new and evolving, the Committee suggested that such data would not only provide essential context on progress but also help identify demographic disparities, such as gender gaps in swimming participation, that require targeted interventions.
101. The Committee recognised the importance of learning from the current implementation of the Strategy to inform the next iteration. It was suggested that identifying practical lessons and areas for improvement, where appropriate, would enhance future strategies by focusing on outcomes rather than outputs. This approach, the Committee felt, would strengthen the Council's ability to meet community needs effectively and ensure that policies remain grounded in evidence and best practices.
102. The Committee acknowledged and commended the success of the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit in Rose Hill as an innovative model of community health support, noting that promoting this initiative as a national case study would showcase its positive outcomes and encourage other councils to replicate its success.
103. Lastly, the Committee underscored the need for stronger Member engagement in the development and review of locality plans to address deprivation across the

city. The Committee suggested that involving ward councillors in identifying and targeting pockets of need within their ward would ensure that resources are allocated effectively and that no communities in need are overlooked.

104. **Five recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 11 December 2024, all were accepted.

#### **Finance and Performance Panel – 4 December 2024**

105. At its meeting on 4 December 2024, the Panel considered five substantive items:

- Integrated Performance Report Q2 2024/25
- Business Rates Non-Payment and Systems Management
- Supported Accommodation cost of City Council Finances
- Treasury Management Mid-Year Review – April to September 2024
- Budget 2025/26
- ODS-ODSTL Business Plan Refresh

106. The **Integrated Performance Report Q2 2024/25** was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024.

107. The Panel asked a range of questions, including income from Council owned car parks, costs relating to temporary accommodation, costs associated with the repairs to Council tenants and overspends relating to evaluation fees and bank charges, following a move to Cloud-based software and services.

108. There were **no recommendations**.

109. The **Business Rates Non-Payment and Systems Management** provided the Committee with an update to the administration of Business Rates within Oxford.

110. The Panel asked a range of questions, including the amount of debt collected during 2023/24, the empty premises and pop-up shops across the city and any changes to the Corporate Debt policy.

111. There were **no recommendations**.

112. The **Supported Accommodation cost of City Council Finances** was a briefing note requested by the Panel in September 2024 analysing the housing benefit subsidy issues and potential options.

113. The Panel asked a range of questions, including if similar issues were faced in other cities across the Country, and further coordination between District and County Councils.

114. There were **no recommendations**.

115. The **Treasury Management Mid-Year Review – April to September 2024** was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024.

116. There were **no recommendations**.

117. The **Budget 2025/26** report was a report due at Cabinet on 11 December 2024, due to be approved for consultation.

118. There were **no recommendations**.

119. The **ODS-ODSTL Business Plan Refresh** was reviewed by the Panel.
120. **Two recommendations** were sent to Shareholder and Joint Venture Group on 05 December 2024, which were accepted.

### **Scrutiny Committee – 14 January 2025**

121. At its meeting on 14 January 2025, the Committee considered 5 substantive items:
- Governance changes to address the increase in Urgent Key Decisions
  - Council of Sanctuary Framework
  - HRA Rent Setting Report 2025/2026
  - Withdrawal of Oxford Local Plan 2040 and approval of the Local Development Scheme 2025-2030
  - Flood Management
122. The **Governance changes to address the increase in Urgent Key Decisions** was a report updating the Committee on progress made and ongoing plans to address the increase in Urgent Key Decisions taken in 2024. The Committee was presented a series of measures aimed at improving and strengthening governance across the Council.
123. The Committee looked at and noted the various measures outlined in the report, which included clarifying the definition of a Key Decision in the Council's constitution, revising the Forward Plan and report templates to include clearer guidance for users, delivery of training sessions for senior management and staff across various services, and the introduction of mandatory e-learning modules for all staff. The Committee also noted efforts being made to align the governance practices of Council-owned companies through training arrangements tailored to them.
124. Members of the Committee asked questions relating to the specifics of staff training and how continued compliance could be maintained. Questions were also raised about the gaps in governance practices between the Council and its companies, as well as trends that might explain the increase in urgent key decisions.
125. The Committee sought clarification on timelines and the implementation of mandatory training, asking whether a two-year refresh cycle was the right approach. Members wondered if more frequent monitoring mechanisms could be introduced to ensure consistent compliance across the board.
126. Another area of focus was the transition involving the appointment of a new Company Secretary in the Council-owned companies. The Committee noted the need to avoid governance gaps during such transitions and highlighted the importance of aligned governance standards between the Council and its companies.
127. Lastly, the Committee discussed the importance of analysing trends that result in urgent key decisions being taken, highlighting the need to distinguish between unavoidable circumstances and capacity-related challenges. The Committee

suggested implementing better data collection and reporting would help provide a clear picture for ongoing scrutiny.

128. **Two recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 22 January 2025, which were accepted.
129. The **Council of Sanctuary Framework** was a report due at Cabinet on 22 January 2025, which recommends that Cabinet approve and adopt the draft Council of Sanctuary Framework document, including the Action Plan; agree that an annual progress update should be produced for Cabinet; delegate power to the Executive Director (Corporate Resources), in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, to amend the design of the framework document.
130. The document proposed a three-year action plan supporting Oxford's Council of Sanctuary accreditation. This accreditation underscores the city's commitment to welcoming refugees and asylum seekers while fostering an inclusive environment.
131. The Committee acknowledged the significant work of officers in developing a bold vision for addressing key issues faced by individuals seeking sanctuary in Oxford. They discussed several key measures and objectives outlined in the document, and raised questions about enhanced data collections, partnership development, and language and education support.
132. Members raised queries about the adequacy of data on the number of people the action plan aims to support. They asked how data collection could be refined to include precise metrics and identify specific community needs, with Officers confirming work ongoing to enhance data tracking in the form of Key Performance Indicators which will be reported on a yearly basis. With this, the Committee suggested that this reporting is formally established and that annual updates are brought to the Committee for progress monitoring.
133. Further questions centred on the challenges in accessing English language education, with some members noting gaps in provision and barriers such as the lack of qualified tutors and digital access. The Committee noted the ongoing efforts to map current resources and address these gaps are in place through strategic partnerships and face-to-face outreach, including visits to accommodations and partnerships with County programmes to improve digital accessibility and the availability of English language tuition across the county.
134. Focusing more on the details of the document, concerns were raised about the absence of measures addressing anti-migrant violence within the report. The Committee suggested including this as a key challenge and setting out responses to prevent such violence. In addition, the Committee discussed how national policy changes impact local initiatives, urging adaptability in the action plan.
135. The Committee also noted the work the Council has commissioned to fully understand the level of need in Oxford. Noting that this key document could help foster better understanding of people seeking sanctuary and what could be done to improve their experience, the Committee recommended that the needs assessment report is made publicly available, ensuring confidential data is safeguarded where required.

136. **Four recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 22 January 2025, two were accepted and two were rejected.
137. The **HRA Rent Setting Report 2025/2026** was a report due at Cabinet on 22 January 2025, which proposed the rent setting and garage charge increases for the 2025/26, noting the 2.7% increase in rent charges, in line with the maximum allowable rate of CPI + 1%, bringing the average weekly rent to £133.63, which remained to be very good value for money within the Oxford housing market.
138. The Committee asked a number of questions, including queries on the application of percentage increases in charges, particularly those relating to garages. Members questioned the rationale behind exceeding the CPI +1 threshold for garage charges, with officers pointing to the importance of maintaining consistency of the charge for garages within the HRA and those in the General Fund. Suggestions were made to include exploring a more dynamic pricing modelling the impact of limiting garage charge increases to CPI + 1 in the final report to be presented to Cabinet.
139. The Committee also raised concerns on the potential ripple effect of increased council rents on the private rental market, particularly the feasibility of tracking its long-term impacts. Officers noted ethical and methodological difficulty in tracking this relationship due to the market complexities, however the idea of building vision for understanding market interdependencies was noted. It was suggested that a reflection on trends within the private rental market, including broader market observations for the year ahead, is included in the report and any future iterations.
140. **Two recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 22 January 2025, which were accepted.
141. The **Withdrawal of Oxford Local Plan 2040 and approval of the Local Development Scheme 2025-2030** was a report due at Cabinet on 22 January 2025, due to recommend to Council the withdrawal statement of the Oxford Local Plan 2040 from Examination and for Cabinet to approve the Local Development Scheme 2025-2030, which sets out the work programme for the revised Oxford Local Plan 2042.
142. The Committee asked questions including the impact of the forthcoming local government organisation to the timetable of the Local Plan, the implications of the extended end date now set to 2042, and whether there would be any impact on the review of neighbourhood plans as a result of these alterations.
143. There were **no recommendations**.
144. The **Flood Management** presentation was requested by the Scrutiny Committee, explaining the current flood response and protocols within the city.
145. The Committee's discussion centred around inter-agency coordination between the City Council, the County Council and the Environment Agency, including how resources like pumps, barriers, and manpower are deployed. The discussion also touched on exploring ways to coordinate volunteers within communities.
146. Members of the Committee raised questions about the adequacy of existing flood mitigation equipment, noting that ODS typically deploys its one pump to Botley Road and its one flood barrier to Hinksey Lake. Officers explained the collaborative nature of pump usage amongst agencies, stating that additional pumps may need to be sourced from outside the county in severe cases of

flooding. They drew attention to the logistical challenges of pump deployment, giving emphasis to the risks associated with improper discharge of water that could potentially exacerbating flooding in adjacent areas. In addition, the manpower required to set up and operate pumps was explained, with the Committee noting the working relationship between ODS and the Environment Agency in managing these resources.

147. Another key concern that the Committee raised was the unclear agency responsibilities for maintaining ditches, waterways and other infrastructure critical to flood prevention, with members highlighting resident perception that some areas are neglected due to the ambiguity around accountability. The Committee was reassured that efforts were underway to map responsibilities more clearly, including close collaboration with the county council to address gaps. The Committee commented on the importance of keeping Councillors well-informed about ongoing investigations specific to their wards and suggested that clear communication channels are maintained between agencies.
148. Members of the Committee highlighted the impact of flooding on residents, including disruptions to education and daily life, stating the need for improved community support. They discussed measures to increase transparency about flood risks and supporting residents with practical guidance to help make their homes more resilient.
149. The discussion also focused on the financial implications of frequent flooding events, noting the strain on emergency planning reserves depleted by unpredictable costs of emergency responses. The Committee agreed that a comprehensive review of the reserves is essential to ensure sufficient funding for future incidents, emphasising the Council’s duty to protect its residents by maintaining preparedness and resilience in the face of worsening flooding risks.
150. **Three recommendations** were sent to Cabinet on 22 January 2025, one was accepted, two were partially accepted.

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