

To: Council

Date: 14 July 2025

Report of: Chair of the Scrutiny Committee 2024/25

Title of Report: Annual Scrutiny Report 2024/25

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To provide Council with a summary of Scrutiny activity during the 2024/2025 municipal year
Key decision:	No
Lead Member:	Councillor Katherine Miles, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee 2024/25
Corporate Priority:	All
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2024-28

Recommendation(s): That Council resolves to:	
1.	Note the update report.

Information Exempt from Publication	
N/A	N/A

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Breakdown of Scrutiny recommendations 2024/25	No

Foreword by the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee



Scrutiny during the municipal year of 2024-25 took place against a political context shaped by a minority-run administration and a fragmented city council composition following the local elections. An administration under no overall control presents challenges for scrutiny committee but also underscores the critical importance of its function in a setting where there is a delicate balance of power.

This scrutiny unfolded against the backdrop of the Planning Inspectorate's recommendation that Oxford City Council withdraw its Local Plan 2040 from examination due to their assessment of a failure in the duty to cooperate.

In this context, the council's constitutional processes have been tested. Firstly, there was the rare use of a call-in to scrutiny of a Cabinet decision—a process less likely to be employed under an overall control scenario. In this case, the call-in related to a decision regarding the sale of council land in Headington, with the cabinet decision ultimately supported by scrutiny.

Secondly, there has been a trend in the use of the council's procedure that requires scrutiny chair approval to shorten, and in some cases nullify, call-in periods for urgent decisions. This prompted a dedicated item on the scrutiny agenda to explore in greater depth the rationale behind the use of this mechanism and consider its appropriacy. While recognising that nimbleness and legal processes may require the occasional use of such measures, scrutiny made recommendations aimed at improving procedural robustness and capacity, with safeguards against overuse of the mechanism. Consequently, the Committee requested an annual report on call-in removals to keep a watching brief on this developing trend.

Thirdly, moving beyond procedural matters, scrutiny focused on thematic policy priorities amid a global political climate marked over the past year by growing instability and increasing divisions on topics related to immigration, diversity and inclusion, and climate change. Despite this wider context, I am heartened that, despite our own local political differences, scrutiny has united around shared values that have informed its recommendations. The Committee has embraced its voice and role as a constructive critical friend, acknowledging successes and offering recommendations to strengthen the Council's practices in building inclusive and diverse communities, as well as promoting diversity and inclusion within its own workforce.

Scrutiny has also maintained a strong commitment to advancing the council's net zero ambitions, evidenced by the continuation of the Climate and Environment Panel and its focus on climate change, biodiversity and air quality agendas, including related topics discussed and addressed in the main committee, such as the council's approach to flood response.

As I hand over the reins to my capable colleague and successor, I extend my sincere thanks to the officers, committee members and cabinet members who have all devoted time, effort and many an evening to make scrutiny happen for the benefit of our city and its residents.

Councillor Katherine Miles
Chair of the Scrutiny Committee 2024-25, Oxford City Council

Introduction

1. This report provides a summary of activities undertaken by Council's Scrutiny function during the 2024/25 municipal year. It reflects on the work carried out by the Committee and its Panels, highlights key recommendations made to Cabinet, and offers a forward look at its priorities for the coming year.

Overview of structure and function

2. Scrutiny at Oxford City Council operates through the overarching Scrutiny Committee, supplemented by three standing Panels: Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, and Climate and Environment. Each panel was given the responsibility to undertake detailed review of decisions and issues relevant to their remit, with the Finance and Performance Panel also taking on the examination of the Council's companies performance.
3. Scrutiny Committee was comprised of 12 cross-party, non-executive Members, reflecting the political composition of the Council. It was chaired by Councillor Katherine Miles.
4. The Panels were made up of:
 - Finance and Performance Panel – 4 members
 - Housing and Homelessness Panel – 6 members
 - Climate and Environment Panel – 4 members
5. Membership of the Committee and Panels were as follows:

Scrutiny Committee Cllr Katherine Miles (Chair) Cllr Tiago Corais (Vice-Chair) Cllr Mohammed Altaf-Khan Cllr Chris Jarvis Cllr Dr Amar Latif Cllr Sajjad Malik - <i>until March 2025</i> Cllr Edward Mundy Cllr Simon Ottino Cllr Asima Qayyum Cllr Dianne Regisford Cllr Ajaz Rehman - <i>from March 2025</i> Cllr Mike Rowley Cllr Anne Stares	Finance and Performance Panel Cllr James Fry (Chair) Cllr Dr Christopher Smowton Cllr Chris Jarvis Cllr Ian Yeatman
	Housing and Homelessness Panel Cllr Lizzie Diggins (Chair) Cllr Theodore Jupp Cllr Edward Mundy Cllr Asima Qayyum Cllr Rosie Rawle Cllr Anne Stares
	Climate and Environment Panel Cllr Emily Kerr (Chair) Cllr Judith Harley Cllr Jemima Hunt Cllr Katherine Miles

6. The Committee saw a minor change in its membership in March 2025 when the Real Independent Group requested to vacate their seat. Following approval by Council, the seat previously held by Councillor Malik was reallocated to Councillor Rehman of the Oxford Independent Group.

7. The Committee's work balanced between consideration of Cabinet reports and commissioned items, with the aim to contribute ideas and evidence to policy development, holding decision-makers to account, and support the continual improvement of Council services.

Summary of activities

8. During 2024/25, the Scrutiny Committee held 11 meetings (9 ordinary meetings, 1 informal remote meeting and 1 extraordinary meeting). The Panels collectively held 16 meetings (6 meetings of Finance and Performance Panel, 5 meetings of the Housing and Homelessness Panel, and 5 meetings of the Climate and Environment Panel).
9. The Committee and its Panels collectively made a total of **96 recommendations** to Cabinet across a wide range of policy areas. Of which, 59 were agreed, 16 agreed in-part, and 15 were not agreed. Cabinet did not indicate its position on 6 recommendations, providing only written commentaries.
10. Whilst not all recommendations were agreed, the Committee believe they formed a constructive part of the policy and decision-making process, and provided opportunities for the function to influence Council decisions in a meaningful way. A breakdown of Scrutiny recommendations and whether they were agreed, agreed in part, or not agreed is supplied in Appendix 1.
11. Scrutiny covered a broad range of issues this year, reflecting both its statutory responsibilities and wider areas:
 - **The Scrutiny Committee** considered cross-cutting strategies including the thriving communities strategy, the council's internal equalities review, and investment plans for leisure services. It looked at the council of sanctuary framework and commissioned items on anti-social behaviour, adult exploitation and modern-day slavery, update on the development of the Oxford river action plan, and how responsibilities around flood risk management are coordinated between different bodies, leading to some valuable clarity being gained.
 - **The Housing and Homelessness Panel** considered key strategic housing and landlord issues including the development of tenancy engagement strategy, roll-out of selective licensing, and implementation of the HRA asset management strategy. The Panel reviewed the performance of homelessness and landlord services and ongoing efforts to reduce rough sleeping and temporary accommodation use. There was strong interest from Panel Members in how tenant voices are embedded in decision-making, helping shape a number of key recommendations.
 - **The Climate and Environment Panel** looked at progress against the Council's Net Zero and climate resilience ambitions. It reviewed delivery of initiatives such as eco-moorings, solar panel feasibility at council-owned car parks, and wider energy efficiency measures. The Panel also considered updates on air quality, and played a key role in shaping the Council's position on the expansion of the Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership (ZCOP).

- **The Finance and Performance Panel** provided ongoing oversight of the Council's budget position and financial planning, including scrutiny of treasury management. It reviewed the performance of the Council's wholly-owned companies and monitored budget outturns and quarterly performance reports.
12. In November 2024, the Committee convened for an extraordinary meeting to consider a call-in request pertaining to Cabinet's decision to enter into an Option Agreement for the disposal of land at Foxwell Drive. Following deliberation, the Committee agreed to uphold Cabinet's original decision. This was the only call-in received during the year.
 13. This year, the Committee also re-established the **Budget Review Group** to conduct the annual examination of the Council's budget proposals for 2025/26. The Group met 5 times between December and January, reviewing a range of evidence from CMT and Cabinet Members. The work of the Budget Review Group concluded with the submission of a report containing 23 recommendations to Cabinet. The report was formally presented to Council in February 2025.
 14. Further to this, Scrutiny Committee and the Finance and Performance Panel made a combined 8 recommendations to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group in relation to various businesses of the Council's Companies. All 8 recommendations were accepted.

Impact of Scrutiny's Work

15. Scrutiny made a number of tangible contributions this year. It helped strengthen the Council's Equalities action plan following detailed feedback. It supported improvements in tenant engagement across the housing service. It raised concerns around the clarity and transparency of urgent key decisions, which have since informed governance discussions. It also helped shape the direction of the Zero Carbon Oxford Partnership strategy. In each case, scrutiny provided a space to challenge, question, and test assumptions in a constructive way.

Reflections and looking ahead

16. As ever, Scrutiny faced challenges. The breadth of issues under review often meant hard decisions had to be made about what to prioritise. Timescales for considering some reports were tight, which made deep dives more difficult in some cases. And engaging residents and external voices in the process remains a continuing challenge. Despite these, Scrutiny remained committed to robust, evidence-led examination of issues, not with the intention to criticise, but to drive better outcomes for Oxford residents.
17. In the year ahead, Scrutiny will continue to review the Council's Forward Plan to identify reports for consideration and look to focus on a number of key areas including: oversight of the Oxford Local Plan 2042; monitoring the delivery of the Council's key strategies and priorities particularly around housing provision in the city and our environmental sustainability goals; review emerging changes to the local authority landscape; support effective governance; and work collaboratively to ensure the scrutiny process focuses on the issues that matter most to residents.

18. Scrutiny will also continue to evolve and fine-tune its procedures to strengthen its role in supporting Cabinet and the Council through robust reviews, staying committed to keeping its practices effective and proactive.

Acknowledgements

19. The Scrutiny Committee and its Panels extend their thanks to all Cabinet Members, Council officers, external witnesses, and members of public who contributed to scrutiny work this year, and look forward to continued meaningful collaboration in 2025/26.

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