

To: Council
Date: 23 March 2026
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Update from the Scrutiny Committee

Summary and recommendations	
Decision being taken:	To update Council on the work of the Scrutiny Committee and Working Groups.
Key decision:	No
Lead Member:	Councillor Alex Powell, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Corporate Priority:	A Well-Run Council
Policy Framework:	None

Recommendation(s): That Council resolves to:
1. Note the work of the Scrutiny Committee and the recommendations as set out in the report.

Information Exempt From Publication
Appendix 2 to this report is deemed exempt from publication under Schedule 12A paragraph 3 (Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)) of the Local Government Act 1972.

Appendix No.	Appendix Title	Exempt from Publication
Appendix 1	Scrutiny recommendations and Cabinet responses	No
Appendix 2	Exempt Scrutiny recommendations	Yes

Introduction and Overview

1. This report provides an update on the activities of the Scrutiny Committee and its Working Groups since the last update to Council on 24 November 2025. It covers the period from 20 November 2025 to 18 March 2026.
2. Section 9F of the Local Government Act 2000 grants the power to the Scrutiny Committee to make reports or recommendations to the Cabinet with respect to the discharge of any functions which are the responsibility of the Executive; and on matters which affect the authority's area or the inhabitants of that area.

Update on Scrutiny Activities

3. Since the last full Council meeting, the Scrutiny Committee held 4 ordinary meetings to consider a range of substantive items:

2 December 2025

- Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2024/25
- Devolution

13 January 2026

- Workforce Equality Report
- Proposed Submission of Draft Local Plan 2045

3 February 2026

- Debt Recovery Procedure
- Noticeboards Update
- AI Strategy Update
- Budget Review Group Report

10 March 2026

- More Leisure Annual Service Plan (Year 3) and Update
- Nighttime Economy
- Fly-tipping and Litter Management

4. The Committee also endorsed recommendations from the following Working Group meetings:

Housing and Homelessness Working Group – 13 November 2025

- Housing Complaint Handling Performance (Q1 and Q2)
- Building Safety & Compliance (Q1 and Q2)
- Draft Resident Involvement Strategy 2025-28
- Decarbonisation update: Impact of Energy Efficiency Funding programmes (LAD1b and SHDF) and EPC programme

Climate and Environment Working Group – 17 November 2025

- Net Zero Tracker
- Air Quality Action Plan
- Biodiversity Strategy and Environment Act Update

Finance and Performance Working Group – 26 November 2025

- OxWed LLP – Delivery Options for Oxpens [SJVG]
- ODS Clienting
- Treasury Management Annual Report 2024-25

Climate and Environment Working Group – 25 February 2026

- EV Infrastructure Update
- Heat Network Update
- Net Zero Tracker

Housing and Homelessness Working Group – 26 February 2026

- Allocations Scheme Review
- Measures to meet growing demand for Temporary Accommodation

5. In reviewing the abovementioned reports, the Committee submitted 41 recommendations (inclusive of the Budget Review Group recommendations). 24 were agreed by Cabinet, 7 partially agreed and 5 not agreed. For the remaining 5, only commentary was provided without a stated position.
6. Cabinet considered these at its meetings on 10 December 2025, 13 January 2026, 11 February 2026 and 18 March 2026. Written responses were provided to inform Scrutiny of the rationale behind Cabinet's decision. There is a table summary setting out in detail the recommendations and responses, supplied as Appendix 1 to this report. No table was produced for items where no recommendations were made.
7. Recommendations made to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group were endorsed under delegated authority by the Scrutiny and Governance Advisor, in consultation with the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee. These were submitted to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group for consideration at their Special meeting on 1 December 2025. Further details are provided in the exempt Appendix 2.
8. Minutes of relevant meetings are provided below as hyperlinks:
 - [Scrutiny Committee 2 December 2025](#)
 - [Scrutiny Committee 13 January 2026](#)
 - [Scrutiny Committee 3 February 2026](#)
 - [Scrutiny Committee 10 March 2026](#)

Summary of discussions

Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2024/25

9. The Committee raised concerns around why the housing targets had not been met and why the use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding for the different wards within the city was not consistent. There were also comments about the downturn of large-scale sites within the city and if there was any provision for homes for an aging population. Finally, there were comments about the ongoing communications with the universities and the impact on student housing across the city in the emerging local plan.

Devolution

10. Reflecting on Local Government Reorganisation, the Committee raised uncertainties about how the Three Unitary Authority (3UA) model relates to the larger concept of a Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). Members asked about the Government's position on the MSA, in contrast to the more complex LGR landscape, and whether the MSA process might progress more smoothly given the broad agreement amongst authorities. In seeking further clarity, the Committee noted potential synergies between a smaller, place-based unitary and a larger strategic authority capable of securing investment and delivering major transport, planning and long-term environmental projects which could be channelled to local areas. The 3UA model was reiterated as essential to ensuring Oxford retains a meaningful voice within any future MSA, particularly given that this influence could be diminished under a county-wide unitary.
11. Some concerns were raised about Oxford identity in the Thames Valley, noting that many residents may not instinctively identify with the area, and the need to clearly communicate the benefits of Devolution including powers over issues like planning, infrastructure, skills and potentially tourism levies. The Committee then queried Swindon's place within the proposed geography, and noted that Swindon, not only initiated early discussions, but has strong economic and business links with Oxford, and is naturally aligned with the Thames Valley economy. Further to this, Swindon is viewed as a logical western end to the Oxford-Cambridge corridor.
12. Additionally, the Committee sought clarity on several governance-related issues: what arrangements are likely to accompany an MSA and how these would align with what the Council's current position; what decision-making powers would the Council retain or gain; how successful initiatives such as Oxford Direct Services (ODS) would be safeguarded within a larger strategic structure. It was explained that governance discussions will form the next stage once Government's response is known, and that a collegiate model is being explored. The Committee noted that whilst certain decisions would rest with the Mayor, the system is designed to avoid unilateral imposition.
13. Lastly, in relation to devolved powers and budgets, the Committee heard that these would likely include strategic planning (for example, housing and environmental sustainability targets) and strengthened by the soft power of representing a large, economically strong region.

Workforce Equality Report 2025

14. The Committee was pleased with the data the Council publishes annually relating to recruitment and that it was meeting its targets for 16.5% workforce representation from minority ethnic groups across the authority. There were also comments relating to the Council ensuring to issue fair pay decisions and progress towards the incremental progression plan following staff completing their 6-month probationary

period, along with further work on inclusive recruitment practices. The committee also raised concerns and questions on how best to ensure that Trans staff are protected within the context of waiting for the EHRC to issue its revised code of practice.

Proposed Submission of Draft Local Plan 2045

15. In discussing the proposed submission of the Draft Oxford Local Plan 2045, the Committee was minded to emphasise the importance of providing clear guidance on how planning can be designed to ensure Oxford creates child-friendly places and amenities, recognising that such practice has been adopted by other authorities. The Committee noted that children's needs should be addressed within the Local Plan policies, potentially through the Technical Advice Note. Acknowledging the current timeline for the Plan's implementation, the Committee requests that this matter be recorded and revisited in future.

Housing Complaint Handling Performance (Q1 and Q2)

16. The Housing and Homelessness Working Group acknowledged the positive feedback from the Ombudsman regarding the Council's complaint handling. It noted the current backlog and sought assurance that sufficient resource is in place, with Officers confirming new staff are being trained and the backlog is expected to be cleared by the end of Q3. Members raised questions about escalation routes when officers do not respond and highlighted the need for clear communication pathways for residents who wish to raise concerns without entering the formal complaint process. There were no recommendations.

Building Safety and Compliance Performance (Q1 and Q2)

17. The first point noted by Members was regarding the subcontracted fire risk assessors not appearing on the professional register, which was raised by external auditors in their report to the Audit and Governance Committee. The Housing and Homelessness Working Group was reassured that an internal fire assessment team has been established following recommendations from the auditors and that auditors were positive about this progress.
18. Members also discussed the anticipated impact of Awaab's Law and the likelihood of increased reporting and resource need. Lastly, the Working Group sought clarification on stairlifts provisions and implications for vulnerable residents to whom these were provided. It was clarified that stairlift provisions for residents are not legally required under LOLER, however as a result of this oversight, the Council agreed arrangements with residents and will reassess future arrangements. No recommendation was put forward by the Working Group.

Draft Resident Involvement Strategy 2025-28

19. A strong expression of support for the Strategy was offered by the Housing and Homelessness Working Group, welcoming the significant resident influence throughout its design. The Working Group welcomed the opportunity to track that the strategy's intentions are reflected in the way policies are delivered, and any plans to strengthen feedback loop from the Tenant Board.
20. Other points raised included resident involvement which often intersects with other areas of work such as EPC inspections. Members highlighted the importance of making sure that feedback from residents are captured consistently and channelled effectively across workstreams, including the work of Scrutiny. The Working Group also noted the need to avoid duplication of work and to ensure resident voices are

not diluted. They welcomed the confirmation that efficient governance arrangements are being reviewed with these considerations in mind. There were no formal recommendations made.

Decarbonisation update: Impact of Energy Efficiency Funding programmes (LAD1b and SHDF) and EPC programme

21. Discussions centred around the risk of large numbers of EPCs expiring simultaneously with Members noting the need to manage assessment cycles more evenly. The Housing and Homelessness Working Group also sought clarity on progress towards EPC targets and whether the Council remains on track to reduce properties below Band C by 2030.
22. Other concerns raised pertained to resilience and future external funding, and tenant refusals to retrofit work. It was noted that these often stemmed from disruption, health issues, or misconceptions particularly surrounding insulation and air source heat pumps, which prompted the Working Group to highlight the importance of educating residents on these topics. No recommendations were made.

Air Quality Action Plan

23. The Climate and Environment Working Group noted the Air Quality Action Plan consultation booklet has effectively incorporated previous scrutiny feedback on ensuring information for the public is clear and easily digestible.
24. Points were raised regarding the extent to which delivery of the AQAP may be affected by county-level policies and measures, including the congestion charge. They queried whether the document sufficiently accounted for potential inconsistencies between administration and whether these differing positions were acknowledged. In the context of Local Government Reorganisation, the Working Group emphasised the need to maintain strong commitment to the excellent work being done, and to ensure that this positive trajectory continues.
25. Some concerns were also noted from areas such as Woodstock Road and Hollow Way about potential displacement effects arising from temporary congestion measures, and the Group considered whether additional monitoring in these areas might be beneficial. The Working Group accepted the clarification that the 44 diffusion tube monitoring points previously assessed in relation to traffic filters align with those areas predicted to experience the most significant impacts from congestion related measures. Overall, the Working Group expressed general support for the draft Air Quality Action Plan. No formal recommendations were made.

Biodiversity Strategy and Environment Act Update

26. The Climate and Environment Working Group wished to ensure that the newly appointed Ecologists have the resources required to meet the Council's biodiversity commitments and duties. It noted that the team is still assessing its needs and would be in a position to forecast these in due course. Members queried Section 106 allocations and whether parameters should be set, however it was understood that a deliberate decision had been taken to retain simpler guidance to avoid placing unnecessary limitations on the biodiversity team. The Working Group also discussed the robustness of enforcing biodiversity policies within the Local Plan, and the potential to link certain elements to Section 106, both of which will need to

be worked out within the forthcoming Biodiversity Net Gain document to formalise the Council's approach.

27. The Working Group welcomed and expressed thanks to Richard Hill and Sarah Hawes, both of whom joined the Council recently as Principal Ecologists and extended its appreciation to the wider Environment Sustainability team for their contributions to the meeting.

Treasury Management Annual Report

28. There were no recommendations from the Finance and Performance Working Group.

ODS Clienting

29. The Finance and Performance Working Group initially proposed two recommendations to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group. However, as they related to the clienting function between Oxford Direct Services and the Council, they therefore fell to the Cabinet for a response, in line with the relevant schemes of delegation.

Debt Recovery Strategy

30. The Committee discussed the Council's use of enforcement agents in recovering debt and measures in place to safeguard vulnerable residents, raising points on accessibility including whether language barriers and digital exclusions are being addressed. Members were satisfied that enforcement procedures aligned with council policies, emphasising the protection of vulnerable residents, and the role of advice centres as contact points for which partnership with the council must be maintained.

Noticeboards Update

31. In light of discussions relating to the effective use and management of noticeboards, there was a clear view from Scrutiny for Council to introduce active day-to-day management and operation of noticeboards and save for where there were already effective mechanisms in place such as arrangements led by parish councils or neighbourhood associations, urging that they should not be discouraged should the Council proceed with the recommended option. Noting budgetary implications to this approach, a recommendation was made as part of the budget review process. Alternatively, should the first preferred option be deemed unachievable, the Committee made a secondary recommendation for Council to take no further action.

AI Strategy Update

32. Recognising that AI is a rapidly evolving technology, the Committee was generally supportive of the current strategy and governance arrangements, as well as future plans to develop further training and monitoring of its use within the Council. The Committee was overall supportive of the use of AI within the Council as a tool for efficiency but not as replacement for the workforce. No recommendations were made.

Budget Review Group Report

33. The Budget Review Group held five meetings in December 2025 and January 2026 to examine the draft budget proposals, as approved by Cabinet for consultation in December 2025. The Group made 10 recommendations which were endorsed by the Scrutiny Committee on 3 February 2026, considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 11 February 2026 and submitted to Full Council on 23 February 2026.

34. The Budget Review Group was grateful to all officers, working group members and cabinet members who have all contributed to the process, responding to questions in advance and attending the evening meetings.

More Leisure Annual Service Plan (Year 3) and Update

35. The Committee sought further clarity on data presented within the report, particularly in regard to the second year performance figures and the number of recorded visits, noting the discrepancies in previous year's data that were due to mobilisation. Members also sought to understand the disaggregation of data when it comes to gender, young age groups and usage particularly against geography.
36. The Committee made positive comments on the investments being made to the redevelopment of the leisure centre in Blackbird Leys, however some concerns were raised relating to displaced users of the sports hall with members seeking confidence that there have been offers of alternatives to ensure users were encouraged to continue with their sports. Finally, the Committee explored how the council's range of leisure offering could be expanded to provide non-traditional sports, as well how the Council could better improve gaps in youth participation specifically the under 18's.

Nighttime Economy

37. The Committee supported the work being undertaken to improve Oxford's nighttime economy. Comments were particularly focused on expanding the geographical scope including other areas in Oxford where nighttime economy like Cowley Centre and Botley industrial estate could also improve.
38. In relation to the existing live music offering, members discussed the frequency of live music events, how audits should better assess venue capacity, as well as opportunities to grow grassroots music and alternative venues. The Committee also focused on a more inclusive nighttime economy, drawing on creative activities offered in other cities such as night museums, late night café's, bookshops and other non-alcohol focused offerings that are family-friendly. Better use of council-owned spaces was also explored.
39. Lastly, members raised concerns about impacts on residents and environmental health, the safety of nighttime economy workers particularly the availability of late night transport arrangements and how these issues could be addressed.

Fly-tipping and Litter Management

40. The Committee welcomed the ongoing work to address fly-tipping and litter in Oxford. Members encouraged stronger focus on prevention, including improved data on hotspot locations and clearer use of signage particularly in areas where this had been beneficial. There was also significant interest in community and behavioural solutions such as education campaigns and encouraging residents to take part in practical litter-picking initiatives.
41. Other questions Members had raised centred around bin placement and design, park litter capacity and business responsibility for waste generated by licensed premises and other venues.

EV Infrastructure Update, Heat Network Update and Net Zero Tracker

42. The Climate and Environment Working Group noted the concerns previously raised by this Working Group regarding the risk of monopolistic behaviour and the potential

for the Council to have limited leverage once Heat Network infrastructure is installed and operational, further noting the importance of a robust approach to procurement.

Allocations Schemes and Measures to meet growing demand for Temporary Accommodation

43. The Housing and Homelessness Working Group noted the proposed changes to the Allocations Scheme and asked questions relating to relocation capabilities under unique circumstances such as trauma or mental health challenges, and noted the role of the Exceptional Circumstances Panel in dealing with these types of scenarios.
44. The Working Group also delved into the practice envisioned for the new face-to-face offer in the city centre as means to prevent homelessness noting similar and successful practices by other local authorities. No recommendations were agreed; both reports were supported by the Working Group.

Acknowledgements

45. The Committee would also like to offer its thanks to all Council Officers, Members and Speakers who contributed to Scrutiny's work and meetings this reporting period.

Financial implications

46. Financial implications for the reports listed above were outlined within the reports presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Group.
47. Where appropriate, any further financial implications were reviewed when considering the recommendations.

Legal issues

48. Legal implications for the reports listed above were outlined within the reports presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Group.
49. Where appropriate, any further legal implications were reviewed when considering the recommendations.

Level of risk

50. Risk Registers, where appropriate, were linked to the reports presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Groups.
51. Where appropriate, the risk register was reviewed when considering the recommendations.

Equalities impact

52. Equalities Impact Assessments, where appropriate, were linked to the reports presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Groups.
53. Where appropriate, the Equalities Impact Assessments was reviewed when considering the recommendations.

Carbon and Environmental Considerations

54. Consideration for Carbon and Environmental impacts, where appropriate, were linked to the reports presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Groups.

55. Where appropriate, the Carbon and Environmental impacts were reviewed when considering the recommendations.

Implications of Local Government Reorganisation

56. Implications of Local Government Reorganisation for the reports listed above were outlined within the report when presented at Scrutiny Committee or Working Group.

57. Where appropriate, any further implications were reviewed when considering the recommendations using the linked guidance from Government: [Financial decisions before local government reorganisation - GOV.UK](#)

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