

July 2025

# Scrutiny

annual report

2024/25



OXFORDSHIRE  
COUNTY COUNCIL

# 1 Introduction

The past year has been a period of significant activity and progress for the Overview and Scrutiny<sup>1</sup> function at Oxfordshire County Council (the Council). Its primary focus has continued to ensure that the council's decisions and policies are subject to rigorous examination and that they reflect the needs and aspirations of our community. Through comprehensive reviews, public engagement, and collaborative efforts with various service areas, the Overview and Scrutiny Committees have strived to enhance transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in local governance.

This annual report provides an overview of the function's key areas of focus and recommendations, highlighting the impact of our work on the council's operations and the community at large.

The report covers a twelve month period from 1 June 2024 to 1 May 2025, largely covering the 2024-2025 municipal year.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless overview is specifically mentioned the term 'scrutiny' refers to both overview and scrutiny. A distinction is often drawn between 'overview' which focuses on the development of policy, and 'scrutiny' which looks at decisions that have been made or are about to be made to ensure they are fit for purpose.



## What is scrutiny?

In the Council most major decisions are taken by the Cabinet members, either through ‘single member decisions’ or formal meetings of the whole Cabinet. The Cabinet is made up of elected councillors from the controlling political administration. During the municipal year 2024-25 this was a minority Liberal Democrat/Green administration.

In operating an ‘executive’ (Cabinet) decision-making governance model, the Council is required by law to have an Overview and Scrutiny (“Scrutiny”) function, made up of elected councillors who are not on the Cabinet. The Scrutiny function acts as a counterweight to the Cabinet, empowering its cross-party membership of ‘backbench’ councillors to hold the Cabinet and its decision takers to account for the Council’s performance and its decisions, and to strengthen council decision-making. An Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Scrutiny Committee) can

also investigate any issue that affects the county or its residents, regardless of whether it is within the direct responsibility of the Cabinet. The work of Scrutiny helps to provide assurance that the Council is performing well, delivering value for money, and taking the best decisions it can to improve public services and the quality of life for the residents of Oxfordshire through influencing existing policy and informing policy development.

A Scrutiny Committee has no power to require that decisions be reversed or policies changed. It operates in a very similar fashion to Parliament’s select committees in that it seeks to engage relevant and informed individuals, consider policy or performance in light of the evidence gathered and present, in what is referred to as a ‘critical friend’ approach, recommendations for the relevant decision-maker to consider how improvements might be made. When Scrutiny makes a recommendation it is a legal duty that the recommendation be responded to in writing by the relevant Council decision-maker.



## The Shape of Scrutiny at Oxfordshire County Council

The Scrutiny function at the Council has six Committees:

- 1. Education and Young People**  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 2. Performance and Corporate Services**  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 3. Place** Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 4. People** Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 5. Oxfordshire Joint Health**  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- 6. Horton Joint Health**  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**This report primarily focuses on the work of the Education and Young People, Performance and Corporate Services, Place and People Overview and Scrutiny Committees.**

The Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee as a joint Committee (meaning it includes members of the district and city councils within Oxfordshire) has its own reporting arrangements and published its annual report, which was presented to Overview and Scrutiny Committee has not met during the reporting period but was established by the Oxfordshire Joint Health Scrutiny Committee, meaning any activity would be included within the Health Scrutiny Annual Report.

## Overview and Scrutiny function



**Cllr Eddie Reeves (chair)**

Performance and Corporate  
Services



**Cllr Liam Walker (chair)**

Place



**Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)**

Education and Young People



**Cllr Kieron Mallon (chair)**

People

Membership
Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair)
Cllr Bob Johnston (Deputy Chair)
Cllr Brad Baines
Cllr Arash Fatemian
Cllr Damian Haywood
Cllr Kieron Mallon
Cllr Ian Middleton (until April 2025)
Cllr Calum Miller
Cllr Glynis Phillips
Cllr Alison Rooke (for April 2025)

Membership
Cllr Liam Walker (Chair)
Cllr Robin Bennett (Deputy Chair)
Cllr Felix Bloomfield
Cllr Duncan Enright
Cllr Charlie Hicks
Cllr Susanna Pressel
Cllr Nigel Simpson
Cllr Bethia Thomas

Membership
Cllr Nigel Simpson (Chair)
Cllr Jenny Hannaby (Deputy Chair)
Cllr Liz Brighouse OBE
Cllr Ian Corkin
Cllr Trish Elphinstone
Cllr Andy Graham
Cllr Sally Povolotsky
Cllr Roz Smith
Cllr Michael Waine
Fraser Long – Catholic representative co-optee
Toby Long – Anglican representative co-optee
Hana G – Young Person co-optee (from February 2025)
Katie N – Young Person co-optee (from February 2025)
Peace Nnaji – Parent Governor co-optee (from February 2025)

Membership
Cllr Kieron Mallon (Chair)
Cllr Imade Edosomwan (Deputy Chair)
Cllr Kevin Bulmer
Cllr Trish Elphinstone
Cllr Andy Graham
Cllr Jenny Hannaby
Cllr Nick Leverton
Cllr Alison Rooke
Cllr Michael Waine



# 2 Scrutiny in numbers

Number of  
meetings held

**19**

Reports  
to cabinet

**22**

Members  
of public involved  
(public speakers)

**18**

Number of  
substantive items  
considered

**42**

Working  
group reports

**1**

Click-throughs  
to agendas

**8,475**

Working group  
recommendations

**20**

Cabinet response breakdown  
(based on responses received at time  
of publication)

**35 accepted** (38.89 per cent)

**9 partially accepted** (10 per cent)

**2 rejected** (2.22 per cent)

**44 no reply** (48.89 per cent)

Scrutiny  
recommendations

**90**

**Scrutiny in numbers can provide interesting insights. However, it is important to recognise its limitations. Quality of scrutiny is more important than quantity, meaning that a higher number of substantive items is not necessarily a good thing.**

Equally, when scrutiny has looked at an issue and not found anything it wishes to make a recommendation on it will not make a report to Cabinet. Lastly, there is no optimum number for what constitutes 'success' in terms of Scrutiny recommendations to Cabinet. This number will always be impacted by two variables: the value of the recommendation itself, and the willingness of an executive to engage with suggestions from Scrutiny.

**These numbers tell us a number of things:**

- An average of approximately substantive 2.2 items have been taken per meeting, which is a slight fall on the previous year, but closer to the recommendation of two by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny.
- The reduced number of items has led to an increase in the number of reports and recommendations going from Scrutiny to Cabinet: from 19 reports and 74 recommendations in 23/24, to 22 reports and 90 recommendations in 24/25, indicating a growing engagement in policy over the last year by Scrutiny.
- Almost no Scrutiny recommendations, only two, have been rejected by Cabinet. This suggests that Scrutiny's suggestions are worthwhile, and that the executive is willing to engage with good suggestions.

- The high number of recommendations with 'no reply' is simply a function of timing, with five reports, including a working group report with 20 recommendations being agreed at the very end of the reporting period and submitted afterwards. This does not indicate a systemic issue with recommendations not being responded to.
- Public involvement has been stable: with approximately one member of the public attending each Scrutiny Committee meeting. Its public reach is also illustrated by receiving over 700 click-throughs per month to its agendas.

**Call-in**

Call-in is a statutory function that enables councillors to challenge decisions that have been taken by an executive decision-maker, such as Cabinet or a Cabinet member, before they are implemented. This power was not used in the period covered by the report.

The Council's Constitution requires that provisions relating to call in are monitored annually. This process was undertaken as part of the Council's wider review of its Constitution. The revised process is clearer as to when a decision may be called in and the role of the Monitoring Officer, more consistent, whilst also reflecting the Council's need to become more agile in its decision-making as it becomes more commercial in approach.

# 3 Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## Chair's introduction

The principal areas of focus for the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee this year demonstrate the variety of levels at which the Council operates and can make positive differences to our residents. The Committee has delivered its central role through overseeing the operation of the Council and high standards of delivery of its own services, the management of costs and the sensible allocations of funds to meet future challenges.



**Cllr Eddie Reeves (chair)**

The Council does not deliver services in isolation and is a key partner for many wider challenges. The Committee has given particular attention to the Council's plans around local economic development following the transfer of those powers to the Council from the Local Enterprise Partnership. The Committee has considered the ways the Council ensures that the benefits of economic development are felt across the multiple geographies and communities of Oxfordshire. Finally, our local communities themselves exhibit huge commitment and innovation to supporting local residents and the Committee has devoted time to ensuring the provision of buildings is equitable, sustainable and effective. In making positive contributions to the Council's policy in these areas, the Committee has also sought to serve our residents and improve their lives both now and in the future.

I am deeply grateful to my fellow committee members for the perceptiveness, experience and cooperation brought to the work of the Committee, the Cabinet members and senior officers who have attended for their willingness to engage with the Scrutiny process, and to Tom Hudson and Ben Piper for their enabling work on behalf of the Committee. I wish the new Committee the best, and hope that it can continue to provide a valuable service to our residents.

**Cllr Eddie Reeves, Chair of Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2024/25**



## Membership

Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair)  
 Cllr Bob Johnston (Deputy Chair)  
 Cllr Brad Baines  
 Cllr Arash Fatemian  
 Cllr Damian Haywood  
 Cllr Kieron Mallon  
 Cllr Ian Middleton (until April 2025)  
 Cllr Calum Miller  
 Cllr Glynis Phillips  
 Cllr Alison Rooke (for April 2025)

## Activity in brief

Number of meetings held	Reports to cabinet	Working group reports
5	7	0
Click-throughs to agendas		1,866
Number of substantive items considered	Working group recommendations	0
8	Scrutiny recommendations	20
Members of public involved (public speakers)		1
Cabinet response breakdown*		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 accepted (45 per cent)</li> <li>• 4 partially accepted (20 per cent)</li> <li>• 2 rejected (10 per cent)</li> <li>• 5 no reply (25 per cent)</li> </ul>		
*(based on responses received at time of publication)		

## Key areas of focus and achievements

### Budget

In England during the 2024/25 municipal year, no councils issued s.114 notices – sometimes referred to as declaring effective bankruptcy. Whilst this is an improvement on recent years, a total of 19 councils were provided with support by central government to manage financial pressures via the ‘Exceptional Financial Support’ process. This is a high figure, and illustrates the elevated level of financial strain local authorities are operating under nationally, a pressure from which Oxfordshire is far from immune. Scrutiny of the budget is typically the single most important contribution of the Committee.

In undertaking the Committee’s scrutiny of the budget it has to process the significant amount of data to produce its outcomes in a form that can be easily understood. The Committee submission to both Cabinet and Council draws out what members think are the key issues and contextual facts members and the public should be aware of, for instance the proposal to take on £65m Prudential Borrowing, to fund the Council’s Highway Network would, according to the s.151 officer, bring the Council’s borrowing to the maximum prudent level. Likewise, it was able to establish and clarify the simultaneous facts of the Council experiencing some unanticipated good news in terms of external funding, whilst facing a more challenging medium-term horizon as allocations of central government funding follow more closely national levels of deprivation. The Committee sought to ensure members were better informed on issues of particular concern, making recommendations to provide further information around issues such as school meals and flood defences.

In addition the Committee did make recommendations directly to change policy, for instance, recommending stepping required increases to the cost of school meals over a longer period to help parents and carers struggling with the cost of living. Recommendations were also made to improve the effectiveness of planned spend, arguing

in favour of more a formalised approach to prioritising active travel schemes and recognition of the compounding effect existing infrastructure has on active travel take-up when it forms part of a network with new proposals.

## **Economic Development**

As referenced in relation to the Council's budget situation, whilst the financial pressure of the last year was less than anticipated, it remained significant and with a deteriorating outlook. To safeguard the services which our residents so highly value it is necessary that the Council maximises its commercial opportunities. It is in this context that the Committee provided scrutiny to the proposed Commercial Strategy.

Discussion of the proposals helped to clarify for members and officers the different meanings of 'commercial activity', the different approaches and timelines they would require, and the differing levels of risk, reward and risk-mitigation required. Driving better deals in contract negotiations is equally as commercial as establishing a local authority trading company, but must be approached in completely different ways.

Further, to bringing clarity to the scope of activity required, the Committee also contributed a number of specific recommendations, including being willing to urge investment through dedicated capacity to improve the Council's strategic commissioning and contract management to realise the potential savings available.

The Committee has sought regular updates and a project plan for the Commercial strategy, outlining specific commercial opportunities in development, enabling activity, timelines, targeted savings or expected income generation, risk and RAG ratings, which is expected to bring more rigour, monitoring and accountability to its progress across the Council.

The Council's engagement with the commercial sector is far from limited to its own commercial activity, particularly in view of central

government's decision in 2024 to pass the responsibilities of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) around business representation, strategic economic planning, and responsibility for the delivery of government programmes to upper tier authorities. Such is the importance accorded to this development that the Committee considered this item twice.

The first consideration was taken at the Committee's first meeting of the year and was primarily an overview of the expected process of integrating the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) into the Council. The report and discussion focused on governance issues, financial risks, plans for maintaining existing service levels, and when to expect greater clarity over what difference in policy would exist given the Council's assumption of responsibility. The main point made at this stage was the importance of ensuring a wide variety of businesses were represented and consulted as part of the changes.

The second report was taken in April 2025, allowing an eight month gap for progress to have been made. The Committee was provided with details around the legal processes taken to absorb the OxLEP (or Enterprise Oxfordshire, as it has been renamed) into the Council, the governance structures, and progress made in recruiting necessary new members to fulfil roles within the governance structure. Discussion focused on the suitability of the governance structure, and whether its degree of complexity was required to achieve its strategic objectives. The Committee pushed that there should be greater clarity also over the Council's ultimate ownership of any financial liabilities arising from Enterprise Oxfordshire. At the time of the meeting, the Enterprise Oxfordshire's Strategic Business Plan had not been agreed, meaning the Committee was unable to provide scrutiny on progress made against it. It intends, however, to review this issue at the end of the current municipal year (April 2026).

## **Community Wealth Building and Social Investment**

Very much linked to the Council's commercial activity is the wish not simply to generate money, but to use commercial activity in a holistic sense to improve Oxfordshire as a place.

**Indeed, one of the Council's key priorities is to work with local businesses and partners for environmental, economic and social benefit.**

The Council worked with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies and received a number of recommendations, which were then further tested and developed, and aggregated to present the Council's approach towards 'community wealth building'.

Though the proposals covered multiple strands which were explored in depth, such as economic development, skills and employment, spending and procurement the most pressing area for discussion was over access to property, particularly the Council's Community Asset Transfer (CAT) policy, under which organisations can use surplus Council buildings. Given the level of interest, a full separate report was commissioned and considered at a later point in the year. This report looked at the scale of CAT transfers, the income generation and costs, the demand for space, the status of Covid-related rent concessions, and the outlines of a new light touch leasing policy for the voluntary sector.

The core outcomes of the Committee's consideration were to secure greater member involvement in plans to provide new leases or alter existing ones for buildings in their divisions, improved communications for members and residents about the plans and progress against plans for empty properties, and better working with partner organisations such as the district and city councils to widen the pool of potential buildings for applicants seeking them, whilst also allowing better planning and coordination between the different organisations to mitigate any issues arising, such as traffic increases.

## **Other Activity**

### **BMMR**

One area the Committee has moved away from scrutinising in recent years is the 'performance' element. The Council reports, through Cabinet, on its financial performance, its risk, and against a number of key performance indicators every two months through its Business Management and Monitoring Report. Formal scrutiny of this is important when it comes to the Council's external audit, illustrating robust internal monitoring procedures. On this basis, the Committee recommenced its consideration of the BMMR report, and is expected to continue doing so.

# 4 Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## Chair's introduction

**I very much enjoyed my time as a member of the Place Committee last year and I was delighted to be elected chair for this last year of the council term.**

Transport, development, wildlife, community safety, flooding, nature recovery, roads, street lighting, rail, infrastructure funding: all these topics make a huge difference to day-to-day life and the committee has been keen to look into them in detail and to make a difference. That this committee business has been wide-ranging reflects both the diversity of members' interests but also the extensive impact of council activity on residents' lives.

The Council has some commendable ambitions and part of the Committee's role is to ensure that these ambitions are sensible, pragmatic, and achievable. The scrutiny of members of this committee has sought to make tangible difference to that and to offer value with the cross party non-partisan approach exemplified by members of the committee.

I am proud that this is precisely what we have done I'd like to thank officers for all their work both supporting the committee and appearing before it. I would like to thank in particular Paul Fermer and Robin Rogers and their respective

teams for appearing so enthusiastically and engaging so constructively. I would also like to thank Cllr Gant, Cllr Roberts, and Cllr Sudbury as the relevant Cabinet members for attending the Committee and for their willingness to listen to us.

Cllr Robin Bennett and Cllr Charlie Hicks both stepped down at the election but their contributions to the Committee, both as Deputy Chair and as members, was profound and the Committee owes them a great debt for their dogged enthusiasm and commitment.

Thank you, too, to the Scrutiny team – particularly Richard Doney and Ben Piper – for their support to the Committee.

As I reflect over the past year of the Committee's work, I think I'm most proud of the laser eyed focus that we have given to the section 106 infrastructure funding statements. Initially, I fear there may have been a temptation to think we were stepping on officers' toes but as the project – ably encouraged by Cllr Mallon when he was chair in the last council year – has developed and come to fruition we

have seen real change. A real impact and a real difference will be made which ultimately will benefit residents right across the county. That tangible impact is something of which we should rightly be very proud.

**Cllr Liam Walker, Chair of Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2024/25**



**Cllr Liam Walker (chair)**

### Membership

- Cllr Liam Walker (Chair)
- Cllr Robin Bennett (Deputy Chair)
- Cllr Felix Bloomfield
- Cllr Duncan Enright
- Cllr Charlie Hicks
- Cllr Susanna Pressel
- Cllr Nigel Simpson
- Cllr Bethia Thomas

### Activity in brief

Number of meetings held	Reports to cabinet	Working group reports
5	9	1
Click-throughs to agendas		2,291
Number of substantive items considered	Working group recommendations	20
13	Scrutiny recommendations	59
Members of public involved (public speakers)		3
Cabinet response breakdown*		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>24 accepted (40.68 per cent)</li> <li>6 partially accepted (10.17 per cent)</li> <li>0 rejected (0 per cent)</li> <li>29 no reply (49.15 per cent)</li> </ul>		
*(based on responses received at time of publication)		



## Key areas of focus and achievements

### Section 106 Infrastructure Statement

The Infrastructure Funding Statement had initially been included on the Committee's agenda in the last municipal year to provide a level of assurance to members of the Committee. Instead, the Committee made a resolute call for action to ensure that processes were improved and that more funding was spent.

That call was heeded by the Cabinet and an improvement project was put into place.

The Committee has nonetheless been concerned at the number of barriers and constraints around expenditure of s.106 moneys. These funds are paid by developers to the Council in order for the Council to provide infrastructure needed as a result of developments. The Committee makes no apology for the amount of attention it has paid to the Council's failure to spend huge sums of money as quickly or as efficiently as it should have done. The need to remedy this is one of the things that unites members across the Chamber and united the Committee.

As a result of this, the Committee's municipal year was book-ended by s.106 funds with a request for a further item in its first meeting of the year and with a report on the Improvement Programme Update at the last of the year and of the Council term.

The Committee made eight recommendations in November, received a written update in February, and welcomed a whole suite of officers to its April meeting. The Committee was pleased at the progress made by April 2024 and adopts for itself the words from last year's annual report that the "Committee's close scrutiny of the Infrastructure Funding Statement will, it hopes, have drawn attention to issues which when remedied will be of great benefit to Oxfordshire's residents."

The second report was largely based on the recommendations arising from the first report and shows the Council recognising the value of the Committee's input. The Committee had also

identified the Local Government Association's Planning Advisory Services' self-assessment kit as something that should be undertaken and this recommendation was accepted, along with others, with the Council committing to incorporate it into the workstream within the wider programme.

The Committee had long-recommended the speedy implementation of the data dashboard which shows, by division, what s.106 contributions are available, for what, and when they will be delivered. The Committee hoped that following the May 2025 election new and returning members would find this extremely useful and, whilst it recommended a few tweaks, was delighted by its demonstration in Committee.

It will be for the successor committee to decide whether to continue to monitor the work of the s.106 improvement programme board but the outgoing committee was keen that it would and the board itself, which recently began phase 3 of its work, would hope to continue to report to the Committee.

### Transport

Transport has, perhaps inevitably, also been a key theme of this past year. The Local Transport Connectivity Plan (LTCP) Monitoring Report was reviewed by the Committee before it was submitted to Cabinet. The LTCP progress report was introduced as having marked a major shift aimed at changing travel behaviours in the county. Despite difficulties in setting a relevant baseline due to COVID-19's impact on travel at that time, there were positive trends like increased cycling, bus, and rail use, along with fewer road traffic casualties. However, vehicle miles and road emissions rose slightly. The report also mentioned delays in major policy implementations. The Committee was reminded that some of the data pertained to 2022 which made monitoring a challenge.

Members raised concerns about changes in baseline measurements for car trips, noting a 4% increase in 2022 compared to 2019 and

a 2.3% decrease in 2024 compared to 2022. It emphasised the need for more detailed data and for clearer distinctions between policy adoption and infrastructure delivery. Mobility hubs were discussed as a means to reduce congestion and emissions by facilitating a switch to public transportation. The School Streets scheme showed significant reductions in car arrivals and increases in cycling among children. Despite fewer car trips, vehicle miles increased, aligning with national trends, and members highlighted the need for more qualitative data to understand these changes.

The Committee made several requests of the Director of Environment and Highways regarding presentation and detail of the report before it was submitted to Cabinet. These requests were to provide greater clarity so that monitoring was easier and the requests were largely adopted. In addition, one formal recommendation was made to Cabinet which was about changing the headline LTCP target on car use reduction. Rather than relating to car trips, the Committee was of the view that it should relate to car mileage. This would align more readily with carbon emissions.

The Council's target is to replace or remove one out of every four current car trips in Oxfordshire. However, a journey by private car to a railway station or to a Park and Ride where the motorist then switches to public transport to travel into the urban centre, for example, is preferable to that whole journey, from home to the urban centre, being undertaken by private car. Residents seeking to reduce their car use might well choose to do this with the best of intentions (and with beneficial outcomes) but are counted as equally problematic as if they had undertaken their whole journey by car. The Committee considered that there would be considerable merit in following the example of the Scottish and Welsh Governments and moving from a car trip to car mileage reduction measure.

In September 2024, the Committee established a Transport Working Group – comprising Cllr Hicks (chair), Cllr Walker (deputy chair), Cllr Bennett, and Cllr Haywood. The Working Group

was concerned that, whilst the LTCP set out the objectives for the Council, the LTCP5 Monitoring Report showed that the Council was not on track to meet those objectives. This was of concern to members who, through this Group, sought to scrutinise aspects of the Council's delivery to consider what was working well and what could be improved.

The Group conducted two deep dives, into the Oxford Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) and into the Science Vale Movement and Place Strategy. In order to ensure the Group's work was focused, it concentrated primarily on the active travel targets whilst having an awareness of wider targets. The Committee and the Group were very grateful to the large number of officers who had contributed to its work.

The Transport Working Group submitted its report to the Committee in April 2025 for its approval and onward submission to Cabinet. The Group made 20 recommendations which the Committee endorsed in their entirety. The recommendations focused on data, governance, capacity building, funding, partnerships, and public engagement. The recommendations were fundamentally about ensuring that the Council makes the changes necessary to meet its headline targets of the LTCP, including the necessary resources, monitoring, skills, capacity, and approach, to mean that its active travel plans are at the heart of its place-making priorities.

Working groups are widely held to be the forum for focused and detailed scrutiny that could otherwise dominate the agenda of a committee for multiple meetings. This Group was such an example and the Committee is proud to have established it and grateful for its work. Both the Group and the Committee more widely recognised that some of the recommendations would be slightly more challenging to achieve but considered that all of them would be of great value. Members were pleased to hear the Director of Environment and Highways comment in Committee on their usefulness.

The final Committee of the year also considered an update on the nascent rail strategy and

anticipated that a report would be submitted to the new Committee in the autumn so that the Committee contribute more tangibly to the draft strategy before it goes to Cabinet for approval. The Committee made two recommendations.

The Network Management report updated the Committee on progress on the Lane Rental Scheme. This was envisaged as something that would make a real difference to Oxfordshire residents in that utility companies would be provided with an incentive to ensure efficient utility works through financial measures which would also generate for highway maintenance. The Committee looked forward to the scheme coming to fruition.

### **City Centre Accommodation Strategy**

The February meeting of the Committee also saw a large number of guests attending. Recognising the benefits of considering the proposal before it was submitted to Cabinet, the Committee agreed to scrutinise the plans for the disposal of County Hall. The Council had been working to reduce the number of county council buildings to reduce expenditure and to reflect contemporary working practices. In addition, the carbon inefficiency of the current estate meant that significant expenditure would be needed were County Hall to be retained.

The Committee was provided with the information in draft that was expected to be before Cabinet on 25 February 2025 when it was recommended to “agree to the freehold disposal of New and Old County Hall, on the terms set out in exempt Annex 4.”

The Committee was advised that both the disposal of County Hall and the transformation of Speedwell House provided the Council with the opportunity to use its assets, covenant and influence to be the ‘place-shaper of choice’ in Oxford city centre and to be at the heart of social regeneration. The capital receipt from the disposal of County House would be sufficient to fund the delivery of the refurbished Speedwell House complex and would also enable the wider regeneration and placemaking initiatives envisaged in and around Speedwell Street.

Given the commercial sensitivity of the content of some of the annexes, the Committee resolved to exclude the public from the remainder of the meeting and so it would be inappropriate to go into any further detail here but topics explored by the Committee included which scrutiny committee should most appropriately have considered the proposal; the assessment of alternative options; potential socio-economic benefits; redevelopment strategies for Speedwell House; market engagement and bid processes; issues related to public access and heritage conservation; planning considerations; the implications of local government reorganisation.

The Committee recommended that the Council should work to ensure that public access to both New and Old County Hall was maintained as far as possible and, also, that the Council should set out its strategy and action plan for the city centre’s redevelopment and regeneration. These recommendations were accepted. In presenting them, the Committee explained that it considered that the Council should develop and present a strategy for the city centre which would set out the Council’s place making ambitions. It should describe where, when, and what changes the Council foresees and how it seeks to achieve them. It would also include the Council’s commitment to the maintenance of public access. The Committee expected this to have an integrated land use and transport lens and to be written taking the Central Oxford Movement and Place Framework into account.

The Committee recognised that the County Council does not have sole responsibility or power for place making and that no council will have such even after local government reorganisation. It will be for the Council and its successor body to work with partners and stakeholders across the city and county to regenerate the city centre. Such a strategy would set out how this is envisaged to work. The Committee looks forward to scrutinising this in the future.

## Community Safety

The Committee's first meeting of the municipal year saw the Thames Valley Police (TVP) and Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable attend when the Committee sat as the Council's Crime and Disorder Panel. The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) gave an overview of his new police and crime plan and provided an update on a separate Road Safety strategy his office had been working on. The Chief Constable updated the committee on the operational performance and challenges faced by Thames Valley Police and the Chief Superintendent gave a brief overview of the crime trends and issues in Oxfordshire.

The Committee was keen to see collaborative efforts between both TVP and the PCC's office and the Council and its highways department. It also encouraged TVP to adopt targets that matched the then new Government's priorities for policing.

As well as police officers, the Committee had also invited the Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety to present the Community Safety Annual Report. The Chief Fire Officer presented the report on the statutory community safety agreement, which outlined the achievements and challenges of the community safety partnership in Oxfordshire in the past year. He highlighted some of the key areas of work, such as tackling domestic abuse, reducing reoffending, preventing radicalisation, and supporting vulnerable people.

The Chief Fire Officer discussed ongoing engagement with probation services as part of the partnership's efforts to reduce reoffending, especially among young people. This indicated a collaborative approach to addressing community safety concerns.

The report and discussion emphasised various programmes aimed at supporting young people, particularly those at risk of offending or reoffending. This included efforts to provide both general support and more targeted interventions for individuals, with ongoing work to ensure the right provision across Oxfordshire.

The Chief Fire Officer returned to the Committee in September 2024 to present a report on the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service improvement plan, highlighting it as a major change and addressing both His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) recommendations and broader service improvements. The Fire Improvement Board had been established and had its first meeting, with HMICFRS showing support for the approach. The recommendation was for the Committee to endorse the Fire Improvement Board as the method to track improvements and to agree that the Chief Fire Officer should report annually on progress to the Committee.

## Other areas of Activity

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy captured the Committee's imagination and enthusiasm and members made 12 recommendations, all of which were accepted at least in part, and which sought to strengthen and future-proof the success of the strategy.

The Flood Event Response report was received by the Committee on 25 September 2024, when there was flooding across the county. The report was retrospective and focused on how the county's services had responded to Storm Henk and what lessons had been learned. The Committee invited a wide range of officers representing teams across the Council and was pleased to welcome representatives from Thames Water and the Environment Agency as well as a representative of South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of the White Horse District Council.

This provided the opportunity to raise questions about how the Environment Agency and Thames Water engage with the Council and with the city and district councils.

Whilst the Council is the Lead Local Flooding Authority, the Committee was keen to impress upon all the importance of multi-agency collaboration and made six recommendations to Cabinet which were all accepted, at least in part.



# 5 Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## Chair's introduction

**I was privileged to be elected to chair the Education and Young People Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year and to chair it throughout this reporting cycle.**

The Committee has rightly continued to scrutinise the Local Area Partnership's progress on the special educational needs and disability (SEND) Priority Action Plan and the Council's improvement journey but – whilst that is hugely important – it has also been keen to ensure that its focus has been wider than that.

Home to School Transport is an issue that affects children and young people in all divisions across the county and so, when there were plans to change the policy, the Committee was keen to consider it fully. As well as considering it on two occasions in Committee, members also met officers as part of what we called a Sprint Group to fully understand the challenges and to inform our recommendations.

The Committee was looking forward to scrutinising the draft policy after the consultation but that and the Education Otherwise Than At School Policy, which the Committee also reviewed in draft form may form part of the Committee's future work.

Amongst other important matters, we considered Youth Justice, Children's Homes, Adoption, the Virtual School, Safeguarding, and School Place Planning.

Chairing this committee involved some of the most important work I undertook during my time at County Hall and I would like to thank all members of the Committee for working with me

constructively to try and add value. I would like to pay particular tribute to Michael Waine who retired from the Council at the election after 20 years' service. His contribution to the work of this committee and its predecessor committees was invaluable and I am delighted that Council has conferred on him the honour of being an Honorary Alderman.

I would also like to thank Richard Doney and Ben Piper for their support to me as chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee EYP and of People before that.

The Committee's remit covers vitally important responsibilities on the Council's part and I wish members and officers well as they seek to discharge them to their best of their abilities.

**Cllr Nigel Simpson, Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2024/25**



**Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)**



## Membership

Cllr Nigel Simpson (Chair)  
 Cllr Jenny Hannaby (Deputy Chair)  
 Cllr Liz Brighthouse OBE  
 Cllr Ian Corkin  
 Cllr Trish Elphinstone  
 Cllr Andy Graham  
 Cllr Sally Povolotsky  
 Cllr Roz Smith  
 Cllr Michael Waine

Fraser Long  
 – Catholic representative co-optee

Toby Long  
 – Anglican representative co-optee

Hana G  
 – Young Person co-optee  
 (from February 2025)

Katie N  
 – Young Person co-optee  
 (from February 2025)

Peace Nnaji  
 – Parent Governor co-optee  
 (from February 2025)

## Activity in brief

Number of  
meetings  
held

**5**

Reports to  
cabinet

**5**

Working  
group  
reports

**0**

Click-throughs  
to agendas

**2,646**

Number of  
substantive  
items  
considered

**17**

Working  
group  
recommendations

**0**

Scrutiny  
recommendations

**7**

Members of public involved  
(public speakers)

**14**

### Cabinet response breakdown\*

- **2 accepted** (28.57 per cent)
- **2 partially accepted** (28.57 per cent)
- **0 rejected** (0 per cent)
- **3 no reply** (42.86 per cent)

\*(based on responses received at time of publication)

## Key areas of focus and achievements

### Home to School Transport

Home to School Transport was considered by the Committee at its first meeting of the municipal year, in July 2024. The Committee had asked for an update on the report from the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Home to School Transport Working Group that had been presented in March 2023 and also sought information about the broader home to school transport system, including details of the spare seats scheme.

The Committee then formed a Sprint Group which met with officers to consider the Spare Seats Scheme and the topic returned to the Committee in February 2025 as part of the public consultation on the Revised Home to School Transport Policy and Post 16 Policy Statement Review. The Policies had not been consulted upon since 2014 and the consultation focused on six areas, including language updates, direct payments to parents, alternative provision, post-16 SEND transport charges, split villages, and the spare seat scheme. The dedicated Education and Young People Committee gave the Council the opportunity to have its proposals properly scrutinised and to have these matters discussed in public before they were submitted for decision-making.

The item was concluded with agreement from Members that the results of the home to school transport consultation would be brought back to the committee for further discussion and analysis. This is expected to occur during the next municipal year.

### SEND

The September meeting saw officers from across the Local Area Partnership attend to answer the Committee's questions on the SEND Priority Action Plan Update. The Committee received another update on progress made across the Partnership in February 2025, when members of the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee were also invited to attend. The Committee welcomed representatives of the Integrated Care Board as well as Steve Crocker, the independent chair of the SEND Improvement Advisory Board.

The Committee had called for greater transparency around the work undertaken by the SEND Strategic Improvement and Assurance Board (SIAB) and the progress made in committee provided the opportunity for external assurance that members who are not responsible for decision-making, including co-opted members, can provide.

### EOTAS

The Committee considered the draft Education Otherwise Than At School Policy (EOTAS) in November 2024. The number of children and families receiving EOTAS had increased from 42 to 52 and the annual spend at November 2024 was £2.1 million. This highlighted the need for a clear policy detailing responsibilities and processes. There had been considerable disquiet from some parents and carers in the lead up to the meeting and the Cabinet member for SEND Improvement acknowledged that and explained it was the intention to engage more with parents and carers before the policy was subsequently submitted to Cabinet.

The Committee made two recommendations to Cabinet, one being that the Council should develop an Alternative Provision policy and the other being that the draft EOTAS policy should be redeveloped using co-production and that this should be done swiftly. No-one appeared to be content with the current proposal – whether Cabinet member, officer, Committee member, or member of the public – and the Committee was keen to encourage the Council to revise its draft significantly.

Subsequently, it was agreed that the development of the policy in a co-produced way was taking more time than initially anticipated but that the work was fruitful and that, rather than creating arbitrary deadlines, it was preferable for that work to take its course. It would, therefore, return to the Committee after the close of this reporting period.

Whilst this meant that the adoption of the policy was to be delayed, the early engagement with the Committee will – it is hoped – lead to improved outcomes and a policy with which members, officers, and the public are content.

## Annual Reports

As well as the 'big ticket' items, the Committee also has an important role in providing assurance to both the Council and to the public that particular areas of work which would not otherwise gain public attention have been considered in a public, democratic forum.

The Youth Justice Annual Plan was reported to the Committee in September with the plan covering both strategic and operational delivery arrangements. The strategic priorities for the partnership were: reducing our First Time Entrants (FTE) rate; tackling exploitation of children in Oxfordshire; tackling serious youth violence in Oxfordshire; improving outcomes for children with Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) in the criminal justice system in Oxfordshire.

There was discussion around the importance of collaborating with partners, including local authorities, police, health services, probation, schools, community groups, and district councils to tackle youth justice issues holistically. The Committee was pleased to hear that robust mental health support had been a strength of the partnership's approach to youth justice.

The Committee considered the Annual Children's Safeguarding Report and welcomed the Independent Chair of the Board to present the report on the Oxfordshire Children's Safeguarding Board over the past year.

The Committee considered the Annual Report on Holiday Activities and Food Programme. This national grant-funded initiative supported children eligible for free school meals during holidays. The Committee commended the collaboration and information-sharing which sought to maximise the take up. Councillors were encouraged to promote the programme in their communities, too, to boost both awareness and participation.

The Committee received the Annual Report from Adopt Thames Valley. The agency manages recruitment, assessment, approval of adopters, non-agency adoptions, family finding, and post-adoption support. The agency also aids special guardianship families, indirect letterbox contact, birth relatives, and adopted adults seeking records.

The final meeting of the reporting cycle, in March 2025, saw the Committee consider an update on the opening of children's homes. The Committee noted that a place in a Council owned children's home cost around £4.5k per child per week whilst, in the private sector, costs often exceeded £7k and sometimes reached £18k per week. The Committee was keen to emphasise that the focus should remain on providing quality care rather than solely financial considerations. It made one recommendation to Cabinet, about encouraging Ofsted to ensure the registration period for children's homes is as short as possible helping to expedite the process of placing children in registered settings.

The Committee considered the annual report on the Virtual School and also requested an update on the extended responsibilities laid on the Virtual School as well as ones that were anticipated to come into force under new legislation. Members heard the school's core duty described as being to promote education for children in care and care leavers, and extended duties for previously cared-for children, children with a social worker, and children in kinship care. Achievements included reducing school move times, improving educational outcomes, and increasing university attendance and graduation rates among care leavers.

The Committee made two recommendations in response to this report, the first being that the Council should highlight the work of the school and the second being that there should be more detail presented about exclusions in the annual report, including identifying where there have been informal exclusions.

The last item of the Council year was a report on School Place Planning and Delivery, which highlighted the challenges posed by falling birth rates and the impact of significant house building in Oxfordshire. Concerns were expressed about the capital expenditure required for new schools and the potential risks to funding for school replacements. The Committee emphasised the need to engage planning authorities and how developer funding could be used for schools.

# 6 People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

## Chair's introduction

**Adult social care is a service that receives adverse headlines across the country and in Oxfordshire we are justifiably proud that we are not in that position. The services provided to our residents are not full of the scare stories that pervade the popular consciousness but are often good news stories.**

That doesn't necessarily mean though that we always get it right as a council and, with adult social care accounting for approximately 40% percent of the Council's revenue budget each year, it is imperative that we keep a close eye on and scrutinise in detail all aspects of the service.

I hadn't been involved in the scrutiny of adult social care for some years when I was elected to chair this committee and getting up to speed was a learning curve for me. I'm grateful to the officer corps for the education and training and induction they provided.

I would also like to express my thanks to Cllr Imade Edosomwan for his work and support as Deputy Chair and to all members of last year's Committee, particularly those who did not return to County Hall this time. I hope that the work we contributed continues to bear fruit and I wish the new members of the Committee well.

Last year, I noted my pleasure that the Place Committee had retained the same Scrutiny Officer throughout the year. That has also been the case for this Committee and I would like to thank Richard Doney and Ben Piper for their superlative work in supporting me specifically and the Committee more generally. Thank you!

**Cllr Kieron Mallon, Chair of People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2024/25**



**Cllr Kieron Mallon (chair)**

## Membership

Cllr Kieron Mallon (Chair)  
 Cllr Imade Edosomwan (Deputy Chair)  
 Cllr Kevin Bulmer  
 Cllr Trish Elphinstone  
 Cllr Andy Graham  
 Cllr Jenny Hannaby  
 Cllr Nick Leverton  
 Cllr Alison Rooke  
 Cllr Michael Waine

## Activity in brief

Number of meetings held	Reports to cabinet	Working group reports
4	1	0
Click-throughs to agendas		1,672
Number of substantive items considered	Working group recommendations	0
	Scrutiny recommendations	4
Members of public involved (public speakers)		0
Cabinet response breakdown* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 0 accepted (0 per cent)</li> <li>• 0 partially accepted (0 per cent)</li> <li>• 0 rejected (0 per cent)</li> <li>• 4 no reply (100 per cent)</li> </ul>		
*(based on responses received at time of publication)		



## Key areas of focus and achievements

### Committee work

The People Committee received the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Safeguarding Board's (OSAB) annual report. The presentation was led by the Independent Chair, who stressed that safeguarding was a collective responsibility, regardless of any staff shortages and budget limitations. A decrease in safeguarding enquiries was also observed. The importance of quicker and more effective learning from reviews to prevent future incidents was highlighted, pointing out recurring issues such as insufficient professional curiosity and poor multi-agency risk assessment. The Independent Chair identified three key priorities for OSAB, derived from over 200 recommendations: understanding barriers to learning, embedding acquired knowledge, and monitoring effectiveness.

The Committee explored what strategies were in place to ensure that adequate time was provided to individuals at risk and sought assurance that care was sufficiently tailored to individuals; established that the team was conducting an in-depth review of concerns raised in 2022/23 and 2023/24 to assess similarities or differences between the years, and to determine whether the issues were resolved or continued. Members further explored the interplay between the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment (MARM) process – one intended for individuals who may not have had traditional care and support needs but still presented recurring risks – and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) which was a central, coordinating hub where all referrals for adults and children (including those from the police) were received.

### The Committee also discussed whistleblowing and the importance of safeguarding being everyone's business.

Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DOLS) were created to protect people in care homes or hospitals who could not consent to their care with a 2014 Supreme Court ruling expanding the definition and increasing those under DOLS. The service required a complex assessment process, needing both a doctor and a qualified social worker or occupational therapist. The Committee established that the completion rate for DOLS assessments was at that point below the national standard but was pleased to hear that efforts were being made to improve that through additional staffing and external agency support. Efforts to boost efficiency included using shorter documents, which still complied with the legal requirements, to raise the number of completed assessments.

One of the dominant themes for Adult Social Care has been preparedness for the Care Quality Commission's Assurance visit. Its visit, in January 2025, was the CQC's first visit since 2010. The Committee was keen to understand the Council's readiness and received a report in December 2024 which focused on the improvement plan put in place after the LGA's Peer Review in March 2024 and which had been reported to the Committee in April 2024.

The improvement plan included embedding the Oxfordshire Way, enhancing co-production, improving data and transforming pathways. Progress had been made in reducing assessment wait times, safeguarding enquiry delays, Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards backlog, and improving relationships with care homes. Efforts continued to amplify the voice of individuals and to enhance use of plain language.

The Committee's discussions with the Cabinet member and the officers highlighted the importance of collaboration, continuous improvement, and effective communication in delivering high-quality adult social care services. Members encouraged maintaining strong joint working arrangements, enhancing co-production efforts, and ensuring timely assessments and care delivery.

The final meeting of the municipal year, and of the Council term, saw the Committee receive a report on co-production in Adult Social Care. The Committee was pleased to welcome officers from a range of roles to hear different perspectives. The Committee was aware that co-production had been an important topic for discussion both at Council and more widely.

This report provided an overview of co-production and its progress since the Peer Challenge had identified its green shoots of success. The Director set out that the Oxfordshire definition of co-production is:

**‘...the process where providers and/or professionals and stakeholding citizens equally share a whole-life responsibility for the creation and delivery of products, services or knowledge. Co-production is underpinned by the principles of equality, diversity, access and reciprocity.’**

This was not a definition unique to Adult Social Care but was one used across the Council and it was explained that co-production is intended to be a collaborative process where public services and people work together in the design, delivery, and evaluation of public services.

Topics explored included clarity of language and the need for plain English; different needs of different demographic and geographic groups and the resultant need for differentiation of approach; clear and timely communication; resources for embedding co-production across the Council; how the Council monitored the success of co-production; the Co-Production Advisory Board and its membership; co-production training; relationships with the NHS and other system partners.

The Committee was keen to encourage and enable the Council to further embed the principles and practices relating to co-production which services have been seeking to deliver over recent years. Members and residents, as well as officers, have been keen to see the ‘green shoots’ the LGA identified grow and thrive. The Committee therefore made four recommendations to Cabinet: one was about officer training and one about member training; the third was about members sitting on the Co-Production Advisory Board to offer a different perspective and insight. The fourth tied the three together into a single, overarching recommendation about the Council committing itself to systemic and whole-hearted co-production across Children’s Services and Adult Social Care.

## 7 Other Areas of Work

### Briefings

It is common for Scrutiny Committee members to be briefed by officers on areas of particular interest or relevance. Although briefings are designed to equip Scrutiny members to undertake their role, the briefings can also be of wider relevance. Over the reporting period Scrutiny has hosted Scrutiny briefings on:

- Education outcomes data

# 8 Reflections and Future Ambitions

**One of the first decisions made by the Council in the previous electoral cycle was to refresh and expand the Scrutiny function in July 2021. It is timely, therefore, to reflect on its journey and the impact of that decision.**

The most significant change has been in committee capacity, with the total number of Scrutiny Committees (excluding Health Scrutiny), since the 2020/21 Council Year, increasing from two to five, and the number of meetings from 20 to 25. Whilst the number of substantive items fell from 75 to 70 in this period 2024/2025, the greater capacity of the Scrutiny function has enabled greater time to be devoted to each item.

The fruits of this greater capacity are seen in the huge increase in communication of ideas between Cabinet and Scrutiny, with 71 recommendations being made to Cabinet in the last year, where there were none made in 2020/21. Even recognising that not all recommendations are accepted, Scrutiny's input and influence on shaping the Council's policy and delivery has grown over this period.

As referenced elsewhere, however, the impact of Scrutiny is hard to measure by numbers alone. The following are some of the comments made by members who have been part of Scrutiny's development over the past four years:

"Scrutiny is 'one of the most enjoyable areas of council... It provides you with the opportunity to scrutinise and challenge the administration in a non-political manner. It also gives you the most in-depth and up-to-date information regarding council business."

[Previously] "we weren't giving a suitable voice for the rest of the council to scrutinise papers coming through... We now have a number of committees performing that very important function... It has raised some very valid points and there have been things raised at Scrutiny before going to cabinet, and have been altered before being put in front of cabinet ... That's a really positive improvement"

I now feel ... that we are 'getting' scrutiny and starting to deliver

## Election

The local election results of May 2025 pose both an opportunity for Scrutiny, and a challenge. The level of turnover, with fewer than half of councillors prior to the election returning, is perhaps the most significant. The Scrutiny function has lost many long-serving and experienced members with deep understandings of relevant fields. It will be important to support new members to develop this experience, understanding and effectiveness whilst not quashing their enthusiasm or new ideas and perspectives.

## Public Engagement

In 2023/24, Scrutiny implemented a monitoring system to track its interactions with public speakers and their experience of engaging with the Scrutiny function. An analysis of the feedback collected from the 2024/25 municipal year highlights the following:

- A high satisfaction level, with an average rating of 4.2 out of 5 for public speakers' experiences. This reflects the team's success in balancing rigorous member scrutiny with a positive and accessible approach to the public.
- An improved perception of the Council overall following its engagement with scrutiny, scoring 3.2 out of 5, with 5 meaning significant improvement. Increased public participation has been instrumental in fostering transparency and trust.
- Praise for the team's friendly, welcoming, and approachable nature, emphasising the value of their willingness to engage with public speakers before meetings. Such proactive communication has created an inclusive and supportive environment, in which speakers report feeling confident and respected.

By prioritising engagement and approachability, the scrutiny team has strengthened its reputation as a vital part of the council's work and set a high standard for public-facing governance. These efforts have not only improved perceptions but also reinforced the importance of scrutiny in fostering civic engagement and accountability.

A further aspect of public engagement within the Scrutiny function this year has been the appointment of co-opted members. These are members of the public with specific knowledge or lived experience who become members of a committee without having been elected.

The Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee relies most heavily on co-opted members. Nationally, one of the groups of co-opted members education committees must take representatives from, parent governors of maintained schools, are extremely difficult to recruit to and Oxfordshire has not managed to fill these posts over the last decade. In the last year, however, one of the two vacancies has been filled, which is a significant achievement.

Whilst parent governors and representatives of Catholic and Church of England education providers are required to be given seats on education scrutiny committees by law, the Council has gone further. On the basis of its commitment to future generations and the good practice embodied by the phrase 'no talking about me without me' the Council has become the first County Council in the country to recruit young people as co-opted members to the committee. This has allowed young people's perspectives to be voiced directly in the committee setting as full – albeit non-voting – members. Support for these young people has, this year, been provided internally by the Council, but over the coming year this is expected to transition to an external provider to ensure and be seen to ensure greater independence of the young people.

## Corporate Culture

The same point has been made consistently across previous annual reports, and in view of its importance is repeated here: Scrutiny is a collective endeavour. As highlighted by the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in its statutory guidance on Scrutiny, 'The prevailing organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes of an authority will largely determine whether its scrutiny function succeeds or fails.' The health of Overview and Scrutiny, and the positive development of Scrutiny across the previous administration is a corporate success and an indication that the culture, behaviours and attitudes prevailing in the Council are positive.

### **Over the course of the last year Scrutiny has worked to further this cultural integration, focusing on:**

- Improving the Council's compliance in responding to Scrutiny recommendations within statutory timeframes. Over the past year, the average time for Cabinet to respond to Scrutiny recommendations has fallen from almost 90 days (89.7) to a little over 60 (62.1). This will continue to be a focus to seek that all recommendations are responded to according to statutory requirements.
- Improving governance and decision-making processes. The Council's governance has been a large area of focus corporately, including significant work by officers to clarify internal processes, as well as significant member work in reviewing and negotiating updates to the Council's constitution. Scrutiny seeks to remain involved in the Council's ongoing work to improve these areas of its activity to ensure it is part of the Council's decision-making process and not an add-on to it.
- Staff awareness and skills. The Scrutiny function has invested significant time in designing or updating and delivering training to staff on different areas of governance. These include (in partnership with Policy colleagues) the Council's mandatory training for managers on 'Working in a Political Environment', Introductions to the Role of Scrutiny and Cabinet for different directorate leadership teams, Report-Writing training, and even a 'mock-Scrutiny' session for the Council's Oxfordshire Younger Generation (OxYGen) network to allow members of staff without experience of Scrutiny to gain it in a less intimidating environment than a public meeting. The success and positive feedback from these sessions, as well as the Council's intention to continue its improvements to governance, mean it is expected that this too will continue to be an area of focus for the coming year.

It is worth highlighting that one reason Scrutiny has been able to make its improvements and contributions to the Council's wider processes has been through undertaking its work more efficiently. Scrutiny has been using the Council's AI tool, Co-pilot. This has leveraged capacity within the team, particularly reducing the time taken to write minutes of meetings, but also being used to support initial drafts of a number of paragraphs to this annual report.



# 9 Thanks

**Taking the slightly longer view of Scrutiny's development over the previous electoral cycle there are many people to thank. A significant majority of elected members were involved in Scrutiny over this period, either as committee members or substitutes, or attending as Cabinet members.**

**Deep thanks go to all councillors contributing to the Scrutiny function, but particularly to the 2024/25 Chairs and Deputy Chairs, including former Councillors Eddie Reeves and Bob Johnstone of the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Nigel Simpson of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny, and Robin Bennett of Place Overview and Scrutiny.**

Particular thanks from this year is given to Peace Nnaji, Hana G, Katie N, Fraser Long, and Toby Long for their willingness to give up their time and share their expertise as co-opted members of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Finally, deep gratitude is expressed to the officers of the Council who have participated in the Scrutiny process. From the efforts of writing reports to having the Council's work publicly challenged and implementing recommendations, Scrutiny requires significant time and effort. The willingness and commitment to do that hard work to improve outcomes for residents is commendable.

# 10 Contacting Scrutiny

If you would like to contact scrutiny with suggestions, ideas or comments please email [scrutiny@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:scrutiny@oxfordshire.gov.uk).

Meetings of its committees are open to the public and are livestreamed, the link to which can be found on the relevant meeting agenda which can be accessed from this page:

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ieDocHome.aspx?bcr=1>

**We also welcome members of the public sharing their views on relevant items on the agenda in person or via Teams.**

Should you wish to know what is coming to a particular committee you can register for updates via:

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ielogon.aspx?lp=1&RPID=1954675&HPID=1954675&Forms=1&META=mgSubscribeLogon>



**Tom Hudson,**  
Scrutiny Manager

Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee



**Richard Doney,**  
Scrutiny Officer

- Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- People Overview and Scrutiny Committee



**Omid Nouri,**  
Scrutiny Officer (Health)

- Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (HOSC)
- Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (BOB HOSC)



**Ben Piper,**  
Democratic Services Officer

- To cover People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for 2025/26