

PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Wednesday, 24 July 2024 commencing at 2.00 pm and finishing at 4.18 pm

Present:

Voting Members: Councillor Liam Walker - in the Chair

Councillor Robin Bennett
Councillor Trish Elphinstone
Councillor Donna Ford
Councillor Charlie Hicks
Councillor Susanna Pressel
Councillor Nigel Simpson
Councillor Bethia Thomas

Officers: Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways
Matthew Barber, the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley
Jason Hogg, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police
Benedict Clark, Chief Superintendent and Local Command Unit Commander for Oxfordshire
Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety
Richard Doney, Scrutiny Officer

The Council considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and decided as set out below. Except insofar as otherwise specified, the reasons for the decisions are contained in the agenda and reports, copies of which are attached to the signed Minutes.

17/24 ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 1)

The Scrutiny Officer invited nominations for Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year. Cllr Simpson proposed Cllr Walker and Cllr Ford seconded the nomination.

With no other nominations and no objections, Cllr Walker was **ELECTED** Chair for 2024/25.

18/24 ELECTION OF DEPUTY CHAIR FOR THE 2024/25 COUNCIL YEAR

(Agenda No. 2)

Having taken the Chair, Cllr Walker invited nominations for Deputy Chair of the Committee for the 2024/25 municipal year.

Cllr Hicks was proposed by Cllr Elphinstone and seconded by Cllr Pressel.

Cllr Bennett was proposed by Cllr Thomas and seconded by Cllr Ford.

Having been put to the vote, Cllr Bennett was **ELECTED** Deputy Chair for the 2024/25 municipal year.

19/24 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS
(Agenda No. 3)

Apologies were received from Cllr Bloomfield, substituted by Cllr Ford, from Cllr Enright, substituted by Cllr Elphinstone, and from Cllr Dr Ley, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Inequalities, and Community Safety.

20/24 DECLARATION OF INTERESTS - SEE GUIDANCE NOTE ON THE BACK PAGE
(Agenda No. 4)

21/24 MINUTES
(Agenda No. 5)

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 April 2024 were **AGREED** as a true and accurate record.

22/24 PETITIONS AND PUBLIC ADDRESS
(Agenda No. 6)

There were none.

23/24 POLICE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE PLAN FOR OXFORDSHIRE
(Agenda No. 7)

As part of its Crime and Disorder Panel responsibilities under the Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009, the Committee welcomed Matthew Barber, the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley (the Commissioner), Jason Hogg, Chief Constable of Thames Valley Police (the Chief Constable), and Benedict Clark, Chief Superintendent and Local Command Unit Commander for Oxfordshire (the Chief Superintendent), to the Committee.

The Police and Crime Commissioner gave an overview of his new police and crime plan, which was due to be published next week, subject to final comments from the police and crime panel. The Commissioner provided an update on a separate Road Safety strategy which his office was working on. He highlighted some of the key priorities and initiatives, such as increasing funding for community safety partnerships, developing a Thames Valley wide closed-circuit television (CCTV) partnership, and the positive work that had been done through Operation Deter and youth offending teams to reduce knife crime and reoffending.

The Chief Constable gave an update on the operational performance and challenges of Thames Valley Police (TVP), including the recruitment and retention of officers and staff, the increases in demand and complexity of cases, and the budget shortfall. The Chief Constable explained the rationale and benefits of the force restructure, which

would reduce the number of local command units from eleven to five and enable more flexibility and efficiency in deploying resources. The Chief Constable emphasised the importance of neighbourhood policing and the investment in increasing the number of neighbourhood officers and special constables.

The Chief Superintendent gave a brief overview of the crime trends and issues in Oxfordshire, noting that the county was relatively stable and had seen reductions in some of the most serious offences, such as knife crime and sexual offences. The Chief Superintendent also mentioned some of the operations and initiatives that were underway to tackle specific problems, such as shoplifting, rural crime, county drugs lines, and e-scooters. He outlined the plans for the new local command unit for Oxfordshire, which would be led by him and have thematic leads for different areas of work.

Cllr Ford left the meeting following the presentations.

Following the conclusion of the presentation, the Committee raised a number of comments and questions for the Commissioner, Chief Constable, and Chief Superintendent.

- Members asked for more details in relation to the scale, and future potential scale, of the restructure of the TVP in Oxfordshire.

The Chief Constable and Commissioner explained to the Committee that the restructure was a response to the scale and relative demands upon the TVP in Oxfordshire. The restructure intended to provide Oxfordshire policing with good space for the next 10 to 20 years. There was no intention to overinflate the size of the TVP, with greater localised needs focused on across the Thames valley.

- Several questions were raised concerning the data, challenges and lessons learnt by the TVP concerning the retention rate of the force.

The TVP was exploring additional screening and training to ensure candidates were better prepared for the role. Efforts were also being made to improve the working environment and offer more flexible working arrangements to retain staff. TVP was addressing the challenge of 22% of new officers leaving within the first year by examining the recruitment process.

The retention for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) officers was worse than for white officers. TVP had been working towards increasing the intake of BAME recruits from 5% to around 15%, but there had been a drop this year, which was being investigated.

The TVP was exploring additional support for those who might struggle with language barriers, working with local language schools. These measures were to ensure that new recruits are better prepared and suitable for the role. TVP were considering including a potential additional English test.

There was also a focus on making the TVP a more attractive place to work by offering more flexible working arrangements but issues over levels of pay were an ongoing concern.

Paul Fermer, Director of Environment and Highways, joined the meeting online.

- Members emphasised their concerns about road safety, and their support and enthusiasm for the Council's Vision Zero policy. Members also asked about the enforcement of many of the new 20mph zones implemented across the county.

The conversation emphasised the importance of road safety, with a focus on the Vision Zero initiative that targets eliminating preventable road fatalities. The Commissioner noted the impending release of a new policing and crime agenda that integrated road safety within the framework of the Vision Zero objective.

There was a keenness to establish a strategic board for road safety, which would include senior directors from highways authorities, cabinet members, and senior members from the Joint Operations Unit. This board aims were to have high-level discussions on road safety, aligning with the Vision Zero approach. The Road Safety strategy which was planned was to ensure a joined-up approach to road safety across the Thames Valley, including Oxfordshire, due to the large a complex geographical landscape of the highways and authorities.

The Commissioner underscored the value of data analysis in pinpointing the greatest risks to public safety, often found on roads with speeds of 40 mph or higher. It was pointed out that, despite the significance of managing speed and safety within local communities, the perceived problems might not coincide with where the most considerable dangers existed.

Furthermore, it was noted that tackling road safety issues may entail more than just enforcement, possibly requiring alterations to the road designs or other engineering interventions.

The Chief Constable clarified that the police had been enforcing 20mph zones, but fixed speed cameras did not function at 20mph. This meant that enforcement was mainly through the Roads Policing Unit using speed guns. Monthly, the police carried out roughly 65 enforcement actions in 20mph zones, especially in areas where data suggested a greater need for enforcement. It was noted there were available speed cameras which worked at 20mph but they came at a high financial cost.

- In relation to road safety, Members expressed their concerns about the rising use and abuse of unauthorised electric scooters and unauthorised and modified e-bikes.

The conversation recognized unauthorised e-bikes and e-scooters were contributing to wider anti-social behaviour issues. In areas like Oxford, operations by the TVP had specifically targeted these vehicles. There was an admission that current laws did not adequately cover the use of e-bikes and e-scooters, complicating efforts to control their use, which in turn affected law enforcement and public safety. The risks to police

when chasing these vehicles, particularly those illegally modified to go at high speeds, was discussed especially in built-up city centre areas.

- Members asked about the efforts to reduce violence against women and girls and inquired if there was a goal similar to other national police forces to cut violence levels by half within Thames Valley and/or Oxfordshire.

The Commissioner clarified that TVP had not set specific objectives to lessen violence against women and girls, but acknowledged it was a broader social aim. The concept of "halving" such violence was not clearly defined, yet there was consensus on the importance of its reduction.

An increase in reports of domestic violence and aggression towards women was viewed optimistically, suggesting society had grown more accepting of discussing and tackling these matters. The Commissioner pointed out that the rise in reports might give the impression that violence was increasing, but it could signify a stronger commitment to addressing the issue.

Project Vigilance, targeting predatory male behaviour particularly at night, used undercover officers to spot and stop potential offenders, thereby helping to protect women and girls. Praised for its success, this strategy had been taken up by other police units. The Chief Constable emphasized the dedicated efforts to arrest domestic abuse perpetrators, noting that one-third of all arrests in the region were linked to domestic violence. This firm stance sent a clear signal that violence against women and girls would not be tolerated and aimed to discourage would-be perpetrators.

- The Committee also discussed what the TVP had done to combat spikings at large scale events in Oxfordshire.

The efficacy of 153 targeted operations against drink-spiking incidents, particularly in night-time economic settings, were reported with varied outcomes. The TVP faced a substantial hurdle as two-thirds of the alleged victims of spiking did not submit samples for analysis, which complicated validation and investigation. New methods had been trailed, such as training police dogs to identify substances frequently involved in drink-spiking cases. The TVP underscored the importance of adopting a proactive and comprehensive strategy to tackle the problem.

- The Committee asked how bureaucracy and paperwork affected their work.

The Chief Constable likened the impact of bureaucratic demands on police to those experienced in other public sector organisations. The level of bureaucracy hampered the TVPs ability to work efficiently. This was a significant concern for a criminal justice system described as being in crisis.

Efforts had been made to address these issues, including restructuring to protect frontline services and reduce managerial layers, to reduce the bureaucratic burden on officer.

- The Committee explored the levels of confidence and trust in the TVP, and what the force was doing to improve in those aspects.

The Chief Constable highlighted the importance of getting the basics right to raise confidence and trust. This includes ensuring that police officers are present in the community, addressing local issues effectively, and ensuring victim satisfaction with police responses. It was also explained to members that there was an 80% victim satisfaction rate, suggesting the TVP was doing excellent work with those who were victim to crimes. The discussion emphasised the role of neighbourhood policing in building relationships within communities and addressing local concerns. The Impact of wider national and global policing had a significant impact on the perception of the TVP, but the force could only focus on their work.

One thing the TVP could do to influence the perceptions of policing in the Thames Valley was to create and maintain a positive culture within the force. The Chief Constable and the Chief Superintendent highlighted the force's commitment to a positive culture, emphasising the importance of colleagues reporting inappropriate behaviour and the force's actions in dismissing officers for poor behaviour, reflecting a proactive stance on maintaining high standards within the force.

- Members requested an update on the status and capacity of prisons within the Thames valley.

The Chief Constable highlighted a £20 million shortfall in the budget, which indirectly impacted the capacity and operational efficiency of prisons. The restructuring of the police force aimed to protect frontline services, which could have implications for how the police worked with prisons.

The Chief Constable and the Commissioner discussed concerns about the reoffending rate and the impact of early release programmes. They mentioned efforts to address bureaucracy and improve efficiency, which could indirectly affect how release programmes were managed and how reoffending was addressed.

The discussion also touched on the broader challenges faced by the criminal justice system, including the need for more efficient project management and delivery functionality. This related to how prisons manage capacity and release programmes, although the specifics of prison operations were not detailed.

The Committee thanked the Commissioner, the Chief Constable, and the Chief Superintendent for their attendance and their comprehensive reports.

The Committee resolved to **AGREE** the following recommendations to Thames Valley Police and to the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner:

- That Thames Valley Police and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner should commit to enhanced collaborative efforts with the County Council and its highways department;
- That Thames Valley Police neighbourhood policing units should work directly with the Council's Locality Meetings;

- That Thames Valley Police should adopt targets of halving violence against women and girls; halving incidents of knife crime; raise confidence in the police from to its highest level; increase the proportion of crimes solved.
- That Thames Valley Police should trial the use in Oxfordshire of speed cameras with a 20 mph limit capacity;
- That Thames Valley Police and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner should ensure data relating to crime statistics is presented more clearly and straightforwardly.

24/24 COMMUNITY SAFETY ANNUAL REPORT

(Agenda No. 8)

The Committee requested a report on the statutory community safety agreement. Cllr Dr Nathan Ley, Cabinet member for Public Health, Inequalities, and Community Safety, and Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer and Director of Community Safety, were invited to present the report and to answer the Committee's questions. Cllr Dr Ley had apologised in advance that he was unable to attend.

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 Committee asked a number of questions and made some comments on the following topics:

- Members enquired about the status and on-going work with the probation service, and how young people are being supported.

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

- Members praised the work of the Oxford Inclusive Economy Partnership, and examples such as the Tap Social Movement. There was a desire to continue the Partnership and for its role within a Community Safety partnership as a method of reducing reoffending.

25/24 COMMITTEE ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee **NOTED** the progress of previous recommendations and actions arising from previous meetings and raised no further questions on the contents.

The Scrutiny Officer assured the Committee that recommendations categorised as 'in progress' were being chased for further update.

26/24 COMMITTEE FORWARD WORK PLAN
(Agenda No. 10)

The Committee **AGREED** its work programme for forthcoming meetings, taking account of the Cabinet Forward Plan and of the Budget Management Monitoring Report, subject to the following additions and changes:

- The creation of a Transport Working Group, featuring a member of each political group. Cllrs Hicks, Bennett, and Walker volunteered to sit on the group.
- An item on highway infrastructure and the use of available s.106 money.

Members also expressed a desire for the new Director of Economy and Place provide an update on the recommendations and address the Committee once they were in place.

27/24 RESPONSES TO SCRUTINY RECOMMENDATIONS
(Agenda No. 11)

The Committee **NOTED** the Cabinet response to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee report on the Infrastructure Funding Statement 2022/23.

..... in the Chair

Date of signing