

December 2024

Scrutiny

annual report

2023/24



OXFORDSHIRE
COUNTY COUNCIL

1 Introduction

The Overview and Scrutiny¹ function is principally responsible to two audiences. Whilst required by law it is nevertheless formally established by Council and remains accountable to elected members for its activity and contribution. However, it is a corporate governance function, which seeks to improve the decision-making of the Council and improve its service delivery. Having an impact on what the Council does, it also has an accountability towards residents, that its involvement in the

Council's processes makes a tangible improvement to their wellbeing. This report seeks to highlight what the Scrutiny function has done, put on record the contribution it has made, reflect on its performance and identify its principal areas of focus for future improvement.

The report covers the period July 2023 – June 2024 and not the municipal year. The reason for this is that typically the first meeting of an Overview and Scrutiny Committee will consider an agenda developed by the previous year's membership and, as such, that meeting reflects the issues and priorities of the earlier membership.

What is scrutiny?

At Oxfordshire County Council most major decisions in the Council 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. It is worth recognising at this point the changes during the year to the administration. At the start of this reporting period the administration was formed of an alliance of two political groups comprising three political parties: the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Co-operative and the Green Party. However, in late September 2023, the Labour and Co-operative group formally withdrew from the administration, and the Cabinet, leaving the Liberal Democrat-Green group to continue as a minority administration.

In operating an 'executive' (Cabinet) decision-making arrangement, the Council is required by law to have a 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 contribute to council decision-making. The 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 in formulation.

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 as to 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.

Background

In July 2021 the members of the Council agreed unanimously to refresh the Council's Scrutiny function by establishing a broader set of overview and scrutiny committees in place of the two existing overview and scrutiny committees. This was to enable a greater range and depth of scrutiny activity and to be inclusive of a wider range of members of the Council.

On 12 December 2023 the Council agreed to establish a new scrutiny committee: the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Until this point, the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee had been responsible for education and young people, as well as adult social care. In financial terms, this meant one committee held responsibility for scrutinising around 70% of the Council's service budgets. Creating an additional committee afforded greater capacity to focus in on a high profile area of the Council's activity. The new committee held its first meeting on 18 January 2024.

Current shape

The Scrutiny function at Oxfordshire County Council technically has six Scrutiny Committees:

- Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny
- Horton Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny

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 Council in July 2024. This document can be read here:

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s71593/CC240709R10%20Annex%201%20OCC%20HOSC%20annual%20report%202024.pdf>

The Horton Joint Health 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.

1 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.

Each non-Health Committee comprises nine elected members – Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny also has co-opted members. The committees convene at least four times per year, with each having distinct remits:

- **Education and Young People:** all services and preventative activities/initiatives relating to children, young people, education (including Home to School Transport and Special Educational Needs and Disability), and support of families; the Council’s statutory functions in relation to children’s social care and safeguarding. This includes public health as they relate to children and young people where they are not covered by the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee; matters relating to care leavers and the transition between children’s and adult services; the welfare of unaccompanied young asylum seekers; services for Young Carers.
- **Performance and Corporate Services:** Corporate and directorate performance; financial reporting; budget scrutiny.
- **People:** all services and preventative activities/initiatives relating to adults in potential need of social care; scrutiny of the Council’s statutory functions in relation to adult social care and safeguarding. Includes public health matters as they relate to adults where they are not covered by the Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- **Place:** Climate change, transport, highways, planning and place-based services including the delivery of regulatory services, fire and rescue, community safety and community services such as libraries.

Overview and Scrutiny function



Cllr Eddie Reeves (chair)
Performance and Corporate
Services Overview and
Scrutiny Committee



Cllr Kieron Mallon (chair)
Place Overview and Scrutiny
Committee (Till May 24)



Cllr Eddie Reeves (chair)
Education and Young People
(Till May 24)



Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)
People Overview and Scrutiny
Committee



Cllr Liam Walker (chair)
Place Overview and Scrutiny
Committee (From May 24)



Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)
Education and Young People
(From May 24)

Membership
Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair)
Cllr Brad Baines (vice-Chair to May 24)
Cllr Bob Johnston (vice-Chair from May 24)
Cllr Neil Fawcett (to Sept 23)
Cllr Donna Ford
Cllr Damian Haywood (to Sept 23 and from Jan 24)
Cllr Charlie Hicks (to Sept 23)
Cllr Kieron Mallon
Cllr Ian Middleton
Cllr Liz Brighouse (Nov to Dec 23)
Cllr Calum Miller (from Nov 23)
Cllr Glynis Phillips (from Nov 23)

Membership
Cllr Kieron Mallon (Chair to May 24)
Cllr Liam Walker (from Feb 24 and Chair from May 24)
Cllr Charlie Hicks (vice-Chair)
Cllr Andrew Coles (to Sept 23)
Cllr Arash Fatemian (to Sept 23)
Cllr Ted Fenton
Cllr Nathan Ley (to Sept 23)
Cllr Judy Roberts (to Sept 23)
Cllr Freddie van Mierlo
Cllr Yvonne Constance (to Feb 24)
Cllr Robin Bennett (from Dec 23)
Cllr Duncan Enright (from Dec 23)
Cllr Alison Rooke (Dec 23 only)
Cllr Nigel Simpson (from Apr 24)
Cllr Richard Webber (from Dec 23)

Membership
Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair til May 24)
Cllr Nigel Simpson (from May 24 and Chair from May 24)
Cllr Liz Brighouse (vice-Chair til May 24)
Cllr Jenny Hannaby vice (Chair from May 24)
Cllr Trish Elphinstone
Cllr Andy Graham
Cllr Sally Povolotsky
Cllr Roz Smith
Cllr Michael Waine
Cllr Ian Corkin (from May 24)
Fraser Long – Catholic representative co-optee
Ruth Bennie – Anglican representative co-optee (to Jan 24)
Toby Long – Anglican representative co-optee (from May 24)

Membership
Cllr Nigel Simpson (Chair)
Cllr Sally Povolotsky (vice-Chair til Nov 23 when left the committee)
Cllr Imade Edosomwan (vice-Chair from Jan 24)
Cllr Trish Elphinstone
Cllr Andy Graham
Cllr Nick Leverton
Cllr Bethia Thomas (to July 23)
Cllr Michael Waine
Cllr Liam Walker (to Oct 23)
Cllr Jenny Hannaby (from Sept 23)
Cllr Ian Corkin (from Nov 23)
Cllr Alison Rooke (from Nov 23)
Ruth Bennie Anglican school representative co-optee (to Oct 23)
Fraser Long Catholic school representative co-optee (to Oct 23)

2 Scrutiny in numbers

Number of meetings held

18

Number of substantive items considered

46

Working group reports

0

Number of recommendations made

74

Reports to cabinet

21

Members of the public, non-committee members involved

16

Cabinet response breakdown

(based on responses received at time of publication)

72% accepted

21% partially accepted

7% rejected

Though Scrutiny in numbers can tell us some information, 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 magic number for what constitutes 'success' in terms of Scrutiny recommendations to Cabinet. This number will always be significantly influenced 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 that:

- An average of approximately two and a half substantive items have been taken per meeting, which is slightly above but not far off the recommended optimum suggested by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny of two. This is a slight increase on the previous year, when the number was a little over two, indicating a growth in the number of items being considered at Committee.
- Scrutiny has sought to undertake more of its work through committee than working groups, having not submitted any working group reports.
- Every committee has met its constitutional responsibility of a minimum of four meetings per year, bar Education and Young People, which was established mid-way through the year.
- On average, just over one member of the public has attended each Scrutiny meeting. This does, however, represent a fall from the last year, where the number was closer to two.

- Nineteen reports and 74 recommendations indicate a consistent flow of ideas between Scrutiny and Cabinet. This represents an increase on the previous year's reports (17), but a reduction in the number of recommendations made (107). A fall in the number of recommendations per report is generally considered a good sign, indicating Scrutiny is learning to focus its recommendations.
- The ideas which Scrutiny puts forward are well-received by Cabinet, with around one in fifteen being rejected. In the previous year, the figure was approximately one in ten, further suggesting that Scrutiny may be becoming more selective in making recommendations.

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. If a call-in request is deemed valid, then the decision in question is held in abeyance and cannot be implemented until a special meeting of the relevant Scrutiny Committee is held. The Committee will hear both sides of the argument and decide whether or not to refer the decision back to the Cabinet or individual Cabinet member, or sometimes an officer in respect of any key decision delegated to them, with reasons why the decision should be re-considered. There were no call-ins during this reporting period. It is worthwhile noting that Scrutiny Officers have been contacted on more than one occasion by members of the public seeking to call-in decisions. Whilst Scrutiny remains a doorway for members of the public to access the Council and make their views heard, the Council's commitment to 'playing our part in a vibrant and participatory democracy' must remain within the space of operation defined for it within statute. As such, call-in remains an exclusively member-focused function.

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Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Chair's introduction

Councils of all political persuasions have faced acute challenges in developing the legally mandated balanced budgets in the light of constrained income and growing demand for statutory services. Oxfordshire is not immune to these pressures.



Scrutiny of the Council's budget preparations and proposals is this committee's most important responsibility. To that end, different aspects of the budget have been taken through committee at half of the meetings this year. This has provided members with a solid platform to understand better the Council's future strategic aspirations, the changes planned to enable those aspirations, the risks involved, and the reliability of the assumptions on which they are based.

Budget scrutiny varies significantly across local government, with some Councils performing the task well and others, less so. Oxfordshire County Council has, during its current term, made great leaps forward in this regard and is beginning to do budget scrutiny well.

Budgetary challenges heavily shape the context of the Council's operations and activities, meaning the committee rarely has approached topics in which one or more financial challenges have not featured. However, budget-specific questions, particularly around the quantum of resources available, are not the sole determinants of the Council's performance; it is also vital that the Council successfully translates its ambitions from numbers on budget lines to tangible improvements for the residents of Oxfordshire and maximises the impact of the resources it has. Within the fast-changing environment in which it operates, the Council is having to make significant practical and operational changes, not least in its decision to vacate County Hall, which is a significant commercial property transaction in itself. The Committee has devoted particular focus therefore across multiple aspects of the Council's organisational change and transformation activity to provide challenge to the Council's proposals.

Similarly, whilst budgets largely determine the Council's headcount, supporting our valued employees to deliver better services to residents is about much more than money.

Better understanding how to retain and develop our staff over the long-term, how to keep them engaged and productive, and smarter approaches to recruitment surrounding hard-to-fill vacancies are all questions which, if not addressed correctly, pose a significant risk to the Council’s strategic ambitions. To that end, another key focus of the committee over the last year has been around the Council’s workforce.

I would like to pass my thanks on to all members of the committee for their hard work and contributions, noting the especial benefit to the committee of having several former Cabinet members among its number, including two from the current term.

Cllrs Leffman, Levy, and Ley have been the primary Cabinet members attending the committee over the last year and I would like to thank them on behalf of the committee for the openness and engagement throughout.

As intimated above, recognising the valuable contribution of the officers at the Council has been a key theme of the committee’s work this year. It would be remiss therefore of me to overlook their hard work in supporting the work of the committee and of the wider Council, in particular, the preparation of its budget. Special thanks go to Lorna Baxter and Kathy Wilcox in this regard.

I should also thank Ben Piper and Tom Hudson in Democratic Services for their superb support throughout.

Cllr Eddie Reeves, Chair of Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Membership

- Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair)
- Cllr Brad Baines (vice-Chair to May 24)
- Cllr Bob Johnston (vice-Chair from May 24)
- Cllr Neil Fawcett (to Sept 23)
- Cllr Donna Ford
- Cllr Damian Haywood (to Sept 23 and from Jan 24)
- Cllr Charlie Hicks (to Sept 23)
- Cllr Kieron Mallon
- Cllr Ian Middleton
- Cllr Liz Brighthouse (Nov to Dec 23)
- Cllr Calum Miller (from Nov 23)
- Cllr Glynis Phillips (from Nov 23)

Activity in brief

Number of meetings held 6	Reports to cabinet 10	Working group reports 0
Number of substantive items considered 20	Number of recommendations made 20	
	Members of the public, non-committee members involved 0	
Cabinet response breakdown* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65% accepted • 20% partially accepted • 15% rejected 		
*(based on responses received at time of publication)		

Key areas of focus and achievements

Budget and strategic plan

Scrutiny of the Council's budget is challenging in that there is a huge amount of information to digest, but during the period of scrutiny the proposals remain provisional whilst further detail, such as the local government finance settlement from central government, remain unannounced. The uncertainty over extent of the changes between iterations of the budget and, just as importantly, where any necessary changes are proposed to be made makes it difficult to split consideration between meetings. The scrutiny of the budget and strategic plan, was extended this year to be considered over three meetings, half of the committee's annual total. The first meeting allowed for wider consideration of the general approach to budget savings, with detailed consideration of the entire budget as it stood in December 2023 whilst waiting for key information to be shared, and a final meeting in January 2024 focusing primarily on the changes proposed from the previous iteration.

Unusually, over the course of three meetings the committee did not make any recommendations. A recommendation in scrutiny is a proposal which requires a formal response by Cabinet. Nonetheless, Scrutiny provided over the course of the three meetings significant effort into understanding the Council's priorities and how it intends to deliver those priorities, assessing the adequacy of the financial resources dedicated to enabling those actions, testing the reasonableness of forecasts where there was uncertainty, and assessing the level of risk the Council's budget proposals involved. Ultimately, it made a total of 18 observations, which were issues for the Cabinet to consider, but did not require any formal response.

The committee's feedback traversed all levels of the budget, from specific areas of saving, where it felt the Council might be forfeiting too much in relation to customer services (for instance, responses to planning applications as the local flood authority), and under-appreciated individual risks, such as the impact of the McCloud judgement on future pension liabilities. Equally, it provided challenge at a directorate level, for example placing on record its concerns over the potential for operational impact if all savings were to be realised within children's social care. Corporate level plans, particularly around layering were subject to a number of prescient observations. The Committee raised a concern that front-loading layering into the first two years of the medium-term financial plan may raise the risk of redundancies. Finally, some of the key strategic issues faced by the Council lie outside of its control, for example the statutory override for the High Needs Block which allows the Council to hold this expenditure off-balance. Nevertheless, it is important that the Council be cognisant of such issues and be preparing for their impacts, which the committee sought to ensure occurred.

The report arising from the committee's budget scrutiny process stated that it had three intentions: i) to provide to Cabinet the Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee's response to the budget proposals prior to deciding the details of the budget to be proposed at Council for ratification; ii) to inform members of Council of the issues identified by the Scrutiny Committee; iii) to provide assurance to the public that amidst the difficult decisions which need to be made, that robust challenge as to the outcomes and assumptions has been provided. Notwithstanding the lack of formal recommendations, it is considered that these objectives were met. The familiarity with the issues by all members provided by the budget scrutiny process was clearly an important factor in helping members to inform their decisions.

Business Change and Transformation

As referenced by the Chair in his introduction, the Council is undergoing significant business change and transformation. This is partially driven by financial imperatives, though not solely. Changing work practices and the move to hybrid working has significantly changed the Council's requirements for physical space. Likewise, taking opportunities to reflect on whether there are ways of doing core business in a more effective way is an ongoing driver. With very significant changes going on to the way the Council is working, Performance Overview and Scrutiny has been heavily engaged with these issues. The move from County Hall, and other activities around realising the value of under-utilised assets have been looked at via reports on the Council's Capital Asset Disposal Strategy and City Centre Accommodation Strategy. The key steer from the committee was a wish for the Council to have greater clarity about its ambitions and desired outcomes from asset disposals. It is legitimate to see maximal income, used to underpin Council services as the primary aim of asset disposals. Equally, the Council may wish where permissible to forfeit some of its income to support wider social value and benefit. Whichever option is pursued to achieve that outcome the Council must be clear, and it is this clarity the committee has consistently pushed for in terms of how it approaches asset disposals, including County Hall.

Across the country there are many instances of failed IT projects. The Council's decision whether to switch from its current business services system was considered twice during the reporting period. The Committee is pleased to see that the Council's ultimate decision reflected the concerns expressed over the degree of risk and doubts over whether there was sufficient resource to invest to make sure any switchover was successful.

The Council is also seeking to become more commercial, and it is expected that a reasonable assessment of increases to income could be between 3 and 8% through improvements through commercialisation. The Committee has engaged with this approach and generally supports it, though the suggestions were at an early a stage and were not scrutinised in depth. One area flagged by the committee, however, was the need to factor in governance and oversight processes which reflected both the Council's risk exposure, and also the legal vehicle used to deliver any commercial plans. The Committee is expected to receive an update on this activity in November 2024.

Staffing

The ability of the Council to recruit and retain staff is a key strategic risk to its ambitions. Failure to recruit to hard-to-fill posts, for example in children's social care where there are national shortages of vital staff, has a knock on in terms of the Council's performance, including in areas where there exist statutory benchmarks. Widespread failure to recruit to permanent positions means that to avoid a reduction in performance the Council must take on interim staff, whose cost to the Council is greater than the cost for equivalent permanent staff. Local knowledge and understanding, and working relationships with other key partners are soft skills which are developed over time. Whilst their impact is hard to quantify, it is easy to see when they are absent; challenges become harder to overcome and more missteps may be made. Such skills are only developed over time, meaning a constant turnover of staff after a short period means these soft skills do not have the chance to develop. The time investment of recruiting and inducting staff is significant. A high turnover of staff means the Council is using resources to maintain the current position instead of being able to use those resources to achieve its ambitions.

Consequently the committee has invested significant time to ensure that the Council's plans to recruit and retain the staff it requires are sound. To this end, the committee has commissioned papers on or reviewed existing work around the Council's draft Workforce Strategy, Workforce Report, Employee Engagement Survey, Equality Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan (though not solely employee focused, it has large elements which are), and the progress of the Council's Delivering the Future Together programme.

Three key outputs arose from these reports, the first simply being a number of practical areas the committee asked the Council to prioritise, for example clarifying expectations around working hours in the more flexible and fluid context of hybrid working, and taking steps to improve psychological safety of staff to allow upwards challenge without fear of recrimination.

The largest number of recommendations made concerned data, ensuring that the Council was collecting the right information to allow it to make informed decisions about its performance, and its subsequent actions. Multiple recommendations were made to allow fuller contextual understanding of the data collected, with long-term trend data, the addition of comparators and the identification of key demographic groupings whose specific needs were not able to be looked at because they were not suitably categorised, for example part-time workers.

Finally, one aspect of Oxfordshire is its strong military connection. The Council has recognised this through signing up to the Armed Forces Covenant. Regular relocation and the impacts of deployment mean that armed forces families face specific challenges in accessing work, particularly work at their level of experience. The Committee learned that some of the specific interventions the Council has in place to mitigate the challenges faced by service personnel had lapsed to a degree, making a number of recommendations as to how this important work could be revitalised.

Cost of living

The Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested a report on the Council's cost of living support during the most acute phase of the cost of living crisis. At that meeting, it was recognised that it would be necessary to transition from emergency support to more preventative activity. During the reporting period, therefore, the committee heard a follow-up report to consider how the Council was pivoting towards a more preventative approach.

Understanding poverty – its different forms, its locations, and its manifestations in different contexts – is vital to develop longer-term preventative interventions. The majority of the committee's inputs concerned steps on how to improve the breadth and granularity of the information in the poverty dashboard under development by officers. Whilst these may seem low-key recommendations, the work of understanding where poverty is and what it looks like is foundational to the Council's intended future work around community wealth building.

Social Value

Despite being one of the largest employers in the county, the extent of the Council's responsibilities – for instance, social care and highways – mean that it is an outsized procurer of these goods and services, a so-called 'anchor institution'. As part of its duties under the Social Value Act 2012, the Cabinet agreed a Social Value Policy in early 2022 stating how it would give weighting within its procurement practices to undertakings which were of social, not directly financial, in nature. The committee reviewed its first-year progress following the release of its annual report.

The overriding feedback was that securing nearly one million pounds of socially valuable activity was very welcome. However, to maximise the benefits of the policy it was necessary for the Council to be more targeted in its application. Specifically, it made recommendations to encourage the Council to find out whether bespoke measures of social value could be applied, and that the Council should clarify the outcomes it most wishes to see and the plan for achieving those. Unfortunately, the suggestion put forward by the committee in relation to the measures it would recognise, adopting measures from Wales about Future Generations, is not legally permissible. However, clarity on the way forward and the Council's intended objectives remains both possible and desirable.

Customer (Resident) Experience

In a large and complex organisation such as the Council, which interacts directly or indirectly with residents on a daily basis across its services and areas of responsibility, it is to be expected that there will be variations in the level of resident satisfaction. The draft Customer Experience Strategy, considered by the committee, was devised to 'level up' user experience by learning from the high performing areas to drive improvements across the less responsive ones.

Unfortunately, this is one of the reports for which recommendations have not been responded to at the time of publication. However, the committee hopes that if the vision of the strategy is to 'put the customer at the heart of our service delivery' then the committee's recommendations about building the strategy around public perceptions of 'the Council' to improve service levels by sub-contractors and to find ways of supporting those approaching the Council with enquiries relating to district/city council issues, will have been listened to.

4 Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Chair's introduction

I enjoyed chairing this Committee and would like to take this opportunity to thank all those officers and Cabinet members who appeared before it. With the political changes, there were then changes of portfolio holder and changes of membership to the Committee. However, there was some consistency in that Cllr Hicks as Deputy Chair and I, and the Committee as a whole, received support from the same Scrutiny Officer for the whole year. I am delighted to have finally been able to say that.

Amongst the changes to the membership of the Committee, we have seen previous members move to Cabinet posts but I would like to acknowledge Richard Webber's service on the Committee. His resignation from the Committee and from the Council in May 2024 on health grounds meant that the Council lost a dedicated public servant and we wish him well. In a similar vein, I would like to pay tribute to the contribution of Yvonne Constance and her public service on this committee.

The Committee has looked at a range of items across the year and, from roads and safety to football and libraries, the items considered have been ones that will have a tangible impact on residents and their day to day lives. It is tempting for councillors to place too many items on their work programmes and to achieve very little in what can become "talking shops". I hope we have guarded against that in our activity on Place and I am grateful to my fellow Committee members for working with me to do so.

Cllr Kieron Mallon, Chair of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee to May 2024.



Cllr Kieron Mallon (chair)

Membership

Cllr Kieron Mallon (Chair to May 24)

Cllr Liam Walker (from Feb 24 and Chair from May 24)

Cllr Charlie Hicks (vice-Chair)

Cllr Andrew Coles (to Sept 23)

Cllr Arash Fatemian (to Sept 23)

Cllr Ted Fenton

Cllr Nathan Ley (to Sept 23)

Cllr Judy Roberts (to Sept 23)

Cllr Freddie van Mierlo

Cllr Yvonne Constance (to Feb 24)

Cllr Robin Bennett (from Dec 23)

Cllr Duncan Enright (from Dec 23)

Cllr Alison Rooke (Dec 23 only)

Cllr Nigel Simpson (from Apr 24)

Cllr Richard Webber (from Dec 23)

Activity in brief

Number of meetings held

4

Reports to cabinet

5

Working group reports

0

Number of substantive items considered

9

Number of recommendations made

37

Members of the public, non-committee members involved

5

Cabinet response breakdown*

- **76% accepted**
- **21% partially accepted**
- **3% rejected**

*(based on responses received at time of publication)

Key areas of focus and achievements

The committee's key outcomes include its important contribution in providing assurance to the public of the probity of the Council's decision making in a matter of significant public interest, namely whether to sell Council-owned land to Oxford United Football Club. Another crucial area, particularly within times of such financial pressure, has been to consider the effectiveness of the Council's access to the contributions made by developers to support the infrastructure of the homes they are building, known as s. 106 contributions. Finally, it is always encouraging to see that Scrutiny is in line with wider Council thinking, particularly pressing how much latent value there is in the way we use data. This corresponds with the Council's action in making significant investment in recruiting and running data apprenticeships from amongst its existing employees to improve the Council's use of its data. These apprenticeships began in September 2024.

Oxford United Football Club (OUFC)

Unusually for Scrutiny, by necessity, the committee considered the report relating to the proposed sale of land to OUFC as an exempt item the ahead of the Cabinet's consideration of the same report at its meeting the following week.

The proposal to build a new stadium on the Triangle site in Kidlington had garnered high levels of support from the public but there were also high levels of opposition. The Committee's role was not to agree whether or not the stadium should be built but, rather, to consider whether the correct process had been followed, whether a case had been made for sale or for leasehold, and whether the seven strategic priorities had been adequately assessed.

The Committee was satisfied that the engagement process had been thorough and extensive. The Committee considered that the process had been fair and equitable with officers making sound assessments.

The Committee was satisfied that it was evident that the club was unable to remain at The Kassam Stadium after June 2026.

It made two recommendations to Cabinet: firstly, that Cabinet should fully understand the short-, medium- and long-term impacts of covenants proposed and, secondly, that it should pay particular attention to whether freehold or leasehold was most appropriate, were it to agree to the proposal. Cabinet accepted both these recommendations and, whilst the officer recommendation had been to agree to proceed with a freehold sale, Cabinet decided to agree to a leasehold disposal subject to a number of conditions.

Whilst the Committee had no view on the merits or otherwise of the proposal itself, it was pleased that its close scrutiny had an impact on the Cabinet decision-making.

Money – Infrastructure Funding Statement

The Infrastructure Funding Statement came to the Committee in December 2023 prior to consideration by Cabinet. This retrospective look at developer contributions secured, spent, or received during the previous financial year caused concern amongst members at the number of barriers and constraints around expenditure of s.106 moneys. There are inevitably restrictions but the Committee was keen to encourage the Council to build as much flexibility as possible into its agreements so that the money received could actually be used for things that were needed.

It was clear that the process for the delivery of infrastructure was complex. Needs are identified often far in advance of when they are to be delivered, sometimes many years, and can involve multiple independent parties each delivering part only. These needs and the relevant sums for infrastructure delivery are usually tightly defined by developers, providing little flexibility to adjust provision as needs alter over time.

This level of complexity and uncertainty makes it challenging to understand where a project stands, and therefore whether it is on track. The more difficult it is to monitor projects, the more likely delivery slips, which ultimately means residents miss out on the infrastructure they need.

This was a concern for the Committee, and it was pleased to be assured that the Council was reviewing its current contracts to identify at what point each project was, and what degree of flexibility the Council held. The Council was also examining how it might improve its whole s.106 process, from negotiation to delivery. This too was strongly welcomed.

On that occasion, the Committee made a total of ten recommendations which focused on two broad areas: maximising the benefits of available infrastructure funding for residents as well as supporting the realisation of the Council's strategic ambitions around transport.

The Council started a sprint piece of work into the matter and the Committee received an update in April 2024. The Committee was reminded that the Council had highly effective processes for negotiating and securing development contributions in place but that the expenditure of these funds in a timely fashion was more challenging.

The report received by the Committee noted that some funds had been "held for over 20 years without any movement other than accruing of interest." This was of concern to the Committee who highlighted this in its recommendations to Cabinet. 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.

Data and roads – HGVs and Vision Zero

Scrutiny playing a role in policy development is, of course, a key part of its function and, whilst this can be done informally in task and finish groups, there is also the opportunity for doing so in Committee. The Committee was asked to provide comment on the proposed approach to the management of Heavy Goods Vehicle (HGV) issues in Oxfordshire. A quickly implemented, county-wide Area Weight Restriction Strategy had not been deemed practical by the Council despite its initial intention when adopting the Freight and Logistics Strategy in 2022.

The Committee called for the Council to review its data infrastructure to ensure that it could be easily reviewed and monitored. Engagement with Traffic Advisory Committees and with local members in developing a viable strategy that will work for individual communities as well as for the county as a whole was key.

Questions of traffic and roads came to the fore again when the Committee scrutinised the draft Vision Zero and Action Plan. The importance of close working with Thames Valley Police to achieve anything close to the Council's ambitions was highlighted by the Committee and, whilst outside this reporting cycle, was also emphasised when the Committee met the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable a few months later. Again, the Committee reminded the officers of the importance of data driving the approach with infrastructure projects being implemented based on evidence. It also sought to break down some of the data for the public's benefit so that they could see more readily why Vision Zero was so important and what the action plan could achieve.

The Circular Economy

The Circular Economy Strategy and Action Plan came to the Committee in its development stages. This was intended to “go ‘beyond waste’” and focussed not only on reducing waste and emissions but also sought to provide wider benefits for residents, for communities, for the economy, and for the environment.

Four recommendations were submitted to Cabinet: two were about clarifying information and improving communication, one about ensuring that the strategy resulted in reduced costs, and the fourth about working with neighbouring authorities for cross-border use at Household Waste and Recycling Centres for the benefit of residents.

Publicity and Libraries

Having scrutinised the plans before the Libraries and Heritage Strategy was launched, the Committee received an update on it in December 2023. The Committee commended the clarity of the report and an infographic providing usage figures across what was then Cultural Services was particularly well-received. The Committee called for more publicity: whilst mobile libraries are unlikely to return, the Council’s Home Library Service would be of great value to many people who are currently unaware of it. There was also a call to work with partner organisations to ensure that people are aware of the support and facilities available in libraries.

5 Education and Young People

Chair's introduction

It was a privilege to be elected to chair the Education and Young People Committee. The Council rightly recognised that greater attention to, and capacity for, scrutiny of children's services was necessary. I should like to thank Cllr Reeves for his work in Chairing this committee from the off, and the members of People Overview and Scrutiny Committee for their previous work. I hope that the Education and Young Peoples Committee develops into an effective committee.

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) was a feature at the first two meetings of the Committee during this period and it is a crucially important topic. There is a keenness by members across the Council to play their part in ensuring that the necessary improvements are made. The Committee will also have the capacity to consider other matters going forward and it looks forward to doing so.

I take this opportunity to thank members and officers for attending the Committee and also those members of the public who have addressed the Committee. They have provided valuable insight from their lived experience.

Cllr Nigel Simpson, current Chair of the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.



Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)

Membership

- Cllr Eddie Reeves (Chair til May 24)
- Cllr Nigel Simpson (from May 24 and Chair from May 24)
- Cllr Liz Brighthouse (vice-Chair til May 24)
- Cllr Jenny Hannaby vice-Chair from May 24)
- Cllr Trish Elphinstone
- Cllr Andy Graham
- Cllr Sally Povolotsky
- Cllr Roz Smith
- Cllr Michael Waine
- Cllr Ian Corkin (from May 24)
- Fraser Long – Catholic representative co-optee
- Ruth Bennie – Anglican representative co-optee (to Jan 24)
- Toby Long – Anglican representative co-optee (from May 24)

Activity in brief

Number of meetings held 2	Reports to cabinet 1	Working group reports 0
Number of substantive items considered 4	Number of recommendations made 2	
	Members of the public, non-committee members involved 5	
Cabinet response breakdown* <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50% accepted • 0% partially accepted • 50% rejected 		
*(based on responses received at time of publication)		

Key areas of focus and achievements

Established shortly after the publication of the Priority Action Plan (PAP), the Committee requested updates on it at both meetings. The Committee is acutely aware that Education and Young People's services cover more than SEND. However, members across the Council are keen to ensure that there is robust monitoring of improvements.

One issue raised in Committee was about the newly-established improvement board's apparent lack of transparency and the Committee suggested that members of it should sit on groups within the Governance and Accountability structures which would enable them to act as envoys and to avoid wasted procedural time reporting back to the Committee.

The update report in January 2024 addressed various actions within the PAP and the Committee was advised that, whilst it was a key document, the transformation programme relating to it was to implement and embed a fundamentally transformative approach, around schools, Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), specialist provision, and with pathways into employment. There were some areas where action could be taken immediately but it was important to ensure that any changes implemented were sustainable and that they would deliver better outcomes. It was this that would lead to increased confidence on the part of parents and carers as well as on the part of children and young people. Levels of trust and confidence would be surveyed and monitored on a regular basis.

The Committee was keen that the seeming absence of the voice of young people from the PAP should be remedied. It was explained to the Committee that there were plans to improve some aspects of the PAP's language, particularly to amplify the voice of children and young people but also to make some actions tighter so that it would be clearer where targets were being achieved.

It was emphasised that the work arising from the PAP was not simply a response to the Local Area SEND Inspection, although it arose from that. Instead, it was seeking to ensure that issues that had arisen and developed over a number of years were remedied. Whilst recognising that some issues were negative, the Committee was reminded that there was also a great deal of excellent work happening and that this work would be publicised too. A commitment to openness and transparency demanded the sharing of all work whether good or less so.

The Committee received a further update in May and established that the Department for Education was satisfied that appropriate progress had been made.

The programme governance arrangements were fully established and a SEND Transformation Roadmap had been recently published in line with a commitment given. The SEND Improvement and Assurance Board had representation from across the Local Area Partnership and had received reports. The Committee was pleased to hear that the SEND Youth Forum was to be revamped and noted that, whilst there had already been groups engaging with young people, their work had not necessarily been publicised widely enough.

The second meeting of the Committee in this reporting cycle also saw reports on Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) and on validated examinations data in the county. The ILACS report had been published with Ofsted having judged the council's children's services as 'Good' across all five areas of inspection criteria, namely:

- 1.** Overall effectiveness.
- 2.** Impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families.
- 3.** Experiences and progress of children who need help and protection.
- 4.** Experiences and progress of children in care.
- 5.** Experiences and progress of care leavers.

This was the first formal inspection since 2018. The Committee established that the Council was working on an action plan which it needed to submit to show how it would address the four areas highlighted in the report.

To improve the quality of direct work with disabled children in care, the Committee heard that the service would ensure that, in every statutory review, there was supervision from the independent reviewing officer and actions were taken to help each child comprehend why they were not being looked after by their families.

For disabled children, this would involve exploring different methods of communication with them. The service needed to ensure that this work was clearly evidenced in every child's case file. The Deputy Director emphasised that, whilst appropriate work had been undertaken, it had not always been evidenced. It was this that needed improvement.

The Committee established that, to support work demonstrating areas of improvement within the action plan relating to participation and engagement, CoramBAAF, a leading UK organisation for adoption, fostering and kinship care, had been asked to lead a survey of all children in care about their experiences in care to provide focus on areas of strength and areas for improvement. Case audits were being undertaken where every family had the opportunity to engage with the service and talk about their experiences including what else could be done to support them. These audits included the views of young people.

The validated exams data was received by the Committee. In order for it to have been more useful, the Committee would have preferred greater granularity of data.. It noted that, whilst there were positives, it was of concern that Oxfordshire's disadvantaged children and black and minority ethnic children performed less well than their national counterparts.

With 95% of Oxfordshire schools being rated either Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, it was suggested that most Oxfordshire schools were performing well in meeting the needs of most children in their community. The data was not gathered and formulated specifically to look at the performance of individual schools and was not divided between maintained and academy schools. Members of the Committee have been keen to explore educational data in detail and intended to do so in the next reporting cycle.

6 People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Chair's introduction

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has sought to work in a positive cross-party manner in its scrutiny of children's and adult's services. I believe we have achieved that and I am grateful to members. It would have been easy for members to criticise at times but I am strongly of the view that it is better to try and work together to improve things rather than to complain about what might have been.

I am very grateful to Cllr Povolotsky for her tireless work as Deputy Chair of the Committee and to Cllr Edosomwan for taking up the reins after she left the Committee. I would like to thank all those members who sat on the Committee for their focus and dedication to help the Council improve services for the good of residents.

Although we should not be complacent and there is always room for improvement, this year there has been a greater level of openness, transparency, and engagement with our committee which has made our scrutiny more effective.

Children's social care and Safeguarding were scrutinised by the Committee as, too, was Homelessness. A close eye has been kept on Adult Social Care and the Committee is pleased at the continued success of the Oxfordshire Way. It was positive for the Committee to be able to submit a recommendation to Cabinet recognising that the Oxfordshire Way is a success and should be celebrated.

SEND was, of course, the issue that attracted headlines and to which the Committee paid a great deal of attention with no apology for doing so. We hope very much that the improvements we have started to see continue and that children, young people, and families feel the effects of those improvements. Having recommended the creation of a committee dedicated to education and young people, the Committee was delighted when it was established and wishes it well.

Cllr Nigel Simpson, Chair of People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.



Cllr Nigel Simpson (chair)

Membership

Cllr Nigel Simpson (Chair)
Cllr Sally Povolotsky (vice-Chair til Nov 23 when left the committee)
Cllr Imade Edosomwan (vice-Chair from Jan 24)
Cllr Trish Elphinstone
Cllr Andy Graham
Cllr Nick Leverton
Cllr Bethia Thomas (to July 23)
Cllr Michael Waine
Cllr Liam Walker (to Oct 23)
Cllr Jenny Hannaby (from Sept 23)
Cllr Ian Corkin (from Nov 23)
Cllr Alison Rooke (from Nov 23)
Ruth Bennie - Anglican school representative co-optee (to Oct 23)
Fraser Long - Catholic school representative co-optee (to Oct 23)

Activity in brief

Number of meetings held

6

Reports to cabinet

3

Working group reports

0

Number of substantive items considered

13

Number of recommendations made

15

Members of the public, non-committee members involved

6

Cabinet response breakdown*

- **73% accepted**
- **27% partially accepted**
- **0% rejected**

*(based on responses received at time of publication)

Key areas of focus and achievements

Committee work

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee began the reporting year by considering a report on children's social care placement sufficiency as well as market management and fostering. The Committee was pleased that the Council had committed to reducing the number of Children We Care For as part of a commitment to ensuring that such measures were taken as a last resort and in the best interest of the child.

Safeguarding

The annual reports of the Safeguarding Adults Board and of the Safeguarding Children's Boards were received by the Committee and the meeting dedicated to them was an example of the overview aspect of the Scrutiny function. Members looked in detail at the reports and explored what lay behind the headlines.

The request for a report on Homelessness and Rough Sleeping had arisen from consideration of an earlier Adults Safeguarding Board report. The Committee established that as a County Council, the Council had no statutory duty to look after homeless people. However, the Council had a long history of working with its partners to provide services that did so. There is a Prevention of Homelessness Directors Group which is made up of various partners, including the Council, the district and city councils, and the NHS. This had produced a comprehensive action plan with seven key strands.

The Committee was reminded that homelessness was a complex issue not least because the majority of homeless people are adults with capacity to make decisions that could be considered unwise. The system-wide response in Oxfordshire had sought to tackle this complexity whilst recognising that there are no easy solutions.

The collaborative process between the partners enabled support to be offered to individuals who did not fall solely under one service area. Relevant data about an individual was shared between services so that professionals had a clear understanding of their needs. The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board (OSAB) identified cases to ensure that the lessons shared across organisations were being acted upon and were resulting in the expected improvements.

The Committee commended the clarity of the report and commended the evident trust between partners which was of benefit to those they sought to support.

Adult social care

In April 2024, the Committee received a report setting out the Council's preparations for the Care Quality Commission (CQC) Assurance visit and the development of a self-assessment for Adult Social Care. It also provided an update on the recent Local Government Association (LGA) Peer Challenge.

Since the introduction of the Health and Care Act 2022, CQC had a duty to assess how local authorities met their Care Act 2014 duties against the published guidance and assessment framework. Upon notification of an inspection there would be three weeks to submit data requested in the Local Authority Information Return (LAIR). This enabled CQC to review key documents, information, and data in advance of its arrival. CQC would arrive for an on-site assessment within six months. CQC focused on four key themes: i) working with people, ii) providing support, iii) how the local authority ensures safety within the system, iv) leadership.

The LGA Peer Challenge had provided data on these key themes and a wide range of evidence for the LAIR. The peer review included 250 people with a range of experience from frontline workers to senior leaders throughout the organisation.

The LGA Peer Challenge identified several strengths within the Oxfordshire Adult Social Care System including improvements in waiting list times, the outcomes-focused Safeguarding Adults Board, and the passion and pride of staff but the review highlighted areas for development including the need to further embed an understanding of the Oxfordshire Way into staff culture, to develop work done around co-production, and to improve the data and intelligence dynamic.

The draft Digital Inclusion Action Plan was scrutinised in September and arose from the Digital Inclusion Strategy which was considered by the Committee previously.

The action plan was a work in progress which was to be overseen by the Digital Inclusion Working Group but was a cross-council initiative which needed to be factored in to everyone's thinking. The Committee agreed with the then Cabinet member that it was important for the Council to be encouraging digital inclusion whilst being acutely aware of the potential for digital exclusion.

The success of the Oxfordshire Way has been seen in the strong performance of the Adult Social Care directorate throughout the year. The Committee has monitored and scrutinised the service but was acutely aware that the narrative around adult social care nationally is often negative owing to pressures and difficulties faced by individual councils, in contrast to the Council's own successes. The Committee was pleased to establish that the positive changes had not been the result of additional staff but, rather, a focused attention to detail with frontline staff following the Oxfordshire Way to ensure all opportunities to support service users had been fully explored.

Very often, national news items relating to adult social care are reported through a lens of negativity. There are challenges in Oxfordshire and there are opportunities for further improvement but the situation here is far more positive than the national picture might indicate. The Oxfordshire Way is a good news story and is one which residents should know more about, as well as also being able to inform the national conversation around Adult Social Care.

Education and SEND

The October 2023 meeting of the Committee was the last one where it considered education. It received the Oxfordshire Education Commission's report and members thanked the Commission for a clear, well-written, comprehensive report bringing together strands of work which had been undertaken over a number of years. There was a need for collaborative work across the Council to address the issues raised by the Commission. The data was broadly the same as that in reports from the former Education Scrutiny Committee which had made very similar recommendations in 2020 but members considered that there had been little discernible action.

Members perceived that the Committee had not properly engaged with education since the establishment of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee and that Scrutiny would benefit greatly from the restoration of a committee dedicated to education. The Committee was therefore very pleased by the establishment of the Education and Young People Committee by Council in December 2023.

The People Overview and Scrutiny Committee was keen to encourage the Council to develop long-term sustainable plans which ensured key stakeholders worked together for the benefit of the county's children and young people and made several recommendations to Cabinet in this respect.

This meeting was also the Committee's first opportunity to review the report after the Local Area Partnership SEND Inspection and to consider the indicative action plan development process and proposed governance arrangements.

The Committee was pleased to hear an unequivocal acceptance of the report and the apologies made on the Council's behalf and of the resolve and commitment to rapid and systemic improvement. The Committee welcomed the openness to scrutiny.

The Committee heard, and noted in the Ofsted report, that "[l]eaders openly acknowledge the urgent need for a 'reset' to repair the fractured relationships with parents and carers and other stakeholders." The Committee agreed that was essential. The Committee also heard a commitment to improving culture. The poor communication cited in the report had hindered the building of successful relationships and an element of restorative thinking and of building new successful partnerships with families and with other stakeholders was key. The Committee considered that this should include a commitment to co-production and a preparedness to engage with suggestions made by those who did not necessarily have an official relationship with the Council but did have positive contributions to make.

Timely, clear, and charitable communication would be essential and the Committee was pleased to hear of the quality assurance work being undertaken in the area of responses to complaints.

In addition to the remit of the Committee the fact that the inspection was into the Local Area Partnership meant that there were elements of Scrutiny work that fell into the Oxfordshire Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee's (HOSC) remit. The Committee was keen to consider how it could work with HOSC more effectively. At that time, HOSC had considered the report and focused on the health aspects with the Committee considering education and the Council's provision. The Committee subsequently made seven recommendations to Cabinet which were identical to those of HOSC.

7 Other Areas of Work

Business management and monitoring (BMMR) staffing/staff turnover

In the previous reporting period, regular meetings were held with Chairs and Deputy-Chairs to provide an opportunity to ask questions about the Council's Business Management and Monitoring performance in relation to its key performance indicators, finance and risk. As these meetings were not held in public there was no scrutiny held in public. Now at each committee meeting the latest BMMR report is submitted as part of the work-programming item, informing all members in public about the Council's performance and facilitating the Committee's forward planning.

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 and/or all-member briefings on:

- Street Design Guide
- Poverty Mapping Dashboard
- Advice Centres

8 Reflections and Future Ambitions

In Scrutiny’s Annual Report for 2022–2023, the following areas were identified as requiring additional focus in 2023–2024: staffing, the balance between committees, organisational culture, the integration of Scrutiny into the Council’s operation, public engagement and added value.

Staffing

The 2022–2023 report highlighted the challenges of delivering an effective Scrutiny function reliant on interim staff. Following the restructure of the Law and Governance service, two new permanent employees were successfully recruited. The team has been fully staffed over the year. With this greater capacity the function has been able to undertake its expanded role (detailed below), and it hopes to provide greater input into integrating Scrutiny into the Council’s decision-making processes.

Committee balance

The 2022–2023 report highlighted the challenges of having one committee, the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, being responsible for providing Scrutiny for approximately 70% of the Council’s service spend, especially given that within its remit was an area of particular overspend: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). As detailed in the background section above, the Council established a new Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 12 December 2023, and held its first meeting on 18 January 2024.

The formation of this committee has allowed more detailed focus on educational matters whilst keeping an ongoing eye on the improvement of the Council’s SEND performance.

Though the formation of the additional committee has created additional capacity it remains necessary to keep under review the balance of committees to ensure scrutiny time is focused where it needs to be.

Corporate culture

In April 2024 the then Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities issued updated statutory guidance on overview and scrutiny. This updated guidance reiterated that successful scrutiny is a shared endeavour within Councils and relies on a strong organisational culture: ‘The prevailing organisational culture, behaviours and attitudes of an authority will largely determine whether its scrutiny function succeeds or fails.’

The previous annual report recognised the challenges to developing a positive scrutiny culture in an organisation which had undergone change at both a political and senior officer level. A clear corporate vision has been established and a culture of cross-council working with embedded Scrutiny.

The establishment of a corporate culture which is supportive and enabling of scrutiny is a constant journey and the Council has further to go. A key expectation of a Council which has a strongly pro-scrutiny culture across the organisation is that it will consistently meet its legal obligations towards the scrutiny function. Cabinet members may be required to attend a scrutiny meeting to answer questions and the Cabinet is required to respond to recommendations received from Scrutiny within two months of receipt of them.

These legal requirements have not been consistently met. For example, although responses have been submitted to the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee only 20% have been made within two months of receipt from the Committee. This is an area where officers will need to work with the Cabinet to ensure that the timeliness of response is improved.

The attendance of relevant Cabinet members at scrutiny meetings enables the committee's work. If the lead member is not present a substitute Cabinet member has typically attended, although this is not generally as effective as having the lead member present. The Scrutiny function highlights with particular concern the non-attendance by the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care at four of six meetings over the course of the reporting period (two relating to People Overview and Scrutiny, and two relating to the budget scrutiny).

The Scrutiny statutory guidance states that 'while each request for information should be judged on its individual merits, authorities should adopt a default position of sharing the information they hold, on request, with scrutiny committee members.' It should be noted that there has been an improvement over the reporting period in relation to access to information although securing requested information has not always been timely or easy and again this should be a focus for improvement.

Integration

Whilst Scrutiny is a forum which provides challenge to the Council, it is a 'critical friend' which seeks to help the Council raise standards and improve the lives of local residents. To do so, it must be embedded as a core part of the Council's decision-making process and delivery. As in other areas, there has been progress made over the course of this year: the level of communication, particularly between Chairs and senior officers, has improved markedly, along with the degree of collaboration.

Recommendations to Cabinet are the way Scrutiny can convey how it would see improvements to the Council's services or proposals so. A failure to respond to some scrutiny recommendations, or to respond in a consistently timely fashion, is not symptomatic of a system in which scrutiny's suggestions are engaged with meaningfully or thought given to how the issues they raise might be addressed.

An area of focus for the coming year for the Scrutiny function is to develop a better sense of not only whether formal responses have been made to Scrutiny recommendations, but also how thorough the Cabinet is at following through on actions it has agreed to undertake. Replying to a recommendation is a necessary step, but unless those actions the Cabinet commits to as part of its response are delivered then the value of the suggestion is not realised.

Public engagement

One of the functions of scrutiny is to be an access point for members of the public who find it difficult to reach the key decision-makers of the Council. The number of members of the public attending Scrutiny meetings, therefore, is an important metric in its success. Good scrutiny will be looking at issues the public care about. It is of some disappointment, therefore, that the number of members of the public attending scrutiny over the last year has fallen from 28 to 21, despite the rise in the number of meetings.

One potential issue, which the scrutiny function would like to see reviewed as part of a Constitution Review, is the rule that prevents members of the public from attending multiple committees to make an address on the same matter.

Scrutiny seeks to inform its work through co-opted members, and the newly-formed Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee has been designed with the potential for up to six co-opted members. As required under legislation, it has successfully found representatives of Catholic and Anglican educational establishments.

Legislation also determines that the Council must seek to co-opt parent governors from maintained schools within the county. As is the case nation-wide and historically at the County Council, the regulated and inflexible process for recruiting such co-opted members was undertaken as required, but was unsuccessful. Scrutiny will continue to fulfil its legislative duties with further attempts to fill these roles. Finally, a common adage of good practice in social care is ‘no discussion about me, without me’. As a consequence, Scrutiny is working to identify co-optees to the committee who are young people. The potential for working with vulnerable young people, and the safeguards entailed, have meant that this process has not been quick. However, work is underway to ensure that the voice of young people is represented on the committee.

A further area relating to public engagement undertaken by the scrutiny function over the last year is the introduction of feedback forms from those attending. As the sample this year is small and therefore not representative analysis of feedback will be considered as part of the 2024–2025 Annual Report.

Added value

Scrutiny has an importance in creating cross-party consensus. To do so, members of the Cabinet should be willing to engage and listen to the suggestions coming from scrutiny and scrutiny members should be willing to commit to sharing their insights fully.

One aspect of improvement for Scrutiny to focus on in the coming year, is to undertake a working group deep-dive. Working groups with more time to spend on matters tend to be the source of Scrutiny’s most reasoned and useful recommendations.

Overall reflections

It is the nature of scrutiny to focus on areas of improvement meaning that it can be easy to lose sight of the positive strides made. Equally, it is important to recognise that there remains work to do, as highlighted in detail above if the Council is to become an exemplar of how to do scrutiny well.

9 Thanks

As has been emphasised throughout this report, Scrutiny is a multi-party enterprise. Its successes and contributions are the result of the time and effort given by many people – Scrutiny members, Cabinet members, Directors, Scrutiny Officers, report-writers, front-line staff, external contributors, stakeholders and members of the public. The Chairs of the Scrutiny Committees would like to put on record their appreciation to all those who have contributed towards the shared endeavour of enabling a Council decision-making process which, ultimately, seeks to deliver the best possible outcomes for its residents, current and future.

10 Contacting Scrutiny

If you would like to contact scrutiny with suggestions, ideas or comments please email 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

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

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Tom Hudson,
Scrutiny Manager

Performance and Corporate Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Richard Doney,
Scrutiny Officer

Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee and People Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Omid Nouri,
Scrutiny Officer (Health)

Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Ben Piper,
Democratic Services Officer

Supporting all Scrutiny Committees