



Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2020/21

Foreword

This annual report for overview and scrutiny at Cherwell District Council outlines the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2020/21.

Whilst meetings were delayed in starting for the year as officers worked out how to continue governance under the backdrop of a global pandemic, the quality of scrutiny and debate was first-rate, and meetings were full of thought-provoking and relevant topics for consideration.

The committee's work programme this year was of profound importance to our residents, with two deep dives undertaken to examine Cherwell and Oxfordshire's response to the pandemic, covering everything from the vaccination programme to support for our most vulnerable residents.

We have also had the pleasure of examining an array of topics that I hope will help Cherwell 'come back better' in a post-Covid world, from a draft strategic vision for Oxfordshire and our Climate change response, to our 'Including Everyone' strategy examining how we can be more representative of our residents and incorporate their diverse lived experiences into our policy-making.

I extend my gratitude to officers and members of this committee who rose to the challenges of using a virtual platform to enable us to convene throughout the covid-19 pandemic.

Councillor Lucinda Wing
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
2020/21

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Lucinda Wing (Chairman)	Councillor Tom Wallis (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Mike Bishop	Councillor Phil Chapman
Councillor Shaida Hussain	Councillor Chris Heath
Councillor Tony Mephram	Councillor Ian Middleton
Councillor Perran Moon	Councillor Les Sibley
Councillor Douglas Webb	Councillor Bryn Williams

Substitutes

No substitutes attended the Committee during 2020/21.

Guests in attendance

Councillor Barry Wood – Leader of the Council
Councillor Ian Corkin – Lead Member for Customers and Transformation
Councillor Tony Ilott – Lead Member for Financial Management and Governance

External Guests

Craig Bower, Digital Programme Manager, Oxfordshire County Council

Officers

Yvonne Rees, Chief Executive
Ansaf Azhar, Corporate Director of Public Health and Wellbeing
Stephen Chandler, Corporate Director Adults & Housing Services
Paul Feehily, Executive Director – Place and Growth (Interim)
Kevin Gordon, Corporate Director of Children's Services
Steve Jordan, Corporate Director Commercial Development, Assets & Investment & (Interim) Monitoring Officer (until January 2021)
Rob MacDougall, Chief Fire Officer
Jason Russell, Director Community Operations
Claire Taylor, Corporate Director Customers and Organisational Development
Anita Bradley, Director Law and Governance & Monitoring Officer (from January 2021)
Gillian Douglas, Assistant Director – Social Care Commissioning and Housing
Robert Jolley, Assistant Director – Growth & Economy
Ed Potter, Assistant Director – Environmental Services
Nicola Riley, Assistant Director – Wellbeing
Richard Webb, Assistant Director – Regulatory Services and Community Safety
Belinda Green, Operations Director – CSN Resources
Robin Rogers, Head of Strategy
Louise Tustian, Head of Insight and Corporate Programmes

Frances Evans, Housing Strategy and Development Team Leader
Sandra Fisher-Martins, Climate Actions Mobilisation Manager
Richard Hawtin, Deputy Monitoring Officer
Sue Marchand, Community Nature Officer: Wellbeing
Steven Newman, Senior Economic Growth Officer
Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader
Samantha Shepherd, Policy Team Leader
Sam Thomas, Sustainability Project Officer
Glenn Watson, Principal Governance Officer
[To be updated post-March meeting]

Scrutiny Topics 2020/21 and their links to Corporate Priorities

Covid-19 updates – *all priorities*

Performance, Risk and Finance Monitoring – *all priorities*

Including Everyone – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Framework – *all priorities*

(Draft) Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire – *all priorities*

Constitution Review – *all priorities*

Community Nature Plan 2020-2022 – A natural environment for people and wildlife
all priorities

Housing Strategy Progress Report – *Housing that meets your needs*

Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026 – *Housing that meets your needs and Healthy, resilient and engaged communities*

Digital Connectivity in Cherwell – *An enterprising economy with strong and vibrant local centres*

(Draft) Statement of Licensing Policy – *An enterprising economy with strong and vibrant local centres and Healthy, resilient and engaged communities*. Updates on

Climate Change – *Leading on environmental sustainability*

Safeguarding – *Healthy, resilient and engaged communities*

Business Plan 2021 – N/A as reviewing all priorities for 2021/22

Summary of the topics considered

Covid-19 updates

The Committee have received two **[will be three post-March meeting]** comprehensive updates on the district and county response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The updates gave details of the level of cases across the district, the financial support that was being offered to businesses and individuals via the various government grant schemes, educational arrangements and community support services that had been set up.

During the first national lockdown a number of district council departments had their usual day-to-day work put on hold, and the staff were temporarily redeployed to assist county council colleagues.

[Further brief paragraph post-March meeting]

The Committee have been extremely grateful to the officers of Cherwell District and Oxfordshire County Council for taking time to give detailed updates during the pandemic.

Including Everyone – Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Framework

In October 2020 the Committee considered a draft of the proposed Equality, Diversity and Inclusion framework, 'Including Everyone'.

A partnership approach had been undertaken with Oxfordshire County Council, and a number of engagement sessions had been held with staff from both Councils to help inform the first draft of the framework.

As well as the framework, each Council would have its own action plan that would give details of how the framework would be applied in each organisation.

The Committee were asked for any comments on the draft framework or suggestions for inclusion in the Cherwell specific action plan, ahead of its consideration by Executive. The Committee commented that not all residents had access to IT equipment or the internet at home, and in some areas of Banbury Polish speaking residents accounted for a large proportion of the electorate. It was therefore requested that digital inclusivity and community integration of non-English speakers be included.

Executive considered the draft framework at their November 2020 meeting, and they agreed the framework and action plan, which had been updated to include the comments made by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Constitution Review

The Committee considered the Constitution Review across two meetings, in October and December 2020.

A review of the Constitution was carried out in September 2020. Feedback on the existing Constitution was sought from members and officers, with legal firm Bevan Brittan supporting the process.

The Committee was asked to consider some 'areas for further consideration'; those areas of the Constitution that would undergo a more detailed review by an informal cross-party working group.

The Committee agreed the areas for further consideration, and recommended them to Council for approval and the establishment of a working group. Council agreed the recommendation at its meeting in October 2020.

The Committee then considered the 20 recommendations that had been made by the working group, at their December 2020 meeting. Four of the recommendations were amended from what had been put forward by the working group, and a further three had amendments proposed but not supported.

Council considered the recommendations from Overview and Scrutiny at their meeting in December, and all were agreed.

Community Nature Plan 2020-2022

Also in December 2020, the Committee considered the Community Nature Plan for the period 2020-2022.

The Community Nature Officer – Wellbeing explained that the Council had a statutory biodiversity duty, under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006. In previous years a corporate biodiversity plan had been produced, and this had evolved into a Community Nature Plan.

The Community Nature Officer – Wellbeing also explained to the Committee that the delivery of the plan was achieved thanks to partnership working with key organisations and a network of local conservation and community groups, that included Wild Oxfordshire, Warriner School Farm and the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust.

The Committee endorsed the plan, and requested that a progress update be given towards the end of 2021. It was also requested that consideration be given to an all Member briefing in advance of the next review of the Plan, to allow more Members engagement in the review process.

Executive considered the plan at their meeting in January 2021, and it was approved.

Housing Strategy Progress Report and Draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2021-2026

The Committee have considered two Housing updates this year, regarding progress on the Housing Strategy in July 2020 and the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy in January 2021.

The Committee had considered the draft Housing Strategy 2019 – 2024 in February 2019, and endorsed it ahead of its adoption by Executive in March 2019. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee had requested an update on implementation of the new strategy after 12 months.

The Committee had been due to receive the update in March 2020, however the Covid-19 pandemic meant that the meeting did not take place. The pandemic also impacted on the delivery of the Housing Strategy, and officers explained to the Committee that the annual action plan for 2020-21 had been revised to take account of the changes and challenges occurring as a result of covid.

At the time of the update in July 2020, £180,000 had been spent on emergency accommodation for homeless residents, with a number of local hotels being used as temporary accommodation.

In January 2021, the Committee considered the draft Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy for the period 2021 – 2026. The current strategy had come to an end, and it was a statutory requirement for the Council to have a Homelessness Strategy.

The proposed new strategy would cover a period of five years, and the main changes included a person-centred, strengths based approach to actions and

solutions; working with partners and using feedback from customers to identify upstream prevention; working with registered providers to review the allocation scheme and accept nominations of customers who are 'tenancy supported'; and improving data capture, recording and monitoring.

In providing feedback to be considered by the Executive at their meeting in March 2021, the Committee commented that they would like to see more reference to social housing in the strategy rather than affordable housing, as there was still a need for more social housing.

[Further paragraph to be added with outcome of Executive meeting on 1 March]

Digital Connectivity in Cherwell

In July 2020 the Committee received a presentation relating to Digital Infrastructure, as a follow-on to work that had been undertaken in previous years regarding broadband and mobile phone connectivity across the district.

The Senior Economic Growth Officer for CDC and the Digital Programme Manager for OCC explained that superfast coverage, defined as speeds above 30 megabits per second, had increased from 66% across Cherwell in 2013 to 98% in 2020.

With regard to future plans, universal coverage of full fibre fixed broadband was targeted for 2033, with near full availability of 5G for mobile connectivity by 2033. Recent central Government announcements had suggested that the full fibre target could be brought forward to 2025.

The Digital Programme Manager clarified that the rollout of the 5G network was critically dependent on the fibre network, it was not a case of one being developed over the other.

The Committee commented that there was a clear link between the future rollout of fixed fibre and its importance to the Cherwell Industrial Strategy, and requested a further update on the combined subject later in the year.

Work on the Cherwell Industrial Strategy has been affected by the covid-19 pandemic, but officers remain committed to providing an update at an appropriate time.

Climate Change

The Committee has received one [will be two post-March meeting] detailed updates from officers regarding ongoing Climate Change work taking place across the Council.

The first update was in September 2020 and gave details of the work that had been undertaken since the Council had declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, and included a pledge to make the Council carbon neutral by 2030.

Workshops had been held with officers and Members, assisted by consultants from Aether and BioRegional, to give more information on climate change and to gather ideas for inclusion in a detailed action plan.

A joint team had been set up with officers from Oxfordshire County Council, as well as a Climate Change champions group that was looking at installing electric vehicle overnight charging points in car parks.

The vehicle fleet used by the Environmental Services team was also being reviewed. A number of smaller electric vehicles were already in use at the waste services depot, but the technology was not yet available for larger refuse collection vehicles. Cost models currently estimated that an electric refuse vehicle would cost around £400,000, compared to the current £175,000 for a diesel vehicle.

As well as the initial cost of the vehicles, charging capability and the relevant upgrading of equipment and increase in electrical capacity would need to be factored in to cost modelling.

[Further paragraph to be added post-March meeting]

Performance, Risk and Finance Monitoring

Quarterly monitoring of the Council's Performance Framework remains an important part of the ongoing work programme for the Committee.

The Committee has continued to concentrate on the performance element of the reports, as the risk and finance sections fall under the remit of the Accounts, Audit and Risk and Budget Planning Committees respectively.

The Committee has been extremely pleased to see Council performance on the whole remaining high despite the Covid pandemic, and have noted changes to the framework which have been required as a direct result of the pandemic.

[Further paragraph to be added post-March meeting]

Business Plan 2021

In January 2021 the Committee received an update regarding the proposed business plan for 2021/22.

The four existing strategic priorities – housing that meets your needs; leading on environmental sustainability; an enterprising economy with strong and vibrant local centres; and healthy, resilient and engaged communities; would remain in the plan, alongside the underpinning delivery themes of customers, healthy places, partnerships and continuous improvement.

Three new delivery themes would be added, to reflect the changing local and national priorities; Covid-19 recovery; including everyone, the equalities, diversity and inclusion framework; and climate action.

The 'Plan on a page' approach that had been used for previous plans had been replaced by a slightly longer business plan document, which included a foreword from the Leader of the Council and details of Council funding sources.

The Committee supported the draft Business Plan, which was approved by full Council in February 2021.

(Draft) Statement of Licensing Policy

In January 2021 the Committee considered proposed changes to the Statement of Licensing Policy, prior to its consideration by the Executive.

The Council was required to review the policy at least every five years. The last review had taken place in 2015, with the revised policy taking effect from January 2016.

The proposed changes for the latest review related to policy changes around child exploitation and safeguarding, and the provision of 70% no smoking seating in external areas of licensed premises, similar to the requirements under pavement licence conditions.

The Committee supported the proposed changes to the policy, which was approved by Executive at its February 2021 meeting.

[Further paragraph to be added post-March meeting relating to request for clarity over consultation and advertisement processes for Licensing applications]

Safeguarding

The Committee would usually consider a draft of the annual Safeguarding Audit in November, however due to the Covid pandemic the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Board delayed the requirement for submission of the completed audit.

The Assistant Director – Wellbeing instead gave a general update on safeguarding, and advised the Committee that policies and processes were still being followed. The overall number of reports made in connection with safeguarding issues was at a similar level to 2019.

The Committee were also advised of changes to the staff training system, which meant that it was easier to track the number of staff that had completed mandatory training. At the time of the update in November 2020, completion numbers for the Prevent module which focussed on extremism stood at 89%.

Whilst safeguarding training was not mandatory for Members, it was highly recommended that as many members as possible complete it. At the time of the update, 50% of members had completed the training.

Rolling Topic Sheet

The Committee again made use of the rolling topic sheet throughout the year, to keep track of subjects raised as possible areas of scrutiny.

Annexe 1 to this report gives details of the topics raised, with a brief summary of the actions taken.