

Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2009/10



Students meet Tony Baldry MP at the Houses of Parliament as part of the Local Democracy Week activities in October 2009

Foreword



This year the overview and scrutiny procedures at Cherwell District Council have worked extremely well as you will see from this report. We have continued to build on the work that has been done over the last few years and undertaken scrutiny in new areas as well as monitoring work that has previously been carried out.

This year, overview and scrutiny work has attempted to be as much pre-decision as it has been reviewing what has already taken place. By and large this has been successful with many recommendations being made to the Executive that have subsequently been acted upon.

Major reviews have taken place into youth engagement in local democracy, the impact of the 2012 Olympics on the district, the Older Person's Housing Strategy, the Private Sector Housing Strategy, the Council's Budget, Registered Social Landlords and the management of social housing, the Council's partnership with Oxford Rural Community Council, conservation areas and houses of multiple occupancy and anti social behaviour.

In carrying out these reviews, both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board have called on witnesses from our partners and outside groups. This has ensured that the evidence collected is as relevant and current as possible.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has continued to monitor existing Council activities. During the year Residents' Parking schemes, concessionary travel, markets and RAF Bicester, amongst others, were revisited to ensure that action was being taken as had been previously agreed.

Over the coming year both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board will continue their work to ensure that relevant topics will be reviewed and newly scrutinised thus providing checks and balances as well as helping the Executive to make decisions.

Councillor Dan Sames
Chairman
Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2009/10

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Dan Sames (Chairman)
Councillor Ann Bonner
Councillor John Donaldson
Councillor Alastair Milne Home
Councillor Les Sibley
Councillor Lawrie Stratford

Councillor Lynda Thirzie Smart (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Nick Cotter
Councillor Tony Ilott
Councillor Paul O'Sullivan
Councillor Chris Smithson
Councillor Trevor Stevens

Youth Engagement

The Committee considered that undertaking a review into how the Council engages with young people was timely given the growing emphasis placed on involving young people in decision making and national concerns about electoral apathy.



Students question Tony Baldry MP as part of the Local Democracy Week activities in October 2009

The review encompassed a visit to Westminster as part of Local Democracy Week, attendance at local Youth Councils and discussions with representatives from the local Youth Councils and the Youth Parliament. On the basis of these observations the Committee concluded that the Council should introduce a formal policy for youth engagement, which encouraged more involvement with local schools and youth groups.

2012 Olympics

In the autumn of 2009 the Committee reviewed the Council's involvement with the 2012 Olympics and in particular the links to tourism in the district. They noted that the latest projections indicate that there would be 900,000 more visitors to Britain and in the period 2007 – 2017 some £2.1 billion additional income to tourism businesses.

The Committee noted that the 2012 Olympics presented a unique opportunity for the district to increase participation in sport and the arts and to maximise the economic benefits from tourism. However, the Council would need to take positive action in 2010 or it would be too late. They agreed that this was a significant issue which needed to be properly and professionally managed. They felt that, notwithstanding the budgetary and resource constraints facing the authority the Council should identify someone to take the lead on promoting and co-ordinating the Council's interests in the 2012 Olympics in order to maximise the potential benefits to the district.



Older Person's Housing Strategy

In their consideration of the Older Person's Housing Strategy the Committee was conscious of the projected increase in the number of older people living in Cherwell District, which would be significantly higher than other parts of the county. In particular the Committee recognised the importance of ensuring that suitable accommodation is provided for elderly residents to allow them to continue living in rural areas. The Committee suggested that the Council should promote mixed housing provision in all new housing developments, for example, via the Local Development Framework and in North West Bicester.

Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board

Membership

Councillor Colin Clarke (Chairman)
Councillor Alyas Ahmed
Councillor Margaret Cullip
Councillor Devena Rae
Councillor Keith Strangwood
Councillor Doug Webb

Councillor Nick Mawer (Vice Chairman)
Councillor Maurice Billington
Councillor Victoria Irvine
Councillor Carol Steward
Councillor Pat Tompson
Councillor Martin Weir

2010/11 Budget scrutiny

As part of the 2010/11 budget process, the Board undertook a review of the Council's prioritisation matrix, revenue expenditure by service and reviewed the capital bids received as part of the 2010/11 process. Relevant officers and Heads of Service attended each meeting to answer Members' questions.

Group 1 met twice to consider non-consulted service areas, including Member Services, Democratic Services and Communications. Group 2 met on one occasion and focused on services areas that had been raised by Members at the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board meeting on 22 October 2009 and were not related to the non-consulted services or capitals bids. Group 3 met on three occasions to consider the capital bids 2010/11.



The Board met formally on 1 December 2009 to consider the 15 draft recommendations that had evolved from the working group meetings. The Board agreed to submit 14 of these recommendations to the Executive, 10 related to non consulted and miscellaneous services and 4 to the capital programme.

All of the Board's recommendations and observations were welcomed and accepted by the Executive and Council as part of the 2010/11 Budget.

Partnership Scrutiny – Registered Social Landlords and the management of social housing

In February 2010 the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board undertook a "light touch" review of the partnership between the Council's Housing Services and the Registered Social Landlords responsible for social housing in the district. In particular the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board wanted to explore strategic and operational issues relating to the management of housing stock across the district.

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board concluded that this was an excellent example of effective partnership working. They saw evidence of significant progress on the provision of decent homes and the delivery of the traditional elements of local authority housing (rents /repairs). They were pleased to note that the group was now turning its attention to the wider housing agenda and looking at community based issues such as availability, affordability, deprivation and regeneration.

Partnership scrutiny ~ Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

Cherwell District Council's Constitution delegates responsibility for the scrutiny of partnerships to the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board. As part of its annual work programme the Board will scrutinise at least one partnership per year.

The Resources and Performance Scrutiny decided to focus their first partnership scrutiny review on the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, a 'medium priority' partnership.¹

The Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council covers three service areas: housing; rural community development; and, community transport. As the housing element of the partnership had been the subject of a scrutiny review early in 2009,² the Board agreed that they would consider rural community development and community transport. The Board chose to focus their review on a number of issues principally pertaining to establishing a better understanding of the relationship between Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, reviewing the funding arrangements, determining whether the partnership provides value for money for Cherwell and meets the goals of both partners and determining the extent to which the partnership meets the needs of the residents, businesses and parish councils in the rural areas

The review included briefing and witness sessions. These were supplemented by 3 site visits to meet with Parish Council representatives to obtain their views and experience of working with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council. Representatives from Oxfordshire Rural Community Council also joined each of the site visits.

The Board observed that the Council and Oxfordshire Rural Community Council have a shared vision of rural community development and community transport provision which is delivered by Oxfordshire Rural Community Council with support from Cherwell District Council. The partnership plays a significant role in the delivery of services to rural communities across Cherwell district.

The Board's recommendations focused on the actions Cherwell District Council could take to improve the partnership, such as the development of a Service Level Agreement for the rural community development and community transport elements of the partnership, an annual programme of aims and objectives for the partnership and for the role and involvement of elected Members in the partnership to be clarified and strengthened. The Executive accepted the Board's recommendations in April 2010 and agreed that they would add value to the partnership.



Councillor Nigel Morris and Linda Watson (Chief Executive, Oxfordshire Rural Community Council) at the launch of the first rural Linkpoint machine at Cropredy Bridge Stores -23 March

¹ Cherwell District Council Partnership Register 2009

² 'Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites', Overview and Scrutiny Committee, April 2009

Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board ~ Working Groups

The members of the Board have divided into two informal working groups that each meet about five times per year to undertake more detailed assessments of the Board's areas of responsibility, in particular, review of the management of resources and scrutiny of the financial management, treasury management, property and asset acquisition and disposal, capital programme and monitoring of year-on-year performance indicators.

Finance Scrutiny Working Group

Membership: Cllr Clarke (Chairman), Cllrs Mawer, Rae, Strangwood, Tompson, Webb, Weir.

The Group's role is to carry out detailed consideration of the Council's finances and budgets. At every meeting the Group reviews the Council's performance against a range of financial indicators covering income, debt, investment, creditors and risk. In 2009/10 the Group continued to focus attention on the Council's response to the Icelandic banking crisis and to the recession. It also reviewed the impact of the recommendations from the scrutiny review into the Council's fees and charges in 2008/09.

Performance Scrutiny Working Group

Membership: Cllr Clarke (Chairman), Cllrs Ahmed, Billington, Cullip, Irvine, Steward.

The Group carries out detailed scrutiny of corporate and service performance, considers performance where targets are not being met or over performance, considers targets, their relevance and future targets considers performance based on what it means to the public. At every meeting the Group reviews the Council's performance, using the Performance Management Framework data as its baseline evidence. During 2009/10 the Group looked at the Council's performance across a number of areas including: customer service standards, CO₂ emissions from Council activities, fly tipping and the mobile camera unit.

Task and Finish Groups

Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour

Membership: Cllr Irvine (Chairman), Cllrs Ahmed, Billington, Clarke, Cullip, Sibley, Smithson, Tompson

The Crime and Anti-Social Behaviour Task and Finish Group was formed to gain a better understanding of the levels of crime and anti-social behaviour in the District. A fundamental issue that Council faces is that whilst crime levels in the District are low the level of fear of crime is high and the perception of young people in the District contributes to this issue. The Group felt that this review was a starting point in addressing the fear of crime and the perception of young people.

The review encompassed briefings with Officers, walkabouts with the Street Wardens in Bicester and Banbury, meetings with representatives from Banbury Youth Forum and Bicester Youth Council, who also produced a video project on their perspectives of anti-social behaviour, meetings with Age Concern, a visit to the Bicester Youth Bus and a round table discussion with representatives from the National Youth Agency, Banbury Youth Forum, Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council.

The review identified some key issues including: the need to challenge the negative perception of young people, the role of the media in forming the fear of crime and the relationship between different generations and how this contributes to the fear of crime. The scope and timing of the review did not allow the Group to look in any great detail at youth engagement and the provision of facilities for young people. The Group acknowledged that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may wish to look at these issues in more detail.



Members of the Task and Finish Group visited the Bicester Youth Bus and met with young people who use the bus

Private Sector Housing Strategy

Membership: Cllr Rose Stratford (Chairman), Cllr Stevens (Vice-Chairman), Cllrs Rae, Sibley, Smithson, Lawrie Stratford, Tompson

In April 2009 in response to a request from the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a Task and Finish Group to contribute to the production of the Private Sector Housing Strategy. This represented an opportunity for scrutiny to get involved in policy development from the outset of the project.

The approach taken differed from the normal Task and Finish Group approach in so far that members of the Task and Finish Group worked directly with officers to help develop the strategy and policies. This was done through a series of meetings on specific topics with the conclusions from these sessions consolidated into the overall report. The whole process was managed by the Private Sector Housing Strategy Steering Group chaired by the Portfolio Holder Planning and Housing. This Steering Group was responsible for the delivery of the strategy.

The Task and Finish Group met on two occasions and the Chairman and Vice-Chairman attended meetings of the Steering Group. Members of the Group also attended the public consultation events. Given the strategic importance of this topic the Task and Finish Group felt that it would be appropriate to discuss the draft document at a full Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting prior to its consideration at Executive.

In January 2010 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorsed the Private Sector Housing Strategy and Action Plan prior to Executive approval in February 2010. The Committee added the item to its work programme for review in spring 2011.

Call-in

There were no Call-ins during the municipal year 2009/10.

Training and Development

There were 2 scrutiny related training events for members in 2008/09:

- 6 councillors attended the introduction to overview and scrutiny on 30 June 2009 as part of the induction programme.
- 14 councillors attended one of the two questioning skills sessions held on 19 January 2010. 6 councillors from other districts also

In addition members and officers attended a number of conferences and seminars during the year:

Event (start from June 2009)	Members	Officers
Centre for Public Scrutiny Conference (CfPS) June 2009	1	2
LGA seminar October 2009 (CDRP Scrutiny)		1
CfPS seminar October 2009 (CDRP Scrutiny)		1
Scrutiny visit by Oxfordshire councillors to Select Committee seminar in December 2009	1	1
CfPS / Parliamentary Select Committee seminar	1	1
CfPS seminar January 2010 (Performance Management)		1

Statistics

Statistic	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
Number of scrutiny committee meetings	25	20	20	17
% attendance at scrutiny committee meetings	76%	78%	82%	76%
Number of completed reviews	7	6	6	5
Number of committee reviews undertaken	1	1	4	6
Number of Task & Finish Groups established	12	2	2	1
Number of Call-ins	0	1	0	0
% scrutiny recommendations accepted by Executive or other body	-	90%	97%	100%

Corporate priorities checklist

How does the overview and scrutiny function contribute to the Council's corporate priorities?

Strategic priority: aim	Completed reviews 2009/2010							
	Youth Engagement	Olympics 2012	Older Persons Housing Strategy	Budget 2010/11	Registered Social Landlords	ORCC	Anti Social Behaviour	Private Sector Housing
A district of opportunity								✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance employment and housing growth by developing businesses and homes that meet local need within an overall robust planning policy framework. 								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide business land and premises opportunities to support local economic development. 				✓				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support business success by fostering innovation and helping businesses to recruit and retain skilled employees 								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make it easier for you to get where you need to go 			✓					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure housing growth that meets Government targets and the needs of the District through an appropriate mix of market and affordable housing. 			✓	✓		✓		✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Give you advice and support to find a home if you are without one. 					✓			✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve the standard of housing particularly for vulnerable people. 			✓		✓			✓
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve local services and opportunities in rural areas. 	✓			✓		✓	✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop safe and pleasant urban centres which provide you with good facilities. 				✓	✓		✓	
A safe and healthy Cherwell							✓	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help you feel safe in your home and community, working to reduce further our very low level of crime 			✓	✓	✓			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve you in making your community stronger through Neighbourhood Management 								
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help to deliver improved healthcare for Bicester and Banbury. 			✓					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make it easy for you to lead a healthy and active life through our countryside, leisure facilities and tourist attractions 		✓		✓		✓		

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Strategic priority: aim	Youth Engagement	Olympics 2012	Older Persons Strategy	Budget 2010/11	Registered Social Landlords	ORCC	Anti Social Behaviour	Private Sector Housing
• Make big improvements to our sports centres.								
• Provide community facilities and activities to meet local need.	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
A cleaner, greener Cherwell								
• Keep streets and open spaces clean and free from litter, graffiti and abandoned vehicles and well maintained	✓			✓			✓	
• Help you recycle so we can reduce the amount of landfill waste.								
• Protect our environment, wildlife habitats and the country side, by working with others.		✓						
• Maximise energy efficiency and minimise carbon emissions in our own buildings, and developments.								
• Keep you informed about climate change and what we can all do to help.								
• Significantly improve green spaces and public places so that you really notice the difference where you live and work.								
An accessible, value for money Council								
• Be easy to contact, approachable and responsive.	✓							
• Always treat everyone with dignity and respect and meet the specific needs of young people, older people, disabled people and ethnic minorities.	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	
• Put things right quickly if they go wrong.								
• Deliver value for money by achieving the optimum balance between cost, quality and customer satisfaction for all services.				✓				
• Reduce financial burden to local taxpayers.				✓				
• Explain how your council tax is spent and why.				✓				
• Work with others to provide you with local services and access to information about them.	✓		✓					
• Demonstrate that we can be trusted to act properly for you								
• Improve the way we communicate with the public, partners and other stakeholders in order to explain what the Council is doing and why.	✓	✓			✓		✓	
• Listen to your views and comments, however you want to make them	✓		✓	✓			✓	