



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2012/13

June 2013

Foreword

This annual report for overview and scrutiny at Cherwell District Council outlines the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board in 2012/13.

We have continued to build on the work that has been done over the last few years and we have sought to minimise the turnover of committee membership in order to develop an experienced group of councillors who are building up a strong skill base and understanding of the principles of good scrutiny and at the same time a knowledge of scrutiny case history.

This year, overview and scrutiny work has attempted to be as much about policy development as it has been about reviewing what has already taken place. In the main this has been successful with many recommendations being made to the Executive that have subsequently been acted upon.

With the decision in May 2013 of Council to review the scrutiny arrangements and create a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with responsibility for all overview and scrutiny activity, it is hoped that, over the coming year, the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee will continue the work done to-date, ensure relevant topics are reviewed and challenged, thus providing checks and balances as well as supporting the Executive in decision making.

We firmly believe that overview and scrutiny continues to make a valuable contribution to the continuing success of this Council.

Councillor Ann Bonner
Chairman,
Overview and Scrutiny Committee
2012/13

Councillor Nick Mawer
Chairman,
Resources and Performance Scrutiny Board
2012/13

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Ann Bonner (Ch)
Councillor Colin Clarke
Councillor Chris Heath
Councillor Kieron Mallon
Councillor Jon O'Neill
Councillor Les Sibley

Councillor Daniel Sames (V Ch)
Councillor Tim Emptage
Councillor Melanie Magee
Councillor Alastair Milne Home
Councillor Nigel Randall
Councillor Lawrie Stratford

Eco Bicester: A Garden City of the Future

In July 2012 the Committee considered a proposal to identify Eco Bicester as a next generation Garden City.

Originally identified as an Eco Town location in 2009, North West Bicester had benefited from work to provide highly sustainable new developments. However, new Government guidance now referred to 8 Garden City principles, and it had therefore been agreed by the Council and the Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board to explore the opportunity of securing Government monies through identifying Eco Bicester as a next generation Garden City. This proposal was supported by the Committee, albeit caution was urged to ensure public expectations were not unduly raised.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Cleaner Greener Cherwell – ‘Work with partners to support the development of Eco-Bicester as a national exemplar, creating a vibrant place where people choose to live, to work and spend their leisure time in sustainable ways.’

RAF Bicester

In September 2012 the Committee received a presentation on a decision to investigate the potential for securing the RAF Bicester site for heritage purposes through a partnership with Bomber Command Heritage (BCH). It was noted that there was no intention for the Council to acquire the site, but rather support would be given through the provision of professional and strategic advice and any financial support would be within existing budgets. In any event, the Council was able to exercise considerable control and influence over any future development through the Bicester Master Plan and Planning Policy Guidelines. There were no circumstances where the Council, through its Planning obligations, would have to take responsibility for the site and its liabilities.

In April 2013 the Committee was advised that the site had been acquired by Bicester Heritage, which planned to establish a national vintage motoring and aviation facility on the technical site.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A District of Opportunity – ‘Balance economic development and housing growth.’

Banbury Brighter Futures

The Committee noted the progress being made against the six theme areas of the Banbury Brighter Futures project, despite the challenges posed by multi-member partnership working, when each of those partners faced budget and resource pressures. To ensure no loss of momentum, Theme Leaders met every other month and, in addition, action could be taken in between these meetings to address rapidly changing situations and circumstances.

Particular regard was given to the unemployment situation in the three Wards covered by the Programme. Whilst these showed the highest rate in the District, the figures remained comparable with the national average. It was nevertheless agreed that future reports should contain more comparative information in order to allow for the better identification of those areas where efforts and resources might be concentrated.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A District of Opportunity – ‘Deliver the Brighter Futures in Banbury programme.’

Health Sector Reforms and Emerging New Local Arrangements

The Committee reviewed the wide ranging changes occurring in the local health sector and, noting the complexities involved, identified that District level Members would only have a limited opportunity to exert influence (each of the proposed four new Boards would have just one appointee representing all District Authorities in Oxfordshire). In this respect, it was concluded that communicating the changes to the public and helping them identify who would be delivering services would be a major challenge.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Safe, Healthy and Thriving Community – ‘Support improvement of local health facilities, services and standards across the district.’

National Benefit Changes

In September the Committee received a presentation on the introduction, from April 2013, of wide-ranging National Benefit reforms including:

- A Benefit Cap
- Size Criteria for Social Housing
- Disability Living Allowance
- Introduction of Universal Credit
- Local administration of Social Fund by County Council

It was clear that, collectively, these changes would have significant implications for the Council and its customers. With respect to the new arrangements for those customers in receipt of Housing Benefit (currently paid directly to the landlord by the Council), not only would they find the level of benefit capped, but the monies were to be received direct, and they would be personally responsible for paying their rent. It was widely thought this would prove unpopular with landlords, and was likely to result in a decrease in property available for rent, with a subsequent increase in homelessness and Discretionary Housing Payments. There was also likely to be an increase in customer contact as the introduction of Universal Credit impacted on customers. The Committee noted that a report had been submitted to the Executive in July, and was pleased to learn that the Council was looking to work closely with partners, adopt a proactive communications strategy for both claimants and landlords, and review the implications for the budgets in respect of

Discretionary Housing Payments, temporary accommodation, Housing and Customers services, service assurance and the Capita contract.,

The Committee also identified that there were likely to be significant implications for other service providers, particularly the Citizens Advice Bureau, and it was agreed that Councillors should be advised of the number of properties in their Wards where there were residents who would be affected. It was, however, acknowledged that the changes were being introduced not only with a view to reducing the overall welfare budget, but also to move people away from a dependency on benefits and encourage them into work. In this respect the Council must continue in its efforts to create a business friendly District of opportunity.

In April, 2013 the Committee received a further presentation on the latest position on the changes in respect of:

- Size Criteria for Social Housing.
- Replacement of Council Tax Benefit.
- Localisation of Social Fund.
- Personal Independence Payments.
- Benefit Cap.
- Universal Credit.
- Universal Credit – Local Delivery.
- Impact of Welfare Reforms on Cherwell.
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Welfare Reform at Cherwell District Council

The Committee noted and welcomed both the proactive approach adopted and the flexibility shown as changes were introduced by the Government at short notice. Identifying that communication was key to the successful introduction of the various changes, it was also recommended to the Lead Member for Financial Management that, as a Spend to Save scheme, consideration be given to the introduction of a Welfare Reform Team, with a remit to give advice and assistance to customers applying for or encountering issues with Universal Credit.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible Value for Money Council – ‘Develop and implement an effective approach to address the financial impact of Government welfare reform’

Air Quality in the District

In October 2012 the Committee reviewed the processes involved in monitoring Air Quality across the District, noting the declaration of an Air Quality Management Area in respect of Hennef Way, Banbury, and three detailed assessments currently in progress in respect of:

- Oxford Road to Southam Road, Banbury.
- Kings End to Field Street, Bicester.
- Bicester Road, Kidlington.

The Committee identified a number of issues, particularly with regard to enabling Members to report areas of concern, and the matter was retained on the Work Programme for a further presentation.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Safe, Healthy and Thriving Community – ‘Work with partners and businesses to support public health, safety and environmental protection.’

Planning and Building Control Enforcement

In October 2012 the Committee reviewed a decision to temporarily increase the resources of the enforcement function for a two year period. Funded from the Planning Reserve fund and notwithstanding current budget pressures and planning enforcement being a discretionary service, it had been felt that the need to correct planning errors and strengthen the Council’s reputation as Local Planning authority was imperative. The Committee endorsed this view, concluding that the effective implementation of planning regulations and policy played a key role in ensuring the creation of a business friendly District of opportunity.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible Value for Money Council – ‘Maintain high rates of customer satisfaction with our services.’

Update on Empty Homes

In January 2012 the Committee had considered the issue of Empty Homes, and agreed four principles should form the basis for the Council’s approach:

1. The Council wants empty homes to be used.
2. The Council will encourage and facilitate their re-use (e.g. by providing advice, grants and loans).
3. The Council will take action to resolve specific issues caused by empty homes (where powers permit).
4. The Council will take action to secure re-use of empty homes where a business case exists.

In March 2013 the Committee reviewed progress, and noted that efforts had been concentrated on 50 properties that had been empty for at least 2 years in those areas of the District in greatest need (Banbury, Bicester and Kidlington). Although 24 of these properties had been found to be occupied (with Council Tax being informed accordingly), 3 had been returned to use, and formal Notices of Entry had been used to gain access to a further 2 properties. In total, it was anticipated that 10 properties from the initial list would be returned to use. Refinements to the system of data gathering from the Council Tax system would speed up the process when taking action on the next 50 properties identified for action. It was also noted that the Council would benefit from New Homes Bonus income over the next 2/3 years as a result of HCA Empty Homes grant funding securing the release of some 250 properties for lease. The Committee had welcomed the progress made to date, although suggested greater effort should be made to highlight the availability of the Council’s Empty Homes Loan, and Loan-to-Lease schemes. The issue would be re-visited in 12 months’ time.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A District of Opportunity – ‘Support vulnerable residents through focusing on homelessness prevention and housing advice at current levels of performance.’ ‘Deliver 100 affordable homes in the district.’

Housing Strategy

In March 2013 the Committee reviewed the Housing Strategy Annual Delivery Plan. A five year programme, it identified six priorities:

1. Increasing the supply and access to housing.
2. Developing financially and socially sustainable communities.
3. Housing for our most vulnerable residents.
4. Ensuring Homes are safe, warm and well managed.
5. Preventing homelessness.
6. Maximising resources – Investment Ready District.

The Committee noted on-going work to deliver the Plan, particularly with respect to research into equity loan products, a review of the Rural Housing Partnership, sustainable housing (Low Carbon Housing), housing for the most vulnerable, and the introduction across the District of the 'Green Deal'. The Governments changes to the welfare system would present a challenge to preventing homelessness, but the Council had already undertaken a lot of work with the CAB and other partners, which would be key to successful delivery. It was also noted that, with regard to priority 3, the Delivery Plan should put more pressure on developers to build properties once they obtained planning consent.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A District of Opportunity – 'Support vulnerable residents through focusing on homelessness prevention and housing advice at current levels of performance.' 'Deliver x new homes including through planned major housing projects.' 'Deliver 100 affordable homes in the district.'

Business Planning and Service Plan Process - Enforcement Service Plan

In March 2013 the Committee received an overview of the Business Planning and Service Plan process. The process comprised five key elements: The Sustainable Community Strategy; The Business Plan; the Medium Term Financial Strategy; service plans; and Performance Appraisal.

The elements were variously delivered through the Executive, Scrutiny, Joint Management Team, and then Directorate Managements teams, Team Plans and Appraisals. The process was a year-on-year evolving one, and informed from several sources, including

- Previous commitments (e.g. big capital projects);
- Budget constraints;
- Customer feedback;
- New policy/legal requirement;
- Member Priorities;
- Performance improvement;
- Key Local strategies;
- Major projects and programmes.

The Committee agreed that there should be greater Member involvement in the process during the autumn of 2013, when the Committee would first give consideration to each specific service plan, and then identify one for detailed scrutiny.

Consideration was also given to the outcomes from an Enforcement Service Plan Member Briefing held on 17 January. Members agreed that the Planning and Building Control enforcement service should be reviewed in order to gauge the impact of the recent increase in resources.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible Value for Money Council – ‘Ensure the Council’s budget is matched to strategic priorities demonstrating and promoting the Council’s commitment to value for money and effective service delivery.’

Resources & Performance Scrutiny Board

Membership

Councillor Nick Mawer (Ch)
Councillor Alyas Ahmed
Councillor Patrick Cartledge
Councillor Jon O’Neil
Councillor Nigel Randall
Councillor Douglas Williamson

Councillor Douglas Webb (V Ch)
Councillor Maurice Billington
Councillor Margaret Cullip
Councillor Neil Prestidge
Councillor Lawrie Stratford
Councillor Sean Woodcock

Chairman of the Council’s Allowance

At the request of the council, the Board had undertaken a review of a proposal to pay an allowance to the Chairman of the Council. The Democratic and Elections Manager had advised the Board on the current arrangements, and that the proposed allowance would cover the ceremonial elements of the role.

The Board had sought and considered feedback from the previous five Chairmen regarding expenses claimed, out of pocket expenses, and their general comments. Comparison information was also considered from neighbouring authorities regarding what their Chairman’s Allowance covered and what other civic budgets they had.

The Board was of the view that the position of Chairman of the Council was one of honour, and no Member should feel unable to accept the opportunity to serve due to concerns about the potential personal financial costs. However, in order to ensure transparency to the public, a Scheme of Reference should be developed to make it clear what was, and what was not covered. It was also agreed the Independent Remuneration Panel should consider the granting of a Special Responsibility Allowance to the Chairman of the Council, in recognition of the administrative element of the role (i.e. charring meetings).

At the conclusion of the review, the Board recommended to Council that an annual allowance of £2000 be paid to the Chairman of the Council, that a Scheme of Reference for the Chairman’s allowance be adopted, and that the operating period for the Chairman’s budget aligns with the municipal year rather than the financial.

All recommendations were agreed by Council in July 2012

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible Value for Money Council – ‘Demonstrate that we can be trusted to act properly for you by being transparent about our costs and performance’.

Briefing on Street Cleansing Performance

In July 2012 the Board received a briefing on the Council’s street cleansing performance as the Quarter 3 Performance Management Framework information having indicated a reduction in customer satisfaction.

Investigations identified no specific reasons for the drop in customer satisfaction but, to test standards, the Council had entered the ‘Clean Britain’ awards. In addition, measures had been taken to raise the profile of the service and ensure problem areas received quick attention. Neighbourhood blitz events had also been widened to involve more organisations and individuals.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Cleaner Greener Cherwell – ‘Maintain high levels of residents’ satisfaction with street and environmental cleanliness.’

Oxfordshire Waste Partnership

The Board had previously scrutinised the Council’s role in the Oxfordshire Waste Partnership (OWP) in 2010/11, and agreed to retain the issue on the Work Programme to ensure further monitoring of the financial arrangements.

The OWP had been developed to encourage collection authorities to invest in systems that in-turn reduced the level of waste going to landfill. The scheme had proved successful and, as a result, Oxfordshire County Council had made payments to collection authorities in the region of £1m. The County Council had subsequently sought to reduce the level of payments, and negotiations had taken place with all partners to agree a position for the future. The Board noted that, as a result of the negotiations, the Council would receive the same level of payments in 2013/14, but with a phased reduction of 25% over the years 2014/15, 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A cleaner, greener Cherwell – ‘Increase the household recycling rate to above 60%.’ ‘Reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill’

Review of Landscape Maintenance Contract

The Board reviewed the Council’s Landscape Maintenance contract, looking at the history, service level, agency and contract arrangements, officer time allocated to contract management and management methods, contractor performance and financial deductions for poor performance, and the three year contract extension (to 2015) agreed by the Executive in December, 2010.

The Board noted the contract was generally performing well, although there were issues from time-to-time across the district. Consequently, it had been agreed that the contract renewal process (commencing spring 2013) be kept under review. In this respect, in April

2013 the Board received an overview of the contract pre-tender programme, and this was commended.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A cleaner, greener Cherwell – ‘Work to ensure our streets, town centres, open spaces and residential areas are clean, well maintained and safe.’

Business Case to Restructure the Resources Directorate Support Team

In July 2012 the Board considered the business case to restructure the Resources Directorate Support team. The existing structure had been in place since February, 2010 but, with the creation of the Joint Management Team Support Team in September 2012, the wider Resources Directorate Support team required consideration. Three options had been put forward and consulted on, and the proposal producing the greatest benefit was to de-centralise the team and return the individual posts (8) to the local services team within the Resources Directorate; and without the requirement for any redundancies. This proposal welcomed and noted.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An accessible, Value for Money Council – ‘Implement /embed shared back office systems and services to secure efficiencies’

2013/14 Budget scrutiny



The budget scrutiny process began in July 2012, when the Board received a briefing from the Head of Finance and Procurement on the Local Government Resources Review. This provided an overview of the financial context, financial projections, the impact of the LGRR, the budget setting process, and suggested topics for review as part of the 2013/14 budget process.

The Board agreed that the following topics would form the 2013/14 budget scrutiny review:

- Fees and Charges: concessions and bi-annual review.
- Capital Programme
- Environmental Services
- Homelessness and Temporary Accommodation Budgets
- A review of all proposals recommended over the previous 2 years.

Environmental Services: The Board appreciated that Environmental Services delivered many of the front line services most well-known to residents, such as waste collection, street cleansing, public conveniences and landscape management, and these accounted for a significant percentage of overall Council expenditure (The overall revenue budget for Environmental Services was £5.86m). It was noted that several measures had been made to reduce costs, including reviewing waste collection and street cleansing routes and purchasing more efficient vehicles to reduce fuel cost. Capital costs had also been reduced through the introduction of a seven year vehicle replacement programme, whilst keeping repair costs under control. Consideration had been given to introducing a separate food waste collection service in order to receive compost credits from OCC. However, the implementation costs would have exceeded the income from the likely level of compost credits that would be received. Nevertheless, the Board encouraged the

identification of further means of income generation, and suggested commercial waste collection was one such area.

Homelessness Budget: The Board noted that the Council's homelessness budget had remained static over the previous two years and that, whilst not ring-fenced, the Government's homelessness grant to the Council would be maintained at its current level for the next two years. However, it was also noted that the need for homelessness support would increase as a result of the Government's Local Government Resources Review and Welfare Reforms. The Board therefore agreed to maintain a watching brief.

Capital Budget 2013-14 to 2016-17: The Board undertook detailed consideration of the Capital Budget 2013-14 to 2016-17, with particular scrutiny of capital bids for 2013-14. These were subjected to a rigorous scoring system, resulting in twenty schemes being recommended to the Executive for inclusion in the Capital Programme, with a further two schemes also being recommended subject to conditions being applied. Decisions on six schemes were initially deferred for additional information, with five of these subsequently being recommended to the Executive for inclusion. Subject to some amendments to the proposals, the Executive had accepted all of the Board's recommendations.

Review of proposals recommended over the last 2 years: The Board noted that 15 of the 18 recommendations made in respect of the 2011/12 and 2012/13 budgets had been completed. A further two schemes had been partially completed, and one scheme deferred to 2013/14. It had been agreed that similar feedback be submitted in the future, as it demonstrated the impact of the scrutiny process.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An accessible, Value for Money Council – 'Provide value for money and a financially sound organization, minimising the impact of smaller council budgets on frontline and priority services.'

Concessions Policy

As part of a previous budget scrutiny process, the Board had identified that there was a need for a consistent approach to concessions across the authority. Accordingly, as part of the 2013/14 budget scrutiny process, nominated Board members met with Finance Officers and reviewed the concessions currently offered by the Council and third parties. The review identified some discrepancies in approach, and it was consequently agreed that, together with an equality impact assessment, a policy should be developed based on overarching principles taking into consideration the services provided by the Council, services externally delivered, and the groups currently in receipt of concessions.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Safe, Healthy and Thriving Community – 'Work with partners to support the development of safe and thriving local communities and neighbourhoods.' 'Support the local community, voluntary and not for profit sectors to play an active role in the district.' 'Provide good quality recreation and leisure opportunities in the district.'

Oxfordshire Rural Community Council

Having undertaken a review of the Council's partnership with Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) in 2009/10, the Board reviewed progress against the

recommendations made at that time. It was noted that a new Service Level Agreement was to be agreed for 2013/14, and that ORCC continued to have a community transport role, partnering Banbury CAB in the development and delivery of Cherwell's volunteer driver scheme and hosting the Oxfordshire Community Transport Advisory Group.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Safe, Healthy and Thriving Community – 'Work with partners to support the development of safe and thriving local communities and neighbourhoods.' 'Support the local community, voluntary and not for profit sectors to play an active role in the district.'

Electronic Document and Records Management

The Board reviewed the business case for the Electronic and Records Management (EDRM) project, which would enable the secure sharing of electronic information across Cherwell District Council, South Northamptonshire Council and external third parties. Subject to the development of a document outlining success criteria, the Board supported the proposal to undertake a pilot exercise, together with the establishment of a joint EDRM project group which would subsequently report back on the results and analysis from the pilot.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible, Value for Money Council – 'Implement/embed shared back office systems and services to secure efficiencies.' 'Implement a shared ICT service.'

Trade Waste Recycling

In April, 2013 the Board considered a proposal to launch a Trade Recycling scheme in late May centred on Bicester and aimed at small and medium sized enterprises (SME's). The Board supported the proposal, together with the rationale for the development of fees and charges, which would encourage businesses to recycle.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: A Cleaner Greener Cherwell – 'Provide excellent waste collection and recycling services, working to reduce the amount of waste produced and to increase recycling across the district.'

Performance Management Framework

Periodically throughout the year, the Board reviewed the Council's performance as measured through the Performance Management Framework. The Council's generally excellent performance was readily acknowledged and praised. Where some issues were identified, further information and assurance had been sought.

Contribution to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible, Value for Money Council – 'Demonstrate that we can be trusted to act properly for you by being transparent about our costs and performance.'

Call-in

The right to Call-in a decision of the Executive was not used during the municipal year 2012/13.

Training and Development

There were no specific scrutiny related training events for members in 2012/13, however a number of other Member development events supported the role of councillors on the scrutiny committees.

Statistics

Statistic	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of scrutiny committee meetings	20	20	17	17	16	17
% attendance at scrutiny committee meetings	78%	82%	76%	71%	72%	74%
Total Number of completed reviews	6	6	5	9 + Joint case = 10	6 + 1 Joint	5
Number of committee reviews undertaken	1	4	6		2	5
Number of Task & Finish Groups established	2	2	1	1	1	0
Number of Call-ins	1	0	0	1	0	0
% scrutiny recommendations accepted by Executive or other body	90%	97%	100%	100%	100%	100%