



Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2013/14

June 2014

Foreword

This annual report for overview and scrutiny at Cherwell District Council outlines the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in 2013/14.

The Committee has continued to build on the work that has been done over the last few years and has 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.

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

I very much 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
2013/14**

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Membership

Councillor Ann Bonner (Ch)	Councillor Dan Sames (Vice Ch)
Councillor Alyas Ahmed	Councillor Melanie Magee
Councillor Alastair Milne Home	Councillor Jon O'Neill
Councillor Lynn Pratt	Councillor Nigel Randall
Councillor Lawrie Stratford	Councillor Rose Stratford
Councillor Douglas Williamson	Councillor Sean Woodcock

Substitutes

Councillor Nick Mawer
Councillor Gordon Ross

Guests in attendance

Lead members:

Councillor Ken Atack – Lead Member for Financial Management
Councillor John Donaldson – Lead Member for Banbury Brighter Futures
Councillor Michael Gibbard – Lead Member for Planning
Councillor Tony Ilott – Lead Member for Public Protection
Councillor Debbie Pickford – Lead Member for Housing
Councillor Nicholas Turner – Lead Member for Performance and Customers
Councillor Barry Wood – Leader of the Council

Councillors:

Councillor James Macnamara

Officers:

Ian Davies – Director of Community and Environment
Bob Duxbury – Development Control Team Leader
Ryszard Filipiak – Service Assurance Team Leader
Jackie Fitzsimons – Interim Public Protection and Environmental Health Manager
Sean Gregory – Environmental Protection Officer
Mark Harmon – Environmental Protection Manager
Kevin Larner – Rural Development and Countryside Officer
Tim Madden – Interim Head of Finance and Procurement
Tim Mills – Private Sector Housing Manager
Marianne North – Housing Needs Manager
Andy Preston – Head of Development Management
Claire Taylor – Corporate Performance Manager
Louise Tustian – Senior Performance and Improvement Officer
Shirley Vaughan – Performance and Planning Officer
Hedd Vaughan Evans – Research and Intelligence Officer

External Officers:

Shirley McAneny – Transport Coordinator (Community Transport and Concessionary Fares) – Oxfordshire County Council.
 Barbara Shaw – Chief Executive, Banbury CAB.

Corporate Priorities - Links to Scrutiny Topics 2013/14	
An Accessible, Value for Money Council	Performance Monitoring. Business Planning & Service Plan Process 2014/15. Concessions Policy. Welfare Reform Update. Customer Insights Reporting. Joint Visit to Westminster with South Northamptonshire Council's Scrutiny Committee. Cherwell District Council Five Year Business Strategy. Housing Service Plan.
A Cleaner Greener District.	Air Quality in the District.
A District of Opportunity	Banbury Brighter Futures. Community Transport and Dial-a-Ride. Wind Turbines. Commissioning of Services to Banbury Citizens Advice Bureau. Planning Enforcement Service Plan.

Link to Corporate Priorities: An Accessible, Value for Money Council.

Performance Monitoring

Periodically throughout the year, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee reviewed the Council's performance as measured through the Performance Management Framework. Annual Performance was reviewed in May, 2013, with Quarter 1, 2 and 3 reports being considered in September and November 2013, and March 2014 respectively. The Council's generally excellent performance was readily acknowledged and praised. Where issues or areas of concern had been identified, further information and assurance had been sought, with appropriate Lead Members and key Officers attending to provide information and explanation.

Business Planning & Service Plan Process 2014/15

In August 2013 the Committee reviewed the Business Planning and Service Plan process, noting that the key elements would be the new Medium Term Financial Strategy, the outcomes from the Customer Satisfaction and Budget consultation processes, the impacts from the census, and any other known impacts on services. A draft of both the Business Plan and Service Plan was submitted to the November meeting, with development of the Service Plan overlapping with the Business Plan process, with both being completed in January 2014.

It was identified that an important aspect would be reviewing how the delivery of a service plan progressed during the year and, in this respect, it was agreed that the Head of Development Management be invited to the November meeting to advise the current position (see below).

Concessions Policy

During August the Committee considered a scoping document prepared by Committee member Councillor Randall, proposing a Scrutiny Review to ascertain the value or otherwise of the Council adopting a formal concessions policy. The Committee had agreed that a Scrutiny Review be undertaken by way of an informal working group comprising Committee members Councillors Jon O'Neill, Nigel Randall and Lawrie Stratford. The informal working group subsequently prepared a draft policy, and this was supported by the Committee for recommendation to the Budget Planning Committee for consideration.

Welfare Reform Update

In September the Committee considered the progress being made with respect to the introduction of national changes in the welfare system. Areas of particular scrutiny included the number of mutual exchanges that had taken place since the introduction of the Spare Bedroom Subsidy rule; the number of appeals made under the Council Tax Reduction Scheme; the localisation of the Social Fund; the introduction of the Benefit Cap, and the spend on the Discretionary Housing Payments budget. The Committee had commended the work of the Local Government Resources Review Project team in respect of both the anticipation of the changes, and also as these were rolled out. Future monitoring of the Welfare Reforms would take place through the Performance Management process, with appropriate Officers being required to report to the Committee where an indicator showed red.

Customer Insights Reporting

During September and December the Committee reviewed Customer Insight Reports for Quarters 1 and 2, noting overall satisfaction rates; satisfaction regarding particular services; complaints; media enquiries, social media, and website interaction.

The Committee noted that a new, two stage complaints process had now been introduced and welcomed the fact that, from 1 January 2014, the complaints process was to be moved within the Performance and Insight team in order to centralise responsibility for complaints management. Relatively low satisfaction levels were noted in respect of the Council's website, but the Committee had been informed that this area had already been identified for improvement, as the website was particularly important if future plans to 'channel shift' customers to web transactions (from face-to-face or telephone contact)

were to be successful. The Committee also welcomed the intention to update and improve the on-line complaints form and the provision of additional information which would enable complainants to raise their issues with the appropriate authority/organisation where this was not the Council.

Joint Visit to Westminster with South Northamptonshire Council's Scrutiny Committee

In November the Committee undertook a joint visit with South Northamptonshire Council's Scrutiny Committee to Westminster. Arranged through the Parliamentary Outreach Service, Members received an overview of the Select Committee process from Mr Glenn McKee, Committee Secretary to the Communities and Local Government Committee. Members also attended a number of Select Committees that were in session, and valuable insight was gained into the process.

Cherwell District Council Five Year Business Strategy

At its meetings in November and December the Committee reviewed the Council's draft five year Business Strategy and emerging priorities for the annual business plan.

The Committee supported the draft strategic priorities, but concerns were raised regarding a potential decline in the Council's recycling rates, and an assurance was obtained that the appropriate key objective would be amended to ensure monitoring took place. The Committee also raised concerns that future cuts by central Government and the County Council would impact on key objectives c4, ("Work to promote and support health and wellbeing across the district"), c5, ("Provide high quality and accessible leisure opportunities") and c6, ("Provide support to the voluntary and community sector"). It was therefore agreed that consideration be given to not only the Council's involvement, but what measures the Council could take, and whether business and other third parties could provide support. The Committee agreed that the Executive be asked to consider additional or amended objectives in respect of b4 ('Reduce our carbon footprint and protect the natural environment'); c2 ('Work with Partners to support financial inclusion and help local people into paid employment'), and c6 ('Provide support to the voluntary and community sector'). The Committee was also of the view that some reference should be included regarding promoting tourism within the district.

The Committee also identified that the critical documents for review by Members were the individual service plans and that, accordingly, in future these should be made available for Member consideration at the earliest opportunity.

Housing Service Plan

As part of a thorough review of the Housing Service Plan, the Committee held an informal meeting during February, 2014, with all Members of the Council invited to attend. A report was then submitted to the scheduled meeting the following week, identifying key challenges and achievements. The Committee commended the work of Housing Services, and commented in particular on the excellent level of the cooperation coordination between the teams within the section, and the admirable progress to date in preventing homelessness, delivering and enabling housing development, improving housing standards and commissioning housing related services. The Committee also supported the establishment of a Credit Union and appointment of a Credit Union Development Officer (shared post with South Northamptonshire Council) on a three year contract, and

supported the principle of undertaking annual inspections of licensed Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO's).

Link to Corporate Priorities: A Cleaner Greener District.

Air Quality in the District

Following on from earlier consideration during 2012/13, the Committee further reviewed the subject of Air Quality across the District in May 2013 and January 2014. Whilst acknowledging the excellent monitoring work done by the Councils staff, the Committee was very concerned that there was little action the Council could take to secure improvements where monitoring showed these were required. Improvement measures were the responsibility of a number of other organisations, and there was an apparent absence of penalty action should recommended remedial actions fail to be progressed. The Committee had agreed to retain the matter on its Work Programme for 2014/15, and had suggested the topic be discussed by the Oxfordshire County Council's Cherwell Localities Committees.

Link to Corporate Priorities: A District of Opportunity

Banbury Brighter Futures

In July 2013 the Committee received a report and presentation on the performance of the Brighter Futures in Banbury Programme 2012/13, and advising priorities for 2013/14.

The Committee had noted the positive progress made to date and that, with all partners fully engaged, the direction of travel on all themes was good. The only area where progress had not been as great as it might have been in respect of education, and this was mainly due to changes in personnel. It was acknowledged, however, that efforts were underway to increase the pace of improvement and have educational achievement at or above the average for the County as a whole.

An area where the Committee had previously raised concerns related to recycling rates. In this respect it was acknowledged that a lot of work had been undertaken in the area, with blitz teams and also through education. With a high number of flats and Houses in Multiple Occupation, there were particular challenges, and although the area was kept tidy, more work was needed to increase recycling rates.

Although the Committee acknowledged that the areas of greatest need in the district remained the Wards covered by the BBF Programme, and resources should remain focused on these, it was also acknowledged that experience gained and good practice was being rolled-out across the District, particularly through Connecting Communities Events.

Through partners such as Sanctuary Housing, careful monitoring was taking place to ascertain the impact of changes to the Benefits rules, and whether the types of housing accommodation being provided was appropriate. It was acknowledged, however, that decisions were taken only when clear evidence was available to ensure the right type of accommodation was provided for local needs. Notwithstanding this, the target for the provision of affordable housing had been exceeded, and the transfer of land from

Oxfordshire County Council would enable further provision, and there were a higher number of development sites within the Banbury Brighter Futures programme area than anywhere else in the District.

The Committee had concluded that excellent progress had been made during the first three years of the programme, albeit it was important that there be no loss of momentum. It was acknowledged that all partner organisations remained fully engaged, whilst efforts should be made to identify and engage with new partners (e.g. School Head Teachers and Governors). The knowledge and experience gained and good practice identified through the BBF programme should, wherever possible, be utilised elsewhere across the District, and a focus on housing was to be encouraged. The provision of a Credit Union, which would become operational in 2014, was also welcomed.

Community Transport and Dial-a-Ride

At its meeting in August the Committee was addressed the Council's Countryside and Communities Manager and Oxfordshire County Council's Transport Coordinator (Community Transport and Concessionary Fares) who advised on the operation of the 'Dial-a-Ride' service, the development of Community transport, and the operation of the Oxfordshire Community Transport Advisory Group.

The Committee noted that the Dial-a-Ride service was well used across the district, and that the top-up provided by the Council for the years 2012/13 and 2013/14 was helping to maintain the service at the level required by users. However, it was also noted that the County Council would be reviewing the future of the service as part of its overall budget setting process, and concern was expressed that any future additional contribution by the district council could only be considered if it was known the service as a whole was to continue. The item was therefore retained on the Work Programme, and the Countryside and Communities Manager and the Transport Coordinator (Oxfordshire County Council) invited to attend a future meeting to advise on the future of the scheme.

Wind Turbines

At its August meeting the Committee considered a scoping document prepared by Committee member Councillor O'Neill, proposing a Scrutiny Review into the possible introduction of an updated policy regarding the future development of wind farms in the district. The Committee acknowledged the value of having a revised policy that would stand up to the planning appeals process and thereby help protect communities throughout the district. It was therefore agreed that a Scrutiny Review, to be undertaken by Committee members Councillors Ann Bonner and Jon O'Neill supported by other Members and officers as appropriate, review the Council's current policy in respect of wind turbine developments with a view to developing and subsequently introducing an updated policy. The Review was currently on hold pending the outcome of a Planning Appeal Hearing.

Commissioning of Services to Banbury Citizens Advice Bureau

During December the Committee received a presentation advising on the services provided by the Banbury Citizens Advice Bureau and, in particular, the operation of the contract with the Council. The debt and money advice services included the mortgage rescue scheme, and the scheme within Cherwell was recognised as the most successful in the region. Debt management plans had been arranged for 1407 families and benefits advice given to clients had resulted in additional income of £3.8m being secured.

Additionally, advice to people made redundant and people with disabilities had secured benefit payments which, in-turn, had prevented instances of homelessness.

Support from the Council had helped the CAB facilitate 201 people into volunteering, and the volunteer driver service had already delivered 1191 journeys and was therefore likely to hit its annual target of 2000 journeys (it being already apparent that, with the reduction in ambulance services, demand for the volunteer driver service was increasing).

Monitoring by the Council of the various elements of the contract was undertaken by the Housing Needs Manager and the Countryside and Communities Manager and, rather than simply specifying footfall and client numbers, this related to outcomes, thus ensuring the issue of service quality was monitored, as well as service volume. It was acknowledged, however, that pressure on the service was increasing and it was currently running a budget deficit. The Committee therefore agreed that the item be retained on the Work Programme, and that further reports be submitted to future meetings.

Planning Enforcement Service Plan

At its meeting in December the Committee received an update on the impact on the Planning Enforcement service of the allocation of additional staff resources. The Committee noted the fluctuating number of complaints, and welcomed the intention to adopt a more proactive rather than reactive approach, and it was acknowledged that it was the allocation of additional resources that had improved performance to the point where this could be considered. The Committee also agreed that, whilst the service was discretionary, it was unquestionably essential to ensuring the credibility and effectiveness of the whole planning process. It was equally acknowledged that the discretionary element allowed the Council to decide against action where this was considered inappropriate, and this helped ensure the Council was seen to act in a fair and reasonable manner, and also make the best use of its resources.