



Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE

Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2024/25

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Foreword

This year has been significant for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as it has for the Council as a whole, with some particularly important issues coming before the Committee for review. There have been reviews of some high impact strategic policies and decisions for the Council, which have included the Proposed Cherwell Local Plan to 2042, the new Cherwell District Council Housing Strategy, the Council's new Transformation Programme and oversight of the Council's disposal of its offices at Bodicote House and its move to its new Council Offices at Castle Quay.

Through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee elected councillors have been able to provide assurance and accountability through questioning the Executive portfolio holders and senior officers on these and other important issues and also been able to make some contribution to the direction of policy through our recommendations to the Council's Executive.

We have also been able to provide oversight and scrutiny of some wider community issues and partnerships, including the review of Cherwell's Community Safety Partnership, with oral evidence from the Thames Valley Police, as well as the Chairman of the Partnership and the council's own Community Safety officers.

The work of the Committee has also often been timed to enable pre-decision scrutiny, so that the observations and recommendations from the committee can be made in advance of final decisions being made by the Executive, which makes sure that our work is well timed to be taken into consideration and make an impact.

In addition to the work of the main committee we have carried out in depth scrutiny inquiries through Scrutiny Working Groups, including a review of the Council's Climate Action strategy and the Council's Equality Diversity and Inclusion strategies. This has enabled us to draw on the wider involvement of the Council's members, through appointment to the Scrutiny Working Groups and to allow some additional time to consider these issues with the Executive portfolio holder and officers, as well as hearing from external expert witnesses from organisations outside of the Council, drawing on different perspectives.

These have included, notably, hearing evidence from Dr Marco Rauei from Oxford Brooks University and from David Cruchley from Oxfordshire Youth, who have kindly made time to share their knowledge and expertise as part of our scrutiny inquiries.

The Scrutiny Working Groups have also provided several scrutiny reports, that is, reports from the Committee setting out our agreed findings and recommendations from our in depth scrutiny inquiries carried out this year. This helps us to communicate more widely both internally and with the wider

community and provides a submission to the Council Executive and officers to consider.

There have also been opportunities for scrutiny members to review policies from other councils, as part of reflective review, such as reviewing equality and diversity strategies used by other councils in the development and refresh of our own.

Scrutiny Members have also been able to go outside of the formal committee setting with site visits to community settings such as the Banbury Larder, to see first hand the difference Council and community collaborative work is making on the ground and to meet and hear directly from the people involved.

All of these different approaches have contributed to inclusive decision making, providing a vehicle for elected councillors as community leaders to contribute, to include perspectives from external stakeholders and to provide greater assurance and accountability.

I have had the pleasure of chairing and leading the scrutiny committee over the past year, with I feel, some notable successes in proving effective accountability and valid contributions to the development of Council policy, for example, through the consideration of the proposed new Local Plan for public consultation. The work of the Committee is, however, a collective endeavour, with members of the committee working together constructively and to provide a "critical friend" to the Executive.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the committee for their collective efforts in helping to make this year a success for Scrutiny, in particular my Vice Chair, Councillor Nigel Simpson for his collaborative support, as well as to thank the Members of the Executive and officers of the Council who have appeared before the committee to present reports and answer questions from the Committee. I'd also like to thank the external witnesses who attended meetings and contributed, including the Thames Valley Police.

We've been able to play our part and contribution to Cherwell Council's governance and democratic arrangements and this Annual Scrutiny Report should provide a flavour of the work we have accomplished this year. I hope that this work can also provide a platform for the continued development and effectiveness of the scrutiny function in 2025-2026.

Councillor Isabel Creed
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
2024 - 2025

1. Overview and Scrutiny at Cherwell District Council

- 1.1. Cherwell District Council established one Overview and Scrutiny Committee to undertake the statutory scrutiny function. This committee meets throughout the year to consider a range of issues across the Council departments and services to provide accountability and contribute to policy and service review.
- 1.2. Overview and Scrutiny Committees are led by elected Members of local authority councils and provide a check and balance to Council decision making and a vehicle for Members of the Council who are not part of the Council's Executive to contribute to the decision making process.
- 1.3. The Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were:
 - Councillor Dr Isabel Creed (Chairman)
 - Councillor Nigel Simpson (Vice Chairman)
 - Councillor Gordon Blakeway
 - Councillor John Broad
 - Councillor Phil Chapman
 - Councillor Grace Conway Murray
 - Councillor Andrew Crichton
 - Councillor Frank Ideh
 - Councillor Harry Knight
 - Councillor Simon Lytton
 - Councillor Lynne Parsons
 - Councillor Barry Wood.



The Overview and Scrutiny Committee – in session.

- 1.4. The Committee meets six times a year (in addition to any special meetings) to consider issues across the range of council policy and service areas, which it selects and sets out in its Annual Scrutiny Work Programme. In addition to considering issues at its main committee meetings, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may establish Scrutiny Working Groups to consider matters in more depth and more informally outside of the main committee and report back.
- 1.5. After considering any issue, the Committee may make reports and recommendations to the Council's Executive, which is required to respond, setting out any actions it will take.
- 1.6. Overview and Scrutiny is a key part of the Council's overall governance arrangements and central to the Council's democratic decision making. Through its scrutiny inquiries, the Committee also helps to drive improvement and development of Council services, as well as providing greater public accountability and transparency to decision making. It can help test out if policies, proposals and services are effective and provide best value.
- 1.7. In carrying out its scrutiny inquiries, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its Scrutiny Working Groups can require Members of the Executive and senior officers to answer questions in committee, consider commissioned reports from Council departments and hear evidence from external organisations and people, including expert witnesses. This can help to add value to the decision making process by drawing on the knowledge of people and organisations both inside and outside of the Council and considering different perspectives.
- 1.8. Throughout the year this has included pre-decision scrutiny, where the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers an issue before the Executive makes a decision, which provides an opportunity for the Committee to contribute before the final decision is made.
- 1.9. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also has the power to "call in" a decision of the Executive for review before the decision is implemented. Any five members of the Council can also trigger referral of an Executive decision for review by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Although this provision is used by exception, this provides an additional democratic check where Members may wish for an Executive decision to be more widely considered. There were no call in requests in 2024-2025.
- 1.10. More information on the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and links to all of its meetings and published papers can be accessed online at: <https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=116#:~:text=The%20Overview%20and%20Scrutiny%20Committee%20is%20attended%20by%20review%20and%20monitor%20the%20effectiveness%20of%20Council%20services>.

2. Scrutiny Inquiries in 2024 - 2025

- 2.1. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee met throughout 2024-2025 to review Council policies and services across the range of Council departments. These included reviewing the performance and outcomes of Council services to provide accountability, as well as contributing to Council policy and service development.



*Councillor Isabel Creed –
Chairman of the Overview and
Scrutiny Committee 2024-2025*

- 2.2. The following short scrutiny inquiries were undertaken in 2024 - 2025:
- Proposed Cherwell Local Plan to 2042.
 - New Cherwell District Council Housing Strategy 2025-2030.
 - Housing Allocations Scheme Review.
 - Everybody's Wellbeing Strategy Impact Assessment.
 - Cherwell Safer Communities Partnership.
 - Cost of Living 2023/2024 Review and Activities for 2024/2025.
 - The Council's Annual Safeguarding Report.
 - Resettlement and Migration
 - The Council's new Transformation Programme
 - Review of the Sale of Bodicote House
 - New Council Offices at Castle Quay
 - The council's end of year performance position for the financial year 2023-2024.
 - Council performance throughout 2024-2025 – quarterly performance reviews.
 - Annual Delivery Plan and Performance Outcomes Framework for 2025-2026.
- 2.3. The Committee also undertook in-depth scrutiny inquiries on *Equalities and Diversity, Food Insecurity, Climate Action* and *Planning Application Appeals*. These scrutiny inquiries were undertaken through Scrutiny Working Groups established by the Committee to carry out scrutiny inquiries on particular matters and report back. The Scrutiny Working Groups in 2024-2025 are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Housing Allocations Scheme

- 2.4. On 10th September 2024 the Committee considered the New Cherwell District Council Allocations Scheme, reviewing proposed changes to the scheme, which was out for public consultation.
- 2.5. The main changes proposed in the new Scheme were:
- An increase in the banding for statutory homeless households.

- The creation of a domestic abuse category within Band 2 to comply with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.
- Income threshold being capped at £80,000 for applications on larger properties.
- Changes to how overcrowded households are managed through the waiting lists.
- Additional preference for people leaving the armed forces and their families – consistent with the armed forces covenant within legislation.

- 2.6. The Committee recommended that the New Cherwell District Council Allocations Scheme be adopted by the Executive and that the Executive receive a summary of the public consultation for consideration alongside the Scheme being recommended for adoption.

Cost of Living

- 2.7. In September the Committee also considered the Cost of Living 2023/2024 Review and 2024/2025 related activities. The Committee reviewed the impact the councils' interventions has had on residents of the district and funding through HSF6 agreements with Oxfordshire County Council. The Committee recommended that the Executive endorse the scheme.

Performance

- 2.8. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee maintained oversight of Council performance throughout the year, considering quarterly performance reports against the Council's Key Performance Indicators across all Council service areas and with questions to the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services and Council officers. It also considered the annual performance of the Council for all of the 2023-2024 year.



Councillor Chris Brant - Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services, answering questions from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Performance for 2023 – 2024.

- 2.9. On 18th July 2024 the Committee considered a report from the Assistant Director – Customer Focus that detailed the council's performance position at the end of the financial year 2023-2024.
- 2.10. The Committee found that 26 of the 27 Business Plan measures had been achieved. The one measure not achieved was "Net Additional Housing Completions to meet Cherwell Needs" with a final figure of 792 completions, which was 70% of the set target. This measure had been heavily affected by the national context, circumstances such as inflation, high building costs, and

high interest rates which resulted in lower than expected number of completions.

- 2.11. The Committee considered how the Council's measured targets were set and if targets could be more challenging. Council officers advised that the Council use national targets and benchmark from previous years and took into consideration local context to set ambitious targets.
- 2.12. The Committee found that the number of housing completions target was missed by 30%, and that housing delivery had been good in respect of the requirements of the Cherwell Local Plan 2015 with an average of 1281 homes built a year.
- 2.13. In 2023-2024, the number fell to 792 homes built however this was consistent with national figures linked to issues with house building across the country. The Committee found that 6000 homes had been granted planning permission within the district but had not yet been built.

Quarter 1 Performance

- 2.14. On 10th September 2024 the Committee reviewed the council's performance position at the end of Quarter 1 2024-2025.
- 2.15. The Committee found that 50 of the 57 Business Plan measures had been achieved, 6 were operating slightly behind target and 1 being behind target. The one measure that was operating behind target related to temporary accommodation where 68 households were reported in temporary accommodation against the maximum target of 45.
- 2.16. With regards affordable housing, the Committee found that the overall housing target and qualifying target for affordable housing would be reviewed as part of the Local Plan process and would have regard to the Council motion to target 50%. It was important to balance the target with what was viable to ensure housing delivery occurred.
- 2.17. In response to a question regarding the percentage of Major Applications overturned at appeal and the cost to the council, the Assistant Director Planning and Development advised that the national target of 10% was the indicator whilst the actual for quarter 1 was 18.8%. The council was also measured nationally over a two-year period and this figure was 11.2%. The Committee found that the number of appeals this year had been higher than previous years resulting in more appeals being allowed. The cost of appeals varied greatly and were subject to various factors.

- 2.18. In response to a request that the red and amber indicators on the EDI Action Plan action plan be considered at the first meeting of the EDI working group, Committee endorsed the request.

Quarter 2 Performance

- 2.19. On 26th November 2024 the Committee reviewed the council's performance position at the end of Quarter 2. The Committee found that of the 17 business plan measures with set targets, 14 were either achieved or within the agreed tolerance, one was slightly behind target, and two behind target. The two measures that were operating behind target related temporary accommodation, where 77 households were reported in temporary accommodation against the maximum target of 45. It also found that the net additional housing completions to meet Cherwell needs where 307 housing completions (provisional) were reported against a target of at least 571 for the first half of the year.
- 2.20. In response to a question asking for more detailed figures in the rise of people in temporary accommodation and the support provided to single people with complex needs facing evictions from home office accommodation the Committee found that residents who have not intentionally made themselves homeless are eligible to apply for emergency temporary accommodation and that the process was designed to aid those with complex needs.
- 2.21. In relation to a question on unmet housing needs, noting the position of 307 provisional housing completions against the target of at least 571 for the first half of 2024. The Committee found that the Council's position reflects national trends in unmet housing needs. The Committee noted this as a concern, due to many complex site specific challenges related to infrastructure and the housing needs of neighbouring authorities.

Quarter 3 Performance

- 2.22. On 28 January 2025 the Committee reviewed Performance for Quarter 3. The Committee found that out of the 55 measures, 44 were on track, 8 measures were slightly behind target and 3 measures were behind target. Of the 16 business plan measures 12 were not met, or achieved within the agreed tolerance, 2 were slightly behind and 2 were behind target. The two behind target were:
- Number of homeless households in temporary accommodation, with 77 households in temporary accommodation against the target of 45 and reflects national statistics.
 - Number of affordable homes delivered, with 38 affordable homes delivered against the target of 50 for Quarter 3. This was reflected against the annual target, which was reported ahead, with 192 homes delivered against the target of 150.

- 2.23. Of the 15 annual delivery plan milestones, the Committee found that 12 were achieved and 3 were slightly behind schedule. All priorities except one were on track for delivery by year end. Of the 24 EDI action plan activities, 3 were slightly delayed.
- 2.24. The Committee found that the number of households in Temporary Accommodation was the same as the previous quarter and queried if this meant that as one household moved into permanent accommodation another household took their place and sought clarity on how much temporary accommodation the council had.
- 2.25. The Committee considered the cost of temporary accommodation to the council and impact on the overall Council budget, and the Committee found that that spend for the last financial year was £634,000. The Council had thus far been able to operate within existing budgets in delivering that temporary accommodation. There was a base budget provided for that provision but there were also government grants that the Council received annually that had been unspent in previous years creating financial reserves.
- 2.26. The Committee recommended that the Executive consider writing to social housing providers in the district to enquire how the providers are spending government grants to improve their stock in relation to the energy efficiency of housing in Cherwell with particular reference to the eradication of damp and mould.

Housing Strategy 2025 – 2030

- 2.27. On 15th October 2024 the Committee reviewed the New [Cherwell District Council Housing Strategy 2025-2030](#) ahead of submission to Executive for adoption. A review of the current strategy and development of a new strategy was required to reflect changing national and local context over recent years and develop new priorities and objectives to be delivered. The Executive had agreed a public and stakeholder consultation commence on the draft revised Strategy at their 9 September 2024 meeting.
- 2.28. The Committee considered the consultation process, National Policy Framework (NPPF) and local policy context, as well as the scope of the policy, the existing housing stock, types of development and the social and physical infrastructure and resulting environmental impact.
- 2.29. The Committee found that the new Housing Strategy had been formulated in conjunction with the NPPF and the emerging Local Plan, but the full impact was unknown as consultation was ongoing.

- 2.30. The Committee found that according to the latest council tax data, approximately 1700 properties within Cherwell were vacant and that there were enforcement policies within the Housing Strategy to help tackle vacant properties. Stipulations on types of new developments were included in the emerging Cherwell Local Plan as well as the Oxfordshire Homelessness and Rough Sleeper policy and that schemes to aid in affordability were available for first time buyers.
- 2.31. The Committee considered what targets, metrics and measures of success were in place to monitor and deliver the Housing Strategy and found that the measures for tracking progress were outlined within the strategy, that an action plan would be used to monitor the strategy alongside regular update reports to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 2.32. The Committee recommended that the development of the new Local Plan be aligned with the new Housing Strategy, once adopted and that a section be included in the Housing Strategy Action Plan to provide further details and emphasis on single people in insecure accommodation (e.g. “sofa surfing”) and that a summary of consultation responses received as part of the report to Executive and Executive be recommended to give those responses due consideration.

Proposed Cherwell Local Plan

- 2.33. On 12th November 2024 and 4th December 2024 the Committee reviewed the proposed Cherwell Local Plan to 2042. The Committee considered the timelines, key changes since 2023 and the key themes and policy areas, including housing need, requirement and supply and stipulations of affordable housing within proposed developments. The Committee also considered submissions of correspondence received and replies to prospective developers as evidence.



Councillor John Broad – in committee

- 2.34. The Committee considered key strategic themes: strategic options and considerations, timetable and governance, housing and economic needs assessments, climate change and sustainable development, infrastructure, and consultation and engagement.
- 2.35. In response to a question in relation to stipulations for the installation and retrofitting of solar energy panels on both domestic and industrial units with the goal of reducing energy costs, the Committee found that the sustainable construction standards proposed for net zero emissions in the plan should ensure that the resulting developments would be more energy efficient but

that the plan cannot *require* the use of Solar PV on developments. Through the standards proposed, however, the overarching goal of net zero emissions would be achieved through multiple technologies and innovations which may well include solar energy and if achieved would then result in lower energy costs involved in heating said developments.

- 2.36. The Committee considered the Sustainability Assessment and the designation of land for employment and industrial uses and found that the plan contained flexibility to allow various forms of employment and development to take place within designated sites.
- 2.37. The Committee considered the allocation and removal of green belt land adjacent to the Oxford Technology Park to allow for expansion of the site and requested a further review of land allocated. The Committee found that since the Local Plan 2015 the land in question had been allocated and subsequently built on and therefore had no need to remove it from the green belt. In preparation for the proposed Local Plan a full review of green belt land had been undertaken.
- 2.38. The Committee made the following observations:
- That if the Local Plan submission is rejected by the Planning Inspectorate this could present a serious risk to the Council's local planning process.
 - The importance of evidence of engagement with neighbouring local authorities, (including Oxford City Council). It noted that planning officers had agreed to meet with Chesterton Parish Council on employment proposals along the A41 corridor.
 - The importance of the robustness of the Local Housing Needs Assessment, particularly in regard to unmet housing needs of neighbouring local authorities.
- 2.39. The Committee also noted that lessons learnt from the process followed pre-consultation scrutiny of the proposed Draft Local Plan including that there should be a longer lead in time for pre-consultation scrutiny.

Cherwell Local Plan 2042

A vision for sustainable development

Consultation runs until 14 February 2025



- 2.40. The Committee recommended to the Executive that the Draft Local Plan include a reference to Health in Rural Areas (provision of health facilities partially in rural areas). The Committee also recommended to the Executive to agree that the land adjacent to Isis Avenue, Hambleside, Eden Way and bordering Middleton Stoney Road be designated a part of the Local Green Space Designation in Bicester West.
- 2.41. In addition, the Committee recommended that the Proposed Cherwell Local Plan 2042 be approved for the purpose of inviting representations under Regulations 19 and 20 of The Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) Regulations.

Safeguarding Self-assessment 2024

- 2.42. In December 2024 the Committee also considered Safeguarding and the annual return Report on Safeguarding (Safeguarding Self-assessment 2024)
- 2.43. The Committee noted the work carried out year to date, highlighting key challenges and successes achieved as well as statistics on the internal "See it Report it" (SIRI) and the reporting of safeguarding concerns.

Resettlement and Migration

- 2.44. On 28th January 2025 the Committee considered Resettlement and Migration, including resettlement and migration schemes in Cherwell to assist asylum seekers and refugees. The Committee considered the definition of "legal" vs "illegal" migration routes, the financial, resource and social impacts of the scheme to the Council and wider community, as well as the impact on housing supply and the volume of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests issued.
- 2.45. The Committee considered the resource burden arising from Freedom of Information requests and whether there was a resource limit placed on dealing with this and found that there was a resource pressure from this on the department. There is a statutory limit on the number of hours a response takes before the council can place a charge for Freedom of Information Requests, but it was very rare to receive individual requests that exceeded this limit.
- 2.46. The Committee considered to what extent the schemes are compulsory and to what extent there was local choice and found that the Homes for Ukraine programme was based on sponsors and hosts within the district, so the Council had no control over the numbers of those people wishing to live in Cherwell. It was very much a local offer to a group of people who needed housing.

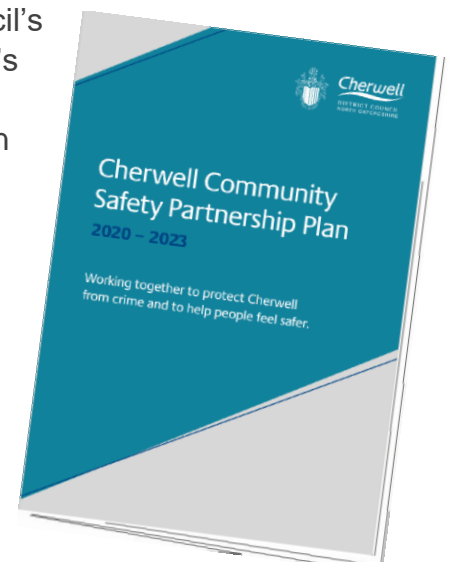
- 2.47. The Committee found that the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS) was an initial agreement to settle 18 families predominantly from Syria. This programme had significantly reduced over time. The Afghan families' schemes placed all people in properties that were formally Ministry of Défense (MOD) (so not social housing or private housing). Whilst the Council could refuse to support families and not get involved in the programs at all, there had been an expectation nationally that local authorities would play their part.
- 2.48. The Committee recommended that the Executive publish key information on resettlement and migration data that is frequently requested through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to help manage future FOI requests and that the Executive agree mandatory member training on resettlement, asylum and migration be included in the member development programme.

Sale of Bodicote House

- 2.49. On 28 January 2025 the Committee considered the sale of Bodicote House, the disposal of the property where the main council officers were situated, reviewing the process and progress of the proposed sale of Bodicote House. Specifically, the Committee reviewed the:
- key options considered
 - overall timeline – past and future projection
 - governance arrangements – including key dates for Executive Decision and sign off
 - financial and resources implications – inc costs and
 - value for money assessment – and criteria (including benchmarking)
 - risks and mitigations
 - asset management strategy and criteria
 - links to the move to Castle Quay – including the interrelated finance dimensions and risks.

Cherwell Safer Communities Partnership

- 2.50. On 11 March 2025 the Committee reviewed the [Cherwell Safer Communities Partnership](#). This was the Committee meeting as the Council's statutory Crime and Disorder Committee to fulfil the Council's statutory requirement for crime and disorder scrutiny;- to review or scrutinise decisions made, or other action taken, in connection with the discharge by the responsible authorities of their crime and disorder functions no less than once in every twelve-month period.
- 2.51. The Committee reviewed the Cherwell Community Safety Partnership as a whole, the [Cherwell Community Safety](#)



[Partnership Plan 2020 – 2023](#) and Priorities and how the Partnership works together to deliver this.

- 2.52. The Committee noted successes in securing a Home Office Safer Streets 4 bid from the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) to tackle youth related violence and Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) in Banbury, introducing a Public Spaces Protection Order for Bicester town centre, securing funding to support a Young Women and Girls project, working with Thames Valley Police (TVP) colleagues to deliver objectives for an ASB focussed operation named OP JANKLE, as well as the Safeguarding Children in Banbury (SCiB) initiative.
- 2.53. The Committee also noted the proposed new CCSP 2025 – 2028 priorities:
- Anti-social behaviour (ASB)
 - Modern slavery and exploitation
 - Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)
 - Domestic Abuse
 - Serious Violence
 - Retail Crime (including shop lifting)
 - Rough Sleeping.
- 2.54. The Committee also considered the Safer Oxfordshire Partnership (SOP), a thematic group in Oxfordshire that aims to bring together community safety partners to work together to deliver joint priorities and emerging themes, with a focus to make the county a safer place to live, work and visit by providing strategic oversight and direction for preventing crime and anti-social behaviour across Oxfordshire.
- 2.55. In response to a question regarding the lack of a CCSP plan for 2024 the Committee found that the change in the plans term and lack of a report were caused by the loss of staff as a result of the Councils split from Oxfordshire County Council.
- 2.56. The Committee also heard evidence from the Police and Crime Commissioner for the Thames Valley, Matthew Barber, Chief Constable Jason Hogg and Superintendent Benedict Clark, from Thames Valley Police.
- 2.57. The Police and Crime Commissioner advised the Committee on the review and restructure of the Thames Valley force, noting that it was the largest review and restructure since 2010, and that identified savings of £15.7m. £7m of these savings had been delivered to date. It was noted that the restructure was necessitated by the uplift in demand on policing in the area and that dedicated command units for specific areas were being rolled out across the district.

- 2.58. The Committee noted plans for increasing diversity and inclusion within the force, with measures being researched to encourage female applicants as well as applicants from diverse backgrounds.
- 2.59. The Committee noted the measures that had been undertaken to improve the response times on the non-emergency 101 police contact service. This included the introduction of new methods of contact such as social media channels, webchat functionality and an online victim portal as well as a new neighbourhood policing app.
- 2.60. The Committee found that the Thames Valley Allerts system had seen a boost in users to the sum of 107,000, and a rise of 57.37% interactions, which better enables the force to tackle local crime.
- 2.61. Superintendent Clark provided the Committee with more details on some of the operations currently taking place to reduce knife crime, anti-social behaviour, retail theft and rural crime in the Cherwell district. The Committee was advised that the emphasis was on prevention of such activities and often involved a highly targeted approach working with other agencies and partners.
- 2.62. The Committee recommended that the Executive, as a matter of urgency, ensure that the Cherwell Safer Community Partnership Plan be reviewed and updated and presented to this committee early in the next municipal year.



Councillor Lynne Parsons – in committee

New Council Offices at Castle Quay

- 2.63. On 11 March 2025 the Committee reviewed the plans for the New Council Offices at Castle Quay, including the process, progress and lessons learnt from the building of the new council offices within the Castle Quay estate in Banbury town centre. This scrutiny inquiry provided a check and assurance that the procedures have been followed, to achieve value for money and consider any reflections (lessons learnt).
- 2.64. In particular, the Committee reviewed:
- The current position and introductory summary of key events as to how the Council has arrived at the current position.
 - The overall timeline – from project inception and proposal to future projection
 - A summary of the tendering process.

- Negotiations, value engineering required time, resource and risk implications arising from this leading to contract sign off.
- Financial and resources implications – including costs and value for money assessment – and criteria (including benchmarking)
- Risks and mitigations
- Asset management strategy and criteria – how this links to and derives from the Council's Asset Management Strategy.
- Cross reference and links to the sale of Bodicote House – including interrelated finance dimensions and risks.
- Lessons learnt.

Transformation Programme

2.65. On 18 March 2025 the Committee reviewed the Cherwell District Council Transformation Programme, which included the development of the Transformation Programme, the next steps to developing a multi-year transformation programme, alignment with the Council's digital strategy and integration of other cross-cutting effectiveness strategies and programmes.

2.66. Specifically, the Committee reviewed:

- The development of the Cherwell District Council Transformation Programme, including the progress to date and next key steps.
- The next steps to developing a multi-year transformation programme.
- How the Cherwell District Council Transformation Programme aligns with the Council's digital strategy, and integration of the cross-cutting effectiveness strategies and programmes.
- The main impacts on front line Council service delivery and services to residents, including an areas of service reduction/rationalisation and any anticipated improvements.
- The anticipated financial implications including anticipated main costs and savings.
- Any significant Equalities Implications especially for particular groups or communities (cross referenced to Protected Characteristics).

2.67. The Committee also considered to what extent the recent English Devolution White Paper and Local Government Reorganisation and the proposed end of 'two tier' councils to be replaced by unitary councils, impacted on the Transformation Strategy, given that Cherwell District Council may shortly cease to exist. The Committee discussed to what extent this likely possibility has been built into the new Council Transformation Strategy.

Everybody's Wellbeing Strategy Impact Assessment

- 2.68. On 18 March 2025 the Committee reviewed Resettlement and Migration, which was a review to consider and reflect on the resettlement schemes in operation with Cherwell District Council, including the scope and history of these programmes, the resettlement work during the year highlighting successes and challenges.
- 2.69. The UK operates three resettlement schemes:
- the UK Resettlement Scheme (UKRS),
 - Community Sponsorship Scheme, and
 - Mandate Resettlement Scheme.
- 2.70. The Committee reviewed the resettlement schemes in operation with Cherwell District Council, the scope and history of these programmes, the resettlement work during the year highlighting successes and challenges and the financial and social impacts.

Annual Delivery Plan and Performance Outcomes Framework

- 2.71. On 18 March 2025 the Committee reviewed the council's draft Annual Delivery Plan and Performance measures for 2025/26, prior to the Executive finalising the annual delivery plan and associated measures.
- 2.72. In February full Council agreed to adopt a new vision for the council and four strategic priorities for achieving over the next five years, as part of its new Corporate Strategy. This overarching 5-year strategy is underpinned by Annual Delivery Plans for each year of the Corporate Plan period, which set out the strategic actions for delivering each year towards achieving the priorities establish in its Corporate Strategy.
- 2.73. The council's progress towards achieving its strategic priorities and measuring service delivery will be through a series of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the proposed list of KPIs for 2025/26 was reviewed by the Committee. The Committee reviewed the new key deliverables and major milestones. It was noted that these will be monitored and reported to this committee and Executive on a quarterly basis.
- 2.74. The Committee recommended that in relation to the development of quarterly milestones within the Annual Delivery Plan the following methodology and approach be adopted:

Quarter 1 –

Survey of tenants to analyse and establish a baseline for concerns and needs.

Quarter 2 -

Establish a monitoring framework based on the analysis of the above.

Quarter 3 -

Hold a registered providers forum.

Quarter 4 –

Further survey of tenants to inform actions for 2026/27.

- 2.75. The Committee also recommended to the Executive that the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) on Number of Homeless Households living in Temporary Accommodation retain the number of homeless households living in Temporary Accommodation and include an additional KPI metric on the number of people who are in nightly charged accommodation.

3. Scrutiny Working Groups in 2024-2025

- 3.1. Scrutiny Working Groups and informal working parties that are established by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider particular matters. They are made up of non-Executive Members of the Council appointed by the Committee.
- 3.2. In 2024-2025 the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established the following Scrutiny Working Groups:
- Equalities and Diversity Scrutiny Working Group
 - Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group
 - Climate Action Scrutiny Working Group.
 - Planning Application Appeals Scrutiny Working Group.

Equalities and Diversity

- 3.3. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee re-established this Scrutiny Working Group and membership on 15 October 2024. This Scrutiny inquiry was established to review the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion strategies, including, principally, the *Including Everyone* framework. This included reviewing the implementation of the Council's *Including Everyone* framework, reviewing the performance against the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion objectives, reviewing the development of the Council's new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion objectives for 2025-2026 and reviewing the arrangements for engagement and feedback with groups with 'protected characteristics' to help inform policy and approach.

Members of the Scrutiny Working Group

- 3.4. This Scrutiny Working Group was made up of members of the Personnel Committee and members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Members of the Scrutiny Working Group for 2024-2025 were:

Councillor Rebecca Biegel - Chairman
Councillor Gemma Coton – Vice Chairman
Councillor Barry Wood
Councillor Lynne Parsons
Councillor Frank Ideh
Councillor Dr Chukwudi Okeke.

- 3.5. This inquiry focused on equality diversity and inclusion policies and strategy and performance (i.e. relevant to the public sector equalities duties provided in the Equality Act 2010) and not broader community engagement issues.

- 3.6. The Council's *Including Everyone Framework* outlines the Council's approach to equalities, diversity and inclusion and sets out its vision to providing inclusive services, workplaces and communities, equitable access to services and equality of opportunity.



- 3.7. Cherwell District Council's Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion strategies are set out on the Council's website here:
<https://www.cherwell.gov.uk/info/5/your-council/1109/equalities-diversity-and-inclusion>
- 3.8. The goals and commitments of Cherwell District Council's *Including Everyone Framework* are set every four years. Sitting beneath this Framework are three annual action plans, that reflect the different ways in which Cherwell Council is working to make its organisation services and communities more inclusive.
- 3.9. The action plans have indicators to help measure progress against the goals. Implementation was overseen by the Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion Member working group with reporting aligning with quarterly business plan monitoring.

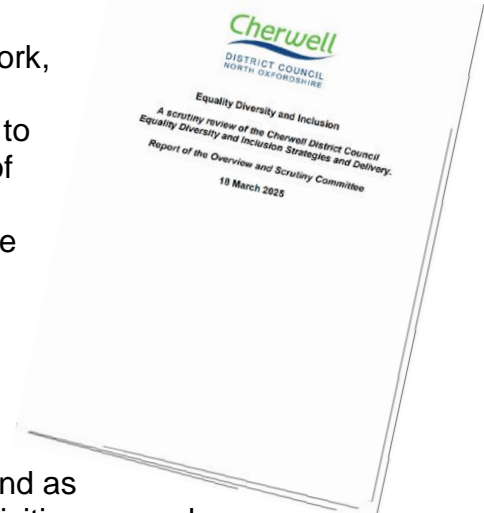
Witnesses to the Inquiry

- 3.10. The Scrutiny Working Group heard evidence from the following witnesses during 2024-2025:
- Councillor Chris Brant – Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services (attending two of the meetings)
 - Nicola Riley, Assistant Director Wellbeing & Housing

- Claire Cox, Assistant Director Human Resources
- Shona Ware - Assistant Director of Customer Focus
- Celia Prado-Teeling - Performance Team Leader
- David Cruchley - Senior Youth Partnerships Manager, Oxfordshire Youth.

3.11. At the end of the scrutiny inquiry the Scrutiny Working Group put forward a draft report and ten recommendations to the Executive, which were adopted by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 18th March 2025.

3.12. These included recommendations for a refreshed Council Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy and framework, EDI audits of public facing council services, a review of all policies plans and projects to make sure that they have up to date Equality Impact Assessment assessments, a review of the Council's recruitment process, an EDI audit of the Council's website and communications, and a refresh of the council's EDI objectives and KPIs to make sure they are focused and measurable.



Climate Action

3.13. Cherwell Council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and as part of this committed to ensure its own operations and activities are carbon Net Zero by 2030 to do its part to support the district as a whole to become Net Zero. To achieve this, the Council has published a Climate Action Framework and an associated Climate Change Action Plan 2023-2024.

3.14. The Climate Action Scrutiny inquiry was established by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee for a further year in 2024-2025, to review the implementation and development of the Council's Climate Action strategy and action plan in pursuit of the corporate Net Zero targets. This included reducing the District Council's own greenhouse gas emissions, as well as reducing the area of the district's greenhouse gas emissions as a whole.

Members of the Scrutiny Working Group

3.15. The Members of the Scrutiny Working Group were:

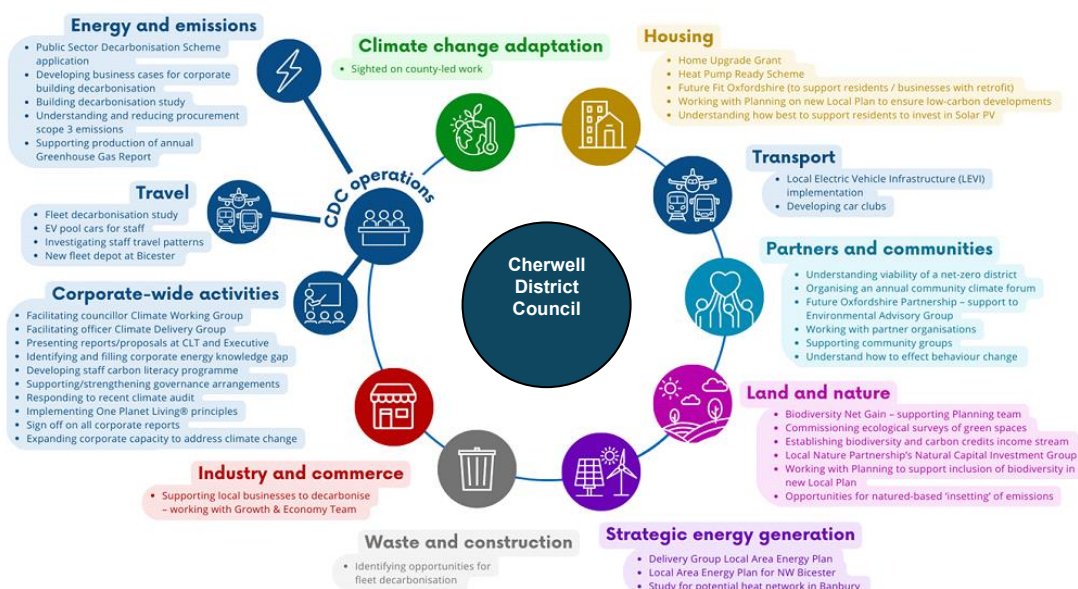
Councillor Grace Conway-Murray – Chairman
 Councillor John Broad - Vice-Chairman
 Councillor Barry Wood
 Councillor Isabel Creed
 Councillor Les Sibley.

Witnesses to the Inquiry

3.16. The Scrutiny Working Group considered evidence from the Executive Portfolio Holder for Greener Communities, Councillor Tom Becket and the Council's lead officers for Climate Change; Jo Miskin - Climate Action Manager,

Environmental Services and Hitesh Mahawar - Climate Change Programme Manager, as well as expert witnesses during its inquiry.

- 3.17. It also received evidence from Mona Walsh Assistant Director of Property and Christina Cherry - Planning Policy, Conservation & Design Manager at Cherwell Council.
- 3.18. The Working Group also received evidence from external expert witnesses Dr Marco Raugei - Senior Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow in Mechanical Engineering, Oxford Brooks University and Andy Wainwright MSc CEng FIET - Whole System Manager, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks.
- 3.19. In evidence the Scrutiny Working Group considered the context to the Climate Change Programme and key elements for the Climate strategy in Cherwell, including:
- Governance arrangements
 - Strategy and Action Plan
 - Cherwell Council and district emissions
 - Recent achievements
 - Challenges in reaching Net Zero
 - Next steps.
- 3.20. The Working Group has considered the climate impact of local plans and how they contribute to the Climate Action Plan, as well as the solar strategy for the district. Officers from the planning department discussed the climate impact of planning applications.



- 3.21. Cherwell Council's approach requires new relationships with its stakeholders, new expectations and engagement with its supply chain, and a review of where it is best placed to support others to take action.

- 3.22. The Council reports against its climate action framework in order to inform future corporate planning in the Council. The Council also reports on its carbon emissions over time to help monitor, evaluate, review and communicate progress.
- 3.23. The Climate Action Scrutiny Working Group met throughout the 2022-2024 municipal years and reviewed progress on climate action as well as supporting the development of the Climate Change Action Plan 2023-2024. On 15 October 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed that this Scrutiny Working Group continue its work through the 2024-2025 municipal year. At the completion of its work for 2024-25, the Scrutiny Working Group agreed on eight recommendations to the Council's Executive, made through the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.24. These included recommendations for a new Council Climate Action Strategy, an evaluation of interim options to replace the Council fleet of vehicles, and hypothecated investment in Cherwell Council district corporate capacity to manage and optimise renewable energy and new technologies.

Food Insecurity

- 3.25. The Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group was originally established in 2022 and continued through 2023-24 and 2024-25. The Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group was set up to provide oversight and assurance and facilitate contributions from elected members, to review the progress of the implementation of the Cherwell Food Action Plan and make recommendations and suggestions for consideration by the Executive Portfolio Holder and the Wellbeing and Housing Services department.
- 3.26. The Scrutiny Working Group was originally established following the adoption of a Council motion which declared a food poverty emergency commitment to the following actions:
- Designating a Food Champion
 - Reporting to Overview and Scrutiny on the scale of the food poverty crisis in Cherwell
 - Drawing up a Cherwell Food Action Plan to support local communities
 - Developing a promotional campaign relating to underclaimed Healthy Start Food vouchers
 - Supporting local communities to reduce food waste.
- 3.27. Prior to the food poverty emergency being declared, in June 2022 the Executive had endorsed and committed to the Oxfordshire Food Strategy. The Oxfordshire Food Strategy sets out a vision where everyone in Oxfordshire can enjoy the healthy and sustainable food they need every day.



- 3.28. A critical part of implementing the Oxfordshire Food Strategy has been the development of local Food Action Plans for each district, to ensure that the Food Strategy reflects local priorities and reflects the unique nature of the City and each of the Districts.
- 3.29. The Cherwell Food Action Plan identifies actions spanning 2024 – 2027. The Scrutiny Working Group reviewed progress against targets and metrics and helped to refine actions, providing oversight and assurance and also providing contributions from the Working Group through the review of the implementation of the Cherwell Food Action Plan.
- 3.30. The Scrutiny Working Group's assessment of the Cherwell Food Action Plan, focused on the key priority areas. At each meeting, actions within the identified priority areas were reviewed, with a particular emphasis on tackling food poverty and diet-related ill health, as well as building vibrant food communities.

Members of the Scrutiny Working Group

- 3.31. The following Members were appointed by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for the 2024-2025 municipal year:

Councillor Rebecca Biegel - Chair
 Councillor Phil Chapman – Vice Chair
 Councillor Dr Isabel Creed
 Councillor Gordon Blakeway
 Councillor Andrew Crichton
 Councillor Dr Chukwudi Okeke.

Witnesses to the Inquiry

- 3.32. The Scrutiny Working Group has spoken with both internal and external expert witnesses during its inquiry, including Councillor Rob Pattenden - Portfolio Holder for Healthy Communities, Councillor Ian Middleton – Executive Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood Services, who is also the Council's appointed "Food Champion, they have been involved with the Scrutiny Working Group throughout 2024-2025.



Members of the Scrutiny Working Group visit the Banbury Larder

- 3.33. During the inquiry members of the committee have visited the [Banbury Larder](#) and seen first-hand the work going on there to support the community.
- 3.34. The Scrutiny Working Group has also worked with Departmental Officers Nicola Riley, Assistant Director of Wellbeing and Housing Services, Edward Frape, Senior Healthy Place Shaping Officer and Libby Knox, Food and Wellbeing Officer, who have provided support, briefing reports and answered questions at each meeting.

- 3.35. The Scrutiny Working Group also received oral evidence from expert witness Alison Drake from the [Bicester Foodbank](#).

Planning Application Appeals

- 3.36. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a Planning Application Appeals Scrutiny Working Group made up of all Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 3.37. Members of the Committee met on 25 February 2025 to consider an overview of planning application appeals performance, having particular regard to planning application refusals overturned at appeal (Planning Committee and delegated decisions), the reasons for cost implications and lessons learnt.
- 3.38. This allowed members to examine the evidence and put questions to the Executive Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development Management, Councillor Jean Conway - Portfolio Holder, and the council's lead planning officers.
- 3.39. The Head of Development Management provided a presentation on Cherwell District Councils planning application appeals, with particular regard to planning application refusals overturned at appeal, the reasons for cost implications and lessons learned.
- 3.40. Members heard that the Council had performed well in the speed of decision making for both major and non-major applications. It had also performed well on the quality of decision making for non-major applications. The Council had, however, underperformed on the quality of decision making for major applications. This was as a result of a high number of major appeals being allowed (12) against the total number of major application decisions made in the assessment period (114). This resulted in a figure of 10.53% of appeals allowed, which was over the 10% threshold set by the government.
- 3.41. Members heard that, as a result of this underperformance the Council could be at risk of being 'Designated as underperforming' and if designated, the Council might lose the ability to determine some applications and also lose the associated planning fee. In addition, members were advised that defending Cherwell District Council's the high number of appeals, came at a cost to the Council, as such there were financial implications if the appeal performance was not improved.
- 3.42. Members put questions covering various topics such as the applications process, performance, speed of applications, and costs implicated, as well as applications overturned against officer recommendation. Members agreed five recommendations to the Executive under the following key themes.
- Lessons Learnt
 - Member Training
 - Action Plan

- Monitoring Improvement

4. Scrutiny Resources and Member Development

4.1. Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were invited to attend *An introduction to effective scrutiny a development and training event* on Thursday 12 December 2024 run by the Local Government Association.

4.2. In addition to Leadership Advisors from the LGA, the event included insights from practice from Councillor Jackie Taylor – Cabinet Member for Adult Services, Health and Wellbeing, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.

4.3. More information and resources on Overview and Scrutiny at Cherwell District Council is available via the Council's website:

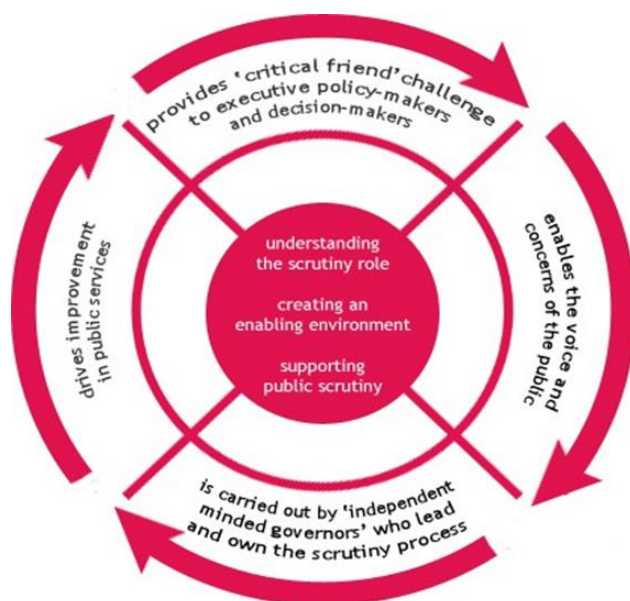
<https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=116>

4.4. The [Cherwell District Council Scrutiny Guide](https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/documents/s58559/Scrutiny%20Guide%2024.pdf), which sets out key aspects of how Overview and Scrutiny works at Cherwell Council is available here:

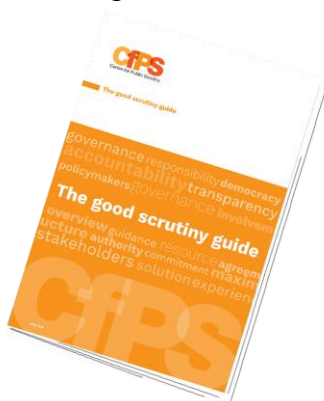
<https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/documents/s58559/Scrutiny%20Guide%2024.pdf>

4.5. The [Statutory Scrutiny Guidance](#) published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is available here: [Statutory Scrutiny Guidance 2024](#).

4.6. [The Centre for Governance and Scrutiny](#) also publish a wealth of information on Overview and Scrutiny, including the [Good Scrutiny Guide](#).



Cherwell Council
Scrutiny Guide



CfGS Good Scrutiny
Guide



Statutory Scrutiny
Guidance 2024

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is appointed by Cherwell District Council to carry out the local authority scrutiny functions.

Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Councillor Dr Isabel Creed (Chairman)
Councillor Nigel Simpson (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Gordon Blakeway
Councillor John Broad
Councillor Phil Chapman
Councillor Grace Conway-Murray
Councillor Andrew Crichton
Councillor Frank Ideh
Councillor Harry Knight
Councillor Simon Lytton
Councillor Lynne Parsons
Councillor Barry Wood

Formal Minutes

Minutes of proceedings are available to view or download from the Council website at <https://modgov.cherwell.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=116>

Committee Staff

The current staff of the committee are:
Michael Carr - Interim Principal Officer - Scrutiny and Democratic Lead
Martyn Surfleet - Democratic and Elections Officer.

Contacts

Email: democracy@cherwell-dc.gov.uk

Cherwell District Council

March 2025

www.cherwell.gov.uk