

Cherwell District Council

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Bodicote House, Bodicote, Banbury, Oxon OX15 4AA, on 28 January 2025 at 6.30 pm

Present:

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

Apologies for absence:

None

Also Present:

Councillor Lesley McLean, Portfolio Holder for Finance, Property & Regeneration
Councillor Chris Brant, Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services
Councillor Rebecca Biegel
Councillor David Rogers

Also Present Virtually:

Councillor Grace Conway-Murray, Overview and Scrutiny Committee member attending virtually with no voting rights
Councillor Jean Conway, Portfolio Holder for Planning and Development Management
Councillor Nick Cotter, Portfolio Holder for Housing

Officers:

Gordon Stewart, Chief Executive
Shiraz Sheikh, Assistant Director Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer
Mona Walsh, Assistant Director - Property
David Peckford, Assistant Director Planning & Development
Nicola Riley, Assistant Director Housing and Wellbeing
Mike Gillespie, Interim Property and Assets Manager
Michael Carr, Interim Principal Officer - Scrutiny and Democratic Lead

Martyn Surfleet, Democratic and Elections Officer

Officers Attending Virtually:

Michael Furness, Assistant Director Finance & S151 Officer
Ian Boll, Corporate Director Communities
Shona Ware, Assistant Director Customer Focus
Celia Prado-Teeling, Performance Team Leader
Katie Thrussell, Head of Resettlement

44 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

45 **Petitions and Requests to Address the Meeting**

There were no petitions or requests to address the meeting.

46 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meetings of the Committee held on 26 November and 4 December 2024 were agreed as correct records and signed by the Chairman.

47 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairmans announcements.

48 **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

49 **Resettlement and Migration**

The Committee considered resettlement and migration schemes in Cherwell to assist asylum seekers and refugees. The Portfolio Holder for Housing provided introductory remark, and the Committee received a presentation from the Head of Resettlement that detailed the ongoing work carried out by the Resettlement and Migration department.

Committee members posed questions to the Portfolio Holder for Housing, the Assistant Director – Wellbeing and Housing and the Head of Resettlement, including on the definition of “legal” / “illegal” 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.

A question was asked about the resource burden arising from Freedom of Information requests and whether there was a resource limit placed on dealing with this. The Assistant Director – Wellbeing and Housing explained that there is a statutory limit on the number of hours a response takes before the council can place a charge. It was very rare to receive individual requests that exceeded this limit. Notwithstanding, dealing with the volume of Freedom of information requests was a resource pressure on the department.

In response to a question seeking clarification on what extent the schemes are compulsory and to what extent were local choice, the Assistant Director – Wellbeing and Housing explained 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 people wishing to live in Cherwell. It was very much a local offer to a group of people who needed housing.

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.

Further questions had been submitted by members of the Committee in writing and the Assistant Director – Wellbeing and Housing said that she would be happy to provide a written answer to those.

It was proposed by Councillor Lynne Parsons to recommend that the Executive make training on Resettlement and Migration mandatory as part of the member development programme. This was seconded by Councillor Andrew Crichton.

The Committee discussed the motion. On being put to the vote, there were 4 votes for, 4 votes against and 1 abstention. The Chairman used their casting vote in favour of the proposal. It was agreed that mandatory member training on resettlement, asylum and migration be included in the member development programme.

Resolved

- (1) That having given due consideration, the presentation on Resettlement and Migration be noted.
- (2) That the Council Executive be recommended to publish key information on resettlement and migration data that is frequently requested through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, to help manage future FOI requests.

- (3) That the Council Executive be recommended to agree that mandatory member training on resettlement, asylum and migration be included in the member development programme.

50

Performance Monitoring Report - Quarter Three

The Committee considered a report from the Assistant Director – Customer Focus that detailed the Council's performance position at the end of Quarter 3 2024-2025.

In introducing the report, the Portfolio Holder for Corporate Services advised that out of the 55 measures the Council, 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.

Of the 15 annual delivery plan milestones, 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.

Members were advised that the Quarter 4 monitoring report would be the final monitoring report under the current business plan. The 2025-26 business plan had been consulted on and would be submitted to the 24 February Council meeting alongside the 2025-2026 for agreement. The Priority areas were:

- Economic Prosperity
- Community Leadership
- Environmental Stewardship
- Quality Housing and Place Making

Members were also advised of the development of a new draft vision for a modern Council inspiring and enabling positive lasting change. The draft vision had been positively received by residents surveyed. This would also be submitted to the 24 February Council meeting.

In considering the report, Members commented that the number of households in Temporary Accommodation was the same as the previous quarter last 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.

In response to the question, the Portfolio Holder for Housing explained there was no secondary waiting and offered to follow up with a written supplementary response.

In response to a committee question on the cost of temporary accommodation to the council and impact on the overall Council budget, the Committee was advised 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.

Having received several written questions in advance the Portfolio Holder for Housing agreed that responses would be provided in writing after the meeting.

In response to a question regarding the allocation of Government funds to tackle the condition of social housing within the area it was proposed by Councillor Parsons and seconded by Councillor Broad that the Executive be recommended to 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 mold.

Members voted unanimously in favour of the recommendation

The Chair advised that a recommendation had been submitted in advance. It was proposed by Councillor Parsons and seconded by Councillor Crichton that Notwithstanding the dedicated work by Council officers and the department to address homelessness and reduce the number of households in Temporary Accommodation, this Committee recommends that the Executive prioritise this area of work.

This Committee recommends that the Executive develop a robust plan for reducing homelessness and the numbers of households in Temporary Accommodation. This plan should include:

- A. Criteria for target setting,
- B. how the Council intends to use the additional funding provided by the government to address the number of families trapped in Temporary Accommodation and
- C. ways in which the Council can prevent the increasing numbers of children in Temporary Accommodation.”

Members proceeded to discuss the recommendation seeking advice from officers regarding the proposals. On being put to the vote, there were 2 votes in favour, 7 against and no abstentions. The motion was therefore lost and fell.

Resolved

- (1) That having given due consideration, the Council's Performance Monitoring Report Quarter 3 2024 - 2025 be noted.
- (2) That Executive be recommended to write 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 mold.

51 **Scrutiny Working Groups Update**

The Committee received an update on the progress of the Scrutiny Working Groups established by the Committee since the last Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26 November 2024, including verbal updates from the Chairmen of the Working Groups.

The Chairman of the Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group, Councillor Rebecca Biegel, provided an update on the Scrutiny Working Group

The Chairman of the Food Insecurity Scrutiny Working Group, Councillor Grace Conway-Murray, provided an update on the Scrutiny Working Group.

The Chairman of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Scrutiny Working Group, Councillor Rebecca Biegel, provided an update on the Scrutiny Working Groups.

An update was provided on the focus and scope of the Working Groups for 2024 – 2025, which was set out in the respective terms of reference submitted to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee for agreement.

The Committee noted that Resettlement and Migration scrutiny had now undertaken, earlier during this meeting and would therefore be removed from the work programme.

Resolved

- (1) That the progress of the Scrutiny Working Groups be noted.
- (2) That it be noted that the Resettlement and Migration Scrutiny Working Group had been concluded through the agenda item at the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 28 January 2025.
- (3) That it be noted the Planning and Appeals Scrutiny Working Group would meet on 25 February 2025 for a Spotlight Review and report back to the next meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

52 **Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25 (Updated)**

The Chairman provided an update on Committee's Work Programme 2024-25 advising that due to the large volume of remaining items on the work programme that it was agreed to hold an additional meeting in March to better disperse the items over the two meetings. The Committee would therefore meet on both 11 March and 18 March.

It was proposed by Councillor Chapman and seconded by Councillor Wood that due to the change in housing targets as a result of the updated National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) resulting in a lower than expected housing supply, officers be requested to submit a report to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to cover any possible actions or mitigations that could be implemented in light of the current housing situation.

Members discussed the suggestion seeking advice from officers. On being put to the vote, there were 8 votes in favour, no votes against and 1 abstention. Democratic and Elections Officers would liaise with Planning regarding the scheduling of the item.

The Committee also requested that a report on the Housing Development Action Plan be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

Resolved

- (1) That subject to the following addition, the Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25 be agreed.
- (2) Housing Development Action Plan to be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.

53 **Exclusion of the Press and Public**

That under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the public and press be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the ground that, if the public and press were present, it would be likely that exempt information falling under the provisions of Schedule 12A, Part 1, Paragraph 3 would be disclosed to them, and that in all the circumstances of the case, the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

54 **Sale of Bodicote House**

The Assistant Director Property submitted an exempt report detailing the process and progress of the proposed sale of Bodicote House.

Officers responded to a range of questions regarding the content of the report.

Resolved

- (1) That having given due consideration, the Council's report on the Sale of Bodicote House be noted.

The meeting ended at 8.59 pm

Chairman:

Date: