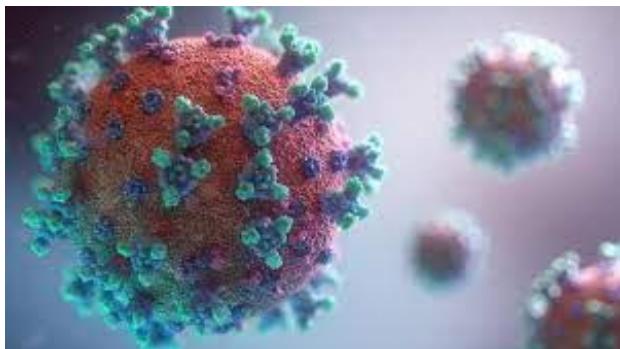
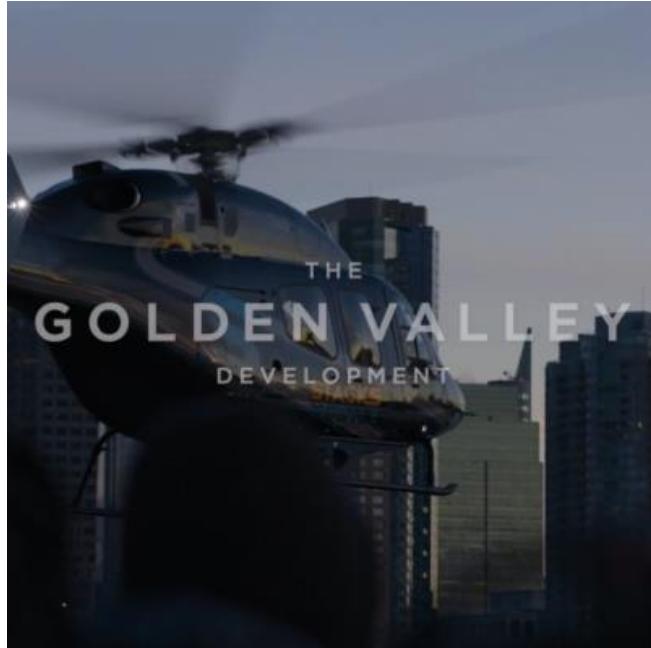


SCRUTINY ANNUAL REPORT

2020-21



PUBLICA



FOREWORD

COUNCILLOR CHRIS MASON, CHAIR OF OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

It is my pleasure to introduce the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S), Annual Report for 2020/21.

In keeping with tradition. I would like to thank all those who have made a positive contribution to O&S. This year has seen a change the membership of the committee. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Cllrs Baker, Dobie, Holiday, Horwood and Wilkinson who have gone on to fields a new within the council, and Klara Sudbury who did not stand for re-election in May.

For any committee to function efficiently it needs a solid support base. The Council's Democratic Services has certain provided this support during these very challenging times. My final thanks go to Saira Malin and Darren Knight.

The format for running the committee was changed in the year 2019/20. I am pleased to confirm that the receipt of pre-meetings reports is now the norm, which improves efficiency. Thus, allowing members to forward specific questions to presenters before the start of the meeting. This in turn enhances the depth of debate and understanding.

Despite the pandemic and virtual meetings, the committee has considered several important issues and policies. Though not extensive these include monitoring air quality by schools, our Covid-19 recovery plan, response to the council's climate change motion, challenging the economic and development plans for the town, housing, the municipal offices and CIL governance. One of the committee's key functions is to be a critical friend. It is in this spirit that those addressing the committee can discuss what is going well and where improvements could be made. An effective O&S committee should provide challenge and make constructive comments and/or suggestions; and this is what it has done over the past 12 months.

I trust members find the report informative and following its presentation to the council would welcome questions.

DARREN KNIGHT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE & CHANGE

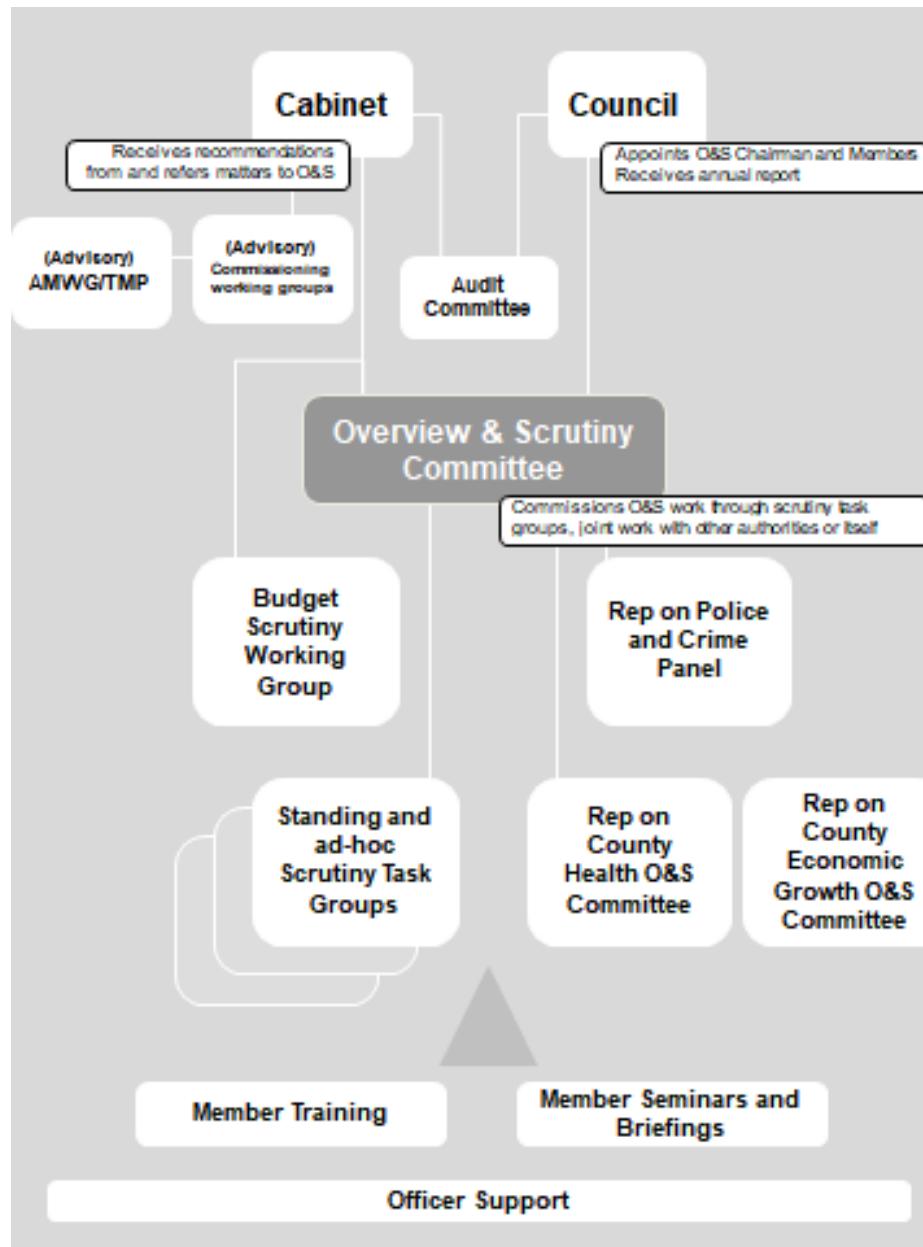
The role that the committee plays in local democracy in holding to account both members and officers is as important as ever, as the authority, the town, and in fact the whole country, continues to experience a period of significant change.

With the Council progressing major projects such as the Golden Valley Development and the £180m housing investment plan, it was good to see the Committee commission an independent review to help identify ways to further improve their effectiveness, as they will have a key role reviewing the progress of these initiatives and as well as other ambitions the Council is taking forward.

The findings from the review have been positively welcomed by the committee and put into an action plan to take forward with a dedicated task and finish group established. Actions have already been rapidly implemented to further improve the committee's effectiveness.

On a personal note, I have thoroughly enjoyed working with the Chair's Group and wider committee to support this vital part of the Council's wider governance arrangements.

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY STRUCTURE



TASK GROUPS

BUDGET SCRUTINY

The Budget Scrutiny Working Group (BSWG) is a small but effective group that keeps a careful watch on in-year spend and the developing budget for the following year. Input from the group is particularly important as the council seeks to diversify the way in which it raises income to support service provision in light of its various financial challenges.

The Covid crisis formed the main focus during the last year, resulting in a recovery budget which the group scrutinised in detail in November before its approval by Cabinet and Council. The group acknowledged the unprecedented situation and the need to consider all options in order to maintain financial stability and continue delivering high quality services.

The group also considered budget monitoring reports, the financial outturn report and the General Fund and HRA budget proposals for 2021/22. Throughout, it took into account the difficult economic conditions the council was operating in and looked ahead to the challenges that may be faced in the future, both as a result of the pandemic and beyond.

Paul Jones (Executive Director Finance and Assets) commented that the Budget Scrutiny Working Group is '*a valuable process which has given members an opportunity to input into the development of the budget proposals and key initiatives which has added value to the process. BSWG have also provided an independent review of the financial performance of the council during the year, as well as considering the final outturn position and our approach to commercialisation. The financial position remains challenging and it is both helpful and important to have a forum for deeper consideration of the issues facing the council and wider member influence over the strategy for dealing with it.*'

TASK GROUPS

SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY ALLOWANCES

The O&S Committee were asked by Council to look at whether Special Responsibility Allowances payments could be made to those members who are appointed to outside bodies as non-executive directors or trustees.

Given the complexities of the issue, the committee decided that a task group would be the most appropriate way in which to give consideration to this matter. The one page strategy was agreed by the O&S Committee in February 2020 and they were tasked to understand the options and restrictions relating to such payments, looking at what other authorities did and considering the budget implications of any payments.

Due to Covid, the task group did not meet until October 2020, where the group considered advice from the Legal Officer. This made clear that to enable a payment to be made the Member had to be 'representing the authority'. Yet when a member took up the position of Director or Trustee of an outside body they were attending Board meetings in their capacity as a Director or Trustee of that body and were expected and indeed would have legal duties to look after the bodies' interests and to further its aims and not the authority's aims.

In light of this advice the STG ruled out recommending an SRA for those members who were appointed as Directors or Trustees and returned to the committee in November 2020. The O&S Committee were of the opinion that no further work should be undertaken as none of the bodies for which SRAs were potentially payable were bodies where members had been appointed as non-executive directors or trustees; and it had been these bodies, specifically, that Council had asked the O&S Committee to consider.

A report outlining this conclusion was noted by Council in December 2020.

TASK GROUPS

SCRUTINY REVIEW

In July 2019, Campbell Tickell were commissioned to undertake a review of the council's Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Committee. The key aim of the review was to make recommendations as to how the O&S Committee could be more effective and what changes could be made to ensure it made a tangible difference to the work of the council, and also consider whether existing resources were sufficient to support effective scrutiny.

Campbell Tickell reported their recommendations in February 2020 and the committee resolved to establish a task group to look at the recommendations, how best they could be implemented and devising an action plan.

Progress was impacted by Covid-19 and as such, the review took longer than it ordinarily would. The task group considered each of the recommendations and appropriate actions and presented their final report to the committee in June 2021. As a consequence, their recommendations will be covered in more detail in the 2021-22 annual report.

OTHER SUCCESSES

It should be noted at this stage that a number of meetings were cancelled in the first months of the pandemic.

When the committee started to meet again, virtually, the Overview and Scrutiny committee looked at the following things, in addition to standard items, including reviewing Council performance, briefings from the Leader on key issues and regular updates from representatives on county-wide scrutiny groups:

Publica

Publica presented their annual performance report. The challenges of the pandemic were acknowledged, as was the support that had been provided at an operational level, which was highly commended by officers and members. The report identified key areas of focus for the ensuing year and members looked forward to discussing progress in these areas at a future meeting.

West Cheltenham

Officers updated the committee on the impact of Covid-19 on the procurement process, the programme and the assessments which had informed these processes. Members agreed that this was an ambitious and exciting prospect for Cheltenham and commented on how impressive, exciting and engaging the marketing material had been.

Council investments

The committee were reassured that the council's commercial investments were less of a worry to CBC than the loss of parking income, simply because unlike some neighbouring authorities, CBC had a more diverse investment portfolio and less exposure to the retail sector. Members commended the prudent investments that had been made, in Cheltenham, for the benefit of Cheltenham.

The Cheltenham Trust

The committee considered the current financial position and performance of The Trust in light of the pandemic and discussed future plans. Members were impressed with the quick and dynamic way that the Trust had responded to the Covid situation and thanked the team for delivering on the promises they had made in the previous year.

OTHER SUCCESSES

Air Quality

The Senior Environmental Health Officer outlined some of the work being done, specifically around schools. He also explained some of the complexities of monitoring and limitations in terms of restrictions.

Clearview

The committee were given a live demonstration of the system which would be used by the organisation to review, monitor and manage performance and risk. Admittedly some of the data not been fully populated or updated since it was first input, because the system had been rolled out immediately before the pandemic. The committee could see how useful the system would be for the organisation and for them as a committee, in being able to monitor performance in 'real time'.

Covid-19 Recovery Programme

The committee received an update on some of the key initiatives that were underway in terms of recovery activity, which had been split into 5 work streams (Economy, Returning CBC to a new normal, Community & Volunteers, Environment & Wellbeing and Finance), each made up of a range of activities and with a lead officer/member.

Climate Emergency

The newly elected Cabinet Member Climate and Communities, Councillor Wilkinson, outlined some of his priorities going forward. He acknowledged that there was little spare capacity within existing resource to pursue enough new projects, but assured the committee that the climate change emergency budget would be used to employ new members of staff who could take forward some key projects.

Cabinet Member Economy & Development

The newly elected Cabinet Member Economy & Development, Councillor Atherstone, outlined ambitious plans to support the development of her portfolio, which were particularly relevant due to a number of key priorities for the borough; including Cheltenham's COVID-19 economic recovery growth plans and development of sustainable and affordable housing.

OTHER SUCCESSES

Strategic Housing Review

The committee were given the opportunity to consider the independent strategic housing review report. Members fully supported the recommendation that CBH be retained and the partnership be developed further.

Strategic Waste Site

The committee had asked to be kept informed of progress and this was an opportunity for them to hear about how the project had been impacted by Covid and understand revised timescales.

Cheltenham Economic Recovery Task Force

Members were introduced to the Chair and gained an understanding of the priorities, as well as some of the challenges facing the Task Force. They felt the business plan was innovative and exciting and would look forward to future updates.

Community Infrastructure Levy governance arrangements

The Head of Planning explained the legislative requirements for governance and reporting of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), as well as the regulations which constrained where and how these monies could be spent. The committee suggested that a register of monies held and allocated would be useful and asked that this be developed as soon as possible.

Municipal Offices – options appraisal update

Officers outlined progress on what the committee accepted was a highly complex and emotive issue. Progress had been hampered by the pandemic, but members were pleased at the full range of options that were being considered and the depth to which these options were being explored.

CABINET MEMBER WORKING GROUPS

Cabinet Member working groups are fundamentally different to scrutiny task groups in that they are set up and chaired by the Cabinet Member and their aim is to assist the Cabinet Member in formulating their final report to Cabinet. By contrast scrutiny task groups are scrutiny led and can only make recommendations to Cabinet or Council or another body.

However, what they do have in common is that very often Cabinet Member working groups are helping to formulate new policy and offer challenge which are both key parts of the overview and scrutiny function. Both involve non-Executive Members.

The working groups for 2020/21 included:

Asset Management Working Group

Planning and Liaison Member Working Group

Housing Supply

Members' ICT

Waste and Recycling

WHAT'S NEXT?

Please note that this report looks back over the work undertaken by the committee between April 2020 and March 2021 and as such, this section may refer to events which have already taken place and which will be covered in more detail in the 2021/22 Annual Report. Also, the work of the committee is in no way limited to the items listed below.

O&S Review STG – the task group will present their draft action plan in response to the Campbell Tickell recommendations.

One Legal – the committee will hear about how the shared service has evolved since its inception in 2009, as well as understanding current performance and challenges.

Housing and Regeneration – officers will present a draft strategy which will be designed to achieve long-term and overall objectives in terms of housing and regeneration in the town.

Business Improvement District (BID) – having successfully secured a second term, the committee will consider the new BID business plan. This will be linked with a wider conversation about the high street and public realm.

Covid-19 – 2021/22 will see a continued focus on the pandemic, particularly lessons learned and the Recovery Plan. The committee will also continue to look at how shared services and organisations including The Cheltenham Trust have been or continue to be impacted.

Golden Valley Development – the committee have requested updates at appropriate junctures of this project, which represents the biggest project ever undertaken by the council.

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