



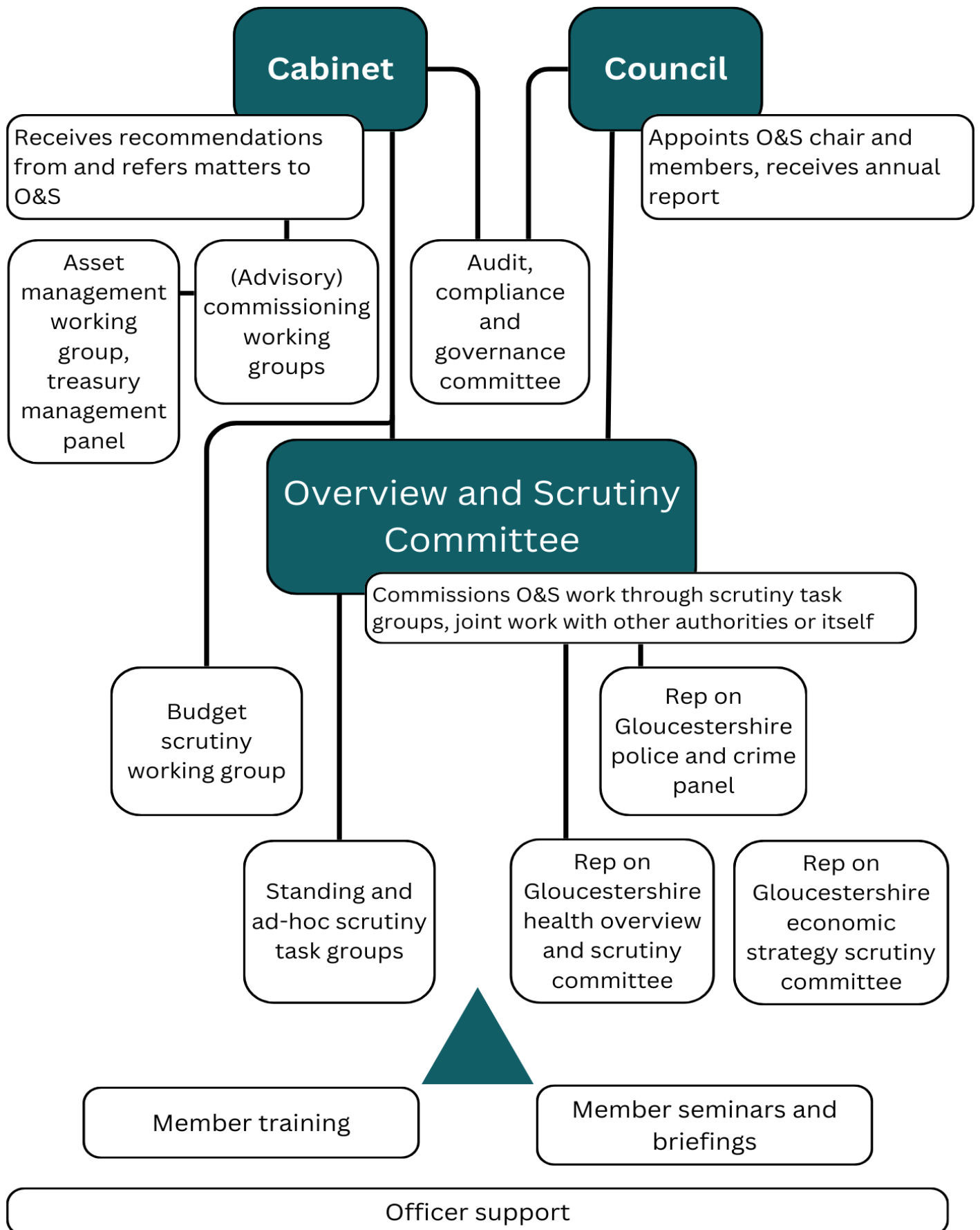
CHELTENHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

DRAFT Overview and Scrutiny

Annual Report

April 2023—March 2024

Structure of Overview and Scrutiny



Foreword

Councillor Tabi Joy, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny

I am really pleased to introduce the Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Annual Report for 2023-24. This has been the cumulative effort of so many different people making positive contributions, and I'd like to take this opportunity to thank members of the committee both current and previous for their support and patience while I have adjusted to the role of Chair throughout my first year.

Thank you to the Director of Governance and Customer Services in her role as lead officer—her guidance has helped me tremendously—and to the Democratic Services team. Thanks also to the Chair of the Association of Democratic Services Officers, and to our external trainer who both delivered comprehensive chairing and O&S training that has helped greatly in getting us where we are today.

The O&S Committee has considered a wide array of issues since our last Annual Report, examining CBC's partnerships with the Cheltenham Trust, the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, Gloucestershire Airport, Ubico, Publica, Cheltenham BID, and many others.

One of our most notable actions this year was the first 'call-in' in recent memory, addressing the transfer of Cheltenham Borough Homes (CBH) to the council, transforming the arms-length management arrangement of two decades to bring their operations back in-house. This resulted in a new working group and ongoing scrutiny process, and I would like to thank Councillors Baker, Nelson, Flynn, Bamford and Williams, as well as CBH Board Member Ian Mason, for their hard work in bringing together the vital elements for O&S to consider in the transfer process.

It is good to note that CBC has been advised by the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman that no complaints against the council have been upheld, demonstrating our good practice and effective operations.

I am very proud that the current O&S team has contributed towards the annual workplan, reconfiguring it for the upcoming year with suggestions of targeted approaches and areas of improvement based on member expertise and changing social needs.



Members paid a visit to the Minster Exchange (MX) site in 2023 and subsequently reflected on learning from the project—see page 9

A review of the 2023 Race Festival was undertaken in July, together with a representative from Gloucestershire Police and the Head of Public Protection, to identify successes and lessons learnt—see page 8



A scrutiny task group was set up to consider the transition of housing services from CBH back to CBC—see page 7. Housing and homelessness was also addressed by the committee—see page 8

In February 2024, the Committee considered CBC's current tourism and marketing provision, which accounts for around 4% of borough-wide employment—see page 10



Budget Scrutiny Working Group

Councillor Tabi Joy, Chair of Overview and Scrutiny

The aim of Budget Scrutiny Working Group (BSWG) is to monitor council spending throughout the year as well as to examine incoming budget proposals. It is a good opportunity for non-Cabinet members of CBC to provide an independent review and feed in ideas on budgetary measures and responses to external pressures on CBC operations as a whole.

We are hopeful that the merging of CBH with CBC will give the council greater financial resilience in years to come, with the additional aim of integrating services to ensure they are more responsive to resident needs. The group noted the necessity of a rent increase to accord with the final year of the five-year rate guidance provided by Government, which ideally will help alleviate pressure on construction and maintenance costs for schemes and energy efficiency programs, while new compliance measures including Awaab's Law, which requires landlords to investigate and fix reported health hazards within specified timeframes, are also brought into force.

As part of the BSWG's oversight, the group was able to examine and comment on the 2024-25 Housing Revenue Account budget proposals, on General Fund Revenue and Capital Budget Proposals 2024-25, and the CBC Financial Out-Turn Report 2023-24.

BSWG notes that the cost of living crisis has persisted, and that the council's approach is to bolster cash reserves where possible in order to maintain resilience against a changing economic landscape. Members are aware that the council does not want to reduce service provision, but will need to be proactive in ensuring that financial targets are met and the budget is delivered effectively. Through the recent LGA Peer Review, it was noted that there was "shared understanding across the council of the financial challenges being faced," with a recommendation to improve training and reinforce mechanisms for monitoring Budget measures and ensure savings are delivered where needed, with accountability "built in both individually and collectively across the council".

Scrutiny Task Group

Tackling Deprivation

The LGA Corporate Peer Challenge at Cheltenham Borough Council, which took place 18–20 July 2023, made specific mention of the “excellent” work of the Tackling Deprivation scrutiny task group, whose [report](#) had been published in time for the Peer Challenge visit. The work of the task group covered five points of action - Community Outreach, Health, Education, Housing, and Economic Growth and Employment. Many members of the community were included to collect an array of experiences and make recommendations based on best guidance.

Important context and information was disseminated to give background on the acute effects of inequality in Cheltenham, including statistics demonstrating that the average life expectancy for men in the most deprived decile is 8.7 years lower than that of those in the least deprived decile, with the disparity for women being 6.5 years.

Specific outcomes of intervention through the task group’s suggestions include:

- distributing key information on resource signposting and advice through staff and councillor training, as well as directly to households
- exploring a financial inclusion partnership
- using Housing Act powers to correct issues such as mould and damp through enforcement in the private rented sector
- tackling fuel poverty in CBH dwellings through retrofit and other energy efficiency measures
- collaborating with the NHS and Gloucestershire County Council to expand outreach
- calling health services and housing providers to account for the health risks of poor-quality homes
- intervening to prevent school exclusions, support those with Adverse Childhood Experiences, and promote digital literacy and access, along with green skills and jobs in order to contribute towards the Net Zero pathway
- maintaining access to safe, good-quality open spaces while addressing antisocial behaviours
- supporting those dealing with addiction through a whole system approach

In due course, the Overview and Scrutiny committee will reflect on the actions taken following the task group’s recommendations, and ensure that they take into account the changing realities of community support and social provision.

Scrutiny Task Group

Cheltenham Borough Homes to Cheltenham Borough Council Transition

O&S called in the [Cabinet Decision](#) of 17 October to bring housing services back in house, and met on [Monday 30 October](#) where it was agreed that a Scrutiny Task Group should be set up with the following terms of reference :

- To receive the integration action plan
- To actively contribute to the creation of a consultation framework in order to develop a Tenant Offer which will provide tenants and leaseholders with the opportunity to provide their view on the proposed change in management, state their priorities in shaping the future housing service provision, ensure their continued involvement, and complement the new consumer standards
- To actively contribute to the development of the future governance framework

Councillors Baker, Bamford, Flynn, Nelson and Williams were appointed to the cross-party task group and decided to co-opt a Cheltenham Borough Homes tenant board member, Ian Mason, whose input was very valuable.

The group met seven times and regularly reported back to formal meetings of O&S Committee before producing its final [report to O&S](#) in September 2024.



Other scrutiny

The committee scrutinised a number of key topics throughout the year, in addition to standard items, briefings from the Leader of the Council on key issues, and regular updates from task groups and representatives on county-wide scrutiny groups [Health Overview and Scrutiny, Police and Crime Panel, and Economic Growth Scrutiny]

Annual Report of the Police and Crime Commissioner

The Gloucestershire Police and Crime Commissioner, Chris Nelson, presented his annual report in [November](#). He was accompanied by the Chief Inspector. They spoke about how the new enhanced operating model has changed daily operational policing and responded to questions from Members about levels of criminality in Cheltenham with a particular focus on anti-social behaviour (ASB) and organised crime and the Safer Streets initiative.

Cheltenham Race Week

The objective of this session held in [July](#) was to review the 2023 festival, with the Head of Public Protection and the Police, and to identify successes and lessons learnt. There was a particular focus on additional measures, including reduced daily capacity at the racecourse, additional marshals, police and PCSOs between the racecourse and town, additional toilets and the 'war on wee', all of which appear to have resulted in fewer complaints about ASB compared to 2022. Littering, parking and traffic management remain issues to be dealt with by GCC and the racecourse, with recommendations to improve parking enforcement action and offer marshals specific training in traffic management.

Housing and Homelessness

All priorities in the CBC Housing Strategy and action plan, which was considered in [November](#), aim to address homelessness and rough sleeping, which primarily see investment in affordable housing options, existing stock, and community cohesion measures. There are new staff members and preventative techniques being adopted against a surge in the number of applicants seeking assistance, with additional wraparound support needs, including mental health management, asylum applications and post-carceral transition.

Other scrutiny

[continued]

Gloucestershire Airport

In [January](#), the committee looked at Gloucestershire Airport Limited's financial sustainability, both in relation to recent improvements and in the long term.

Minster Exchange [MX]

The committee undertook a tour of the site before reflecting on learning from the project with the Chief Executive, finance officers and representatives from the MX project throughout the year. As a town-based bridge to the Golden Valley Cyber Park, progressing from two existing sites at the Brewery Quarter and Gloscol's Cheltenham campus, Hub8 is building relationships and identifying community needs to offer a good programme of support. The site comprises open plan space, private meetings rooms, phone booths, and private offices for a wide range of needs.

O&S was able to ask questions in advance of its meeting in [September](#) about the progress the council was making towards its net zero target and considered achievements to date and future initiatives. Cheltenham Borough faces obstacles to addressing emissions, such as the high number of heritage buildings (for which we are examining case studies from Bath and West and Cambridge Universities). The newly-launched Retrofit Streets project will be used to inform the retrofit strategy more broadly, and better energy planning should be investigated to help deploy more extensive PV installation. Crowdfunding and community funding pathways should be considered. An ecologist has been recruited to help adapt to Biodiversity Net Gain legislation and locate wider spaces for tree planting.

Climate Emergency Overview

Other scrutiny

[continued]

Business Continuity

In [January](#), the committee considered the robustness of CBC business continuity arrangements in the event of a major incident. Members recognised the internal audit opinion of the robust ICT service delivered by Publica in its effort to keep the council's systems safe. Each council-run service has its own plan, and the next stage is carrying out Business Impact Analysis as part of a high-level Corporate Recovery Plan to maximise resilience. A recent cyber audit provided good levels of assurance, and a partnership with the Local resilience Forum has met compliance needs.

Tourism and town marketing provision

O&S considered CBC's current tourism and marketing provision at its meeting in [February](#). This accounts for around 4% of borough-wide employment, and CBC holds influence over events and destination management, year-round visitor economy marketing, inward investment, and commercial income generation in combination with UK Shared Prosperity Fund programme management. We are looking into Tourist Information service provision and day visit monitoring so we can respond to changing market needs and post-pandemic recovery. The council commissions an annual independent assessment of the volume and value of tourism, and the committee was recommended for to read this upon publication.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Policy (EDI)

Also in [February](#), pre-scrutiny of the draft EDI policy was undertaken by O&S to fully incorporate elements of the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty. An officer EDI working group has been established and Member-appointed Equality Champions will be introduced, alongside a two-stage process for equality impact assessments with an initial questionnaire followed up by more detailed analysis and responses for every report. All members and officers are encouraged to engage and complete mandatory training.

Other scrutiny

[continued]

CBC Flood risk management overview

O&S invited GCC to its [March](#) meeting as lead authority for flood management. CBC's flood alleviation work and planning process can reduce the amount of surface water entering the combined sewer system. Severn Trent has an ongoing maintenance plan and a scheme for improvements along the River Chelt but no others of which we are aware, although sewage overflows are primarily a Severn Trent issue while water quality enforcement is undertaken by the Environment Agency. CBC meets quarterly with Severn Trent, and O&S would also like to be included in these meetings.

The Strategic Flood Risk Assessment will be updated alongside the Strategic Local Plan, which is vital for any building developments on flood plains.

What next?

Since the election in May 2024, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee has considered its next steps

Overview and Scrutiny external training

An external trainer provided an informative and interactive session for 15 councillors, both new and existing, focussing on how to get the best results from the O&S process and the key skills and approaches required to do so.

Workplan

By inviting all members of the O&S group to consider items for the workplan, a wide range of suggestions have been prioritised and itemised for the coming year and beyond. These include:



Local Planning Enforcement Plan

Scrutiny of the new approach and priorities for CBC's planning enforcement team, before the plan is submitted to Cabinet



Air Quality

Exploration of air quality in Cheltenham, including the national context, measurements and actions to address them, and future actions



Biodiversity Duty—first consideration report

Examination of current management arrangements for greenspace and best practice in terms of biodiversity and wildlife management



Golden Valley

To gain better understanding of the delivery of social value in the Golden Valley



Walking, cycling, and highways

Assessing the impact of the cycling spine, understand plans for low traffic neighbourhoods, and look at solutions for safer e-scooter usage



Heritage protection vs. sustainability

Scrutiny of the issues involved in developing a working balance between protecting heritage assets and implementing environmental solutions

Contacts

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