

COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 30 January 2013

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Altaf-Khan (Chair), Lloyd-Shogbesan (Vice-Chair), Campbell, Clack, Darke, Haines, Humberstone, Jones, Kennedy, O'Hara, Sanders, Wilkinson and Wolff.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer), Ian Brooke (Head of Leisure and Parks), Michael Crofton-Briggs (Head of City Development), Martin John and Mathew Metcalfe (Democratic and Electoral Services)

18. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

20. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) introduced this item and presented the Work Programme to the Committee and highlighted the following issues:-

1. Housing Panel – this has 4 members of which one is often unable to attend. Does the Committee wish to ask if another member is willing to take this space should the original member wish to stand down? (Councillor Kennedy indicated willingness to do this, however, the original member later indicated that he wished to continue in his role)
2. Educational Attainment Panel – this has now “twinned” with the John Henry Newman Primary School and will be making regular visits to observe progress. The Committee agreed to Councillor Sander’s request to join in visits to the school as it is in her ward.
3. Customer Contact Panel – this has only one active member and its work is progressing very slowly, mainly owing to matters beyond its control. Councillor Darke indicated he would be happy to join this Panel in the short term. It is understood that the Board Member, Councillor Coulter, is investigating why the Customer Contact Strategy is being delayed. It might be necessary to reschedule the proposed report back on this Panel’s work which was originally set for 4th April.
4. Enfranchisement and Engagement and “Helping the High Street” are both items on this agenda.

Resolved:-

- (1) To note the current Work Programme;
- (2) That there is nothing in the current Forward Plan that the Committee wishes to take up.

21. REPORT BACK ON COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer) introduced this item and presented the report back to the Committee.

There were two items upon which reports back were made; the Homelessness Strategy review and the Area Forum review. On the latter, it was noted that all four recommendations had been agreed, the last one being picked up as part of the review of the Council's Governance structure.

22. COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY - DRAFT CHARGING SCHEDULE

The Head of City Development submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the draft charging schedule for the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

Michael Crofton Briggs (Head of City Development) attended the meeting and presented the report and its background to the Committee. He explained that this was a tax payable by every developer, and that the money would return to the City Council as the planning authority. It would agree with Oxfordshire County Council what the priorities were for its use. The CIL is paid when development starts on site, and it may be in the form of staged payments.

It is expected that the CIL would come before Council for formal adoption in (approximately) October 2013.

The Committee received the following additional information in response to its questions and comments:-

Infrastructure Project list

The Council has examined its Core Strategy and asked what infrastructure would be needed to support development. The project list is an initial snapshot of development that will take place over a long period of time. It is intended that a priority infrastructure list (a "1,2,3" list), would be prepared annually for members' approval. It was likely that CIL discussions would track the Budget cycle.

Levy on industrial development

It is believed that industrial developments are capable of bearing the CIL at the suggested rate of £20. Some other local authorities have decided not to levy the CIL on some developments, but by doing so they run the risk of slipping into the

area of state aid, which is not permitted. The Council believes that the level of CIL that it has chosen will not discourage development.

Flexibility

There is no flexibility in the system. The CIL proposed is set at a level which it is believed can be met by all developers.

There are 2 exemptions: for charities or developments for charitable purposes, and for affordable housing.

Difference from S106 money

It should be noted that the CIL is a different approach to developer funding. Under S106, there was a correlation between a development and its impact on services around it. With the CIL, there does not have to be a geographical link. It is possible to create a fund that will pay for things across the whole City as and when they are needed. It is not possible to say how much the CIL will raise as it is new. It may be that the priorities for CIL funding will be significant pieces of City infrastructure.

Cost of introducing the CIL

It is expected that there will not be any additional pressure on resources created by the introduction of the CIL. The Council can, in any case, use up to 5% of the money raised to cover the cost of administering it.

Involvement of Councillors and local communities

It was intended that Members would have good involvement with discussions about the use of the CIL. It should also be noted that there would be circumstances in which 25% of the CIL is returned to the community that has taken the impact of a development, perhaps via a Parish council. Communities will have a part to play in discussions about spending the CIL./

Committee comments

The Committee noted the introduction of the CIL. It felt that it was extremely important that Councillors be involved with discussions about the spending of the CIL, particularly Councillors who represented deprived wards. The Scrutiny Committee itself would welcome involvement as appropriate. It was also interested to know more about any protocols for Parish Councils spending CIL funding.

Resolved:

- (1) To note all information provided;
- (2) To ask that Committee views be included as part of the consultation process.

23. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH STRATEGY REFRESH

The Head of City Development and the Strategic Policy and Partnerships Manager submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the Economic Development and Growth Strategy Refresh. Michael Crofton Briggs (Head of City Development) attended the meeting and presented the report to the Committee.

He explained that, although Oxford has not fared as badly in the recession as some places, there was no room for complacency. The refreshed Strategy presented 11 recommendations, and the next step for the Oxford Strategic Partnership would be to produce an action plan. In addition, the Council has, following an invitation from Government, submitted an expression of interest in the "City Deal".

The Committee raised the following issues:-

Students

It noted that Oxford University does not appear to see student numbers contracting, and indeed expects its research sector to grow. Oxford Brookes may experience a contraction of numbers on some courses, but they would like to increase postgraduate numbers; and any contraction may be in their outlying campuses.

District Centres and the retail offer.

There was some disappointment that there was very little in the document about the district shopping centres. The Committee noted that the focus of the document had been the City's knowledge economy, and that some key (but not all) employment sectors had been looked at, however it still felt that more could be done to develop the distinctive district centres that lay beyond the City centre. To address this, consideration should be given to amending recommendation 4 so that it included the words "across the city" to avoid it being limited to the City centre.

Although the importance of the independent sector is acknowledged, it would be helpful to know who the independents were and why, in the context of this document, they were considered important.

Growth

The Committee noted that it was believed that growth would come from those businesses already in Oxford. There was a need to grow our own enterprises, as well as attract new business in.

Employment sites needed to be protected, both large and small.

Transport

Transport links between major employment sites and the district centres could receive greater emphasis.

Although mention is made of rail communications, there is nothing about the impact on the City of the A40 and the A34, and in particular on those commuting in and out of the City and experiencing congestion on these roads. They are important communication arteries which link Oxford to other places.

Housing

The Committee welcomed the strategic housing market assessment as being accurate and relevant. Was there now a need to meet with our neighbouring local authorities in order to discuss housing sites, especially those which are on or across the border or across with neighbours? The City Council had a huge housing waiting list, and discussion around what we could be doing to help alleviate problems was needed.

There was a big issue in that Oxford was now almost at bursting point, and there was a need to take the pressure off both housing and land.

Sustainability

The section on sustainability was good, but the conclusions were too narrow.

Conclusion

The Committee acknowledged that this is only one of a suite of documents and noted that the OSP wished to increase dialogue with the business community.

The Committee also noted that a report outlining the City's response to this strategy and the actions needing to be undertaken by the Council will be prepared for CEB in April. It felt that the following key points needed further exploration and emphasis:-

- District Centres;
- A40 and A34;
- Sustainability;
- Emphasis on the duty to co-operate with our neighbours.

It asked that all its comments made be taken into account when the report for CEB was prepared. In addition, the Committee's comments would be forwarded to Councillor Bob Price, as Lead Member for Corporate Governance and Strategic Partnerships.

24. GREEN SPACES STRATEGY

The Head of Leisure and Parks submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) concerning the Green Spaces Strategy. Ian Brooke presented the strategy to the Committee and explained its background.

Ian Brooke provided the following additional information and observations in answer to questions from members of the Committee:-

Biodiversity

The Countryside team had a lot of knowledge in this area. Stuart Fitzsimons had been working with Bucks, Berks and Oxford Wildlife Trust recently and there was always the option of buying in extra support if that was needed. The Tree Team has some very skilled officers who are able to care for and manage trees effectively.

Allotments

Leisure and Parks was aware that there was a waiting list for allotments and that three sites were no longer in use, however it was not possible at this stage to say whether or not it was possible to re-open the sites to cater for demand. A debate by Council would be needed to determine that.

It was noted that the Trap Ground allotments may possibly close.

Workforce

Leisure and Parks did employ unpaid interns. It should be recognised that, being in Oxford, a lot of expertise was available to be tapped into; and the Council received regular requests from people who wished to work with it. The interns were unpaid because they gained valuable experience and the Council worked with them to help develop their skills.

The Council also provided apprenticeships and had the target of 10% of the Direct Services workforce to be apprentices. A lot of hard work went into supporting these posts.

Underrepresented groups

Comments from the Committee about encouraging minority and underrepresented groups to use our green spaces were noted. However, these groups had complex and changing needs and there was not a single answer to the question "how do we encourage them?" It was acknowledged that further work with communities was needed, and that it was desirable to engage with people from an early age. It was also desirable for the Council, as a body, to have more diverse engagement with people because the Council wanted to encourage representative users. Surveys have been undertaken to understand the demographic and geographic need.

Town Greens and Friends Groups

There are some things that the Council as a body is unable to do in relation to Town Greens, but advice is available. There are 2 Parks Development officers who are available to advise people seeking to set up "friends" groups.

Value Assessments

Parks have a real value to the community – social, economic, communal – that goes above and beyond being simple open spaces. It was noted that both Sefton and Birmingham Councils have carried out value assessments of their open spaces.

Open Spaces as a therapeutic environment

Comments about the value of “health walks”, some of which take place in Oxford’s parks and open spaces were noted. It is a useful means by which diversity can be encouraged. Leisure and Parks would like to encourage more volunteers and voluntary schemes into the open spaces.

Also noted were comments from the Committee about the value of sensory gardens for people who were visually impaired. .

Recommendation to CEB

The Committee welcomed the strategy and RESOLVED to make the following recommendation to CEB:-

“To achieve the excellent ambition of access and use of our green spaces by all we need to prioritise engagement across all sectors and groups within Oxford’s communities. Significant learning is required in this area and the committee would like to see, as a priority, a focus on this to allow the beneficial outcomes from green spaces to be enjoyed by all. “

25. ENFRANCHISEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT - UPDATE ON PROGRESS

The Enfranchisement and Empowerment Panel submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) that provided an update on its work to date. Councillors Graham Jones and Roy Darke presented this item to the Committee and explained the background.

Enfranchisement

The Panel had initially concentrated its efforts upon the enfranchisement part of its work. It thanked Martin John (and the Election Team) and Mark Fransham for their work and the useful information that both had provided. Thanks and congratulations were also offered to Lois Stock and Mathew Metcalfe for all their hard work and effort on this topic, which was much appreciated by the Panel. There was much here with which the Council could be pleased. Data showed that the City Council had a high return (96.4%) on electoral registration, especially when compared with similar places (such as Cambridge, which was below 90%). It was felt that it would be difficult and overly expensive to try to improve on this. But it would be useful to know why people, who are registered, do not vote.

The Committee observed that voter apathy was a problem, and perhaps one that would best be tackled at an early stage, in schools, with a focus on first time voters. It was agreed that the Panel should not stray too far into this, area as there was a danger that this could evolve into a huge review, which was not the original intention of the Committee when adding this to the Work programme.

Empowerment

The Panel felt that it was time to move on to the empowerment aspect, which was a greater challenge. There was a need to understand more the diversity of Oxford, to appreciate the value of it, to help new arrivals to feel accepted and part of the community, and to know how and where they can access services. This goes beyond the BME community and encompasses small groups such as the Kurds and the Azaris. Many new, small groups may not vote, indeed, they may not be eligible to go on the electoral register, but they use services such as education, and many contribute by their work to our economy.

Next Steps

As a next step, the Panel would like to speak with diverse groups within the community, whether or not they are eligible to go on the electoral register, to find out where they are and what they want from the City Council.

The Panel would also like to ascertain their country of origin, why they chose to come to the UK and in particular Oxford, whether they knew what services were offered and by whom, how to access those services, and for those eligible to vote to ask why they did or did not vote.

The Panel would also analyse when available the latest census results on nationality (the electoral register did not show this) as this could have an impact on low voter registration and turnout.

26. "HELPING THE HIGH STREET" - SUGGESTED FOCUS

The Supporting Local Businesses and the High Street submitted a briefing note (previously circulated, now appended) giving their suggested focus for their work. This had been requested by the Committee at its last meeting. Councillor Bev Clack introduced this item on behalf of the Panel which was considering it.

The Panel thanked Lois Stock for all her help and support for their work.

The Committee noted the Panel's proposed scope and that it intended to look at two District centres in more detail – Headington and Cowley Road. Following further consideration, the Panel felt that it would probably not become too involved in issues around the balance of shops, as it noted that a review would be held in the medium term of district centre frontages which would include examination of the balance of use classes.

It was agreed that:-

- (1) The Panel should, as its next step, talk to traders in both centres in order to obtain a sense of what was good and what was bad about each area;
- (2) The issue could be carried forwards into the next Council/Scrutiny year if necessary.

27. COMMUNITY CENTRES

The Head of Corporate Property submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) giving the Committee an update concerning the maintenance backlog issues at Community Centres. This information had been requested at the previous meeting.

The Committee noted the information and made the following points:-

- (1) Can the appropriate Ward Members and Community Associations be involved in any discussions about spending money on the maintenance of particular Community centres please? There should be more discussion about how and when this money is spent;
- (2) There does not seem to be much discussion with Community associations about forthcoming work on their buildings. This should be addressed;
- (3) Why are some centres prioritised for spending ahead of others – what are the criteria for this?

Resolved that the above should be forwarded to the appropriate Board Member and a response sought.

28. MINUTES

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 28th November 2012.

29. DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved to note the following date:-

4th April 2013.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.35 pm