

Minutes of a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE on Thursday 17 May 2018

www.oxford.gov.uk



Committee members:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Henwood

Councillor Bely-Summers

Councillor Simm

Councillor Arshad

Councillor Fry

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Simmons

Officers:

Stefan Robinson, Scrutiny Officer

James Pickering, Welfare Reform Manager

David Hunt, Commercial Manager

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

None

1. Election of Chair for 2018/19

The Committee resolved to elect Councillor Gant as Chair for the Council year 2018-19.

2. Election of Vice-Chair for 2018/19

The Committee resolved to elect Councillor Henwood as Deputy Chair for the Council year 2018-19.

3. Declarations of interest

None.

4. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed those present to the first meeting of the newly constituted Scrutiny Committee, extending a particular welcome to those who were newly elected Councillors and whose fresh insights and views would be welcome.

5. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 05 April 2018 as a true and accurate record, subject to some minor typographical corrections.

6. Scrutiny Operating Principles and Panel Arrangements

The Scrutiny Officer had submitted a report setting out a draft set of operating principles for the Scrutiny Committee for the 2018/19 municipal year and to establish Standing Panels and appoint Standing Panel Chairs.

Speaking to the report, he drew particular attention to its 4 recommendations. In relation to the Companies' Standing Panel, it was agreed that further clarification about its role in relation to the companies' shareholder (ie the City Executive Board (CEB)

meeting as the shareholder) would be helpful, with particular reference to the information it would have access to. It was noted that consideration might be given to merging the Companies and Finance Panels at some point in the future.

The Committee elected Chairs to the Standing Panels (see below). Other members of the Panels would be agreed at the next meeting of the Committee. The Scrutiny Officer would contact group secretaries for nominations.

With reference to review groups and items for the work plan, the Scrutiny Officer would welcome suggestions for subjects by 21 May. The suggestions would feed into a long list for further consideration on 05 June.

The Scrutiny Officer reminded members of the Committee of his offer to meet them on a 1:1 basis at a mutually convenient time. This might be particularly helpful for new member of the Committee. He had tabled a copy of a new Scrutiny Guide for Councillors which was also being sent to members of the Committee electronically.

The Committee resolved to :

1. **Agree** the Committee Operating Principles for the 2018/19 municipal year.
2. **Agree** to re-establish the Finance, Housing and Companies Standing Panels for the 2018/19 municipal year.
3. **Appoint** the following Panel Chairs: Finance, Cllr Fry; Housing, Cllr Henwood; Companies Cllr Fry.
4. **Note** the schedule of meetings for the 2018/19 municipal year.

7. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to the report which set out the proposed work plan for the 2018/19 municipal year.

He reminded members of the Committee that the content of the plan was for it to determine, subject to the resources available to carry it out. He noted that CEB consideration of the Local Plan had been deferred to September and Scrutiny consideration of it had, therefore, slipped too.

Separately from regular consideration of the Work Plan, the Scrutiny Committee conducts an annual Work Plan review, which will take place at the Committee meeting on 5 June. Committee members were reminded to submit items for the Work Plan longlist to the Scrutiny Officer by 21 May.

8. Review of Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

The Scrutiny Committee had been asked for this item to be included on the agenda for pre-decision scrutiny. The City Executive Board on 22 May would be asked to approve amendments to the current Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) Policy and to note the trends in expenditure detailed in the report.

The Welfare Reform Manager spoke briefly to the report. The principal objective of the DHP policy, (to provide short term financial relief to applicants in order to give them time to find more sustainable solutions) remained unchanged. The Policy had been

reviewed in light of the wider roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and other consequential and related changes.

The fluctuating level of government funding for DHP required a responsive approach to its delivery and an eye to be kept on other welfare changes which might impact upon its use and adjustments to the allocation criteria. Part of the Policy intention was to ensure that its use did not result in liabilities for the Council once funding was either reduced or removed. Unspent allocations for one year could not be carried over to the next.

Issues about the uses of DHPs were inextricably linked with the introduction of UC. It was suggested that the Committee might benefit from a report on the consequences of the latter in due course.

It was noted that the Council did not top up the funds available for DHP, as it was able to do if it wished and as some other authorities did. In this context it was noted that the Homelessness Reserve might be used for such a purpose. The Welfare Reform Manager noted that a separate sum of £25k was available in the current financial year to assist residents, on a case by case basis, who are particularly adversely affected by the introduction of UC. Despite this, it was agreed that representations should be made to the CEB to top up the DHP fund if it was considered that there was further need which could be met by additional funds being made available.

9. Oxford Town Hall

The Scrutiny Committee had asked for a report to enable it to consider how the Council can improve the profile and accessibility of the Town Hall.

David Hunt, Commercial Manager, Community Services introduced the report. There had been recent audit of the building's accessibility, the final report of which was not yet available. The audit had been conducted by a team with experience of addressing the challenges of access in listed and otherwise historically valuable college buildings in the city. The Town Hall, as a Grade 2 listed building, presented some interesting challenges when it came to matters of access and some pragmatic decisions had to be made about the extent of some otherwise desirable changes whether on grounds of cost or the limitations imposed by listed status. There was agreement however on the desirability of treating those rooms available to the public as a priority.

The recently confirmed programme of a £3m refurbishment of the museum would help affirm the Town Hall as a cultural hub for the City. The imperative of accessibility had been "baked into the process" of its development to ensure the highest levels of participation once open. Thought was being given as to how the attraction of the new museum could be used, in turn, to promote other aspects of the Town Hall. Cllr Simm noted that thought was being given to linking the new museum with the City's other museums and so generating the idea of a "Museum Quarter."

The balance to be struck between generating income through lettings; free use by community groups (which have a positive impact on Oxford's residents); and use to meet the Council's meeting and other needs was always a difficult one. It was "difficult

to turn away bookings.” David and his colleagues were in touch with members of the communities team about how best to promote the use by community groups.

In a wide ranging discussion about accessibility concerns were raised about the practice of charging for the Town Hall’s voice enhancers and of levying a £5 per capita charge for groups wishing to bring their own food. There was a strong view that residents in some part of the City did not regard the City centre (and therefore the Town Hall) as ‘their’ town centre, gravitating, rather, to Templars Square for example. It was noted that the new Museum was being developed in a way which deliberately sought to break away from the customary ‘town and gown’ model with a much more inclusive approach which embraced all parts, aspects and communities of the City, past and present. It was hoped that this would encourage more local people to engage with the museum than hitherto.

It was noted that the agreement for letting the Town Hall flat was subject to a break clause which was being exercised to bring it back under Council control with effect from July 2019 to allow the necessary museum work to take place. This break would provide an opportunity to consider a new arrangement that might provide better value.

There was a strong perception in some quarters that the Town Hall was not seen as a welcoming, notably by the BAME community. The comparable practice in some other towns and cities (eg Luton and Birmingham) was seen as much more inclusive. It would be useful to see a breakdown of lettings by users. The Commercial Manager said that all groups were welcome; feedback forms reflected a 72% “Excellent” response to the service provided; and that all complaints were followed up.

In conclusion it was agreed that the following recommendations should be put to the City Executive Board:

1. That the charging schedule for rental facilities in the Town Hall be reviewed to ensure that it does not discriminate against any person with a disability or impairment. For example, there should be no charge for the use of voice enhancers;
2. That data should be collected on the number, type and proportion of community groups using the Town Hall, relative to the number of private and council bookings. These data should be used to analyse what barriers might exist to different user groups, and targeted promotional activities should be undertaken to engage more effectively with those underrepresented. These data should include:
 - a) The type of user groups using the Town Hall;
 - b) Where the user groups are geographically based; and
 - c) How often each user group books rooms at the Town Hall
3. That consideration be given to how key public spaces within the Town Hall can be made equally accessible for all visitors.

It was also agreed that the access audit report should come back to the Committee when complete.

10. Report back on recommendations

The Committee noted the response by the City Executive Board to its recommendations in relation to Health Inequalities.

11. Dates of future meetings

Meetings for 2018 are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 05 June
- 03 July
- 30 July (provisional)
- 06 September
- 08 October
- 06 November
- 04 December

Standing Panels

Housing Standing Panel: 05 July, 11 October, 12 November

Finance Standing Panel: 04 July, 10 September, 06 December

Companies Panel (*Provisional dates*) 07 June, 31 July, 11 September, 29 October, 12 December, 03 January 2019

All meetings start at 6.00 pm

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.35 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 5 June 2018