

# Minutes of a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE on Tuesday 5 February 2019

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## Committee members:

|                            |                                   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Councillor Gant (Chair)    | Councillor Arshad                 |
| Councillor Bely-Summers    | Councillor Curran                 |
| Councillor Djafari-Marbini | Councillor Donnelly               |
| Councillor Fry             | Councillor Kennedy                |
| Councillor Lygo            | Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair) |
| Councillor Simmons         | Councillor Harris                 |

## Officers:

Alison Cassidy, Anti-Social Behaviour Investigation Team - Case Manager  
Stefan Robinson, Scrutiny Officer  
David Rundle, Private Rented Team Leader  
Bruce Thompson, Building Operations Manager  
Paul Wilding, Programme Manager Revenue & Benefits  
John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

## Also present:

Councillor Tom Hayes, Board Member for Safer, Greener, Environment.  
Councillor Linda Smith, Deputy Leader Board Member for Leisure and Housing,

## Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Altaf-Khan and for whom Councillor Harris was attending as a substitute

## 84. Declarations of interest

None.

## 85. Chair's Announcements

The Chair explained that the Growth Board's Scrutiny Panel had met recently to consider the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan Regulation 18 Consultation Document as this Committee had done at its previous meeting. The Growth Board's Scrutiny Panel, as representative of all the authorities involved, had been able to go further than this Committee and recommended the redrafting of some aspirations and goals within the document.

## **86. Minutes**

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2018 as a true and accurate record subject to the addition of Councillor Kennedy to the list of those present.

## **87. Work Plan and Forward Plan**

The Scrutiny Officer said the update to the Corporate Plan had been moved to the agenda for the March meeting of the Committee as the report to the City Executive Board had similarly been delayed by one month.

A progress report following the No Local Connection Review was scheduled for the June meeting, and the Committee agreed to schedule the second part of the JSSP Regulation 18 Consultation Document concerning locations for growth for its July meeting.

The Scrutiny Officer had been informed that the Fusion Lifestyle Audit Report, scheduled for the March meeting, would be dealt with as a verbal update because the information required for the audit of performance data would not be available in time. The Committee was disappointed to hear this, having been informed, previously, that the data would be available. The Scrutiny Officer was asked to convey the Committee's view to the relevant officers and ask for every effort to be made to provide a written report for the meeting.

With reference to the recent Council motion recognising "Climate Emergency" the Committee agreed that an item on the subject should be noted, in advance, for consideration as part of the next council year's Committee Work Plan.

## **88. Report back on recommendations**

The Chair was pleased to report the City Executive Board's agreement to the Committee's recommendations in relation to the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan Regulation 18 document. The Committee agreed that the Chair should ask to see the draft council response to the consultation.

## **89. Appointments to the Housing Panel**

The appointment to a vacancy on the Housing Panel fell to the Liberal Democrat Group. The Chair announced that the position would be filled by Councillor Liz Wade.

The election to the position of Chair of the Housing Panel fell to the Committee. Councillor Bely-Summers was nominated and in the absence of other nominees and, on being put to a vote, was unanimously appointed to the position.

## **90. Oxford Rent Guarantee Scheme**

Councillor Linda Smith, Board Member for Leisure and Housing said that while dealing with the consequences of homelessness and rough sleeping were a proper Council priority, the need to prevent homelessness in the first place was fundamental.

The Systems Change Manager (Homelessness Prevention), Paul Wilding, said that the Oxford Rent Guarantee (ORG) was a means of supporting those at risk of homelessness. The effectiveness of the previous model which focussed simply on finding possible accommodation was compromised by the difficulties of affordability in the City. ORG worked in partnership with landlords for whom, while the rent may be less than the market rate, there was a guaranteed rental income paid three months in advance. Coaching was provided to tenants as part of the ORG to help them gain future financial independence and better resilience to prevent future homelessness. This important element of the ORG was modelled on the support provided by the Welfare Reform Team.

Over 73 families had benefitted from the pilot and lessons learnt from it had triggered some minor adjustments to existing Council systems.

In discussion it was noted that ORG's focus had been on families as that was where the Council's first duty lay. It was agreed that thought should be given to expanding the scheme by making a connection with the Lord Mayor's Deposit Scheme which supports single people. Accommodation provided through the ORG outside the City was usually within the County and took account of the need for good transport connections with the City. Placements made out of county were often at the request of individuals who had family connections elsewhere. One officer was dedicated to out of area work.

Despite the work of officers to attract more landlords to participate in the scheme, the lack of properties remained the biggest stumbling block to helping more families. The costs of the scheme were counterbalanced by costs which would otherwise be incurred elsewhere, though the committee noted that no formal analysis of this position had been done. Participating landlords signed up to the scheme for 12 months at a time and none had failed to renew at the end of the initial term.

The Committee expressed great concern at the longer term future of the Council's homelessness reserves, and how this might affect delivery of the scheme in future. A paper on the opportunity costs of continuing to pursue the scheme or not would be welcome.

The introduction of Universal Credit touched on this matter as well as many others. It was agreed that the suggestion of a review group to look at the consequences of its introduction should be noted in advance for consideration as part of the next council year's Committee's Work Plan.

The Chair thanked the Board Member and the Systems Change Manager for their contribution to the discussion following which the Committee would make a recommendation to the City Executive Board that the scheme should be expanded to better align with the Lord Mayor's Deposit Scheme and the needs of single people at risk of homelessness. The Committee would also register concern at the scheme's apparent dependence on Council's homelessness reserves.

## 91. Graffiti Prevention and Removal

The Committee had before it two reports, one dealing principally with street art, and the other with the policy on graffiti removal as delivered by Oxford Direct Services.

Councillor Hayes, Board Member for Safer, Greener, Environment introduced the item by emphasising the distinction between street art and graffiti. He said the former can be a valuable expression of the values and views of a community and have a very positive effect, the latter is an unacceptable blight. The amount of graffiti had increased considerably in recent years but so had the rate of its removal.

Councillor Chapman, Board Member for Customer Focused Services said Oxford Direct Services (ODS) was intensifying its work to remove graffiti, responding quickly to new incidents and working hard to address a backlog. Central to this new regime was a revision to the previous policy which had required owners of all premises affected by graffiti to pay for its removal. Owners of smaller/private/domestic properties were not now required to pay for removal, although permission to do so was still needed. This facilitated swifter removal and removed the need for sometimes protracted and unsuccessful attempts to persuade owners to pay.

A pragmatic approach was called for in determining whether a charge should be made in a particular case. Dealing with graffiti on buildings/ items owned by utilities could be problematic given those organisations' policies often resisted intervention by third parties. The loss of income from the new approach was considered by the Board Member to be probably marginal. There was sufficient budgetary provision within ODS for the purpose at the moment on the basis of the present level of demand.

The City Centre and Street Scene Service Manager said that Street Scene teams dealt with 'low level' graffiti as part of their usual day to day work. New working practices were soon to be introduced in which Street Scene colleagues would have responsibility for a particular part of the City and would, as a result, be better placed to spot new graffiti and deal with it quickly. Reports of graffiti from members of the public were dealt with as soon as possible and if, for example, racist or sexist, treated as urgent priorities. Owners of larger/commercial properties failing to cooperate would, if necessary, be faced with fixed penalty notices.

The Regulatory Services and Community Safety Case Manager said that following a significant increase in the amount of graffiti in 2015, an appreciative inquiry, involving a significant number of stakeholders resulted in agreement that the Council would provide free wall space for local artists to use. Officers said the spaces used in this way were well regarded by local communities and, once established, were not often damaged by subsequent graffiti. Engagement of and consultation with local communities was essential before proceeding with such a scheme as was the case in relation to the wall surrounding the Convent of Incarnation in Meadow Lane mentioned in the report.

In discussion it was suggested that the Council might become aware of potential sites with free wall space via its role as planning authority and therefore becoming aware of building sites with hoarding. The protective shutters on commercial premises might also offer other free wall space.

The lack of adequate youth provision in the City as a result of prior decisions by the County Council was regretted and thought likely to be a contributory factor to the increase in the amount of graffiti.

The Committee noted that judgements about the visual quality of street art was subjective but the Council was fortunate to have access, through contacts established by officers, to the skills of a number of local and talented artists. Deterioration of murals on permanent surfaces can be (and is) ameliorated by overpainting.

Councillors expressed mixed views on the benefits of street art, noting that it worked best where it was welcomed by a diversity of residents and set up in appropriate locations.

The Chair thanked the Board Members and officers for their contribution to a useful and full discussion. There had been an appreciation by the Committee both of the work done by Street Scene in tackling graffiti and of the value of well-placed street art.

It was agreed that the Committee should recommend consideration of commercial protective shutters as another source of free wall space and request a further appreciative inquiry, focussing on the issues concerning Meadow Lane described in the report.

## **92. Report of the Budget Review Group 2019/20**

Councillor Fry spoke to the report before the Committee, drawing attention to a few matters in particular. While the Council was powerless to challenge the proportion of business rates it retained, the regrettable fact that it would retain a mere 8.5% of them should be noted as should the fact that this small share was under threat from the "Fair Funding Review." Maintenance of support for twinning arrangements was important in the present environment as was the desirability of being clear about environmental consequences of Council plans. The use of the Council's homelessness reserves, touched upon in the previous item, was a matter of great concern and the recommendation to the City Executive Board about it should be expanded to request a contingency plan to deal with the consequences of its significant use. It might, for example, be necessary to revisit the Council's decision to maintain the Council Tax Reduction scheme.

Subject to some points of clarification and minor amendments, the Committee endorsed the report for submission to the City Executive Board on 12 February 2019.

### **93. Dates of future meetings**

The next meetings of the Scrutiny Committee and its panels are scheduled as follows:

#### **Scrutiny Committee**

- 05 March 2019
- 02 April 2019
- 15 May 2019

#### **Standing Panels**

- Housing Standing Panel: 4 March, 8 April
- Finance Standing Panel: 4 April, 01 July
- Companies Panel: 28 February

All meetings start at 6.00 pm

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm**

**Chair .....**

**Date: Tuesday 5 March 2019**