

COMMUNITIES AND PARTNERSHIP SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 28 November 2012

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

OFFICERS PRESENT: Lois Stock (Democratic and Electoral Services Officer) and Pat Jones (Principal Scrutiny Officer)

9. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

10. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None

11. STANDING ITEM: WORK PROGRAMME

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

Introduction

She explained that she would include the Forward Plan from now on, so that the Committee could decide if it wished to pre-scrutinise a particular item. It was agreed that the Committee would see item 34 on the Forward Plan – the Green Spaces Strategy – at its meeting on 30th January 2013.

The Committee noted the progress on the Work Programme to date. It also noted that the Housing Panel had appointed a Tenants' Representative, Linda Hill, who has started to work with the Panel.

The Committee also noted that work would begin on the issue of Local Celebratory Events later in the year. Work on Young People and Work was also ongoing and a date for a meeting of that panel would be set for the New Year.

Update on the Education Panel

A number of schools have engaged with the City Council's investment in primary education. The Panel wishes to form a relationship with one of the schools so that it can monitor the progress and development of the scheme as a case study. The selection of school very much depended on which school was willing to take part. The Panel would prefer to study a school that had no support from any other source as it wished to judge the true effect of the new scheme.

In response to a suggestion from the Chair, Councillor Altaf Khan, it was agreed that the Principal Scrutiny Officer would obtain information concerning school places, but this would not be included in the Panel's brief (other than as a matter of information) as this was very much an Oxfordshire County Council matter.

Resolved to note the Work Programme

12. STANDING ITEM:REPORT BACK ON THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The Principal Scrutiny Officer introduced this item and presented the report to the Committee.

Resolved to note that the report and recommendations would be presented at City Executive Board on 5th December 2012.

13. SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES AND THE HIGH STREET

The Head of Law and Governance submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended), providing an update to the Committee on the work carried out by the Panel that was investigating issues around the health of Oxford's shopping areas.

Councillors Clack, Wolff and Wilkinson were the three Panel members. Councillor Wilkinson presented the report to the Committee and explained the background to it. The Committee noted that the Panel had decided to focus on the district shopping areas as defined by the Core Strategy. These were Headington, Summertown, Blackbird Leys and Cowley Road.

Introduction

The Panel members explained that, although a lot of initial work had been carried out, there were still further areas to explore, including:-

- Exploration of the balance of planning use classes;
- Community use of empty shops – district shopping areas should not be just about shopping, they should involve and include the community too;
- Council powers regarding community use of empty shops;
- Access to district centres by walking, cycling and public transport;
- Holistic ideas for shopping areas as laid out in the *Portas Review*;

The Panel wished to continue its work, and invited comments from the Committee regarding its future direction.

Comments from the Committee

In response, the Committee made the following observations:-

- The work carried out so far is useful, but the economic context needs to be woven into any future work as this affects shopping patterns;

- The Council is a landlord for many retail units and it has a duty to maximise its income – how can this be balanced with the desire to put empty shops into community use?
- There are issues too with major retailers (big multi nationals) and small independent shops competing in the same market;
- Need to ensure equality of access for all groups and need to think about how we could use district centres to create hubs for voluntary and community groups;
- It is noteworthy that our vacancy rate is very low;
- Would be useful to know the number of independent traders in an area and if this had changed significantly over time. It would be useful to measure the number of charity shops;
- Vitality is often measured by “dead” frontages (that is, shops given over to estate agents, insurance brokers etc), so it would be useful to look at the percentage of shops that fall into this category;

Executive Board Member comments

The Committee welcomed Councillor Colin Cook to the meeting.

Councillor Cook observed that Oxford was the most desired retail location in the UK, and that the City had very low vacancy rates. A monitoring report to CEB had revealed that there had been a decrease in vacancy rates in the previous three years

He did not feel that the Council could have much impact on shopping cycles – and shopping trends were cyclical. In modern days there was huge competition from the internet for shopping that would be delivered straight to your door – almost a throwback to the Victorian period when shopping was delivered to households.

It would be very difficult for the City to buck the national and international trend.

Committee response

The Committee acknowledged Councillor Cook’s points, but did not agree that current shopping trends should be accepted as inevitable, and as something about which nothing could be done.

There is a need to think about district shopping centres more critically – what are they there for, and how can they be used to add to the individuality of Oxford, and, indeed, create a sense of “what is Oxford?”. District centres all have different personalities and we should seek to nurture that. There are retail businesses that do buck the trend – what is special about them and what do they do differently?

Next steps

The Committee was happy to see this work continue further. It felt that it would be valuable to look at one, or perhaps two, of the district centres in more detail rather than trying to examine all of them. One aspect for consideration is their vitality – does this reflect the definition of “vitality” in the Core Strategy?

The Panel should also consider the impact of large chains on our district centres, and examine specific proposals to help independents and small retail shops. It's important to see how shop use in areas has changed.

Resolved:-

- (1) The Panel should return to the next meeting with a proposal for the way forwards; focussing on 1 or 2 district centres and including some exploration of issues around small and independent shops;
- (2) Panel members will decide which and how many district centres to examine

14. COMMUNITY CENTRES AND COMMUNITY COHESION

Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods manager) submitted a report (previously circulated, now appended) providing an update on Community Centres.

Introduction

The Committee welcomed Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager) and Mark Spriggs (Neighbourhood Locality Officer) to the meeting.

Angela Cristofoli informed the Committee that she was buying in support from "Community Matters" as this was targeted help for people associated with Community Centres. It was important to recognise that Community centres are largely run and managed by volunteers. Every centre had been audited and user satisfaction surveys have been carried out. She would like to investigate in more depth who uses the centres and for what purposes. It is suggested that an Oxford Standard for Community Centres is developed.

Additional information

The following information was provided in response to questions from members of the Committee:-

- It is noted that the Council should be careful that it does not take away business from local concerns – for example cafes – where similar ventures are run in the Community Centres;
- There are internet cafes at several Community Centres – for example at Blackbird Leys, Barton and Northway. There are work clubs at Barton and Littlemore;
- The Communities and Neighbourhoods team is also trying to work in partnership with the library at Blackbird Leys – they are trying to complement ventures and activities already in existence, and they want to help people learn how to do more things online;
- Some Community Centres are providing outlets for enterprise, such as a cake baking project at Wood Farm that is known as "Muffin Mums";
- Recycling at Community Centres is a complicated procedure, but it is hoped that all centres will be signed up for this shortly;

- The Council's vision for the future of Community centres is a much wider topic for debate, but the main aim for now is to have all the centres functioning well. There is the question too of their geographical setting – are they in the right place in their community?
- Asset management is addressing the question of the maintenance backlog at the Community Centres, and Communities and Neighbourhoods is working in partnership with them on this. A maintenance plan for Community centres has been drawn up.
- A lot of work is being done with volunteers – on recruiting them, supporting them and developing their skills;
- It is noted that Marston does not have a designated Community centre, but it does have Mortimer Hall and a Scout Hut, and outreach work is ongoing in the area;
- Although the comments about the importance of any buildings being pleasant to be in were noted, it is important to ask who measures this. Could this be part of the customer satisfaction survey perhaps?
- It would be useful for Community Associations to visit other Community Centres in other parts of the country in order to look at examples of best practice and see for themselves how things could be done differently;
- The Council needs to make its buildings safe, and it needs to pay heed to child protection issues, but it is important not to frighten potential volunteers away! There is an issue with attracting younger volunteers, but there will be a volunteer fair in February and some work is being carried out with student volunteers;
- Lots of Community Associations are now sharing best practice and trying to build up their support networks.

The Committee expressed the view that the health check carried out by Communities and Neighbourhoods was preferable to the “Visible” standard for Community Centres.

Angela Cristofoli explained that her team was working on a scheme to define a minimum standard for Oxford's Community Centres. There would be an agreed route for assessment on a gold, silver or bronze scale. Discussions are now taking place about the establishment of such a scheme. The Committee felt that this would be a very valuable move, and that it would like to see a simple agreement with Community Centres that defined what was expected from them and what support they could expect in return.

Resolved:-

- (1) To thank Angela Cristofoli and Mark Spriggs for their attendance, and to thank the whole team for its valuable work;
- (2) To note that a conditions survey has been carried out, and to request that a copy of it and a copy of the maintenance programme be supplied to the Committee.

15. AREA FORUMS - REVIEW OF THE FIRST YEAR.

The Scrutiny Review Panel submitted a report concerning the first year review of Area Forums. Panel members Councillors Sanders and Wilkinson asked Principal Scrutiny Officer Pat Jones to introduce this report to the

Committee. The Committee was asked to note that the report and its findings related specifically to the last Council year (2011 to 2012) and what the Panel observed then. It was also noted that Councillors Campbell and Sinclair had joined the Panel at a later stage.

Introduction

Pat Jones explained the report and its finding to the Committee. Councillor Sanders emphasised that every Area Forum was different, some were well attended, others less so, and that one size did not fit all. There were many ways of engaging with the public besides Area Forums, and each area should consider and use what worked best for its particular communities. She had found that the Communities and Neighbourhoods team offered superb support to the Forums, and was sure that this had made a difference. Councillor Sanders believed that it was not necessary for the Forums to meet unless there was a specific reason to do so, and when they did meet, it was desirable for there to be fresh input from different people, rather than having the same point of view put forward every time.

Councillor Wilkinson added that in some areas the Forums were enormous in size, and she felt that for some issues it would be better to break them down into smaller geographical units.

Angela Cristofoli (Communities and Neighbourhoods Manager) clarified that her team was there to support each Area Forum in the way it found most helpful. Each area had 4 fixed sessions per year, and resources depended very much on what people wished to achieve from their Area Forum. It was up to each Forum to determine how it used its meetings and its resources.

Committee comments

The following comments were made by the Committee:-

- (1) Forums can be effective if they are managed well;
- (2) It's important that the needs of the local community are central to debates at Forum level;
- (3) There are some excellent tenant and Residents Associations within the City and these can be more effective than an Area Forum;
- (4) Some Forums cover a very big area and perhaps this limits their effectiveness;
- (5) The Council has very poor engagement with the public, and this is likely to continue until powers and budgets are given back to areas in a similar manner to the old Area Committees;
- (6) There is a need to link the future of the Area Forums to an overall review of Council Governance;
- (7) The 4th recommendation listed in the report should be first;
- (8) We have a lot to learn from each other. It would be helpful to have a compulsory training session on Councillors as local leaders, then we might be better placed to know what resources we should be seeking from the Communities and Neighbourhoods team;
- (9) Not convinced of the usefulness of Area Forums, but believe that the Neighbourhood Officers do a great job by supporting their various areas;

- (10) We want to work with people in the City, but are not sure that Area Forums are the best way to do it. We need to identify ways for members to interact with the community first;
- (11) Training is very important. Good chairing skills are key. Councillors need training to become community leaders. People want to see proactive outcomes from their Area Forum meetings.

Councillor Wolff submitted some amendments to the recommendations. Councillor Jones indicated that he supported these. However, the Committee did not support these.

Resolved that the following be **recommended** to CEB on 5th December 2012:-

- (1) That an informed debate takes place between Councillors in their area grouping and community development officers to agree how Councillors' community leadership roles can best be delivered and supported in their areas, within the Councillor, officer and likely resident resources available;
- (2) That the Council considers within its governance structures how the community voice can be heard in a way that allows:
 - Ideas, issues and solutions from communities to be heard and considered by decision makers through their ward councillors in a timely manner.
 - For service and officer protocols to exist that link community views within service construction and outcomes.
 - In all circumstances for the views and challenges of communities to be responded to via their local councillors or decision makers whichever is more appropriate.
- (3) For the various mechanisms already available to councillors to champion the views of their communities within the organisation to be detailed clearly within protocols and made clear to all.;
- (4) That the Chief Executive facilitates a cross party debate on the various roles played by elected councillors as ward representatives and members of the Council. The aim of these debates would be to get broad agreement on the expectations and requirements to allow training and support programmes to be designed, put in place and command the respect and engagement of all.

16. MINUTES

Resolved to confirm as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 18th June 2012.

17. DATES AND TIMES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Resolved to note the following dates:-

30th January 2013

4th April 2013.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.18 pm