

# SCRUTINY REPORTS FOR CITY EXECUTIVE BOARD - THURSDAY 11 JUNE 2015

## 4. Scrutiny Committee Reports

The following Scrutiny Committee reports will be submitted as a supplementary agenda:

- a. City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order
- b. Covered Market Leasing Strategy
- c. Support for Businesses in the City Centre, report of the Local Economy Panel
- d. Housing Asset Management Strategy, report of the Housing Panel (provisional)
- e. Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Scheme, report of the Housing Panel (provisional)

### a) Support for Businesses in the City Centre (Pages 5 - 26)

The Scrutiny Officer has submitted a report which presents the recommendations of the Local Economy Panel.

#### **Scrutiny Committee Recommendations to the City Executive Board**

1. We recommend that the City Council:
  - a) Ensures that information about appealing to the Valuation Office Agency is made available to local businesses. In particular, this information should be communicated to all independent traders who may be affected by the major redevelopments taking place in Oxford.
  - b) Takes any opportunities to join with other local authorities to lobby the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for more council controls over business rates.
2. We recommend that the City Council works with the County Council through the Town Team to agree on a single united channel of regular communications to businesses, such as about travel disruptions, supported by a single online source of information.
3. We recommend that the City Council develops a more corporate approach to communicating with businesses, including guidance for all departments whose work has an impact or involvement with businesses. This could take the form of defining a central point of

contact within the City Council, which can identify the appropriate unit to respond on specific issues, including the County Council as appropriate.

4. We recommend that the City Council works with partners through the Town Team to reinforce the coordinated overall marketing and publicity campaign for Oxford in ways that cover all major potential audiences.
5. We recommend that the City Council develops a one stop shop function for events. This exercise should include a review of the costs and processes associated with aspects such as permission for road closures, stall licences and permits for distributing leaflets.
6. We recommend that the City Council produces a simple analysis of the costs and benefits of pop up shops to landlords and the City Council.
7. We recommend that the City Council takes a lead in establishing and facilitating a city centre commercial property landlord forum. This would be intended to bring together the owners of commercial properties, including the City Council, to ensure that there is a coordinated approach towards issues affecting the city centre, such as the minimisation of the time during which premises are empty. The forum could be chaired by the Leader of the Council, linked to the work of the Town Team and constituted based on the model of the previous Pensions and Language School forums. We also suggest that its membership should include a representative of each political group and that City Councillors should be able to observe meetings of the forum.
8. We recommend that the City Council leads on the development of a long term strategy for the city centre as a whole. This should include a commitment to developing and supporting vibrant and distinct city quarters away from prime sites, in locations such as Gloucester Green, Jericho/Observatory Quarter, Market Street, Broad Street and a possible arts quarter around the Ashmolean Museum.
9. We recommend that dedicated officer time is allocated to the development and delivery of this city centre strategy. This could be funded wholly or in part via a BID and by additional business rates income that the role will generate, via reduced voids in commercial properties.
10. We recommend that the City Council's next Asset Strategy (2016-2020) builds upon the aim (not always presently achieved) of utilising City Council assets in ways that can provide wider strategic benefits to the city centre. The Asset Strategy could provide clear guidelines on the use of City Council-owned commercial premises to ensure the diversity and vitality of the city's wider retail offer.

**b) Scrutiny Report City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO)  
(Pages 27 - 30)**

The Scrutiny Officer has submitted a report which presents recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee on the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order.

**Scrutiny Committee Recommendations to the City Executive Board**

1. We recommend that an Enforcement Code of Conduct for Officers should be produced and that this code should be in place and in the public domain before any enforcement actions are taken under the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order.
2. We ask the City Executive Board to note that a minority of the Scrutiny Committee opposed aspects of the PSPO most notably the inclusion of non-aggressive begging and busking in the PSPO.
3. We recommend that the existing 'Code of Conduct for Busking and Street Entertaining in

Oxford' should be reviewed and revised to provide a more comprehensive "Guide to Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford". This guide should be accessible to buskers, street entertainers, businesses and the public, and draw on examples of good practice from other cities, as well as input from stakeholders such as the Musicians Union. It should be in place before any enforcement actions are taken under the PSPO.

4. We recommend that officers are instructed to look at the differential equalities impact of the PSPO proposals, for example the behaviour of sleeping in public toilets, having regard for example to safeguarding concerns for vulnerable adults.

**c) Scrutiny Report Covered Market Leasing Strategy (Pages 31 - 32)**

The Scrutiny Officer has submitted a report which presents recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee on the Covered Market Leasing Strategy

**Scrutiny Committee Recommendations to the City Executive Board**

We recommend that the City Executive Board approve the updated Covered Market Leasing Strategy 2015 with the following amendments:

- a) The word 'discouraged' in paragraph 4.4 is strengthened to 'avoided'.
- b) The word 'typically' in the sixth bullet point of paragraph 4.9 is changed to 'usually'. It could also be stated that exceptions will be considered for larger independent retailers that originate from Oxford.

**d) Scrutiny Report Housing Asset Management Strategy (Pages 33 - 34)**

The Scrutiny Officer has submitted a report which presents recommendations from the Housing Panel on the Housing Asset Management Strategy

**Recommendation of the Housing Panel to the City Executive Board:**

We note that a number City Council owned garages are not in use and recommend that the City Council reviews how it could make better use of these assets (for example as sites for new affordable housing or free off street car parking for residents), treating several garage sites as a virtual site. Consideration should be given to explicitly stating this aim, currently implied, in the Asset Management Strategy.

**e) Scrutiny Report Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) Licensing Scheme (Pages 35 - 38)**

The Scrutiny Officer has submitted a report which presents recommendations from the Housing Panel on the Review of the HMO Licensing Scheme

**Housing Panel Recommendations to the City Executive Board**

1. We recommend that the City Council renews the HMO licensing scheme in its entirety for a further 5 years (option 3). Consideration should be given to appropriate incentives and disincentives for landlords, and to the balance between taking a more pro-active approach to compliance whilst continuing efforts to extend the licensing scheme to cover more HMOs.

2. We note that the City Council is developing a Corporate Enforcement Policy and recommend that:

- a) Enforcement within the Private Rented Sector is a corporate priority,
- b) The Policy recognises that the City Council should take a different approach to enforcement in different sectors (e.g. Private Rented Sector, Public Spaces Protection Orders, etc.), rather than a one size fits all approach.

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**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 June 2015**

**Report of: The Scrutiny Committee**

**Title of Report: Support for Businesses in the City Centre**

## **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present the recommendations of the Local Economy Panel.

**Key decision?** No

**Scrutiny Lead Member:** Councillor James Fry

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Bob Price, Leader and Executive Member for Corporate Strategy, Economic Development and Planning

**Policy Framework:** Corporate Plan 2015-19 - Vibrant, sustainable economy

### **Recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:**

1. We recommend that the City Council:

- a) Ensures that information about appealing to the Valuation Office Agency is made available to local businesses. In particular, this information should be communicated to all independent traders who may be affected by the major redevelopments taking place in Oxford.
- b) Takes any opportunities to join with other local authorities to lobby the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for more council controls over business rates.

2. We recommend that the City Council works with the County Council through the Town Team to agree on a single united channel of regular communications to businesses, such as about travel disruptions, supported by a single online source of information.

3. We recommend that the City Council develops a more corporate approach to communicating with businesses, including guidance for all departments whose work has an impact or involvement with businesses. This could take the form of defining a central point of contact within the City Council, which can identify the appropriate unit to respond on specific issues, including the County Council as appropriate.

4. We recommend that the City Council works with partners through the Town Team to reinforce the coordinated overall marketing and publicity campaign for Oxford in ways that cover all major potential audiences.
5. We recommend that the City Council develops a one stop shop function for events. This exercise should include a review of the costs and processes associated with aspects such as permission for road closures, stall licences and permits for distributing leaflets.
6. We recommend that the City Council produces a simple analysis of the costs and benefits of pop up shops to landlords and the City Council.
7. We recommend that the City Council takes a lead in establishing and facilitating a city centre commercial property landlord forum. This would be intended to bring together the owners of commercial properties, including the City Council, to ensure that there is a coordinated approach towards issues affecting the city centre, such as the minimisation of the time during which premises are empty. The forum could be chaired by the Leader of the Council, linked to the work of the Town Team and constituted based on the model of the previous Pensions and Language School forums. We also suggest that its membership should include a representative of each political group and that City Councillors should be able to observe meetings of the forum.
8. We recommend that the City Council leads on the development of a long term strategy for the city centre as a whole. This should include a commitment to developing and supporting vibrant and distinct city quarters away from prime sites, in locations such as Gloucester Green, Jericho/Observatory Quarter, Market Street, Broad Street and a possible arts quarter around the Ashmolean Museum.
9. We recommend that dedicated officer time is allocated to the development and delivery of this city centre strategy. This could be funded wholly or in part via a BID and by additional business rates income that the role will generate, via reduced voids in commercial properties.
10. We recommend that the City Council's next Asset Strategy (2016-2020) builds upon the aim (not always presently achieved) of utilising City Council assets in ways that can provide wider strategic benefits to the city centre. The Asset Strategy could provide clear guidelines on the use of City Council-owned commercial premises to ensure the diversity and vitality of the city's wider retail offer.

## **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Scope of the Local Economy Review

Appendix 2 – Town Team responses to Local Economy Scrutiny Panel

Appendix 3 – Executive response

## **Foreword from the Chair of the Local Economy Panel**

The Panel was formed to examine the situation of small and medium enterprises, in particular, in and near the city centre during a time of major developments which will affect the trading environment while construction occurs. The Panel considered how the City Council could make the city centre even more attractive to the public and to local businesses.

We would like to thank Andrew Brown for the amount of work he put into his role as Secretary to the Group. The Panel is intended to complement the initiatives of the Town Team and would like to thank Laurie-Jane Taylor, the City Centre Manager and a lead member of the Oxford Town Team for the enthusiastic help that she has provided to the Panel during its deliberations.

## **Introduction**

1. The Local Economy Panel is a cross-party working group established by Oxford City Council's Scrutiny Committee during the 2014/15 municipal year. Its membership comprises Councillors Fry (Chair), Benjamin, Darke, and Gotch.

## **Background**

2. Oxford city centre is entering a critical time, with three years or more of major redevelopments taking place in key strategic locations, such as the Westgate Shopping Centre and Oxford Station, as well as numerous road works. City centres also have to respond to competition from out of town supermarkets and retail parks, as well as from other towns and cities.
3. A key ambition of Oxford City Council is to move beyond being a service delivery organisation to becoming a 'leader of place' through partnership working and collaboration. This means that the City Council wants to be widely recognised as being the leading authority and voice for Oxford.

## **Terms of reference**

4. The Panel met four times from January to May 2015 to investigate the following lines of enquiry. These were agreed by the Panel at its first meeting in January and subsequently signed off by the Scrutiny Committee:
  1. *What can the City Council do to mitigate disruption to the city centre economy while major developments are taking place? How can communications be improved for lasting benefit to residents and visitors?*
  2. *What scope does the City Council have to minimise the time shop units are left empty, and to improve the appearance of empty units?*

5. The city centre is broadly speaking the geographical area that covers the Holywell and Carfax wards, with the High Street, St Aldate's, Queen Street and Cornmarket being the major roads centred on Carfax. We chose to focus on the city centre on the basis that it is going through a significant period of change and is of interest to Oxford's economy as a whole. We recognise that there is also a role for the City Council in promoting district centres in Oxford, some of which also have issues with disruption from major new developments in the city and with empty shops, but these centres are outside the scope of this review.
6. The Panel also recognises that transport is a major issue for Oxford and its economy. However, given that we have limited scope to influence transport, which is largely a County Council function, we chose to focus on transport only to the extent that it relates to the first line of enquiry.

### **Methods of investigation**

7. The findings of the Panel have been informed by verbal evidence provided by officers and witnesses at meetings, as well as by written submissions and desk research. The Panel has:
  - Met the Retail Group, a working groups of the Oxford Town Team,
  - Reviewed written submissions from members of the Oxford Town Team,
  - Held a discussion with two major city centre landlords,
  - Held discussions with council officers,
  - Reviewed briefing notes and responses to written questions provided by council officers.

### **Findings**

#### **Mitigating disruption and improving communications**

##### How other local authorities have responded

8. The City Centre Manager made enquiries into what some other local authorities have done to mitigate the effects of major city centre developments. We were advised that no particular steps had been taken in the cities she had contacted and there definitely does not seem to be one single strategy that cities apply.

##### The City Council's approach

9. The City Council's response to the disruption and pressures facing the city centre economy is largely being delivered in partnership with key stakeholders through the work of the City Centre Manager (a post that is jointly funded with Oxfordshire County Council) and the Oxford Town Team.
10. The Oxford Town Team is a partnership of businesses and public sector organisations. It has a steering group which meets quarterly and six working groups with specific sets of objectives. These objectives include:
  - Producing a free map of the city centre featuring independent retailers and transport links,
  - Improving visitor journeys into and around the city centre,

- Developing a late night information pack or mobile app,
- Creating a city centre charter which includes a customer service standard that all businesses can sign up to,
- Circulating a monthly newsletter to all businesses that provides a health check on the city centre economy, information about key events and an update on Oxford road works,
- Encouraging businesses to identify ways in which they can take better advantage of events such as Alice's Day and the Christmas Lights Festival.

11. The Panel wholeheartedly supports the work of the City Centre Manager and the Oxford Town Team. We note in particular that there is significant scope to improve visitor journeys into and around Oxford. For example, visitors arriving from Heathrow airport often do so using buses that do not accept card payments, and are dropped off at the central bus station in Gloucester Green, far from the taxi rank. We have asked that these issues be considered as part of the work on visitor journeys. The Panel welcomes the appointment of two City Centre Ambassadors, funded by the City Council, who are making the city centre more welcoming.
12. Different parts of the city centre are being showcased through the promotion of events such as Small Business Saturday and the Covered Market overspill into Market Street on certain days. The City Council is also focusing on building up the market at Gloucester Green. We strongly endorse these plans and would like to see a focus on these areas developed further as part of a long term strategy for the city centre (see recommendation 8).

#### Business rates

13. Business rates are governed by a national regime and rates payable are controlled by the Valuation Officer Agency (VOA). We note that the Westgate redevelopment has led to a drop in business rates income for the City Council because nearby traders are receiving a discount on their business rates from the VOA.
14. Some businesses based in different parts of the city away from the centre have reported that their footfall is down since the redevelopment of Westgate started. This would indicate that its impact on Oxford's economy is more widespread. However, the reduced revenue that these businesses are experiencing is not being mitigated by discounted business rates.
15. We suggest that the City Council ensures that information about the VOA appeals process is communicated to local businesses, particularly independent traders who might not otherwise be aware of it. This kind of information should also be made available online in a central place alongside other information relevant to Oxford businesses (see recommendation 2). We note that any discounts offered by the VOA will have a revenue impact on the City Council.
16. We would also like to see greater control over business rates devolved to local authorities as this would provide Councils with a useful new policy lever. We

suggest that the City Council partners with other local authorities to lobby the new government for additional powers over business rates.

**Recommendation 1 – We recommend that the City Council:**

- a) Ensures that information about appealing to the Valuation Office Agency is made available to local businesses. In particular, this information should be communicated to all independent traders who may be affected by the major redevelopments taking place in Oxford.**
- b) Takes any opportunities to join with other local authorities to lobby the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for more council controls over business rates.**

Business Improvement District (BID)

17. A BID is a business-led partnership in a defined area that funds additional resources or services beyond those provided by the local authority, doing so through a 1-2% levy on business rates. These partnerships can agree to fund things like marketing or public realm improvements, and businesses that would be required to pay the levy vote in a ballot to determine whether the scheme goes ahead.
18. A partnership of city centre businesses attempted to create a BID in 2008 around the start of the last recession. However, it narrowly missed out on achieving a majority in the ballot.
19. We heard at a meeting of the Town Team Retailing Group that plans for a BID in Oxford city centre are once again being progressed. A business plan will be developed over the next 6 months, with a view to holding a ballot within a year. All retailers in the city centre will be included in the development of these plans, even those that wouldn't be affected by the levy. The Panel is strongly supportive of a city centre BID. We note concern that retailers will be asked to pay a levy at a time when footfall is down. However, we believe that these concerns are outweighed by the wider benefits on offer, which are particularly needed during a phase of major redevelopment.

Improving Communications

20. Members of the Oxford Town Team were asked to contribute ideas relating to the Panel's first line of enquiry. A number of their responses focused on the need for closer working between public sector organisations to deliver better and more joined up communications to both businesses and visitors. The responses are included in full in appendix 2 and summarised below:
  - The message that Oxford is still open for business during major developments is one of the key communications that needs to be sent out, both from the perspective of businesses and as part of Experience Oxfordshire and the visitor economy perspective.
  - There should be an identifiable person and phone number that concerned businesses can contact for more information about disruptions and what the impact might be on their business.
  - It needs to be explained in advance to visitors what disruption is going to take place and why. Park and Ride bus stops could be used as mini

information centres, and later used to showcase the different areas in the centre of Oxford.

- The City and County Councils should work together to decide what the united channel of communication should be and stand behind it. This could make use of existing channels such as 'Transforming Oxford', 'Oxfordshire Travel Choices' or the Town Team newsletter.
- With super-connected broadband across the city, it would be good to have a central online source of information on a whole range of things. The City, County and Experience Oxfordshire (and other stakeholders that are trying to improve the visitor experience) should get together to agree a single web address. This should be promoted widely with a very high profile campaign.
- Lots of emails are received from the City Council's Events Team. These should be rationalised or circulated only to those who actively subscribe to them.

21. The Panel strongly supports the development of a single united and proactive channel of regular communications to businesses about issues such as travel disruptions, preferably giving advance notice of forthcoming disruptions, supported by a central online resource.

***Recommendation 2 – We recommend that the City Council works with the County Council through the Town Team to agree on a single united channel of regular communications to businesses, such as about travel disruptions, supported by a single online source of information.***

22. We heard that a number of different council services currently have some level of contact with businesses. However, in many cases, this contact is relatively infrequent and council officers are not necessarily close to business or empathetic to its needs.

23. We suggest that a more corporate approach should be taken to improve the quality and consistency of council communications to businesses and build stronger relationships, particularly with independent businesses. This approach could include the issuance of guidance to officers, and the identification of a lead officer for businesses within the City Council who can coordinate responses on a range of different issues.

***Recommendation 3 – We recommend that the City Council develops a more corporate approach to communicating with businesses, including guidance for all departments whose work has an impact or involvement with businesses. This could take the form of defining a central point of contact within the City Council, which can identify the appropriate unit to respond on specific issues, including the County Council as appropriate.***

24. Town Team members identified the need for a more concerted overall marketing campaign for Oxford. This should involve a more co-ordinated rolling programme of publicity that reaches all the different audience groups in the city, such as residents, businesses, visitors and students.

***Recommendation 4 – We recommend that the City Council works with partners through the Town Team to reinforce the coordinated overall marketing and publicity campaign for Oxford in ways that cover all major potential audiences.***

25. We note that it can be difficult for businesses and others to navigate the process of applying to hold events in Oxford. The Council's events team and licensing team are both involved, and applicants are required to go through separate processes to obtain permissions for things like road closures, stall licences and leaflet distribution. The Panel would like to see the City Council making this process easier as this would help to encourage and support events. We suggest that one stop shop function should be developed in order to provide applicants with a single council interface when planning events.

***Recommendation 5 – We recommend that the City Council develops a one stop shop function for events. This exercise should include a review of the costs and processes associated with aspects such as permission for road closures, stall licences and permits for distributing leaflets.***

#### Parking incentives

26. The Panel investigated the possibility of offering discounted parking incentives at off-peak times to encourage shoppers into Oxford. We found that no cost benefit analysis has been undertaken on this option. However, the limited availability of parking and the complexity of the tariff structure mean that changing tariff rates on a short term basis is difficult to do. Retailers have previously been given the opportunity to offer discounted parking to their customers. This scheme was widely publicised but despite some interest, no businesses took up this facility.
27. We also found that the closure of the Westgate car park had not had a significant impact on visitor numbers. The provision of the alternative car park at Oxpens together with increased use of park and rides mean that usage levels are broadly in line with last year's results.
28. The Panel considered the option of offering discounted parking at park and ride sites, as this would have the benefit of keeping any additional traffic out of the city centre. We were concerned that parking discounts could be tricky to implement at park and rides and might encourage shoppers from nearby towns to drive rather than use buses. We are not making a specific recommendation at this stage but this issue may warrant further consideration in the coming municipal year.

### **Minimising the time for which shop units are left empty, and improving their appearance**

#### The extent and impacts of empty premises

29. A City Council survey in January 2015 found that there were 20 empty shop units in the city centre. This equates to some 6% of the total 325 ground floor shop units.

30. The City Council is itself a major city centre landlord and now generates in excess of £10m per annum in commercial rents, which is equivalent to nearly half of the Council's net budget requirement. This income stream is affected when City Council-owned units are empty.
31. Empty units owned by other landlords have an impact on the City Council's business rates take. The standard business rate exemption period for empty units is 3 months but for listed buildings, which are numerous in Oxford, the exemption applies to the whole period that they are unoccupied. Units used for charitable purposes are subject to rates relief while occupied, which reduces the revenue impact of these being unoccupied. Empty units can also have wider effects on the city centre economy in terms of their visual impact on the street scene and their impact on footfall. We would like to see local authorities having more powers to vary business rate exemptions based on local circumstances (see recommendation 1b).
32. The closure of the Westgate Shopping Centre does seem to be having an effect on the number of empty units in the city centre. Further movement should be expected as the prime pitches gravitate towards the new Westgate Centre. This process is normal and is expected to settle down once the new Westgate Centre opens. Nevertheless, empty shop units in prime locations are relatively few in number and, from discussions with landlords, there tends to be a particular story behind each specific situation.

#### The City Council's approach

33. The City Council is extending its surveys of empty residential dwellings to include commercial properties. The Council's Empty Property Officer has also contacted a number of owners and leaseholders of empty commercial properties and offered advice and assistance. We welcome this approach and note that the City Council has powers to tackle empty properties and improve the appearance of the street, which could be used as a last resort, such as Compulsory Purchase Orders.

#### Demand for retail space

34. Demand for retail units is currently greater than the supply of empty premises. Rent levels in prime locations are therefore high and were largely unaffected by the last recession. In this environment, landlords are able to take a relatively passive approach to empty units, knowing that asset values and rent levels they can charge will continue to rise. Rent levels in secondary locations drop off significantly compared to prime locations, but they are still relatively high compared to other cities.
35. Cities such as Bath have successfully developed thriving independent retail sectors, but this is lacking in Oxford. Smaller retailers need the right sort of space in which to develop their businesses but we found that there is no clear pathway for traders to progress from Gloucester Green to the Covered Market to secondary retail spaces. Currently, there is no spare capacity in the Covered Market and were told that the Market Manager is taking action to deter owners of shops from keeping them empty in the hope of profiting from rising values. We

are also unaware of any mechanism or hub that matches seed capital to entrepreneurs, which could help to get new independent retailers off the ground.

#### Promoting pop-up shops

36. The Panel investigated what scope the City Council has to promote pop up shops to provide small traders with opportunities while also making use of empty units between tenancies. Pop up shops can potentially provide benefits to landlords, shoppers and traders, and generate additional business rates revenue for the City Council.
37. The City Council has recently started to explore the option of having pop up shops in its own empty premises. However, we could only find one space in Oxford advertised online as a location for pop-up retail, in Golden Cross. This compares with four spaces Bath and seven in Royal Tunbridge Wells.
38. We heard from landlords that there are a number of barriers to pop up shops, including length of term, fit out costs, and EPOS and Wi-Fi connections, which can take 2-3 weeks to set up before a pop up shop is able to operate. We also recognise that suitable locations are very important to the success of pop-up shops, and that they should complement the wider retail offer in any given location. However, pop-up shops can work really well where the conditions are right and targeted flexibility for particular usages could form part of a wider long term strategy for the city centre (see recommendation 8).
39. We would like to have a better understanding of the costs of pop-up shops to landlords. We suggest that a simple analysis is done on the costs and benefits of pop-up shops to landlords and the City Council. This may help in promoting the benefits of pop-up shops to landlords at forum meetings (see recommendation 7).

***Recommendation 6 – We recommend that the City Council produces a simple analysis of the costs and benefits of pop up shops to landlords and the City Council.***

#### Virtual windows

40. The Panel also looked into the option and costs of virtual windows to improve the appearance of empty units, which can look neglected and thus deter customers from visiting nearby shops. Virtual windows can be a viable and attractive option for improving the city centre street scene in interesting and innovative ways. This option could be promoted to landlords of empty units in prime locations as an alternative to pop-up shops.

#### Working with landlords

41. We are unaware of any formal commercial property landlord forum in Oxford. This would provide a mechanism for landlords and public bodies to discuss issues affecting the city centre economy, such as empty premises.
42. From discussions with landlords, the City Council has the profile and presence to facilitate a commercial property landlord forum and lead in establishing a strategic direction for the city centre. This forum would enable the City Council and landlords to share information and intelligence (including when units are

becoming empty), and to discuss and negotiate on issues affecting the city centre as a whole. The residential landlord forum may be a suitable model for this forum but we suggest that it should be chaired by the Leader of the Council, whose executive remit includes corporate strategy and economic development. This would be consistent with the City Council's ambition to be the leading authority and voice for Oxford. We also suggest that City Councillors should be able to observe meetings of the forum.

43. The City Council, University of Oxford and Oxford University Colleges are some of the main owners of city centre property and should be included in the membership of the forum.

***Recommendation 7 – We recommend that the City Council takes a lead in establishing and facilitating a city centre commercial property landlord forum. This would be intended to bring together the owners of commercial properties, including the City Council, to ensure that there is a coordinated approach towards issues affecting the city centre, such as the minimisation of the time during which premises are empty. The forum could be chaired by the Leader of the Council, linked to the work of the Town Team and constituted based on the model of the previous Pensions and Language School forums. We also suggest that its membership should include a representative of each political group and that City Councillors should be able to observe meetings of the forum.***

Shaping a strategic direction for the city centre economy

44. Given that the prime retail locations are the most economically resilient, the strategic focus should be on areas where there are opportunities to shape the development of different offers located near to, but not on, the main shopping streets. These 'quarters' could be based around Gloucester Green, Jericho/Observatory, Market Street, Broad Street, and around the Ashmolean Museum. There may also be a case for having other quarters further out from the city centre, in areas such as Cowley Road and Summertown.
45. A strategy for the city centre should consider the total environment of the city centre, as well as the health of the retail sector. We note for example that there is a shortage of office space within the city centre and that the number of jobs located in the city centre has actually reduced slightly over recent years. The strategy should seek to address these kinds of issues over the longer term.

***Recommendation 8 – We recommend that the City Council leads on the development of a long term strategy for the city centre as a whole. This should include a commitment to developing and supporting vibrant and distinct city quarters away from prime sites, in locations such as Gloucester Green, Jericho/Observatory Quarter, Market Street, Broad Street and a possible arts quarter around the Ashmolean Museum.***

46. We note that Cheltenham Borough Council created a partnership arrangement to look strategically at the re-use and development of sites around Cheltenham town centre. This function was branded as Cheltenham Development Task Force and supported by one or more dedicated members of staff.

47. The development of a long term strategy for Oxford city centre would need to be similarly supported by a dedicated resource, rather being an add-on to an existing role. This resource could actively broker ideas between different stakeholders and move the strategic agenda forward more quickly. It could become wholly or partly self-funded through additional business rates income from reduced voids in commercial properties, or by a BID if businesses support this.

***Recommendation 9 – We recommend that dedicated officer time is allocated to the development and delivery of the city centre strategy. This could be funded wholly or in part via a BID and by additional business rates income that the role will generate, via reduced voids in commercial properties.***

48. Given that the City Council is a major city centre landlord, it has scope to use its own assets in ways that support its longer term strategic aims for the city centre. In some cases this has already happened but in other instances the City Council has instead opted to maximise its commercial property income. This approach may involve foregoing short term income in favour of wider long term benefits to the city centre economy. We would like to see this ambition articulated in the City Council's Asset Strategy for 2016-2020.

***Recommendation 10 – We recommend that the City Council's next Asset Strategy (2016-2020) builds upon the aim (not always presently achieved) of utilising City Council assets in ways that can provide wider strategic benefits to the city centre. The Asset Strategy could provide clear guidelines on the use of City Council-owned commercial premises to ensure the diversity and vitality of the city's wider retail offer.***

### **Further consideration**

49. We recommend that the Scrutiny Committee continues to prioritise a Local Economy Panel in the 2015/16 municipal year. A number of important issues have been raised that warrant continuity of consideration over the coming months. This panel could monitor and build on the recommendations above and seek to inform the city centre strategy and the development of city quarters, if this approach is supported by the City Executive Board. The Panel may also wish to consider the business case for a BID in Oxford city centre.

### **Acknowledgments**

50. The Panel would like to thank all those who have provided evidence to inform the findings of this review. We appreciate the willingness to co-operate we have received from the below named:

- a) Laurie-Jane Taylor (City Centre Manager)
- b) Michael Crofton-Briggs (Head of City Development)

- c) Michael Scott (Senior Asset Manager)
- d) Julia Castle (Senior Lettings and Disposals Surveyor)
- e) Mel Mutch (Empty Property Officer)
- f) Jason Munro (Parking and Shopmobility Officer)
- g) Ann Harvey-Lynch (Revenues Manager)
- h) Gary Lloyd (University of Oxford)

**Name and contact details of author:-**

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Scrutiny Officer  
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**List of background papers: None**

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## Scope: 'Local Economy' Scrutiny Review

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Review Topic</b>   | Local Economy   |
| <b>Lead Member Review Group</b>   | Councillor James Fry  |
| <b>Other Panel Members</b>  | Councillors Elise Benjamin, Roy Darke and Mike Gotch  |
| <b>Officer Support and allocate hours</b>   | Scrutiny Officer approx. 2-4 days per month. Additional support from the Town Centre Manager.   |
| <b>Rationale</b><br>(key issues and/ or reason for doing the Review)                              | Scrutiny Members are keen to understand what the City Council already does to support the local economy, particularly small businesses, and what more could be done.<br><br>The Scrutiny Committee prioritised this review when agreeing its work programme for 2014-15   |
| <b>Purpose of Review/Objective</b><br>(specify exactly what the Review should achieve)            | To identify how the City Council currently supports small and medium sized businesses in the city centre and what further support is possible. Key lines of inquiry are:<br>1. What can the City Council do to mitigate disruption to the city centre economy while major developments are taking place? How can communications be improved for lasting benefit to residents and visitors?<br>2. What scope does the City Council have to minimise the time shop units are left empty, and to improve the appearance of empty units?<br>A third line of inquiry was identified by the panel but this will only be considered in so far as it relates to 1 because it is likely to require a separate scrutiny review:<br>3. What could feasibly be done to improve transport in and around the City Centre?<br><br>To engage with officers and stakeholders and produce evidence based recommendations to the City Executive Board. |
| <b>Indicators of Success</b><br>(what factors would tell you what a good Review should look like) | Good Quality engagement with stakeholders that delivers a range of opinion.<br><br>Broad agreement on recommendations amongst Panel Members, Officers and stakeholders.<br><br>The majority of recommendations are agreed by the City Executive Board and implemented.  |

|   |   |                                  |                |
|---|---|----------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Out of scope</b>   | The Covered Market  |                                  |                |
| <b>Methodology/ Approach</b><br>(what types of enquiry will be used to gather evidence and why) | Evidence gathering to include:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evidence sessions with officers and witnesses</li> <li>- Document and Policy review</li> <li>- Considering what could be learnt from other Local Authorities</li> </ul>  |                                  |                |
| <b>Specify Witnesses/ Experts</b><br>(who to see and when)                                      | Evidence sessions to be held with:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Laurie-Jane Taylor, City Centre Manager</li> <li>- Michael Crofton-Briggs, Head of City Development</li> <li>- Members of the Town Team, including those representing SMEs</li> <li>- Two city centre landlords</li> </ul> <i>Other witnesses and experts to be identified</i> |                                  |                |
| <b>Specify Evidence Sources for Documents</b><br>(which to look at)                             | The following documents may be used as evidence:<br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Town Centre Manager report</li> <li>- Oxford City Council's Corporate Plan</li> <li>- Discretionary Rate Relief Policy</li> <li>- Other City Council policies</li> </ul>   |                                  |                |
| <b>Specify Site Visits</b><br>(where and when)  | A visit to meet the Town Team TBA   |                                  |                |
| <b>Projected start date</b>   | January 2015  | <b>Draft Report Deadline</b>     | April-May 2015 |
| <b>Meeting Frequency</b>  | TBA   | <b>Projected completion date</b> | May-June 2015  |

**Draft outline of meetings (Not in necessarily in chronological order and some meetings may be combined)**

|   |
|---|
| Meeting one   |
| 7 January 2015 – Meeting held with Michael Crofton-Briggs and Laurie-Jane Taylor to consider the Town Centre Manager Report and identify how the City Council currently supports small and medium sized businesses in the city centre. Lines of inquiry identified. |
| Meeting two   |
| TBA – Meeting with two city centre landlords to discuss issues around empty properties.   |
| Meeting three   |
| TBA – Meeting with members of the Town Team to understand their views relating to both lines of inquiry.  |
| Meeting four  |
| TBA – Meeting with the Town Centre Manager to discuss how other local authorities have handled major development projects and about their policies on other topics covered by the Town Team.  |
| Meeting five  |
| TBA – Meeting to consider evidence gathered and agree recommendation areas.   |

## Town Team's Written Responses to Local Economy Scrutiny Panel

March 2015

The Local economy Scrutiny Panel posed the following questions to members of the Town Team:-

***What can the City Council can do to mitigate disruption to the city centre economy while major developments are taking place?***

***How can communications be improved for lasting benefit to residents and visitors?***

The following responses have been provided:-

Oxford has gained itself an awful reputation for being difficult to get to. When Oxford is mentioned people invariably mention the transport problems, even if they never actually come to Oxford. This needs to be counteracted through positive publicity. The message that Oxford is still open for business during the Westgate refurbishment and the road infrastructure works is one of the key communications that needs to be sent out, both from the perspective of the retailers and other businesses in Oxford and also as part of Experience Oxfordshire and the visitor economy perspective.

It needs to be explained what is going on and why, in such a way that visitors actually see and understand the potential impact.

A key issue that needs to be addressed is who leads on this type of communication? The City it is felt has traditionally seen the County as the Highways Authority so 'anything to do with roadwork's is their responsibility'. Is this a particularly helpful approach?

The City and the County need to get together and decide what the united channel of communication is going to be and stand behind it with everybody's logo included etc. This could make use of existing channels such as the new 'Transforming Oxford' campaign, the 'Oxfordshire Travel Choices' bulletins or indeed our own Town Team fact sheet to increase awareness of the disruption at Stage 1. Park and Ride bus stops would make ideal mini exhibition centres, with large posters showing the completed vision with the intended benefits, and giving current information of how best to travel around the centre avoiding any construction work, Enabling information on potential disruption to get out much further in advance. These exhibition sites could become a permanent feature and later be used to showcase the different areas in the centre of Oxford.

There are virtually daily e-mails from the city events team on what event applications have been submitted so perhaps anybody interested in how events might affect them should be encouraged more proactively to subscribe to this system and comment accordingly?

If the City feels it can make a contribution there needs to be an identifiable contact number and person that concerned retailers / restaurant owners / accommodation providers can contact for more information on disruptions and what the impact might be on their business. Who should this be? It will require some serious thought as the last thing people want to hear is 'that isn't us, it's them at the County' or similar. Joe public doesn't really understand the difference.

It is felt that perhaps City, County and Experience Oxfordshire (and other key stakeholders that are trying to improve the visitor experience) all need to get together and agree a single web address that can be accessed in advance via the web with links to all the different things that people look for. It could be called something like 'Oxford at your finger tips' and could be promoted widely with a very high profile campaign. With super connected Wi-Fi throughout the city, including on all the buses it would be really good to have a central source of info on a whole range of things that people can access.

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Improving the appearance of empty units in the city centre is purely dependent on who owns the unit. There are however many examples across the country where this has been achieved and the opportunity has been taken to use the window space either to market the unit, or to rent the space for advertising.

## Executive response

### Report of the Local Economy Scrutiny Group: Support for Businesses in the City Centre

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| <b>Recommendation</b>   | <b>Agreed?<br/>(Y / N / In part)</b> | <b>Comment</b>   | <b>Board Member / Lead Officer</b> |
|---|--------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| <p>1. We recommend that the City Council:</p> <p>a) Ensures that information about appealing to the Valuation Office Agency is made available to local businesses. In particular, this information should be communicated to all independent traders who may be affected by the major redevelopments taking place in Oxford.</p> <p>b) Takes any opportunities to join with other local authorities to lobby the new Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for more council controls over business rates.</p> | yes                                  | There is no doubt that business rate reform and/or local capacity to benefit from business rate growth on a more generous basis are major issues for local government. The devolution agenda will also have a bearing on these issues. | Matt Peachey                       |
| <p>2. We recommend that the City Council works with the County Council through the Town Team to agree on a single united channel of regular communications to businesses, such as about travel disruptions, supported by a single online source of information.</p>   | yes                                  |  | City Centre Manager                |
| <p>3. We recommend that the City Council develops a more corporate approach to communicating with businesses, including guidance for all departments whose work has an impact or involvement with businesses. This could take the form of defining a central point of contact within the City Council, which can identify the appropriate unit to respond on specific issues, including the County Council as appropriate.</p>  | no                                   | The Communications team will examine this recommendation and consider what elements of it will be feasible and useful to take forward  | Head of Comms                      |

|  |          |   |                                |
|--|----------|---|--------------------------------|
| 4. We recommend that the City Council works with partners through the Town Team to reinforce the coordinated overall marketing and publicity campaign for Oxford in ways that cover all major potential audiences.   | yes      | The Town Team should also work closely with the Chief exec of Experience Oxfordshire on marketing and publicity for the city  | City Centre Manager            |
| 5. We recommend that the City Council develops a one stop shop function for events. This exercise should include a review of the costs and processes associated with aspects such as permission for road closures, stall licences and permits for distributing leaflets.   | possibly | The Events Team already provides a pretty comprehensive one stop shop function within the City Council but they have to work alongside County Council officers on highways issues, which inevitably results in a less than fully comprehensive service. Worth exploring the scope for greater integration | Peter McQuitty/Alison Drummond |
| 6. We recommend that the City Council produces a simple analysis of the costs and benefits of pop up shops to landlords and the City Council.  | no       | The costs and benefits will vary so widely that this is likely to be a nugatory exercise.   |                                |
| 7. We recommend that the City Council takes a lead in establishing and facilitating a city centre commercial property landlord forum. This would be intended to bring together the owners of commercial properties, including the City Council, to ensure that there is a coordinated approach towards issues affecting the city centre, such as the minimisation of the time during which premises are empty. The forum could be chaired by the Leader of the Council, linked to the work of the Town Team and constituted based on the model of the previous Pensions and Language School forums. We also suggest that its membership should include a representative of each political group and that City Councillors should be able to observe meetings of the forum. | yes      | This is a worthwhile initiative and worth trying, although there is an obvious danger that it would simply replicate the Town Team's work. The TOR would have to be very carefully written.   | Jane Winfield                  |

|  |               |  |                             |
|--|---------------|--|-----------------------------|
| <p>8. We recommend that the City Council leads on the development of a long term strategy for the city centre as a whole. This should include a commitment to developing and supporting vibrant and distinct city quarters away from prime sites, in locations such as Gloucester Green, Jericho/Observatory Quarter, Market Street, Broad Street and a possible arts quarter around the Ashmolean Museum.</p>           | yes           | Work is already under way in the Planning Policy team on a city centre strategy.   | Rachel Williams             |
| <p>9. We recommend that dedicated officer time is allocated to the development and delivery of this city centre strategy. This could be funded wholly or in part via a BID and by additional business rates income that the role will generate, via reduced voids in commercial properties.</p>  | prematu<br>re | When we have an agreed strategy, the resource implications will be assessed. The Town Team will be continuing their consideration of a BID over the next few months. The initiative lies with the business community |                             |
| <p>10. We recommend that the City Council's next Asset Strategy (2016-2020) builds upon the aim (not always presently achieved) of utilising City Council assets in ways that can provide wider strategic benefits to the city centre. The Asset Strategy could provide clear guidelines on the use of City Council-owned commercial premises to ensure the diversity and vitality of the city's wider retail offer.</p> | no            | This recommendation will be remitted to the Asset management team for consideration with the portfolio holder and key officers when work on the 2016-20 strategy is started.   | David Edwards/Jane Winfield |

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**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 June 2015**

**Report of: Scrutiny Committee**

**Title of Report: City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO)**

## **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee on the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order.

**Key decision?** No

**Scrutiny Lead Member:** Councillor Simmons

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Dee Sinclair, Executive Member for Crime, Community Safety and Licensing

**Policy Framework:** The Corporate Plan 2015-19 – Strong, Active Communities; Cleaner, Greener Oxford

### **Recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:**

1. We recommend that an Enforcement Code of Conduct for Officers should be produced and that this code should be in place and in the public domain before any enforcement actions are taken under the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order.
2. We ask the City Executive Board to note that a minority of the Scrutiny Committee opposed aspects of the PSPO most notably the inclusion of non-aggressive begging and busking in the PSPO.
3. We recommend that the existing 'Code of Conduct for Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford' should be reviewed and revised to provide a more comprehensive "Guide to Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford". This guide should be accessible to buskers, street entertainers, businesses and the public, and draw on examples of good practice from other cities, as well as input from stakeholders such as the Musicians Union. It should be in place before any enforcement actions are taken under the PSPO.

4. We recommend that officers are instructed to look at the differential equalities impact of the PSPO proposals, for example the behaviour of sleeping in public toilets, having regard for example to safeguarding concerns for vulnerable adults.

## **Introduction**

1. The Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) decision at its public meeting on 2 June 2015. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Dee Sinclair, Richard Adams and Jeremy Franklin for presenting this report and answering members' questions.
2. Three speakers addressed the Committee and the Committee would like to thank them for their contributions:
  - Councillor David Thomas, ward member for Holywell
  - Councillor Ruthi Brandt, ward member for Carfax
  - Giles Payne, Crisis Skylight

## **Summary of recommendations**

3. The Committee asked a number of questions including around; what powers PSPOs replace, alternative powers available to the City Council, the wording and interpretation of the PSPO, how evidence is gathered, the enforcement process, and how representative the results of the consultation were.
4. The Committee questioned how the approach to enforcement would differ across the different behaviours covered by the proposed City Centre PSPO. The Committee heard that enforcing officers are trained to have a conversation in the first instance; it would not be a case of handing out on the spot fines immediately.
5. The Committee heard that urinating or defecating in public places might be an example of where a more zero tolerance approach would be taken. However, the Committee noted that in some instances there may be a reasonable excuse for this behaviour, such as a medical condition.
6. The Committee suggest that guidance should be issued to enforcement officers to provide clarity as to what approach should be taken to different behaviours. Members heard that a corporate enforcement policy is being developed and will go to the City Executive Board later in the year. This would in effect be a code of conduct for enforcing officers. The Committee suggest that guidance should be available to officers and be in the public domain before any enforcement action is taken.

***Recommendation 1 – We recommend that an Enforcement Code of Conduct for Officers should be produced and that this code should be in place and in the public domain before any enforcement actions are taken under the City Centre Public Spaces Protection Order.***

7. The Committee considered a proposal that the City Centre PSPO represented a punitive approach and that the case had not been effectively made that existing powers were insufficient. A majority of members did not support this proposal and a minority of members did support it.
8. The Committee considered a proposal that 'persistent begging' should be removed from the PSPO. A majority of members did not support this proposed change and a minority of members did support it.
9. The Committee also discussed whether 'persistent begging' should be changed to 'persistent and aggressive begging'. A majority of members did not support this proposed change and a minority of members did support it.
10. The Committee considered a proposal to remove 'breaches of the Code of Conduct for Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford' from the behaviours covered by the PSPO. A majority of members did not support this proposed change and a minority of members did support it.

***Recommendation 2 - We ask Executive to note that a minority of the Scrutiny Committee opposed aspects of the PSPO most notably the inclusion of non-aggressive begging and busking in the PSPO.***

11. The Committee supported having a code of conduct for buskers and the principle that buskers should busk for a maximum of 60 minutes in any one place, as this enables more people to have the opportunity to busk in prime locations.
12. It was suggested that the City Council's Code of Conduct for Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford could be strengthened and that the words 'enjoy yourself' should be removed. A member noted that Liverpool has a more substantial guide to busking which has been highlighted as best practice. The Committee suggest that the City Council's Code of Conduct should be reviewed in light of examples of policies in other cities, as well as input from groups such as the Musicians Union.

***Recommendation 3 – We recommend that the existing 'Code of Conduct for Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford' should be reviewed and revised to provide a more comprehensive "Guide to Busking and Street Entertaining in Oxford". This guide should be***

***accessible to buskers, street entertainers, businesses and the public, and draw on examples of good practice from other cities, as well as input from stakeholders such as the Musicians Union. It should be in place before any enforcement actions are taken under the PSPO.***

13. The Committee noted concern that 'Sleeping in toilets' is primarily a safeguarding issue. The Committee suggest that officers should look at whether including this behaviour in the city centre PSPO would have a differential impact on equalities, for example by affecting women more than men.

***Recommendation 4 – We recommend that officers are instructed to look at the differential equalities impact of the PSPO proposals, for example the behaviour of sleeping in public toilets, having regard for example to safeguarding concerns for vulnerable adults.***

#### **Further consideration**

14. The Committee requested an update report in 6 months, to monitor the impact of the City Centre PSPO, which should detail the breakdown between early intervention and enforcement actions.

#### **Executive response**

*To follow*

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**List of background papers: None**

**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 June 2015**

**Report of: Scrutiny Committee**

**Title of Report: Covered Market Leasing Strategy Update**

## **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present recommendations from the Scrutiny Committee on the Covered Market Leasing Strategy Update.

**Key decision?** No

**Scrutiny Lead Member:** Councillor Simmons

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Ed Turner, Executive Member for Finance, Corporate Asset Management and Public Health

**Policy Framework:** Vibrant and Sustainable Economy, Efficient & Effective Council

**Recommendations** of the Scrutiny Committee to the City Executive Board:

We recommend that the City Executive Board approve the updated Covered Market Leasing Strategy 2015 with the following amendments:

- a) The word 'discouraged' in paragraph 4.4 is strengthened to 'avoided'.
- b) The word 'typically' in the sixth bullet point of paragraph 4.9 is changed to 'usually'. It could also be stated that exceptions will be considered for larger independent retailers that originate from Oxford.

## **Introduction**

1. The Scrutiny Committee pre-scrutinised the Covered Market Leasing Strategy Update at its public meeting on 2 June 2015. The Committee would like to thank Elaine Philip for presenting this report and answering questions.

## **Summary of recommendations**

2. The Committee support the Covered Market Leasing Strategy.

3. The Committee note that the Covered Market has a distinctive composition of shops and agreed that uses that detract from the Market's special character should be avoided rather than discouraged. The wording in the guidelines (paragraph 4.4) should be strengthened to this effect.
4. The Committee questioned whether units were being left empty by leaseholders looking to benefit from higher rents and whether the City Council has any powers to address this. Members heard that the two units currently empty are both in the process of being refurbished.
5. The Committee reviewed the criteria that future tenants will need to satisfy (paragraph 4.9). Members questioned whether the threshold for independent retailers was too high and noted that the vicinity of other outlets is also important. The Committee agreed that the threshold of 'typically less than 10' should be changed to 'usually less than 10'. Exceptions could be considered for larger independent retailers originating from Oxford.

**Recommendation - We recommend that the City Executive Board approve the updated Covered Market Leasing Strategy 2015 with the following amendments:**

- a) The word 'discouraged' in paragraph 4.4 is strengthened to 'avoided',
- b) The word 'typically' in the sixth bullet point of paragraph 4.9 is changed to 'usually'. It could also be stated that exceptions will be considered for larger independent retailers that originate from Oxford.

### **Executive response**

*To follow*

**Name and contact details of author:-**

Andrew Brown on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee  
Scrutiny Officer  
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**List of background papers: None**  
**Version number: 1**

**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 June 2015**

**Report of: Housing Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)**

**Title of Report: Housing Asset Management Strategy**

## Summary and Recommendations

**Purpose of report:** To present recommendations from the Housing Panel on the Housing Asset Management Strategy

**Key decision?** No

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Scott Seamons, Executive Member for Housing

**Policy Framework:** Corporate Plan Objective – Meeting Housing Needs

**Recommendation** of the Housing Panel to the City Executive Board:

1. We note that a number City Council owned garages are not in use and recommend that the City Council reviews how it could make better use of these assets (for example as sites for new affordable housing or free off street car parking for residents), treating several garage sites as a virtual site. Consideration should be given to explicitly stating this aim, currently implied, in the Asset Management Strategy.

## **Introduction**

1. The Housing Panel considered the Housing Asset Management Strategy at its public meeting on 4 June 2015. The Panel would like to thank Stephen Clarke for introducing this item and answering questions. The Panel would also like to thank Councillor Seamons for contributing to this discussion. The Panel had previously considered a draft of the Strategy in December 2015.

## **Summary of the discussion**

2. The Housing Panel supported the Housing Asset Management Strategy.
3. The Panel asked a number of questions including about; housing need in the city, the impacts of government policy, taking a co-ordinated

approach with peers, speeding up void times, the stock condition survey, renewable energy on Council properties and the consultation response rate.

4. A member noted that there are numerous unused garages in Blackbird Leys. These could be knocked down and the sites developed as affordable housing or off street car parking for residents. The Panel heard that this is within the concept of making better use of the City Council's assets and that a review of these assets is needed as part of the Estate Improvement Plans (section 5.2). It has been several years since such a review took place and a member noted that at the time, several sites were treated as a virtual site. The Panel suggest that the City Council goes back through this cycle again and that the Strategy makes specific mention of garages.

***Recommendation - We note that a number City Council owned garages are not in use and recommend that the City Council reviews how it could make better use of these assets (for example as sites for new affordable housing or free off street car parking for residents), treating several garage sites as a virtual site. Consideration should be given to explicitly stating this aim, currently implied, in the Asset Management Strategy.***

#### **Further consideration**

5. The Panel agreed to review the Council's Energy Strategy before this goes to the City Executive Board.
6. A member suggested that the Panel could do a piece of work around tenant involvement. This will be added to the Scrutiny work programme for further consideration.
7. A member suggested that the Housing Panel should look at Estate Improvement Plans. This will be added to the Scrutiny work programme for further consideration.

#### **Executive response**

*To follow*

**Name and contact details of author:-**

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**List of background papers: None;**

**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 June 2015**

**Report of: Housing Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)**

**Title of Report: Review of the HMO Licensing Scheme**

## Summary and Recommendations

**Purpose of report:** To present recommendations from the Housing Panel on the Review of the HMO Licensing Scheme

**Key decision?** No

**Executive lead member:** Councillor Scott Seamons, Executive Member for Housing

**Policy Framework:** Meeting Housing Needs & Efficient and Effective Council

### **Recommendations of the Housing Panel to the City Executive Board:**

1. We recommend that the City Council renews the HMO licensing scheme in its entirety for a further 5 years (option 3). Consideration should be given to appropriate incentives and disincentives for landlords, and to the balance between taking a more pro-active approach to compliance whilst continuing efforts to extend the licensing scheme to cover more HMOs.

2. We note that the City Council is developing a Corporate Enforcement Policy and recommend that:

- a) Enforcement within the Private Rented Sector is a corporate priority,
- b) The Policy recognises that the City Council should take a different approach to enforcement in different sectors (e.g. Private Rented Sector, Public Spaces Protection Orders, etc.), rather than a one size fits all approach.

## **Introduction**

1. The Housing Panel considered the Review of the HMO Licensing Scheme at its public meeting on 4 June 2015. The Panel would like to thank Ian Wright and Adrian Chowns for introducing this item and answering questions. The Panel would also like to thank Councillor Seamons for contributing to this discussion.

## Summary of the discussion

2. The Panel strongly supported the HMO scheme and option 3 - renewing the HMO licensing scheme in its entirety for a further 5 years.
3. The Panel asked a number of questions including about; rates of compliance with conditions, information sharing with tenants, restrictions on new HMOs, legal limits on uses of income from HMOs, weekday tenants, children living in HMOs, and whether the City Council has any powers to limit rent increases and ensure longer tenures.
4. The Panel questioned whether there is more scope to incentivise good landlord practices and dis-incentivise bad landlord practices. The Panel heard that the City Council could look at lower charges for landlords who comply with the scheme and introducing a 'polluter pays' principle where landlords whose properties require more checks could contribute more to the cost of this. However, there is a fine balance and the scheme needs to remain self-funding. Fee structure options will be presented to Members in October.
5. The Panel also questioned whether the City Council has scope to introduce tougher penalties for non-compliance, for example when landlords seek to renew their HMO licence having failed to comply with the conditions of their previous licence. The Panel heard that the City Council is one of the toughest local authorities nationally in terms of enforcement but has scope to be tougher on non-compliance. The balance of activity is likely to shift somewhat from focusing on unlicensed HMOs towards ensuring greater compliance.

***Recommendation 1 - We recommend that the City Council renews the HMO licensing scheme in its entirety for a further 5 years (option 3). Consideration should be given to appropriate incentives and disincentives for landlords, and to the balance between taking a more pro-active approach to compliance whilst continuing efforts to extend the licensing scheme to cover more HMOs.***

6. The Panel agreed that strong regulation in the Private Rented Sector should be a high corporate priority for the City Council, noting that much of the worst housing in the city is within the HMO stock.
7. The Panel noted that a Corporate Enforcement Policy is due to go to the City Executive Board in November, and this could determine the Council's approach to enforcement in the Private Rented Sector. Members commented that the approach to enforcement in the Private Rented Sector should be very different from the approach taken in other sectors, such as Public Spaces Protection Orders, which require a more light touch approach in some instances. The Panel suggest

that the Corporate Enforcement Policy should be sensitive to the need for different approaches to enforcement in different sectors.

**Recommendation 2 - We note that the City Council is developing a Corporate Enforcement Policy and recommend that:**

- a) Enforcement within the Private Rented Sector is a corporate priority,**
- b) The Policy recognises that the City Council should take a different approach to enforcement in different sectors (e.g. Private Rented Sector, Public Spaces Protection Orders, etc.), rather than a one size fits all approach.**

### **Further consideration**

- 8. The Panel agreed to review the proposed October report setting out the results of the statutory consultation and the proposed future of the licensing scheme, before it goes to the City Executive Board.
- 9. Officers agreed to look into a suggestion that HMO tenants should be entitled to free bulky item collections.
- 10. The Panel agreed to follow up on a question about controls over HMOs in the new Barton development with planning officers.
- 11. The Panel agreed that comparative data between investment levels in HMO stock compared to other sectors would be useful.

### **Executive response**

*To follow*

#### **Name and contact details of author:-**

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Tel: 01865 252230 e-mail: [abrown2@oxford.gov.uk](mailto:abrown2@oxford.gov.uk)

**List of background papers: None**

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