

Supplement for

Cabinet

Wednesday 15 July 2020

6.00 pm

Scrutiny Committee Reports

Contents

7.	Scrutiny Committee Reports	3 - 16
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The agenda, reports and any additional supplements can be found together with this supplement on the committee meeting webpage.

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To: Cabinet
Date: 15 July 2020
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Local Growth Funded Workspace Projects

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Local Growth Funded Workspace Projects report
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development
Corporate Priority:	Foster an Inclusive Economy
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 06 July 2020, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet concerning the Local Growth Funded Workspace Projects.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development, for presenting the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Matt Peachey, Economic Development Manager, and Andrew Humpherson, Regeneration Manager, for compiling the report and supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Leader of the Council, Councillor Susan Brown introduced the report. The funding described in the report provided a timely opportunity to refurbish some of the Council's city centre commercial properties which were in urgent need of attention. This would, among other things, support the Council's ambition to support small local businesses and start ups at a time when the economic situation was severe.
4. Matt Peachey, Economic Development Manager, said Oxford's city centre business growth lagged behind some comparable city and town centres. This was probably partly attributable to its dependence on just three sectors, education, retail and tourism, the latter of which likely to suffer particularly as a result of Covid-19. Encouraging a more diverse range of enterprises was therefore important and this in turn required the development of flexible and accessible work spaces of good quality that were relatively affordable. The funding sought by the report would unlock the potential of the sites described in the report. Preparatory work was well advanced and the projects were achievable in the timescales demanded by the conditions associated with the funding.

The Committee welcomed the report presented. In its scrutiny the Committee's discussion mainly concerned timescales for spending, the size of the market for such workspaces and whether Covid would be likely to increase entrepreneurship or decrease it, and means of safeguarding current tenants at Cave St.

5. It makes one recommendation around clarifying plans for the Standingford House Development.

Potential Options for the Standingford House Development

6. In discussion of the proposed Standingford House development it was recognised that the plot sits adjacent to other, currently unused, Council-owned land and which might be suitable for consideration for residential use. Reference in the Cabinet report to the 'adjacent land' was suggested to be unclear whether it referred to the car parking area for Standingford House, or the unused area.
7. It was confirmed to the Committee that the potential development plans for Standingford House included both the car parking area and the unused land, and that the brief for the options appraisals includes consideration of residential as well as commercial uses. However, in the absence of this being contained within the report, it was requested that written confirmation be provided.

Recommendation 1: That the Council confirms that the brief for the development at Standingford House, Cave St includes the adjacent Council owned land and that it is registered as being for mixed business/residential use.

Further Consideration

8. It is likely that Scrutiny will wish to consider any update report sent to Cabinet on the progress of this item. However, no further scrutiny is expected in the current civic year.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 06/07/2020 concerning the Local Growth Funded Projects report

Response provided by Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development, Susan Brown

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
That the Council confirms that the brief for the development at Standingford House, Cave St includes the adjacent Council-owned land and that it is registered as being for mixed business/residential use.	Partially	The Council's plans do include the land adjacent to the Standingford House site. The land is, at present, registered as commercial (not mixed use). A change to mixed residential/commercial use is being considered as one option. It is contingent upon a full appraisal of the options and subject to planning permission, and would include no loss of commercial space.

To: Cabinet
Date: 15 July 2020
Report of: Finance and Performance Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)
Title of Report: Integrated Performance Report 2019/20 Q4

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Finance and Performance Panel recommendations concerning the Integrated Performance Report 2019/20 Q4
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor James Fry, Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Ed Turner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management
Corporate Priority:	All
Policy Framework:	Council Strategy 2020 - 24
Recommendation: That Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation made in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 07 July 2020, the Finance and Performance Panel considered the end of year Integrated Performance Report 2019/20, detailing the Council's financial, performance and risk measures.
2. The Panel would like to thank Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services, for compiling the report and supporting the meeting, Helen Bishop for co-compiling the report, and Anna Winship, Management Accountancy Manager, for presenting the report and answering questions.

Summary

3. The Panel was introduced to the Cabinet report by Anna Winship, Management Accountancy Manager. The main financial, risk and performance headlines were outlined to the Panel with explanations provided for the main causes. In response, the Panel's areas of questioning focused primarily on the level of capital spending over the last year, levels of reserves and specific areas of significant variance between outturns and budgeted figures, the majority of which were bringing forward spend in multi-year projects.
4. The Panel makes one recommendation concerning service charge levels within the HRA.

Service Charge Levels

5. The Panel discussed in detail paragraph 19 of the Cabinet report, and specifically the favourable variances reported in relation to service charges and management and services within the HRA. In particular, the question was raised over how the Council might know if it were making a profit from service charges. It was noted that a significant majority of the favourable variance in service charge levels related to costs passed to leaseholders, a heavily regulated area designed to stop overcharging. It was also explained, however, that the mechanism for setting service level charges for tenants was considered within the broader context of contributing towards a balanced HRA and was not regulated in such defined terms. Panel members suggested that in light of the surplus shown in the HRA it was possible, therefore, (though not guaranteed) that the mechanism may not be working to ensure the charges levied to tenants matched the costs incurred. It is the view of the Panel that at the present time the Council's anti-poverty agenda is of particularly critical importance, and that the Council should make all efforts to satisfy itself that it is not charging financially vulnerable residents more than is necessary at the present time.

Recommendation 1: That the Council reviews the service charges it makes to Council housing tenants to ensure current levels reflect actual costs.

Further Consideration

6. The Scrutiny Committee has agreed to consideration of quarterly Integrated Performance Reports for the remainder of the civic year.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Finance and Performance Panel made on 07/07/2020 concerning the Integrated Performance Report 2019/20 Q4 report

A verbal response will be provided by Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management, Councillor Ed Turner

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<i>1) That the Council reviews the service charges it makes to Council housing tenants to ensure current levels reflect actual costs.</i>		

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To: Cabinet

Date: 15 July 2020

Report of: Finance and Performance Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)

Title of Report: The Social Value Act 2012 and Social Responsibility in Procurement

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Finance and Performance Panel recommendations concerning The Social Value Act 2012 and Social Responsibility in Procurement
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor James Fry, Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Ed Turner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management
Corporate Priority:	Foster an Inclusive Economy
Policy Framework:	Corporate Strategy 2020-24
Recommendation: That Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 25 February 2020, the Finance Panel (now Finance and Performance Panel) considered a report on Social Value in Procurement. Covid-related disruption has led to the delay in the production of this report.
2. The Panel would like to thank Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services, Annette Osborne, Procurement Manager (ODS), and Kay Alsopp, Contracts and Procurement Specialist, for attending the meeting, presenting the report and answering questions.

Summary

3. The Panel was informed that Council agreed to implement a 5% weighting on social value considerations within contracts above £25,000 in May 2019. The requirements of the Social Value Act for local authorities is simply that service contracts above c. £185k are required to include consideration of social value; the Council was shown therefore to be committed to embedding the principle far more deeply.
4. Having implemented the concept less than a year previously the Council was still having to learn and manage a number of issues. In particular, one of the aims of considering Social Value was to provide support for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). However, it was proving to be challenging to find a balance between a meaningful monitoring of social value outcomes and one which did not overburden SMEs with bureaucracy, thereby precluding them from contracts through the very measures which were brought in to support them. The Council was working hard to bring SMEs alongside and ensure a level playing field, but work with SMEs is often best at a personal level, which is very resource intensive.
5. Owing to the need not to be overly-bureaucratic the Council also faced challenges relating to issues which rely on a level of bureaucracy: measuring the impact of various social value interventions, being able to evaluate the relative value of different interventions, and tracking that promised undertakings were indeed acted upon. Whilst the Council had some measure of the first, it was subjective and certainly would not allow for a comparison between the benefit of two different types of intervention. Monitoring of the latter required embedding through training and systems in contract management relationships. The Council was currently looking to the leaders on implementing social value – Manchester, Croydon, Bristol and Portsmouth - for ways to manage these challenges.
6. Despite the challenges recognised, it was also recognised that the Council is a long way ahead of many, many Councils both nationally and locally in terms of its grappling with the challenges and implementation of the requirement.
7. In its consideration of the report the Panel considered a number of issues: the challenges of recording social value information centrally, following through on ensuring promised social value benefits were realised, the potential for setting minimum standards for particular criteria (particularly whether a company pays the Oxford Living Wage), incorporating green issues into procurement and how greater weight may be accorded to social value in procurement, especially whether its rating could be raised to 10% in the procurement process.
8. Further to these discussions, the Panel considered issues around how it might monitor its own success in enabling access to potential projects for small and medium enterprises, and how it might share information and good practice amongst different stakeholders. The Panel makes one recommendation in relation to each of these two issues.

Monitoring Success

9. As referenced above, the Panel notes that one of the main vehicles for delivering social value is through providing support to local small and medium sized enterprises. This provides a challenge, however, in that small and medium sized enterprises by definition have fewer resources than their larger competitors, making it more difficult to justify devoting capacity to developing a response to social value criteria in procurement contracts. Meaningfully monitoring the impact of social value criteria in procurement whilst not crowding out smaller businesses is difficult.

10. Due to the tension between the two objectives, it is recognised that monitoring of the impact of social value will always be difficult. One suggested measure is benchmarking spend with small and medium sized enterprises against other local authorities. It is recognised that there are challenges and deficiencies around using this as a measure on its own: it is necessary to find similar councils (urban district Councils) as comparators. The Council will also need to be careful in how it manages the distorting impacts of having its own local trading companies. A further limitation of the measure is that simply because two councils may have similar proportions of spending with small and medium sized enterprises does not necessarily mean that the same amount of social value is generated in doing so. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, targeted benchmarking does provide an indication of the Council's success in not crowding out smaller firms with bureaucracy, which is a significant prerequisite to delivering social value, and it will show how well the Council is managing that challenge compared to other Councils who also face it. The Panel, therefore, recommends that the Council begins to benchmark its spending against a group of similar councils around the country.

Recommendation 1: That the Council benchmarks its spending with SMEs against other similar councils nationally.

Sharing Information and Good Practice

11. The Panel recognised that the Council is not alone in trying to manage the complexities of balancing the promotion of social value outcomes within its procurement process. Other Councils nationally face the same challenges, but companies too are faced with a new element to the procurement process which they must seek to navigate. As a market develops, it is expected that support services will also develop. It is the view of the Panel that bringing stakeholders together to learn from one another and collaborate is vital in achieving the outcomes the Social Value Act and the Council's additional implementations seek to achieve. The Panel's view is that the Council hosts a similar event around fraud prevention, which should act as a template. Should in-person events be deemed to be unsuitable, the Council is encouraged to develop a virtual alternative instead; this idea would potentially make it easier for representatives from leading Councils such as Manchester, Croydon, Bristol and Portsmouth to attend. Though there are resource implications of hosting such an event, ensuring social benefits through the Council's procurement is more vital than ever in the current climate.

12. In addition, the Panel considers it valuable to include within any such conversation, opportunities for those SMEs who do find engaging with social value procurement practices difficult in order to mitigate those challenges as far as possible.

Recommendation 2: That the Council underwrites an event for social value similar to that run by Fraud Prevention, which brings neighbouring Councils, support service providers and experts together to improve overall standards. The Council should also seek to understand better from SMEs the barriers faced and seek to reduce them

Further Consideration

13. The Panel remains very interested in monitoring the embedding of the principles of social value effectively within its procurement processes and has requested that an update be provided in September.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Finance Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) made on 25/02/2020 concerning The Social Value Act 2012 and Social Responsibility in Procurement

Provided by the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management

<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
1) That the Council benchmarks its spending with SMEs against other similar councils nationally	Yes	We have already done some of this work informally and we would like to take this forward as far as data permits.
2) That the Council underwrites an event for social value similar to that run by Fraud Prevention, which brings neighbouring Councils, support service providers and experts together to improve overall standards. The Council should also seek to understand better from SMEs the barriers faced and seek to reduce them.	Yes	We will try to take forward an appropriate event (whether in person or virtual) as part of our new procurement strategy.

15

Date of Cabinet meeting: 15.07.20

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