

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday 9 December 2015

www.oxford.gov.uk



COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Simmons (Chair), Hayes (Vice-Chair), Coulter, Darke, Fry, Gant, Hollick, Henwood, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Smith and Taylor.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Price.

INVITEES AND OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT:

OFFICERS PRESENT: Ian Brooke (Head of Community Services), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Caroline Green (Assistant Chief Executive), Mike Scott (Senior Asset Manager (Contractor)) and Jennifer Thompson (Committee and Members Services Officer)

64. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

There were no apologies.

65. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest made. Councillor Simmons said he was an ordinary member of the East Oxford Community Association but this did not amount to a disqualification from considering the Community Centre Strategy.

66. COMMUNITY CENTRE STRATEGY 2015-2020

The Head of Community Services presented the draft Community Centres Strategy prior to submission to the City Executive Board and public consultation.

The Board Member sent her apologies.

Councillor Wolff presented a short paper setting out some suggested clarifications for the Committee's consideration.

Judith Harley, a local resident, spoke about her concerns with the strategy and asked about the proposed public consultation.

In discussion the Committee noted a number of points, in particular:

- the process for consultation;
- that in the event that the major regeneration planned for Blackbird Leys did not happen, there were plans to improve the current community centre but no alternative funding;
- once the strategy was agreed there should be discussions with community centre associations about supporting local and/or disadvantaged groups through their charging structure.

The Committee resolved that the following recommendations be put to the City Executive Board:

1. greater clarity should be provided that the 15 minute walk time used to model community centre catchment areas is not exclusive;
2. clarity should be provided as to how three specific gaps in community facilities have been identified from the map in figure 4, which also shows gaps in other areas of the city (specifically in the north);
3. further consideration should be given to making the amendments proposed by Councillor Wolff (see appendix 1) before the Strategy goes out to consultation.;
4. new priority theme should be added under the sustainable management action area around making the best use and most effective use of facilities at community centres;
5. the strategy should articulate what the Council's approach will be to ensuring there is an inclusive, high quality community hub serving the Leys area in the event that the proposed replacement of Blackbird Leys Community Centre is compromised or delayed, including seeking external funding;
6. the strategy should better recognise and articulate the importance of volunteers to the city's community centres;
7. That the scope of the consultation set out in the report should be widened to include:
 - Residents associations and tenants groups as key stakeholders,
 - A disability focus group,
 - Each of the equality strands,
 - outreach to non-users and individuals as well as groups,
 - And should include publicity at each community centre.

67. RESETTLING SYRIAN REFUGEES IN OXFORD

The Assistant Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council presented a report on progress in accommodating Syrian refugees in Oxford. They provided further updates and answered questions.

The Committee noted:

- There were no unaccompanied minors coming through the VPRS scheme but an increasing number coming through other routes. The County Council social services had responsibility for them. There was a resulting pressure on

schools and social services, and a shortage of foster carers, and insufficient support.

- Government funding for the Syrian refugee resettlement scheme was guaranteed for five years on a tapering basis.
- There was less provision in place to support the relatively high numbers of refugees in the city who were outside of the new Government scheme. The Committee suggested that the Council should ensure support was available to these refugees too.
- Asylum Welcome and other voluntary organisations were able to assess and provide for refugee's needs but need adequate secure funding.
- Oxford had some specific needs in terms of supporting refugees, such as the very high cost and pressure on housing in the city, and the attractiveness of the city as a destination for asylum seekers. The Committee discussed how to source support and opportunities to make the case for additional resources to fund facilities or services for refugees.
- The City Council provided funding to Asylum Welcome but needed to avoid over-committing.
- There was scope to share information and best practice across local authorities and this was being done locally and nationally.
- That when assessing the housing needs of refugees the 'local connection' requirement could be interpreted as contact with appropriate refugee support groups in Oxford and this was covered implicitly in the motion adopted by Council on 23 September 2015.

The Committee resolved that the following recommendations be put to the City Executive Board:

- the City Council should continue to work with partners to co-ordinate and strengthen local arrangements for accommodating and supporting refugees, including educational support and language services.
- the City Council should assist the County Council in promoting campaigns aimed at recruiting new foster carers and adopters.
- the City Council should also maintain a focus on the types and impacts of support available to the refugees and asylum seekers in Oxford that did not arrive as part of the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS).
- the City Council should update local MPs on what the Council is doing to support refugees in Oxford, and engage with them about the challenges and needs that are more specific to Oxford.
- the City Council should look for opportunities to engage constructively with government about the city's needs and how these can be met, including seeking additional funding to provide specific support services.
- City Councillors should be periodically updated on progress, funding and developments at public meetings.

The Committee thanked officers for their work on this.

68. ASSET MANAGEMENT PLAN 2016-2020

The Senior Asset Manager presented the draft Asset Management Plan prior to submission to the City Executive Board. He explained that there was a separate Housing Revenue Account asset management plan. The Council tried to maximise returns on its portfolio and was currently achieving an 8% return.

The Committee noted:

- Social returns had to be weighed up against reduced income. The document acknowledged social value but there was a need to quantify that value. The Committee suggest that the Social Value Act provides a useful framework and that the Council could use this to take a more structured approach to evaluation.
- Green leases could be used to incentivise tenants to reduce their energy or water usage. The Plan would commit the Council to investigating and reviewing their potential for new lettings but it would be more difficult to implement them in a legacy portfolio. Current lettings were governed by the Landlord and Tenant Act and many tenants tended to be averse to green lease arrangements.
- The Committee questioned what scope the Council had to minimise empty commercial units by encouraging their temporary use, for example as pop-up shops, to ensure that these areas remain vibrant and attractive to shoppers. The Committee heard that the Council's commercial holdings in the city centre were small and on long leases, so the Council had little direct control. The Committee suggest that the Council should aim to engage with the wider market and seek to influence landlords
- The Plan built on the previous plan, which articulated a review of the Council's agricultural land and holdings. These tended to be relatively small sites with long term lease arrangements in place and the income received from these was low. Some sites had potential for future development but other sites had less future value to the Council, as well as potential liabilities.

The Committee commended the policy of seeking strong returns from its portfolio and resolved that the following recommendations be put to the City Executive Board:

1. the City Council should take a structured approach to evaluating social value throughout the Plan using the Social Value Act 2012, which provides a framework for quantifying social value.
2. the City Council should, as a matter of course, consider the case for negotiating 'green lease' arrangements when existing leases are due for renewal;
3. when agricultural leases are due for renewal, the Council should explore all options including revenue opportunities, for example managing the land to generate forestry revenue;
4. add action under the Commercial Property heading (section 5.1.1 on p. 16 of the Plan) to aim to engage with the wider market and ask the landlords of vacant commercial properties to make temporary use of these premises, for example as pop-up shops.

69. REPORT OF THE GUEST HOUSES REVIEW GROUP

The Committee considered the report of the review group.

Councillor Coulter, the Chair of the review group, introduced the report and explained the legal and practical reasons for the recommendations.

The Committee discussed and agreed the report and recommendations. It asked that the report and recommendation be publicised in the media and sent to all relevant groups and the LGA.

Members asked if guest houses in surrounding districts could also be asked to sign up to the code or participate in their authority's schemes; and asked officers to check the legality of homelessness services only using accredited premises.

The Committee resolved to:

1. strengthen recommendation 14 to specifically reference the guest house sector and to call for power to introduce a mandatory code;
2. approve the report and the recommendations of the Guest Houses Review Group for submission to the City Executive Board on 17 December 2015;
3. monitor progress over time, including the implementation of any agreed recommendations.

The Committee thanked Councillor Coulter and the review group for their work.

70. PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT 2015/16 QUARTER 2

The Committee considered the performance indicators for Quarter 2.

Members were concerned that targets for apprenticeships, training and youth ambition were not met.

The Committee agreed to request information on the Council's apprenticeship scheme including:

- maximum practical numbers of apprenticeships the Council can offer;
- recruitment of apprentices by the Council and by partners and contractors;
- how the pay and benefits compared to the cost of living and working;
- the impact of the proposed levy on the Council's strategy;
- national trends.

71. UPDATES SINCE THE LAST MEETING

The Committee noted the updates.

72. WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

The Committee reviewed the work programme and the Forward Plan. It noted that the report on the Customer Contact Centre would be ready for the February meeting and that would leave one item of business for the January meeting. It asked to scrutinise Item 26 - energy and water supply procurement approach.

The Committee agreed to:

1. take the taxi licensing report at the February meeting;
2. scrutinise energy and water supply procurement approach in advance of the City Executive Board meeting;
3. take the item on Local Economy recommendation monitoring at the March meeting; and
4. cancel the 12 January meeting as the substantive business could be taken at later meetings.

73. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee noted the results of the recommendations to the City Executive Board.

74. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 2 November 2015 as a true and accurate record.

75. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the dates, and confirmed the cancellation of the 12 January meeting.

The meeting started at 6.15 pm and ended at 8.25 pm