

Minutes of a meeting of the SCRUTINY COMMITTEE on Monday 8 October 2018

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Committee members:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Arshad

Councillor Cook (for Councillor Djafari-Marbini)

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Simmons

Councillor Henwood (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Bely-Summers

Councillor Donnelly

Councillor Lygo

Officers:

Patsy Dell, Head of Planning, Sustainable Development & Regulatory Services

Adrian Arnold, Development Management Service Manager

Sarah Harrison, Team Leader (Planning Policy)

Amanda Ford, Principal Planner

Paul Adams, HR & Payroll Manager

Stefan Robinson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Board Member for Planning and Transport

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Board Member for Customer Focused Services

41. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Djafari-Marbini (substitute Councillor Cook), Councillor Fry and Councillor Altaf-Khan

42. Declarations of interest

None.

43. Chair's Announcements

The Chair noted with regret the passing of Councillor Angie Goff who had, among other things, been a member of the Committee's Housing Panel. A vacancy would remain on the Panel for the time being. A minute's silence would be held in her memory at the next Council meeting.

The Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Board Scrutiny Panel had met. He had been elected as its Chair and Councillor Henwood as its Vice Chair.

Patsy Dell, Head of Planning, Sustainable Development & Regulatory Services, attending this meeting of the Committee, was leaving in a few weeks' time. He paid tribute to the valuable contribution she had made during her time with the Council.

44. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 06 September 2018 as a true and accurate record subject to changing "positive" to "limited" in minute 37.9.

45. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the item. The report on the East Oxford Community Centre Improvement Centre, originally destined for CEB in the Autumn had been postponed until March 2018; Scrutiny consideration had therefore been postponed until then.

The "No Local Connection" review was in its final stages and the resultant report would come to the next meeting of the Committee.

The last meeting of the Committee had questioned the reasons for the removal of some key performance indicators (KPIs). Some KPIs are no longer being measured at service level and have been replaced by others. The Committee had before it an expanded list of indicators and members were asked to consider which it wished to monitor in the future (views to be passed to the Scrutiny Officer).

The impact of the Westgate Shopping Centre was scheduled for the next meeting of the Committee. The Director of the Centre had been due to attend this meeting but was now unable to do so. The Committee agreed to postpone this item until the following meeting in the hope that the Director could attend the revised date.

46. Report back on recommendations

The Chair was pleased to note that the Board Member had given a verbal assurance that there would be an audit to address the matters which had been identified by the Committee. He agreed to seek confirmation at the next meeting of the City Executive Board that there was clarity about the nature of the audit sought by the Committee.

47. Oxford Local Plan

The Chair introduced the item by reminding the Committee that this was the third phase in production of the Local Plan, following preliminary public consultations in 2016 and 2017. The principal purpose of this phase was not to look at detailed aspects of the plan but, rather, to consider if the plan met the necessary test of soundness before submission to the Secretary of State.

Councillor Hollingsworth agreed that while the principal purpose was not, at this stage, to look at detail, if either the Committee or the City Executive Board made compelling cases for detailed changes they would of course be given serious consideration. He paid tribute to the work of officers in preparation of the plan, with particular reference to

the contributions of Sarah Harrison (Team Leader (Planning Policy)) and Amanda Ford (Principal Planner).

Councillor Hollingsworth went on to set out the overarching purpose of the plan with reference to its foreword. The plan sought to contribute to a better society for all and to strike the right balance between the competing pressures that Oxford and its people face. Oxford is a wonderful city, with a beauty and a history and is a centre of learning and innovation on a global scale much of which it can be rightly proud. But it is also a city where inequality is stark - where decent and affordable housing is out of reach for so many of its citizens, and where poor air quality damages the lives of many more. The plan will seek to respect the city of previous generations while shaping the city for those to come.

The plan can only address matters within the City's borders and within which the amount of land suitable for housing development is very limited. The plan will address this by look at opportunities for higher buildings and increased density of housing. Wharehouses within the City do not represent a good use of space and would be discouraged.

The plan seeks to provide a framework for the future with as much of a qualitative element as a quantitative one which should, in turn, lead to more subtlety in planning decision making.

The Chair asked why a new calculation of housing need based on the Government's methodology set out in the National Policy Framework was not undertaken (para 2.29 of Appendix 2ii). It was explained that this methodology reduced the City's unmet housing need to zero, contrary to previous projections and despite the clear need for affordable housing; very high housing costs; and Government recognition that Oxford was set to make a significant contribution to the economic growth of the Country. The Government had also indicated, just a few days after their publication, that the recent household projection figures would be revised. The Strategic Housing Market Assessment undertaken in 2014 remained a sound basis for calculating future housing demand in the City and had been adopted, also, by other parties to the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal.

The consultation process to date was welcomed but there was disappointment that the plan was so rigidly structured, and a suggestion that a more flexible 'place making' approach would be preferable. Councillor Hollingsworth said that the qualitative rather than quantitative approach addressed this issue to some extent (for example in relation to the threshold policy for shops). The Team Leader (Planning Policy) said it was hard to pull together the many themes woven through the plan without recourse to some formal structure and an eye had to be kept on its ultimate use by, among others, Building Control.

The Principal Planner confirmed that, in relation to transport matters, the plan was closely aligned with the County Council as the local Highway Authority and its proposals flowed from a jointly commissioned study.

The reference to the development of the Cowley Branch line was welcome but the Committee expressed concern that the absence of a reference to other alternative

means of transport (tram or cable car for example) might subsequently be interpreted as the Council having dismissed such alternatives. Councillor Hollingsworth was clear that this was not the intention but agreed the some wording should be added to the introduction to make it clear.

In response to the review of Green Belt land, it was confirmed that the eight specific sites that would be de-designated only constituted 1.45% of the total Green Belt land inside the City boundary. It was noted that a considerable proportion of Green Belt within the City was incapable of being built on. The land to be released was only that in relation to which the landowners had indicated a willingness for it to be developed. Sites in relation to which development would be regarded as detrimental were not being taken forward. Some 50% of those Green Belt sites within the City boundary which were developable were not being taken forward.

A question was asked about the possibility of introducing another park and ride for the City. While this was superficially an attractive proposition, it ran counter to the County Council's longer term objective of situating park and ride car parks beyond the City boundary and in addition to which it would not represent the most effective use of land available to the City.

It was noted that Policy SP66 relating to William Morris Close Sports Ground had the potential to exacerbate the travel/congestion issues that already existed in relation to the nearby school. Councillor Hollingsworth said this provided a good example of the distinction between planning policy and a planning application; a potential developer would have to demonstrate that they had addressed all relevant policies, including those that related to the transport consequences of an application.

The importance of ensuring affordable transport to the City Centre was noted, the costs of which could be prohibitive for families (particularly given the eventual introduction of a zero emission zone in the city centre). The City Council, however, had no direct control over rail or bus fares. An enhanced partnership with the bus companies would provide opportunities to address the issue. This question did raise the issue of personal versus community decision making. There was no cost to an individual deciding, for example, to drive into the City centre and, in doing so, contributing to making air quality worse. There were, however, considerable costs to the community associated with poor air quality, such as poor health, links to dementia and reduced educational attainment. The contribution to collective decision making, as exemplified by the plan, always had to be for the greater good.

In relation to Policy RE1 (Sustainable design and construction) it was suggested that the requirement for an Energy Statement to be submitted for any scheme of 5 or more residential dwellings should be extended to all dwellings, or perhaps, in the lighter touch form of an Energy Performance Certificate. Councillor Hollingsworth agreed that this suggestion should be considered and the outcome reported back to the City Executive Board. He noted however that care would need to be taken not to incorporate something too prescriptive which might be challenged by the inspector.

The plan seeks to protect the Covered Market, wishing to maintain, enhance and promote its character, recognising the need to look to the future as well as the past.

In relation to Policy G4 (Allotments and community food growing) it was suggested that the ability to provide “new community food growing space” as part of the open space provision should be made a requirement. The Team Leader (Planning Policy) said that the wording reflected the need to be able to respond appropriately to different developments. It had to be recognised that, for some developments such a growing space would be impractical.

In relation to SP61, about which there was a very brief discussion, Cllr Lygo stated for openness that he lives on Valentia Road.

The Chair thanked Councillor Hollingsworth and officers for their contribution to this important debate.

48. Update report on progress with the Planning and Regulatory Service Improvement Plan

The Head of Planning, Sustainable Development & Regulatory Services introduced the report which provided the Committee with its latest update on the Planning and Regulatory Service. There had been a continuous programme of improvement since her arrival three years ago and she was grateful for the Committee’s interest in the service over that time. She was pleased to confirm that Adrian Arnold, the Development Management Service Manager would take over her role following her departure in a few weeks’ time.

Oxford was a great place for planners to work but also, of course, a very expensive place to live which, as for other areas of work, had significant consequences for recruitment and retention. The service set great store by its successful apprentice programme and a wish to ‘grow their own’.

The service’s performance as measured by key indicators exceeded national standards and the service was not, therefore, subject to government scrutiny as it otherwise would be. There was a higher level of enforcement activity than hitherto.

The Committee were pleased to note the continuing improvement and particularly the steps taken to address the staffing difficulties with particular reference to the apprenticeship programme.

The difference in response times to deal with enforcement matters was asked about. The time taken to respond would depend on the circumstances, history and complexity of a case and these could be significantly different. The use of a generic contact number for enquiries was intended to ensure that no delays were caused by the temporary absence of a particular officer.

The introduction of work placements for young people up to the age of 16 was not viable because of the levels of supervision required under the council’s safeguarding policies, something which was not sustainable in such a busy team. Future work placements for those older than 16 could however be given consideration and accommodated where capacity exists.

In discussion about the future, it would be important to secure the necessary resources to ensure the resilience of the service; developing in-house capacity and being innovative would be key.

Councillor Hollingsworth reiterated the importance of resilience. The transition to the current service structure had, inevitably, been disruptive and had had an effect on performance. The challenge was to ensure that the current systems and processes can cope with disruption however caused.

The Development Management Service Manager said that account was taken of anticipated applications over a 3-4 year horizon so that steps can be taken to ensure that projects are adequately resourced when they come on stream.

The Committee were grateful for the update and agreed that it would be helpful to have a further one in a year's time.

49. Staff Absence and Wellbeing

Councillor Chapman, in his capacity as Board Member for Customer Focused Services, introduced the report which had been triggered by discussion earlier in the year. The story was one of improvement for the first part of the year but care should be taken not to draw too many conclusions before the year end given the likelihood of increased levels of sickness and absence in the Winter months. The service was providing a lot of good work with a few members of staff on long term sick leave and whose absence can distort the overall picture to some degree.

The HR & Payroll Manager said that the Council's position is currently a little out of kilter with that of the rest of the UK where sickness absence levels are at their lowest for the last 10 years.

It was suggested that it might be helpful to record vacancy levels in a service area alongside absence rates; this would enable any correlation between the two to be identified.

The Committee noted that, the Council sickness absence data no longer included those relating to colleagues working in Oxford Direct Services.

Reference was made to the increase in the number of those experiencing mental ill health and the importance of appropriate interventions in relation to something that was not necessarily immediately visible.

The HR & Payroll Manager said that considerable efforts were made to work with colleagues who had significant attendance issues, with the aim of supporting the employee's return to work and termination of employment as a very last resort.

The 10th October was World Mental Health day, it was suggested that, in future, consideration might be given to an event in the workplace to mark it.

In discussion it was agreed that different management styles might contribute to levels of sickness and attendance and that good practice should be celebrated and serve as a model for others.

50. Dates of future meetings

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

Scrutiny Committee

- 06 November
- 04 December
- 14 January (provisional)

Standing Panels

- Housing Standing Panel: 11 October, 12 November
- Finance Standing Panel: 06 December
- Companies Panel: 13 November, 11 December, 03 January 2019

All meetings start at 6.00 pm

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 6 November 2018