

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Monday 6 July 2020

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Committee members present:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Azad (for Councillor Howlett)

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Simmons

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Arshad

Councillor Corais

Councillor Fry

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Also present:

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Carolyn Ploszynski, Planning Policy and Place Manager

Matthew Peachey, Economic Development Manager

Andrew Humpherson, Regeneration Manager

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors McManners and Howlett sent apologies.

19. Declarations of interest

None.

20. Chair's Announcements

None.

21. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2020 as a true and accurate record.

The minutes of the meeting held on 02 June had been revised in accordance with the wishes of the meeting on 17 June and were also before the Committee for approval. The Committee approved the revised minutes as a correct record.

22. Report back on recommendations

The Chair was pleased to report Cabinet's support for the bulk of the Committee's recommendations in relation to both the report on "Covid-19 update and work areas moving forward" and the "Annual Update Report on the Corporate Plan 2016-20". Similarly, Councillor Fry, in his capacity as Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel, was pleased to report Cabinet's support for the Panel's recommendations in relation to the "April Budget Monitoring Report."

23. Feedback from Panel representatives

Councillor Fry, in his capacity as Chair of the Companies Scrutiny Panel, drew attention to some of the key issues arising from its recent meeting. In relation to Oxford Direct Services (ODS) there had been discussion about its trading performance and the steps being taken to address a high sickness rate, the latter was partly but not wholly attributable to Covid-19. A recommendation from this discussion was the desirability of ensuring that the social value of capital projects was taken into account when commissioned from ODS by the Council. In relation to Barton Park there had been recognition of the detrimental effect Covid-19 had had on the value of some houses. In relation to Oxwed, a report was scheduled for Cabinet in November which would set out the phasing of this important project. In relation to the Housing Company, the Panel had been pleased to welcome its new Managing Director and there had been discussion about the potential merits of off-site development of buildings.

More generally he noted that the scale of the task for the Companies Scrutiny Panel (dealing with 4 companies at one meeting) was such that consideration might usefully be given to dividing the task amongst two panels in the future.

24. Local Growth Funded Workspace Projects

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, introduced the report. The present economic situation was taking its toll. 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.

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 principal dependence on just two sectors, education and

tourism, the latter was 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 which 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. It was noted that the timescales referred to in paragraph 27 were in need of updating and this would be done before the report went to Cabinet.

The report referred to a vacant site adjacent to Standingford House. The Committee was keen that sight should not be lost of its possible use for housing rather than office accommodation. Officers confirmed that while the focus would be on office accommodation, both sites would be looked at in their entirety and consideration given to the most beneficial mix of commercial and housing use. It was also confirmed that the views and needs of the buildings' current tenants would be fully taken into account and that social value would be an important consideration as the projects develop.

The Committee were concerned lest the market for the type of accommodation described might not be buoyant enough to make the proposal economically sustainable. Officers said that while there was still a great deal of uncertainty about the market, current indications were that it would be sustainable and the project would be supported by good commercial advice throughout.

It was in the Council's interests that the improvement of these properties was on a sound commercial basis; it would not be appropriate for them or parts of them to be made available for community use.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed that a recommendation should be made in relation to the brief for the development at Standingford House, Cave St. The brief should include the adjacent Council owned land and that it was for mixed business/residential use.

25. Local Development Scheme (LDS) 2020-2025

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning & Housing Delivery, introduced the report which fulfilled a statutory requirement. The report detailed the many planning policy documents, which will supplement the 2036 Plan. The report also drew attention to the intention that the 2040 plan should align with neighbouring local authorities' plans. This would, in turn, facilitate the broad alignment of plan end dates and the evidence base of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 which is broadly being worked up in key 10 year tranches. This would save a considerable amount of time and effort on technical work necessitated by plans which were not in sync with one another at the time of examination.

He noted that the report had been written in advance of an anticipated Government announcement about plans for significant changes to planning legislation, potentially the most profound changes since the introduction of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947.

The Committee were concerned that some current policies, such as zero carbon housing, might be at risk through reviewing the Local Plan. Carolyn Ploszynski, Planning Policy & Place Manager said that any review of a Local Plan would always

be underpinned by the intention to build on existing policies rather than undermining them. The main risk would come from national changes introduced by the Government which might, for example, change the ability to set local targets for policies such as carbon reduction. It wasn't possible, therefore, to say that the Council's current policies would necessarily be protected forever.

The Committee questioned whether the Technical Advice Notes (TANS) might be used to add further elements to the Oxford Local Plan 2036 policies, which the Council thought desirable. The Planning Policy & Place Manager said TANS could not be used to add requirements to adopted policies but, rather, to provide advice about how a policy requirement could be met. This can include drawing attention to best practice.

The report contained references to potential means of reviewing CIL arrangements which would be driven, in due course, by the need to secure the most effective approach in securing developer contributions towards infrastructure costs in Oxford.

The Committee had no recommendations to make in relation to this report.

26. Longlist of potential items for Scrutiny Committee review

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the report which set out proposals for the Committee's work plan for the remainder of the Council year, including potential subjects for review groups. He reminded the Committee of the 'TOPICC' methodology for ranking proposed subjects. The methodology had been tweaked slightly to take account of the consequences of Covid-19 and the temporary focus on reports destined for Cabinet. The Committee was recommended to select those subjects with a TOPICC rating of 8 or above.

The Chair noted that the subject of "Tourism Review Group Update" was rated 7, just below the proposed threshold for inclusion. However, given the importance of tourism to the City and the detrimental consequences of Covid-19 to it, he proposed that it should be included in workplan nonetheless.

The Committee agreed that the significance of the "Climate Emergency Review Group Update" warranted the promotion of Climate Emergency to be the subject for a further review group. The scope of original review had had to be constrained and limited to buildings. Consideration of a further review could start with the original scope and then be honed down to the extent necessary.

The Committee agreed with the recommendations contained in the report, subject to the addition of the two items mentioned above.

27. Dates of future meetings

Scrutiny Committee

- 04 August 2020
- 01 September 2020

Standing Panels

- Housing & Homelessness: 03 August
- Finance & Performance: 29 September
- Companies Scrutiny: 14 September

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.20 pm

Chair Date: Tuesday 4 August 2020