

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 6 October 2020

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Committee members present:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Howlett

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Arshad

Councillor Corais

Councillor Fry

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Simmons

Also present:

Councillor Tom Hayes, Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford.

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director (Development)

Matthew Peachey, Economic Development Manager

Pedro Rocha Abreu, Air Quality Officer

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

None

37. Declarations of interest

None.

38. Chair's Announcements

The Chair noted that Council had considered the Committee's Annual report earlier in the week and thanked the Scrutiny Officer for an excellent piece of work.

He proposed a re-ordering of the agenda for the benefit of guests of the Committee and noted that it was intended to take screenshots of the next Committee meeting one or some of which would be incorporated in the following year's annual report.

39. Annual Air Quality Status Report

Cllr Tom Hayes gave a brief introduction to the report. After a significant period of improving air quality, the rate of improvement was plateauing, contributed to, in part, by 3 months in 2019 of extreme weather conditions across the city. This underlined the importance of the steps proposed in the Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) which had been the subject of discussion at the previous meeting of the Committee and, in particular, the establishment of a target for air quality improvement which was more stringent than that required by Government. A target which would be contributed by the measures set out in the AQAP such as the introduction of a Zero Emissions Zone; the electrification of the Council's vehicle fleet; encouraging the local bus and taxi trade to move towards the increasing use of electric vehicles etc.

In response to a question Cllr Hayes agreed that the previous recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee in relation to the AQAP would be worked into future monitoring reports.

The Committee enquired about the contribution of weather conditions to the decline in air quality cited in the report, asking if it was likely to be a deep seated and ongoing issue as a consequence of climate change. Pedro Abreu, Air Quality Officer, confirmed that climate change was producing more extreme weather conditions than hitherto and so it was likely to continue to be a factor from time to time. DEFRA had independently confirmed that the conclusions of the report were properly evidenced.

In subsequent discussion it the Committee agreed that there would be no real merit in monitoring and recording detailed weather conditions to be read in parallel with the air quality data not least because of the natural variation of conditions which were sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental to air quality. Notwithstanding the Committee's view Cllr Hayes argued that there was still merit in providing relevant contextual factors when producing a public report.

The report's reference to the Energy Superhub was thought to be in need of some clarification in relation to whether or not its spare capacity was to be fed back into the grid or used for high speed charging stations. It was agreed that clarification would be provided to the Committee on this matter.

Cllr Hayes said it was difficult, at this point, to quantify the potential beneficial impact of the Superhub on air quality. This was because it was not known to what extent the "private wire" capability would be taken up by businesses, fleet operators et al. The Council would encourage all those who might benefit to do so with a particular focus on the bus companies. The introduction of a significant number of electric vehicle charging points should increase the number of electric vehicles in the City.

In discussion about the possible connection between poor air quality and Covid-19 Cllr Hayes said an emerging research base was looking at the links between Covid-19 and air quality. It was however prudent to wait until there could be complete confidence in the research base before making that explicit connection, despite the increasing likelihood that there was one.

Cllr Hayes noted that at a time of financial pressure decisions had yet to be made about the allocation of funding to support implementation of measures in the AQAP. At the same time it was important to remember that the Council had been very successful in drawing in a considerable amount of external Government funding for a wide range of projects, not least because the Council had established itself as a "can do" authority

that “got things done.” Other bids were in train, including one for significant funding for the “all-electric bus town” scheme for which the Council was a serious contender.

It was agreed that improved/safer cycling opportunities in the City (eg the introduction of a “Dutch style roundabout” in St Clements) would, collectively and ultimately, contribute to improved air quality. In relation to St Clements in particular Cllr Hayes noted that there had until recently been a St Clements Air Quality Working Group involving both City and County representatives which had been set up for the express purpose of seeing what could be done to address the matter of air pollution in St Clements. This had resulted in a series of actions, including increased monitoring, which had, broadly, been implemented. Notwithstanding what had been done, it would be the introduction of low and zero emission buses which would make a material improvement and, finally, see air pollution in the area reach an acceptable legal level. A reduction in vehicle use in the City, particularly around St Clements, as well as reducing pollution levels, would also offer the opportunity to reallocate the road space to cyclists.

It was recognised that the Council’s monitoring of air quality was constrained to some extent by the number (75) of monitoring devices available. Monitoring generally focused on places with high levels of vehicle movements and or footfall. The monitoring sites were reviewed every 2-3 years and moved to a new location if the air quality was well within the legal limits. The team was open to suggestions from members of the public or councillors for new locations. It was noted that the consequences of Covid-19 on air quality (atypical transport patterns for example) would make it difficult to make robust conclusions about pollution levels on the basis of recent monitoring and therefore this year’s new monitoring locations would not be moved or changed in the next monitoring campaign of 2021.

In relation to the Cutteslowe/Wolvercote roundabout and anticipated developments there, the AQAP recognised the area as one of four “hot spots” which demanded and would receive particular attention from an air quality monitoring point of view. It was noted that the new developments in the area included air monitoring assessments as part of the planning process.

The criteria for locating a monitoring device meant that some parts of the City with residents more likely to be vulnerable to the effects of poor air quality for socio-economic reasons, were not, therefore, necessarily monitored. Cllr Hayes said that a new monitoring device had recently been located in Blackbird Leys and its future there would take account of the contextual factors of its location and not simply the measured air quality.

The Council had recently involved local primary schools in competition to design a clean air/anti idling banner to mark Clean Air Day. A small number of these banners were now available for any school to display outside their front gates to promote sustainable transport.

The Chair thanked Cllr Hayes and the officer for this update on progress with this important matter.

40. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 01 September 2020 as a true and accurate record.

41. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to proposed changes to the published version of the Committee's work plan which were noted and agreed.

Scrutiny of next year's budget would be dealt with by a combination of the budget review group and finance panel, following a similar timetable to the previous year.

42. Report back from Panel representatives and on recommendations to Cabinet from the Committee and its Panels

Councillor Aziz feedback on the most recent meetings of the Housing & Homelessness Panel.

Councillor Fry feedback on the most recent meetings of the Finance & Performance Panel and the Companies Panel.

Cabinet's responses to the Committee's previous recommendations were noted.

43. Tourism Review Group Update

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director Development, introduced the report by reminding the Committee of the profound effect Covid-19 had had on the visitor economy and the City centre with footfall down by some 39%, contributed to in some part by many peoples' current reluctance to use buses. Implementation of many of the review group's recommendations remained partial, this was principally due to the limited capacity of the Economic Development Team which had had to divert its attention, temporarily, from work on the City Centre Vision and the Economic Development Strategy (which will frame the response to the matters raised by the review) to focus on the more immediate demands of responding to Covid-19. Going forward, this work would seek to address the recovery of the Visitor economy at a County level through the Economic Recovery Plan which OxLEP is required to deliver to central Government by the end of the year.

Matt Peachey, Economic Development Officer, said the review had been and would continue to be valuable in framing the City's economic strategy. He went on to highlight some key points from the report.

The Chair noted that not all of the Cabinet responses were covered in the report and was anxious that the spirit of the original recommendations should not be lost.

The Committee recognised the particularly difficult challenge of addressing these matters in the present environment.

It was intended to brief members on the City Centre Vision before Christmas. Publication and engagement with the wider stakeholder groups was likely to be best timed after Christmas.

Budget discussions to confirm what bids might be made to support this work were ongoing. Given the significance of the challenges facing this sector, efforts would be focused on the countywide economic recovery plan (and ultimately central Government funding) referred to above.

It was noted that the “Rediscover Oxford” scheme had been beneficial. It was agreed that a future version of it (one was proposed for Christmas) would benefit from refined messaging to emphasise the measures taken to ensure the safety of visitors.

While not one of the original review’s recommendations, it was noted that the previously rehearsed arguments for a cable car in the City might be better framed as a tourist attraction rather than, principally, as a transport option.

In relation to tourist coaches coming into the City it was hoped that they would be subject to the same emission requirements as those vehicles based in the City.

The community toilets scheme had been recognised as being important for visitors (the absence of which was a recognised factor in visitor dissatisfaction). The City Centre Manager had been in touch with local businesses about the scheme. There was awareness of a similar scheme in Bath and it had been flagged as something which may be brought forward as part of the City Centre Strategy.

Recent applicants for Covid-19 Discretionary Grants had been asked if they paid the Real Living Wage (RLW). While the Council is clear that the aspiration is for employers to pay the higher Oxford Living Wage (OLW), asking the question about the RLW has provided a starting point for further engagement with those employers.

Experience Oxford had made a significant contribution to the City’s visitor business. The recent closure of its Visitor Information Centre as a result of the Council’s decision to cease its funding was regrettable and the Committee was keen to see how its contribution might be replaced. Experience Oxford was being encouraged to move to a more commercial model but experience elsewhere suggested that visitor information services could rarely operate successfully on a solely commercial basis. The future was likely to be best served by a stronger digital presence.

Persuading residents that the City centre is a safe place to enjoy remained a challenge. Some of the initiatives already taken had proved helpful (e.g. use of the Re-opening High Street Safety Fund; pedestrianisation of some areas; and use of tables and chairs outside) but as we moved into Autumn and a new phase of behaviours (less people on holiday for example) and less welcoming weather, further thought would need to be given to this. In relation to the use of tables and chairs businesses had, so far, and understandably, been reluctant to invest in such things as coverings to protect customers from the rain and heaters, due to the temporary nature of provision. It was to be hoped that as businesses became more confident in the potential of outdoor seating as a model for the future so they would make a greater investment. Such outdoor seating had to be licensed and seeking agreement for those licences to extend into the evening required a good working relationship with Thames Valley Police, who, as statutory consultees in relation to licence applications, might not naturally support such applications.

70% of people coming into Oxford do so by bus and so it would continue to be important to ensure that buses were (and were perceived to be) safe.

While the City did not lend itself to the provision of open spaces in the public realm, efforts would be made to secure them for the enjoyment of and use by the public. The ambition would be to expand the pedestrianisation of some streets. Work would also be done to encourage more overnight stays.

The Chair noted the continuing importance of addressing how best to deal with the matter of tourist coaches, drop off and layover. It was explained that the necessary discussions were continuing and it was, indeed, a standing item on a regular monthly

meeting with County Council representatives. A survey to gather evidence to inform the best way forward had been delayed because of the virtual cessation of tourist coaches as a result of Covid-19 but it was hoped to take this forward in 2021. In the meantime, more immediate interim means of taking the pressure off coach parking in St Giles were being explored.

The Committee was very supportive of the proposed development of open spaces and, in particular, of taking that opportunity to provide a sense, for all residents, of ownership of the City which, it was felt, was often lacking. This might be taken forward as a co-production project which could include, among others, young people. This proposal chimed with an element of the recently agreed Council Business Plan, which included an objective to “make the City centre more relevant to a wide range of people.” In the longer term, the development of Oxpens provided a significant opportunity to provide high quality public realm open spaces.

It was noted that a number of colleges had erected a marquees with open sides to eat meals outside but under cover, this might provide a model for future public spaces.

The Committee noted the potential for Low Traffic Neighbourhoods to contribute to the provision of open spaces.

It was agreed that a further update would be brought to the Committee in due course.

The Chair thanked the officers for their contribution to this important debate.

44. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 03 November
- 01 December

Standing Panels

- Housing & Homelessness: 08 October, 05 November
- Finance & Performance: 03 December
- Companies Scrutiny: 14 December

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm

Chair Date: Tuesday 3 November 2020