

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 8 December 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Wade (Chair)

Councillor Corais

Councillor Fry

Councillor Linda Smith

Councillor Tidball

Councillor Waite

Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Mundy (for Councillor Djafari-Marbini)

Councillor Smowton

Councillor Thomas

Councillor Wolff

Cabinet Members Also present:

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement

Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors Djafari-Marbini sent apologies.

68. Declarations of interest

None.

69. Chair's Announcements

In response to a question from the Chair, the Scrutiny Officer confirmed that in the absence of a further legislative change it remained a requirement to hold Committee meetings in person.

70. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee with the latest changes to the Workplan. After a brief discussion it was agreed that the Cabinet report on Grant Allocations to Community and Voluntary Organisations should also be added to the Workplan for the February meeting.

71. Annual Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement

Cllr Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning & Housing Delivery, introduced the report which fulfilled a statutory duty for all planning authorities to report performance, annually, against a range of targets. He then responded to a number of questions from the Committee.

Accommodation outside University campuses was only deemed to be University accommodation if provided directly by one of the Universities for its students. This did not, therefore, for example, include the Student Castle, which was open to students from anywhere.

The significant number of students not on full time taught courses were excluded from accommodation needs as the relevant policies distinguish between those on full time taught courses and those who are not. This was a matter which had been discussed at some length during inspection of the current Local Plan. A student on a 9 month taught post-graduate course would be counted towards the number with accommodation needs.

Table 7 (Net additional dwellings completed since start of the Local Plan period) included communal and non-communal dwellings and there might be merit in splitting the table to distinguish between the two in future.

It would not always be easy to identify a developer's contribution to a particular number of affordable dwellings given that it could take many forms and sometimes at a place other than the principal development.

It would be beyond the scope of the Local Plan to encourage the use of sustainable transport for visitors to Oxford as an element of the Sustainable Tourism part of the Plan.

Projections of the age profile of the City's residents were taken account of in preparing the future housing requirements in the Local Plan.

The significant recent reduction in student numbers from both universities without accommodation was probably largely attributable to the consequences of Covid.

The proportion of affordable housing to be included as part of the Northern Gateway represented significant progress given the original stance of the developer.

In the case of major applications which did not secure a reduction of 40% of regulated energy as required by Policy RE1 it would be useful to know where and why.

For land identified in the Local Plan as suitable for housing, officers were in regular and frequent contact with landowners to press them as to when proposals would come forward.

72. Workplace Equalities and Action Plan

Cllr Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Customer Focused Services introduced the report. Which reflected the Council's ambition to be a welcoming and inclusive employer with a diverse, representative and high performing work force. The Workforce Equality Report attached to the report fulfilled a statutory requirement and contained some positive indicators. The target for BAME employees had been exceeded and the gender pay gap decreased. There had, nonetheless, been a stagnation in the number of BAME applications and there was more which could be done in this area, especially in relation to work with schools and further education establishments.

There had been good progress with the recommendations made by the Committee a year previously.

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement, noted that this area of work was underpinned by the new People Strategy which emphasised the importance of a truly inclusive culture which would be integrated into all aspects of an employee's work life.

The Committee raised a number of matters which were responded to by Cllr Rowley and the Head of Business Improvement.

There would be merit in seeing the equivalent HR data for the Council's companies. While such data could not be included in the formal annual equalities report, there was no reason why a parallel report could not be prepared by ODS in relation to them. It was understood that the relevant data were collected by the companies.

It would be helpful to include a brief reference to the fact that pay grades was always evaluated in accordance with an agreed scheme, on the basis of the responsibilities of a particular post.

It was regrettable that a high proportion of managers chose not to declare their ethnicity (given the value of having comprehensive data about this indicator) and there would be merit in encouraging them to do so.

There was still a long way to go in relation to securing a workforce which was truly representative of the local community. There were perhaps occasions when the desire to fill a post swiftly had overridden the importance of doing all that was possible to improve the diversity of the workforce.

An account of what positive actions were being taken to address these matters would be helpful in the future.

In order to encourage employees to declare protected characteristics there would be value in making clear the use to which these data were put and the benefits of that.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that the Council:

1. Considers asking ODS for a report providing similar details of the diversity profile and the actions being taken to ensure the workforces of these companies are reflective of the community they serve;
2. Publishes as an appendix to next year's report the same statistics for the staff in its wholly-owned companies as it does for its own staff;
3. In the next year's report, provides details of the positive action schemes undertaken by the Council – those started, those completed and those planned, and their results (where relevant) – and that that information is shared with those minoritised groups the Council is targeting as being particularly unrepresented within the Council workforce;
4. Makes a renewed and determined effort to persuade managers to share the details of their protected characteristics; and
5. Continues to monitor the demographic profile of responses to adverts and short-listed candidates, and supports areas which are struggling to attract appropriately-qualified diverse candidates to do so.
6. Amends its report to clarify that the gender pay gap is caused by differences in seniority and full time/part time working, rather than that there is unequal pay for equal work.

73. Strategic Grants Review

In advance of the first item of substantive business a brief presentation was made to the Committee on behalf of some of Oxford's advice centres and in anticipation of item 8 on the Agenda, Strategic Grants Review. Sue Tanner, Chair of the Board of Trustees at Rosehill and Donnington, spoke on behalf of the three local advice centres, Agnes Smith in Blackbird Leys; Barton and Rose Hill; and Donnington. She drew attention to a paper which had been distributed by them to members of the Committee in advance of the meeting. A copy of that paper is attached to these minutes.

Advice centres had suffered significant cuts in grant funding in recent years and were now faced with a proposal to remove the Development Fund and to cut a further £25,000 from the budget for advice centres and Citizens Advice.

Advice centres carry out work which, was in effect delegated, to them by the City Council, such as the distribution of the Covid support grants and receiving referrals from the Hubs. All the work they did was in line with Council's strategic priorities.

Advice centres worked in the most deprived areas of the city, bringing financial gains for clients in those neighbourhoods. Last year the three centres helped clients to access nearly £10 million, which was a good return on the £0.5 million received from the City Council.

She hoped that the Committee would recommend rejection of the proposal to reduce by £25,000 the core funding to the advice centres

Cllr Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities, introduced the report by first thanking Sue Tanner for her presentation at the beginning of the meeting and for the important contribution made by all those who work in advice centres. The workload of advice centres had undoubtedly increased as a result of Covid, having to deal with a multitude of issues, frequently affecting the most vulnerable members of the community and particularly women. The proposals before the Committee didn't seek to identify, specifically, where cuts would be made but, rather, to set out a strategy for making such decisions in due course. Comments made at this stage would help to inform the strategy.

Cllr Aziz was grateful for the letter which had been sent to members of the Committee on behalf of the advice centres in advance of the meeting and said she would be pleased to meet their representatives to discuss their concerns. It was agreed that this letter should inform the Budget Review group's deliberations.

The strategy sought to set out a new approach to grant funding which supported the following principles: equalities at the heart of the programme; recovery from Covid; tackling deprivation; and environmentally sustainable. The strategy also sought to make the process of accessing grants easier and, in particular, to facilitate access to grants by organisations/groups which had not done so previously.

Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services, said the need to take £200k from the overall programme was a difficult and unwelcome challenge. The review process leading to this point had been lengthy and detailed, involving conversations with as many relevant people as possible to inform the proposals now before the Committee. The contribution of advice centres was not in question, and the written submission made in advance of the Committee provided the basis of some helpful options to be explored.

The Committee raised a number of matters which were responded to by Cllr Aziz and the Head of Community Services.

The opportunity to apply for three year grants was welcome; the extension of that to allow subsequent rolling renewal would be valuable as it would provide further confidence and continuity for those benefitting from the grants.

The leverage potential of grants to generate subsequent savings/income for individuals and groups was recognised, making the provision of some grants particularly cost effective. There were some data about the 'multiplier effect' for some grants. It was suggested that it would be helpful to see these data. It was also noted however that grants with a high multiplier effect might be financially beneficial but this was not, necessarily, the same as the provision of high value in a broader sense.

The proposals to ensure that the provision of grants was linked to the Council's objectives was very welcome as was the transparency about grant criteria and weighting which made it very clear to applicants what was expected of them.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that the Council:

1. Permits (but does not oblige) organisations granted three-year grant funding to reapply for such funding on an annual basis; and
2. Makes available tickets for the Oxford Lottery at cash registers in the Town Hall, such as the museum shop and coffee shop.

74. Budget Review Group - Scope

The Committee resolved to agree the scope of the review group.

It was agreed however that the membership of the review group would benefit from an improved gender balance. The Committee agreed to appoint Councillor Imogen Thomas to the Finance and Performance Panel and the Budget Review Group, replacing Councillor Duncan Hall.

Child Poverty Review Group

The Scrutiny Officer reported that the County Council was, unfortunately, unable to participate in the review as full members of it. The Review Group would therefore proceed with a membership of 4 City Councillors. County Council colleagues could however be invited to contribute on an ad-hoc basis as the need arose.

75. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

The Scrutiny Officer reported back on Cabinet's response to the Committee's recommendations in relation to Anti-social Behaviour Policy; East Oxford Community Centre; Discretionary Housing Payment Policy; and EV Strategy, the majority of which had received a favourable response.

The Committee was disappointed however with the negative response to aspects of the recommendations in relation to the EV strategy and the time it had taken to get those responses. It was noted that the Cabinet Member was due to appear before the Committee in March to report back on the strategy and some of these matters could be revisited then.

Cllrs Champan and Fry fed back to the Committee on the most recent meetings of the Companies Scrutiny Panel and Finance & Performance Panel respectively.

76. Reports for approval

The report before the Committee included two recommendations for Cabinet. In discussion it was agreed that two further recommendation were warranted:

1. That the Council, in its work with partners, pursues a renewed focus on attracting domestic tourists to Oxford; and
2. That the Council reviews and updates its responses to the recommendations made by the Tourism Review Group in light of the changes of Covid and the proposed Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan.

77. Dates of future meetings

Scrutiny Committee

- 18 January
- 01 February
- 07 March
- 05 April

Standing Panels

Housing & Homelessness: 16 December, 02 February, 04 April
Finance & Performance: 07 December, 24 January, 09 March
Companies: 13 December, 24 March

All meetings start at 6.00 pm except Housing and Homelessness on 16 December, which will start at 5pm.

78. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 02 November 2021 as a true and accurate record.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 9.00 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 18 January 2022

Request to Oxford City Council to reconsider £25,000 reduction in core funding for Advice Centres

1. Executive Summary

Oxford City Council's Communities Grants Strategic Review Report explains the need to make grant savings of £200,000 per annum, and recommends that part of this saving is achieved by ending the £45,000 pa Advice Development Fund and reducing core funding to the Advice Centres by £25,000 pa.

Agnes Smith Advice Centre (ASAC), Oxford Community Work Agency (OCWA) and Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre (RHD) request that the City Council do not make the proposed reduction to Advice Centre core funding.

The Strategic Review Report shows that, even without the reduction, the council will achieve their target of total grant savings of £200,000 pa.

There would still be significant savings from overall advice funding as the Advice Development Fund would still be cut. However removing the reduction to our core costs would reduce the impact on those who need advice in the most deprived areas of Oxford.

If this proposal isn't accepted, we ask that the cut is achieved through assisting Citizens Advice Oxford to relocate, avoiding the need to cut funding across the advice agencies.

2. Introduction

Our three advice centres provide a vital service in the most deprived areas of Oxford. Our City Council grant funding has not increased in line with inflation since 2010 so, effectively, we have been subject to funding cuts year on year, (an approximate 30% cut over the last 10 years using the Bank of England inflation calculator). The Advice Development Fund was established by cutting our core funding by 5% in 2018. The proposal to remove the Advice Development Fund now is a cut of 8.7% to our funding. A further reduction to our vital core costs would seriously risk damaging advice-service provision for the most vulnerable Oxford residents at a time when they are under huge and increasing pressures.

We therefore request that the Communities Grants Strategic Review Report is amended as follows:

- Recommendation 3 is increased to £500,000 for advice centres
- The £25,000 reduction to advice services is removed from savings at Table 1

3. Our service

ASAC, OCWA and RHD have worked hard to reduce costs, develop innovative projects, and collaborate with each other and with Citizens Advice, to ensure that we deliver an efficient and high-quality advice service to beneficiaries. Our work supports City Council priorities and reduces demand for City Council services; for instance, by increasing financial inclusion, targeting inequality, and preventing homelessness and fuel poverty. Our outcomes are outstanding: in 2020-21 the three agencies achieved total financial gains of nearly £10 million for almost 6,000 service users. A cut in funding resulting in a reduction in service could well lead to a cut in the amount of financial gain, which would adversely affect the local economy.

We already work hard to bring in external funding. In 2020-21, the Oxford City Council core grant formed less than 35% of Agnes Smith Advice Centre's total grant income. However, fundraising for core costs has become much more challenging in the wake of Covid-19, while at the same time demand for our services has increased. ASAC has seen a 52% increase in client numbers between January and October 2021, compared with the same period in 2020.

Unlike Citizens Advice, our three agencies are not able to make cost reductions by co-locating or by under-using our premises during the Covid-19 crisis. Because we support the most vulnerable members of society, and because we provide in-depth, transformational advice, we have focused on remaining accessible in our local communities for those who need us most. Digital and telephone advice are an important part of our offer. However, our clients have told us how much they need face-to-face advice - particularly our most vulnerable clients who are less likely to have internet access/digital skills, and often find it difficult to manage by phone. At ASAC we staffed the centre throughout the crisis, to provide emergency/essential face-to-face advice and support, and so that people could knock on our door if they had no other way of reaching us. RHD and OCWA have not always had full access to their premises but face-to-face advice remains a vital part of their commitment to a blended in-person, telephone and e-mail service

The impact of a £25,000 cut

A £25,000 cut applied equally across the four advice agencies would mean each agency would lose £6,250 per annum. £6,250 roughly equates to a 1 day per week adviser salary. Reducing adviser hours by 1 day a week would mean we could each see just under 100 fewer clients per year. This would reduce financial gains for clients, from benefits claimed, debts written off etc, by at least £100,000 per year for each agency, and would put more people in risk of homelessness due to rent arrears or unclaimed benefit entitlement. Waiting times for clients would be longer, with more pressure on staff/volunteers. More Manager time would be taken up with core fundraising, which leaves less time for projects, strategy and development, including liaising with other organisations such as the OCC Locality Hubs.

Please note that there is no evidence that the Hubs will reduce our workloads (Section 39 of the Strategic Grants Report). Since April 2021, ASAC has referred 6 clients to the South Hub for help from the Community Larder. Those clients still needed ongoing advice from us. During the same period, Oxford City Council has referred 19 clients to us for social-welfare advice, and we have also distributed Covid Winter Support Grants and Household Support Grants on behalf of the Council. We are very happy to do this, and gladly accept referrals/work with the Hubs, but this cannot be used to justify a cut to our funding.

It is worth pointing out also that the advice agencies are much more cost-effective than other forms of provision, because so much of their work is carried out by volunteers.

4. Our proposal

5.1 Proposal 1 – remove the £25,000 cut to advice services. This will still mean we have a cut due to inflation and of £45k in the Advice Development Fund.

This is our preferred proposal since it minimises likely consequences for beneficiaries. The Communities Grants Strategic Review Report states the 2020-21 Grants budget totals £1.72 million, with a £200k reduction required. The report proposes the following:

Community Impact Fund	£558k
Commissioning Fund for domestic abuse and advice services	£475k

Homeless monies pot	£442k
Total proposed grants for 2021-22	£1.47 million

This results in savings of £245k. Therefore, removing the £25k cut to advice services would still leave savings over the target of a £200k reduction.

5.2 Proposal 2 – do not apply the £25,000 reduction to the three smaller advice centres

Face to face advice and a physical presence in communities is key to how ASAC, RHD and OCWA reach the most disadvantaged people in our communities. We understand Citizens Advice Oxford have achieved significant savings in 2020-21, following changing their model to be almost entirely remote. They also intend to relocate in December 2022 to reduce cost. These cost saving options are not open to ASAC, RHD and OCWA, who need to maintain their existing premises and focus on face-to-face advice in the community, in order to target those suffering greatest deprivation. Applying a cut to the smaller agencies is very likely to reduce advice provision.

Citizens Advice Oxford are our trusted partners, and we do not want to make proposals that would be harmful to CA. However, if a £25,000 cut cannot be avoided, it appears to us that this could be applied to Citizens Advice’s funding without detriment, as they will recoup this from reduced rental in Years 2 and 3. Citizens Advice should also be in a position to use the savings they made in 2020-21 to cover costs of current rent between April and December 2022.

5.3 Proposal 3 – a pro-rata cut during Year 1 only

If the cut in funding is applied to all advice agencies, we ask that the cut is applied on a pro-rata basis according to the size of our existing grants. We also request that the cut only applies in the first year, with grants returning to the existing amounts in Year 2 once Citizens Advice’s lease has ended and they have been assisted to co-locate to cheaper premises.

This is our least preferred option and we hope this can be avoided, as any cut to our core funding will very seriously reduce our organisational resilience and jeopardise services for residents in the most deprived areas of Oxford.

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