

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 17 June 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 Susan Brown, Leader of the Council

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Caroline Green, Assistant Chief Executive

Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director (Development)

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

None.

12. Declarations of interest

None.

13. Chair's Announcements

The Chair reminded the Committee of the protocols to be followed at a remote meeting and proposed a reordering of the agenda for the benefit of guests of the Committee which was agreed.

With the Chair's agreement the Committee was then addressed by Peter Thompson, speaking on behalf of the Oxford School of English. Mr Thompson said the expanded Retail Discount Scheme for Business Rates was not extended, in Oxford, to language schools. He argued that the Oxford School of English catered for what was, essentially, a 'type of tourism', rather than education provision; its students came to experience British life and customs as much as to learn English. Some authorities, such as

Cambridge City Council, interpreted the scheme more liberally to include language schools, the failure to do so in Oxford was regrettable.

Councillors Djarfari-Marbini and McManners joined the meeting during this item.

14. Report back from Panel representatives.

Councillor James Fry, Chair of the Finance and Performance Panel, reported back on the previous day's meeting of the Panel. The Panel's discussion had focussed on consideration of the Council's deficits projected in the Medium Term Financial Plan and ways of tackling them with a particular focus on the current financial year. The Panel recognised that it would have the opportunity for a more detailed exploration of these matters later in the year when the same members would meet to look at budget proposals for 2021/22. The Panel was concerned about the future of the current funding for rough sleepers. The Panel saw merit in the Council lobbying for the capitalisation of deficits over a longer period. It had also looked at proposals for individual deferments of spending and recommended that, if possible, one relatively modest but important project of £60k for cycling infrastructure should continue.

The importance of aligning the budget and recovery programme was noted and acknowledged.

15. City Council COVID Recovery Programme

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, turned first to the address made by Mr Thompson. She said the matter had been raised on a number of previous occasions by Mr Thompson and officers had been asked to check the line being taken in Oxford. Officers had confirmed the view that language schools are not within the scope of the scheme. While Cambridge City Council had awarded a relief to one language school it had since come to the view that this might need to be reconsidered. They are not paying further reliefs or grants to language schools and have requested further guidance from MHCLG. The Council had sympathy for the position outlined by Mr Thompson and had written to Government in support of an extension of the scheme to language schools but in the meantime the Council had to operate the scheme as it was currently understood to apply.

Councillor Brown then introduced the report. She emphasised the absolute interconnection between the financial and recovery elements of the Council's response to Covid-19. The three elements around which the plan was built (restart, recover and renew) were important and distinct, each one of which would require their own actions. The principles on which the programme will be based, as set out in paragraph 6 of the report, were also important and would be applied across all strands of work. She went on to draw particular attention to and comment on some of them.

“Embed and build on positive changes that have emerged to the way we work across the council, and with our communities, volunteers and other partners.” The response of communities and volunteers across the city to recent challenges had been outstanding and it would be important to build on that way of working.

“Seek to retain or enhance environmental benefits wherever we can”. This was an important and crucial goal for the Council.

“Target our resources to where they are most needed to support those most in need or most vulnerable.” This had been done in recent weeks and it was important that it should continue. It was clear that many citizens would be facing significant and additional economic hardship over the coming months and the Council would do all it could to protect them.

“Ensure Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are embedded in all areas of our work.” This was an important message to communicate, particularly at the present time and in the light of the worldwide response to the Black Lives Matter movement. The Council was clear that it would continue to listen to, work with and for all members of the community.

Councillor Brown went on to describe the 7 workstreams in the programme. In relation to these, Hardship & Vulnerability would be particularly important as increasing numbers of citizens were likely to face financial hardship or health difficulties and the Council needed to be ready to support them. The Council had had to deliver services very differently in recent weeks and it would be important to capitalise on the lessons learnt from this. The Council Strategy and financial sustainability were key and this had regrettably but inevitably, necessitated the pause of some projects, to give time to review everything in the round. The workstream of Health, Social Care and Wellbeing had been and would remain significant, not least because of the way in which health inequalities in the city had been exacerbated by recent events.

Caroline Green, Assistant Chief Executive, reminded the Committee that the recovery programme was unfolding at a time of considerable disruption and that the initial support work in response to Covid-19 would need to continue in many areas. The Council was also having to adapt to new and changing guidance about many elements of the response. It was necessary to be resilient and flexible, ready to respond to any new peaks, all of which resulted in extra workload for many parts of the Council service. It was important to remember that the programme would not proceed on the basis of a return to ‘normal’. There was a real opportunity to apply the benefits of the new ways of working for the communities and residents of Oxford.

The Committee was appreciative of a comprehensive report which dealt with an unprecedented environment. There was particular appreciation of the engagement with volunteers, the greater understanding of vulnerable members of the community than hitherto and the additional provision made for rough sleepers over a very short period of time. It would be important to find ways of sustaining some of these new benefits in due course and that would, inevitably, prove to be difficult as priorities would have to be made and resources finite.

One theme which had not been drawn out explicitly but which might be helpful to consider would be that of a digital strategy for the City and the Council which would tie in with several elements of the programme.

The development of community ownership in its various forms and how that might translate into new organisations and businesses to meet community needs would be important. Would the LEP be able to provide advice to those who might wish to explore such developments for example? Regional mutual banks have been established elsewhere in the country and this might be worthy of consideration in the City. Given the potential availability of buildings in the City which the Council owns or has influence over, consideration might extend, not only to start up businesses, but also to social enterprises, co-operatives, non-trading organisations and community groups which

might, perhaps, extend to use by the Black Lives Matter movement. Furthermore could priority be given to businesses led by marginalised groups?

In relation to connecting communities, cessation of the Pick-Me-Up bus service was regrettable.

The emphasis on equalities in the programme was most welcome as was the increased community involvement with the Council; it was important that this two way dialogue should be sustained.

Councillor Brown agreed that there was merit in the development of a digital strategy, something in relation to which there had already been some preliminary thinking. She confirmed that as a Director of the LEP the Council would be working closely with it about the matters raised. The “meanwhile” use of assets while admirable in principle needed to be treated with some caution given the Council’s need to maximise revenue in financially straitened times. In the present climate, applications for use of assets by all businesses should be encouraged and business start ups by members of the BAME community would be welcome but actively discriminating on the grounds of race would be problematic. The failure of the Pick-Me-Up service had been disappointing but it had proved to be financially unviable from the bus company’s point of view. Given the current climate, now would not be the best time to revisit that particular issue but it would be important to have discussions about bus services to link communities and workplaces in the short to medium term.

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director Development, explained that the Government had asked the LEP to co-ordinate a countywide economic recovery plan, this would be an important document on which work has just started. The plan will be of countywide application while also taking account of local issues. He said that future use of space in the city was uncertain. It would however comprise a mix and, notwithstanding recent developments and work habits, it seemed likely that there would still be a significant demand for office space. Local centres were likely to assume greater importance in the future

In relation to the application of the Retail Discount Scheme to Language Schools, discussed earlier in the meeting, Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services, confirmed that further advice had been sought about the application of the scheme but in the absence of advice to the contrary it remained the Council’s view that language schools were not eligible for relief under the extended scheme. It was too early to say whether an application under the discretionary scheme would be successful.

The Assistant Chief Executive said the costs of housing all rough sleepers for the first three months had been estimated at £532k, £32k of which had been provided by Government with the expectation that the balance would be found from the general funding to local government (both tiers) for response to Covid-19. However, the funding received by both the City and the County leaves a significant funding gap for both councils. The original instruction had been to provide housing until the end of June. There was a lack of clarity about expectations for the next phase, complicated by uncertainty about social distancing requirements etc. Officers were in more or less daily contact with MHCLG seeking clarification. The intention was to move to a more stable and sustainable provision (eg long term use of hotels is unsustainable). It also needed to be noted that the population of rough sleepers was in a constant state of flux. A further statement from Government about the next phase of funding was expected in the coming two weeks. Negotiations were taking place with the County Council to secure some financial contribution.

About 20% of those rough sleepers who had been housed had no recourse to public funds. Representations had been made to Government about this and would continue to be made. The current climate provided a good opportunity to make this point with added emphasis. There is a clear public health issue for those who would otherwise be sleeping rough, both for themselves and for others.

Homeworking for Council staff had generally worked well and may prove a model for many staff in the future. For some staff however it was either not possible to work from home or difficult because of an unsuitable home environment.

In relation to the section on Health, Social Care and Wellbeing with partners it was suggested that the HOSC could have a useful role to play a role in monitoring and evaluating the programme and its effects, particularly on BAME communities. Secondly, the HOSC could be asked to share good practice with partners. The first suggestion was already understood to have been put to the HOSC by Cllr Bely-Summers who serves on it as the Council representative. It was agreed that the second suggestion was sensible and should be put as a proposal to Cllr Bely-Summers and Cllr Upton who serves on the Health & Wellbeing Board.

In relation to the public realm, the reference to a change to waste collection arrangements in the City Centre was simply notice of the intention to reduce the amount of time businesses should leave waste out for collection,

A recent LGA report noted that the government instruction to close leisure centres represented a change in the law and consequent changes to contracts with leisure centres with associated costs for councils. Officers agreed get back to the Committee with the consequences of this for the council.

The impact on health and wellbeing of Covid-19 had been considerable. The importance of physical activity should not be underestimated and the council should continue to work with communities and the voluntary sector as well as leisure providers to encourage activity, particularly for those who need it and have struggled during the lockdown. A better integration of indoor and outdoor leisure to maximise the benefits of the outdoors and open spaces would be welcome.

In relation to recent events, as a matter of public health, it was agreed that there should be clarity for members of the public wishing to take part in public protests about how to do so safely in the context of the need to ensure appropriate social distancing etc, whether that advice comes from the Council or elsewhere.

Councillor Brown concluded by noting that one of the consequences emerging from the pandemic was a greater focus on people living, working and shopping in local neighbourhoods, something which chimed closely with the council's 2050 vision for the City.

In conclusion the Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council coordinates and / or develops an overarching digital strategy for the City and considers in joined-up fashion the multiple areas in which digital will play an increasingly important role in the Covid recovery response. Areas to include but not limited to: working from home, service user modal-shift, infrastructure requirements, the impacts of increasing digital shopping and working on the city centre, and enabling shop-local within an increasingly digital retail environment;
2. The Council investigates the potential of setting up a regional mutual bank;

3. The Council encourages OxLEP to provide advice on how to set up or convert to social enterprise or cooperative business models to those for whom it would be appropriate;
4. The Council develops options on how it mobilises its leisure services, officers, and assets, and how it can work in partnerships with communities, health and other partners to target higher-need groups to get people active and improve their health. The Council is especially encouraged to consider how it might increase the use of outdoor facilities and spaces more; and
5. The Council endorses the request of Scrutiny to the Council's Health Overview Scrutiny Committee representatives that the HOSC undertake a review concerning the equalities impacts of the Covid epidemic.

16. Minutes

Agreed that the minutes of the meeting held on 02 June 2020 should be amended to include a reference to the agreement that the Committee should, until September 2020, only deal with Cabinet reports as a consequence of additional pressures on officer time as a result of Covid-19. The minutes to be returned to the next meeting of the Committee for approval.

17. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer noted that the Cabinet report on procurement had been delayed until August and the Committee would now need to meet in August to consider it. Furthermore, given that the Committee would now be meeting in August, he proposed that the meeting should be used to finalise the scope of review groups for the current year. The Committee agreed to this proposal.

Finally the Committee was reminded of the need to submit proposals for the work plan and review groups to the Scrutiny Officer in time for the July of meeting of the Committee.

18. Dates of future meetings

Scrutiny Committee

06 July 2020

04 August 2020 (no items currently scheduled for this meeting)

01 September 2020

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

Standing Panels

Housing & Homelessness: 03 August

Finance & Performance: 07 July, 29 September

Companies Scrutiny: 22 June, 14 September

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.05 pm

Chair

Date: Monday 6 July 2020