

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 14 July 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Wade (Chair)

Councillor Corais

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Linda Smith

Councillor Thomas

Councillor Waite

Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Fry

Councillor Smowton

Councillor Tidball

Councillor Wolff

Cabinet Member

Councillor Tom Hayes, Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford.
Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Mish Tullar, Head of Corporate Strategy

Rachel Williams, Principal Planner

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

None

27. Declarations of interest

None.

28. Chair's Announcements

The Chair drew the Committee's attention to a message from the head of Legal Services which advised that staffing pressures meant that attendance at all Scrutiny Committee meetings by a member of the legal team could not be guaranteed.

29. Minutes

The Committee agreed with the Chair's proposal that the minutes should be amended to reflect the previous meetings agreement that scrutiny panel membership should be agreed outside the meeting. The Chair noted that this had now happened.

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 08 June 2021 as a true and accurate record, subject to the amendment noted above.

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the confidential minutes of the meeting held on 08 June as a true and accurate record.

30. Work Plan, Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer said the Finance & Performance Panel had met since the last meeting and had asked to receive two reports: an update on the implementation of Aereon QL; and one seeking further information about the performance monitoring process.

Given the cancellation of Cabinet in August and only one item currently proposed for the August Scrutiny meeting, the Committee agreed that it should be cancelled and that the Tourism Update item (scheduled for the August meeting) should be moved to the September meeting.

In response to a question about the desirability of Scrutiny consideration of the performance of Leisure Centres it was noted that this was a report at the top of the list for consideration during the year.

31. Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 (Part 2) consultation document

Cllr Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning & Housing Delivery, introduced the report. The papers before the Committee were being considered in parallel by the relevant Committees of all Oxfordshire's District Councils and the County Council. At this stage all that was being sought was agreement to proceed with a formal consultation exercise for a plan which would set out a vision and planning framework for the County for the period until 2050.

Given that the consultation document had had to accommodate the views of all the parties involved over several iterations, and been produced at some speed, it was difficult to provide a text which ensured perfection at this stage. Adrian Arnold, Head of Planning Services said this had been a very extensive and complex piece of work which had had to be refined up to the last minute.

The plan had to strike a balance between the need to reflect a position which was appropriate and applicable across the County while at the same time not cutting across matters which were proper to individual Local Plans. This was well illustrated in relation to affordable housing where there was agreement about some overarching principles but that the detail of policy was better agreed on a local basis.

A meeting of the authorities' planning officers would take place in a few weeks' time to confirm any editorial changes to the current text ahead of the consultation in the light of these and the parallel discussions now taking place. Furthermore, once the consultation was underway, the Council, as a consultee, could make further suggestions for improvement. Officers agreed to take away detailed comments made and to ensure that they were reflected either in the editorial changes ahead of consultation or in the Council's response to the consultation.

The Committee made a number of detailed observations about the consultation proposals. The desirability of assessing the need for travellers' sites (given the significant draw, for example, of hospitals in the City) while important, was proper to

Local Plans rather than the Oxfordshire Plan. It was suggested that there may be a contradiction between policy options 10 and 16, and not wanting to limit the use of Green Belt land for leisure and recreational use. Officers agreed to consider this. Policy option 13 made no reference to the desirability of preserving parks and open play spaces which was regrettable given the importance of them for those who do not have ready access to open/green space. This was another matter which was more proper to Local Plans. It was noted however that the importance of open spaces and related health matters were very high on the agendas of all the councils involved and was likely to be reflected in the next document which would come before the Committee in due course as a set of draft policies.

There was concern at the navigability of the consultation document once launched. The Committee was reassured that the final, published, version would be professionally produced, complete with relevant hyper links etc and would be considerably more easily navigable than the text now before the Committee. The timescale for completion of the consultation (concluding on 08 October) was considered tight by some but on balance sufficient for the purpose.

While the consultation recognises the importance of creating jobs and the provision of affordable housing, there was no mention of the desirability of stable, and adequately paid jobs (eg OLW as a minimum) given the costs of housing in Oxfordshire. However it had been made clear when the recent Local Plan was being finalised that such references could not be included as part of a formal requirement of a planning document. Nonetheless, officers agreed to consider if it might be possible to include a reference to those principles.

While the consultation referred to the need for support for “ people who can’t afford access to the housing market, those in low paid jobs and newly forming households with the need for smaller accommodation”, account should also be taken of those with larger families. This section of the document was written, in part, to reflect the importance of a range of both urban and rural needs. Officers agreed to consider some refinement to take on board this point.

The section on Water Quality did not currently refer to the widespread presence of man made lakes (ex quarries) throughout the County and officers agreed to consider how this could be remedied.

It was argued that there was a need for improved references to the importance of inclusivity and the needs of disabled people, in for example, policy options 14, 15 and 28. There should be a ‘golden thread’ about these matters throughout the document. While some of these concerns would already be addressed by other mechanisms, officers agreed to consider how to strengthen this. In relation to matters to do with health infrastructure the challenges of engaging effectively with the NHS were noted.

Agreed that a note of the points made would be passed to the officers and Cllr Hollingsworth.

32. Oxfordshire Electric Vehicle Strategy

Cllr Tom Hayes, Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford, introduced the report which sought approval to proceed with commissioning the Council's EV strategy. This would shape a citywide approach to EV charging provision by Charge Point Operators and determine the Council's own future role in the EV world, one in which it had some agency. He would be pleased to return to Scrutiny in March 2022 to discuss the strategy once complete.

The Committee raised a number of questions and comments about the report. The inclusion of some references to accessibility, not seen in an earlier draft, were most welcome. Further references to innovation in new vehicles and the desirability of ensuring accessibility in hire schemes (such as Co Wheels) and scooter schemes would be helpful. *Motability* use of electric vehicles is very limited and the Council might use its position of influence to encourage a more flexible approach. The reference to the EV charging infrastructure to be "a vehicle for inclusivity and unobstructive to those making the use of pavements" was welcome and could be usefully linked with the question at 32 g of the report with a reference, for example, to the need for accessible green transport. It would be helpful for the strategy to take account of the Centre for Social Justice's recommendations on transport and its recent report on disability. The term vulnerable drivers might be better replaced by "Drivers with protected characteristics and other needs". In relation to destination charging there would perhaps be merit in enabling residents to make use of some of those charging points at a reduced rate at non-peak times.

Paragraphs 16 and 17, making the connection between electric vehicles and the wish to reduce the number of vehicles in the City overall, were seen to be key and a greater emphasis on the connection between them would be helpful. In response the Committee was reminded that this was not intended as a scoping document but rather a Cabinet report to set the context for the strategy commissioning process.

The Committee suggested that the paper needed to address the question of priorities. This was the subject of discussion concluding with a vote in favour of a proposal, as recorded below.

The final costs of the EV charging rollout were likely to be very considerable but it was not possible at this stage to quantify them. Implementation would be through a mix of private sector and public funding, with the majority likely to be via the private sector.

In relation to the eventual financing of EV charge point installation it was desirable that it should be subject to some ethical funding principles in recognition, for example, of the exploitation of some companies of the "Global South". It was likely that there would be opportunities for ODS to contribute to the installation of EV charge point infrastructure to the benefit of everyone as well as acting as a market disruptor, a market which, if left to its own devices, was likely to focus on the wealthier parts of the City.

The Committee noted that successful introduction of electric vehicles might in turn compromise the effectiveness of the Zero Emission Zone (ZEZ) and overall wish to reduce private traffic movement through the centre of the City. Councillor Hayes explained that it was for this reason that the Connecting Oxford congestion reduction scheme was designed to be introduced alongside the ZEZ.

In conclusion the Committee agreed to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. When the Council commissions the EV infrastructure study it asks those who produce it to come up with a clear recommended prioritisation for EV infrastructure roll-out which takes account of the wider policy context of reducing overall private car ownership and use in the city. The prioritisation should be clear, widely understandable by and acceptable to the public and the report should indicate how it could be applied in practice;
2. The Council amends paragraph 16 of the report to remove reference to the Council already being committed to Connecting Oxford, and states instead that the Council has agreed to further scheme and business case development of Connecting Oxford;
3. The Council includes within the EV strategy an evolution plan for the ZEZ for when ceases to serve its congestion-reducing function due to increased EV take-up; and
4. The Council agrees not to partner with or commission organisations relating to the EV strategy in which it would be unable to invest because of its ethical investment policy.

33. Scrutiny of Council Companies

It was noted that the proposals for a revised approach to the scrutiny of Council Companies were informed by a recent internal audit of the companies' governance arrangements by the Council's internal auditors, BDO. The Committee agreed that the revised arrangements would provide improved opportunities and better scrutiny of Council Companies.

It was agreed that decisions about clerking the Companies Scrutiny Panel and the consequences of that in terms of the Scrutiny Officer's capacity to undertake other work on behalf of the Committee needed further consideration.

Scrutiny Committee resolved to:

1. **Note** the revised executive arrangements for the governance of the Council's companies and joint ventures;
2. **Note** that proposed changes to the Constitution will be presented to the 26 July Council meeting following consultation with political groups;
3. **Agree** that members of the Companies Scrutiny Panel would seek to attend Shareholder and Joint Venture Group meetings, that Companies Scrutiny Panel meetings would continue to take place prior to Shareholder and Joint Venture Group meetings as a more informal way of agreeing issues to discuss, which would be supported by the Scrutiny Officer; and
4. **Agree** to amend the Scrutiny Operating Principles to remove the rule that Standing Panel and Review Group Chairs must be members of the Scrutiny Committee and instead state that Standing Panel and Review Group Chairs will be accountable to the Scrutiny Committee.

34. Operating Principles

The Committee resolved to agree the amended operating principles.

35. Topics for Scrutiny Commissioned Reports

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the report which set out proposals for which reports the Committee might commission during the year. It was agreed that the “Empty Houses in Oxford” topic was not recommended for inclusion but that it could reasonably be inserted as a sub heading for a housing report which was recommended for inclusion.

The Committee Resolved to agree:

1. The list of priority topics as given in Appendix 1 of the report for Scrutiny Commissioned reports subject to including the red-listed report on empty homes within an alternative report, while noting that the Scrutiny Officer will apportion those topics to the relevant dates and forums for consideration; and
2. That the priority topic for a Review Group should be Child Poverty and that a scope would come to the Committee’s September meeting for agreement.

36. Report back on recommendations

The Committee noted Cabinet’s responses to its previous recommendations.

The Committee also noted that the extent to which agreed recommendations were implemented was not always clear. The Scrutiny Officer agreed to explore two options: the addition of an “action to be taken” column in the Cabinet response sheet; and the establishment of a process to feedback on action taken when a subject returns to the Committee.

37. Dates of future meetings

Scrutiny Committee

- 03 August 2021 . *This meeting is now cancelled*
- 08 September 2021
- 05 October 2021
- 02 November 2021
- 06 December 2021

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

Standing Panels

Housing & Homelessness: 02 September, 06 October; 02 November*

Finance & Performance: 08 July; 02 August; 06 September; 08 December

Companies: 20 July; 24 November; 13 December

*revised date

38. Matters Exempt from Publication

No matters were considered in confidential session.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.45 pm

ChairDate: Wednesday 08 September 2021