

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 8 June 2022

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Committee members present:

Councillor Arshad	Councillor Bely-Summers
Councillor Corais	Councillor Coyne
Councillor Diggins (Vice Chair)	Councillor Jarvis
Councillor Mundy	Councillor Pegg
Councillor Rowley	Councillor Tidball
Councillor Hunt	Councillor Altaf-Khan
Councillor Sandelson	

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Alice Courtney, Committee and Member Services Manager (Interim Acting)
Matthew Peachey, Economic Development Manager
Carolyn Ploszynski, Head of Regeneration and Economy
Andrew Brown, Committee and Member Services Manager

Also present:

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships
Councillor Imogen Thomas, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice

Apologies:

Apologies were received from Councillors Roz Smith (substitute: Councillor Altaf Khan) and Chris Smowton (substitute: Councillor Jo Sandelson).

1. Election of Chair for the Council year 2022/23

The Committee resolved to elect Cllr Dr Chris Smowton as Chair for the 2022/23 Council year.

2. Election of Vice Chair for the Council year 2022/23

The Committee resolved to elect Cllr Lizzy Diggins as Vice Chair for the 2022/23 Council year.

3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

4. Chair's Announcements

There were no announcements.

5. Minutes

The Committee resolved to approve the minutes of the meeting on 5 April 2022 and the informal remote meeting held on 12 April 2022 as true and accurate records.

6. Scrutiny Operating Principles 2022/23

The Chair introduced the report which sought to establish the scrutiny arrangements for the year which would be similar to previous years.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that the proposed change to the way that the Companies Scrutiny Panel would operate would create capacity to support an additional standing panel or review group. The July meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel was recommended to be rescheduled for September due to a lack of business in July and to enable scrutiny of the Draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy. Members were encouraged to contribute suggestions to inform the emerging Scrutiny work plan for the year.

It was suggested that the Committee considers proposals for establishing a Climate and Environment standing panel at a future meeting.

The Committee resolved to:

1. Agree the proposed Committee Operating Principles for the 2022/23 municipal year, as set out in Appendix A
2. Agree to establish the following standing panels for the 2022/23 municipal year with the following remits and timeframes:
 - i. Finance and Performance Panel – finance and budgetary issues and decisions, annual review of the Council's budget, quarterly monitoring of finance and performance (including performance of the Council's companies);
 - ii. Housing and Homelessness Panel – strategic housing and landlord issues and decisions, homelessness, housing services performance and interaction with the Tenant's Forum;
 - iii. Companies Scrutiny Panel - executive decisions made in relation to any companies wholly or partly owned by the Council.
 - iv. To consider proposals for the establishment of a Climate and Environment standing panel at a subsequent meeting.
3. Agree the schedule of meetings as presented within the report and to reschedule the July meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel for September.
4. Agree the size and allocation of seats on standing panels to political groups for 2022/23 as set out in the report (Finance and Performance Panel: 4 members, Companies Scrutiny Panel: 4 member, Housing and Homelessness Panel: 6 members).

5. Agree to appoint members and chairs of the Finance and Performance, Housing and Homelessness, and Companies Scrutiny Panels in accordance with nominations made by political groups:
 - i. Housing and Homelessness Panel: Cllrs Dunne (chair), Diggins, Fouweather, Nala-Hartley, Rawle, Sandelson.
 - ii. Finance and Performance Panel: Cllrs Fry (chair), Jarvis, Landell Mills, Latif
 - iii. Companies Scrutiny Panel: Cllrs Rowley (chair), Fry, Landell Mills, Morris.
6. Agree:
 - i) The preliminary Work Plan covering the period to September 2022 as detailed in Appendix B; and
 - ii) That Committee members will send ideas for topics for Scrutiny-commissioned reports to the Scrutiny Officer by e-mail for consideration at the Committee's 05 July meeting.

7. Report of the Child Poverty Review Group

Sue Tanner from Oxford and District Action on Child Poverty addressed the meeting. She welcomed the review and the impressive report and commended the Council's existing policies including but not limited to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, funding for advice centres, the Oxford Living Wage and the Council's approach to social housing. Sue Tanner drew particular attention to the following recommendations:

- 11 & 12 on the adoption of a socio-economic duty within the next 12 months
- 17 & 18 on holding a poverty truth commission within the next 12 months
- 20 about providing cash support rather than vouchers
- 5 about inflation-proofing the funding provided to advice centres

Cllr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, chair of the child poverty review group, addressed the meeting remotely and introduced the report. She thanked all of the contributors and the Scrutiny Officer and said that poverty is the result of political choice. By way of context, Oxford and Cambridge were the most unequal cities in the country and poverty was getting worse due to the cost of living crisis. £3.9m children were living in poverty in the UK. There were lots of structural issues that contributed to poverty and it was striking that 75% of children in poverty lived in a household where at least one family member was in work. Children should be viewed for who they are in the present, not for their future potential. There was a need to work with partners in a unified way, to hear the voices of those experiencing poverty, to take a cash-first or food-first approach in supporting them and to put this issue right at the top of the political agenda.

The Scrutiny Officer drew the Committee's attention to some proposed amendments that had been circulated in advance of the meeting including a change to the wording of recommendation 1 to clarify that the good employer charter would be an extension of the Oxford Living Wage, and other typographical amendments and points of clarification. The Committee was recommended to approve the report subject to those amendments and to delegate to the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Review Group and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, to make minor amendments to the report prior to its submission to Cabinet.

The Committee welcomed the report and commended the excellent work that had gone into producing it. In discussion the Committee noted that:

- The Council's work to mitigate poverty during the pandemic was to be commended.
- Experts had advised that a cash/food-first approach was the best way to reduce stigma, and to support those with no recourse to public funds.
- Local Authorities need to be properly funded and given greater powers to tackle poverty.
- In relation to recommendation 36 on the downsides of not being on an electric meter, many tenants in the private rented sector had no choice but to use pre-payment meters and the Council's interventions in the private rented sector were crucial.
- Food bank usage had increased significantly and there were issues with some models of food bank provision not working for everyone.

The Committee resolved to:

1. Thank the Chair and members of the Child Poverty Review Group for their work and report.
2. Approve the report for submission to Cabinet subject to the amendment to recommendation 1 and other minor and typographical amendments.
3. Delegate to the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the Chair of the Review Group and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Scrutiny Committee, to make the necessary amendments and finalise the report for submission to Cabinet.

8. Waterways update

The Waterways Co-ordinator introduced the report which provided an update on recommendations made by the Committee in November 2020. Since then the priorities had shifted because a number of health and safety issues had been identified which had taken a high priority. An asset management system was being established. It was difficult to determine riparian ownership. Designated bathing status had recently been achieved for Wolvercote Mill Stream. This meant that water quality would be monitored closely but did not necessarily mean that the stream was fit for swimming.

The Committee welcomed the report and in discussion noted that:

- Parts of the waterways were deteriorating and there were issues around anti-social behaviour, bio-diversity and accessibility. The Council should look at targeting specific areas for improvement.
- There needed to be a role for the university and colleges in contributing to the improvement of the waterways; communication with them had been limited but there was scope to do more. It was suggested that the Council should work with them and to pitch for external funding.

- Any budget bid for waterways improvements would need to be considered in the round and priority would have to be given to addressing urgent health and safety issues.
- There was a need to increase mooring provision although the Environment Agency had advised that no permanent facilities could be added on the main waterways, other sites would need to be considered.
- The discharge of sewage into the waterways was a serious concern and Thames Water had accepted some responsibility. It was suggested that water quality data should be used to lobby government and the Environment Agency to hold Thames Water to account.
- A working group had been established to support the bathing water status. This was a five year project and the public would be better informed of water quality.
- Waterways infrastructure needed to be safe, enabling safe means for users to enter and exit the water. The Council was working with specialist consultants on this.
- There was an ongoing conversation with community groups and members about the former open air swimming pool Tumbling Bay where the concrete was at risk of slipping in. There was a need to decide on options and then to secure funding.

The Committee resolved to note the report and agree to produce a report to Cabinet with recommendations based on the discussion, which would come to the next meeting of the Committee for approval.

9. Oxford's Economic Strategy - Consultation Report and Recommendations

Evelyn Sanderson from Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment addressed the meeting. She said that 80% of respondents to the consultation had felt that the Strategy had not fully captured the issues. In her view this feedback had been either dismissed or addressed only in minor ways in the report before the Committee. Oxford had 99% employment and jobs growth in sectors such as life sciences would only serve to exacerbate inequality. The Strategy would also not support the aim of achieving net zero by 2040. Only one individual who identified as being from a BAME group had responded to the consultation. Members had insufficient time to digest the report prior to its adoption by Cabinet and it should be deferred to enable further engagement and work on the aims of the Strategy and to ensure that it would be coherent, deliverable and fit for the future.

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships, introduced the report and clarified that the Strategy aimed to address existing planned growth, as set out in Local Plans, and ensure that growth would be inclusive. The Strategy reflected a range of other strategies related to housing, planning, etc. but was focused specifically on the economy. The work on the Strategy had started pre-pandemic and there had been a good level of engagement from residents and stakeholders. The context was that notwithstanding the national economic challenges, Oxford's economy was growing strongly and this was clearly evident, for example in the increasing demand for workspaces. It was necessary for the City to plan for the growth that was happening.

The Economic Development Manager added that the Council had done its best to listen to the consultation feedback. The inclusion and zero carbon themes had been well

supported but the global theme less so, and efforts had been made to make this clearer. Oxford had a globally significant and impactful economy and it was about making that impact positive, it wasn't about greed or globalisation. Lots of work was underway to manage growth in an inclusive way, such as the Meanwhile in Oxfordshire programme, the Oxford Living Wage, affordable workspaces, the Oxford flood alleviation scheme, and community employment benefits from major developments such as Oxford North. It was accepted that there was a need to engage better with BAME groups and young people in particular.

In discussion it was noted that:

- Consulting on strategy documents was inherently difficult so the Council used a Citizen Panel to test consultation approaches and there had also been workshops offered, but poorly attended. There was a need to consider different ways of engaging with diverse groups.
- The term “affordable housing” could be taken to mean different things and it was important to clarify that the Council was primarily talking about social housing and, to a lesser extent, shared ownership and keyworker housing schemes.
- The existing pressure on the city’s infrastructure was a concern although the city was the most sustainable location for growth within the county, as a population centre with good transport links.
- The UK had a centralised system of government and local authorities needed more powers to address local challenges, such as the power to levy a tourism tax. As the Council had limited levers available to make interventions in the economy the Strategy was to some extent aimed at influencing partners.
- Technical and science based jobs were not for everyone but the strategy also dealt with the visitor economy, retail and the third sector, although there should be more emphasis given to the contribution the third sector and trade unions make to an inclusive economy.
- The Economic Growth Board was being expanded and the diversity of that board was crucial; it was suggested that the membership should include trade union representation.
- The Council had successfully bid for external funding to support co-operatives and build capacity in that sector. Five new co-ops had been seed funded but it was regrettable that a significant and longstanding Oxford retailer had decided not to become a co-operative.
- It was suggested that there should be a bio-diversity metric and consideration should be given to where that would sit.
- The ratio of working age employees who live in the city was of interest. The Office for National Statistics did report a local job density figure which measured this.
- Brexit was leading to staff shortages in a number of key sectors.
- There was a need to consider how to communicate the balance struck between different priorities, such as the Doughnut Economics model.
- The Strategy reflected a range of other strategies. A number of issues that were raised around public transport, active travel, transport strategy, air quality, food production, and land usage, such as sites for housing and the protection of green spaces, were not unrelated to the economy but were being addressed elsewhere.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That the Council seeks to more effectively engage with diverse communities as part of future consultation exercises, with a focus on using different methods of engagement to get responses from a wider demographic – and in particular increased responses from minoritised groups and young people.
2. That the Council clarifies the definition of affordable housing being used within Oxford's Economic Strategy.
3. That the Council seeks to have Trade Union representation on the Economic Growth Steering Board.
4. That the Council makes explicit reference to Trade Unions within Oxford's Economic Strategy.
5. That the Council makes reference to the Third Sector within Oxford's Economic Strategy and ensures a bigger focus on the Third Sector's contribution to the local economy.
6. That the Council includes reference to biodiversity under the 'environmental success factor' outlined in Oxford's Economic Strategy.
7. That the Council develops an additional Key Performance Indicator ratio based on the number of working age people living in Oxford and number of jobs in the City for inclusion in Oxford's Economic Strategy.
8. That the Council seeks to develop a clearer way of demonstrating how competing priorities (economic vs. social and environmental) have been assessed.
9. That the Council makes explicit reference to Brexit and the challenges it brings within Oxford's Economic Strategy

10. City Centre Action Plan (Draft) - Consultation Report and Recommendations

Cllr Imogen Thomas, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice, introduced the report. The City Centre Action Plan had been delayed due to the pandemic but there had been lots of engagement on it. The intention was that it would be a community-owned plan that encouraged feedback into the future and would add structure, momentum and ownership. Lots of the work needed to be delivered by partners.

The Economic Development Manager added that there had been a good consultation process with 398 responses and the four key themes and SWOT analysis had been well supported. There were opportunities to improve the castle quarter, support arts and culture and to support the greening of the city centre. The Action Plan would be kept under regular review and there would be strong governance in place.

In discussion it was noted that:

- There was a need to increase overnight stays in the city and there were strong environmental and social reasons for seeking to do so.
- There was very limited available office space and the spaces that were available tend to be small and dated. There was demand for both affordable and high value office space.
- Many employers were rationalising their office footprint and wanted more flexibility to scale up and scale down.
- The Action Plan included visions for key city centre streets such as the High Street and Cornmarket and it was important to get the right mix of outlets and to

support independent retail; it was regrettable that the Boswells department store had closed.

- There was an aim to build a vision for the historic core of the city which needed co-ordination.
- There was a need to reflect on the lack of diversity of the consultation responses and take an adaptive approach.
- The Citizen’s Panel was reflective of the diversity of the city but had not engaged with the Action Plan.
- Response rates to formal consultations on more specific places within the city centre, such as the Covered Market or Broad Street, tended to be much higher than engagement on strategy documents, which was why workshops had also taken place.
- Residents had provided feedback that they were put off from visiting the city centre because of a concentration of high end retail, a lack of free activities, and because the university and colleges were not seen as being approachable.
- It was suggested that feedback from residents should be more prominent in the report and that the resident engagement should be repeated annually.
- It was difficult to influence the leasing policies of other organisations but the Council sought to lead by example, for example in the Covered Market.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That the Council seeks to more effectively engage with diverse communities as part of future consultation exercises, with a focus on using different methods of engagement to get responses from a wider demographic – and in particular increased responses from minoritised groups and young people.
2. That the Council notes the diversity of consultation responses received in relation to the City Centre Action Plan going forward and uses the intelligence to adapt the Plan to ensure it reflects that diversity.
3. That the Council seeks to have diverse and representative annual resident engagement.
4. That the Council makes reference to additional forms of engagement undertaken outside of formal consultation exercises within the consultation report.

11. Dates of future meetings

The dates of future meetings were noted.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.52 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 5 July 2022