

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Monday 4 December 2023

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Committee members present:

Councillor Pegg (Chair)

Councillor Corais

Councillor Douglas

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Thomas

Councillor Rehman (for Councillor Aziz)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Diggins

Councillor Fry

Councillor Smowton

Councillor Hollingsworth (for Councillor Arshad)

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Rachel Williams, Planning Policy and Place Manager

Alexander Sutton, Planner

Lorraine Freeman, CIL, Data Analysis and Reporting Team Leader

Lan Nguyen, Senior Data Analyst

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement

Gail Malkin, Head of People

Tina Mould, Head of Sustainability

Laura Harlock, Parks and Open Spaces Service Manager (Oxford Direct Services)

Caroline Green, Chief Executive

Lucy Cherry, Policy and Partnerships Officer

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Lucy Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

Cabinet Members present:

Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Healthier Communities

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Arshad and Aziz sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

57. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

58. Chair's Announcements

There were none.

59. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 6 November 2023 as a true and accurate record.

The Committee agreed to take agenda items 8, 9, 10 and 11 next on the agenda, and return to agenda items 5, 6, 7 and 12 to make best use of officer and Cabinet Member time.

60. Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2022/23

Cllr Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Healthier Communities presented the report of the Planning Policy and Place Manager which sought approval of the Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement for publication. She advised the Committee that the Authority Monitoring Report was an annual report which summarised a series of performance indicators based on policies set out in the Oxford Local Plan. She further highlighted the Infrastructure Funding Statement, a statutory document which summarised the amount of developer contributions (CIL and Section 106) obtained, allocated and spent by the authority in the previous financial year (April 2022 – March 2023).

Rachel Williams, Planning Policy and Place Manager, Alexander Sutton, Planner, Lorraine Freeman, CIL, Data Analysis and Reporting Team Leader and Lan Nguyen, Senior Data Analyst attended the meeting to speak to the item and answer the Committee's questions.

During discussion, the Committee noted the following:

- Included in the report was the amount of housing delivered as a result of site allocation policies and the degree to which those policies had been realised, as per a previous recommendation from the Committee.
- Regarding the number of Oxford Brookes students living outside of university provided accommodation, it was noted that the agreed exclusions were listed within the report.
- It was further noted that there was an expectation for these student numbers to increase when the Clive Booth Student Village was completed.
- There was no cap on the numbers of students admitted to other educational establishments in the city, and data on their accommodation was not included within the data. Those that were living within Unite student accommodation were included within the figures as they were affiliated to a university.
- The difference in the number of University of Oxford students needing accommodation in Oxford between 2019/20 and 2020/21 had reduced due to the change in the agreed exclusions applied to the data, in particular that the 2020/21 data excluded all students on a research-based Postgraduate degree, rather than only those in their last year of their research-based Postgraduate degree in the previous data capture.

- The list of heritage assets at risk in Oxford was a useful tool to monitor the deterioration of buildings held on Historic England's Heritage at Risk programme, and this list should get shorter over time. In particular it was noted that the Church of St Thomas the Martyr was due redevelopment and would therefore be removed from the list when this was carried out.

Cllrs Sandy Douglas and Tiago Corais arrived at the meeting.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendation on the report for Cabinet:

1. That the Council sets out the change in definition of students captured by the student threshold at the boundary where it changed in future iterations of the Authority Monitoring Report.

61. Equalities Update

Cllr Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies, presented the report which sought Cabinet approval for the publication of the annual Workforce Equality Report 2023, Gender Pay Gap Report, Ethnicity Pay Gap Report and Disability Pay Gap Report, and set out the progress on the Workforce Equalities Report and Action Plan. He further highlighted that over half the workforce were women (59.7%), which was above that of the population of Oxford at 48.2%, and the proportion of women in senior roles had decreased by 1%, and now made up 49% of roles at grade 11 and above. He recognised that there had been a decrease in representation of minority ethnic groups in the workforce over the reporting period to 14.2%, however had remained close to the Council's target of 15% by 2024.

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement, provided context to the report, and noted that whilst the report focused on the Council's workforce, it was important that it was recognised in the wider context of the Council's equalities work and how workforce equalities fit within the Council's strategic framework.

Gail Malkin, Head of People, informed the Committee of the three main areas of focus which were, improving the diversity of the workforce, inclusive leadership practices and understanding the workforce in terms of data and employee experience; and outlined the actions taken and progress made against these.

Cllr Nigel Chapman, Helen Bishop and Gail Malkin answered questions as follows:

- The Council's target figure of 15% for representation of minority ethnic groups in the workforce would be reviewed in light of the 2021 Census information which had seen an increase in members of minority ethnic communities that were economically active rise from 20% to 27.7%.
- Whilst there had been an increase in the number of applicants from minority ethnic groups to the Council, these had not been shown in the data as translated into job offers. However, this could be in part due to personal data not being shared by new starters as this data was only requested on new starter forms, and not at application stage, and was an area identified for improvement.
- A more diverse make up of Panel members had been prioritised at both interview and stakeholder stage, particularly around the more senior positions, and additional training had been developed to support all staff involved in the recruitment process.
- New questions had been introduced into the staff survey on whether people felt they belonged in the organisation as a measure of inclusion. Survey results showed no

differences between groups defined by personal characteristics and their levels of satisfaction.

- Lunch and learn sessions had been developed to increase awareness and build inclusion and a sense of belonging for all groups. It was hoped that they would also lead to improved awareness and inclusion and a decrease in the bias that might affect groups. They were mostly recorded, and slides were available for all staff following the sessions.
- New data collected now included trans and non-binary status and would be reported against in future reports.
- The Council did not currently benchmark against other local authorities; however, this could be investigated for future reports.
- The Council had not surveyed unsuccessful applicants; however, this could be considered as a piece of qualitative work, dependent on staff capacity.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations on the report for Cabinet:

1. That the Council surveys unsuccessful job applicants relating to equalities issues and surveys appointing managers as to why unsuccessful applicants were not recruited in order to improve the Council's data and insight into workforce equalities issues at the recruitment stage.
2. That the Council sets a higher, more ambitious target for the representation of minority ethnic groups within the workforce to increase the pace of improving representation.
3. That the Council explores the reasons for under-representation of Muslim staff within the workforce and works to identify and address barriers to the recruitment and retention of Muslim staff.
4. That the Council expands the gender identity options within its application forms and workforce monitoring to include options for Trans Man and Trans Woman.
5. That the Council routinely collects Equality, Diversity and Inclusion data from all job applicants, regardless of the application route they take (e.g. CV or online application form).
6. That the Council anonymises job application forms during the shortlisting process for all applications going forward.
7. That the Council maps the career trajectory over time for individuals within the workforce with a protected characteristic; to include information such as length of service, pay grade, age and protected characteristic.

62. Review of Glyphosate Use by Oxford Direct Services to Manage Weeds on Behalf of Oxford City Council

Cllr Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies presented the report from the Head of Corporate Strategy which set out the recommendations over the use of Glyphosate by Oxford Direct Services (ODS) to control weeds on behalf of Oxford City Council.

Cllr Nigel Chapman, Tina Mould, Head of Sustainability and Laura Harlock, Parks and Open Spaces Services Manager (ODS), answered questions as follows:

- Standards must be maintained on hard surfaces around the city which was why a uniform approach to Glyphosate application across the City was proposed; a communications plan was being developed to inform residents of this.

- There were many variables as to why timetables for Glyphosate application might have to be adapted, with tight regulations around the use of the herbicide (i.e., it could not be used when it was raining or windy) however further advice could be provided regarding which months treatment was intended to take place.
- Consideration could be made in respect of preparation of a list for the ODS operatives to inform them of which streets they should take extra care on due to the existence of active gardening and community groups.
- A list of streets that had opted out from being treated previously could be shared.
- It had been found that the use of non-chemical products increased the number of staff required for treating the weeds, which would lead to an increase in staffing costs and studies had found that these methods had not been as effective in controlling weed growth.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations on the report for Cabinet:

1. That the Council works with Oxford Direct Services to compile a list of areas within the City where local community groups have purposefully planted plants, which should be approached with caution by Oxford Direct Services when applying Glyphosate so as not to cause unwanted damage.
2. That the Council provides a means for community groups and interested individuals to register for updates related to when Glyphosate application will take place in particular areas across the City, to enable the synchronisation of works undertaken by those groups and Oxford Direct Services.
3. That the Council publishes a list of those areas of the City which have currently opted-out of Glyphosate application, to ensure councillors are aware of areas in their respective wards and can access the information freely.
4. That the Council develops a communications plan for those areas of the City which have currently opted-out of Glyphosate application and the public more broadly to ensure awareness and understanding of the proposals regarding Glyphosate usage going forward.

63. Local Government Association Corporate Peer Review: Council Action Plan

Cllr Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy and Partnerships presented the report which outlined the Council's Action Plan in response to the Corporate Peer Review feedback and recommendations received in July 2023. She reminded the Committee that the Council had requested the peer review to ensure that the Council was learning as an organisation, and it was an effective audit. The paper was a response to that report, and the key points around the recommendations were highlighted.

Caroline Green, Chief Executive highlighted that the Council had developed the structure around the corporate boards to monitor delivery against core projects. The Change Front Door enabled further discussion around taking on more projects and provided robust challenge around capacity. She thanked Lucy Cherry for producing the report and advised that the Peer Review Group would return in April 2024 for a further review of progress against the recommendations made.

Cllr Susan Brown, Caroline Green and Lucy Cherry, Policy and Partnerships Officer, answered questions as follows:

- Prioritisation and capacity to deliver was the biggest challenge, the recommendations set out improvements the Council should make, however the challenge for implementation would be for ICT due to recruitment challenges and increased demand for better systems.
- Recommendations regarding the Oxford Model and ensuring governance and alignment of cultures with the Council's companies was critical.
- The Oxford West End Board encompassed the Cowley Branch Line as it was part of the connectivity of the city with the Cowley area, and those involved on the Board were connected to the discussions on the Cowley Branch line.
- A lot of work had been undertaken focused on shared objectives between the city universities to deliver objectives together, and how the universities could help to address negatives and inequalities experienced in the city.

The Committee resolved to make the following recommendations on the report for Cabinet:

1. That the Council places engagement with local anchor institutions at the heart of the Corporate Strategy 2024-28, in particular the need to hold open and honest conversations about the overall vision and aspirations for Oxford to enable organisations to work together to drive forward that collective vision of the type of city Oxford should be.

64. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Committee noted the Forward Plan.

The Committee reviewed the Work Plan and confirmed its agreement to consider the following reports at the January meeting:

- Draft Corporate Strategy 2024/28 for consultation
- Oxfordshire Food Strategy Action Plan
- Leisure Management Contract
- DAHA Accreditation and Domestic Abuse Review Group Update (Scrutiny commissioned)

The Committee was advised that the following Cabinet items were due to be considered by the Finance and Performance Panel in January:

- Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2024/25
- Integrated Performance Report for Q4 2022/23
- Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Rent Setting Report 2024/25

The Committee noted that items to be considered at Scrutiny meetings beyond January would be considered at the next meeting.

65. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

The Chair presented the report on recommendations.

The Committee noted that on 15 November 2023, Cabinet considered recommendations related to two reports, responses to which were set out in the agenda pack:

- Grant Allocations to Community and Voluntary Organisations 2024/25
- Central (City & University) Conservation Area Appraisal

All recommendations from the last meeting were agreed.

Cllr Hollingsworth, Chair of the Climate and Environment Panel provided the Committee with an overview of the meeting held on 29 November 2023, which had considered the following reports:

- Biodiversity Action Plan for Oxford City Council Parks and Nature Areas – September 2023 Review
- Retrofit [presentation]
- Net Zero Masterplan

He thanked Cllr Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice and officers for attending to present their items and answer questions. The Panel will next meet on 27 February 2024.

66. Scrutiny Standing Panel and Review Group Arrangements

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report from the Head of Law and Governance which sought appointment of members and chairs of Scrutiny Standing Panels and Review Groups following changes to the political composition of Oxford City Council.

It was noted that the following nominations had been received in line with the cross-party principle guide for appointments to Scrutiny Standing Panels and Review Groups, which were agreed by the Committee:

Finance and Performance Panel (and Budget Review Group): Cllr James Fry (Chair); Cllr Tiago Corais; Cllr Chris Smowton; Cllr Chris Jarvis; Cllr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini; Cllr Amar Latif

Housing and Homelessness Panel: Cllr Lizzy Diggins (Chair); Cllr Mary Clarkson; Cllr Jo Sandelson; Cllr Rosie Rawle; Cllr Paula Dunne; Cllr Shaista Aziz

Climate and Environment Panel: Cllr Alex Hollingsworth (Chair); Cllr James Fry; Cllr Katherine Miles; Cllr Emily Kerr; Cllr Paula Dunne; Cllr Shaista Aziz

For the Companies Scrutiny Panel, the Oxford Socialist Independents Group did not wish to take up its allocation of a seat. It was therefore recommended that this Panel revert to a membership of 4 Members and the vacant seat be given over to the Independent Group, therefore the Panel would be comprised as follows:

- Cllr Mike Rowley (Chair), Cllr Katherine Miles, Cllr Alistair Morris and Cllr Ajaz Rehman

The report proposed that the Scrutiny Operating Principles be updated to reflect the revised cross-party principle guide for appointments to Scrutiny Panels and Review Groups. The Scrutiny Officer proposed that the Operating Principles also be updated to provide clarity on membership in case a similar situation arose in the future where political groups might not want to take up their seat allocation on a particular Panel/Review group. The following wording was agreed, which the Committee requested that the Scrutiny Officer amend in the Operating Principles:

“Where a political group does not wish to take-up its allocation of a seat on a Standing Panel or Review Group, it will first be offered to political groups that would not normally have a seat allocation through the cross-party principle guide for appointment to Standing Panels and Review Groups – the seat will be offered to those political groups in priority order based on strongest entitlement to a seat as per political proportionality calculations. Should there be no take-up of the seat after offering to other political groups, the Committee will decide what to do.

Where two or more political groups have the same entitlement to a seat on a Standing Panel or Review Group as per political proportionality calculations, but where there are not enough available seats to allocate to all of those political groups, the Committee will decide what to do. ”

The Committee were resolved to:

1. Agree the revised cross-party principle guide for appointments to Standing Panels and the Review Groups as set out in paragraph 5 of the report; and delegate authority to the Scrutiny Officer to update the Scrutiny Operating Principles 2023/24 to reflect the change.
2. Agree the allocation of 6 seats of Finance and Performance Panel, Housing and Homelessness Panel and Climate and Environment Panel; and 4 seats on Companies Scrutiny Panel for the remainder of 2023/24.
3. Agree to appoint the members nominated by political groups to Standing Panels and Review Groups.
4. Agree to re-appoint the existing chairs of Standing Panels for the remainder of 2023/24 (as set out above) in the interests of continuity.
5. Agree that the membership of Finance and Performance Panel, including the Chair, will comprise the membership of Budget Review Group for 2023/24.
6. Approve the wording in respect of what to do where a political group does not take up its seat allocation on a Standing Panel (set out above) for inclusion in the Scrutiny Operating Principles 2023/24; and delegate authority to the Scrutiny Officer to update the Operating Principles accordingly.

67. Dates of future meetings

The dates of future meetings were noted.

The meeting started at 6.05 pm and ended at 8.35 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 16 January 2024

When decisions take effect:

Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired

Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued

All other committees: immediately.

Details are in the Council’s Constitution.