

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Monday 2 December 2024

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Committee members present:

Councillor Miles (Chair)

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Mundy

Councillor Stares

Councillor Corais (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Latif

Councillor Ottino

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor

Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

David Butler, Head of Planning and Regulatory Services

Lorraine Freeman, CIL Data Analysis and Reporting Team Leader

Sarah Harrison, Team Leader (Planning Policy)

Hagan Lewisman, Active Communities Manager

Peter Matthew, Executive Director of People and Communities

Rachel Nixon, Principal Planner

Paula Redway, Culture and Community Development Manager

Also present:

Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning

Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford

Councillor Lubna Arshad, Cabinet Member for a Safer Oxford

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Malik and Qayyum sent apologies.

50. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

51. Chair's Announcements

The Chair informed the Committee that she had approved some urgent decisions since the last meeting and that these would be addressed under 'Work Plan'.

52. Minutes

The committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the ordinary meeting held on 4 November 2024 as a true and accurate record.

The minutes of the extraordinary meeting on 18 November would be approved at the next meeting.

The Committee agreed to consider items 8 and 7 next on the agenda, followed by 5, 6 and 9.

53. Authority Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2023/24

Cllr Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning, introduced the report and informed the Committee that it is an annual statutory requirement to examine how well planning policies are being achieved. The three overarching objectives of the report were named: strong responsive and competitive economy, building vibrant communities, and protecting and enhancing natural and built environments. The Committee heard some headlines from the report including the increases in R&D employment and space and the increase in students living out. The latter is a policy focus for the Council to limit these numbers in protection of residents, but the report finds an estimated 800 Oxford University students and up to 3000 Oxford Brooks University students are currently living out. Additionally, the Committee heard of the report's focus on the vitality of the city and various district centres and housing for which Cllr Upton noted 365 houses were built in Oxford this year alongside nearly 1000 affordable houses since the start of the local plan period. The Committee were directed to the funding statement within the report for information regarding the infrastructure levy, section 106 funds, and spending records.

David Butler, The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service, informed the Committee that the report will go to Cabinet and be published online for public access.

The Chair thanked Cllr Upton and The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service and invited the Committee raise questions on the report.

Sarah Harrison, Planning Policy Team Leader, Lorraine Freeman, CIL, Data Analysis and Reporting Team Leader, and Rachel Nixon, Principal Planner were present to respond to questions.

Cllr Ottino queried what understanding there is of how student accommodation is being used and when it is empty or unused, especially when in private buildings. Cllr Mundy similarly noted the increase in Oxford Brooks University students' living within the private rented sector in comparison to previous years and requested more information on what is causing the increase, and whether it is expected to be a continuing pressure. The Chair additionally asked how it can be ensured that new student accommodation is used by Oxford or Brooks University students and how the link between new accommodation and demand is managed.

The Planning Policy Team Leader explained that current policy only impacts accommodation managed by universities and therefore policy currently focuses on nomination rights to ensure that properties not necessarily owned, but managed, by the universities are included and can be steered to accommodate students. Regarding vacancy rates, the City Council have little but it was noted that there are no signs indicating an issue with empty accommodation. She explained that universities are having an issue with accessing enough accommodation, rather than vacancy issues, but admitted that unfortunately some accommodation options are inherently less popular with students and harder to fill. In relation to Oxford Brooks University, The Planning Policy Team Leader admitted the large increase in students, demonstrated by the growth to 19586 this year compared to 16050 in the previous year. It was explained to the Committee that although there is a large increase in student numbers, this does not entirely match the increased number living out due to many being on placements elsewhere. The total number of new students requiring accommodation has increased by around 1000 whilst new accommodation availability has only increased by a few hundred. Based on this, The Planning Policy Team Leader acknowledged a growing issue and assured the Committee that this was considered in the new local plan which contained an increased threshold that Oxford Brooks University has struggled to meet. Finally, regarding specifically connecting students from the two major universities with accommodation, The Planning Policy Team Leader stated that policy changes over time have meant that a restrictive approach has been lost due to concerns over fairness. She explained that now, it is stipulated that accommodation must be taken by full-time students on courses of more than a year and that evidence on the effectiveness of this policy highlights the issue has reduced since Covid and Brexit and less students from other institutions are taking up the accommodation spaces. The policy has gone as far as it can and cannot limit to just the two major universities.

Cllr Latif noted that if most new students reside in HMOs, there will be a significant reduction in the number of houses available to the private rented sector. He negatively associated this trend with undoing the work that is being done to build more houses in Oxford City. Cllr Latif therefore asked whether there needs to be more focus on student numbers in the private rented market, as opposed just to rate of house building. Cllr Ottino agreed and asked what can be done, in planning terms, to restrict numbers and especially in regards Oxford Brooks University. The Chair enquired why there is not a levy on other institutions and could there be. Cllr Upton expressed agreement with the observation but explained that the last local plan sought to impose lower caps, but inspectors blocked this because universities must be allowed to thrive and would therefore disagree with the policy. The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service explained that land use policy does not have the powers to cap university number, for example, and that planning policy can instead apply various levers on the

private sector to impact concentration levels to restrict HMOs. He admitted this is a challenging balance as other groups, such as young professionals, also occupy HMOs and policy must be mindful not to negatively impact these groups. Therefore, the focus must be to seek a reasonable mix of HMO and private rental options. Regarding the possibility of a levy, The Planning Policy Team Leader stated that it is beyond the powers of planning to restrict institutions and therefore a threshold would not be useful. The best way to protect the housing market is to prohibit houses from being used as boarding accommodation but policy to manage this does not exist yet.

Cllr Ottino expressed being unconvinced that all student accommodation is in use and queried whether there are means for monitoring usage. If empty, could sanctions be imposed and the building be used for alternative purposes, such as temporary accommodation? Additionally, the Chair queried whether there is data on how other educational institutions accommodate their students and whether this is routinely collected. The Planning Policy Team Leader reiterated that some accommodations options are less popular amongst students based on location or quality and that the universities are considering and seeking redevelopment options to remedy this. In response to the Chair, she explained that there is a student accommodation needs assessment that is not detailed within the report which fulfils this.

The Chair invited the Committee to raise questions on other matters within the report.

The Chair queried the possible impacts of having a gap between local plans in 2026, especially in relation to student accommodation, and if there is a means to assess the implications of high levels of student accommodation on the Council's finances. She used the example student council tax exemption alongside increased waste collection demand. Furthermore, the Chair also addressed the recent lack of new care homes for Oxford City's ageing population and the possibility of a gap in provision those who can no longer live at home; she asked if extra care provisions are being planned and if any barriers are being experienced. The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service assured the Committee that the local plan would continue to be the appropriate statutory document for planning until a new one is published. A renewed local plan is in development and concerns regarding a policy gap are not significant as the current plan goes to 2036. He also explained that the new NPPF will support the new local plan in the interim and that a new draft local plan to go to Cabinet and Council in January. In regards financial implications of student increases, he noted that little can be done other than to shoulder the cost of any increased pressures. Finally, Cllr Upton reassured the Committee that planning policy enables the development of new care homes but explained that has now power to force people to use their land for this purpose. She recognised the pressures of the ageing population but stressed that the local plan can only encourage and enable options, it cannot force actions.

In reference to appendix 2, Cllr Ottino asked what Littlemore Parish Council have spent CIL money on and whether guidance is provided. The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service explained that guidance is provided but, as a Parish Council, the two areas have freedom to spend their money as they wish within the statutory rules. The City Council has no oversight of this.

Cllr Mundy acknowledged BMW's previous exemption relief from CIL and enquired whether there have been any other major sites that have had any granted exemptions from CIL. The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service David stated that no other applications have been received.

In relation to CIL, the Chair observed that current information provided is not divided by ward. She requested whether a breakdown could be offered to the Committee to show if CIL is being spent in the immediate area that it is generated. She explained that this would address concerns that CIL is often allocated to other areas of the city and fails to provide immediate infrastructure support to the local area. The Head of Planning and Regulatory Service explained that when CIL is received, it is split into 'pots' including administration, neighbourhood and strategic. He directed the Committee to p.121 for more detail on this and assured the Committee that the 'neighbourhood pot' is used by Parish Councils or neighbourhood forums for the local area.

Finally, the Chair enquired as to what can be done to address the lack of land and grant funding for self-build properties listed in the report, and what can be done to maximise opportunities for reaching the housing target. The Planning Policy Team Leader explained that self-build plots have come forward recently. In regard housing targets, she informed the Committee that housing build rates vary year on year but that landowners are being proactively contacted to check if any land is becoming available and where progress can be pushed forwards. There is a limit to action that can be taken on this.

The Committee raised no further questions on the report.

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

1. That Cabinet ensures that comprehensive data on unmet student accommodation demand from universities, alongside details of sites identified or proposed by these institutions to address their accommodation requirements, are included in future reporting of the Authority Monitoring report.
2. That Council works with University of Oxford and Oxford Brookes University to ensure that their land holdings, including those located at or near city boundaries, are used effectively to meet unmet accommodation demands; and that Council encourages universities to share their plans for leveraging these land assets for this purpose.

Cllr Upton and David Butler left the room and did not return. Sarah Harrison, Lorraine Freeman and Rachel Nixon also left the meeting and did not return.

54. Thriving Communities Strategy Update

Cllr Munkonge, Cabinet Member for a Healthy Oxford, and Cllr Arshad, Cabinet Member for a Safer Oxford, introduced the report highlighting that, based on wide consultation, there is a focus on working with communities to support residents to live full lives. Cllr Munkonge linked the strategy to Oxford City Council's wider corporate plans. Across the 11 measures within the report, he explained that various partners are being worked with to ensure improvements to issues such as childhood swimming abilities. Cllr Arshad additionally explained that the strategy seeks to address inequalities in Oxford City through leisure, culture, and community initiatives and has attracted £2.8m in funding from external bodies so far, demonstrating its progress and positive impact. She connected this strategy to the goals of the Locality Plan 2025 including addressing food inequalities, youth opportunities, and diversity representation. She concluded by emphasising how collaboration around the strategy has successfully targeted investment and community engagement.

The Chair thanked the presenting councillors and invited the Committee to raise questions on the report.

Peter Matthew, Interim Executive Director (Communities and People), Paula Redway, Culture and Community Development Manager, and Hagan Lewisman, Active Communities Manager, were also present to answer questions.

Cllr Jarvis observed that the report utilised indicators of increase or decrease to assess the measures within the report but queried how these conclusions can be made without accompanying comparative data sets. He requested that the Committee review some comparative data to support their understanding. He then asked, in relation to relationships with the outsourced leisure providers, what is the process through these relationships exist in terms of implementation of the strategy. Finally, he observed that the report in question focuses on social impacts primarily but questioned how this is balanced with financial considerations when navigating provider contracts in a manner which protects the social value of the projects. The Active Communities Manager explained the Council has been working with Serco for one year therefore the report only demonstrates a short-term data set which will determine baseline KPIs for future use. The Committee were also informed that Serco are measured on their social impact alongside financial data and that regular meetings take place to ensure this. The Interim Executive Director (Communities and People) outlined that the possibility of tension between financial and social impacts was a key question considered throughout development of the tendering process. It was deemed that Serco could offer both financial and social values which were deliverable and, to some extent, also compatible. Regarding Cllr Jarvis concerns regarding measurement of the indicators in the report, the Interim Executive Director (Communities and People) also offered assurance that the strategy is in its early days and that future reports will contain more comparative data to support determination of relative success and failure. He also committed to investigating whether some comparative analysis could be conducted at this stage.

Cllr Ottino queried the breadth of the measures included within the report and noted that only some are within the City Council's which limits capacity for accurate measuring. He then questioned whether the number of measures could be reduced and made more specific. The Chair agreed, noting this as a possible lesson to be carried into future reports. In relation to measure 1, Cllr Ottino also asked if there has been much progress given that he has observed that not all schools utilise Council pools and questioned whether it could be more informative to measure young people using the Council's pools, rather than schools. The Interim Executive Director (Communities and People) explained that the report was structured around the preferences of the Cabinet but agrees the 11 measures do cause some confusion. He noted that future reports could adopt a more precise and outcome focused structure with a smaller group of measures.

Cllr Corais, in relation to health and wellbeing, queried what examples there are of measures being taken in Littlemore and whether more details on the impacts of health and promotion events in Littlemore could be shared with the Committee. The Active Communities Manager explained that although not demonstrated in the report, there are existing programmes within Littlemore focused on health and wellbeing, details of which could be provided to the Committee. He also explained that health and promotion events are not currently focused on Littlemore as the strategy concentrates more in health priority areas on matters such as food and obesity.

Cllr Mundy focused on the necessity to ensure children can access leisure centres. In relation to measure 2, he expressed some confusion with the pie chart presented and questioned why West Oxford and Headington are not included. He therefore requested clarification on whether these areas receive any input and if not, why. The Chair agreed and queried why there is also little data on North Oxford which exhibits areas of deprivation. She also sought clarification on why grants are not distributed to certain areas of the city. The Culture and Community Development Manager explained that the pie charts represent the self-selected options included by grant applicants at the time of applying and monitoring. Additionally, she explained that the grantees included are the Big Ideas grantees; details of medium and small grants are not included but do exist and demonstrate a different picture.

The Chair welcomed additional questions from the Committee.

Cllr Ottino focused on measure 6, reducing physical inactivity, and questioned how residents could be aware of this goal, as he himself is not. He also sought clarity on what the measure is based on, whether this be GP referral and what has been the most successful means by which people pick up these opportunities and programmes. The Active Communities Manager detailed the communications work that exists with GPs and social prescribers which is the most successful method for ensuring referrals. He explained that self-referral is also an option based on online information and that this is supported by targeted interventions such as posters and social media. The Officer committed that more work needs to be done around communications to reach more people, admitting this must also include councillors.

The Chair acknowledged the success of the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit (EPAU) at Rose Hill and gave her thanks for this. She queried whether the unit is being connected with third sector support to ensure 24-hour support is available to mothers and partners when the EPAU is not open. Separately, she sought clarification on the extent to which data is disaggregated by gender when analysing swimming and gender-based sports and noted that this could inform more targeted interventions. Finally, she sought clarification on the demand levels of residents with Parkinsons and Dementia and, in relation to youth ambition, whether monitoring is taking place to track drop off levels in sport. The Active Communities Manager notified the Committee that the Chief Medical Officer had visited the EPAU in 2023 and commended its standards. He informed the Committee that feedback from EPAU users had been positive in comparison to the John Radcliffe Hospital. As the EPAU is controlled by the NHS, the Council can only offer additional aftercare support when requested. In response to Chair's second question, it was noted that data is disaggregated by gender in relation to leisure centres and activity programmes and that these examples could be used in the future. The Active Communities Manager also stated that demand levels of the ageing population are monitored to ensure targeted action occurs. Finally, in relation to youth ambition, he assured the Committee that data is tracked according to gender and informed that there was a near 50/50 split at the last count and pointed to some examples. Cllr Munkonge echoed the Active Communities Manager's information regarding youth ambition by referring to an image in the report which displayed a 50/50 gender split. The Interim Executive Director (Communities and People) emphasised the importance of this topic for informing how the Council initiates activities and actions to promote health. He linked this to engagement with the ICB and NHS and reiterated that integrated health is a major focus for the community and stated that further capabilities for capturing performance will be continually developed. He concluded that there is a need to develop more initiatives with communities around the physical health agenda and to join up with ICB and health agendas.

In relation to measure 1, Cllr Ottino asked whether there is a sense of what the locality plans may look like and whether some geographical regions in Oxford are too broad to realistically benefit from a locality plan. The Culture and Community Development Manager detailed that through Covid, ways of collaborating with a range of partners were learned and it is now the goal to continually build on these relationships to support projects across geographical areas. Ensuring local approaches are bespoke must be the key focus of these collaborative efforts but they must be accompanied by a strategic overview and connected to the wider priorities of the Council. She explained that this is not always easy to do, and it is a work in progress. Cllr Ottino accepted this response but questioned whether there could be a resource issue during these efforts to which the Culture and Community Development Manager assured that resources are already in place, but more planning will be needed to agree the geographical focus.

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

1. That Cabinet makes the Council commitment to creating a truly walkable Oxford clear, by specifying in Measure 6 of the Strategy that focused attention will be

given to improving walkability in areas most affected by physical activity deprivation, in line with the motion passed by Full Council on 25 November 2024.

2. That Cabinet incorporates comparative data over time in future updates of the Strategy to contextualise the scale of progress and identify gender disparities, particularly in activities like swimming, to guide and refine targeted interventions.
3. That Cabinet draws on and incorporates lessons learned from the implementation of this strategy to inform and strengthen the preparation of its next iteration, ensuring future improvements are grounded in evidence and best practices.
4. That Cabinet promotes the Early Pregnancy Assessment Unit health hub in Rose Hill as a case study to highlight its positive outcomes and innovative practices, disseminating these successes nationally to encourage other councils to adopt similar initiatives.
5. That Cabinet ensures strong Member engagement in the development and review of measures relating to locality plans, by involving all ward councillors in recognising and identifying pockets of deprivation within each ward, with an aim to target resources effectively and ensure that no communities in need are overlooked.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Members and officers for their valued work and continued focus.

Cllr Munkonge, Cllr Arshad, Peter Matthew, Paula Redway and Hagan Lewisman left the meeting and did not return.

55. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Chair outlined the upcoming meetings of the Committee, including an item on Governance in respect of the urgent decisions that had been taken recently by the Scrutiny Chair. An updated list of programmes is contained within the supplementary pack.

The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser informed the Committee that Financial Crime and Noise complaints on licensed premises had been added to the longlist of Scrutiny items for future consideration of the Committee.

The Committee agreed the Work Plan.

56. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

The Committee noted that on 13 November 2024, Cabinet considered recommendations on 4 reports, responses to which have been included in the agenda pack.

The Scrutiny and Governance adviser also notified the Committee that the Climate and Environment Panel met on 20 November 2024 and made 4 recommendations; and the Housing and Homelessness Panel met for an extraordinary meeting on 27 November 2024 and made 3 recommendations which will all go to Cabinet on 11 December 2024.

57. Dates of future meetings

The Committee was informed that the meeting scheduled for 1 April 2025 would be rescheduled to 26 March 2025 in observance of the Festival of Eid.

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.05 pm and ended at 7.45 pm

Chair
2025

Date: Tuesday 14 January

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.