

# Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 29 January 2025

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## Committee members present:

Councillor Miles (Chair)	Councillor Corais (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Altaf-Khan	Councillor Jarvis
Councillor Latif	Councillor Mundy
Councillor Ottino	Councillor Qayyum
Councillor Regisford	Councillor Stares

## Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Helen Bishop, Director of Communities & Citizens  
Ted Bowler, Corporate Asset Manager  
Andrew Humpherson, Regeneration Manager  
Gail Malkin, Head of People  
Rui Marcelino, Regeneration Manager – Green Transport  
Paula Redway, Culture and Community Development Manager  
Ted Maxwell, Economy, City Centre and Green Transport Lead  
Celeste Reyeslao, Scrutiny and Governance Advisor  
Hannah Carmody-Brown, Committee and Member Services Officer

## Also present:

Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities  
Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and an Inclusive Economy  
Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies  
Councillor Ed Turner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management  
Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning

## Apologies:

Councillor(s) Malik sent apologies.

## **69. Declarations of interest**

Councillor Ottino stated that he is a City Council representative for the Citizens' Advice Bureau and attends the Agnes Smith Advice Centre meetings in his capacity as a Ward Councillor but receives no financial interest from these organisations. The Chair confirmed that Councillor Ottino could remain and contribute to the meeting.

On arrival later, Councillor Mundy stated that he is employed by the Agnes Smith Advice Centre and managed by Zoe Millington, an attending public speaker. The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser requested that Councillor Mundy leave the room during the discussions of item 5 to mitigate any conflict with pecuniary interests.

## **70. Chair's Announcements**

The Chair informed the Committee that two public speakers would address the Committee at the opening of item 5. She also noted that private session would be required should members wish to consider the confidential appendices of items 7, 8 and 9. Finally, the Committee understood that the meeting would be livestreamed and that a break would be called part way through proceedings.

## **71. Minutes**

The Committee resolved to **approve** the minutes of the meeting held on 14 January 2025 as a true and accurate record.

*The Committee agreed to take items 7, 8 and 10 next, followed by 9, 11, 5, 6 and 12.*

## **72. Grant Allocations to Community & Voluntary Organisations 2025/26**

*Councillor Mundy joined the meeting.*

The Scrutiny and Governance spoke with Councillor Mundy; he notified the Committee of his interests relating to his role as an employee for Agnes Smith Advice Centre. He explained that Zoe Millington, an attending public speaker, is his manager. The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser requested that Councillor Mundy leave the room during the discussions of item 5 to mitigate any conflict with pecuniary interests.

*Councillor Mundy left the meeting.*

The Chair welcomed two public speakers, notified them of the 5-minute speaking limit and invited them to address the Committee.

Ms Christine O'Hare, Citizens Advice Oxford Chief Executive, addressed the Committee as follows:

*I'm here to urge you to back the proposal to retain core funding for the Advice Centres for the next three years.*

*Our services are a lifeline for residents and the City Council alike. We tackle crucial issues—benefits, housing, debt, employment, immigration, and more—offering citywide support to people who often have nowhere else to turn. For those without digital access or whose first language isn't English, we are essential. In the last 3 years Citizens Advice has helped 17,469 people.*

*We don't just solve problems; we prevent them. We help people out of poverty, stop homelessness before it starts, and secure financial support for those with health challenges. In 2023/24, Citizens Advice delivered £3.9 million in financial gains for local residents—an incredible return on the Council's £190,000 investment.*

*The Council's core grant also enables us to secure further funding. - Last year we raised in total two and a half times the Council's investment from foundations, charities, individual donors, and national contracts etc. But our City Council funding has been frozen since 2020, even as costs soar. Inflation, rising employer national insurance contributions, and increased demand are pushing us to the brink. We've already cut costs to the bone—relocating to smaller premises and planning a merger with Citizens Advice West Oxfordshire and South and Vale on 1st April to maximize the efficiency of our resources.*

*We cannot cut any further without risking vital services. Demand is rising, complexity increasing and we are at capacity. Without sustained funding, more residents will fall through the cracks—leading to greater costs for the Council down the line.*

*This isn't just about keeping the lights on. It's about maintaining a service that saves lives, saves money, and strengthens our community. I urge you: don't let advice services falter. Protect this funding.*

*I'd like to end with a scenario to show how we can help vulnerable residents and prevent homelessness, easing pressure on the City Council's housing team.*

*"Simon", a self-employed driver, faced eviction along with his family due to £6,000 in rent arrears and £25,000 of other debts. His housing benefit had been stopped. We successfully challenged this decision and secured him a backdated payment of £3,200 - halving his arrears.*

*We also helped Simon move over to Universal Credit, making him £700 better off per month, secured him a council tax reduction, and moved him away from a high-fee debt management plan saving a further £400 per month.*

*We then halted eviction proceedings by securing Simon a 'Breathing Space', during which time he worked with our debt adviser to clear his arrears by selling his van and renting one instead. We then helped Simon apply for a Debt Relief Order to address his remaining debts.*

*Now Simon, his partner, and their young children, which included a one-year-old child, are still in their home, back at work, financially stable, and have avoided needing homelessness support from the Council.*

*We help thousands of Oxford residents, like Simon and their families each year.*

The Chair thanked Ms O'Hare for her address and her continued work. The Committee raised no questions.

The Chair then welcome Ms Zoe Millington, Agnes Smith Advice Centre Manager, who addressed the Committee as follows:

*We encourage committee members to support this proposal.*

*Independent advice centres like Agnes Smith Advice Centre, Rose Hill and Donnington Advice Centre and Barton Advice Centre provide services that are targeted to those communities most in need. They serve areas of Oxford that are in the 20% most deprived in the country, according to the 2019 indices of deprivation, and some in the 10% most deprived. The multiple deprivations in these areas increase the need for accessible advice services. People may have had low educational attainment, reducing their ability to complete paperwork, or may suffer from health inequalities that mean their healthy life expectancy is greatly reduced, increasing reliance on disability benefits. Our services respond to the hardship that arises from the inequalities present in our city and are essential for those most affected.*

*As an example of what independent advice centres achieve for residents, Agnes Smith Advice Centre made £3.9 million of financial gains for our clients in 2023/24. This money prevented extreme hardship in many cases, and much will likely be spent in the local economy. Last year we made £14.06 of financial gains for clients for every £1 of income we received, which is an excellent return on funders' investment.*

*We also prevented homelessness for 107 households last year, reducing pressure on Oxford City Council's homelessness services.*

*Demand on our services continues to be very high. We cannot afford a cut to our grant when it is already a challenge to help everyone that needs our services. This high demand means that every single one of our advice centres is important. Please support us to continue providing these essential services by supporting this proposal.*

The Chair thanked Ms Millington for her address and her continued work. The Committee raised no questions.

The Chair informed both public speakers that as the Committee's primary function is to review; it has no decision-making powers but does make recommendations for consideration to Cabinet. The public speakers were therefore informed that the final decisions on matters relating to this item will be taken on 5 February 2025.

The Chair directed the Committee's attention to the report and welcomed Councillor Linda Smith, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities, and Paula Redway, Culture and Community Development Manager, who were present to answer questions.

Councillor Smith introduced the report to the Committee and outlined that within the published consultation budget, there is a proposal to cut the grants to advice centres by 10%. On 28 January 2025 the proposed budget from Oxford City Council was published within Cabinet papers which did not include the 10% cut; it has been pushed back by four years. Councillor Smith expressed a hope that this provides some comfort to Advice Centres. In summarising the remaining contents of the report, Councillor Smith positively noted the inclusion of measures to reduce the bureaucracy experienced by officers and organisations within the application and approval stages of the grants process. The details of this were explained to the Committee and it was assured that the report is focused on reducing inequality in Oxford City.

The Culture and Community Development Manager further explained that whilst the criteria for grant applications is being reduced, the support and funding for advice sessions and support organisations is being maintained.

The Chair invited the Committee to raise questions on the report.

Councillor Qayyum sought clarification in relation to paragraph 8, recommendation 5, asking whether the proposals would impact the ability of parents and babies to get funding through programmes such as Home-Start.

Councillor Altaf-Khan noted dissatisfaction with the levels of diversity noted in the report and asked how this can be addressed when reaching out to groups that are more unaware of the process for grant applications. He specifically asked whether timetables could be made easily available for community groups to ensure understanding.

Councillor Latif supported the need for more understanding and outreach work to reach under-represented groups. He also asked whether overall funding is being reduced, and what the cost saving from reducing the number of application rounds is. Finally, in relation to community centres, he queried what support and reassurance could be provided to ensure good work is not adversely affected.

The Culture and Community Development Manager firstly explained, in relation to funding for babies and parents, that the statutory provision noted in the report would not affect additional work with volunteers. Collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sectors is being encouraged to support funding, as means of supporting services that may otherwise experience funding difficulties. In respect of diversity and outreach, the Committee were directed to data in appendix 2 which demonstrates that diversity is a considered and actioned factor. Appendix 3 also demonstrates diversity within the funded organisations which exhibit a range of protected characteristics. In response to requests for a timetable, the Culture and Community Development Manager explained that more information could be provided on the next funding rounds upon finalisation of the Budget, and this would be widely circulated through a variety of means. Finally, the Committee learned that 20% of organisations funded in recent years have been newcomers, thus demonstrating successful widening of outreach efforts.

*Councillor Upton joined the meeting.*

Councillor Smith noted the difficulty in providing reassurances ahead of the budget finalisation, but assured the Committee that any changes to core funding for advice centres would take place through consultation with prior notice. In relation to cost saving, a figure was not available, but an expectation that time and resources of officers would be saved was noted, thus enabling more support to be provided to applicants.

The Culture and Community Development Manager confirmed that freeing up officers to develop and support relationships with other funders would be a possibility to ensure the maintenance of support to community groups in Oxford.

Councillor Altaf-Khan emphasised the need for more clarity around the timetables for funding application cycles in the future. Councillor Smith welcomed the concept of this recommendation, and the Culture and Community Development Manager confirmed that timetables are published for the full year ahead on the website and in a variety of formats. The Committee were assured this would also happen for the year ahead.

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

1. That Cabinet publishes the timetable for the Small Grants cycle for the year ahead, ensuring that this is communicated through multiple channels to ensure widest possible distribution of the message.

The Committee noted their support for the maintenance of core funding levels for Advice Centres.

The Chair thanked the public speakers for their contributions, and Councillor Smith and the Culture and Community Development Manager for their work on the report.

*Cllr Mundy rejoined the meeting.*

*Ms. O'Hare, Ms. Millington, and the Culture and Community Development Manager left the meeting.*

### **73. Equalities Update**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Citizen Focused Services and Council Companies, Helen Bishop, Director of Communities and Citizens, and Gail Malkin, Head of People, who were present to answer questions.

Councillor Chapman introduced the report and thanked officers for their work, noting the report as evidence of significant success. The Committee heard that the report focuses on the workforce in the year 2023/24 and is an obligation under the Equalities Act. It focuses on staffing, diversity, and inclusion with analysis of various pay gap metrics. The report presents a positive picture, but it was explained that some impacts can have delayed effects. Councillor Chapman highlighted to the Committee some examples of progress including:

- Improvement in the percentage of ethnic minority staff in the Council to the target of around 15%.
- Support for positive action initiatives within the workforce to increase opportunities and to support the attraction and retention of staff.
- Improvements to employee turnover rates.
- The gender pay gap has reduced.
- High scores from staff in response to questions regarding feelings of inclusion in the workplace.

Councillor Chapman emphasised that more work can be done. The Committee heard specifically on the gender pay gap that there has been some reduction to 6.5% but there is ambition for this to be further improved. He noted regrettably that the ethnic minority pay gap has increased slightly and work will be done to address this. The Committee heard the importance being mindful when reviewing the data as 15-20% of staff do not declare their protected characteristics which can affect representations within the data.

The Director of Communities and Citizens drew the Committee's attention to additional achievements including:

- A positive action programme for aspiring managers to improve the management pipeline has been set up. Several attendees have since achieved promotion.
- Training to promote inclusive recruitment has been launched.
- EDI training has been launched for all staff.
- Two staff networks have been established:
  - Race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage network
  - Neurodiverse and disability network

The Head of People outlined the Council's focus areas for the next twelve months. Firstly, in regards recruitment, the Committee heard that the introduction of blind applications is being considered, and work is underway for a positive action policy. Secondly, in terms of talent development, career planning workshops have been launched with mentors to support. Externally facing work is seeking to develop apprenticeship opportunities for young people from diverse communities and a focus on leadership and organisational culture training is being supported with three levels of EDI training. Finally, a focus on employee experience has utilised staff surveys to assess feelings around inclusion and respect. The Head of People stated intentions for future work with staff networks to support improvements to policy and practice development.

The Chair invited the Committee to raise questions on the report.

The Committee then debated the report extensively.

Councillor Jarvis began by focusing on the following concerns:

- The proportion of applicants from ethnic minorities groups, the barriers they face, and how this data is assessed.
- The under-representation of Muslim staff within the Council and actions which are being taken to tackle this.
- Progress with monitoring and reporting on the LGBT pay gap.



Councillor Chapman provided some response to concerns regarding ethnic minority applicant proportions and noted that often, many applications received are not suitable for the role or do not hold the correct right to work eligibility. Regarding the under-representation of Muslim group, the Committee heard from the Head of People that broader actions covering all groups for minority ethnic backgrounds, including extended recruitment advertising, are aimed at tackling this. In respect of pay gaps, the Head of People noted reservations with producing data for LGBT employees due to the small sample size which would inhibit robust analysis, but did commit to considering alternative forms of analysis which could be conducted. Councillor Chapman urged the Committee bring forward any evidence demonstrating that specific issues are forcing the under-representation of Muslim employees within the Council.

Councillor Latif raised several points including:

- Clarification regarding the higher rate of unqualified applicants from the BAME population as opposed to the non-BAME population.
- Clarification on the specific meaning of a 6.5% gender pay gap.

Councillor Chapman clarified that it is not the case that some ethnic minority groups are more or less qualified, rather that higher numbers reflect that more ethnic minority applicants often lack the required eligibility documents to apply for the role. The Head of People confirmed that some applicants that apply without the correct right to work documents are automatically rejected at the shortlisting stage and that this group tends to be more diverse. In regards the meaning of the gender pay gap percentage, Councillor Latif was informed that the calculation is based on the difference between the average hourly rate of pay of women and of men, and that the mean and median averages were both used. Councillor Chapman provided further detail on the concept of gender pay gaps to Councillor Latif and offered for this to be further explained within the report for clarification.

Councillor Mundy welcomed the report and raised several questions including:

- Whether equalities updates for ODS and contacted leisure companies could be included in the report.
- A possible error regarding the median gender pay gap for part-time workers.
- Whether there is concern for the continuing reduction in the number of workers who also live in Oxford since 2022.

Councillor Regisford expressed her thanks for the report and specifically emphasised concern over the terminology utilised within the report. She first sought clarity on the 'EDI' to which Councillor Chapman noted it signified 'equality, diversity and inclusion'. Councillor Regisford then focused on the following concerns:

- The need for more understanding around where the concept of equity sits within the report's EDI training ambitions to ensure meaningful difference is achieved.
- Whether EDI should include equity and therefore become EEDI.

- The need for more qualitative data alongside the breadth of statistics in the report to ensure nuances are highlighted.
- How training is intended to translate into a culture shift with emphasis on monitoring.

In response to Councillor Mundy, Councillor Chapman assured that equality reports from ODS are reviewed at the shareholder meetings which has demonstrated that progress is being made, but that the company faces different issues to the Council. In regard leisure companies, Councillor Mundy was directed to ask Councillor Munkonge for this information. However, Councillor Chapman did clarify that Serco's policies were assessed during the contract process. Finally, concern with the falling number of those working and living in Oxford was not noted as significant due to the flexibility and advantages of online and hybrid working patterns. Councillor Chapman positively expressed the enhanced skill availability this has brought amongst Oxford City Council employees and the Director of Communities and Citizens agreed that hybrid working enables more flexibility in support of other commitments such as childcare.

In response to Councillor Regisford, the Director of Communities and Citizens stated intentions to put forward a positive action programme which may address concerns related to equity and utilised the example of the Aspiring Managers Programme which has resulted in the promotion of four staff members in the last year. She also noted support for the inclusion of qualitative data and noted that this could be achieved through existing networks.

The Head of People confirmed to Councillor Mundy that he had identified an error regarding data on the median pay gap and committed to correcting this. It was also explained that a further cohort is being planned for the Aspiring Managers Programme to combat under-representation and options for applying this model to mid-management roles is also being reviewed. The Committee heard briefly of the risks this could pose to staff retention levels. Furthermore, the Head of People informed that unconscious bias training sessions are being run face-to-face, and work is taking place with staff networks to gather feedback on how people feel within the organisation.

The Chair then queried why more women are leaving their roles and whether the uptake of those using parental leave by gender, alongside return rates, are tracked.

Councillor Altaf-Khan noted dissatisfaction with earlier comments regarding the disqualification of applications from ethnic minority backgrounds and expressed concern with the association this could make to illegal immigrants via the terminology used. Councillor Ottino echoed these comments and noted dissatisfaction with the explanations provided for the ethnic minority data in the report. It was requested that data excluding those without the right to work be made available to enable more accurate analysis. He requested the Committee consider any presence of unconscious bias.

In regards the gender pay gap, Councillor Ottino queried the explanations given and whether there is confidence that no barriers exist for women on higher pay rates from working part time. Finally, it was also asked what is being done to educate people about the importance of filing information on their protected characteristics.

Councillor Qayyum welcomed the report, specifically the information regarding the introduction of blind applications. She queried specifically, in regards the strategic approach to advertising, whether this occurs on diverse platforms, and whether language is reviewed within job descriptions to ensure inclusivity of people across diverse backgrounds. Finally, she expressed concern about the data relating to part-time women's pay and asked whether they are encouraged to apply for higher graded roles or regraded when required. The Chair echoed these comments and suggested the use of photographs within job advertisements.

Councillor Latif raised further points:

- The requirement for point 18 to be re-written for clarity.
- In reference to page 46, he requested clarity on what is being done to support more opportunities for women in higher paid roles.
- In regards the ethnicity pay gap, he asked what steps are being taken to tackle the increase.
- In relation to table 4 in appendix 3, he disputed that considerations of gender are included in the data as stated and asked whether this should be rectified.

Councillor Chapman expressed concern at the quantity of specific questions asked and noted that not all the data to respond sufficiently exists as yet.

Councillor Chapman explained that targets to increase the number of ethnic minority staff are being implemented in light of the number of economically active persons of this category being present in the census.

Councillor Chapman sought to clarify that Councillor Altaf-Khan's concerns of disrespectful language were not representative of the explanations he provided and strongly emphasised his disagreements with this suggestion. He requested the record of this be made clear and the Chair echoed this.

The Head of People noted that when assessing the economically active populations, the context of the large hospitals and two universities in Oxford must also be considered for the effect this has on data. Additionally, in relation to tracking the resignations of women, there is limited data held regarding parental leave and return due to a lack of technology and staffing capacity. This limitation also applies to tracking data through the recruitment process. Finally, in regards part-time gender pay gaps, the Committee were notified that this is assessed on hourly rate of pay and no conscious barriers to part-time at senior levels exist. She noted that the Council is an accommodating employer in this regard; the Chair echoed this sentiment and stated that part time work does not represent a lesser commitment from staff.

The Director of Communities and Citizens referred to the successful socialisation of job opportunities across community networks through local champions, and assured the Committee that job descriptions are constantly reviewed to ensure accessibility. The Committee also heard that every effort is made to encourage the disclosure of protected characteristics. However, this cannot be forced and there is a hope that the messages within community networks will support this.

Councillor Chapman clarified to Councillor Latif that the table 4 will be reviewed for any errors ahead of the report reaching Cabinet.

The Committee recognised there was a need for prioritisation within the longlist of recommendations suggested and acknowledged potential resource constraints of the Council.

It resolved to make the following recommendation(s) on the report to Cabinet:

1. That Cabinet ensures removal of data relating to applicants not eligible to work in the UK from the report, as this information may contribute to misinterpretation and potential stigmatisation of applicants.
2. That Cabinet enhances the language used in the Workforce Equalities Report by including Equity in the stated People Strategy's ambition.
3. That Cabinet commits to conducting qualitative research on insights and behaviour change leveraging the capacity of the Councils internal networks, including information about how the two newly launched staff networks—Race Ethnicity and Cultural Heritage (REACH) and Disability and Neurodiverse Network—are being engaged with and mobilised.
4. That Cabinet conducts a comprehensive review of the Council's recruitment strategies to identify and address barriers to the representation of underrepresented communities, including the Muslim community, ensuring equitable access and fair treatment at all stages.
5. That Cabinet maps out the process of the Council's recruitment process to identify at which stage ethnic minority applicant are dropping off, including a breakdown of the application, interview, and appointment stages to determine whether disparities arise at specific points in the process.
6. That Cabinet evaluates the terminology used within the organisation to refer to ethnic minorities and underrepresented groups and adopts the term 'Equity Deserving' as a more holistic and progressive approach that is aligned with both national and global developments that place equity at the centre of diversity and inclusion efforts.
7. That Cabinet explores available benchmarking data to contextualise the Council's performance relative to other local authorities in relevant areas.
8. That Cabinet further investigates its efforts to ensure equal opportunities for women in the top quartile of employment, specifically in higher-level roles, and

clarify strategies being implemented to support greater female participation and progression in these roles.

9. That Cabinet, in future, provide clarity on the factors contributing to the ethnic pay gap, including the Council's efforts to reduce it.
10. That Cabinet establishes a process for reviewing the implementation of scrutiny recommendations as part of the annual reporting cycle, by creating a tracking document containing a working list of recommendations to support the prioritisation of actions and provide an assessment of progress made against those from previous years.

*Councillor Chapman, the Head of People, and the Director of Communities and Citizens left the meeting.*

*The Chair called a short break in proceedings for 5 minutes.*

## **74. Cowley Branch Line - delivery stage funding**

*The Committee resumed.*

The Chair welcomed Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning, Councillor Ed Turner, Cabinet Member for Finance and Asset Management, and Rui Marcelino, Regeneration Manager for Green Transport, who were present to answer questions.

Councillor Upton introduced the report and explained the contextual background, noting delays due to stalling by Network Rail. She explained that in response, Oxford City Council has drawn together £4m along with Oxford County Council and private developers, and a report is due in March 2025. She informed that the cost benefit analysis is expected to be positive, and the report presented to the Committee focuses on the delivery phase with a cost of £100m, and outlines that a proposed percentage contribution from Oxford city Council of £20m is made from CIL. Councillor Upton explained that this request will be against future CIL receipts and clarified that the money will only be spent if the whole project were to go ahead.

*Councillor Regisford rejoined the meeting.*

Councillor Turner directed the Committee to paragraph 3 of the report, noting that the case could be made for investment on future CIL money due to the benefits the Cowley Branch Line would bring about for tackling local congestion. He further commented that the project could drive development within the area and generate extra CIL in the future. As such, he explained to the Committee that the case is easy to make, and proceeding would be wise.

Councillor Latif noted that, as a Cowley resident, the benefits to the Cowley Ward would be significant and therefore he supported the approach. He raised several points for clarification:

- In relation to paragraph 3, whether there is a total net financial benefit and whether there is an estimate of what this may be.
- Whether Oxford City Council's proposed contribution is at the lower end of the recommended amount and whether this could entail future risk.
- Whether there is information on the size of contributions from other local authorities.
- Where it is expected that housing growth will come from.

Councillor Altaf-Khan queried whether the project is too ambitious and whether the proposal's suggestions exceed the amount of money available to the Council. He suggested the government be contacted for financial support.

Finally, the Chair sought clarity on the effects devolution may have on the plans.

In response to questions, Councillor Turner outlined to the Committee that information on the net financial benefit is provided in paragraph 20 which demonstrates that £3.9m of income is estimated, with further information available in the confidential appendix. In regards the effects of devolution, he assured that rail development is not dependent on mayoral combined authority structures, and therefore it is likely that should change occur, the project would still be supported for the economic growth it will provide.

Councillor Upton responded to concerns regarding the 15% financial contribution and noted that the Council could not be expected to do more and assured the Committee that there is minimal financial risk as the money would only be spent if the project goes ahead. The Regeneration Manager for Green Transport explained that a 15% contribution is reasonable and strong within the context.

On housing growth, the Regeneration Manager for Green Transport assured the Committee that rail links encourage housing densification and ensure populations are less reliant on parking facilities. In turn, local employers will be less pressured to provide staff parking; the plans are also effective for employment.

The Committee supported the Cabinet recommendations for the delivery of the Cowley Branch Line, recognising the net financial benefits to the city and its role in providing strategic infrastructure that would unlock housing growth and address traffic-related issues through the Council's investment in mass transport.

There were no other recommendations agreed.

*Councillor Louise Upton, Councillor Ed Turner, and the Regeneration Manager for Green Transport left the meeting.*

## **75. Revised Masterplan and Business Case for the Covered Market Masterplan**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Business, Culture and an Inclusive Economy, Andrew Humpherson, Regeneration Manager, and Ted Bowler, Corporate Asset Manager, who were present to answer questions.

Councillor Hollingsworth presented the report and explained that whilst the original masterplan was approved by Cabinet, a new report is being put forward to account for more recent work and updates. The Committee heard that this report focuses on the details of the project, associated costs, and goals for ensuring a carbon zero future. As a 250-year-old Heritage building, some costs have differed from estimations, and inflation has also affected prices. Councillor Hollingsworth explained that the project aims to complete work in sequenced sections across the rows within the market to ensure that the space is kept open and undisrupted as far as possible. The Committee also learned that some costs are associated with additional staffing to ensure there is sufficient support and day-to-day contact for the traders during the process.

The Regeneration Manager focused on the ability of the plans to work on future focused projects and maintenance to avoid repeated disruption and expenditure at later dates. Therefore, the new report also contains additional contingences with an eye to benefit the long-term life of the market.

Councillor Latif sought several clarifications:

- In regards recommendation 1 and table 36, whether the essential works figure is already included within the original budget of £6.8m.
- Whether the level of opportunity cost been quantified for the Council.
- In regards the retail unit and present challenges, what could the financial risks be to the Council.

The Chair asked how it will be ensured that traditional traders can maintain a presence.

Councillor Hollingsworth clarified that information in table 36 illustrates the additional cost of the enhancements measured against the cost of only carrying out the essential works. Option 1 identifies the minimum amount of work necessary to keep the market running and is a baseline for the business case to assess the benefits of the enhancements. Option 2 is however being recommended despite the shortfall in money that currently exists. The Regeneration Manager clarified that the funds for the essential works were included within the original masterplan, but that this price has since increased to reflect cost increases and new survey information. In response to Councillor Latif's query, it was clarified that table 36 identifies the additional costs of the enhancements over and above those required by the essential works.

Councillor Hollingsworth then referred to concerns over traders and associated challenges, noting that fixation on retaining long standing traders that are no longer desirable to customers can make the location less appealing. The Committee were informed that whilst a degree of change is required, a focus on local business can still be retained with flexibility. Over 250 years the market has changed continuously, and this must persist. The Regeneration Manager added that the masterplan must work with the leasing street to support the presence of traders.

The Corporate Asset Manager responded to concerns regarding cost opportunity and noted the challenging environment in retail at present which creates issues with finding new traders to fill premises. The Committee heard that new potential traders are being contacted but a balance must be retained with the types of trade present within the market. He expressed the importance of the work on the market for keeping new and existing traders and notified that Committee that other streams of work are developing off the back of the masterplan.

Councillor Mundy noted positively the popularity of the covered market but emphasised that there must be diversity of business types within, supported by the availability of a variety of premises sizes to suit different businesses. Councillor Hollingsworth noted that flexibility is key to the changes planned and agreed that premises size must not constrain the nature of a business. He noted that premises sizes have changed over 20 years and can continue to do so, utilising the example of additional seating spaces being added to support businesses selling beverages. The Regeneration Manager added that the leasing strategy will give the opportunity to replace services and build flexibility. Studies are taking place to assess how this can be done, such as one focused on the ways in which electricity is provided to ensure that future disruption to the market is minimised.

The Committee expressed its support for the work on the Covered Market, recognising the return on investment of the increased capital budget for the project, and the aim to minimise disruption for traders, whilst offering greater flexibility to support the energy transition towards Net Zero ambitions.

There were no other recommendations agreed.

*Councillor Hollingsworth, the Regeneration Manager, and the Corporate Asset Manager left the meeting.*

## **76. Report of the Budget Review Group 2025/2026**

The Chair introduced the report, noting apologies from Councillor Fry, and invited Councillor Jarvis to present the report.



Councillor Jarvis introduced the report noting that the group met on multiple occasions across December 2024 and January 2025. The Committee heard that the review group were considerate to the ongoing financial pressures experienced by the Council and made focused recommendations on the following areas:

- Those for which income could be increased in the short term.
- Those for which income could be increased in the longer term.
- Areas of spending deemed to be lower priority given the savings the Council is seeking.
- Areas where it was deemed additional budget was required.

Councillor Jarvis highlighted several recommendations to the Committee including:

- Allocation of additional budget and officer capacity to support work required to implement the reorganisation of local government.
- An allowance for a rising budget in ICT.
- Larger increases in some charges where there appears to be more elasticity in demand than previously predicted, for example in non-concessionary garden waste bin rates and in car parking charges.
- To ensure that any savings made in the Council's 'Fit for the Future' programme do not result in digital exclusion of vulnerable residents.
- To increase the level of optimism bias in the capital projects from 40% to 45% and to introduce an optimism bias for commercial property rental income for the first time.

The Committee were referred to the report for the full detail of all recommendations.

The Chair noted the considerable work behind the report. The Committee had no questions on the report.

The Chair queried the discussions the group held around advice services to which Councillor Jarvis noted little detail on this and advised that Cabinet have picked up on this in their revised report.

The Committee resolved to approve the report and recommendations of the Budget Review Group for submission to Cabinet, and to Council thereafter.

## 77. Work Plan

The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser noted that any amendments to this would be agreed with the Chair and informed that no recent changes had been made.

The Committee agreed the workplan.

## 78. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

The Chair informed the Committee that Cabinet had responded to recommendations made at the last Scrutiny meeting on 14 January 2025. In total 11 recommendations were made, of which 7 were agreed in full, 2 were agreed in part, and 2 were rejected.

The Chair also informed the Committee that the formats of reports sent to Cabinet will be updated soon. The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser confirmed that the Committee will see new reporting formats and welcomed their questions.

The Scrutiny and Governance Adviser also informed that the Finance and Performance Panel met on 21 January 2025 and considered the Council Tax Reduction Scheme but made no recommendations. The Budget Review Group Report was also approved.

## 79. Dates of future meetings

Cllr Qayyum noted concern with a meeting start time of 18.00 through Ramadan. The Chair acknowledged this and committed to speaking with Cllr Qayyum to discuss this.

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings.

**The meeting started at 6.03 pm and ended at 9.00 pm**

Chair .....

**Date: Monday 3 March 2025**

*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.*