

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 7 November 2016



COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Gant (Chair), Azad, Chapman, Coulter, Fry, Henwood, Pegg, Simmons, Taylor, Tidball and Wilkinson.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Susan Brown (Customer and Corporate Services), Councillor Alex Hollingsworth (Planning and Regulatory Services) and Councillor John Tanner (A Clean and Green Oxford)

OFFICERS PRESENT: Mark Jaggard (Planning Policy Manager), Rebekah Knight (Planner), Paul Wilding (Programme Manager Revenue & Benefits), Neil Lawrence (Digital Development Manager), Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer) and Sarah Claridge (Committee Services Officer)

52. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Hayes.

53. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest made.

54. WORK PLAN AND FORWARD PLAN

The Chair presented the report.

Work Plan

The Committee reviewed and noted the following changes in its work plan for the 2016/17 council year.

The Scrutiny Officer advised the Committee that:

- The Sustainability Strategy (listed for scrutiny in December) has slipped.
- Workplace Parking Levies (listed for scrutiny in February) will come forward once the County have proposals to consult on. In November their Cabinet agreed to develop proposals.
- Instead of an update on the work of the Health & Wellbeing Board, the Board Member has suggested that Scrutiny looks at their Health Inequalities report and

consider areas the City could take forwards. This may require a one-off Panel meeting in the new year.

The Committee agreed to scrutinise the Health Inequalities report as suggested.

Cllr Chapman asked about when the language schools panel would start, the Scrutiny Officer said that the Committee had commissioned a report and depending on the outcomes of it a review panel would be formed in February or March 2017.

Standing Panels

Cllr Henwood updated the Committee on the work of the Housing Panel. The Panel has a meeting on Wednesday –with Oxford and Brookes Universities to discuss student numbers and HMOs.

Cllr Tidball updated the Committee on the work of the Devolution Review Group. The group met last Monday with the chair of OxLEP, the devolution report authors and the Head of Planning and Regulatory to discuss the infrastructure needs of Oxfordshire. The next meeting is scheduled for 16 November and will focus on social care.

Forward Plan

The Committee requested the Commissioned Advice Strategy from the Forward Plan.

55. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Chair presented the report on recommendations.

All recommendations from the last meeting were agreed with one partial – Recommendation 2 on Tree Management Policy.

The Committee noted the report.

56. ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT (AMR) 2015/16

Cllr Hollingsworth, Board member for Planning and Regulatory Services presented the report. The Annual Monitoring Report (AMR) covers a wide range of indicators, the interesting ones have been highlighted in the officer's report. The AMR is a statutory requirement and will influence the local plan review by determining whether policies need to be revised or retained.

The Committee discussed student numbers and student build accommodation.

- The Council's policy is to allow only 3,000 students from each university living outside of student accommodation. Brookes currently has 3,700 students living outside of student accommodation.

- Student accommodation is defined in the Local Plan as being accommodation fully owned and run by Brookes or Oxford universities. It also includes long leased properties which are managed by the universities.
- The policy does not extend to language schools or other education institutes in the city. The Council attempted to include these at the last review of the Local Plan but it was blocked by the inspector.
- The penalty for exceeding this policy is that the Council will add a Grampian condition on all University planning applications that specify that the new academic buildings can't be occupied until the number of students living in private accommodation are down.
- The growth in university numbers means that the Council will have to refine its policy. It might not be appropriate to continue to group graduate and post graduate students together.
- Brookes University's proposal to differentiate students into type is interesting and needs to be considered as we need a policy that is fit for the next 20 years.
- Student accommodation needs at other academic institutions in the city will also be considered during the review of the Local Plan.
- The Council has commissioned work with Cambridge City Council to review the growth of academic institutes which will help inform future policies.

Cllr Wilkinson asked if indicator 33: Traffic growth at inner and outer cordons was relevant? The Planning Policy Officer explained that the data comes from Oxfordshire County Council and the City Council can't influence it but it does provide context for other policies. The Committee decided to query the need of this indicator with the City Executive Board.

Cllr Wilkinson asked whether the Council record the numbers of pubs that have shut and been subject to a change of use. The Planning Policy Manager explained that the Council doesn't keep a list of pubs lost but if members want us to record this, the current policy is that we would stop monitoring one of the other indicators as the fewer indicators the more useful the document.

Cllr Wilkinson asked about the promotion of self-build in the city. Self-build is promoted on the Council's website but there is not a lot of interest in the city as there are few sites available.

Cllr Simmons asked why the Council had failed to meet retail targets. Cllr Hollingsworth explained that the Government has made a number of changes to how we manage retail in the local plan. It is now very difficult to prevent shifts from one use to another as permitted development rights have increased. The Council will have to consider alternative ways to manage retail.

Cllr Chapman asked if there was a reason for the increase in retrospective HMOs applications. Cllr Hollingsworth explained that the number of HMOs hasn't changed significantly but the increase in planning applications might be that more people are realising they need a planning application to create an HMO.

Cllr Taylor asked what defined a household and where do single people sit?

Do we monitor how long people stay homeless or in temporary accommodation? The Planning Policy Manager said that that information had come from the Housing department and he would send Cllr Taylor the information on housing accommodation.

The Chair asked about the viability of applying the Council's affordability housing policy on small developments. The Planning Policy Manager said that the legal challenge had been on the policy's effect on the economic viability of schemes not the principle of our policy.

Cllr Coulter asked about the supply of short stay accommodation. Tourists are hampered by the high cost of accommodation in Oxford which means they tend to come for the day rather than stay overnight. If we could attract fewer tourists that stayed longer and spent more it would be a win win.

Cllr Wilkinson asked about affordable housing figures and whether the right sort of housing with the right number of bedrooms was being built?

The Planning Policy Manager said that affordable housing was on the rise across the city with a good mix of homes being built. We will be reviewing the affordable housing proportions as part of the Local Plan review. However it hasn't been that long since they were agreed.

Cllr Simmons queried the results of indicator 26 Natural Resources impact Analysis as some of the developments listed were not using renewal energy as they were using air source pumps which rely on electricity. The target needs to change to include low carbon energy as well or the performance indicator needs to be changed to amber.

Cllr Hollingsworth said he would review the indicator and amend appropriately.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed the following recommendation to CEB

That clarity should be provided as to whether indicator 26: Natural Resources Impact Analysis includes low carbon as well as renewable energy, and that the wording of the target or the RAG status is amended accordingly.

That consideration is given to whether or not indicator 33: Traffic growth at inner and outer cordons should be included in future Annual Monitoring Reports, and that reasons are provided either way.

57. AIR QUALITY

Cllr Tanner, Board member for A Clean and Green Oxford presented the report. He explained that progress was being made in improving air quality in the city but that further action was needed. The Air Quality Officer explained that public awareness of the impacts of air pollution on health was increasing. There needed to be a shift to zero emissions in the city as hybrid buses still produced diesel emissions.

The Committee asked about the implications of a recent Client Earth court ruling. The Air Quality Officer advised that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) had indicated that their broad framework and the current targets would remain in place post-Brexit. DEFRA was likely to look to increase the number of Clean Air Zones being implemented in UK cities but this was not expected to affect Oxford because a planned zero emissions zone already went further. Another possible change could be the responsibility for meeting EU targets, which sat with the Secretary of State, being pushed down to local levels, together with any associated fines. The Committee suggest that, in the event of a future weakening of air quality targets in the UK, the Council should continue to work to the current EU targets.

Cllr Wilkinson said that the Low Emissions Zone (LEZ) in Oxford City Centre was not well publicised by signage. The Air Quality Manager explained that the LEZ only applied to buses and while the bus companies were fully aware, more could be done in terms of wider awareness-raising.

Cllr Fry said that there were no smokeless fuel obligations or restrictions on boat emissions in the City Centre area, unlike at various residential mooring zones in the city. The Committee suggest that such measures are needed and, in addition, that the Council should lobby the statutory body to introduce appropriate measures more widely.

The Committee noted that there was a growing body of evidence that planting trees can help to reduce nitrogen dioxide concentrations and noted that the Council could draw on local expertise in this field. The Air Quality Officer agreed and said this was something that could be looked at. The Committee suggest that further consideration should be given to the case for tree planting to offset emissions and whether tree planting could be included in the Council's Air Quality Action Plan.

The Committee examined air quality data at various locations in the City for 2011 to 2015 and questioned why, following a trend of steadily improving data, air quality appeared to have deteriorated in 2015 at various locations. The Committee heard that the monitoring data was considered to be accurate to within plus or minus 25%, so the 2015 rises were generally within the margin of error. However, it was expected that prolonged roadworks close to some monitoring locations had had a significant impact on air quality in those areas.

The Air Quality Officer said that St. Clements was one area where, even allowing for the margin of error, the monitoring data for nitrogen dioxide had consistently exceeded targets. Cllr Tanner agreed that this was one of the worst areas in the City for air quality due to heavy traffic, frequent bus movements, a lack of alternative routes and its geographical position. He said that the Council had tried but been unsuccessful in seeking funding for additional monitoring at St. Clements. The City continued to raise concerns with the County and this area could be considered for inclusion in a Zero Emissions Zone. The Committee suggest that urgent action is needed at St. Clements in particular, perhaps supported by an area-specific action plan.

The Committee noted the need for effective partnership working with the County Council as the local transport authority. Transport accounted for 75% of emissions, so County policies will have the biggest impact on air quality. The Committee heard that a lot of work had gone into working with the County to reduce emissions from buses, for example, and that further air quality improvements required commitment and continued pressure from the City.

The Committee questioned what impact the opening of the redeveloped Westgate Shopping Centre with a replacement car park was expected to have on air quality data. The Air Quality Officer said he had seen the air quality impact assessments for the new Westgate Centre and there were likely to be a significant increase in nitrogen dioxide concentrations at a specific location. This had resulted in the developers being required to implement mitigation measures. Modelling future air quality was difficult to do and it was now becoming generally recognised that past projections had included very optimistic assumptions about the impacts of new technologies on emissions levels and air quality.

Cllr Tanner said it was not clear how the County Council planned for shoppers to be transported to and from the new Westgate Shopping Centre. Without clarity on this it was very difficult to predict the impacts on air quality. He said that his preference was for fast buses to and from park and rides or slightly further afield.

The Committee discussed the impacts and take up of additional cycle parking at park and ride sites, controls around wood burning stoves, the prevalence of volatile organic compounds in the City and whether additional monitoring would take place during a major road scheme in Headington. The Committee noted that people would be forced to consider whether journeys through Headington were really necessary and that people tended to be exposed to the highest levels of nitrogen dioxide when in their vehicles, rather than when walking or cycling. The Committee also voiced support in principle for the introduction of a Workplace Parking Levy.

The Committee agreed to revisit the issue of air quality within the next six months or so and to invite representatives of the County Council to that discussion.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed the following recommendation to CEB

That the City Council continues to seek to comply with the current EU air quality targets in the event that the UK Government chooses to introduce less-stringent targets after leaving the EU.

That the City Council should promote and raise public awareness of initiatives to improve air quality in Oxford such as the Low Emissions Zone.

That the City Council lobbies the Canal and River Trust to introduce and enforce restrictions on emissions from boats in Oxford City Centre.

That further consideration is given to whether tree planting should form part of the City Council's approach to improving air quality in Oxford.

That the City Council takes a tailored approach to achieving air quality objectives in the worst areas (e.g. St. Clements), perhaps supported by area-specific action plans.

That the City Council presses the County Council for a clear statement on how they plan for shoppers to be transported to and from the Westgate Shopping Centre when it reopens in autumn 2017.

58. MONITORING OF DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENTS

Cllr Brown, Board member for Customer and Corporate Services presented the report. She told the Committee that today was the first day of the new benefit limits.

The Committee made the following comments

Cllr Pegg asked if there was a number that concerned benefit recipients could call. She asked that advice on how to assist people and the phone number be sent to all councillors. The Revenues & Benefits Programme Manager agreed to do this.

Cllr Simmons asked how much of the grant the Council was using and how much do we predict to use? - Cllr Brown said that the Council hadn't spent half of the budget because we've been aware of the lower benefit cap being introduced. The Council has been saving money to assist households that need help over the next few months.

Cllr Simmons asked if there had been any progress on the London grant levels in Oxford. Cllr Brown said the Council continues to lobby government on having London levels on all sorts of things.

Cllr Chapman asked if the government grant will be the same next year. The Revenues & Benefits Programme Manager said he expected the total grant settlement to be around 500,000. There has been approximately a £1.1M reduction in benefits, so there will be pressure on the budget.

Cllr Fry asked if there had been implications on officer time due to the increased demand. The Revenues & Benefits Programme Manager said that additional funding had been secured from DWP for administration which would fund a full time post for 1 year. The team now consist of 4 members with a caseload of 30-40 people each. The challenge will be to manage the caseload and work out on-going workload.

Cllr Azad asked how the team could prevent homelessness in the private rental sector.

The Revenues & Benefits Programme Manager explained that Support would be given irrespective of living conditions, with the aim being to keeping people in their properties.

The Chair asked if any progress had been made on the Scrutiny Committees previous recommendation 2: on approaches being taken by other local authorities.

Cllr Brown said the team is actually leading the way for other councils to follow.

Cllr Simmons asked why the Council doesn't top up the fund and asked if other councils were topping up?

The Revenues & Benefits Programme Manager said that most of the other council aren't topping up their fund as they can't financially afford to.

The Scrutiny Committee noted the report and thanked officers for their good work.

59. DIGITAL STRATEGY

The Digital Development Manager presented the report. The Digital Strategy explains how the Council will use technology to improve customer services. The Strategy has a customer focus and will provide automated services (for those who wish to use them) and broaden the range of services customers can access on the Council's website.

The Committee discussed the challenges of making services accessible for people who don't use computers. The Committee received assurances that the Council wouldn't be stopping services to those who don't use computers and that officers would still be available for members of the public to talk to. The Strategy was just about making more services accessible on-line. Technology was also recognised as increasing inclusiveness, as accessibility programs enable people with disabilities to access council services online.

Cllr Tidball welcomed the fact that the new Council website met AA accessibility standards and suggested a number of groups and individuals the Council could engage with around online accessibility, such as the student disability community and the University of Oxford's Accessibility Advisor.

Cllr Simmons noted that the Strategy did not extend to outside visitors, he felt that as many search engines directed visitors to the Council website there was a need for the Strategy and action plan to outline how the Council would direct these visitors to tourist providers.

Cllr Fry felt that the planning part of the council website was quite difficult to navigate and improving this should be a priority in the Action Plan. The Digital Development Manager said that the planning software was provided by a national provider and that it would be a challenge to make significant improvements until such a time as the contract was due for renewal.

Cllr Henwood said it would be beneficial to have access of the Council website at the community centres so that people without computers could access council services online.

Cllr Simmons said that the Digital Strategy's customer focus could transform how Council engaged with customers. He suggested it would be worthwhile to combine the Digital Strategy with the Community Engagement Strategy.

The Scrutiny Committee agreed the following recommendation to CEB

That the Council consults with disability groups on the accessibility of online council services.

That the Digital Strategy and Action Plan mention the needs of visitors, in particular how the Council website could direct visitors to tourist providers.

That the Council prioritises improving the ease of use of online planning services, and includes this longer-term aim in the Action Plan.

That consideration is given to whether the Council's website could be more accessible from community centres.

That consideration is given to whether the Digital Strategy could be combined with the Community Engagement Strategy in future.

60. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting is scheduled for 6 December 2016

61. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2016 as a true and accurate record.

The meeting started at 6.30 pm and ended at 8.35 pm

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