

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday 7 September 2017

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COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Gant (Chair), Chapman (Vice-Chair), Altaf-Khan, Azad, Curran, Fry, Henwood, Ladbroke, Lloyd-Shogbesan, Lygo, Pegg and Thomas.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: None Councillor Sinclair (Culture and Communities), Councillor Tidball (Young People, Schools and Public Health)

INVITEES AND OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Alex Donnelly, Debbie Dance (Oxford Preservation Trust), Ian Green (Oxford Civic Society), Kevin MinnsNone

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Ian Wright (Service Manager Environmental Health), Azul Strong (Locality Officer), Patsy Dell (Head of Planning, Sustainable Development & Regulatory Services) and John Mitchell (Committee and Member Services Officer)

23. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies for absence were received.

24. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Cllr Gant declared an interest in the Ark T centre
Cllr Lygo declared an interest in the Oxford Play Association
Cllr Curran declared an interest in Donnington Doorstep
Cllr Azad declared an interest in Parasol

25. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 04 July as a true and accurate record subject to two minor corrections

26. REPORT BACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to the report.

In relation to the Council Tax Reduction Scheme, the CEB had agreed with the Committee's recommendations other than those which had recommended consultation on options which it was already evident were not preferred and which it would not support.

27. WORK PLAN AND FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to the report.

Visit to the recycling team

The Scrutiny Officer reminded the Committee of the visit to the recycling team at Cowley Marsh on 21 September. Members of the Committee to let him know if they wished to attend.

Chair of Housing Panel

The panel had been unable to agree a Chair because of a tied vote. Cllrs Henwood and Thomas both put themselves forward for the post. On putting the matter to a vote Cllr Henwood was elected by a majority of the Committee.

Work Plan

The Scrutiny Officer noted that 5 substantive items were scheduled for the October meeting with only one for November. Agreed that they should be held, at least for the time being.

Agreed that the report on Air Quality scheduled for January should be deferred until February, if officers agree, as it might be informed, to some extent, by the report on the impact of the Westgate development scheduled for February.

Forward Plan

The Forward Plan was noted.

28. ASSESSING DISABLED IMPACTS IN PLANNING

The Scrutiny Committee commissioned a report from the Head of Planning, Sustainable Development and Regulatory Services on how the Council fulfils its duty to assess the impacts on disabled people of new developments and changes of use, including for businesses and private and social sector housing.

The Environmental Health Service Manager introduced the report, noting in particular the fact that healthy life expectancy was not keeping pace with increased life expectancy which had ever increasing consequences for the buildings we use and live in. He also set out the three legislative areas that underpin this work.

OCC's planning policies exceed national requirements and those of many other authorities.

Alex Donnelly had been invited to address the committee as a witness. Alex explained that he was an Oxfordshire resident who was blind and interested in matters of public access. He said the latest data suggested that the national figure for the proportion of the population experiencing a long term health problem or disability that limited their day to day activity was now just over 20%.

He noted that there was an undisputed link between disability and poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimated that 50% of people with disability live in poverty.

Inclusive design is often seen in the context of structural changes for those with particular needs. This was a false assumption; good, accessible design was of value to everyone.

Investment in good, accessible design should not just be seen as a cost but, rather, as an investment. The policy requirement that 5% of all new dwellings should be designed as wheelchair accessible seemed a low aspiration.

Alex concluded by noting that, in the case of large public buildings, as someone who was blind, having clearly identified information points was key.

Cllr Tidball had initiated the commissioning of this report when she had, previously, been a member of the committee and thanked the authors for it. She was pleased to see that Oxford was setting an example by going over and above the strict requirements but suggested that there was probably scope for further development the Committee might wish to consider.

1. Setting up bespoke consultation sessions with disabled members of the community and organisations to feed into the Local Plan.
2. Contacting the DCLG asking them to exhort others to follow Oxford's example. If 18%+ of the community experience some kind of disability, the building estate should reflect that - but it does not.
3. OCC should consider approaching businesses and estate agents encouraging them to embrace inclusive design

In discussion the following points were raised:

- There were opportunities to influence/intervene with the private sector but no powers to require retrospective changes
- OCC committed considerable resource to disabled access issues. Housing associations frequently approached OCC with requests for adaptation.
- Home improvement grants were available to respond to those with disabilities (annual budget of £1m , typically 100+ properties adapted per annum)
- There may be merit in working with landlords responsible for larger numbers of properties to persuade them of the merits of inclusive design.
- There was no authoritative means of monitoring the 5% target for new buildings to be wheel chair accessible, it depended on trusting that those projects overseen by Approved Inspectors would contribute proportionately to the target.
- Storage for mobility scooters would be taken into account as a matter of course in relation to new build but there could be no insistence on retrospective changes to accommodate them
- It was recognised that there were issues with the adequacy of some current Council accommodation from a disability point of view. In relation to commercial buildings, the Equality Act provided some levers. While the OCC could offer advice if asked, individuals would have to pursue cases on their own behalf.
- The question of how best to ensure the needs of young people with disability as they move from home to independent living would be picked up with Housing Services and a response would be sent back to members.
- The Chairman noted that he had been contacted by someone with expertise in these matters who had observed that good design was important for those with cognitive difficulties, not just those with the sorts of disabilities described in the report.

The committee agreed to recommend

1. Consultation with disabled users in the context of the emerging Local Plan
2. The DCLG should be contacted as described above
3. The 5% target should be reviewed based on the latest evidence as part of the Local Plan review and, where possible, compliance should, in future, be monitored.
4. Representations should be made to landlords, estate agents and developers about the importance of creating an inclusive housing market.
5. The Council should push for higher standards through HMO licencing by capturing data from inspections and making recommendations to landlords on good practice.
6. The Council should continue to look at good practice from other authorities' to inform further improvements to planning and regulatory services with regard to disabled access and inclusivity.

29. OXFORD DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

The Scrutiny Committee commissioned a report from the Head of Planning, Sustainable Development and Regulatory Services on the work of the Oxford Design Review Panel.

Debbie Dance, speaking as a representative of the Oxford Preservation Trust welcomed the report and thanked the Committee for the opportunity to speak to it. She noted the desirability of introducing some means of weighting the projects coming before the ODRP. Consistency of approach/panel membership was important; there was evidence that both of these were lacking. The lack of heritage expertise on the panel was a concern; it was frequently regarded as an afterthought and should be played into panel discussions at an earlier stage.

Kevin Minns, speaking as a developer from an applicant's point of view welcomed the ODRP as a constructive mechanism for peer review. He noted the importance of challenging misunderstandings at panel hearings and not waiting until after the event. Given the complexity of many schemes it was important that panel members received papers in good time to ensure informed discussion which was not possible if only seen on the day of the hearing. He echoed the point previously made about the importance of consistency. There needed to be clarity to all concerned that the ODRP was an advisory and not a decision making body.

Ian Green speaking on behalf of the Oxford Civic Society said that he wanted the built environment to improve. The ODRP was a relevant and appropriate mechanism for contributing to that. He suggested that it would be helpful to start to put in place a means of evaluating the Panel's effectiveness and to see if it had made a positive contribution to the built environment. He was concerned that the Panel's awareness of a project's context was not always as great as it should be, particularly when not in a conservation area. Site visits were always important. Continuity for repeat reviews were essential. He also noted the importance of the advisory nature of Panel being clear. In his view panel meetings should be open and texts of decisions made public as soon as possible.

In discussion the following points emerged

- The process was cost neutral to OCC. Applications were currently subject to a £5k charge, regarded as the 'industry standard'
- Most cities comparable to Oxford have their equivalent of the ODRP
- The importance of consistency of membership was recognised with a requirement for the same chair for repeat reviews and other members being the same as far as possible
- The ODRP's greatest benefit was its independence
- There was no consensus about the merits of requiring the Panel's meetings to be open but, on balance, a view that they should not, not least because to require it might discourage developers to engage

- The ODRP was not just concerned with 'high end' projects but a whole range of schemes
- Councillors may submit suggestions for review, this was not widely known. Similarly there was no obvious mechanism for ensuring that Councillors were aware of pre-application proposals in their wards.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed to recommend that:

1. The Panel should have (or have access to) heritage expertise and consideration should be given as to how this can be best achieved.
2. Consistency of membership should be guaranteed as far as possible for repeat reviews.
3. Councillors should be alerted to the fact that they may submit suggestions for review
4. Proposals for a review of the effectiveness of the panel should be drawn up. This might include a social impact element
5. A mechanism should be established to alert Councillors to pre-application proposals in their Wards.

30. GRANT ALLOCATIONS 2016/17 MONITORING REPORT

The City Executive Board on 19 September 2017 would be asked to note the results of the grant monitoring and the positive impact the community and voluntary sector is making in the city. This item provided an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the City Executive Board.

The Executive Board Member for Culture and Communities introduced the report. That the Council was able to support so many groups and organisations to the tune of almost £1.5m was most welcome, a view shared by the Committee. The support offered to smaller groups was particularly appreciated by them. It was noteworthy that a significant proportion of the grants was directed to support those members of the community facing financial difficulties and or who were homeless.

Azul Strong, Community Officer, attending the meeting on behalf of Julia Tomkins, drew attention to some of the key elements of the report including the additional amounts matched or levered into the community for every £1 in each category of grant.

The report's principal purpose was to report back on the programme for 2016/17. Many of the matters raised and recommendations related to the future programme and reporting of it. This would be the subject of a future report to the committee in October. The Committee agreed therefore to hold back on making recommendations that didn't directly relate to monitoring.

In a detailed discussion the following points and recommendations were considered..

- It was noted that the data in the report relied to a significant extent on self-assessment by those in receipt of grants and should, therefore, be treated with a little caution (notwithstanding the evidently overall positive picture).
- Some grants were used to commission services rather than simply providing support to organisations; there may be merit in distinguishing between the two
- The BME community represented a significant proportion of the City's population. There was concern that the support offered to this community, via the grants programme, was not proportionate.
- While there was a proper focus on priority (geographical) areas, it should be recognised that there were some areas of great need within areas not considered to be a priority.

Recommendations

- Annual grants inevitably led to constant uncertainty about whether or not there would be subsequent renewal (and therefore uncertainty for staff). More consideration should be given to grants over a longer term (eg 3 years) or 'rolling' renewal over 2 years.
- OCVA was funded to provide support to groups and individuals, closer scrutiny of how those funds were deployed would be desirable to ensure that it was supporting the needs of the wider community and helping to overcome barriers faced by excluded groups.
- There would be merit in arranging workshops in Community Centres and engaging with Parish Councillors to draw communities' attention to the opportunity of applying for grants and give advice about how to do so.
- The unit cost of a grant (ie grant divided by the number of beneficiaries) would be a helpful additional indicator of a grant's efficacy.
- The data were, principally, quantitative and the wording of future reports should be more nuanced to reflect that. Some thought should be given to including qualitative data in future reports, looking at the impact of grants, a subset of which could well be an equalities impact assessment.
- Consideration should be given to altering the proportions of the total grant fund available to different categories of grant with a view to increasing the proportion available to smaller groups
- More feedback to groups and individuals who were unsuccessful in applying for grants would be helpful.

31. OXFORD LIVING WAGE - REVIEW SCOPE

The report by the Scrutiny Officer was noted and agreed. Agreed that the review should include reference to those already in receipt of the Oxford Living Wage

32. SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2016/17

The Chair's annual report was noted.

33. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meetings are scheduled for
09 October 2017
07 November 2017
05 December 2017

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.45 pm