

MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Monday 9 October 2017



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

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Alex Hollingsworth and Councillor Susan Brown

INVITEES AND OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: None

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Mark Jaggard (Planning Policy Manager), Rebekah Knight (Planner), Paul Wilding (Programme Manager Revenue & Benefits), Jan Heath (Business Improvement & Performance Manager) and John Mitchell (Committee and Member Services Officer)

34. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Thomas. Councillor Simmons attended as substitute.

35. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

36. MINUTES

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 07 September as a true and accurate record subject to the deletion of Ian Brooke on the list of those present and the addition of Ian Wright.

37. WORK PLAN AND FORWARD PLAN

The Scrutiny Officer spoke to both plans. The Committee agreed that the following should be added to the Work Plan

1. Members of the Committee to visit Streetscene
2. Consideration of the “Inclusive Cities” project
3. Children & Young Person Strategy 2018- 2023 (going to CEB in November)

38. ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT

The City Executive Board (CEB) on 16 October would be asked to approve the Annual Monitoring Report 2016/17 for publication. This item provided an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the Board.

The Board Member for Planning and Regulatory Services, Councillor Hollingsworth, Rebekah Knight (Planner) and Mark Jaggard (Planning Policy and Design, Conservation and Trees Manager) joined the meeting for this item.

Councillor Hollingsworth spoke to the report which fulfilled a statutory requirement and encompassed a wide range of indicators, particularly prominent amongst which, in the context of the City, were the data in relation to student accommodation. In discussion the following points were made, among others, under the successive Corporate Priority headings.

A Vibrant and Sustainable Economy

The target for permissions given for new “B1” employment floor space had been exceeded. This was largely attributed to building in the Oxford Science Park (and so contributing to the City’s economic strength). Noted that the number of permissions given for commercial development were more volatile over time than those for housing. It would therefore be sensible to reconfigure targets for this as a rolling average over time rather than have absolute annual ones.

Meeting Housing Needs

While there was a shortfall in the number of houses built as against the target, in percentage terms it was very small. The progress against this measure was agreed, overall, to have been a very positive one, with the shortfall attributable, almost exclusively, to the after effects of the 2007/8 financial crisis.

The indicator for house building trajectory was rated as green, notwithstanding the shortfall in the target, in the confident anticipation of developments known to be in train.

Increases in the number of houses in an area did not improve the ratio of average income to average house prices (ie they did not become more affordable) as starkly evidenced by the data given in relation to Cambridge. A previous study did however show that increased housing supply did slow the rate of house price inflation.

In relation to the section on student accommodation agreed that the commentary should be expanded to reference the overall trajectory of student numbers.

Strong and Active Communities

Indicator 21 describes progress against targets in relation to each priority regeneration area. While Littlemore is recognised on the basis of national indicators as being an area with particularly high levels of need, it is not identified as one of the five priority areas for regeneration identified in the Core Strategy and does not therefore feature in this section of the report.

A Clean and Green Oxford

Noted that that the targets in this section have been universally RAG rated as green for a considerable period of time and consideration should be given to removing them from future reports.

In relation to indicator 27 it was noted that “Green Belt” designation was never given in perpetuity, it was subject to regular review and could be both granted and taken away. The use of the word ‘permanently’ in relation to this indicator was therefore misleading.

Efficient and Effective

There were comments on this section

The Committee had no substantive recommendations to make to the CEB, save the need to make the small textual amendment in relation to student numbers described above.

The Chair thanked the Board Member and officers for their contribution to the discussion.

39. REVIEW OF DISCRETIONARY HOUSING PAYMENT POLICY

The City Executive Board (CEB) on 16 October would be asked to approve the maintenance of the existing Discretionary Housing Payment policy. This item provided an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the Board.

The Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services, Councillor Brown, and Paul Wilding (Revenues and Benefits Programme manager) joined the meeting for this item.

Councillor Brown introduced the report. She reminded members of the Committee that this was an annual report and, on this occasion, relatively straightforward as it did not propose any changes to the present policy.

The reduction in the number of customers in receipt of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP) reflects a positive outcome for customers who have been able to engage with the Welfare Reform Team and so able to address some of their financial pressures in a variety of ways.

Local Authorities have discretion to top up the money available for DHP but the present scheme and associated budget are considered sufficient for the purpose. It is, nonetheless, being kept under review. There was good justification for those few decisions made to turn down applications.

The Committee had no recommendations to make to the CEB in relation this report.

The Chair thanked the Board Member and officer for their contribution to the discussion.

40. REVIEW OF FINANCIAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

The City Executive Board on 16 October would be asked to adopt the Financial Inclusion Strategy for the period 2017-2020. This item provided an opportunity for the Scrutiny Committee to make recommendations to the Board.

The Board Member for Customer and Corporate Services, Councillor Brown and Paul Wilding (Revenues and Benefits Programme manager) remained at the meeting for this item.

Councillor Brown said the report was a refresh of the current policy. It was important to remember that Council supported the more vulnerable members of the community in many and various ways, not all of which were spelt out or referenced in the report.

The imminent introduction of Universal Credit (UC) was likely to have profound consequences for a small but significant group of people. There was the real risk that some households would be left with no income for 6 weeks or more as they migrated to UC. The additional funding sought by the report would be used to support customers directly. Officers were working closely with partners and providers and looking to learn from good practice elsewhere. Early thoughts were inclined towards support in kind rather than money (eg supermarket vouchers, payment keys etc).

The sum of £50k was necessarily an estimate of the likely need (no certainty at this point as to how many people will be affected or to what degree). There was however some confidence that it would be sufficient and, if not, there would be nothing to prevent a further request.

It was confirmed that customers in receipt of this additional funding would not risk other benefits being clawed back.

The Council has a role to provide universal support. Considerable resources were being devoted to communication (via social media and other means), advising and assisting customers. This included, among other things, advice about claiming online and helping with personal budgets.

Councillor Brown noted that while the Council was doing a great deal to support vulnerable members of the community some of the root causes of poverty and its consequences that were beyond the means of the Council to address.

The Chair thanked the Board Member and officer for their contribution to the discussion. The Committee only wished to recommend to the CEB that there should be an explicit reference to the possible need to return to the Board should the sum of £50k prove insufficient.

41. PERFORMANCE MONITORING Q1 2017/18

The Scrutiny Committee has a role in monitoring Council performance and quarterly reports are provided on a set of selected corporate and service performance indicators. This report was provided for the Committee to note and comment on Council performance at the end of 2017/18 quarter.

Jan Heath, Business Development & Support Manager introduced the report which had been recast to take account of the Committee's previous observations and recommendations.

Members of the Committee made a number of detailed observations which Jan Heath agreed to take back. These included among others:

- i. Recognition that this presentation of the performance data was an improvement on the previous version
- ii. IT was an area of some concern but this would be the subject of a bespoke report at a later date
- iii. Some descriptors (eg "Effective delivery") could be expanded so their meaning was clearer
- iv. Expression of annual trends based on just a few months' data were likely to be of limited validity
- v. Measure(s) in relation to leisure services would be helpful

- vi. Some 'clean and green' targets could be removed
- vii. Measure(s) in relation to volunteers giving time to community centres would be helpful
- viii. Ratings should be based on the data available at the point at which the report is written and not in anticipation of future performance.
- ix. An exhortation to keep targets SMART!
- x. Some issues (eg long term absence) are subtle and may benefit from greater commentary
- xi. Looking back at data over a longer period (so as to see trends) would be helpful

The report's second appendix included a list of performance indicators. Agreed that Councillor Fry should consider which of these would be helpful for the Committee to see in the future. Other members of the Committee to share their views about this with Councillor Fry directly.

42. REPORTS FOR APPROVAL

The Committee was asked to approve the following reports for submission to the City Executive Board on 16 October:

Assessing disabled impacts in planning

Report approved

Design Review Panel

Report approved subject to the addition of a reference to recommendation 4 that the public (as well as Councillors) should be alerted to the fact that the Oxford Design Review Panel is an advisory and not a decision making body.

Recycling

Report approved subject to concerns about the proposal to remove bins for a day (so creating a potentially negative image of the City for visitors) and noting the benefits of the British Heart Foundation bins which had been placed in some parts of the City and a suggestion that they be placed again but for longer.

43. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meetings are scheduled for:

07 November 2017
05 December 2017
15 January 2018
06 February 2018
06 March 2018

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.30 pm

Chair 07 November 2017

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