

To: Cabinet
Date: 24 June 2020
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: City Council COVID Recovery Programme

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the City Council COVID Recovery Programme |
| Key decision: | Yes |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Andrew Gant, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development |
| Corporate Priority: | All |
| Policy Framework: | Council Strategy 2020-24 |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

- At its meeting on 17 June 2020, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet concerning the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The Panel would like to thank Councillor Susan Brown, Leader and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development, for presenting the report and answering questions. The Committee would also like to thank Caroline Green for compiling the report and supporting the meeting, and Tom Bridgman, Director of Development, and Nigel Kennedy, Head of Financial Services for their support to the meeting also.

Summary and recommendation

3. Leader of the Council, Councillor Susan Brown introduced the report. In doing so Councillor Brown emphasised the absolute interconnection between the financial and recovery elements of the Council's response to Covid-19. The three elements around which the plan was built (restart, recover and renew) were important and distinct, each one of which would require their own actions.

4. A number of key elements were highlighted:

"Embed and build on positive changes that have emerged to the way we work across the council, and with our communities, volunteers and other partners."

The response of communities and volunteers across the city to recent challenges had been 'amazing' and it would be important to build on that way of working.

"Seek to retain or enhance environmental benefits wherever we can". This was an important and crucial goal for the Council.

"Target our resources to where they are most needed to support those most in need or most vulnerable." This had been done in recent weeks and it was important that it should continue. It was clear that many citizens would be facing significant and additional economic hardship over the coming months and the Council would do all it could to protect them.

"Ensure Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are embedded in all areas of our work." This was an important message to communicate, particularly at the present time and in the light of the worldwide response to the Black Lives Matter movement.

5. Councillor Brown noted that increasing numbers of citizens were likely to face financial hardship or health difficulties and the Council needed to be ready to support them. The Council had had to deliver services very differently in recent weeks and it would be important to capitalise on the lessons learnt from this. The Council Strategy and financial sustainability were key and this had regrettably but inevitably, necessitated the pause of some projects, to give time to review everything in the round.
6. The Committee welcomed the report presented. In its Scrutiny the Committee took in discussion of the eligibility of language schools for rates relief, predicted levels of unemployment, lessons learnt from the 'Everyone In' policy towards rough sleepers, the suitability of home working for staff, and safe management of protest. It makes a total of five recommendations relating to the need for a digital strategy, specific economic responses relating to community wealth building principles, and measures to safeguard the health and wellbeing of local residents.

Digital Strategy

7. One of the key disruptions caused by the pandemic has been the need for distancing to reduce the chance of infection. In many cases, digital provision has been made as an alternative in order to maintain provision of services. With the potential that the threat of Covid-19 may be at least latent in the medium term, until such time as a vaccine might be developed, digital services will be central. Indeed, it is likely that for a lot of services which have been forced to digitise, a return to analogue provision may not be worthwhile. Due to this, the Committee suggests that a digital strategy, to look at the opportunities and requirements of an increasingly digital world, would be worthwhile as a means of ensuring joined up thinking. The Committee recognises that a full consideration of this topic crosses remits beyond the Council's own, and encourages the Council to take a lead in developing partnerships to ensure this central part of the recovery from Covid is developed to its maximum potential.

Recommendation 1: That the Council coordinates and / or develops an overarching digital strategy for the City and considers in joined-up fashion the multiple areas in which digital will play an increasingly important role in the Covid recovery response. Areas to include but not limited to: working from home, service user modal-shift, infrastructure requirements, the impacts of increasing digital shopping and working on the city centre, and enabling shop-local within an increasingly digital retail environment.

Economic Responses – Community Wealth Building

8. Whilst Oxford may have entered the forthcoming recession in a strong position economically and with strong levels of employments, the expected scale of economic retrenchment will nevertheless be deeply damaging. As such, it was suggested by members of the Committee that community wealth building approaches, where capital is owned locally, local jobs are supported and the financial benefits are recycled within the community are ever more important. In what is predicted to be the worst recession since the 18th century, access to capital that support such activities will be increasingly necessary. Elsewhere in the country, mutual banks have been set up to provide access to capital for such schemes, Avon Mutual and South West Mutual bank, for example. It is suggested that community wealth building initiatives are needed, and that access to capital will be a big challenge in the forthcoming environment. As such, it recommends that the Council investigates the potential for setting up a regional mutual bank locally.

Recommendation 2: That the Council investigates the potential of setting up a regional mutual bank

9. A connected issue raised by members of the Committee was that assets in the community – pubs in particular were noted – may struggle to survive under their current structures, but that where they provide significant community benefit there may be opportunities for developing community ownership. This is, however, an area of technical specialism, one which members of the public

cannot automatically be expected to be aware of. It is the view of the Committee that OxLEP, as the group tasked by government to lead on the local economic recovery, are best placed to offer this sort of advice. The Committee considers it important that it recognise the applicability of community ownership models in the current climate, and be willing and able to advise on how to facilitate their use in appropriate circumstances.

Recommendation 3: That the Council encourages OxLEP to provide advice on how to set up or convert to social enterprise or cooperative business models to those for whom it would be appropriate

Health and Wellbeing

10. As the immediate threat of Covid-19 to health has receded, awareness has grown of the negative consequences arising from steps taken to address that threat: deterioration of mental health, weight gain, increased alcohol intake and reduced opportunities for sporting activity. As a leisure provider, the Council faces the challenge of how to respond to these issues within a context that has been wholly reset. It is the view of the Committee that there is an opportunity for the Council to work with stakeholders – community and voluntary groups, and health professionals especially – to ensure that the recast services it provides are of optimal benefit, and in particular target the needs of those who are most in need. One particular change of focus suggested by the Committee is a greater emphasis on maximising the sporting and leisure utility of its outside spaces.

Recommendation 4: That the Council develops options on how it mobilises its leisure services, officers, and assets, and how it can work in partnerships with communities , health and other partners to target higher-need groups to get people active and improve their health. The Council is especially encouraged to consider how it might increase the use of outdoor facilities and spaces more

11. The Committee also recognised that the negative impacts of Covid-19 are felt unequally across different ethnicities. A recently published Public Health England report indicates that black women are almost two and a half times more likely to be infected with Covid-19 than white women, whilst black men are nearly three times as likely to be infected. Bangladeshi men and women are almost twice as likely to die of Covid-19 than white men and women.¹
12. Whilst the Committee recognises that the Council has a high concern for public health, it also recognises that statutory responsibility for public health lies in Oxfordshire, with the County Council. In particular, the Health Overview Scrutiny Committee (HOSC) exists to review situations of such unequal health outcomes. The Scrutiny Committee has agreed to contact the Council's representatives on

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/892376/COVID_stakeholder_engagement_synthesis_beyond_the_data.pdf p.4

the HOSC to request that it undertake a review of the equalities impacts of the Covid epidemic, and seeks that this request is also endorsed by the Cabinet.

Recommendation 5: That the Council endorses the request of Scrutiny to the Council's Health Overview Scrutiny Committee representatives that the HOSC undertake a review concerning the equalities impacts of the Covid epidemic.

Further Consideration

13. The report presented to Cabinet is an overview document outlining the Council's proposed response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts. Scrutiny is likely to consider individual elements of this strategy in greater detail as they begin to be implemented, but further consideration of the Council's overall strategy is unlikely.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 17/06/2020 concerning the City Council COVID Recovery Programme report

Response provided by Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Partnerships and Economic Development, Susan Brown

| Recommendation | Agree? | Comment |
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| 1) That the Council coordinates and / or develops an overarching digital strategy for the City and considers in joined-up fashion the multiple areas in which digital will play an increasingly important role in the Covid recovery response. Areas to include but not limited to: working from home, service user modal-shift, infrastructure requirements, the impacts of increasing digital shopping and working on the city centre, and enabling shop-local within an increasingly digital retail environment. | Y | The response to COVID has meant a significant shift towards digitalisation across our services as people accessing and staff delivering our services have been doing so from home. The “delivering services differently” workstrand of our recovery programme will be looking to sustain and maximise opportunities to digitise many of our services. In terms of the impact of changes in the way that people are using and travelling within the city, the City Economic Strategy will provide the framework for understanding these trends and informing Countywide work to secure investment in digital infrastructure. |
| 2) That the Council investigates the potential of setting up a regional mutual bank | Part | We will explore the practice and experience from elsewhere, particularly to see what impact (positive or negative) the COVID-19 pandemic has had on other regional mutuals. We will then need to assess whether to progress this further. |
| 3) That the Council encourages OxLEP to provide advice on how to set up or convert to social enterprise or cooperative business models to those for whom it would be appropriate | Y | We will discuss with OxLEP how this might be done, building on their eScalate programme which supports social entrepreneurs, enterprising charities and other purposeful businesses committed to enabling positive social and environmental impact |
| 4) That the Council develops options on how it mobilises its leisure services, officers, and assets, and how it can work in partnerships with communities , health and other partners to target higher-need groups to get people active and | Y | This will be taken forward as part of the work on future options for community services and development of the hubs and as part of the discussions with health partners in tackling Health Inequalities highlighted as part of the Health and Social Care workstrand we are aiming to take |

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| <p>improve their health. The Council is especially encouraged to consider how it might increase the use of outdoor facilities and spaces more</p> | | <p>forward with partners. We are also launching a new programme called Go Active Outdoors that includes a range of activities in our parks and on the waterways.</p> |
| <p>5) That the Council endorses the request of Scrutiny to the Council's Health Overview Scrutiny Committee representatives that the HOSC undertake a review concerning the equalities impacts of the Covid epidemic.</p> | Y | Agreed |

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