

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 1 September 2020

www.oxford.gov.uk



Committee members present:

| | |
|---|---|
| Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair) | Councillor Altaf-Khan |
| Councillor Arshad | Councillor Azad (for Councillor Corais) |
| Councillor Aziz | Councillor Djafari-Marbini |
| Councillor Fry | Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan |
| Councillor Pressel (for Councillor Kennedy) | Councillor Simmons |
| Councillor Wade (for Councillor Gant) | |

Also present:

Councillor Tom Hayes, Deputy Leader; Cabinet Member for Green Transport and Zero Carbon Oxford.

Councillor Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer
Mai Jarvis, Environmental Quality Team Manager
Paul Wilding, System Change Manager - Homelessness Prevention
Richard Wood, Strategy & Service Development Manager
John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors Gant, Corais, Howlett and Kennedy sent apologies.

28. Declarations of interest

None.

29. Chair's Announcements

The Chair alerted the Committee to the fact that an urgent key decision had recently been made by the Chief Executive under emergency powers and that Cllr Gant had agreed to waive the Committee's right to scrutinise the matter. Cabinet would receive a report on the matter at its meeting the following week.

30. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 6 July 2020 as a true and accurate record.

31. Discretionary Housing Payment Policy

Cllr Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, introduced the report. The current version of the policy had been introduced in 2013 against a backdrop of significant welfare reform and underpinned by a drive to prevent homelessness. In 2019/20, for example, 602 Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) applications had been made of which 85% had been successful however it had become apparent that the policy needed to be revisited in the light of the economic consequences of Covid-19. She paid tribute to the work of the Welfare Reform Team not just in relation to this report and the application of the DHPP but also their wider work in supporting vulnerable members of the community.

Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping & Single Homelessness Manager, reminded the Committee that the DHPP was discretionary. It deliberately left some room for flexibility of implementation, neither absolutely ruling any particular set of circumstances in or out. This flexibility assisted in getting the help to those who most needed it. It was recognised that, in parallel with the flexibility, there was a need to ensure consistency of decision making. This was addressed by the way in which officers in the Welfare Reform Team cross-checked their decisions with one another (particularly in relation to more complex cases) and the regular review of a 10% case sample.

The Committee noted the challenge of identifying those who were likely to be entitled to DHP given that the Department of Work and Pensions does not share information about those who are in receipt of Universal Credit (UC). It was explained that notwithstanding this challenge, great efforts were made locally (e.g. liaison with the Job Centre) and the better use of other local data to identify those who might benefit. Representations continued to be made to Government about the need for data about UC entitlement to be made available to the council.

The application of conditions as a requirement for the provision of DHP was determined on a flexible basis to best meet the circumstances of a particular applicant, this would, on occasions, mean the application of more than one condition.

The Committee noted the challenges for some members of the community in accessing or applying for DHP. This was of particular concern for those for whom English was not their first language and or did not have access to the internet. The position had been made worse by the absence of Advice Centres serving some parts of the city. It was agreed that access to a drop in facility with access to translation would be helpful as would data about the access to DHP by the BAME community.

Members of the Committee were reminded that if they came across any particular cases where access to the service was proving difficult they should bring them to the attention of the Welfare Reform Team or Cllr Tidball.

It was suggested that there would be merit in wider advertising/communication about the availability of DHP. It was however noted that wider communication had been shown in the past to generate considerable levels of interest (and applications) from those who failed to appreciate the limitations of the scheme and who were therefore ineligible.

The default duration of an initial award of DHP for three months focused an applicant's approach to its associated condition(s) which would be lacking if the period was longer.

The Welfare Reform Team was preparing a forecast of likely need for DHP over the next year and this would inform a message from Cllr Tidball to Government, pressing for the provision of an adequate level of grant for this purpose.

It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That the Council reviews how non-English speakers access advice services, including the suitability of current arrangements for advice services grant-funded by the Council, and the case for providing an in-person translation booth service in East Oxford.
2. That the Council develops a plan to monitor the ethnicity of DHP applicants with a view to identifying particular communities where claims are unexpectedly low.
3. That the Council refreshes its communications plan around DHP to ensure all stakeholders are promoting it and more eligible people are aware of it and how to access it.

32. Air Quality Action Plan

Tom Hayes, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford, introduced the report. The Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) fulfilled a statutory duty. It also provided the Council with an opportunity to demonstrate its desire for a more aspirational approach to the delivery of clean air than was expected by the Government. The need for a robust approach to air pollution was a matter of social justice given the profound impact of poor air quality on everyone, but in particular, on some members of the community including young, elderly and minority groups. The Council already had a good track record of measures to tackle air pollution, working in close partnership with the County Council where necessary and was well placed to address the target for the reduction of air pollution set out in the report. The introduction of a Zero Emission Zone, and "Connecting Oxford" for example, would be critical factors in the achievement of the target.

The Committee welcomed this important report. BAME members of the community were likely to be particularly badly affected by poor air quality and it was suggested that this should be made more explicit.

Central to the AQAP was the objective of achieving a "local annual mean NO₂ target of 30 micrograms by 2025". It was agreed that this should be defined more clearly. While this new target was admirable, sight should not be lost of the current target of 40 micrograms which had yet to be achieved.

The AQAP referred to both NO₂ and NO_X emissions with targets set in the former but measured in some places by reference to the latter. Some clarification of the distinction and relevance of the two would be helpful.

No sanctions would be available for failure to meet the Council's self-imposed target, but the Council would continue to press for measures (and funding) to deal with air pollution from, for example, canal boats burning solid fuel..

There was concern that at time when the Council was facing significant financial challenge, the success of the Plan was dependent to some extent on Council funding. Cllr Hayes was however confident that the plan was achievable and realistic, noting the success in attracting external funding, such as that received for the improvement of the

city's buses and the commitment of Oxford Direct Services to the electrification of its significant vehicle fleet.

The plan would be subject to public consultation and the Committee was keen that this should be as inclusive and wide ranging as possible. It was confirmed that the consultation would include a questionnaire and that good use would be made of the Council's good relationship with schools (and therefore pupils) in the City. Young people were some of the most powerful advocates of the importance of clean air.

Air quality measurements were available for all to see on the Council's website. The ability for members of the public, eventually, to see measures of air pollution at a local street level would be desirable and would be worked towards. Currently there was capacity to measure air quality at 75 sites in the city at any one time and this equipment could be (and was) moved to different locations. Good knowledge of air pollution levels across the whole city and not just the centre was important.

The introduction of more charging points for domestic electric vehicles would be of some benefit. Cllr Hayes noted however the potentially critical modal shift from private car to bus use in the City. This was something which had the potential to make a profound difference to both congestion and air pollution.

It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

1. That the Council amends its action plan to make specific reference to the particular negative impacts experienced by BAME community members as well as other risk factors such as disability and low incomes, as well as the particular negative outcomes experienced by those intersecting multiple risk factors.
2. That the Council makes the achievement of the legal 40 µg/m³ of NO₂ as a milestone in its plan clearer.
3. That the Council, in its efforts to increase the number of electric vehicle charging points around the city, does not overlook provision for lower-income areas of the City.
4. That the Council oversees the implementation of an electric taxi service to replace the Pick me Up service.
5. That the Council works with ODS to bring forward the plans for the electrification of the ODS fleet
6. That the Council provides an explanatory note or glossary reference to explain its use within the Action Plan of NO and NO₂.
7. That the Council provides within its plan a definition of the term 'Local Annual Mean'.
8. That the Council will continue to think of new and imaginative ways of increasing engagement with the issue of air pollution, especially amongst children and young people, and to increase participation in the Council's consultation on the Air Quality Action Plan.
9. That in its communications plan the Council broadens the story it tells about the impact of air pollution away from the City Centre, including people and locations from across Oxford.
10. That the Council continues to employ its best endeavours in working with its partners to realise the plans for the Zero Emissions Zone and Connecting Oxford.

33. Work Plan and Forward Plan (including selection of review group topics)

The Scrutiny Officer tabled a note which detailed a few suggested changes to the work plan as provided with the agenda pack. The changes presented were agreed.

There was some discussion about the addition of an item going to Cabinet in relation to the conversion of Boswells to a hotel and concerns lest this was a planning issue which might compromise Councillors' subsequent involvement with a formal planning application. The Scrutiny Officer reassured the Committee that the purpose of the report was not to raise a planning issue but rather to agree a joint venture between a developer and City Council to enable the building to be redeveloped for hotel use. It was agreed that this should be added to the work plan for consideration at a future meeting, which may be the Finance & Performance Panel or Companies Panel, depending on timings.

The need to delay the Tourism Review Group update by a month (because of pressure on the October agenda) was agreed to be regrettable but unavoidable and hopefully not a delay which was likely to have significant consequences.

Review Groups

Cllr Aziz spoke to the previously distributed rationale for the establishment of a review group on domestic abuse.

Cllr Simmonds spoke to the previously distributed rationale for the establishment of a review group on the climate emergency.

In subsequent discussion it was agreed that all three potential subjects (the other being citizen engagement) were worthy of Scrutiny's attention but recognition that there was only capacity for one review group. It was agreed therefore that, having selected one, requests should be made for the remaining two to be dealt with by reports to the Committee.

On being put to a vote the majority voted in favour of a review group on domestic abuse. It was further agreed that the group should be chaired by Cllr Aziz and that it should comprise 6 members.

34. Report back from Panel representatives and on recommendations to Cabinet from the Committee and its Panels.

Cllr Aziz updated the Committee on the recent work of the Housing and Homelessness Panel.

The Committee noted Cabinet's responses to its more recent recommendations.

35. Draft Annual Report

The Committee noted the draft text of the Annual Report which would be finalised by the Scrutiny Officer in discussion with the Chair and Vice Chair.

36. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 06 October
- 03 November
- 01 December

Standing Panels

- Housing & Homelessness: 03 September, 08 October, 05 November
- Finance & Performance: 29 September, 14 December
- Companies Scrutiny: 14 September, 14 December

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.30 pm

ChairDate: Tuesday 6 October 2020