

Remote meeting

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

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Committee members present:

Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Gotch (for Councillor Gant)

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Corais

Councillor Fry

Councillor Howlett

Councillor Lygo (for Councillor Arshad)

Councillor Simmons

Also present:

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Customer Focused Services

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Caroline Green, Assistant Chief Executive

Nadeem Murtuja, Interim Executive Director for Communities

Helen Bishop, Head of Business Improvement

Rachel Nixon, Senior Planner

Lan Nguyen, Data Analyst

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors Gant and Arshad sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

53. Declarations of interest

None.

54. Chair's Announcements

None.

55. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 03 November 2020 as a true and accurate record.

56. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer updated the Committee with the present position in relation to the Work Plan. While there were no changes to the plan before the Committee he noted that that it had been intended to bring the Cabinet response to the recommendations of the Climate Emergency Review Group to this meeting. This had not been possible but it would be brought to the Committee as soon as possible and probably for the next meeting.

57. Draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, introduced the report. As the Oxfordshire Growth Board had developed, so its members had sought to identify common themes and the ways in which they could work together. From the City Council's perspective, the importance of inclusivity and the need for sustainable growth were key. The document before the Committee already included elements which reflected the Council's input but this was not to say that further improvements could not be made. It was important to emphasise that as a vision document, it was not a strategy, an action plan or, indeed, a formal planning document.

Caroline Green, Assistant Chief Executive, said that the document didn't seek to set out a specific vision for Oxford or places within the City and that the final version would have no statutory basis. It was, rather, a statement of collective ambition and common interests. A great deal of effort had been made to ensure that the document, as far as possible, reflected the diversity of places and, therefore, the different strategies and actions that might be needed to respond to those variations. In discussion to date there had been a range of views about the desirability of producing a more detailed document as opposed to one which remained at a more general level. All members of the Growth Board had been invited to contribute further to the next iteration of the document and the views of the Committee would contribute to that further response.

Cllr Simmons, as member, also, of the Growth Board's Scrutiny Panel, drew the meeting's attention to the views of the Panel to the document. These related to timescales within the document not necessarily aligning with existing policies and plans of Councils and partner organisations; asking Council Leaders to ensure clear visibility of the strategic vision with elected members; encouraging wider networks and the public to engage (and for young people in particular to be targeted as part of this); the need for terminology within it to be clearly defined. The Committee agreed to support these views and the Leader said she would be pleased to take these views, among others, back to the Board, so as to reinforce those of the Panel.

The Committee thought that, despite the improvements which had been made, still greater emphasis was needed on the issues of inequality and diversity, notwithstanding recognition that the experience of other Districts in the County was very different from that in the City.

While there was support for the document's aspirations there were some concerns that that it needed to be more "anchored in reality", so while, for example, it hinted at

significant housing growth it also spoke about seeking to “enhance the natural environment” which was seen as a contradiction. The aspiration that Oxfordshire should be carbon neutral by 2040 or earlier was seen as unrealistic, taking account, among other things, of the Council’s new Local Plan. However the point that this was not a planning document was noted.

The Committee was keen that the document should reference the national living wage and the Oxford Living Wage as appropriate. The Leader agreed that this point would be taken forward.

The current emphasis on inequalities in health was welcome but a specific reference to the importance of mental health and wellbeing in particular might be helpful, as would a greater emphasis on economic inequality. The addition of a reference to the desirability of “active transport” would be helpful too.

“Efficient use of natural resources and land” was a phrase capable of interpretation, some of which might not be entirely positive and would benefit from clarification.

It was suggested that the importance of inclusion and diversity were such that they should be woven into the substance of the document and not dealt with as stand alone elements as a reflection of the City’s commitment to these matters. Notwithstanding the evident importance of this view it would have to be recognised that the final version would have to reflect the wider view of the Board.

The Leader said she would be pleased to take forward the Committee’s recommendations to the Growth Board and, in particular, that the document should take proper account of the diversity within the City. That the City was significantly different from the County’s other districts would continue to present a challenge when trying to agree a text acceptable to all members of the Board.

The Committee agreed that the following recommendations should be made to Cabinet.

That the Council seeks in its discussions at the Oxfordshire Growth Board to have the following suggestions included within future drafts of the draft Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire:

- The recommendations of the Growth Board Scrutiny Panel made on 21st October 2020
- Reference within the Inclusive Economy section to the promotion of the Living Wage, either the national standard or the local standard
- To create a section dedicated to the improvement of mental wellbeing
- To increase the emphasis throughout the document on economic inequality
- To recognise the priority of increasing active transport across Oxfordshire
- For issues of inequality, particularly with regards to race, to be embedded throughout the document rather than being treated in isolation under equality, diversity and inclusion.

58. Annual Monitoring Report and Infrastructure Funding Statement 2019/20

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning & Housing Delivery, introduced the report. This was an annual report showing progress against a number of targets relating to the planning function. It was worthy of note that for the first time in

several years it had been possible to report that the Council was ahead of its target for house building. This was a retrospective report and with a new Local Plan now in place, this would be the last report in relation to targets flowing from the previous Local Plan.

Where the report referred to the “..Council involved in bringing forward 26% of all major housing schemes anticipated over the next 5 years” it was clarified that a “scheme” meant the development of a number of house (rather than individual houses). The percentage as a proportion of houses was likely to be well in excess of 26%.

With a new Local Plan (and the need to measure performance against it) future reports would be in a revised format. There would be a focus on those indicators within the Council’s control and or considered to be particularly important of which housing delivery was a critical one.

At the time of the inspection of the new plan the inspector had made it clear that while the current pandemic might have an impact on deliverability of policies in the short term, it shouldn’t change those policies in the long term. The Plan was a legally binding document and couldn’t be deviated from without going through a local plan making process.

It was nonetheless suggested that some means should be found of being able justify deviation from the Local Plan as a result of the consequences of the pandemic.

The challenge of meeting housing targets was fuelled to some extent by a skills shortage and a short term supply shortage. A bigger issue was the challenge of bringing sites forward but this was now being addressed with owners/promoters of sites identified in the Local Plan as suitable for development being contacted more proactively than before.

The report made brief mention of “2 bedrooms at the Former Gent’s Public Conveniences St Giles (19/00084/FUL)”. Rachel Nixon, Senior Planner, advised that this change of use for short term accommodation had been approved in April 2019, further details were available on the Council’s planning portal.

Oxford University was below its target for the number of students accommodated outside its own premises whereas Oxford Brookes University had exceeded its target, albeit by less than the previous year. As part of the negotiation for new Local Plan the targets for both had been re-calibrated, the former target decreased and the latter increased. Oxford Brookes revised plans for new accommodation on the Headington Hill site would be coming forward and, if agreed, would take it close to or within the compliance threshold for its target.

The Committee made no recommendations in relation to this report.

59. Workplace Equalities and Action Plan

Councillor Nigel Chapman, Cabinet Member for Customer Focussed Services, introduced the report. The report fulfilled a statutory requirement and the data within it were up until March 2020. The data only related to Council activity and did not include those for Oxford Direct Services (ODS). It was important as an employer that the Council should set an example of good practice in the matters covered by the report. It was important to note that the Council was now developing an improved Equality, Diversion & Inclusion Strategy, which extended well beyond just workplace equality matters. As a result of the pandemic, communication with the many and varied communities within the City had improved and this was, in turn, informing the

development of that strategy. The three year workforce plan of 2018-21 had two main areas of focus, to increase the level of BAME representation in the workforce overall and to ensure that there were more women in positions of senior management.

Alongside the requirement to publish details about the gender pay gap, the Council had decided to publish details of the ethnicity pay gap, on a voluntary basis. In 2021 the Council would also publish details of the disability pay gap, also on a voluntary basis.

In relation to BAME representation, the growth of the previous year had been consolidated at about 13% at March 2020. A significant issue in relation to BAME employees was retention, with more or less equal numbers of arrivals and departures. Enquiries of the 15 most recent leavers indicated that two thirds of them had left for reasons of promotion or geography, all of which demonstrated the importance of nurturing and developing BAME employees. The number of BAME applicants was increasing year on year and it seemed likely that the Council's activity with communities during the pandemic would increase that number still further. About 7% (c. 60 -70 employees) of staff choose not to declare their ethnicity when asked and a good number of those may be from BAME communities.

In relation to women in senior positions within the organisation the position remained more or less static with no obvious likelihood of reaching the 50% level in the foreseeable future.

The gender pay gap data is necessarily driven by the predominance of women in lower grades. The gap is unlikely to be narrowed until there are more women in more senior positions. On more positive note however, the pay gap is about 5% better than the national equivalent.

The ethnicity pay gap is, once again, driven by the distribution of employees across different roles in the Council and unlikely to be narrowed unless there is an increase in the number of BAME employees in senior positions.

More work would be done on the interrelationship of the different data sets in the following year.

The Committee noted the importance of taking account of those with a disability caused by emotional and mental illness. It was therefore important that employees were made to feel comfortable about declaring what might be a sensitive matter and that appropriate support was available to them if necessary.

Exit interviews were central to the understanding of why people leave the organisation and for them to be effective, employees must have confidence in them. The proportion of leavers taking part in exit interviews was increasing and the role of HR as an "honest broker" was central to the process.

Many people don't relate to the term BAME and a detailed breakdown of which groups employees self-identify is available in the data held but not published. These data could be shared with the Committee if it was felt to be helpful.

It was suggested that it would be helpful if examples could be given of the improved knowledge and insights into local community groups referred to in the report. The importance of consultation and engagement with the community should not be underestimated and there would be great merit in exploring new ways of engaging the community. Co-production was cited as a particularly important mechanism for doing so.

In relation to the development of the Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy referred to in the report, Nadeem Murtuja, Executive Director, Communities, reminded the Committee that the improved engagement with local community groups in recent months had helped to develop focus groups that involved more than 140 people to participate and identify diversity and EDI issues impacting on their lives in the City. Knowledge had been gained about issues to do with, among other things, race, age, gender, mental health, and disability and, importantly, the intersections of these issues too. The report made clear that a 12 week consultation and engagement process would then follow with the wider public to sense check the proposed issues and proposed actions. This would enable the Council to understand properly the issues in the context of diversity and the needs of the people that live in the City. He also noted that it was important to co-produce the actions with the local community, once that stage had been reached, so that lived experience was properly reflected.

Reasonable efforts would continue to be made to encourage employees to feel safe about making declarations about those matters asked of them. This required a high level of mutual trust, and an understanding of the reasons why people might not wish to declare. At the same time it was recognised that declarations could not be insisted on if an employee chose not to participate.

It was agreed that it would be helpful to refer to the Stonewall guidance on how best to record individuals' declarations about their sexuality and gender.

A number of specific, additional, workstreams were suggested.

- To understand why some employees are reluctant to share their personal information.
- The majority of the Council's Officers live outside the City; it would be helpful if it was made clear that posts in the City Council are for people who live in the City too.
- Clarity about the recruitment practices for women from minoritised backgrounds.
- Clarity about the risks posed by Covid to these and other workforce related activities and targets
- Guidance to HR re the matter of race and retention

The Committee noted that some of the baseline data relied upon (eg the number of BAME residents in the City) were based on the 2011 census and therefore likely to be out of date. Census data in 2021 would however remedy that. It was noted that detailed data about pay/positions in relation to ethnicity were given in the report.

It was suggested that much could be learnt from the experience of other towns and cities with rich and diverse communities.

The data provided in this report about Council employees could not, also, be provided, in the same way, to this Committee, about Oxford Direct Services (ODS) employees. However both the Companies Scrutiny Panel and the Joint Venture Shareholder could ask for information about the ODS employee profile if they wished to do so.

It was recognised that Covid had slowed progress with some of the planned work in this area. The Committee were very appreciative of the progress being made to date while sharing the wider frustration at the delay in some areas.

The Committee agreed that the following recommendations should be made to Cabinet.

1. That the Council fosters an environment in which staff members feel confident to participate in exit interviews
2. That the Council adopts practices for recording sexual identity in line with Stonewall's guidance
3. That the Council investigates the barriers to individuals disclosing their sexuality and faith-based identities
4. That the Council increases the promotion of itself as an employer to those within the City
5. That the Council develops communications and recruitment approaches to target women from minoritised backgrounds
6. That the Council seeks a similar equalities and pay gap report be made from Oxford Direct Services to the Shareholder and Joint Venture Group

60. Matters for the Committee's Agreement

Budget Review Group Scope

The Committee agreed the scope of the Review Group subject to the addition of a reference to the need to take account of the consequences of a deal with the EC if one is reached.

Report to Cabinet on Oxford's Waterways

The Committee agreed that the report before it should be put to the Cabinet subject to a minor amendment.

61. Report back from Panel representatives

Cllr Aziz gave feedback from the latest meeting of the Housing & Homelessness Panel.

62. Report back on recommendations

The Committee noted the Cabinet's responses to its recommendations on those matters listed on the agenda.

63. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 12 January, 02 February, 02 March, 08 April

Standing Panels

- Finance & Performance: 27 January
- Companies Scrutiny: 14 December
- Housing & Homelessness Panel: 01 February

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.00 pm

ChairDate: Tuesday 12 January 2021