

Remote meeting

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 12 January 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Corais

Councillor Fry

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Djafari-Marbini

Councillor Howlett

Councillor Lygo (for Councillor Arshad)

Councillor Simmons

Cabinet Members present:

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Susan Sale, MO and Head of Law & Governance

Mish Tullar, Corporate Policy, Partnership and Communications Manager

Hamera Plume, Consultation Officer

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillor Arshad sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

64. Declarations of interest

None.

65. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Susan Sale, the new head of Law & Governance, to her first meeting of the Committee.

66. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 01 December 2020 as a true and accurate record.

67. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer updated Members with one change to the Committee's Workplan. An additional item had been added to the agenda for the Finance & Performance Panel meeting on 27 January, to consider the consequences of recent changes to conditions surrounding Public Works Loan Board borrowing which would have a consequence for the Council's Commercial Property Strategy.

He noted that the Cabinet response to the Committee's Climate Emergency Review Group recommendations was still being worked on. This was partly to take account of Government funding which had recently become available. The Committee was disappointed to hear of the continuing delay in finalising this response. The Chair agreed to bring this concern to the attention of Cabinet at its meeting the following week.

68. Report back on recommendations and Scrutiny Panel meetings

Cllr Fry fed back to the Committee about the most recent meeting of the Finance & Performance Panel. The Panel had considered 4 reports in relation to Treasury Management; Integrated Performance; Boswell's Development; and Commercial Property Investment. Among other things the Panel had heard that revenue from property investments had fallen slightly because of reduced interest rates and that there would be some support from Government to compensate for losses of sales, fees and charges, this might amount to about £5m for the current financial year.

The Chair reminded the Committee of the Cabinet's responses to its most recent recommendations which had, for the most part, been accepted. In relation to the Waterways Report it was noted that there was provision in the following year's budget for the currently vacant part time post of Waterways Coordinator.

69. Citizen Engagement

Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council, introduced the report which had been prepared at the Committee's request. Engagement with the City's citizens was of paramount importance. All Councillors would share a sense of frustration at the difficulty of face to face engagement with constituents given the constraints imposed as a result of the pandemic. On the other hand, the experience of the pandemic had shown how the Council could be more creative in its approach to engagement as well as building on innovations that were already in place. Engagement with local citizens through the local media was already well established, the Residents' Panel had already been set up, something which didn't require face to face engagement. Online meetings had made it clear that audiences and participation for some activities could be greater than would otherwise have been the case. The Council's Citizens' Assembly had been a very significant element of the Council's engagement with residents, both as a process and in relation to possibly the most important issue facing the City and the world. The very rich output from the Assembly was still being worked through. Despite the good work being done already, it was important to be alive to the potential for improvement and finding new and diverse ways of engaging with residents. She sounded one note of caution, the continuation of the current practice of holding

statutory meetings remotely would require the introduction of primary legislation in a few months' time and the Government had not yet taken any steps to do so.

Mish Tullar, Corporate Policy, Partnerships & Communications Manager, said that the process of preparing the report had proved to be very helpful in improving the team's understanding of the full spectrum of engagement activity. At the same time it was important to be clear that the report did not provide an exhaustive account. The report did not mention, for example, the regular contact between Councillors and their constituents, something in relation to which it might be helpful to establish a formal means of recording. Recent months had illustrated the great potential for digital engagement. A virtual Town Hall session, for example, had been "attended" by some 2000 people and seen by some 1000 people after the event. While digital communication was likely to play an increasingly important role, it would be important to ensure that those who could not or would not engage in that way were not disenfranchised.

The Committee confirmed the view that the role of Councillors was key and one which should not be lost sight of. This was not just about 1:1 engagement and could take many forms such as setting up temporary stalls in shopping centres and involvement with school activities such as international days.

The Committee confirmed the need to take appropriate account of the so called 'digital divide' which was not always simply about access to IT equipment but also the data costs associated with it. This was something which had been exacerbated to some extent by the pandemic. Proper need also needed to be taken account of the needs of those for whom English was not their first language or who had poor literacy skills. In some of these cases the opportunity to respond to a consultation or register a view should be available by telephone. Officers confirmed that all of these matters were taken into account to the extent that resources permitted.

While the digital divide needed to be recognised, so did the fact that a digital approach enabled many people to engage who had, previously, not been able to do so or only do so with difficulty.

It was important to ensure that all views from the community, not just in relation to formal consultations, were captured and that the Council, in turn, provided feedback on its response to those views. Officers noted that a new Council consultation portal would soon be going live which would include a "you said/we did" element as matter of course. This would be available to everyone, not just those who had contributed to a consultation.

Recent engagement exercises such as the Town Hall event mentioned earlier, the Citizens' Assembly and preparation of the Anti-Racist Charter all provided opportunities for learning which should not be lost.

The number of residents with whom there had been engagement, as cited in the report, was about 1% of the City's population. There might be merit in liaising with other local partners and organisations to see how to secure wider engagement while recognising the limited Council resource available for this work. The community hub model was agreed to be effective and successful. Additional, regular, Council presence in the community, in shopping centres, for example, would be welcome. Sight should not be lost of the opportunity to capitalise on all Council/ODS interaction with residents, when carrying out home repairs for example. It seemed likely that engagement was

disproportionately with higher socio-economic class groups. There would be merit in taking steps to gather data about those who engage with a view to securing wider engagement. It was noted that the Citizens' Assembly had sought to provide a representative cross section of City residents, as did the Residents' Panel. It was also noted that the increased level of digital engagement had increased the diversity of those who were engaging with the Council.

Given the limited Council resource, consideration might be given to higher levels of automation through, for example, the provision of dedicated consultation phone lines in Community Centres/hubs to enable 'push button' responses to particular consultations.

The Committee recognised the significant challenges of securing citizens' meaningful engagement, even in relation to matters which might commonly be regarded as important and relevant to them.

The wide spectrum of engagement activity required a range of approaches; in some cases it was sufficient and appropriate to seek the views of a representative sample and on the others it was important to seek the views of everyone who might have a view. Given that consultations will often generate opposing views about an issue it was important to recognise that subsequent decisions will not always accord with all of the views expressed. What was important was that those with a proper interest in a matter were able to contribute to the decision making process. The wide spectrum of engagement activities included those conducted on a statutory basis, those which the Council chose to do and those which were a combination of the two and all of which might require different approaches.

There was sometimes cynicism amongst the public about the meaningfulness of consultations and the extent to which decisions had already been made. It was important that there should be clarity about the extent to which consultation exercises could influence final outcomes.

In conclusion the Committee made the following recommendations to Cabinet.

That the Council:

1. When periods of significant public debate arise (including on areas not the direct responsibility of the Council), considers facilitating a public discussion over them similar to the recently-held Town Hall meeting
2. Ensures it holds regular meetings with private tenant unions.
3. Monitors the response rates for suitable non-statutory consultations against indices of multiple deprivation, and protected characteristics within the Equality Act.
4. When conditions permit, has a regular physical presence, particularly at Temple Cowley shopping centre, but also at its community centres, and that it offers multiple channels, covering analogue and digital, to enable responses to be made.
5. Creates frameworks and guidelines around how and when the Council will engage with and use its elected members when undertaking consultations.
6. Runs a pilot project to establish and assess the practicalities of engaging citizens in participatory budgeting.

7. Is flexible in its approach to consultation periods in non-statutory consultations and is willing and able to allow feedback made outside the official consultation to be meaningfully considered
8. Includes phone contact details with ward member and/or relevant officer details for those who require support with responding to consultations.
9. That the Council builds on the innovation shown in consultation through the use of the locality hubs and community centres, and seeks to learn and implement lessons in citizen empowerment from the Healthy Place-Shaping agenda and from other local organisations and agencies
10. Investigates opportunities for co-production with key stakeholders, particularly local residents

70. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 02 February, 02 March, 08 April

Standing Panels

- Finance & Performance: 27 January
- Companies Scrutiny: 15 March
- Housing & Homelessness Panel: 01 February, 04 March

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

71. Matters Exempt From Publication

72. Shareholder and Joint Venture Group responses to recommendations from the Companies Scrutiny Panel

There was no discussion of this item.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.20 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 2 February 2021

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