

Remote meeting

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Tuesday 2 February 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Gant (Chair)

Councillor Altaf-Khan

Councillor Corais

Councillor Howlett

Councillor Lloyd-Shogbesan

Councillor Simmons

Councillor McManners (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Arshad

Councillor Fry

Councillor Kennedy

Councillor Tanner (for Councillor Djafari-Marbini)

Cabinet Members also present:

Councillor Tom Hayes, 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:

Tim Sadler, Transition Director

Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager Revenue & Benefits

Laura Bessell, Benefits Manager

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors Aziz and Djafari-Marbini sent apologies.

73. Declarations of interest

Cllr Simmons declared an interest in relation to item 7 given his personal professional involvement with work in relation to the climate emergency but none of which had impacted on or would impact directly on the work described in the report.

74. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Benita Edwards, Legal Services Manager, to her first meeting of the Committee

75. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 12 January 2021 as a true and accurate record.

76. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny officer said there had been no changes to the workplan as set out in the papers before the Committee.

It was noted that an urgent delegated officer decision had been made very recently in order to secure £9.5m Salix funding for decarbonisation work across the City. This was something which warranted exploration by Scrutiny, notwithstanding that the decision had been made. Agreed that the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with Cllr Fry as Chair of the Finance & Performance Panel, would decide how best to address this.

77. Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2021/22

Cllr Marie Tidball, Cabinet Member for Supporting Local Communities, introduced the report. The Council was one of just 30 Councils which offered 100% Council Tax reduction via the scheme. This was increasingly important in the present Covid environment which was particularly challenging for some residents. She highlighted the major outcomes of the consultation which preceded the proposals now before the Committee.

The proposal to introduce a minimum charge for working age claimants to reduce the cost of the scheme was rejected as a result of consultation responses and an underling wish by Members to continue to provide 100% relief.

The following proposals were however supported by the consultation responses and would be going forward to the Cabinet:

- Uprating the current Income Bands for UC claimants
- Introduction of an Income Banded scheme for all working age claimants not just UC claimants. The impact of which will be a need for fewer changes to be reported to the Council; less administration; more certainty for claimants and the realisation of £120k of staff savings
- Administering the scheme as a discount from the amount of Council Tax due rather than a benefit.
- Simplification of some of the scheme's rules

It was also proposed that the existing Hardship Funding would continue to be available to support anyone adversely affected by unforeseen consequences of changes to the scheme.

It had been a vibrant consultation with over 400 responses to it, more than in previous years.

The Committee was pleased to see that it was still proposed to provide 100% relief for those who were entitled. It was noted that no savings were envisaged beyond those achieved from simplification of the scheme and that the overall cost of the scheme was likely to increase as the number of those entitled to support from it increased. This would, in turn, have consequences from those other organisations which benefit from the collection of Council tax such as the County Council and Thames Valley Police but no adverse representations had been received by them.

The scheme and the language associated with it was not always easily accessible to those not familiar with it. It was agreed that future consultations would take this into account. This might include the use of worked examples and more consistent/appropriate references to the Oxford Living Wage/National Living Wage.

Cllr Tidball confirmed that the scheme as proposed for 2021-22 was financially sustainable on the basis of the overall budget decisions to be made soon and Members' wish to continue the scheme on the basis set out in the report. The scheme would continue to be reviewed annually thereafter.

It was noted that the temporary £20 increase in Universal Credit was, perversely, unhelpful for many residents as it would take them to the point of the "Benefit Cap". Its proposed cessation (April 2021) was unlikely to be of significant consequence for the majority of those benefiting from the CTR. The Government's discretionary one off "self-isolation" payments of £500 would be disregarded for CTR purposes as they would not be regular payments.

The Chair concluded by noting the Committee's warm welcome for the report and its support of the Council's wish to continue to provide 100% relief for eligible residents.

78. Draft Budget Review Group Report

Cllr James Fry introduced the report by focussing on the main recommendations. In relation to Floyd's row there were two recommendations in the light the inability to make full use of it because of the current Covid restrictions and some concerns about the future funding arrangements for it. It was suggested that the savings flowing from the proposal to move to one planning committee should be monitored and, if not achieved, the position should be reversed. It was agreed that the wording of this recommendation should be revised to the effect that there should be consideration of reversing the decision rather than an insistence on doing so. There was a recommendation for a ring fenced trading account for the covered market given the significant resource dedicated to its upkeep, promotion etc so that an eye could be kept on its effectiveness. It was being suggested that the funding for Experience Oxfordshire should be increased, that contributions from neighbouring authorities should be sought in parallel with greater promotion of the City as a tourist destination. There was a recommendation that the Council should consider a wider range of asset classes for its investments than its current focus on commercial property, and which might extend to, for example, renewable energy. It was also suggested that where property did feature as an investment, there should be a focus on property already owned by the Council.

It was noted that revised budget proposals would be going to Cabinet the following week, these would include a reduction of the sums proposed for capital investment from £53m, to £20m but the substance of the review group's recommendations remained valid.

The Council's move towards increasingly digital delivery of its services was seen to be positive and it was recommended that lessons learnt from recent months should not be lost. The potential of letting one or two floors of St Aldate's Chambers was a source of some concern lest there was insufficient demand (given the amount of space likely to be available elsewhere in the City centre) so it was important to secure the best advice about the creation of flexible workspace to maximise take up. In the event that the overall financial position turns out to be better than expected, then consideration should be given to reinstating grants that might otherwise be lost. The Council's dwindling reserves should be replenished if and when possible. In the present climate of uncertainty, a mid-year budget update would be desirable. The ODS budget distinguishes between income which is secure and that which is not, this is a model which it would be useful for OCHL to follow. The final recommendations represented just the 'tip of an iceberg'. The Review Group had conducted a forensic review of all the budget proposals in what was a particularly challenging year from a budget point of view.

The Committee confirmed its agreement to the Review Group's report and delegated finalisation of it to Cllr Fry and the Scrutiny Office.

79. Zero Carbon Council by 2030: 4th carbon management plan 2021/22 to 2029/30

Cllr Tom Hayes, Cabinet Member for Green Transport & Zero Carbon Oxford, introduced the report, the intention of which was to bring to an end the Council's contribution to global warming by 2030 or sooner and outlining how the Council will be net zero carbon by the end of 2021. This proposal built further on the Council's declaration in 2019 of a climate emergency and the subsequent wish of the majority of the Council's Citizen's Assembly to go 'further and faster' than the Government's ambition to achieve zero carbon by 2050. The Council had assembled a robust evidence base to inform policy and provide the basis for plans which were both ambitious and realistic. While the Council's carbon emissions account for just 1% of those in the City, it had a role to lead by example and galvanise others to do the same. The report looked to the future but it was far from the first step in the Council's programme of activity to reduce carbon emissions, having reduced them by some 23% since 2014. The Council had been successful in attracting significant external funding to support this area of activity and there was every reason to believe that this would continue to be the case all of which would contribute to the success of this ambitious project.

Tim Sadler, Transition Director, reinforced the point that the focus of this report was on Scopes 1 and 2 of the plan, and principally about the Council's operational buildings, and that further reports would come forward in due course about the Council's other interests. There was, also, an ambition to come forward with a Zero Carbon Oxford plan in due course.

The Committee agreed that this was an ambitious and welcome plan. In order to achieve its ambitions it was suggested that a greater level of rigour was needed in relation to reporting, measuring outcomes, setting targets etc. More generally it was important to adopt a standardised reporting approach in relation to zero carbon. A number of detailed recommendations were suggested and subject to discussion.

Cllr Hayes's preliminary response was that much of what had been suggested was not strictly necessary, partly because of the greenhouse gas report which came to the

Committee annually which gave a considerable amount of detail and transparency was ensured by its wide dissemination.

The Transition Director said there would be reluctance to redraft the plan at this stage given the considerable amount of work which had gone into pulling it together across the organisation. He reminded the Committee that the version now before it was based on previous plans and the requirement to report on greenhouse gases. He recognised however the value in seeking to align the plan with other metrics that might be available and useful. He explained that in the case of the Leisure Centres operated by Fusion there was a mechanism to ensure that the Council would benefit from any investment made in those buildings. The successful bid for Salix funding for decarbonisation of Council buildings was very welcome but he sounded a note of caution given that it did come with conditions, of which the most pressing were timescales.

It was agreed that the final recommendations should be prefaced by recognition of the Committee's support for the ambition set out in the plan.

The Committee then considered the recommendations which had been proposed earlier in the meeting all of which were agreed subject to minor modification and are recorded below.

A further proposal was made that all Cabinet reports should contain a section to note the environmental consequences of decisions being sought. Cllr Hayes noted that he had raised the matter at the last Cabinet meeting where agreement to the principle of such a change was given. The Committee agreed nonetheless to include this as a further recommendation to Cabinet, with the addition of a reference to how the decisions would assist with the Council's progression to zero carbon.

Recommendation 1: That the Council develops the Carbon Management Plan to align with established 'net zero' measurement, reporting and target-setting standards and guidance (e.g. PAS 2060, Carbon Neutral Protocol, GHG Protocol Organisational and Scope 3 Standards, Science-based Target Initiative) to ensure that terminology is used correctly and that the plan is credible, transparent and accurate.

Recommendation 2: That the Council subjects the resulting report and the 'net zero' claim to independent audit

Recommendation 3: That the Council undertakes a carbon cost-benefit analysis to guide decision-making and to ensure that the quickest and most cost effective carbon reduction measures are pursued first.

Recommendation 4: That the Council integrates its own strategy into that of the wider City recognising that through its policies, partnership working and influence the Council can impact more than 1% of the City's emissions.

Recommendation 5: That the Council introduces environmental impact assessments into its standard Cabinet report template, with a particular focus on how the actions being proposed will help the Council move towards being zero carbon

80. Report back on recommendations and Scrutiny Panel meetings

Cllr Fry reported back on the last meeting of the Finance & Performance Panel which had reviewed the Cabinet report on the Capital Strategy. Among other things the Panel noted that there may well be value in scrutinising projects once complete to see whether or not they represented good value for money.

81. Dates of future meetings

Meetings are scheduled as followed:

Scrutiny Committee

- 02 March, 08 April

Standing Panels

- Finance & Performance: Provisional meeting scheduled for 06 April (dependent on whether the local elections are delayed)
- Companies Scrutiny: 15 March
- Housing & Homelessness: 04 March

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.30 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 2 March 2021