

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 8 September 2021

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Committee members present:

Councillor Wade (Chair)	Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Abrishami (for Councillor Linda Smith)	Councillor Corais
Councillor Diggins (for Councillor Tidball)	Councillor Djafari-Marbini
Councillor Dunne	Councillor Fry
Councillor Pegg (for Councillor Wolff)	Councillor Snowton
Councillor Waite	

Also present:

Councillor Lubna Arshad, Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction
Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities
Councillor Mary Clarkson, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure and Tourism
Councillor Andrew Gant

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer
Amanda Ford, Environmental Quality Team Manager
Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager Revenue & Benefits
Laura Bessell, Benefits Manager
Iain Nicolson, City Centre Manager
John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Apologies:

Councillors Linda Smith, Thomas, Tidball and Wolff sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

39. Declarations of interest

Councillor Pegg declared that she worked for The Wildlife Trusts, the national organisation which includes Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT). BBOWT has been one of the Council's partners in creating the Urban Forest Strategy to be considered at item 6 although Cllr Pegg had had no involvement in this.

40. Chair's Announcements

The Chair repeated her concern that the presence of a Council solicitor at the Committee's meetings could not be guaranteed. The Committee agreed that she should write to the Monitoring Officer with a request that a named solicitor should be identified as the first port of call for enquiries from the Committee.

41. Minutes

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 14 July 2021 as a true and accurate record.

The Scrutiny Officer had not yet had a response from officers or Cllr Hollingsworth to the points made in relation the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 consultation document.

42. Work Plan and Forward Plan

The Scrutiny Officer drew attention to a number of proposed changes since the agenda had been published. Dates for the items on Responses to the Tenant Satisfaction Survey and Government White Paper on Housing, both destined for the Housing & Homelessness Panel, had been swapped with one another. The Finance & Performance Panel had asked for a report on City Car Parking to go to its December meeting to explore the financial consequences of shifting transport patterns. A report on the Annual Air Quality Monitoring exercise was now proposed for the October meeting. The Committee was happy to agree to these changes and noted the significant number of priorities currently proposed for the November meeting.

It was noted that sign off for the Committee's annual report did not now coincide with a full Committee meeting and it was agreed that this should instead be delegated to the Chair, Vice Chair, Chair of Finance & Performance Panel, and Cllr Gant (as the previous Committee Chair) to deal with outside a meeting.

43. Urban Forest Strategy

Councillor Lubna Arshad, Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction, introduced the report which represented another workstream flowing from the Council's declaration of a climate emergency. The strategy sought to look at the city's tree cover and consider how best to manage and develop our urban forest. The work on the strategy highlighted that there was a correlation between areas of deprivation and lower levels of canopy cover. At its heart was the desirability of having "the right tree in the right place".

Amanda Ford, Environmental Quality Team Manager, added that the Council was committed to increasing opportunities for biodiversity wherever they arose, something to which tree planting would contribute although it was important to note that it was not the only means of delivering biodiversity net gain and carbon capture. Planting trees on important wetlands or species rich grasslands would harm our natural environment as it would destroy these natural habitats and these habitats have been found to sequester more carbon than trees. In addressing the position of the city as a whole and, therefore land which was not owned by the Council, it would be necessary to encourage other land owners to participate. An important source of funding for this work would be via developers' contributions coming from developments across the city where there is a requirement to offset the loss of biodiversity. Currently under policy G2 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 developers are required to ensure that schemes deliver a net biodiversity gain of 5% over the position prior to development. In many cases this net gain cannot be delivered within the site boundaries and it might well be that the off-setting scheme could include some new habitat creation within the city's boundaries, which includes tree planting.

The Committee was very supportive of what the Strategy sought to achieve but raised a number of detailed points.

It was noted that the Strategy might conflict with the city's other ambition to increase the use of electric vehicles; there were reports of residents wishing to remove trees from front gardens to facilitate off street parking and charging. Similarly, paving front gardens for that purpose contributed to flooding risk. The Environmental Quality Team Manager said these wider points would be noted and taken into account in the preparation of the EV charging strategy, while observing that some trees would be protected by virtue of Tree Protection Orders and, in addition, conservation area consent is required for the removal of any tree within a conservation area

Some existing and well established trees in the city caused problems for residents as they block light and or drop leaves/seeds etc. It was agreed that this intelligence should inform decisions about future tree planting and the principle of the right tree in the right place.

Management of the city's trees fell to Oxford Direct Services (ODS) and it would be important to ensure that there was capacity to deal with an expanded tree stock. This might be best achieved by inviting ODS to attend a meeting of the Companies Scrutiny Panel.

Given the multi-faceted nature of the Strategy, a table to show which officers were responsible for which aspect of it would be helpful.

Rewilding of arable farmland was a related matter but just one alongside many others which would contribute to increased biodiversity. On balance it was agreed that to highlight it at the expense of others was not desirable.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that the Council:

1. Reviews the policy tensions between garden space and electric charging and develops a considered position on their interaction, and that it reviews its other climate-related strategies for similar unanticipated tensions;

2. Takes steps to ensure that with greater number of trees being planted, community engagement over proposals is treated as a matter of priority and local residents are given an opportunity to voice their views; and
3. Makes available to councillors and members of the public information on who is responsible for what within the Urban Forest Strategy, and help with understanding who to contact in different scenarios.

44. Council Tax Reduction Scheme for 2022/23

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities introduced the report. The Council was proud to have provided a Council Tax Reduction (CTR) scheme offering the potential for up to 100% reduction of Council Tax since 2013. A banded scheme for all working age claimants was introduced from April 2021. There was a legal requirement to consult on the CTR scheme annually if the Scheme is to change and the report before the Committee set out what changes might, depending on the outcome of the consultation, be made for 2022/23. Covid-19 had impacted heavily on the more vulnerable members of the community and the need to support them generally and the need for the Council Tax Reduction Scheme in particular was greater than ever. She paid tribute to the great contribution made by officers who continued to work tirelessly on this important strand of Council activity.

Tanya Bandekar, Service Manager, Revenues, Benefits and Income, said that since Covid-19, applications and demand for CTR had increased significantly. At the same time the Council was having to address significant financial challenges more broadly and the proposed consultation explored ways in which the scheme might contribute to the forthcoming budget setting process. The proposed changes were relatively minor and took account, among other things, of practice elsewhere. The consultation was being conducted via a variety of mostly digital mechanisms, including social media, but paper copies were available on request.

Officers responded to a number of detailed questions about interpretation of the scheme and questionnaire.

It was agreed to clarify the meaning and consequences of question 7 (amending banding structure to take account of the size of the household) and question 9 (potential reduction of maximum amount of CTR for non-passported claimants to a maximum percentage). It was also agreed that the available responses to question 21 (What is your gender?) should be expanded to be more inclusive.

The Committee echoed Cllr Aziz's praise for the team which was consistently held in high regard for its work by Members and the Council's auditors alike.

In conclusion it was agreed that members of the Committee with further, specific, suggestions, should e-mail the Service Manager, Revenues, Benefits and Income directly.

45. Tourism Management Review Group Report - Update

Cllr Gant addressed the Committee in his capacity as the Chair of the Tourism Management Review Group. The review had been a good piece of work with which he was proud to have been involved. Covid-19 had, inevitably, had a profound impact on

tourism, as recognised by the update report. He had been disappointed by some of the original Cabinet responses to the report's recommendations. This was a matter which warranted more active engagement and the update provided an opportunity to ask that Cabinet revisit the report and recommendations and he urged the Committee to make a recommendation to that effect.

Councillor Mary Clarkson, Cabinet Member for Culture, Leisure & Tourism, introduced the report. Inevitably much of the work in this area had come to a halt as result of Covid-19. The Council had continued to work with Experience Oxfordshire and provided £50,000 to help support the visitor economy until March 2023. It was unlikely that the Council would be in a position to provide further funding to Experience Oxfordshire which was, now, moving towards operating on a more commercial basis. The emerging Oxford Economic Strategy and City Centre Action Plan would include recovering and rebuilding the visitor economy as a priority. Visitor numbers had plummeted as a result of the pandemic and were currently estimated to be just 15% of the number in 2019 and were anticipated to reach 50% of the number in 2022. Work on identifying alternative arrangements for the delivery of visitors by coach was continuing with the County Council, with a site near the Westgate being considered as an additional drop off location to help ease pressure on St Giles. It wouldn't, however, be meaningful to conduct a consultation (for which funding was available) on options given the atypically low number of coach arrivals at the present time. Officers were working to find a suitable premises for a visitor centre in the hope of finding someone willing to run it on a private and commercial basis. A fundamental challenge was to persuade visitors to spend more time and money in the city. The majority of visitors were estimated to spend no more than 90 minutes in the city. The recent opening of hotels in and close to the city should be help with that.

The Committee thought it important that any proposals for addressing the issues of tourism should be sustainable with particular (but not exclusive) reference to transport. Allied to this was the suggestion, which had been made on previous occasions, of the potential financial and environmental benefits of a cable car which might run, for example, from Redbridge Park and Ride to Westgate, this was a 'big idea' to address a 'big problem'.

It was confirmed that a new Waterways Officer had been appointed and that the waterways would contribute to the City Centre Action Plan.

It was noted that the written update was not always clear about whether the position described related to the present or when the report was originally completed; clarification about this would be helpful. On balance the Committee was satisfied with the responses given and noted that a considerable amount had been achieved since the original report's completion.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that the Council:

1. Plans how it will work with those responsible for tourist travel to Oxford more environmentally sustainable; and
2. Revives its partnership with City Centre shops to provide a toilet scheme.

46. Reports for approval

Cllr Fry, as Chair of the Finance & Performance Panel, spoke briefly to the two reports before the Committee.

In relation to Social Value in Procurement it was good to see that the Council's performance was, generally, better than comparator authorities.

In relation to QL implementation an audit of its introduction was to be commissioned.

The Committee agreed that this audit should include an analysis of lost financial and non-financial opportunities for the Council and its wholly owned companies caused by the delay in full and effective implementation.

The Committee resolved to approve the following two reports from the Finance and Performance Panel for consideration by Cabinet (subject to the addition of the recommendation above in relation to QL).

- Social Value in Procurement
- QL Implementation

47. Report back on recommendations

The Committee reconsidered the recommendations made at its meeting 14 July in relation to the Electric Vehicle Strategy. After discussion it was agreed that the first recommendation should be deleted. The remaining three should go forward, subject, however, to revision of the wording of the recommendation referencing the ZEZ to make its intention clear.

48. Dates of future meetings

Scrutiny Committee

- 05 October 2021
- 02 November 2021
- 06 December 2021

All meetings start at 6.00 pm.

Standing Panels

Housing & Homelessness: 02 September, 06 October; 04 November

Finance & Performance: 06 September; 08 December

Companies: 24 November; 13 December (tbc)

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.45 pm

Chair

Date: Tuesday 5 October 2021

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