

To: Cabinet
Date: 16 March 2022
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: Annual Update of the Council Business Plan

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Annual Update of the Council Business Plan report |
| Key decision: | Yes |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery, and Partnerships |
| Corporate Priority: | All |
| Policy Framework: | Council Strategy 2020-24 |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 07 March 2022, the Scrutiny Committee considered the Cabinet Annual Update of the Council Business Plan report.
2. The Committee would like to thank Councillor Susan Brown, Cabinet portfolio holder for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery, and Partnerships for presenting the report and answering questions, and Caroline Green, Chief Executive, for supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Councillor Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery and Partnerships introduced the report, which looked ahead to year three of the four-year Council Strategy. She said that a key aim in the development of this work had been to be realistic with objectives and ensure a narrow focus in order to achieve the Council's aims – which she felt the document did well.
4. The Chief Executive highlighted that the Council delivered against the majority of its plans last year. She said that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were being reviewed and a separate report was due to be presented to the Scrutiny Committee's Finance and Performance Panel in the near future.
5. The Committee addressed the document at length, raising a broad variety of issues. These included linkages with other plans, growth, the tensions and balances between the Council's priorities, housing availability and rent levels, and transport inclusivity in addition to the topics made as recommendations.
6. In total, the Committee makes eight recommendations which relate i) protecting access to leisure, ii) traffic and transport, iii) civic engagement, iv) tree policy and v) the Council's overall approach. It should be noted that the same challenge of grouping ideas relevantly has been faced in this report in the same way as where to locate undertakings of relevance to multiple strategic objectives in the Business Plan. To clarify, this report has not sought to follow the groupings of the Business Plan and has used its own.

Leisure Access

7. Within its objective to provide more, affordable housing the Business Plan includes a check and balance to delivering more housing. Much needed development will occur, but also 'sites valued by local people for leisure and recreation will be protected.' Inherent within this is the understanding that there is (or at least can be) a tension between development and protecting existing amenities. The key challenge is where to draw the line in terms of policy.
8. Scrutiny's recommendation is that the Council commits to protect its parks and play areas from development. Public space is a key form driver of equality and access; when it is lost it is those without the means to access private alternatives who lose out. Dedicated parks and play areas are not the only sites used for leisure and recreation, but they are key social assets. The Committee does not wish to take the position that no land used for leisure can ever be developed, but does consider that this subset is worthwhile taking a policy of non-development on. It is hoped that this position can be reflected in the draft Local Plan and, with partner agreement, the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, but also consideration given to the appropriateness of any parks under consideration for development by OCHL.

Recommendation 1: That the Council commits to protect its parks and play areas from development

9. Linked to the above is a second point. Whilst 'sites valuable to local people will be protected' it is not clear how local people can register the importance of a particular area. In discussion during the Committee meeting it was suggested that the Council's planning function would be the mechanism by which this outcome would be delivered. This is problematic. Planning decisions are made by weighing multiple factors and deciding whether, overall, permission to develop is beneficial. It is perfectly possible, therefore, for a planning application to be granted to develop land which is of considerable importance to a local community if that importance is outweighed by other considerations. This is not the same as ensuring that 'sites valuable to local people will be protected' which implies a veto for those sites of sufficient importance. The Planning function is not sufficient to deliver the Council's intention to protect sites valuable to local people.'
10. If the Planning function is not a suitable mechanism to deliver this outcome, then for it to have hope of being realised an alternative must be devised to determine the requisite levels of public support to prevent development. Further, it must be publicised so that local residents are aware of it. The Committee recommends that this is undertaken as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 2: That the Council determines and publicises the means by which local residents can evidence that a site is valued and worthy, therefore, of protection from development.

11. The Committee welcomes the work undertaken by the Council over the previous year in applying to DEFRA for bathing water status for two areas of river at Port Meadow and is pleased to see that the application for Wolvercote Mill Stream has gone out to consultation. However, the current Business Plan no longer makes reference to this, indicating that it is no longer a priority. In the view of the Committee the progress made to date is to be welcomed, but the work is not complete. Particularly if the application to DEFRA is rejected, work is needed to inform swimmers of the current water quality, safety precautions and facilities. Likewise, if it is granted the bathing water status campaign generated significant public interest, and those members of the public would want to know whether the Council intends to do anything further on this issue. The Committee recommends, therefore, that the Council should include the actions it intends to take in relation to river bathing in the event that the DEFRA applications are accepted or rejected.

Recommendation 3: That the Council updates its Business Plan to provide information on what it will do concerning river bathing in the event that the river bathing status applications currently under consideration by DEFRA are rejected or accepted.

Traffic and Transport

12. One of the outcomes to deliver an inclusive economy is that 'the movement of people and goods into and within the city will have improved, resulting in less traffic congestion, better air quality and faster journey times.' Tragically, Oxford has suffered two cycling fatalities in the last month alone, both relating to HGVs. It is the Committee's hope that better movement of goods will also include safer roads, and that the Council should include a reduction in traffic accidents as part of the outcome it would like to see. Given the strong link between HGVs and fatal cycling accidents the Committee would like to see the Council undertake to use

what powers it has to reduce access by HGVs to the city centre, the busiest cycling area, either by time or to those with the best safety equipment and visibility aids.

Recommendation 4: That the Council includes within the Business Plan a commitment to reducing road traffic accidents, including an action to place restrictions on HGV access to the city centre

13. Another element to the aim of improving the movement of people and goods within the city is important. It is that the actions taken by the Council will seek to align the steps it takes with its inclusive economy principles. A list of potential projects is provided, but the Zero Emissions Zone is not one of them. The Committee does not read anything into this apart from recognising that many actions could plausibly be listed under multiple strategic priorities. However, at the same time, it is keen to draw attention to the need to ensure that all traffic-reducing measures are subject to alignment with the Council's inclusive economy principles, including the Zero Emissions Zone.
14. Having clarity over the import of what the word 'inclusive' means is also important. Scrutiny hopes that it is understood broadly – that all members of society locally benefit from local economic output, rather than a narrow interpretation that there must be equal access and benefit for those individuals with particular protected characteristics. The reason why this is important is that there exists a cohort of people, small business owners and sole traders who are not necessarily in poverty, but who do operate with little financial cushioning, and who rely for their livelihoods on being able to travel extensively throughout the city centre. Standard rules can have different impacts on groups depending on their circumstances, and the burden of the Zero Emissions Zone proposals will be experienced disproportionately harshly as their livelihoods could be undermined by new policies. Scrutiny is keen that this cohort, who are particularly at risk are given particular consideration when the Oxford Transport Strategy is developed and the Zero Emissions Zone is implemented.

Recommendation 5: That in the development of the Oxford Transport Strategy the Council is particularly mindful of the impacts on small businesses and sole traders, whose businesses depend on travelling extensively throughout the city centre, of proposals which limit vehicular access.

Civic Engagement

15. At present one of the outcomes anticipated from the delivery of the Business Plan is 'Citizens will increase their active engagement in civic and political life'. However, no specific actions have been put forward to promote this. A recent government paper¹ exploring political engagement highlights that the key groups politically disengaged at a national level are young people, ethnic minorities, social grade and women. Whilst the Committee would want to see improvements in all these areas, its priority is younger people. In 2018 Oxford was identified as

¹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7501/CBP-7501.pdf>

having the second youngest average age of any city in the country.² The level of engagement by younger people at Committees and Council does not fully reflect this, and although the City Council may have an unusually high number of working-age councillors, there is a relative paucity at the lower end. In a notably young city it is an interesting that the Council has an older-people's champion, but not an equivalent young-people's champion.

16. Youth Councils are run by young people in order to give a voice to young people in the decision-making process. At present, there are 620 across the UK within the different tiers of local government, from parishes to tier-one authorities. The Committee's view is that given its relative youth, the voice of the city's young people is currently underrepresented and would like to see this corrected. To do so would have budget implications at a time when there is precious little unallocated money, so Scrutiny's recommendation is that the Council undertakes as an action to investigate the practicalities of establishing a youth council, so an informed proposal of what it would take can be balanced against other priorities in next years' budget setting process.

Recommendation 6: That the Council adds a commitment in the Business Plan to investigate the practicalities of establishing a youth council in Oxford

Tree Policy

17. One of the actions to make the city 'greener, with more trees and other plants, and increased biodiversity' is the implementation of the Council's Urban Forest Strategy. Scrutiny has, via the Companies Scrutiny Panel, looked at tree management this year already due to concerns that resident issues with trees are a common cause of complaint to members. No recommendations were made at the time, but that same concern persists.
18. The point is taken that the Urban Forest Strategy is not primarily about the Council planting trees directly, but supporting and encouraging all those with the opportunity to become involved in tree planting to do so. Nevertheless, it will involve more trees by the Council being planted for which the Council will have responsibility. If, at present, tree issues are over-represented as a source of complaints to councillors, this is only likely to be exacerbated as the number of trees increases. The Committee suggests that it is important, therefore, that the Council prepares for an increase in demand ahead of time to ensure there is sufficient capacity to manage expected increases. As such, it recommends that the Council undertakes to review its Tree Policy to consider this issue as an action within the Business Plan.

Recommendation 7: That the Council undertakes to review its Tree Policy as part of its Business Plan

Overall Approach

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43316697#:~:text=The%20UK%20city%20with%20the,sixth%20youngest%20city%2C%20is%2036.5>

19. A strong element of the Business Plan is the recognition that its ambitions run beyond what can be achieved unilaterally, and that the Council therefore intends to partner and influence others to support the delivery of its objectives. With its universities and major hospitals, Oxford's anchor institutions have an unusually concentrated influence over issues directly related to the Council's strategy, such as rent and pay levels, access to leisure and biodiversity. Looking with a positive view, this means that any progress made on these issues with anchor institutions will have a disproportionately big impact. The Committee wishes to urge the Council to keep investing time and effort in engaging time and effort to bring the city's anchor institutions in to helping meet the city's needs over the coming year.

Recommendation 8: That the Council continues to engage with local anchor institutions over how they can meaningfully address local needs, particularly regarding rent levels, access to leisure space, minimum wages and tree-planting

Further Consideration

20. In addition to considering the next update of the Business Plan in a years' time, Scrutiny will of course be interested to follow the delivery of particular outputs as part of its work plan for next civic year. In addition, it is expected that the Finance and Performance Panel and Housing Panel will keep watching briefs over performance against relevant KPIs.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 07/03/2022 concerning the Annual Update of the Council Business Plan

Response provided by Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery, and Partnerships, Councillor Susan Brown

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| <i>Recommendation</i> | <i>Agree?</i> | <i>Comment</i> |
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| 1) That the Council commits to protect its parks and play areas from development. | Yes | This is covered in the Council's Local Plan and planning policy. The Business Plan contains a set of actions based on existing policies. |
| 2) That the Council determines and publicises the means by which local residents can evidence that a site is valued and worthy, therefore, of protection from development. | Yes | The planning process already provides the means by which residents can input to decisions on site designations. |
| 3) That the Council updates its Business Plan to provide information on what it will do concerning river bathing in the event that the river bathing status applications currently under consideration by DEFRA are rejected or accepted. | Yes | Action has been captured in the Business Plan 2022-23. |
| 4) That the Council includes within the Business Plan a commitment to reducing road traffic accidents, and relatedly, places restrictions on HGV access to the city centre | No | Oxford City Council has no powers in relation to restrictions on HGV access to the city centre. The work with Oxfordshire County Council on the Connecting Oxford is about reducing traffic volumes and making our roads safer. Both Councils are also working with Oxford University and others to look at the feasibility of consolidating last mile delivery in the city. |
| 5) That in the development of the Oxford Transport Strategy the Council is particularly mindful of the impacts on small businesses and sole traders, whose businesses depend on travelling extensively | In part | Oxfordshire County Council is the Highways Authority and is responsible for the Oxford Transport Strategy. Nevertheless, the City Council is working in partnership with the County Council on the development of the |

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| <p>throughout the city centre, of proposals which limit vehicular access.</p> | | <p>Strategy and implementation of a number of schemes including the Zero Emission Zone and traffic filters. We are mindful of the need to consider carefully the impact of these measures on particular businesses against the wider benefits delivered and we will continue to use our influence with the County Council to seek to get this balance right.</p> |
| <p>6) That the Council adds a commitment in the Business Plan to investigate the practicalities of establishing a youth council in Oxford</p> | <p>No</p> | <p>The Council already hosts the Children & Young People's Partnership which is currently chaired by the Head Teacher of the Oxford Academy. This partnership is used as an important sounding board for policymaking and enables the council to share insights with a range of partners for our annual children and young person's needs assessment.</p> <p>In addition, the Council's Youth Ambition team supports local youth partnerships around Oxford. Youth Voice is central to our Youth Ambition programme where we listen to and provide opportunities and support to build the confidence of a large number of children and young people so their voices can be properly heard. For example these groups recently discussed how they felt about equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) which has directly fed into the Council's new EDI strategy.</p> <p>It is worth noting that many of the Youth Councils around the country are dominated by children from relatively privileged backgrounds. By comparison, Youth Ambition specifically targets children in Oxford from less privileged backgrounds.</p> <p>Therefore, we believe the Council is already more engaged and networked with a large representative body of children and young people across the city, than many of our peer</p> |

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| | | authorities. |
| 7) That the Council undertakes to review its Tree Policy as part of its Business Plan | No | As is noted, the Council has only this year published its Urban Forest Strategy and will focusing on its implementation over the 2022/23 year - in particular the delivery of additional street trees in Oxford, and encouragement of others to plant trees, to mark the Platinum Jubilee 'Queen's Canopy' celebrations. ODS has replanting and maintenance schedules for trees in place and there is also an existing Tree Management Policy that was updated in 2016 under the oversight of the Council's and ODS' tree specialists. Therefore this is not an urgent matter for the Business Plan but will be considered for potential inclusion in the following year. |
| 8) That the Council continues to engage with local anchor institutions over how they can meaningfully address local needs, particularly regarding rent levels, access to leisure space, minimum wages and tree-planting | Yes | Engagement on a range of matters is taking place through the Oxford Strategic Partnership and a number of other regular partnership and bilateral meetings with anchor institutions and this will continue. |

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