

## Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Wednesday 2 March 2022



### Committee members present:

Councillor Wade (Chair)

Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Coyne (*substitute for Councillor Corais*)

Councillor Diggins (*substitute for Councillor Tidball*)

Councillor Dunne

Councillor Humberstone (*substitute for Councillor Fry*)

Councillor Linda Smith

Councillor Snowton

Councillor Thomas

Councillor Waite

### Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People

Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services

Becky Walker, Home Improvement Agency Team Manager

Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

Alice Courtney, Committee and Member Services Officer

### Also present:

Councillor Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities

Councillor Diko Walcott, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless

### Apologies:

Councillor(s) Corais, Djafari-Marbini, Fry and Tidball sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

## 97. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

## 98. Chair's Announcements

The Chair advised that she, the Vice-Chair and the Scrutiny Officer had met with the Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery and the Planning Policy and Place Manager on 17 February 2022 to discuss further Scrutiny engagement around the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. It was confirmed that an All-Member briefing (hosted by the Scrutiny Committee) on the item would take place on Monday 14 March 2022, 6pm

followed by consideration of the item by the Committee and agreement of any recommendations at a meeting in the summer.

The Chair asked the Committee to send any suggested discussion items for the All-Member briefing to her and the Scrutiny Officer as soon as possible.

## **99. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy**

*Cllrs Waite and Humberstone joined the meeting.*

Cllr Shaista Aziz, Cabinet Member for Inclusive Communities thanked the Committee for its ongoing work and provided a brief overview of the report, including that the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy:

- Was a statutory document but the Council wanted to go further to ensure equality, diversity and inclusion was at the centre of all work.
- Set out some ambitious challenges to the Council in terms of how it was working on equalities.
- Had been developed on the back of calls for change and ongoing conversations with communities and that communities across Oxford had become more vocal on equalities issues, which was welcomed.
- Reflected equalities issues that had been deepened by the pandemic.
- Aimed to strengthen oversight, accountability and scrutiny of equalities issues and promote cultural change.
- Was the overarching document for other documents including the Anti-racism Charter and the Thriving Communities Strategy.

Ian Brooke, Head of Community Services set out how the Strategy development work had been conducted, which had included the use of focus groups in order to understand communities' lived experience. Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Communities and People outlined the importance of governance arrangements and highlighted that he Chaired the internal Equalities Steering Group. He gave assurance that equality, diversity and inclusion was high on the agenda and the Strategy would provide the framework for driving work forward.

The Committee commended the Strategy and raised a number of points, including:

- *Proposals to improve Member oversight via the Scrutiny Committee* – the Scrutiny Officer confirmed that it was for the Committee to decide whether this piece of work was taken forward when it defined its priorities for the next municipal year.
- *Understanding and addressing the needs of faith groups* – in response to questions, Cllr Aziz felt that the Council needed to develop a far better understanding of faith-based communities in the City in order to address their needs, which would be an ongoing piece of work.
- *Facilities for community groups* – the Committee had concerns about the wording related to the fifth action point on page 20 of the agenda reports pack. Cllr Aziz advised that the point was trying to highlight the fact that there was no Council resource for new purpose-built facilities for specific groups, but agreed that the wording needed amending to better reflect that.
- *Inclusive services* – Members thought it would be good to see an action related to provision of inclusive leisure services.
- *Accountability* – the Committee wanted assurance that actions contained in the Strategy would be monitored and progress fed back to communities in a

systematic way and that Members would receive information on how things have changed over the course of the reporting period as a result of insights received from communities.

- *Free community WiFi* – the Strategy heavily referenced digitisation and the Committee noted that some groups and individuals were excluded from the process due to lack of access to WiFi. It was felt that free WiFi should be provided in Council facilities and referenced in the Strategy.
- *Reporting back* – an annual equality, diversity and inclusion report to Scrutiny on progress related to the actions contained in the Strategy was requested. This suggestion was welcomed by Cllr Aziz and officers.
- *Cashless transactions* – there were concerns about the move to completely cashless interactions with customers as this excluded some people. It was suggested that more detail was required on what people who could not access cashless services should do, along with how that linked to other information contained in the Strategy (e.g. debt work). The Executive Director for Communities and People confirmed that thinking around this work was already in train.
- *Statistics* – the statistics used were pre-pandemic and therefore outdated. The census data was due to be published in May 2022 which would aid the Council's understanding of the impact of the pandemic on inequalities and the Committee wanted to know what plans were in place to review the data in the Strategy and update it in light of the census data. The Executive Director for Communities and People confirmed there would be a corporate piece of work undertaken related to the census data.
- *Modern Slavery* – in response to questions, Cllr Aziz advised that the Council had a dedicated Modern Slavery Officer and she would ensure engagement with them so that the Council could assure itself that Modern Slavery was sufficiently represented in the Strategy. The Executive Director for Communities and People advised that there was already a lot of work going on around Modern Slavery.
- *Presenting areas of change* – it was suggested that when highlighting change, it would be useful to have a commentary on statistics and measures to show whether they were on track, making steady progress or backsliding and outlining any actions being taken as a result. It was also suggested that separation of actions in plans into things already being done versus novel actions would be helpful. Cllr Aziz said that she and officers would take the suggestions away and work on them.
- *Language* – the Committee asked for some of the language to be updated to reflect currently accepted language. Specific reference was made to the use of 'BAME' and 'non-heterosexual' on page 16 of the agenda reports pack. Cllr Aziz agreed to ask officers to update the language. The Executive Director for Communities and People added that the Equalities Steering Group was due to consider issues related to language and specifically the use of 'BAME'.
- *Black Lives Matter* – a question was asked about the actions Oxford City Council would take to address slavery reparations (e.g. Bristol City Council passed a motion related to this). Cllr Aziz advised that Oxford and Bristol had different contexts and she did not think the Strategy could go into the detail of reparations or make it a priority as there was not the capacity or expertise in the Council. She added that links needed to be made with experts in the City related to reparations.
- *Training on equality, diversity and inclusion* – a question was asked about the scope for ongoing training from people with expertise in the area. Cllr Aziz

advised there was a Member training budget and that Members could suggest ideas for training topics, but acknowledged there was limited time and resource.

Cllr Aziz thanked the Committee for its robust feedback and pointed out that equalities issues had to belong to everyone, so it was good to have so much engagement from Scrutiny.

**The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:**

- The Council provides community WiFi in all its community and leisure centres.
- The Council ensures that potential exclusionary impacts of moving towards cashless provision on relevant vulnerable residents are mitigated.
- The Council explicitly references in its policy the need for inclusive leisure provision, particularly women-only classes, crèche provision at leisure centres, and free or subsidised activities.
- The Council undertakes additional engagement with faith communities to understand their needs and support their contribution towards asset based community development.
- The Council removes bullet point 5 on page 10 of the draft Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy.

*Cllr Aziz and the Head of Community Services left the meeting and did not return.*

## **100. Housing Assistance and Disabled Adaptation Policy**

Becky Walker, Home Improvement Agency Team Manager introduced the report and outlined the proposed changes to the Housing Assistance and Disabled Adaptation Policy set out in the report. Cllr Diko Walcott, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security and Housing the Homeless commended the ongoing work of officers.

The Committee raised a number of points, including:

- *Relocation grants* – in response to questions, the Home Improvement Agency Team Manager confirmed that Council tenants were not eligible for this grant, as legislation stated that Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) funding, which relocation grants were, could not be used for Council tenants. The Executive Director for Communities and People advised that Council tenants who required disabled adaptations would go through a different route. He added that work was ongoing to ensure alignment between the different adaptations policies and ODS.
- *Disabled tenants in the private sector* – the Home Improvement Agency Team Manager advised that tenants of every tenure apart from Council tenants were eligible for the £5,000 DFG funding. The Committee suggested that should be made clear in the policy summary.
- *Housing Associations and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs)* – in response to a question about why Housing Associations and RSLs were not paying the bill for their tenants' adaptations, the Home Improvement Agency Team Manager advised that Housing Associations had their own adaptations policies which set out whether they would fund disabled adaptations. She added that some Housing Associations funded adaptations directly and some made a contribution to the Council.
- *Private sector complexities* – in response to questions, the Home Improvement Agency Team Manager confirmed that there were issues nationally for private

sector tenants as the DFG funding process required landlords to give permission for adaptation works to be carried out. The Committee was advised that many private landlords refused to grant permission and the Council had attempted to counteract this by offering to use its discretionary DFG funding to undertake remedial works to return the property to its original state if a tenant moved out.

- *Communications* – the Home Improvement Agency Team Manager confirmed that the Council had a suite of leaflets available in Community Centres, libraries, GP Surgeries and the Council website. It was added that there was a specific marketing officer who ensured the information was disseminated appropriately. The Executive Director for Communities and People advised that clients were referred in to the service through a variety of pathways.

**The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:**

- The Council, assuming the Selective Licensing application is approved, develops guidance for landlords on best practice around disabled adaptations for tenants in the private rented sector, and ensures officers making inspections are trained and encouraged to identify and provide advice about disabled adaptations when relevant.

## **101. Allocation of Homelessness Prevention Funds**

Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager introduced the report. He highlighted that this was an annual report which provided an overview of the allocation of funding to provide services for rough sleepers and single homeless people in Oxford in the financial year 2022/23. The provision of services was aimed at preventing and tackling rough sleeping and addressing single homelessness in the City.

The Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager highlighted a number of points, including:

- There was a recommendation in the report for Cabinet related to the lease of Floyds Row, which was the homelessness engagement and assessment centre.
- Floyds Row was intended to be used as interim accommodation for homeless people while they were supported to access longer-term accommodation, but had not been used as such during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Council was looking to return Floyds Row into interim accommodation imminently, which was addressed in the report.
- The Council planned to move towards its post-pandemic model of service delivery in relation to Rough Sleeping and Homelessness.
- The new joint commissioning arrangements with partners for Homelessness services would begin in April 2022, which was a key milestone (*set out in paragraphs 13 to 17 of the report*).
- There was not much change from the previous annual report. The main change was that many of the services would now be part of the new countywide Homelessness Service.

The Committee raised a number of points, including:

- *Greater Change* – concerns were raised about the organisation's fundraising model, how many people the funding would help and how the Council was ensuring value for money. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager said that the Council first funded Greater Change through Government funding during the pandemic and that he could share some impact analysis which had

been undertaken. He added that the £25,000 funding had supported around 30-40 people, which he felt offered good value for money.

- *The Old Fire Station* – the set-up at the Council-owned building was praised as a valuable provision. It was requested that the provision of the Old Fire Station building to Crisis on a rent-free basis by the Council be referenced and recognised in the next annual report as a grant or gift in kind. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager confirmed that he was happy to look into doing that.

At this point in the meeting, the following declarations of interest were made:

- **Cllr Wade:** stated that she was a Trustee of The Gatehouse charity; she made the declaration for reasons of transparency; it was not a pecuniary interest and there was no decision to be taken by the Committee related to the organisation, therefore Cllr Wade was not precluded from discussion.
- **Cllr Dunne:** stated that she represented the Council on The Gatehouse Management Committee; she made the declaration for reasons of transparency; it was not a pecuniary interest and there was no decision to be taken by the Committee related to the organisation, therefore Cllr Dunne was not precluded from discussion.

The Committee made additional points related to:

- *Day Services* – the report referenced a reduction in day services and a question was raised about what was planned and how it would take effect. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager explained that the pandemic had led to a reduction in need for Day Services and that the provision met the needs that the City had, but funding would be kept under review.
- *Number of people out on the street* – the Committee raised concern about the number of people out on the street at the moment and asked whether numbers were increasing. The Rough Sleeping & Single Homeless Manager said that numbers were lower than before the pandemic, but that this would continue to be closely monitored and work to reduce those numbers was ongoing.

**The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:**

- The Council recognises the financial value to Crisis of providing the Old Fire Station as part of its future reports on the Allocation of Homelessness Prevention Funding.
- The Council continues to monitor closely the outcomes and value for money of its grant to Greater Change.

## **102. Dates of future meetings**

The dates of future meetings were noted:

- 07 March (*Zoom*)
- 05 April (*in-person*)

**The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.10 pm**

**Chair .....**

**Date: Tuesday 5 April 2022**

*When decisions take effect:*

*Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired*

*Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal  
decision notice is issued*

*All other committees: immediately.*

*Details are in the Council's Constitution.*

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