

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee on Monday 7 March 2022



Committee members present:

Councillor Wade (Chair)	Councillor Chapman (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Corais	Councillor Coyne (<i>substitute for Councillor Waite</i>)
Councillor Diggins (<i>substitute for Councillor Tidball</i>)	Councillor Djafari-Marbini
Councillor Dunne	Councillor Linda Smith
Councillor Snowton	Councillor Thomas
Councillor Wolff	

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Caroline Green, Chief Executive
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer
Alice Courtney, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

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

Apologies:

Councillor(s) Fry, Tidball and Waite sent apologies.

Substitutes are shown above.

103. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

104. Chair's Announcements

The Chair had no announcements.

105. Annual Update of the Council Business Plan

Cllr 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.

Cllr Brown provided a short commentary on progress related to each of the four Council priorities and outlined key actions planned to be undertaken. Caroline Green, Chief Executive reiterated that the purpose of the Business Plan was to set out key actions that would be delivered against the Council's priorities, therefore the list of actions was not exhaustive but focused on key deliverables which resources had been identified for. She added that a number of other projects would be detailed in individual Service Plans, which sat underneath the Business Plan.

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.

The Committee raised a number of points, including:

- *Links with other strategies/plans* – a concern was raised that there appeared to be mismatches between the Council's Business Plan and Economic Strategy. Cllr Brown advised that a number of strategies/plans fell out of the Business Plan, including the Oxford Economic Strategy and the City Centre Action Plan; these were referenced in the report. She added that in her view the Business Plan and Oxford Economic Strategy were linked and addressed the same priorities; and that the Committee would have the opportunity to consider the Oxford Economic Strategy in the not too distant future.
- *Growth* – in response to comments, Cllr Brown confirmed that Oxford was a world-leading city in a number of industries, which attracted people to the area and the Council had no power to stop that growth. She added that the Council was aiming to encourage sustainable growth by working with local partners and organisations to ensure opportunities were provided for local people; this work would be driven by the Oxford Economic Strategy.
- *Inter-priority tensions* – it was pointed out that tensions existed within the document, particularly related to priority one (*enable an inclusive economy*) and priority two (*deliver more, affordable housing*). Cllr Brown agreed that there were conflicting priorities and it was difficult to get the balance right.
- *High rent prices* – a question was asked related to whether the Council could work with landlords and universities to get some agreement around rent prices to prevent prices being so high. Cllr Brown said it was difficult and the City needed the universities to build as much purpose-built student accommodation as possible in order to make private rented homes available for families and prevent prices being pushed up, which universities were trying to do. She added that the loss of family homes to short-term lets (e.g. Airbnb) was a key lobbying issue that she raised at every opportunity, as the Council currently only had very limited planning powers. Cllr Brown also advised that the Council needed to look into the building of purpose-built affordable rent properties that was not social housing.
- *Bathing water status* – there was a comment that the section related to bathing water status was outdated as the Government had recently closed a consultation on one of the locations. The Chief Executive agreed that this should be updated to reflect the current position.

- *Oxpens* – Members asked for a more detailed briefing on Oxpens and reassurance that development would not be at the expense of the existing centre.
- *Public spaces* – there were concerns related to reconciling the reference to improving public spaces and the fact that OCHL was building on Sandy Lane Recreation Ground. It was suggested that if the Council was serious about protecting open spaces then a commitment should be laid out in the Business Plan. The Chief Executive advised that the purpose of bringing the report to the Committee was to consider progress on work to achieve the objectives set out in the Business Plan, rather than debating the objectives which were taken from the Council Strategy.
- *Citizen engagement in civic and political life* – there was a query about how an increase in active engagement in civic and political life would be achieved, as there was no detail in the Business Plan. The Chief Executive advised that there were a number of actions relevant to this objective, but they linked to other priorities so sat in a different place within the document and only appeared once to avoid duplication. She said that consideration needed to be given to how those actions were cross-referenced.
- *Road traffic* – it was suggested that the section on page 50 be fleshed out to include actions such as restricting HGVs entering the City during certain hours to improve road safety, in light of the fatal incident the previous week. It was added that recognition of the importance of community consultation on the development of LTN schemes should be included. The Chief Executive highlighted that the Business Plan set out the actions that would have the biggest impact in the coming year and in the case of transport, Connecting Oxford was the strategic focus of delivery, but other policies and interventions were not necessarily excluded.
- *Number of houses* – in response to a question related to there being no mention of a precise number of homes that the Council would build over the coming years, Cllr Brown confirmed this would be more appropriate to include in the KPIs report.
- *Urban Forest Strategy* – Members asked how far this strategy relied on external funding and whether there was a mismatch between the desire to have more trees and limited resource to maintain them. Cllr Brown advised that Cllr Arshad, Cabinet Member for Parks and Waste Reduction would be best-placed to give advice on the matter.
- *Waste Strategy* – this strategy had historically been about recycling, but in the Business Plan there was a reference to street littering. In response to a question, Cllr Brown agreed that this reference was probably in the wrong place and she would feed that back to officers. The Chief Executive added that the point was more related to the availability of bins.
- *Transport and inclusivity* – a point was raised about the need to ensure that green transport actions did not exclude certain groups of people from the City or make their businesses unviable (e.g. sole operators such as plumbers who needed to drive around the City in order to work and provide their services). Cllr Brown confirmed she had raised this point with the County Council previously.
- *Communications* – there was concern that there was no reference to public consultation related to Zero Carbon Oxford or Connecting Oxford. Cllr Brown advised that the County Council had responsibility for those consultations, but provided assurance that consultation was a key part of those strategies.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council updates its Business Plan to reflect central government's possible decision to grant Wolvercote Mill Stream bathing water status, and has planned next steps for improvements in the area in the event that this status is or is not granted.
2. The Council commits to protect its parks and play areas from development.
3. The Council determines and publicises the means by which local residents can evidence that a site is valued and worthy, therefore, of protection.
4. The Council adds a commitment in the Business Plan to investigate the practicalities of establishing a youth council in Oxford.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. The Council undertakes to review its Tree Policy as part of its Business Plan.
8. 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.

106. Oxfordshire Recovery and Renewal Framework

Cllr Susan Brown, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Inclusive Growth, Economic Recovery and Partnerships introduced the report. She highlighted that the Framework was very high level and was developed as a result of the joint working with other Oxfordshire councils during the pandemic. The purpose of the document was to better align the strategies being brought forward across Oxfordshire so that the councils could continue to work well together.

Caroline Green, Chief Executive added that the Framework was also proposed for adoption by other partner organisations, including OxLEP and health bodies. She said that the Framework was reflective of the close working relationships built through the pandemic, which brought multiple agencies together to focus on the response. The Chief Executive added that the Council wanted to build on the traction, which the Framework would facilitate and that consideration would be given to how the partnership reports back on the Framework.

The Committee raised a number of points, including:

- *Child poverty* – the Committee raised concerns about the fact that, despite best efforts, the child poverty statistics in the City had not changed for quite a long time. It was noted that some wards had seen improvements, but child poverty in other wards was very persistent. It was suggested that the document should include a focus on tackling child poverty and bringing other partners on board.
- *Health inequalities* – there was recognition that the document was framed as responding in a post-COVID world, but the document appeared to suggest that health inequalities did not exist before COVID-19 and the pandemic created them all. It was suggested that the document should be revised to ensure the relevant history was referenced and that COVID had exacerbated issues rather than created them.

- *NHS governance* – it was felt that the document did not demonstrate an understanding of the change taking place in the governance of the NHS after 01 July 2022 and the responsibilities of NHS bodies in tackling health inequalities.

Cllr Brown highlighted that she had sympathy with the comments made, but advised that the Framework was not a Council-owned document so there was limited opportunity to implement changes. However, she added that she was happy to try as she agreed with the comments made.

The Chief Executive added that a number of conversations had taken place related to the document and it had improved significantly from where it was. She said that it had gone to all partners, so going back to partners with lots of changes probably was not feasible. The Chief Executive pointed out that responsibility had been delegated to her and her local authority counterparts to make certain changes to the final version of the Framework and that she could probably incorporate the reference to NHS governance arrangements within the bounds of the delegated authority granted.

Cllr Brown added that the Framework described the bare minimum of what Oxford City Council was already doing, but that the Council was doing much more. She said that it was a positive step to bring partners on board and influence them to undertake work that otherwise they may not have done. It was reiterated that the monitoring mechanisms for the Framework were not yet established, but that she could report back to the Committee when those arrangements were clearer.

The Committee resolved to recommend to Cabinet that:

1. The Council suggests to partners that the Framework be amended so as not to focus exclusively on county-wide policies and strategies but relevant district-level ones also.
2. The Council requests that a report detailing what has happened as a result of the establishment of the Oxfordshire Recovery and Renewal Framework is written by the County Council, considered by the Health and Wellbeing Board, and also made available for Scrutiny Committee consideration.
3. The Council writes its own update report to coincide with the report requested in the recommendation above, reviewing how participation in the Framework has facilitated the Council in its ambitions to consolidate recovery, address health inequalities and support renewal.

Cllr Brown and the Chief Executive left the meeting and did not return.

107. Work Plan

The Committee reviewed the Work Plan. The Scrutiny Officer asked Members to start thinking of and suggesting items to be included on the Work Plan for the next municipal year.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that he would be circulating a self-evaluation to the Committee for completion which would help in assessing the Committee's areas of strength and weakness.

108. Minutes

The following amendment was requested to the recommendations contained in Minute 88:

- After (and related to) the first recommendation, insert: *The Council requests that the supplementary report referred to above identifies consultation responses by respondent type so that Members and the public can understand where particular respondents, or groups of respondents are pressing for particular policy choices.*

The Committee resolved to APPROVE the minutes of the meeting held on 01 February 2022 as a true and accurate record, subject to the above addition.

The Committee asked the Scrutiny Officer to also amend the recommendations in the report to Cabinet to reflect the above.

109. Reports for Approval

The Committee approved the following reports for submission to Cabinet:

- Procurement Update
- Oxfordshire Plan 2050 (*subject to the amendment requested by the Committee in Minute 108 above*)

The Chair reminded the Committee about the briefing on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 which was scheduled to take place on Monday 14 March, 6pm. The Chair added that the Committee would have the opportunity to consider a report on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and make any recommendations at a meeting in the summer.

110. Report back on recommendations and from Scrutiny Panel meetings

The Committee noted the following update from the Scrutiny Officer related to the Budget Review Group recommendations and responses:

- Only one recommendation was refused and the vast majority of recommendations were agreed. Some recommendations were deemed 'not applicable' in cases where the Budget Review Group asked for clarification rather than making specific recommendations.
- Advice Centre reinstatement occurred prior to the Budget Review Group making recommendations.

The Committee made the following points:

- In relation to recommendation 6, which was refused, it was requested that the Committee monitor how much the Council spends on biodiversity consultants. The Scrutiny Officer suggested that the Committee could ask planning officers to review this as part of the budget-setting process before Christmas 2022.
- In relation to recommendation 13, concern was raised that the response was not reassuring and did not address the recommendation in the way that was intended. The Committee agreed that it would monitor progress against recommendation 13.

The Committee noted the following update from Cllr Linda Smith, Chair of the Housing & Homelessness Panel:

- The Panel met on 02 February 2022; it considered the work of the Tenant Involvement Team and heard about the Council’s preparations for the Social Housing Bill, which would place more duties on the Council in terms of tenant involvement in housing services.
- The Panel was looking to publish a report related to the Social Housing Bill which made recommendations related to the Council’s response, which it was hoping to sign-off at its next meeting on 22 March 2022 before presenting to the Committee for final approval.

The Committee noted the following update from Cllr Hosnieh Djafari-Marbini, Chair of the Child Poverty Review Group:

- The Group had engaged with a range of local groups, organisations and national experts.
- Work was developing in two parallel strands:
 - How the work of the Council and its work with the Voluntary Sector can be better coordinated to tackle the issue of child poverty.
 - How the structure is embedded so that we see some changes to child poverty levels in the next decade.

The Committee resolved to:

- **Ask planning officers to review spend on biodiversity consultants as part of the budget-setting process prior to Christmas 2022.**
- **Monitor progress against the Budget Review Group recommendation 13.**

111. Dates of future meetings

The dates of future meetings were noted:

- 05 April (*in-person*)

In response to a request from Cllr Chapman, the Committee agreed that he could ask Cllr Fry to Chair the Companies Scrutiny Panel meeting scheduled for Thursday 24 March on his behalf.

112. Budget Review Group Report - Exempt Recommendations and Responses

There was no discussion under this item.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.35 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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