

PERFORMANCE & CORPORATE SERVICES OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting held on Friday, 30 September 2022 commencing at 10.00 am and finishing at 1.15 pm

Present:

Voting Members:

Councillor Eddie Reeves – in the Chair

Councillor Michael O'Connor (Deputy Chair)

Councillor Brad Baines

Councillor Neil Fawcett

Councillor Donna Ford

Councillor Damian Haywood

Councillor John Howson (Substituting for Councillor Bob Johnston)

Councillor Kieron Mallon

Councillor Ian Middleton

Other Members in Attendance:

Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services

Councillor Calum Miller, Cabinet Member for Finance

By Invitation:

Dr Alison Chisholm, Qualitative Researcher at the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences

Dr Juliet Carpenter, Research Fellow at Kellogg College

Paul Kahawatte, the Jury facilitator

Robert Weavers, research team

Officers:

Lorna Baxter, Director of Finance

Vic Kurzeja, Director of Joint Property Services

John Disley, Head of Transport Policy

Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Organisational Development & Resources

Susannah Wintersgill, Director – Communications, Strategy & Insight

Tom Hudson, Principal Scrutiny Officer

Khalid Ahmed, Scrutiny Officer

The Scrutiny Committee considered the matters, reports and recommendations contained or referred to in the agenda for the meeting and agreed as set out below. Copies of the agenda and reports [agenda, reports and schedule/additional documents] are attached to the signed Minutes.

22/22 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND TEMPORARY APPOINTMENTS

(Agenda No. 1)

An apology for absence was submitted by Councillor Bob Johnston (Councillor John Howson substituted).

23/22 MINUTES

(Agenda No. 4)

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

24/22 PROPERTY STRATEGY

(Agenda No. 5)

Cllr Calum Miller, Cabinet Member for Finance, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Organisational Development and Resources, and Vic Kurzeja, Director of Joint Property Services, attended the meeting and gave the Committee a presentation on the Council's Property Strategy proposals which were to be considered at Cabinet in November.

Members were informed the Council owned around 900,000 square metres of property assets across 905 sites. A significant part of this estate was controlled by third parties under long-term leasing arrangements, producing around £2.9m per annum of income through 353 lease arrangements.

There were three main asset portfolios - Community, Investment and Operational assets. The latter of which was divided into educational, non-educational and corporate assets.

The Property Strategy was an attempt to refresh the approach to the Council's property assets which in recent years had seen relatively limited investment. Reference was made to many of the assets requiring sizeable investment to meet modern office and service delivery standards as well as the Council's environmental obligations and ambitions.

The Committee was informed that the strategy had to take into consideration the worsening financial situation facing the Council, as well as the increase in agile working by staff following Covid, which had implications to the use of property assets by both staff and the public.

The Corporate Director for Customers, Culture and Corporate Services, informed Members on the progress of the report to Cabinet, which would be delayed by a month, to enable her greater oversight having only very recently assumed responsibility for the area within her directorate.

Issues raised by Members

- Members asked that with capital assets of £2.9 Billion, there should be detailed financial information on property contained in the report to Cabinet. Members asked that more information be brought back to the next meeting of this Committee.
- There was no comparative information with the previous strategy to enable to see where proposed changes were. Officers reported that proposed changes were mainly brought about because of Covid. The emphasis of the strategy was on consolidation and moving forward.

- Did the Council have enough staff to take the strategy forward? Officers replied that this was being considered as part of plans for delivery.
- Reference was made to schools on Council's freehold sites and that these were not mentioned in the document. Particular reference was made to the recent High Court Case on the rebuilding of Nettlebed School and the financial impact of this. Therefore, when the Schools portfolio was considered, the Committee suggested that the impact of the recent court judgement over reversion clauses won by the Council be fully considered
- There were no costings of financial information for Members to analyse and the impact the proposals would have on the budget. With assets of £2.9 Billion, it would be good to see a breakdown of the costs to the Council of maintaining these. Officers would consider incorporating this information into the Cabinet report.
- There was a case for consolidation of office working space as there was flexibility within the Council's property portfolio, particularly as was reported, only 20% of the Council's office space was currently being used. This created a potential saving to the Council.
- Reference was made to possible co-location with organisations which shared aims and objectives with the Council, for example other tiers of local government, or providers of health or social care. Rents should be charged on a commercial basis.
- The locations of some of the proposed hubs were in places not easily accessible for public transport. This could have implications for the Council's aspirations to tackle the climate emergency.
- Some of the Council's buildings were in a bad state of repair and would require investment.
- There was the issue of buildings leased out. There needed to be finance details on these. Members referred to the significant costs to relinquishing leases.
- The importance of local members being involved, to represent the views of their communities, and being involved in discussions on local property assets was noted.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their presentation and summarised the general observations of the Committee to be submitted to Cabinet.

1. There was recognition that the Property Strategy was a high-level document, however, there needed to be costings, information on trends, rationalisation, co-locations and those buildings the Council leased as tenants.
2. It was recognised that any changes to the footprint within the Estate needed to take into consideration budgetary constraints, staff working patterns and Climate Action Plans.
3. Any changes needed to be conscious of how schools were operating and any changes to their operations in the future.
4. There needed to be clarity on the community asset transfer policy and what were the aims and were they practical and financially sound.
5. Members welcomed the recognition that in practice the labour market impacts greatly on the Council's Property Estates Strategy and the Committee asked if there could be integration of the Property Estates Strategy with HR and associated strategies.

6. In future, the Committee would like to see more detail from the Cabinet and officers on items which are pre-scrutinised.

7. The Committee would like to extend the option of meeting virtually to enable an on-line question and answer session to take place with the relevant Cabinet Members and officers to discuss the Cabinet report before it is submitted to Cabinet in November.

8. The Committee would like to see in the Cabinet report clear KPIs, together with options, including financial detail.

9. The Committee asked that as a general principle, local members be included in future discussions and decisions, and be included in consultations on local individual assets in the property estate.

RESOLVED – That the information presented be received and the Committee’s comments on the Property Strategy be reported to the Cabinet.

25/22 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS PEER REVIEW

(Agenda No. 6)

The Committee was provided with a presentation on the outcomes of the recent LGA peer review of communications.

Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Culture and Corporate Services, and Susannah Wintersgill, Director of Strategy Insight and Communications, attended the meeting to give the presentation.

Members were informed that the review took place as a result of some disquiet from some Members at the performance of the Communications Team. The review sought to clarify whether the current ways of working supported the strategic direction of the Council, the level of innovation in communications with both members and the public, whether the team was clear about the Council’s priorities, and the adequacy of the resourcing for the Communications function.

Details of the results which came back were reported to the Committee. Overall, the feedback received was positive with the reviewers praising the competence and leadership of the team with the level of resourcing found to be adequate.

Reference was made to further work being required to cultivate relationships with the diversity of media locally, whilst also building relationships at a regional and national level. Reference was made to the work carried out on Low Traffic Neighbourhood (LTN) issue which took up much of the capacity highlighted as engulfing much of the Communication team’s capacity.

The key actions implemented as a response to the recommendations included:-

- the integration of Communications into strategic planning meetings
- the development of new Video and Media Strategies,
- trialling training on political awareness and
- a review of the Council’s digital presence.

Issues Raised by Members

- Communications should be embedded within the Council's policy forming and implementation process from the very outset.
- The integration of Communications was critical to successful policy development and implementation and should be a priority.
- Whilst recognising the professionalism of the Team, Members noted the recommendation that training on political awareness had been identified and commented that there needed to be a balance between the Team's responsibility to communicate messages on behalf of the Council, and on behalf of the administration.
- There needed to be proactive communication of Scrutiny which would increase engagement.

It was agreed that the annual review on the Communications Team would come back to the Committee and be placed in the Committee's work programme.

RESOLVED – That Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to note the observations made by the Committee.

26/22 CITIZENS' JURY (Agenda No. 7)

The Committee received a presentation from the Citizens' Jury report authors, Dr Alison Chisholm, Qualitative Researcher at the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences, Dr Juliet Carpenter, Research Fellow at Kellogg College, two Jury members, the Jury facilitator Paul Kahawatte, and Robert Weavers from the research team.

Councillor Glynis Phillips, Cabinet Member for Corporate Services, Claire Taylor, Corporate Director – Customers, Culture and Corporate Services, and John Disley, Head of Transport Policy, were also in attendance.

The Committee reviewed the Citizens' Jury report, detailing participant experience, the findings, and considered how potentially the Council might take the recommendations on board for future consultations.

The presentation given provided details of the Citizens' Jury make-up and process, documented the recommendations and proposals generated by the Jury and presented the process evaluation.

Reference was made to the recommendations which were identified in the report. Members noted that due to the Committee's remit as the Scrutiny Committee responsible for corporate services, including consultation, focus should be on this area.

Members raised the following issues:

- There was a limitation of consulting only residents of Oxford, particularly when there was a large proportion of travel within the city from people who lived outside the city, which limited deliveries.
- The target audience was not in line with the population and therefore was not demographically representative.
- There were limitations of exploring proposals with no costings involved.
- It was noted that the recommendations made by the Citizen Jury were consensually agreed and were not agreed by majority of jurors.

The Committee asked that Cabinet adopts a clear policy in future on the use of Juries, and in particular, the location of juries within the Council's decision-making process.

The Committee felt there was a lack of clarity over the status of the Citizens' Jury recommendations, and their ongoing treatment within the wider Council's processes. In addition, the recommendations made had no reference to the cost implications of the proposals.

There was opinion expressed by some Members at the value for money of Citizens' Juries, particularly if used as an additional consultation method.

RESOLVED – (1) That the information be noted and the members of the Citizen's Jury be thanked for the work carried out.

(2) That Cabinet be asked to adopt a clear policy on the future use of Juries and their place within the Council's decision-making process.

27/22 WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

(Agenda No. 8)

Members received an update on the Committee's proposed work programme for 2022/23.

During discussion it was agreed that the following be added to the Committee's future work programme:

- Law and Governance functions at an appropriate time
- Annual Review of the functions of the Communications Team

RESOLVED – That approval be given to the work programme.

28/22 CABINET RESPONSES TO PERFORMANCE AND CORPORATE SERVICES RECOMMENDATIONS

(Agenda No. 9)

The Committee noted the Cabinet's responses made to this Committee's recommendations.

29/22 ACTION AND RECOMMENDATION TRACKER

(Agenda No. 10)

Noted.

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Date of signing 200