

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE



Listening Learning Leading

Scrutiny Committee

HELD ON TUESDAY 6 FEBRUARY 2024 AT 6.00 PM
AT ABBEY HOUSE, ABBEY CLOSE, ABINGDON OX14 3JE.

Present in the meeting room:

Scrutiny committee councillors Mocky Khan (chair), David Turner, Jo Robb, Tony Worgan, Leigh Rawlins, James Barlow and Kate Gregory

Officers: Andrew Busby (Head of Development and Corporate Landlord), Tim Oruye (Head of Policy and Programmes), Candida Basilio (Democratic Services Officer), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance), Adrianna Partridge (Deputy Chief Executive for Transformation and Operations).

Cabinet members: Councillors Andrea Powell (Corporate Services), Pieter-Paul Barker (Finance and Property Assets), David Rouane (Council leader), Maggie-Filipova Rivers (Community Wellbeing)

Remote attendance:

Councillors: Sue Cooper and Anne-Marie Simpson

Officers: Suzanne Malcolm (Deputy Chief Executive for Place), Mark Minion (Head of Corporate Services), Anna Winship (Strategic Finance Manager), Carole Cumming (Arts Centre Director)

31 Apologies for absence

Apologies were received from Councillor Ken Arlett.

32 Urgent business and chair's announcements

Chair ran through meeting procedure matters.

33 Declaration of interests

None.

34 Minutes

Resolved:

The minutes of the meeting on 6 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record, with the amend of a typographical error under 'chair's announcements'. The chair will sign the minutes as a correct record.

35 Work schedule and dates for all South and Joint scrutiny meetings

Members discussed their work programme.

Suggestions for the programme:

1. Procurement strategy
2. Housing Mix
3. Didcot Gateway project
4. Cornerstone

36 Public participation

Mr. John Salmons addressed the committee regarding the budget setting report. He questioned the capital budget figure set aside for a potential grounds maintenance hub. He questioned whether the council were still intending to use the site on Great Western Park, Didcot, rather than an industrial site which he felt was more suitable.

The chair thanked Mr. Salmons and asked him to email the statement to Democratic Services for a written response.

37 Revenue Budget 2024/25 and Capital Programme to 2024/25 to 2028/29

The Cabinet member for Finance introduced the report, supported by the Council Leader and Head of Finance. He explained this was a continuity budget and was to maintain services, not cut them. Leader mentioned the corporate plan and financial sustainability – the finances were built on the current corporate plan (there will be a way to update this with the new corporate plan). The bottom line was that the deficit was halved compared to the previous iteration Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP), so the transformation work had led to a more sustainable position.

- Additional waste costs: page 20 Appendix A2. £200k of additional costs? Also Appendix A4? It was responded that in A2, figures were removed for previous one-off support for waste contract work, then brought back into Appendix A4, because officer support was needed/brought back in for the next stages of contract negotiation/retendering. Row 24 was an inflationary increase in contract costs. It was the Council's biggest and most public-facing service, so the figures were relative to the size of the service and was appropriate for the tendering exercise. It was noted by the Leader that retendering was delayed by two years due to uncertainty from central government on what was expected from councils for waste collection services.
- Homelessness – referring to item 12 on page 29, and page 37 on homelessness prevention. Do we consider this figure to be enough? Cabinet member for Finance explained it was government funding not our own budget. Cabinet member for Community Wellbeing provided detail - we were currently unsure of future funding, it may rise but this was unknown, there were pressures as some councils were close to bankruptcy due to rising demand of temporary accommodation. We do get some money back from temporary accommodation costs, but the gap was getting wider between what it costs and what we get back.

- Appendix A2 line 30, a member wanted to understand costs regarding the community hub, activity grants and corporate plan staffing. Cabinet member explained that this was for 2025/26 onwards, community hub was becoming permanent and was in the budget as 'business as usual' and part of the overall revenue budget. Regarding Didcot Community Centres, a member suggested that centres could be part of community provision and which could help to raise income.
- Talked about transition savings – a member asked for examples: transformation programme was becoming permanent to invest in making savings and efficiencies. Examples given included IT efficiencies, and the office move away from Milton Park saved money. A study into Cornerstone can save money in the long-term by investigating how to improve its financial situation. Recruitment of a grant applications officer has been a big boost to securing funds.
- A member asked about contributions to the pension fund with Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) as investment. Officer responded that £5 million was invested twice in the past, such investment was evaluated twice recently and wasn't showing as a good investment this time around but can still be reevaluated in future.
- Discussion about the Gateway site and the office building. Cabinet member and officer explained that if approved, the building would make money from rental income as well. The current view showed when money on the project was expected to be spent. Use of our own funds and potential borrowing costs for this project were considered in the MTFP. It was unknown currently, but the options had been considered in the budget.
- Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) £100k per year for our own support staff. A member raised that there was concern about duplication of work from those who were involved in the Partnership and sub-groups, and whether we should spend this. How do we ensure their accountability? Council Leader explained core work of FOP was covered but there was more officer work supporting sub committees or advisory groups. For example, senior officer support for members regarding the paperwork that was generated for reviewing on these advisory groups. Some of this work was viewed as very helpful and was commissioned at a larger scale (FOP partners) to enable access to a higher level of research. We needed to manage the work done and whether it was value for money. It was important that the costs were highlighted.
- A member asked to see the detail of reserves - what amounts were reserved and for what purpose, and how they were held. Cabinet member referred to page 43. Officer added that there were three specific reserves lines – general fund balance, then earmarked reserves (of revenue in nature), then capital receipts, which was the existing balance. The member used the example of a skatepark, and the officer explained that this was infrastructure so would be capital in nature, possibly the member could ask the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) team/working group on specific project suggestions. Member then asked how do we choose our reserve policy? Officer explained that £50 million was ringfenced, the balance was keeping things going with interest raised for supporting running services. Considered that this was a future discussion, post new corporate plan. This budget was based in current policy.
- Page 39 drainage works – item 10, a member asked were we sure the £36k for drainage was scoped correctly? Then referred to £102k for a pumping station – the member asked whether we can put these together to make savings by purchasing together? Cabinet member mentioned that the drainage item was originally CIL but dropped out because it was no longer eligible, so it now appears here. Details of

schemes was operational information and not part of the budget. Cabinet member would further reply in writing.

- A member discussed whether transformation projects could bring forward the in-year savings and the impact of contract renewal. Cabinet member explained that those contract costs were unknown, but the assumption in the MTFP was to take the costs as they were now and any known costs.
- National infrastructure project – what was this? It was confirmed as EV charging.
- Contracts - how had assumptions been factored? Cabinet member referred to paragraph 57 for contract renewals. Five Councils Partnership (5CP) costs were well understood but there were transition costs factored in. The car park operator, waste and leisure services were the other contracts. Officer confirmed that the waste contract extension had been built in. The working assumption was it costed the same, but the real number will be dealt with when known and there was no guarantee that the cost would rise as normally assumed.
- Business rates consultants were being kept, to continue the work completed so far and this was acknowledged as a good decision, leading on from the previous success of claiming additional business rates. This was highlighted as excellent work by a committee member for the income brought in.
- A member questioned whether there was savings in housing benefit? Officer explained it was not a saving, this was a correction to an estimate made previously.
- Appendix D2 regarding cemetery refurbishment – a member asked do we get revenue for refurbishments? The member questioned why this was only for two cemeteries. Cabinet members explained that the sites listed were in use hence the refurbishment was needed. Burial costs may help the cemeteries to break even. Historical arrangements were involved, and we had asked those two councils about changing this, and they've not wanted to change the current arrangement. It was mentioned that there was cost related to poor access roads at those sites as well.
- Covid scheme had been fully refunded. Homes for Ukraine scheme was fully funded externally. A member asked was there an audit trail? Cabinet member for Community Wellbeing replied that detailed reports were made and can be sent to members. Deputy Chief Executive (Transformation/operations) explained that for some cohorts we make returns to County Council (OCC), for them to report to central government. Other cohorts, we as a district report into central government.
- Business rates schemes – reconciliation process for every scheme. They used a reimbursement formula for council staff time.
- A member suggested there was a tension with the corporate plan and declaration of a climate and ecological emergency and that we need to be explicit in our choices of where we deposit money. How will that progress through the budget setting / treasury management processes? Officer explained that the treasury management strategy gave options for putting money to best use, including ESG (environmental, social, governance) strategy. We've committed to reviewing current investment as well.
- Additional Head of Service? This was confirmed as being for Communities. Confirmed that the Community Hub was now a permanent fixture.
- Page 32 Corporate plan priorities - capital expenditure by theme. A member felt that the range was large from £11.7m for theme 5 down to £112k for theme 1 and zero for theme 2. Cabinet member explained it was a new view and hoped it was helpful. Heads of Service were asked to identify key spends per theme (although some spends could cover multiple themes). It was considered a helpful indicator however and subject to refinement. Leader explained it was just for capital spend – 'protect

and restore the natural world' theme would spend more on revenue. Revenue had not been split in the same way.

Recommendation:

Scrutiny Committee considered the report of the Head of Finance on the revenue budget 2024/25 and capital programme 2024/25 to 2028/29 and made comments as stated above, for the relevant Cabinet members to consider and respond to.

Chair thanked the officers and Cabinet members involved.

38 Corporate Plan 2024-2028 - to agree an approach to the new corporate plan

Cabinet member for Corporate Services introduced the report. The corporate plan should reflect the financial landscape of a council, that sits alongside the MTFP. For the corporate plan to be a credible strategic framework, it can be aspirational and ambitious, but it must be affordable and able to be appropriately budgeted for. The corporate plan was a golden thread where officers could see where their work aligns with the values of the council and of residents. Specific metrics will feature, and quarterly data and annual data would be reported, with a continued development of the data hub for residents.

- Equitable access to leisure facilities – a member asked what happened to creches in leisure centres? Cabinet member explained this could be questioned in consultation, then would have to engage with contractors. Cabinet member for Community Wellbeing explained that she understood the concern, but also the numbers using the service weren't always there for contractors to invest in it.
- Page 18 homes and infrastructure: housing strategy and action plan – a member asked can we look at entering the private rental market, and keep the private standards up, and generate revenue? Council being a private landlord? Cabinet member for Corporate Services explained we had policy flexibility to look into this.
- How do we introduce the overall vision in light of wider issues (poor living standards, covid etc). How do we be optimistic whilst considering what could go wrong. Cabinet member explained this would be within the document/context, after consultation, to see what issues and concerns were raised by consultees. We will use learnings for the Joint Local Plan consultation process and build on that.
- Support shown for the themes.
- Overarching vision needed, state the values that underpin the themes.
- Should we have something about procurement values embedded in the plan due to the upcoming contract negotiations for services.
- Engagement needed to yield us a good database of key contacts/community groups. To be more prepared for the future. Cabinet member explained that various teams – community, grants etc, have their own databases. Also, council member contacts. Our aim was to be a “council in the community”.
- Agreement over merging the climate and nature themes as they were so interlinked. Focus on engagement was approved of.
- Homes and infrastructure – a member asked how we ensure it was an equal mix, fair. Cabinet member responded that we can add this to the vision – treat all demographics equally.
- A member raised the issue of lessons learned from the Joint Local Plan (JLP) consultation, and how there may not be enough time to incorporate those lessons. Officers will review this point but also reminded that this consultation was discretionary.

- Co-production aspirations – go out and facilitate conversations. Cabinet member responded that there was a strong team in-house to facilitate.
- A member raised unfair access to leisure centres for rural residents who are without transport. Cabinet member replied that sustainable transport was being raised at County Council, it was their responsibility so we can only encourage.
- Talked about younger participation. Cabinet member replied that we plan to go where people were already present. Deputy Chief Executive explained that we will build upon networks across teams.
- Support for businesses? Cabinet member explained that this was included in the plan, referencing theme three.
- A member raised that it was our duty to move on and lead on climate adaptation.
- Do we make clear what we mean by equity, equality and fairness. Cabinet member stated that they wanted to be simpler in language and the word ‘fairness’ felt clearer. Member wanted us to make sure that when we did use those words, we were coming from the same understanding.

Members debated, raising the points that they felt should form a recommendation. The committee voted in favour of the following recommendation:

Recommendation

The committee reviewed the approach outlined to develop the Corporate Plan 2024 to 2028. Committee approved of the approach and considered that Cabinet should endorse this. Committee provided comments for Cabinet to consider:

1. Slight changes in language suggested – use of adaptation (related to climate), participants not audiences, promoting not supporting community-led engagement. Suggestion of having a jargon-buster.
2. Engagement should be considered – hard-to-reach groups, look at our communications channel and how we use language.
3. Cabinet is recommended to take forward the drafting of an overarching vision to crystallise the values in the Corporate Plan
4. Procurement strategy should align with priorities in the Corporate Plan
5. Fairness on housing (relating to theme 4) and equal access to services
6. Consider business support and amplifying that in the Corporate Plan
7. Visitor economy – how do we engage with that in the Corporate Plan
8. Supporting engagement for younger people/ future generations
9. Timetable for lessons learned from the Joint Local Plan engagement process

39 Future direction of Cornerstone Arts Centre, Didcot

Before this item proceeded, chair agreed on a two-minute break for attendees. The committee also voted to extend the meeting as allowed by the Constitution, by half an hour, and this vote was taken part way through the discussion below.

Cabinet member for Community Wellbeing introduced the report.

The Cornerstone and the Arts and Culture sector in general had encountered difficulties in recent years. There was also the challenge of building issues for Cornerstone, such as the boiler and a roof leak. To start, we wanted to define the problems, therefore we commissioned some studies - noting that the studies were a snapshot in time, but there were many useful recommendations to take forward. The cabinet member wanted to hear the committee’s views to help develop the action plan. Cabinet member explained that the

18-month timescale was tight but kept us accountable for keeping on target and monitoring progress.

Also present was the Deputy Chief Executive for Place, the Head of Development and Corporate Landlord. The Arts Centre Director was present online.

Committee raised the following questions and comments:

- A member considered that this was ongoing for a number of years, and he asked why the reports were over a year old, as action was needed sooner and he would like to understand staffing and other aspects. He felt that more time was required to discuss this. How can Cornerstone relate to different age groups, crafts and arts? We needed to understand the lease structure. In response, the cabinet member felt that there had been many challenges for Cornerstone that had been dealt with and responsibility had been taken for those. Cabinet member expressed that the skill sets were needed for improving communications on arts and culture and knowledge of the business, audience development etc.
- A member felt this issue hinged on recruiting the right skilled people to help. There was concern over the action plan impeding any staff recruited with the right skillset. The committee member stated that she would like to see data on response to social media and attendance at shows/events and compare to other theatres. Committee member felt that comedy shows were popular and Cornerstone could offer more like that, and added that Didcot had transport access routes to support more visitors. On the action plan, Cabinet member explained that the action plan had been compiled with the help of expert recommendations therefore shouldn't impede staff hired to make progress.
- Monthly data was wanted and a comparison with comparable centres in 18-months' time. Cabinet member explained that staff were already providing this information and would continue to.
- A member recalled that the auditorium was downgraded many years ago, you can't draw in so many big acts with less seats and he considered the impact of increasing seats.
- It was felt that external funding sources should be sought as soon as possible.
- Effective marketing – a member suggested looking into marketing via other mailing lists such as the Beacon, cross promotion.
- Suggestion of having pantomimes, and the longer-term promotion associated with them to gather interest from the public. The committee member also suggested partnering with local dance and drama clubs. Cabinet member suggested that pantos were moved away from due to production costs often meaning the event didn't make a profit. Since then, there was better response to varied events held like movie showings, puppet shows, craft. There were some dance clubs already, and the centre gets commission for selling tickets but staff were looking at options to expand on that.
- It was suggested that weekday nights need to be used better.
- Need to generate a habit of getting people to go there regularly.
- Many members felt that marketing was key. Cabinet member added that marketing staff felt the budget caused restrictions on marketing activities.
- Discussed decarbonisation – a member suggested that this might not pay off for this building. Cabinet member explained that funding would be externally sourced. Consultants advise on what would be suitable works, and it was acknowledged that there were awkward aspects of the building to decarbonise.

- Members asked if there were ways to share best practice. Add to short-term plan and learn from other similar sized venues locally who were performing better. Officer added that the team were in touch with The Mill in Banbury.

The committee provided their views, and on balance members felt the centre was a wanted arts and culture facility and that the review had to get underway as soon as possible.

Recommendation:

Members of the committee reviewed and provided feedback on the Draft Future Direction of Cornerstone Arts Centre cabinet report and they approved immediate progression of the action plan, but ask that Cabinet consider the following recommendations:

1. Better reporting and more frequent reporting was wanted. Monthly analysis and faster outputs were requested.
2. Funding sources should be explored as soon as possible.
3. Committee members suggested the need for a clear marketing and promotion review, with a review of shows and show types, think bigger for the wider catchment area.
4. Members considered that energy savings should be explored at the property.
5. Scrutiny want an update report within 12 months, ahead of the 18-month timescale for the action plan.

Members were reminded that they could comment further at full council.

40 Exclusion of the public

Not required.

The meeting closed at 9.05 pm

Chair

Date

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