

**To:** Oxfordshire Growth Board

**Title of Report:** Growth Board Continuous Improvement Programme

**Date:** 22 September 2020

**Report of:** Bev Hindle, Growth Board Director  
Stefan Robinson, Growth Board Manager

**Executive Summary and Purpose:** This report sets out progress to date in implementing secondary actions arising from the Growth Board's review of its functions, with a specific focus on progress in establishing a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire.

**Recommendation:** That the Growth Board:

- 1) Notes progress to date and provides comment on the paper as a whole; and,
- 2) Agrees to co-opt a representative of the Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum onto the Infrastructure Advisory Sub Group for the remainder of the 2020/21 Growth Board year.

**Appendices:** Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum Terms of Reference

## Introduction

1. This report provides a summary of progress made on secondary actions arising from the Growth Board's review of its functions. This is part of a continuing improvement plan that the Board will be taking forward. In July and August 2020, each of the principal local authorities in Oxfordshire agreed to adopt new terms of reference for the Board, which now provides greater clarity as to its role and purpose going forward.
2. The Board's role centres on coordinating local efforts to manage economic, housing and infrastructure development in a way that is inclusive and maximises local social and environmental benefits. This includes supporting the development of local planning policy that aspires for biodiversity gain and net zero carbon by 2050. This new purpose resonates with, and takes account of, a wide range of submissions received during the Growth Board's review, which received contributions from over 250 people and organisations.
3. Supported by this recharged focus on environmental and climatic issues, this report concentrates principally on progress being made under three thematic areas which emanated as areas for improvement within the review:

- Support for greater integration of environmental issues
- Support for a wider or more networked Growth Board membership
- Support for greater communication and engagement opportunities.

## Local Nature Partnerships

- Local Nature Partnerships (LNPs) provide a joined up and strategic forum to help manage the natural environment in an integrated way to produce multiple benefits for local people, the economy and the environment. They are designed to promote a more formalised, systematic and collaborative approach to the management and enhancement of the natural environment and encompass a broad range of local organisations and people who are committed to this aim. Specifically, the role of an LNP as set out in HM Government guidance is to:
  - Drive positive change in the local natural environment, taking a strategic view of the challenges and opportunities involved and identifying ways to manage it as a system for the benefit of nature, people and the economy.
  - Contribute to achieving the Government's national environmental objectives locally, including the identification of local ecological networks, alongside addressing local priorities.
  - Become local champions influencing decision-making relating to the natural environment and its value to social and economic outcomes, in particular, through working closely with local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Health and Wellbeing Boards.<sup>1</sup>
- Brought in by the 2011 Natural Environment White Paper, LNPs now cover most of England, often based on the geography of upper tier local authorities. Whilst Oxfordshire has a strong network of environmental groups, it is one of the few areas *not* to have an LNP, and the only area within Oxford to Cambridge Arc. Recent research<sup>2</sup> discusses the challenges associated with environmental representation, highlighting that unlike other key sectors (health, business and government), its complex remit makes representation challenging. However, the consensus is that a collaboration of multiple voluntary and professional interest groups provides the best opportunity to build consensus on environmental planning; as would be provided through an LNP.

## A Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire

- Oxfordshire has an attractive and environmentally rich rural and historic landscape. Its diverse landscape provides a range of benefits to wildlife, people and businesses, including a range of ecosystems services that benefit people including clean air, fresh water, surface water management and flood alleviation, food and forestry products, carbon capture and storage and the potential for renewable energy generation (see the Oxfordshire Energy Strategy).

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<sup>1</sup> "An overview of the Local Nature Partnership role". Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. 2012

<sup>2</sup> A sociology of environmental representation. 2016. Available at: [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23251042.2016.1213611](http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23251042.2016.1213611)

7. The extent and condition of many of our environmental assets however has been declining over the course of decades, with major challenges including climate change, air and water pollution, land contamination, fragmentation of habitats and a decline in biodiversity. Climate emergency declarations have been made by all Local Authorities in Oxfordshire, alongside over 200 other local authorities, together with targets to achieve net zero carbon. The recent pandemic has only cemented an even greater recognition that tackling climate change and supporting the environment are critically important to our communities and must be a key consideration in strategic planning for the area.
8. Collective commitments in this respect should naturally read across, permeate and be consolidated within key strategy documents such as the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy (OxIS), the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP) and the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, among others. The increase in emphasis for the Growth Board in addressing environmental challenges through its new terms of reference is one element of this wider work, and the opportunity to develop a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire is another.
9. On 28 January 2020 the Growth Board provided its support for establishing a LNP for Oxfordshire which could link in with the Board's work and wider regional discussions concerning the natural environment. This is a clear step to support the integration of environmental issues more formally and visibly into Oxfordshire's partnership network. Critically, HM Government recognise in their guidance that LNPs have an important contribution to make to strategic planning matters within their area, including contributing to planning for sustainable land use, green infrastructure and green economic growth.
10. Since the Board offered support for the establishment of an LNP, there have been several informal discussions with local partners to develop proposals. Officers have identified the need for an independent facilitator to undertake a stakeholder consultation which is likely to involve a mixture of virtual interviews, surveys and focus group meetings. This exercise will focus on gathering feedback on a range of issues associated with establishing an LNP (i.e objectives, membership and governance etc). It will also be informed by a paper summarising the outcomes of research undertaken by the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) which considered best practice nationally with respect to LNPs. It is expected that this process will be completed by the end of 2020. It is hoped that a basic structure will be in place for the LNPs operation during Spring 2020, though this will be depended on several factors.

### **Cross-Council Climate Change Working Group**

11. Since the recent climate emergency declarations were made by Local Authorities in Oxfordshire, councils have been developing their own targets and plans for how they will reach net zero carbon, among other ambitions. The sharing of best practice in this area between councils will be critical to success in this respect. Accordingly, officers and councillors have already held several joint meetings to identify areas for shared working and develop further thinking and plans. We are expecting a paper on shared principles and priorities being brought to the Growth Board in the autumn. Given the Growth Board's new purpose, and the importance of bringing public visibility to this work, there may be opportunities for

this group to regularly update and present its work and progress to the Growth Board.

### **Growth Board Membership Arrangements**

12. The Growth Board review found that there were several requests for an environmental representative to have a seat on the Board, in addition to the existing Environment Agency seat. The establishment of an LNP represents an opportunity to consider whether a seat might be offered to that group. It is important to note however that any LNP will be independent from the Growth Board and may not necessarily want to be part of its membership. Once an LNP has been established, this issue can be revisited.
13. Since the Growth Board revised the Terms of Reference for its Executive Officer Group (EOG), a representative from the Oxfordshire Environment Board (OEB) has taken a seat on that group. EOG is the lead operational group that supports the Growth Board in its work, which aims to provide advice and support on the range of functions that it covers. The OEB is an alliance of local environmental organisations that aims to provide a voice for Oxfordshire's Natural Environment. This is a demonstrable outcome of the important feedback received during the Growth Board's review. This position might reasonably be reviewed once an LNP is established.
14. In considering how the Growth Board could be better networked into local partnerships, the Growth Board's Infrastructure Advisory Sub-group recently met to consider a proposal to co-opt a representative of the Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum (OSTF) onto its membership. The OSTF was formed in August 2019 when the OxLEP Transport Sub-Group concluded that its work more appropriately aligned with Oxfordshire County Council as the Highways Authority primarily responsible for the prioritisation and allocation of funding for schemes. The Forum consists of representatives from major transport operators, Active Travel, OxLEP, District Councils, Network Rail and Highways England, and is looking to broaden membership to include freight.
15. The role of the OSTF is to "act as a strategic sounding board, providing rigorous advice, recommendations and challenge to decision making bodies on strategic transport opportunities, solutions and agreeing priorities for funding and delivery which will have a demonstrable, positive impact on Oxfordshire's priority outcomes. Having considered the representations made, the Infrastructure Sub-group agreed on 24 August 2020 to recommend that the Growth Board agree to their co-option for the 2020/21 Growth Board year. As a non-decision-making body, the Advisory Sub-group's Terms of Reference permit co-option with the agreement of the Local Authority Membership of the Growth Board.

### **Communication and Engagement**

16. Communication and engagement was one area identified as needing improvement through the Growth Board review. As one of the most significant elements of the Housing and Growth Deal, the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and its development is supported by a dedicated communications lead. The Board's role in overseeing the development of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, which will set a spatial framework for Oxfordshire's future from now up to 2050, has and will

continue to involve a wide-ranging mix of statutory and non-statutory engagement exercises.

17. Most recently, the development and delivery of Oxfordshire Open Thought (an online platform for the public to have their say on planning for Oxfordshire's future) welcomed approximately 275 submissions, which will help inform the next stages of work, before the regulation 18 (Part 2) consultation takes place in 2021. Analysis has shown that much of the interest in this work has been generated through the Growth Board's social media platforms. This work has been supplemented by several workshop events with school, college and university students, as well as a workshop held with the Voice of Oxfordshire's Youth earlier this year, and the existing consultation work that has already been undertaken. The outcomes of this work can be viewed on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 website. A further update will be provided to the Board at a later date concerning the next steps for the Regulation 18 (Part 2) consultation.
18. More work is planned however to provide a systematic approach to communicating about the Board's work more generally; whether that is about public meetings, specific schemes within the Housing and Growth Deal, or about the joint work of local authorities to tackle climate change. Given some of the successes experienced through Open Thought, a new social media protocol is being developed to improve the Board's use of these platforms. A review of the Growth Board's website is also being undertaken to ensure that its content matches with its new purpose. A new facility to record virtual meetings of the Scrutiny Panel and the Growth Board has also boosted our ability to share the content of meetings, and officers are looking at how this and other digital platforms can be used to improve the Growth Board's communication with the public and its partners.

## **Conclusion and Next Steps**

19. Since the Growth Board last met, officers have refocussed the outcomes of the review into a programme of continuous improvement. Notwithstanding the fact that the Oxfordshire Growth Board was the first of its kind to be established, we will need to regularly review how the Board operates and remain open to making changes as we progress. This report should be read in tandem with a forthcoming paper which reflects on the lesson learnt to date concerning the delivery of the Housing and Growth Deal.
20. The next steps in this work will be to assess the impact that the Devolution and Planning White Papers might have on the Growth Board's work. Depending on the content of those papers, it is expected that a report will come to the Growth Board soon summarising any implications.
21. It is expected that further updates will be provided to the Board concerning progress in establishing an LNP, as well as wider progress towards outcomes of the review, at a later date. At this time, officers have not progressed discussions about setting up a wider partnership forum, under the Oxfordshire Leadership Conference concept (as reported in January 2020), given the need to firstly understand the outcomes of the Devolution White Paper. The Growth Board is asked to approve the recommendations set out in the executive summary.

## **Financial Implications**

22. None

## **Legal Implications**

23. None

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