

To: Future Oxfordshire Partnership

Title of Report: Developing a Place Narrative for Oxfordshire

Date: 25 July 2023

Report of: Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place,
Oxfordshire County Council

Status: Open

Executive Summary and Purpose:

There is an opportunity to develop a new place narrative for Oxfordshire. This report seeks to give FOP a more developed view of the project and its purpose and invites FOP to engage further.

How this report contributes to the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision Outcomes:

By crystallising and focussing on our common purpose and what binds us together as a County, developing an Oxfordshire narrative will support momentum and progress across all of the outcomes in the Strategic Vision.

Recommendations:

1. That the Future Oxfordshire Partnership supports the intention to develop a place narrative for Oxfordshire
2. That the County Council works with the Executive Officer group and other relevant officers and partnerships to develop plans and approach

Introduction

1. At the June 2023 FOP meeting, the concept of developing a place narrative for Oxfordshire was introduced. The proposal was to develop a clear and consistent storyboard that sets out Oxfordshire's distinctive opportunities, assets and ambition to be used to enhance the ability of key stakeholders working together to lobby across government for significant funding and leverage to support the delivery of our shared aspirations. This would be built upon the agreed FOP Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development, its themes and guiding principles.
2. FOP members were broadly supportive of a place narrative that help provides a distillation of our overall collective story and helps unlock delivery of our strategies and plans. However, concerns were raised about the input and resources required and the potential for duplication of existing work. Members of FOP also requested further clarification on the purpose of the proposal and the nature and format of the outputs.
3. This revised report seeks to give additional detail, within the constraint that the intention is to progress collaborative and shared outcomes, and that as such the project is necessarily a work in progress.

The purpose of a place narrative

4. A place narrative is a clear and compelling story that distils the complexity of places and people. It is used to form and share a common set of ideas, images, and messages about a place that leaders can communicate consistently and with high impact. The process of developing a place narrative can expand the cohort of influencers who can celebrate and act as ambassadors for place. Importantly, place narratives recognise that there is competition for attention, resources and infrastructure and that to attract the positive investment that helps us deliver our shared vision and strategies, a clear collectively owned identity is essential to cutting-through.
5. In this sense place narrative is a reputation management and marketing tool and can be used to form a place brand supported by visuals, narrative text, film and digital assets.
6. However, a place narrative is also a leadership tool, providing an easy to communicate story that place leaders can use. This can be shared consistently with multiple audiences and can bind place-leaders from different sectors together in a common purpose.
7. Place narratives, when well developed and co-created, are based on research and the place and story described should be recognisable to the community. Forming and publishing the narrative allows places to be in control of their own story, rather than allowing it to be defined externally. Importantly to maximise impact, while local councils have a vital leadership role, effective place narratives reach further and speak to business, education institutions, the cultural sector and the community more broadly.

How other places have used their place narratives

8. Place narratives respond to different opportunities and local context in their development and use. However, some examples below illustrate the potential impact of narrative in different places:
 - Lancashire created a brand story, giving confidence to the county to embrace its proximity and relationships with the Manchester and Liverpool city regions, helping it to understand and achieve its role within the wider Northern Powerhouse context. The narrative created a joined-up approach that allowed the individual cities and towns in the region to 'be the here' in promoting and focussing on themselves but benefiting from the wider county identity. It underpins dialogue with government.
 - The Coventry and Warwickshire place narrative is a co-created stakeholder story setting out the competitiveness and ambition of both city and county and taking control of the place's image externally. Business was reengaged and the process supported the universities to refocus on the benefit they could bring to the city and county. A new ambassador programme helped connect businesses and organisations to place and built thousands of relationships, ultimately resulting in the award of UK City of Culture in 2021
 - Creating the Staffordshire place narrative marked a cultural change to being more outward focussed and confident. The focus of subsequent activity has been on taking the story to Birmingham, Manchester, London and internationally. The relationship with government has been transformed.

A place narrative for Oxfordshire

9. At this point, developing a place narrative would allow us to reiterate our shared identity and articulate what is most distinctive and most valued now, looking confidently to the future. There is an opportunity to celebrate the diversity and difference of communities within Oxfordshire as well as telling the most positive story about our strengths and challenges.
10. The external report: *Oxfordshire Innovation Engine 2023* (Advanced Oxfordshire) calls this "Telling the story, banging the drum for Oxfordshire." A similar call for engagement with the power of the local brand is included in Local Government Association Peer Challenge report to the County Council in 2019.
11. The intention is to develop a storyboard that helps partners across the public, private and community sectors speak consistently about Oxfordshire to broader stakeholders within and beyond Oxfordshire, including to government. Such a narrative should generate civic pride and excitement, setting out clearly what is unique about Oxfordshire, the diversity of interests and needs across the county, and how our different places and sectors complement each other. It must clearly show our role within the wider region and Oxfordshire's place on both the national and international stage. It will also tell a positive story about change and growth pressures, changing demography,

access to public services and responding to the challenge and impacts of climate change.

12. The place narrative will not be a new strategy, vision document or delivery plan. Rather, it is intended to crystallise and bring focus to the delivery of plans already agreed or to be agreed in the future, and so is not intended to replace or change anything already agreed or in development. The research phase will seek to understand existing evidence – including from the most recent engagement on the OxLEP Strategic Economic Plan - and work delivered by partners and the partnership together and more broadly in the Oxfordshire system. The process will seek to condense complex information into a form that can be held beyond the specific facts of individual issues and that is simple enough to be communicated to wider groups.

13. Considering the experience of other places, together we would expect to use an Oxfordshire place narrative to:

- Take control of external perceptions of what Oxfordshire is and can be
- Support local places to 'be the hero' within the broader Oxfordshire context
- Communicate clearly to government, business and the international community our unique assets and potential
- Provide a 'wrapper' to join up lobbying of government from across all sectors for significant funding and leverage to help us deliver our future shared ambitions
- Recognise the diversity of needs and interests and differences across the county
- Attract the positive investment that will deliver on our shared vision and strategies
- Provide context and purpose to engagement on infrastructure – both for proactively seeking investment and being ready to respond to opportunities in a way that works best for Oxfordshire and its places
- Help in-county audiences share a sense of purpose and ambition for the future

Next steps and resource commitment

14. Effective place narratives are co-designed to create an outcome that all involved can share, as appropriate to their organisation. We will need to consider and discuss our individual perceptions of place and come to a broad agreement about which elements are most important, trusting each other to allow different views and priorities on the details, while focussing on what brings us together. The process would engage a broad range of stakeholders across business, the public and community sectors and develop a visual and compelling storyboard and shared narrative.

15. The County Council (OCC) is content to commission and mobilise this work, for simplicity and practical reasons, but would invite FOP to offer support to

the narrative development as the senior place shaping partnership already leading in Oxfordshire. If FOP is supportive, OCC would commit to bringing regular updates and reports back to the FOP board and support engagement as advised, for example with the FOP Scrutiny Panel and the Executive Officers Group. The project will start in summer 2023 delivering through the autumn. A timeline and description of activities is set out below.

16. In the June meeting of FOP, partners expressed concern on the required time commitment, particularly of officer time. The intention is to procure specialist consultancy resource to lead the engagement and to exploit as far as possible existing material and evidence and synthesis what is already in place rather than duplicate effort. Therefore while officer input will welcomed and encouraged, the project does not rely on extensive officer time and the impact on existing priorities should be limited.
17. OCC will has identified funding for the narrative development but would welcome the financial or in-kind support of other FOP partners if minded to.
18. The role of councils is critical to the impact of the project and leaders will be asked to participate in a steering group to guide the process and outcomes.

Indicative timeline

19. Table 1 below sets out an indicative timeline - to be engaged on and reviewed with partners – and the kinds of activities and participation anticipated at each stage.

Aug 2023	<p><i>Discovery</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholder mapping • Specialist consultant immersion visits • Desk research and review of strategy framework • Photography 	Activity principally with project team. Engagement to identify stakeholders.
Aug - Sept 2023	<p><i>Stakeholder engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering group meeting 1-2-1 conversations – up to 70 • Workshops x 6 • Focus Groups x 9 • Stakeholder survey 	Participation from FOP leaders in steering group. Stakeholders invited to one off 1-2-1 conversation and some participation in workshops requested.
Oct 2023	<p><i>Narrative development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steering group meeting • Development of the narrative 	Activity principally with project team.
Nov -Dec 2023	<p><i>Visual development</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of visual language and identify • Narrative toolkit and branding developed • Story book • Steering group meeting 	Activity principally with project team with review points by stakeholders and steering group.

Dec 2023- Jan 2024	<i>Next steps and implementation</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch 	
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Tab. 1 – indicative timeline

Financial Implications

20. There are no direct financial implications to FOP from the recommendations of this report.

Legal Implications

21. There are no legal implications to FOP from the recommendations of this report.

Conclusion

22. An Oxfordshire Place Narrative, supporting partnership plans including the 2050 Vision, will celebrate Oxfordshire’s incredible assets and opportunities as well as maintaining focus on the challenges we face together. FOP is invited to engage in the development of the narrative as a current and future facilitator of our collective place leadership role.

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