

# Minutes

## OF A MEETING OF THE

# Oxfordshire Growth Board Scrutiny Panel



**HELD ON TUESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER 2020 AT 6.30 PM HELD VIRTUALLY**

### **Present:**

Councillors Andrew Gant (Chair), Matthew Barber, Nick Carter, Andy Cooke, Peter Dragonetti, Andy Graham, Sarah Gray, Councillor Jenny Hannaby, Damian Haywood, Alex Postan, Craig Simmons, John Tanner, David Turner, Richard Webber, Lucinda Wing and Sean Woodcock, (Vice-Chair)

### **Officers contributing to and supporting the Panel:**

Amit Alva	Project and Scrutiny Officer – Oxfordshire Growth Board
Susan Harbour	Strategic Partnerships Manager – South and Vale District Councils
Bev Hindle	Growth Board Director – Oxfordshire Growth Board
Kevin Jacob	Democratic Services Officer – Oxfordshire Growth Board
Stefan Robinson	Growth Board Manager – Oxfordshire Growth Board
Paul Staines	Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal Delivery Manager
Hannah Doney	Head of Corporate Finance - Oxfordshire County Council

**Other councillors:** Councillor Emily Smith, Oxfordshire Growth Board Chair and Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council

## **12. Apologies for absence, substitutes; declarations of interest and Chair's announcements**

Apologies for absence were submitted from Councillor Derek Cotterill, West Oxfordshire District Council; Councillor Julian Cooper, West Oxfordshire District Council (who was substituted by Councillor Andy Graham); and Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne, Vale of White Horse District Council (who was substituted by Councillor Jenny Hannaby).

The Chair declared that, in respect of Agenda 6.a, his spouse was a director of a company which could potentially bid to supply services to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc structures.

Councillor Simmons declared that, as a director of a company which could potentially bid to supply services to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc structure, he had an interest in respect of Agenda 6.a.

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### **13. Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 22 July 2020 were approved as a correct record subject to the correction of Cllr Postan's name.

### **14. Public participation**

**Dr Peter Collins, on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire**, submitted a question referring to the agreement by HM Government to a revised timetable for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. It raised concerns that HM Government had not been prepared to extend associated planning flexibilities and that this meant that the reduced housing land supply that Oxfordshire local planning authorities currently needed to demonstrate (three years vs five years) would no longer apply. He asked that the Panel seek a fuller explanation of the implications of such a change – including which local planning authorities might be most affected. Dr Collins also enquired whether the Panel agreed that five-year housing land supply rules facilitated speculative development to the detriment of effective local decision making.

In response, the Chair commented that he felt that the Panel would be minded to request that the Growth Board seek a fuller explanation of HM Government's position on housing land supply flexibility in light of the revised Oxfordshire Plan 2050 timetable. The Panel was not able to comment on the second part of the question.

In discussion, members of the Panel referred to the importance of obtaining a definitive answer from HM Government on the housing land supply period given this was already being tested at appeals to the planning inspectorate. It was agreed to request that the Growth Board seek clarification.

**RESOLVED:** That the Scrutiny Panel recommends that the Growth Board ask HM Government to provide greater clarity in terms of the planning flexibilities within the local authorities and implications on the three and five year land supply with regards to the granted extension of timelines of the Housing and Growth Deal.

### **15. Growth Board response to scrutiny panel recommendations - 22 July 2020**

The Panel noted the Growth Board's responses to the recommendations from the meeting held on 22 July 2020 as set out in the Agenda. The Chair referred to the response to Recommendation 9 which asked the Growth Board, in its work with the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, to re-examine the boundaries of the Oxford Green Belt with a focus on countryside developments and its potential impact upon flood risks. He felt that the issues of the Green Belt and flood risk were separate matters.

In respect of Recommendation 10, which asked the Growth Board to consider investigating ways to incentivise private sector capital investment, the Chair suggested that the Panel could pursue the matter further itself – potentially via a Task and Finish Group. Councillor Postan, who had suggested the original recommendation, asked for assistance from other members in seeking to further develop this idea.

The Panel in discussion, acknowledged the response of the Growth Board in respect of Recommendation 3 and responses to Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. The Panel wished to emphasise that it felt that any coordination between local authorities in

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responding to FOIs should not be allowed to adversely affect compliance with response timelines. The Chair agreed to reinforce this point in his report to the Growth Board.

## **16. Update from Councillor Emily Smith, Chair of the Oxfordshire Growth Board**

Councillor Emily Smith, Chair of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, attended the meeting and gave an update on Growth Board activity with a particular focus upon the Oxford to Cambridge Arc and the Arc Leadership Group Executive. This included:

- The appointment of three elected local authority members of the Growth Board to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc Leadership Group Executive (Councillors Smith, Hudspeth and Wood, substitute Councillor Brown).
- The Group Executive had, to date, held two meetings with civil servants from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Topics discussed had included: the importance of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc to the national economy, the draft Oxford to Cambridge Arc economic prospectus, the effects of Covid-19 on the economy and unemployment in the Arc and the potential regional response to the impacts of the pandemic.
- The draft Oxford to Cambridge Economic Prospectus was intended to set out how the Arc might respond to HM Government's objectives around economic growth, net zero carbon and levelling up. It also laid out what the Arc would need from Whitehall in return.
- It was felt that HM Government was positively engaging with the Arc and that it did have real influence at national level.
- As Chair of the Oxfordshire Growth Board, Councillor Smith had raised the need within the arc to achieve negative carbon emissions. This would mean going further than any current zero carbon ambitions and would involve the prioritisation of rail over road infrastructure
- There was a need for more effective communication in relation to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. A greater focus, for example, should be placed on the fact that the Arc was a much wider than simply physical transport links. Further, there was also the need to improve understanding and transparency about the Arc's governance arrangements.
- The recruitment of a full-time Oxford to Cambridge Arc Director.

The Panel welcomed the appointment of only elected local authority leaders to the Arc Leadership Group Executive. They had previously recommended this to the Growth Board in order to maintain democratic accountability. It was noted that the Terms of Reference for the Group Executive and the number of representatives per area had been set collectively by the Arc.

With regards to addressing the challenges of climate change, members emphasised the need to develop appropriate green technology skills and experience in those working for and advising the Arc. Members questioned whether such skills currently existed with the Arc or whether there were plans to recruit to such posts.

Officers stated that the Arc was currently at a relatively early stage in its development. The current focus was upon securing funding to provide a basis for the consideration of the next steps (e.g. recruitment) of the Arc's evolution. As a region, there was a wealth of expertise potentially available – for example, within the university sector. The challenge going forwards is, therefore, to effectively harness and utilise this knowledge.

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In discussion, members welcomed the apparent general preference towards the provision of rail rather than road infrastructure within the Arc. They did, however, acknowledge Councillor Smith's comments that there remained a range of opinions across the Arc on the issue of the Expressway.

The importance of both developing technical skills amongst the workforce and supporting local businesses to move from research and design to bringing products to market was raised by the Panel. It was felt by members that these were areas in which the UK had a poor record in comparison to many of its peers.

The Panel thanked Councillor Smith for attending the meeting. It was agreed that the job description for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc Director role would be shared with members for their information.

## **17. Items for information due for the Growth Board meeting on 22 September 2020**

### **(a) OxCam Arc Local Natural Capital Plan**

The Panel considered presentation slides setting out an update to the Growth Board on the establishment of a Local Natural Capital Plan and associated activity within the Oxford to Cambridge Arc.

In discussion, the Panel strongly supported the establishment of the Plan. Members asked questions regarding: the progress of the measures set out in the presentation compared to activity yet to be undertaken, the methodologies, sources, scales of measurement and the legal status of the Plan within local plans.

The Panel was also concerned that for the Plan to be effective it would need appropriate status and legal weight. It was, therefore, agreed that the Chairman would work with Officers to develop a set of detailed questions.

It was noted that the presentation was to be given to the meeting of the Growth Board. This would provide a further opportunity for questions to be asked.

**RESOLVED:** That the Scrutiny Panel recommends that the Growth Board, when it receives a presentation on the Arc Local Natural Capital Plan at its meeting on 22 September, asks questions to understand:

1. What methodology and sources of information will be used in quantifying natural capital?
  2. What measurement will be used to assess the current level of natural capital, and to what extent this is being subsumed by development?
  3. How will the Natural Capital Planning tool and investment toolkit be practically implemented?
  4. What additional protections will be added to existing planning constraints with regards to AONBs and the Greenbelt?
  5. What status does the Local Natural Capital Plan have in the refresh of local plans within the districts?
  6. Whether there is an ambition to undertake a natural capital assessment across the county?
  7. Whether there is an ambition to have carbon sequestration objectives within the Plan?
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8. How the existence of flood risk areas will be considered as part of the Plan?
9. How the Plan links with the EEH Draft Transport Strategy?

**(b) Oxfordshire Economic Recovery Plan**

The Panel noted that the slides relating to this topic would be circulated after they had been submitted to the Growth Board on 22 September. It was agreed to invite Officers from the Oxfordshire Local Economic Partnership (OxLEP) to present them at the next scheduled Panel meeting on 17 November.

## **18. Growth Board Continuous Improvement Programme**

The Panel considered a report setting out progress to date in implementing secondary actions arising from the Growth Board's review of its functions – with a specific focus in establishing a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire. In introducing the report, Bev Hindle, Growth Board Director, stressed that the Growth Board was committed to making continuous improvement going forwards.

The proposed establishment of a Local Nature Partnership (LNP) in Oxfordshire would not only link into the wider network of LNPs throughout the country but would also help to support the work to develop an Oxford to Cambridge Local Natural Capital Plan. Further consideration was also being given about whether climate change should be brought into the wider Growth Board conversation and how best this could be achieved.

The report also set out progress in several other areas arising from the review. Additional updates on this work would also be brought to the Growth Board for consideration.

The Panel welcomed the report with its plans for the establishment of an LNP and the proposed addition of the Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum onto the Infrastructure Subgroup. In discussion, the Panel reiterated previous suggestions regarding the need for interim progress targets to help track progress towards Oxfordshire's 2050 climate change goals.

## **19. Oxford to Cambridge Arc Update**

The Panel considered a report updating the Growth Board on work being undertaken in relation to the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. Commenting on the document, Bev Hindle, Growth Board Director, suggested that perhaps the key area of work was around the Oxford to Cambridge Economic Prospectus. HM Government had invited the Arc to develop and submit this ahead of the expected Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). This linkage to the wider CSR process was important because the Economic Prospectus sought to change the landscape for the authorities and communities within the Arc around investment in the area. It also sought to emphasise the Arc's contribution to the national economy.

The Prospectus sought to encourage HM Government to support the suggested initiatives with both funding and changes to processes. These would allow the Arc to continue to thrive in a post Covid-19 and Brexit context. It was expected that the document would be submitted to HM Government in late September – a wider public engagement exercise on its contents was also planned.

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In discussion, the Panel reiterated that in order to drive economic growth within the Arc it was important that manufacturing industries were established and that there was a need for teaching and training of engineering skills at all levels.

**RESOLVED:** That the Scrutiny Panel recommends that the Growth Board, in its aspirations of economic growth within the Oxford to Cambridge Arc, organise workshops and events to:

1. Promote the establishment of manufacturing industries
2. Promote teaching and training of engineering skills at all levels

## **20. Consultation on England's Economic Heartland's draft Transport Strategy**

The Panel considered a report to the Growth Board which set out a proposed response to England's Economic Heartland's (EEH) draft Transport Strategy.

In discussion, the Panel strongly supported the draft response to the consultation – set out in Appendix Two of the report. They particularly focused upon the concerns expressed in relation to the uncertainty around the statutory status of the proposed Transport Strategy and policies 12, 23 and 24.

Members also felt that there were apparent contradictions within the document between its recognition of the need to shift away from car use and the listing of potential road schemes. The Panel also suggested that there was a lack of emphasis on the importance of digital connectivity especially in a post Covid-19 world.

Discussions also centred on the lack of an explicit mention of the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway. It was felt that the Growth Board should seek clarification from HM Government regarding the current status of this project.

A range of views were expressed regarding the future of private and commercial vehicles, with specific reference made to the potential impacts that autonomous vehicles may have in the future – particularly in rural areas. Members also stressed the importance of integrating private and public modes of transport with strategic rail schemes. They felt that such considerations were currently lacking from the draft Strategy.

### **RESOLVED:**

- 1) That the Scrutiny Panel supports the draft comments made by Growth Board on its consultation on the emerging EEH Draft Transport Strategy especially on policies 12, 23 & 24.

### **That the Scrutiny Panel recommends that**

- 1) the Growth Board again seeks clarity from HM Government concerning the current status of the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway project.
  - 2) the Growth Board, in responding to the EEH Draft Transport Strategy:
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- a. Gives greater importance to Digital Infrastructure considering the revelation of its importance in a post-Covid world.
- b. Asks EEH to include research into autonomous vehicles in terms of personal, mass and freight transport in its strategy i.e. e-bikes, electric scooters, mid-level and long-range autonomous freight vehicles.
- c. Indicates the lack of emphasis on Oxfordshire Rail Corridor and its key strategic nature, not just as part of East-West rail, but as part of the national rail infrastructure.

## **21. Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal**

### **(a) Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal Progress Report - Quarter 1 2020/2021**

The Panel considered a report setting out progress at Q1, Year 3 of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal. It highlighted the key impacts to the current workstreams arising out of the extension of the Deal period by HM Government., Paul Staines, Growth Board Service Delivery Manager also referred to ongoing discussions with HM Government which were felt to have been broadly positive and productive.

In discussion, the Panel raised points around the design of affordable housing (including modern methods of construction) and concerns regarding delays to the delivery of such housing as a result of the pandemic.

Members were informed that, in design terms, every effort was always made to seek to build in extra additionality into affordable housing schemes. Unfortunately, however, this had been historically difficult to achieve, in part because of the comparative disparity between the financial attractiveness of grant rates under the Deal and those of other organisations e.g. Homes England. Officers, nevertheless, continued to look for opportunities and add in additional value for money if there was a good case to do so.

In respect of housing delivery, the situation was not uniform across the county and there was some evidence of strong latent demand being fulfilled – although developers were not at peak capacity. The seasonality of development was also a factor affecting delivery.

Members also revisited the issue of whether shared ownership housing was truly affordable to residents in practice. While it remained classified in reports as 'affordable', the Panel noted the Growth Board's request that papers going to the Housing Advisory Subgroup should categorise shared ownership affordable housing into two sub-categories based on the delivery of affordable housing at 80% of market rate and those purchasable with mortgages of no more than five times the median household income. It was acknowledged that there remained challenges in providing this information and that Officers would work with the Chair (outside of the meeting) to fully understand and respond to the request.

The Panel also referred to their earlier discussion around some of the uncertainties relating to three or five year housing land supply requirements and its recommendation that the Growth Board seek further clarification on the issue from HM Government.

**RESOLVED:** The Panel noted the report.

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**(b) Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal Financial Outturn - Quarter 1 2020/2021**

The Panel considered a report to the Growth Board setting out the financial position of the Oxfordshire Housing and Growth Deal at the end of Q1 2020/21. In introducing the report, Hannah Doney, Head of Corporate Finance at Oxfordshire County Council, commented that its purpose was to independently set out the Deal's financial position. The report would be updated in Q2 to reflect the changes to the Deal timelines negotiated with HM Government.

**RESOLVED:** The Panel noted the report.

**(c) Infrastructure sub-group update**

At this point (20:38), it was noted that the meeting had become inquorate – there was no longer Member representation from each partner local authority. It could, nevertheless, continue if it did not make any further formal recommendations to the Growth Board.

The Panel noted the summary notes of the Infrastructure subgroup meeting held on 24 August 2020.

**(d) Oxfordshire Plan 2050 subgroup - update**

The Panel noted the summary notes of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 subgroup meetings held on 16 July 2020 and 20 August 2020.

## **22. Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel and Action Log - September 2020**

The work programme and action log were considered as set out in the agenda. Amit Alva, Growth Board Scrutiny Officer, referred to the earlier proposal for the potential establishment of a Task and Finish Group to consider how the issue of private sector investment in capital projects could be incentivised.

It was suggested that the Panel might wish to add an item to its work programme on the outcome of the second tranche of the bidding process for HM Government's Active Travel Programme, noting that Oxfordshire County Council had submitted a bid totalling £4.6m. Whilst the proposed schemes submitted as part of the bid were local, there was felt to be some impact between the Active Travel Programme and the wider issue of transport planning. This was supported by the Chair.

## **23. Dates of next meetings**

The Panel noted the dates for scheduled meetings as follows:

- Tues 17 Nov 2020 6.30 pm
- Tues 19 Jan 2021 6.30 pm
- Tues 16 Feb 2021 6.30 pm
- Tues 16 Mar 2021 6.30 pm
- Tues 1 June 2021 6.30 pm

The meeting closed at 8.40 pm

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